

Gruening, Assistant Enjoy Walrus Carnival at Savoonga

By GEORGE SUNDBORG

SAVOONGA, ALASKA, May 8—This Eskimo village, located some 4,500 miles (and six time zones) west northwest of Washington, D. C., on St. Lawrence Island, which extends to within 38 miles of the Siberian mainland, has been host this week to Senator Ernest Gruening (D-Alaska) and his administrative assistant, George Sundborg.

The Alaska senator was chief guest of honor at the annual Savoonga Walrus Festival, held last Saturday and Sunday. Senator Gruening took advantage of his three-day stay on the remote island to pay visits also to Gambell and Northeast Cape.

That the visit of a United States senator is a memorable event in this part of the world is attested to by the fact that dozens of Eskimo residents have come up to Senator Gruening to recall that they shook hands with him the last time he visited St. Lawrence Island, 25 years ago when he was the governor of Alaska.

They say they remember that he came to Gambell with Colonel Marvin S. "Muktuk" Marston, then a major, to organize a unit of the Alaska Territorial Guard, referred to still as it was in those World War II days as "the ATG."

Most of the ATG officers of the Gambell unit are now dead, though Senator Gruening was able to visit one survivor, Herbert Apassingok, who is bedridden at his home in the little village of Gambell.

The Eskimo inhabitants of all ages recall to Senator Gruening also that he



ST. LAWRENCE ISLAND WOMEN—Two elderly women on St. Lawrence Island are carrying on a conversation, perhaps talking about some people they knew in Siberia 38 miles from the island. The islanders speak the same dialect as their counterparts in Siberia.

succeeded in arranging an emergency delivery of food to the village when on his earlier visit he discovered that the islanders were facing hunger because they had taken jobs on defense base construction on the island instead of following their immemorial custom of laying in a winter food supply by hunting walrus, seal and other marine mammals in the icy waters surrounding the island in the middle of the Bering Sea.

St. Lawrence actually isn't exactly in the middle of the sea which separates Siberia and Alaska. It is much closer to the Asiatic side. Within 50 miles of Gambell 1400 people

who speak the same Eskimo dialect as the 850 Native people on St. Lawrence Island live in three villages—Chaplina, Avon and Kiwak—on the Chuhotski Peninsula in Siberia. Savoonga is 180 miles southwest of Nome; Gambell is 60 miles farther west.

The Eskimos on St. Lawrence Island are of the same culture and blood as those in Siberia. They cannot understand the two main dialects of Eskimos living on the Alaska mainland, but could converse readily with their Siberian relatives. There was considerable intermarriage and other intermingling among Eskimos of

(Continued on Page 7)

Walrus Carnival at Savoonga . . .

(continued from page 3)

St. Lawrence Island and the U.S.S.R. in earlier days.

As recently as 1947 hunters from the island met their Siberian counterparts in skin boats in the middle of the sea between the two land areas. But since then no Eskimo hunters from the Russian side have been seen by the Alaska hunters, though the St. Lawrence men venture as far westward in quest of the walrus as ever.

It is believed that the Russians have moved many of the Siberian Eskimos from their villages to the largest settlement in the area, Provideniya, and set them to work in industries more sophisticated than hunting. (Provideniya is the terminal point mentioned in the application of Alaska Airlines, now on file with the Civil Aeronautics Board, for certifi-

cation of an air route between Nome and Siberia.)

Senator Gruening, who visited the St. Lawrence Island villages in the course of investigations of what needs to be done to improve the conditions under which Alaska Natives live, was impressed with the fact that the answers for such remote and relatively unspoiled communities as Gambell and Savoonga should probably be quite different than for villages on the Alaska mainland where there is a more persistent influence of the white man's culture and way of life.

Village educational, health and living conditions should be improved, Senator Gruening said, without any effort to turn the Eskimo toward a new economy based on cash wages and new pursuits. This is

possible on St. Lawrence Island and perhaps in a few other locations such as Nunivak Island and the high Arctic because the walrus and other animals on which the people have always based their way of life are still abundant and contacts with so-called "civilization" are infrequent and slight.

The senator said he was impressed with the obvious fact that the people in the St. Lawrence villages are happier than most of their fellow-Americans, although they do not have much in the way of material wealth or even comfort. In three days on the island the senator did not hear one complaint or see one evidence of jealousy of one person or group for any other.

"The Eskimo," Senator Gruening said, "possesses all the attributes we say we admire but which so few of us exhibit. He is cheerful, patient, honest, hard working, generous and kind. There are no finer people anywhere."

The senator did discover a few conditions which need improvement. All improve shortcomings of the white man's government rather than any lack on the part of the Eskimo inhabitants. The senator said he would move immediately to try to obtain for Savoonga without further delay:

- 1) A new school building. A total of 125 pupils in grades one through eight are attending classes in split shifts in a 20-year-old two and one-half room wooden school building;

- 2) A village water supply. Efforts to drive a well have failed, with the result that villagers must melt ice to obtain water in the winter and must bring a supply from a distant creek in the summer. All must be boiled;

- 3) Efficient equipment for clearing snow from the air strip. The old "cat" provided by the Division of Aviation of the State of Alaska cannot cope with snow falls as heavy as those experienced during the recent winter, which caused air service to be curtailed for nearly a month. Though this is a state rather than a federal problem, Senator Gruening said he would urge Governor Walter J. Hickel to take appropriate action;

- 4) A public health nurse. There are no resident doctors or nurses on St. Lawrence Island, which means that — 850 men, women and children are without health care except for occasional itinerant nurse visits. In accidents or other emergencies patients must be

airlifted to Nome or Kotzebue, and sometimes the weather does not permit this. Senator Gruening proposed that local girls from each village might be trained as nurses and stationed at Savoonga and Gambell the rear round.

Savoonga is a young village, having been started only in 1917 as a reindeer herding station. All of the people there came from Gambell. Because their average age is lower, the people of Savoonga are causing something of a population explosion, although rapid increases are evident in both villages.

Birth control advice and devices are made available by the government, but there are some problems. The "pill" is considered not the answer among people such as the St. Lawrence Island Eskimos because of the rigid requirement for daily use to be effective in preventing unwanted pregnancies. The intrauterine device or "IUD" is effective, but because of the long interval between visits by doctors or nurses qualified to insert them a mother often finds herself pregnant again without intent following the birth of a wanted child.

Civilization on St. Lawrence Island is quite old. There are archeological evidences that people lived on the island 2,000 years ago. An ancient village site, Kookoolik, exists five miles east of Savoonga.

The Walrus Carnival included contests in snow shoe racing, women's kick ball, dog team racing, blanket tossing, retrieving seal and tug of war.

In the last event, a team of seven burly airmen from the Air Force station at Northeast Cape was finally dragged across the marker line by seven relatively slight Eskimos who must have averaged 25 pounds lighter per man, this despite the fact the airmen had a slight downhill pull. It was explained that the airmen were slightly out of condition through being indoors all winter. Others said the Eskimos always win the tug of war, as their hands get very strong from their hunting and hauling exploits.

(TO BE CONTINUED)