

Akiachak youth look to village future

By Bill Hess
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Joe George steps out into a cold wind from the building where he and other Akiachak young people have been learning to make sleds, and returns to his village. It is a very small and a very peaceful village. A canoe sits well above the ground suspended over an old-style, hand-made fish trap or an open cache.

Off to the side of the platform a dog waits to be hitched to a team in preparation for a run into the countryside, perhaps to check some beaver traps. A short distance beyond the dog, an ax rests in a tree stump not far from a log resting on a homemade sawhorse. Just to the right of that, a man with a featureless face carries an armload of firewood and prepares to enter his sod igloo.

Everything is covered with light snow.

Nothing moves, not even the man or the dog. George's village is a creation dreamed up in his head and constructed by his hands.

George's classmates and the adults from his home village of Akiachak who walk into the high school to look at his work are proud of him. This tenth grader is a true artist, they say. Some day, with a bit of luck and a lot of work, many people may know his name.

George's village is not a two-dimensional image created with paints, pencil or pen and ink on paper or canvas. He has created it from twigs and sticks and little pieces of wood that he has carved, and placed it all on a big flat board. Another work seen nearby depicts a team of five sled dogs vigorously pulling a sled and man down a frozen trail lined with what appears to be small birch trees.

The real village where George lives has been in the news lately. When the city council government of the second class municipality resigned to recognize the tribal government chartered under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, it created quite a stir in Alaska.

The state told the village



PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Joe George and his dog team.

such a thing had never been done and that before the state could recognize the move and continue funding any projects in the village, the dissolution of the city government would have to be done their way. Even then, the state said, Akiachak would lose money.

The tribal leaders then put the matter to a community vote, and Akiachak backed their move. This should satisfy the state, the leaders said, but it didn't and the disagreements are likely to continue for a while.

George is largely unfamiliar with politics and does not know what to think of the whole thing. Whether what has happened is good or bad, he won't say. All he knows is that he wants life to go on in Akiachak much as it has, so the people can hunt, fish; do what they want, and he can continue with his art.

"I enjoy doing this," he explains. "When my dad works his art, he used to let us watch. When we grow up, he lets us know how to do art." Jesse George is the dad.

"He wants to let us know this culture of ours, like he

knows it. He's been doing this for many years and he wanted to pass it down to his children." Being a young guy, George does not yet have children, but he expects to and when he does, he wants to pass down to them what he has been learning from his father.

"He builds sleds, boats, canoes, and fish traps. He usually carves in ivory. He likes to carve animals, because he likes to hunt."

George says his father wants him to know how to do more

than just record a past Yup'ik lifestyle in art. He wants him to know how to build his own boats, canoes, fish traps, sleds.

"He wants us to know how to hunt, and how to do trapping, the beaver. It's an enjoyable life."

Edward George is a cousin of Joe George, and being a senior with a growing interest in the politics which affect life in his village, he has given the events taking place in the community a considerable thought.

"It's good that we had a government before Alaska became a state; even before the U.S. bought Alaska," he says. Edward is all in favor of the tribal government. He feels it should exercise authority over village life, including the control of fish and game.

He plans to go to college and learn engineering or business law, or perhaps more. Maybe afterward he'll come back and know how to build a bridge, he speculates, or how to help Native businesses and corporations in Akiachak to know what the laws are.

Even so, he wants to continue living subsistence. "I want to be living like we are, the Eskimo way. We should have our own IRA laws, and be able to hunt and fish anytime."

Sarah George is a cousin of Edward and she also is a cousin of Joe. She finds the subject of tribal and city governments confusing.

"I can see it both ways," Sarah says. "I'm worried about the IRA in the future. If they lose the money, what will they do for the people? What will they think, and how will they live? I feel though, that they (tribal government) have the right to own the land. For that, I think they're doing the right thing."

Sarah plans to go to college and learn about computers. She may come back to live and raise a family in Akiachak, she says. Then again, she may not.