



Sunset in Nome at the beginning of the third Annual Elders' Conference last week. More than 250 elders from across Alaska attended.

Bob Kowalik/Tundra Times

# Elders gather at conference in Nome

By BOB KOWELUK  
Tundra Times Reporter

NOME—Sunlight casts the hunter's shadow on steel gray water. The air is still. Slow moving clouds form a cape around the mountains in the distance.

The hunter listens intently. At first it sounds like a flute, and then like the music of a harp. The walrus are singing. It is a sure sign that the wind is about to pick up, that the Bering Sea ice is moving and the northern migration is about to begin.

For the Eskimos living a subsistence lifestyle, learning to forecast the weather is a learned skill, a necessity and a tool. And since animals often detect changes in the weather before humans, the hunter also must learn to understand what the animals are saying.

Toby Ahnanagsuk of Wales says he learned weather forecasting from his parents and relatives. At the third annual Elders' Conference in Nome last week, he described why



Bob Kowalik/Tundra Times

A King Island dancer performs.

this skill is so important. "We have to know how to tell the weather in order to survive," he said. Knowing the weather patterns year round gives you an overall picture to guide

you in hunting and fishing or in obtaining the plants we eat. We travel to different places to get out food to eat today and to save for the winter." Ahnanagsuk said.

"Each area along the coast, the islands, and inland areas have different places where we stay. And these places are to our advantage. They are safe places near where we hunt or fish or gather plants," Ahnanagsuk said.

Fifteen villages in the Bering Straits region were represented with over 250 elders and others attending the conference.

The elders spoke about the past. The coming of Christianity and of the white people was predicted by their elders many years before these things came to pass. They say that men traveling by dog teams brought the news of a religion coming from east of the Bering Straits region. Word spread to the west and north with an excitement, a realization that the Christian God and their traditional god were one and the same.

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The Diomed Island Dancers perform at the National Guard Armory in Nome.

Bob Kowalik/Tundra Times

## ● Elders discuss old ways in Nome

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The elders talked for four days about the changes in their culture. Perhaps, they said, the outcome today would have been different if the new culture had not taken over so quickly. Flu epidemics killed many peoples. Changes in village life were made in a matter of hours.

New technology came to the villages. Fire-arms, housing, clothing, household goods, new foods, boats, motors, radio, snow machines, all made life easier, but all had their price. The old style homes they lived in were easier to heat, even with a stone and oil lamp. On the other hand, it is good to have windows to let the sunlight into homes and to see what is happening outside. Windows have their price, it costs more to heat their homes now.

The new technology is helping the elders today. Some with failing eyesight can see only with the aid of glasses. Some wear hearing aides, dentures or have steel pins in their hips to help to support their bodies.

The new technology is helping them in their sub-

sistence lifestyle also. "I think if I were living in the old style way I would not be able to still hunt and fish, travel from place to place and do all the things I used to be able to do when I was younger," I overheard an elder say during a small group session on currents and ice movements in the Bering Straits.

"Right now I am 65 years old and still hunt and fish with the help of my snow machines. I use a gas powered ice auger to drill holes through the ice. I use eye glasses and a pair of binoculars to help me see."

This year's Bering Straits region Elders conference was sponsored by Kawerak, Inc., the Native non-profit corporation there.

Unity, understanding and trust were the themes of this year's conference. Some 34 individuals and businesses supported the conference, a community effort with SOHIO Alaska providing the travel for elders, the Alaska State Council of the Arts providing travel for the dance groups, the national guard and the Northwest Community College providing the buildings to hold the con-

ference and individuals like Tommy Oontoguk with a slide show presentation, Clarence, of Wales and Fred Goodhope providing reindeer meat, and the Nome-Beltz high school students helping with cooking and setting up tables and chairs.

Willie Hensley, president of the Northwest Alaska Native Association (NANA) Development Corporation addressed the Elders Tuesday afternoon. Hensley said the Eskimo culture will thrive only as long as the "Inuit Spirit" remains healthy and unified.

"We have to pass on what you (elders) have in your heads and your souls into the children," Hensley said. "We have to teach our kids that they are Inuit, along with teaching them to be business people. Children have to learn how to live today."

"Many people don't understand how much our people have suffered in the past 130 years," Hensley said. "They forget about Whaling and mining eras which ushered in Native alcoholism and disease." People often think Alaskan history began when they

came here on the plane from Chicago."

Hensley said that despite some impediments, the Eskimo and the lands are still meshed together while the American Indians fought for their lands since 1600's and lost nearly all their lands. Hensley said that the Eskimo leaders must become involved in business and in the present economic system to succeed.

The elders, with their hundreds of years of accumulated experience and knowledge also provided entertainment for the conference audiences. Games such as maag-"a no smiling game", juggling, skits, string games, Eskimo yo-yo contests, singing and Eskimo dances from the Inupiat, Yupik and Siberian Yupik groups were presented.

As one elder said at the end of the potlatch and dances on the last day Friday, "I can't dance as long as I used to when I was a youngster. I'm happy that we can have some fun, dance and play our native games with our youngsters here to join in and be with us," she said.