

**Part I of a Series . . . A Personal Narrative . . .**

# **An Early Northern Summer**

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Spring and summer seasons unfold differently all across the north. Here, people count the days till the river ice goes; there, upriver, a village is still locked in snowstorms grip.

Snow and ice do not melt the same in Kake as they do in Kiana; spring is not the same in Nondalton as it is in Noorvik,

although both are Eskimo villages. Summers in Selawik and Savoonga are vastly different, although both conduct their affairs according to the seasonal clock of the Bering Sea.

Even in Kiana, Noorvik, and Selawik, all Inupiat Eskimo villages in Northwest Alaska, located within a hundred miles of each other, are not quite

the same, although their summers are one.

I recently spent several days earlier this month travelling in these three towns conducting an evaluation of state aid to rural municipalities. This is what I saw, heard and felt:

Kiana is about a half an hour flight east from Kotzebue, located at the junction of the Kobuk and Squirrel

Rivers. I am abruptly dropped on the gravel airstrip by a pilot who is getting his kicks by racing a competitor (who is on a flight to Noorvik) back to Kotzebue.

Peering though the dust left by my intrepid sky pilot, I see a pick-up that seems to be waiting for me. When I ask the driver for directions to the hotel, he motions me in.

Whether Don Smith, Sr. knew I was coming, or just happened to be driving by, I was never quite sure, but he made me feel welcome with wide grin and strong handshake.

The hotel is a mobile unit, one of those Atco rigs they used in construction camps, complete with kitchen. The

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company that built the nifty new high school left the rig behind and sold it to the NANA Regional Corporation (Kotzebue), who converted it into a hotel, managed by local people. A room is \$25 per night, cash, for a single. The food is a little steep; until noon tomorrow, I will live on the food in my pack.

As the day grows long, the shadows grow long and dark. I go in search of Mayor Vince Scheurch, but find he is downriver fishing. So much for business.

Birds are everywhere. I do not think I have ever seen a place where birds make so much noise: robins, swallows, warblers and chickadees and snipes cheep and chirp and giggle constantly.

Kiana is on a river bluff and gets a nice breeze, which helps keep mosquitoes down. It's also good for drying fish. And clothes.

Whitefish and a few sheefish are drying on racks made of spruce or willow poles. Whitefish are netted the year round, a woman tells me, even under the ice. The mass of migrating sheefish are still below Noorvik, waiting for the silt to settle as the river falls from snowmelt levels.

I am told the people will tire of eating just fish, supplemented with store-bought foods, a few ducks or geese. They want caribou, badly.

The precipitous decline of the Western Arctic caribou herd is a story too long for telling now. Suffice it to say that there are few caribou in this area last year that many of the special permits issued for taking of three bulls for most families were unused. Beef, retailed by three stores in Kiana, is in short supply.

Housing for the 300 people living in Kiana ranges from a few old log cabins to variations on the classic, small, bush plywood frame houses to new government sponsored, painted frame houses.

Although spruce grows here, it is mixed thoroughly with willows and does not grow very big. House logs must be obtained way upriver.

The only reminder of the ancient Inupiat house made out of tundra sod is one frame house on short pilings that uses sod as skirting around the base to keep it warm.

A lot of old and new freight sled. Maybe enough dogs to make a few respectable teams. A lot of snowmachines. Several men are putting rafters on a building for snowmachine storage and repair.

Unable to carry out my official mission, I retire early, trying to hide my eyes from the sun I know will never set.

I awake early. Still the sun, blasting relentlessly through the window. I have absolutely no sense of time, except a certainty that it is early, because no one is about. Except those birds.

I decide to take a walk, sure that I will find breakfast sizzling when I return. I stroll quietly across town. Not quietly enough for the town dogs, who, chained to their stakes, set up a frightful din at my passing, howling and whinnying like I was Lucifer stealing away with the village soul.

I continue meekly past the airstrip to the cemetery. So many children's graves. The north has always been a hard

place to live; oil companies and Teamsters will never alter that truth.

Out the short road to the dump, the thick sweet smell of spruce and willow. Fireweed

and lupine coming up. A few wildflower blossoms bursting forth, urgently. In just a few days, the days will begin to shorten again, already. Fall comes in August.

Part of an old caribou antler, a hoof by the side of the road.

Feeling a little weary from the heat, and a lot hungry, I return to the hotel. Still no one. I give up and go to bed.

I awake sometime later. Is it minutes? Or days later? Not a soul around. Is this Kiana, or some whistle stop in the twilight zone?

To test this theory, I take another walk toward the fringes of town and return. Pacing my short room, I recognize the drone of a plane, coming to rescue me from my hallucinations. (Or is it a spaceshi) from another planet?). I look toward the airstrip and see several people and a couple of trucks. I start for the center of town . . . a person! . . . another! Several people, all moving toward the river.

Actually, they are moving toward the post office, since that plane brought the mail. I find Elwood Atoruk, the vice mayor, waiting in line and ask him the time: 8:25 a.m.

No wonder the dogs howled at me, it must have been nearly four hours ago.

There is a lot of talk today about the first barge of the season. A state official, working out of Nome, arrives in Kiana a little after nine o'clock to help finalize city plans to hire ten village kids to do cleanup work this summer. He reports seeing the barge between here and Noorvik.

I must place a call to Anchorage. The one village phone is here in the city building. It costs 50 cents to use the phone. I have no trouble reaching my party, but my voice is not transmitted by satellite as fast as I am talking. I must finish a sentence, wait for my party to hear the whole message and listen carefully for his answer.

The city clerk collects the phone fees and interviews the kids for summer jobs.

Today is hotter than yesterday. Less breeze, more flies and mosquitoes.

A woman hanging more whitefish puts a tarpaulin over her rack so the fish don't spoil in the heat.

The barge finally arrives, carrying stove oil, diesel fuel for the town's electric generator, plus 75,000 gallons of gasoline, to be retailed for snowmachines and outboards by Scheurch's Trading Post.

A skiff arrives from Noorvik to pick up 210 pounds of frozen french fries, about 30 pounds of frozen meat, a case of ketchup, and a few other items not needed by the Kiana Hotel that are in short supply at the Noorvik Hotel. I beg a ride to Noorvik and soon we are skimming our way down the slow green Kobuk.

I should have realized the trip to Noorvik was going to be a little breezy. After helping load the groceries, I watched my companions don parkas for the trip down; I pull my couderoy sport jacket around me tight.

Still, its good to be on the move.

Some of the riverbanks are freshly cut away by high water.

For 25 miles we twist and bend with the Kobuk. In alternating stretches, where the easterly breeze ruffles the water, the two of us in front are battered mercilessly on our wooden seats. I try to keep my seat without losing my manhood, clutching the gunwale with one hand and trying to keep my ridiculous rag of a coat wrapped around me.

This goes on for a couple of miles, then we are slicing through soft green calm, now sparkling in the sun, now turning dark and deep as the sun is hidden behind a huge convoy of white clouds.

Spruce and willow march right to the edge of the stream, the, nothing but willow, then more spruces. A new channel quietly enters this one. A few ducks and seagulls.

Another bend. The hull pounds the riffles and I clench my teeth.

We pass a barge bearing heavy equipment. Then Noorvik.

A bigger town, between five and six hundred people. So big, in fact that it has distinct old and new sections. Some of the older houses and cabins are as old as 60 years.

One of the biggest topics of conversation in Kiana was the fire they had in Noorvik two nights ago. Six homes in the old section were lost. Four of them still inhabited when the fire broke out. When I arrive in Noorvik in the late afternoon, I find the fire still smoking, even flames in the very center of the burn.

Fortunately no one was lost, but food caches were destroyed as well as water and fuel storage tanks, and building housing the one telephone in the village. A couple of snowmachines charred to a crisp. I see an ax head with no handle, some child's old school assignments, browned around the edges. I cannot imagine how the satellite receiver survived—it stands a few feet from the building where the telephone was. Somehow the paint did not even blister.

Noorvik's legislative representatives have been pushing for funds for firefighting equipment. I am told that Alaska Governor Jay Hammond will be here in a few days to present awards to the National Guard detachment and that villagers will escort him to the fire site to do a little lobbying of their own. The governor will also be reminded of the fire that destroyed the high school power plant last year.

The hotel, identical to the one in Kiana, and established under identical circumstances is filled with RCA crew, fixing the phone. There is also a crew from the Alaska Native Industries Cooperative Association to help inventory the Native store, first of its kind in Alaska to repay its loan from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

There are six other, smaller stores in Noorvik.

There are more fish drying here than in Kiana; more sheefish.

Tonight, even as it grows late and the shadows stretch in the twilight, women are cleaning fish down by the river. Smoky smudge fires are kept burning to keep the mosquitoes away, green wood and grass.

A woman, deftly wielding her ulu and sharpening stone, tells me there is a white man staying with she and her husband:

"He's a nice guy too."

Why is he in town?

"Just looking around, hooking for sheefish. I freeze some for him."

Lots of sheefish. But people want meat-caribou meat.

A white man working at the store tells me beef runs \$5 to \$6 per pound and insists they won't starve without meat.

But they want it, badly. The Eskimos agree there are a lot of caribou in northwest Alaska this year, but none near Noorvik right now. If there were, they would kill some, regardless of fish and game restrictions.

I return to my room to write. A lot of kids are riding bikes, a few people are visiting. A woman tells me people do not visit so much

since the television came.

My work is interrupted now and then by the dogs sounding off in unison. Six families run dog teams in the winter time.

It's late and I'm tired. Tomorrow will be a long day, starting with rain, but clearing and growing hot before the day is too old.

The phone is not repaired, so I send a message to the air taxi service. This is tricky. I persuade the health aid to use her government radio to call the Public Health Service in Kotzebue, who will call KOTZ Radio, who will then broadcast my message over the air. With any luck, the flying service will get the message.

They do, and by 4:15 I am on my way to Selawik.

Via Kiana.

(Next week: Adventures in Selawik and observations of an envious urban dweller of the way Inupiat live today.)