

"My kitchen was my courthouse"

By JEFFREY R. RICHARDSON

"They call on me when they get stuck. Actually, I'm not objecting to their calling me, because I know what it's like to be in that kind of a jam."

Sadie Neakok, from the looks of this writer's notes, has been in one jam or another since she decided to leave her hometown of Barrow to attend high school in California. That was in 1934.

Sadie is best known for her nearly 20 years as Barrow's magistrate, a position she never feared using to protect her Inupiat people from the injustices of a Western society that seemed to offer so much at such high prices.

Retired from the bench last fall, Sadie cares for seven growing sons, "all grease-monkeys," a task that required her attention even while she presided over cases. Before describing some of the high, and low points of her career, she commented on her current caseload:

"All I can say is: being a full-time mother is challenging to the job I had. I never know how I got the work done."

Born while the First World War raged far away, Sadie may have been destined for bigger and better things from the beginning. Her father was Charles D. Brower, a trader and whaler whose legend is told in "50 Years Below Zero," an Arctic classic.

Sadie's first jam came after her graduation from a San Francisco high school. Although accepted by Stanford, Sadie wanted to go home. A friend of her father's paid her steamer passage—but it only took her as far as Nome. It took the good will of the Coast Guard to get her home.

Young educated Native people were few and far between, and they were in de-

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Sadie Neakok, legendary magistrate with jurisdiction over the North Slope for 17 years, enjoys retirement now in her Barrow home. For nearly 3 decades she has served the Inupiat, who are now enjoying unprecedented self-determination, unheard of when she entered public life.

● The Sadie Neakok story

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mand. Following her graduation, the Bureau of Indian Affairs got a hold of Sadie's name and asked her to find seven youngsters who wanted to attend the BIA high school at Eklutna. After rounding the students up, she found the bureau needed somebody to escort them to the little village near Anchorage. Sadie volunteered.

And when school officials informed worldly Sadie that they needed an assistant dorm hostess,

"I offered my services and earned enough to enter the University of Alaska, Fairbanks in 1936."

Torn between mirth and slight embarrassment, Sadie laughs when she recalls being ordered into the office of the University President, Charles Bunnell. The charge: smoking in the dormitory. A Russian aviator, checking out of Fairbanks customs, made her a gift of a carton of potent Russian cigarettes. Sadie nearly "set the whole darn dorm on fire" when she dropped a fine ash in her rug.

Sadie took her first plane ride in 1939. After two years of college, she was qualified to teach and she wanted to go home again. This time, her father paid the \$900 fare, and her pilot was Old Man Gillam.

Here I interrupted her story. You mean the Harold Gillam? I asked, marvelling that I was speaking to someone who flew with the legendary bush pilot. Sadie first chuckled, then laughed at my naivete:

"I mean Old Man Gillam, Harold's father!"

A teaching post was not open to Sadie right away, but soon enough she was to discover the thinking that pervaded the educational philosophy of the Bureau of Indian Affairs:

"You couldn't speak to children in your Native tongue, even to explain an English word. It was a BIA rule. It was to encourage the children to use of the English language."

Sadie taught school until "my babysitter wanted more than I could pay."

By then, the early Fifties, more money was flowing into Barrow than even the heyday of the Yankee whalers had known. Natural gas had been discovered near Barrow, prompting a significant development and construction boom.

"Our men were making big wages, then it all evaporated. We had so many unemployed people."

Sadie became a social worker, filling out unemployment and social security forms, conducting interviews of potential welfare recipients. At a time when

traditional Inupiat community values were reeling under the impact of new ideas and new money, she made Herculean efforts to

try to nest, and state game officials who were determined to enforce an international treaty which banned the killing of migra-



protect her people's rights under a strange new system:

"I filled out income tax forms, reporting to Anchorage and Juneau. My home was like the Post Office every week when forms came in and I did the paperwork. If Social Security ever looked at the signatures, I was the witness for almost all the unemployment forms that first came out of Barrow.

"I was the mayor for quite awhile.

"I was helping out the Public Health nurse, going into homes because the tuberculosis was so bad.

"And guess what? When people got into trouble, I was their counselor!"

To say nothing of raising a family (and substitute teaching).

As if her formative years had been nothing but heavy duty prepping, Sadie assumed her most significant position in 1960 when she became the magistrate in Barrow, responsible for meting out justice all across the North Slope. (She continued as a welfare worker until 1965).

Not one month in office, Sadie was confronted in May of 1960 with a case she concedes was her toughest: the famous Barrow duck-in. The duck-in was a confrontation between the Inupiat of Barrow, whose only source of fresh meat in the spring when whaling is poor are waterfowl who migrate to the north coun-

tory birds by anyone.

Although state game enforcement officials made a modest effort to be reasonable about the waterfowl treaty, Sadie scoffs at the way they went about being modest. One officer told her that Native hunters should put away their guns

Sadie explains her solution:

"When somebody gets arrested, I want to know about it, because that's the day everybody is going to get a duck from his neighbor, or wherever, and stand in front of the game warden. The only way to solve it is to have everybody get arrested and see how it comes out."

Sadie continues her story with relish:

"One day here comes the game warden banging on my door." A tense Barrow magistrate tried to hide her trepidation from an angry warden.

"There's a man, woman and child down there with a duck!"

Sadie summoned her nerve and replied: "What's the matter, don't you know what to do with a person in possession? Arrest them!"

When the warden complained it was too much paperwork, she proposed that one complaint be prepared and that names simply be added to a list at the bottom. The old theater in Barrow was rented and 150 people were arrested for possession of illegal migratory birds. Eventually, the governor of Alaska intervened and the charges were dropped.

After the duck case, which received international attention, Sadie covered everything from "murders to burglaries."

Twice during her long career as Barrow magistrate, Sadie jumped the bench,



and birds when he came into town, but that otherwise they could relax. But Sadie knew he could arrive unannounced. "That was a pretty floozy thing to pull. I knew it would not be all right because there would come a day when he would arrive and we wouldn't know about it."

After her conversation with the enforcement officer, she consulted urgently with State Senator Eben Hopson. Hopson in turn asked Sadie what she thought ought to be done.

not because she tired of trying to make the judicial system work for the benefit of her people, but because that same system took no notice of her overweight caseload and poor working conditions. In one instance, she threatened to quit if steps were not taken to make State Troopers more cooperative. She got action.

By 1970, however, she had accumulated a long list of grievances which required the attention of the Supreme Court.

"I didn't have a reporter. They gave me a clerk for 15 hours a week and I used her up in a day."

Sadie had an office set up in the police station, which raised questions of judicial propriety: "I was seeing my cases!"

What's more, she used to clean the jail cells herself.

"I just walked out until somebody woke up to the fact that I meant business."

The late Chief Justice George Boney got off on the wrong foot when he called to ask Sadie to return to the bench and began his friendly persuasion with "honey". Sadie countered: "Don't you honey me unless you've got some kind of solution."

Boney then decided to send fellow magistrate Nora Guinn of Bethel, a well-known lady in her own right, to talk to Sadie. When that didn't work, he began to get the picture, and relief was granted.

Although magistrates commonly handle misdemeanors and certain arraignments, the demands placed on them by rural circumstances often require more extensive duty. Although Barrow now has a courthouse, Sadie for years heard her cases at home:

"My kitchen was my courthouse," she proclaims.

Her last summer was not a happy one for Barrow people. A double murder blamed by sensational writers on racial tension combined with poor public perception of Inupiat ways took its toll on any sense of optimism the people may have felt about the future. But Sadie, like her people, naturally stoic, would not let the charge of racial tension go by. The convicted murderer of two Californians was a loner who needed help, and subsequent events credited to racial feelings had their root in liquor, a problem in all Alaska:

"Liquor ruined our people, they had no sense of what their lives were worth. When we were dry, we didn't have much crime. Even the whole state has no solution. The only solution is to do away with alcohol completely."

In the longer run, Sadie cautions her people not to place too much faith in the idea of restoring the original design of Inupiat culture. It is impossible to go back, she says. But, she adds, there is still room for a Native culture built around the realities of today. She likes the idea of her children learning to speak Inupiaq again and she cautiously praises the Bush Justice Conference for trying to make the Anglo system suit the needs of Native people.

In daily contact with her former clerk, Magistrate Charlotte Brower, Sadie is not timid about making suggestions, but she seems content with her busy retirement. After 17 years, it's nice to let someone else run the ship.