

Native Artist Evaluates Arts And Crafts Situation at Nome

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Tundra Times
Mr. Howard Rock, Editor
Box 1287
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701

Dear Mr. Rock:

WE WOULD LIKE to submit to you our experiences in Nome, Alaska during a recent visit with hopes that it will inform any interested persons as to what is happening there in regards to fine arts and related subjects in Nome.

THROUGH THE combined efforts of the Association on American Indian Affairs, Inc. of New York and the Indian Arts and Crafts Board of the Department of the Interior, I was able to try out a three week printmaking program with the Sunarit Associates, Inc. of Nome. With the only credits towards my ability to instruct being art student finishing my last year in art school and being somewhat familiar with the Nome area, I agreed to come to Nome during a month's free period in between my wife's and my own class schedules. Jan and I both attend the San Francisco Art Institute. She took additional courses in Education at the San Francisco State College this past summer. My wife's expenses to Nome were paid through our own sources while mine were paid by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board.

WE ARRIVED in Nome on the 16th of September after an overnight stay in Fairbanks with my brother, Ron. Ron was on his way to Washington D.C. for the National Arts Council meeting there. Our first contact with Sunarit Associates was just after arrival in Nome and this was after having heard so much of it as a potentially great asset to the native craftsmen of Nome. I met with Mr. Peter Seeganna, the Assistant Supervisor for the Indian Arts and Crafts Board the first day. I learned from him and from the appearance of the workshop the overpowering barriers which Peter faces everyday in attempting to make headway towards more production of high quality crafts.

ONE OF THESE barriers is the lack of information to the public. The lack of any real communications between the people of different village roots in Nome is definitely a barrier. It was hard to realize that Nome does not really offer much of a future to its youngsters due to its factionalism of various cliques and a resultant disinterested general population.

SINCE THE MAJORITY of Nome are Eskimos, the minority of non-Eskimos have considerable influence on the majority by the following methods: The minority holds the business front though land titles and business establishments; the minority are the maj-

ority in handling tourist oriented establishments selling native crafts and productions of ceremonial dances; the majority of the Eskimo children of King Island Village are still lacking educational incentives to learn the importance of reading and writing; the permanent working class of Nome does not have appreciation of the majority's past history and culture as a viable part of Nome's historic past, hence the Nome City Museum is only open when tourists arrive; leadership for the native groups is lacking support from the minority's stronger organizations; housing for the majority's people is kept at minimal standards to date even when federal and state funds are now being utilized for Nome housing; and, the Nome newspaper does not over-extend itself to the majority's area of news and dissent.

TO BE SURE, a lot of the substandard way of living is the way the Nome natives have chosen as their ultimate resignation towards the best they can afford. Nothing better is presented by anyone as of yet.

THE LOCAL RADIO station in Nome, KICY, showed avid interest in helping the Sunarit Associates, but they had not been made aware of the association until I telephoned them about the printmaking project and of the arrival of Mr. Vincent Price, chairman of the commissioners of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board.

THE KING ISLAND Village of Nome is an outcropping from such conditions as the above mentioned and sticks out like a sore thumb because the people moved to Nome more or less at the same time. From fifteen or so years ago when the King Islanders first settled in Nome permanently, they were the last native group to be at first ostracized by the general Nome public. Their children were humiliated by other children as being backward and illiterate.

TODAY THEY ARE accepted as people but their economy at present cannot extricate them from cruel exploitation emerging from all directions. They do not own the land underneath their shacks. These lands are for the most part owned by various gold mining speculators of yesterday who today live in places away from Nome.

NOT ALL THE houses are shacks; three or four families have managed to keep some sort of pride going and do maintain exceptionally neat and sizable houses. But those that have the pride also have the insights of seeing much better opportunities away from the village and one of the larger houses is rented out while the family has moved to Southeastern Alaska.

THE HOUSES DO NOT conform to Nome's city planning committee's rules, therefore most of Nome feel King Island Village

is not part of incorporated Nome. Nome's sanitary services do not bother to extend their services to the Village.

THE TOURIST BUSINESS in Nome make it a point to include King Island Village in their itineraries, extolling the genius and uniqueness of ivory carvers and Eskimo dancers. But they do not encourage contemporary design or furnish comfortable inns as are made available for incoming tourists. Tourism is such a good deal for Nome that the newspaper disapproved of laying cement sidewalks on the front street in place of the boardwalks of old.

NOME WAS HOLDING its latest city government elections just before we left. For the first time, the native element in Nome was a key campaigning factor. Two candidates of Eskimo descent were trying for open seats in the city council. Their success may prove to be the breakthrough needed to represent the native people and incite them towards a more active role in speaking out for the needs of the natives. However, the voting public of Nome has traditionally numbered in the low twohundreds (out of 3,000 population), showing the number of people who trust in the elective system as a constructive means of representation and how many are capable of understanding the elective system at all.

JAN AND I FIRST approached the older people of King Island Village to find out who amongst them would be interested in attending our printmaking workshop. As most older native groups in Alaska, they distrusted any progressive introductions of new ideas especially if brought out by younger people. They listened quietly and responded quietly. Their leader who emcees the native dances said in effect, "We have enough problems trying to make ends meet; we are satisfied with immediate payment from the airlines for our endeavors. Let them hunt up the younger generation who do not work towards our livelihood."

Another said, "If it is instruction in abstract art, I do not personally want to participate, it has no meaning for me."

SO, WE ENDED up with a totally new age group—11 years old to 18 years old. They were receptive to a new media. They had to start something themselves and only asked when they felt their media (wood-block printing) gave them specific problems. Even if the average age turned out to be 14½ years old, they produced more than the printmaking department at the University of Alaska within three weeks time.

A GOOD NUMBER of them showed excellent potential in the art of blockprinting, maybe mainly because they are continually exposed to some type of carving at the King Island Village. Many did not know how to spell as was apparent in their attempts to write out titles for their editions. For some, it was noticeable that they had some type of hearing problem when they looked

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so eager to learn of a new way of carving but could not understand what I said until I spoke louder; for others it was simply the fact that reading and writing does not start at home—it is pounded to them like other normal readers and writers at school and punishment to them for lacking reading or writing skills is considered a puzzling but accepted occurrence to be expected from new teachers.

SOME OF THEM spoke very fluent Eskimo and seemed to be more able to read and write. Others spoke very bad English and knew very little about even the most elementary spelling. Still others thought that the only means of showing drawing ability emerged from knowing how to draw snow igloos which do not exist in Nome. Very few experimented with other things such as flowers, houses, or automobiles. The most popular objects to draw were animals like polar bear, walrus and seal and figures such as Eskimo hunters or fishermen—the subject matter used by the elders for making carvings for sale.

DRAWING ABILITY to all of them meant a strenuous trial and error method on a very small piece of paper, with much erasing and redoing, to form the smallest image of the various types of ivory carving positions of man and animals.

WE LEFT NOME feeling that there should definitely be some changes made. One of them being our length of stay; it was not nearly enough to prove anything. Three short weeks is too short to try and work out some changes towards the betterment of such an organization as the Sunarit Associates.

WE ONLY SHOWED that the Nome King Island youngsters have not yet learned to mistrust outside help. (Inside help not excluded, but we have not yet seen who is interested enough for inside helping. We did talk with the Vista workers and with the Nome Public Schools' Art Teacher, unfortunately for only a short while.)

THE INSIDE HELP is available through the association's members if they are aware of the possibilities. And if they agree on some sort of an organizational policy which would enable responsible and able youngsters to form their own sub-organization.

MR. PETER SEEGANNA is the Assistant Supervisor of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board. His job is to be the advisor for the Sunarit Associates and act as overall overseer of the building and its contents which are for the most part property of the U.S. Government.

HIS MAIN shortcomings seem to be: his duties are written down and they are the only specific duties apparent in the operations as it is now; they are too easily overpowered by the elders of King Island Village who are used to the system of elder respect before allocation and recognition of powers by the younger; the workshop is so close to the King Island Village that others who may be interested are not encouraged to assimilate themselves to specific King Island Village problems; King Island Village pre-school children, much like other pre-school children, are a rambunctious lot and yet the parents allow them into the place of work, mainly because of the lack of play room at home or elsewhere; his family will not separate his working time from his obligations to his immediate family—since acquiring the use of a vehicle, this problem is twice-fold in its complicity—at all hours of the day, he is called upon to act as a chauffeur. If he does not do this, he may be further estranged by his own

village as a disrespectful bureaucrat; his effectiveness as an advisor is lessened all the more by the lack of a strong organization of the Sunarit Associates, Inc. itself.

PETER MAY BE able to overcome some of these problems in time, but for the associations beginning at efficiency, they should be resolved very soon.

MR. BERNARD KATEXAC is a fine printmaker himself and his post as president of the Sunarit Associates might well benefit from this ability. We had asked him if he would continue the instruction of printmaking to the young group and his reaction did not seem very enthusiastic. He also has to make his position felt to the King Island Village and he tends to identify more with the elder group.

THE IMPORTANCE of carrying on what was started during our three week stay has therefore been left quite up in the air due to the three or four different age groups of King Island Village. We also suggested scrap ivory collages, combination of soapstone and wood sculpture, Nome beach pebble and drift wood assemblages, hide prints, and tin can engravings utilizing hand wringers (the roller-type) for make-shift presses to experiment and keep the young people interested in expressing themselves.

THE OLDEST GROUP feel that their traditional habits are lost in a world of progress. They will leave the new things to their young. The mature but still young feel they understand the life patterns of both the elder and the younger groups and can make do with a little hunting, a little fishing, a little working and a little relaxation.

THEN THERE IS the 18-25 age group who feel left out from mostly everything. The ones left in Nome feel they need not cater to any group and being too old to play childish games, usually revert to drinking excessively and frequently as a pastime. This pastime further alienates this unfortunate age group when the elders give up hope for them to only name them worthless ingrates. This group also absorbs some of the very young—the last group of the age groups—by being influential as slightly older with a pastime to offer.

IN A NUTSHELL, this has been our experience in Nome and much has to be done in order to educate such youngsters as those we had a fleeting glance at in Nome. There is no longer a strong

elderly chief who traditionally took upon his shoulders the brunt of all the responsibilities of efficiently running the village.

TODAY THE CHIEF is a young man who has other obligations—work outside of Nome, a family of his own and a dissipated clan.

FOR TWO AND a half weeks, Jan and I were able to present ourselves to the younger group as persons they needn't feel uncomfortable with, persons who didn't have exploitation or personal promotion in mind and last but not least, persons they could learn something from of themselves and of their own potential.

Sincerely yours,
Joseph E. Senungetuk

cc:

Mr. Peter J. Seeganna, Assistant Supervisor, Indian Arts and Crafts Board

Mr. Bernard Katexac, President, Sunarit Associates, Inc.

Mr. William Byler, Executive Director, Association on American Indian Affairs