

# Appearances differ, problems same for Samis

By Bill Hess  
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They are the aboriginal inhabitants of a far northern land; natives of a tundra-covered, sometimes mountainous terrain who traditionally take their livelihood from the land, sea and the rivers and lakes which surround them. Although bound together by a common language and culture, colonists moving into their territory from elsewhere have drawn four international boundaries across their land.

One of those boundaries is ruled by the Soviet Union and, despite their efforts and desires only the smallest amount of contact with their relatives on that side of the border is allowed. Even in the other three, more "democratic" nations, the Natives must continually fight to save what they can of their land and water rights, their language, heritage, religion and right to subsist.

The Inuit of Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Siberia? No. The Sami of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. While Alaskan audiences may have at first had a hard time identifying five, fair skinned — some blond and blue-eyed — Sami visitors as Native people who are in many ways similar to themselves, the common bond became quite apparent by the time they departed for their homeland last week.

The five, who came from Norway and Sweden, were participating in a student exchange program between the Rural Education Department of the University of Alaska and the Sami Institute. Two years ago, several Alaska Native visited the Sami homeland on the first part of the exchange.

Ralph Eluska, director of Rural Education and the vice-president of the National Congress of American Indians noted that once the Alaska Natives who visited the Samis had a chance to hear their folk songs, see their slide shows and talk to them, it became apparent that the Samis bore many similarities to their Alaskan hosts.

The Samis, who toured the Anchorage, Juneau, Fairbanks, Kotzebue, Nome, Unalakleet and Bethel areas, agreed. "The lifestyle, how they live off nature, I could see many similarities in the way we use the Nature," explained Inger Kvoljok of Sweden, who holds a doctorate in ethnology, and who has spent much time herding reindeer with her family.

"Perhaps they do not use the same tools and implements, but it is the same nature, the same animals; the same fishing and hunting. You could see and feel something common," said Kvoljok.

Per Guttorm from Oumea University in Sweden, had a kind word to say about all the places they visited in Alaska, starting with a salmon and halibut feast at Eluska's An-



Jan Henry Keskitalo (left), leader of the Sami student group, visits with Hugh Beach, who is working with NANA's reindeer herd and who has spent time in Sami land, and Inger Kvoljok, as Per Guttorm Kvenangen and Magne Ove Varsi zip by on a three-wheeler. Not pictured is Gudrun Elissa Eriksen who had to return home early due to a death

chorage home.

"If you are talking about Juneau, I am really interested in the Native lifestyle." The Samis were taken out on a boat for some subsistence fishing. "We caught 130 salmon," noted Guttorm. "It was great. We caught one king salmon. Then if you go to Kotzebue, here we got to witness Eskimo dancing (and eat muktuk, see Native Olympic sports, and get weathered in). They're great, and I really like this Eskimo dancing. I'm going to like it forever.

"Then if you are going to Nome, I always mention when we were fishing up the river. We did not catch so many as Southeast, only two. But it was a good time."

In Unalakleet, as well as in Nome, Bethel, and Kotzebue, Guttorm noted that they met people of Sami descent. The Samis were brought to Alaska to help launch the first reindeer programs in the territory. The best thing in Unalakleet was meeting a Sami woman who could still speak the language.

"The most important thing," said Magne Ovi Varsi, a young journalist from Norway who works with the Sami newspaper SAMILAIGI, "is to get contacts so that in the future, the indigenous people in the world can get more together; to fight for their rights, their land rights, their human rights. I think our trip is a little part of that contact."

Eluska, who is active with the World Council of Indigenous People, agreed. "The aspects of assimilation are sim-

iliar to all of us wherever we go. One common theme seems to surface wherever I go. Through the efforts of NCAI

and WCIP, we seem to be coming together as indigenous people from all over the world."

Eluska has been invited to

attend a Sami council conference next month as a representative of NCAI. The executive committee of WCIP will also be there.

Jan Henry Keskitalo of Norway, the leader of the group, noted that education is one way of reaching such goals, but he observed that education here and in his country faces similar obstacles.

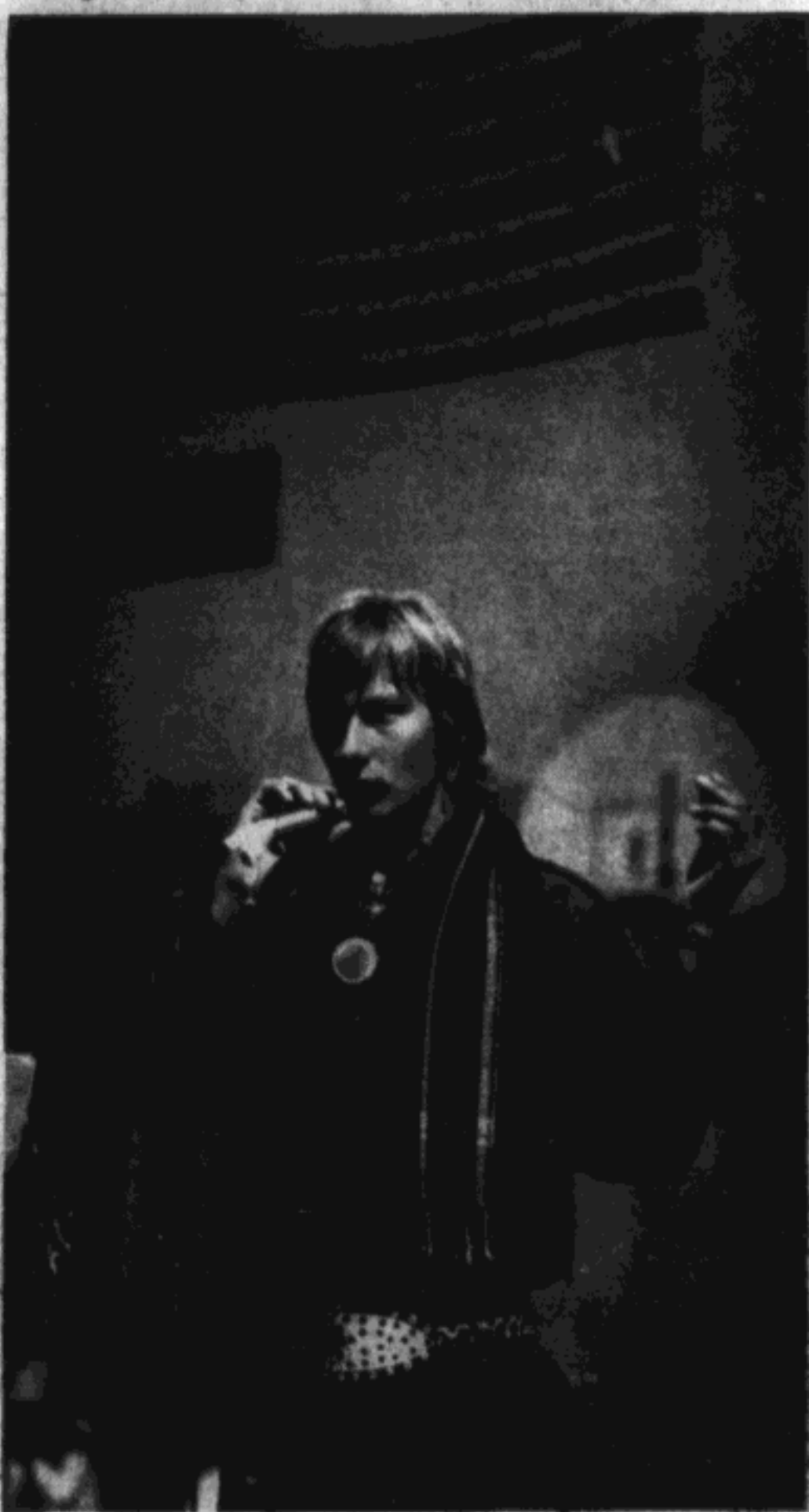
"I learned that in some villages they are trying to develop their own school systems (as an alternate to the state systems," Keskitalo noted. "So there must be something in the state-operated system that does not fit the small villages and societies. We learned that in the curriculum, the purpose is not always what the people expect it to be. We have the same situation."

The Samis situation is similar to Alaska Natives in many respects, but they have been facing the effects of colonialism longer and have yet to obtain most of the rights they claim as indigenous people, including many that Alaskans have made progress on.

The first explorations into Sami land by Europeans from Southern Scandinavia and other places in Europe began about the time of Christ, according to the visitors. "We had already lived there for thousands and thousands of years," said Varsi. "It was about 900 when the first colonists used the words, 'this is my land!'" he added.

The first people to begin moving into their homeland were Christian missionaries.

(Continued on Page Four)



PHOTOS BY BILL HESS

Magne Ovi Varsi addresses Alaskans gathered at Kotzebue Northwest Native Trade Fair.



# Samis battle governmental intrusion

(Continued from Page Three)

followed by miners. There were no wars, the Samis say, as they were basically a non-violent people who lived on hunting, trapping, and fishing, and were scattered about over wide areas and had no system for making war. The colonists simply moved in, decided what they wanted, and took it.

According to the Sami visitors, the same attitude remains today. They estimate their numbers in the countries of Norway, Sweden and Finland to be between 40- and 50,000. No treaties or land claims agreements were ever made between the Samis and those governments. Today, the Samis said, they find that whenever the governments feel they want to do something on the land lived and worked on by the Samis, they do it.

The Samis have taken the governments to court many times, but with little success. Most dramatic is the Alta case, where the Norwegian government decided to build a large hydro-electric dam which would flood out the grazing lands used by the Sami for 25,000 reindeer. Although the government allows reindeer herders to use the land, fish on it, hunt on it, and cut timber to build the small homes they use while herding, it

does not allow them to own the land. Farmers can own land but not herders, according to the Samis.

That did not stop them from protesting when the decision was made to build the dam. "The first non-violent demonstrations began in 1979, when they began to build the road," Varsi explained. "Seven young Samis went south to Oslo and went on a hunger strike for one week. The federal government capitulated, and promised to start an investigation."

Instead, said Varsi, they started the project. A second hunger strike was staged, this time for 40 days. The strikers had to be moved across the border into Sweden, as the government planned to hospitalize them and feed them intravenously. The government was unmoved.

Next, 1,000 protestors, including a majority of non-Samis sympathetic to their struggle, chained themselves together and attempted to block the road. The police severed the chains with electric drills, and then, at what Keskitalo says was a cost of \$12.8 million dollars, they used airplanes, helicopters, snowmachines and dogs to round up

and arrest all 1,000 demonstrators.

Construction has since begun on the dam, and a lawsuit brought by the Samis to prevent it has been rejected by the Norwegian Supreme Court. The demonstrations were not without result, however, as the publicity and pressure brought upon the government caused it to form a committee, composed both of Sami and non-Sami, to investigate the claims of the Sami. A similar committee has been formed in Sweden.

Nils A. Somby was one Sami who chose to carry the struggle a bit further than did his non-violent compatriots. Along with a partner, Somby tried to sneak in some explosives to blow up a bridge leading to the site. Unfortunately, the explosives went off in his hands, causing him to lose his left arm and his left eye.

While he was awaiting his trial, other Samis smuggled

him out of the country and flew him to Canada, where he was adopted by an Indian Tribe in British Columbia. "He's an Indian now," says Varsi. Although Canada and Norway do not have an extradition treaty, his whereabouts is kept strictly secret, according to Varsi, as the Canadian officials have been seeking him also.

"It is not just the damage to the 25,000 reindeer, the forests, the salmon and the salmon berries," said Varsi of the frustration his people feel over the Alta incident. "It's all a question of the right to the land, and the water; the right to use it, when we have been living on it for thousands of years, before anyone else."

Land is not the only Sami right infringed upon by the colonists. Keskitalo explained how in the late 1800s, a law was passed forbidding the Sami language in the schools; the

law stayed in effect until the 1960's. Another law required the Norwegian language to be used in all purchases of land. Many Samis then took on Norwegian names in the hopes they would be able to get farms, Varsi noted.

Religion suffered as well. The Sami religion was considered evil by the missionaries, and every attempt was made to end it. The visitors noted with some irony that in some cases, the same missionaries involved in bringing in the good word were also involved in bringing in the alcohol which was destroying many of the people.

"To read the Bible is not the same as being taught by the Christian people," said Guttorm. "You can read the Bible and get something good, then go to the priest and get something else."