

Natives making the most of doing time

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times

Editor's note: On a recent day, there were 1,235 people incarcerated in Alaska's prisons and jails. Another 96 were residing in half-way houses (the last step before freedom, and some 200 Alaskans were being housed in the federal prison system in different facilities in the Lower 48.

Of this total of 1,531 persons, close to 40 percent, or nearly 600 people, were Alaska Natives. Many hailed from the villages; others from the cities. Nearly all had one element in common: the crimes they committed; from burglary to sex offense to murder, were committed while under the influence of alcohol. Many of the non-Natives in prison also did their crimes while intoxicated.

As one inmate from Southwest Alaska put it, each holds the key on whether or not to come back inside once he or she is out: that key is the decision on whether or not to abuse alcohol. Many "substance abuse" programs have been implemented at various times to help the inmates over their drinking problems.

The Native inmates at the Hiland Mountain Correctional Center in Eagle River seem to have come upon one of the most effective tools yet for combating alcohol: the Native Cultural Council, wherein they seek to learn of the spiritual and traditional values which served their people well before the influx of modern society.

It is Wednesday evening at the Hiland Mountain Correctional Center. Paul Little Chief, spiritual advisor to the approximately 20 inmates gathered inside a classroom, is talking about the traditional purposes of the sweat lodge. Suddenly, he is interrupted by the strains of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" reverberating through the wall. A group of evangelistic Christians have just opened their services in the next room.

Little Chief stops briefly, then continues on as a member of his audience makes a quick joke about the singers in the next room facing the wall, so their voices will convert those in this room.

Both groups have gathered for similar reasons; to strengthen themselves spiritually, so that once they leave this place, they will hopefully never have to come back. There is a major difference, however. Inmates from "Phase I" and from the women's dorm are allowed to

participate in the Christian meeting, but not in the Native cultural meeting.

Prison authorities speak highly of the council, praising it as being the strongest organization within Hiland Mountain. They do not see it as a religion, however, but rather as an organization similar in nature to the Jaycees.

Like virtually all the inmates here, Harry John, chief of the council until his recent move to a half-way house, committed a crime while under the influence of alcohol; a particularly violent crime. For that, he had been imprisoned in the federal prison system Outside. There, he became active in cultural groups, and participated in the sweat lodge and other ceremonies.

"Every time they said something in the sweatlodge, I could remember one of the elders in the village say the same thing when I was young," John remembers. Like the value of sharing. "In the village, if one person was starving, that meant everybody was starving," John says.

Hiland Mountain is a unique prison in Alaska or just about anywhere else. While inmates can not leave, they are given more freedom and privileges than at most other institutions, especially those ones Outside where John spent his time. According to Frank Sauser, the superintendent of Hiland Mountain, inmates there are expected to progress; they are required to take 35 hours of instruction a week, of classes ranging from alcohol and drug abuse to college courses.

Only inmates who have shown good behavior elsewhere and the potential to become contributing members of society are allowed to come to Hiland Mountain, according to Sauser: those who do not progress will not stay.

In the Outside prisons, John says it was the influence of the Native American groups which led to him straightening up his behavior enough to earn a place at Hiland Mountain. On June 6, he is scheduled for parole.

The council was already organized when John got to Hiland Mountain, but was not as active as it could have been. "Natives were just sitting around, doing nothing. They had no incentive."

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Cultural Club proves invaluable to inmates

PHOTO BY BILL HESS



Daniel Ames smiles broadly after being voted in as Harry John's replacement as council chief.

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Only three inmates showed up for the first meeting John attended. Subsequently he became a major force in inviting speakers in from outside the prison, and in establishing activities that made others want to get in and help.

"The secret," he says is in asking, "hey, what can I do to help out the council, to make things better," rather than, "what can the council do for me?"

The council grew. Potlatches involving not only prisoners of many races but also scores of people from organizations outside the walls, including cor-

porations, cultural, student, political and athletic groups were held. When Harry, about to leave for a half-way house, was succeeded recently as chief by Daniel Ames, the weekly meetings had grown to lively gatherings of as many as 25 people.

Sauser, noting the difficulties involved in staging a potlatch with so many involved, especially when transportation must be set up, praises the organization's effort. It has been beneficial for the entire prison community, says Sauser. "It's not an exclusive group. They're not 'for Natives only.' Everyone was able to participate in

the potlatch. The council gives other inmates the opportunity to understand Natives better; it eases the tension."

One such inmate is Art Stewart. "I didn't know anything about what a Native dance was before I came here," he muses over a dinner table in the cafeteria. Stewart came into the Center from the Third Avenue Jail last June at the same time John entered. Although he had been in Alaska for some time, Natives were foreign to him. John got him involved in cooking for two potlatches, along with non-Native Greg Maynard.

Stewart became interested in the Native philosophy, which he recognized as similar to his own "only deeper — it almost makes a white man envious," he says.

Although Stewart is the project coordinator of the inmate council, he agrees with Sauser that the cultural council is the strongest and most positively influential organization in the prison. The inmate council contributed \$600 to the Natives for the last potlatch, he says to back up his point.

"Everyone agreed, there was full cooperation. That's almost unheard of here. Anything else we want to do with our money; basketball, get a new stereo, we always lock horns. Everybody supported the Native Cultural Council."

Bill Amarok, Inupiat from Nome, said he knew nothing nor cared nothing about his Native ways before becoming involved with the council. "There was nothing else to do, so I went to the meetings," he notes. "I have found out we have a history before the white man came. I missed out on learning my language because it was forbidden in schools when my parents were going."

Amarok has taken an interest in Native corporations as well, and hopes to one day work for the Bering Straits Regional Corporation after earning a degree in business management. He has earned 60 credits toward his degree in prison.

He is skeptical about the history behind the corporations, fearing a great deal may be lost come 1991. "I don't really know much about it. Just what I pick out of the newspapers . . . maybe I'm just hearing one side of the coin," he says.

Amarok is also interested in learning about the Indian Reorganization Act governments.

Not all the Natives in the prison participate. Some have little interest.

Felix Walker, ivory carver from Scammon Bay who is well respected within the prison walls, says he attended a cultural council meeting once. It reminded him of the village council meetings back home, of which he had never been fond. He does not rule

Cultural club helps form pride in prison

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out the possibility of joining in with the council from time to time, but he is not active.

Those who are active tend to give each other support they might not otherwise have. Daniel Ames, the new chief, is serving five years on a conviction of vehicular manslaughter which he claims he is innocent of and which he is fighting. His own problems aside, when Sinka Crane came to the table at which Ames was sitting during a break, Ames had an ear for his problem.

Crane has been paroled four times, and has always been returned in violation of his parole. "Sinka, once you get out of here," Ames brings up Crane's pending release date, "I would be very hurt if I ever heard you were back!"

Meanwhile, the council is working to get a sweat lodge established within the prison. Paul Little Chief is pointing out the American Indian Freedom of Religion Act, and the

fact that sweat lodges have been successfully established in prisons in the Lower 48.

Harry John argues that before many of the spiritual leaders of his Athabascan people died of imported disease, they carried out sweat lodge ceremonies similar to those conducted by Little Chief, a Cheyenne pipe carrier. All of life is part of the traditional belief, he adds.

Sauser says he is taking a cautiously optimistic look at the sweat lodge. There are bureaucratic questions such as building and fire codes to be dealt with. He says he must consider the reaction of other inmates if the Natives are allowed to build such a structure. They might want something of their own, too. He must find out if a sweatlodge is a requirement in Native religion. "I don't know," he says.

at yet as a religion in the prison, says Sauser, but that could change.

Until it does, the women from the neighboring dorm will not have a guaranteed place in the cultural meetings.

Hannah Wesley of Noatak notes that the women used to be able to attend such func-

tions, but that these privileges ended when one inmate managed to get pregnant. "I myself like being in Native culture. I don't think it's fair to punish all of us for just one person."

Eileen Sovalik of Barrow

agrees. "It was a white girl that got pregnant," she says. "I am part of Native culture. I should be allowed to attend."

When Native culture gets recognition equal to organized churches, she will be.



PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Hannah Wesley (left) and Eileen Sovalik (right) are escorted back to the womens' dorm after a GED class.