

The Ferguson Family comes North

"Rustguard"

...Ed Yost

He was the "King of Kotzebue".

Some called him the "World's Craziest Pilot," others, "a buccaneer" and the slipperiest of Arctic businessmen. But everyone who ran into him considered him one of the most colorful characters in Alaskan history.

Specifically, he was Archie Ferguson of Kotzebue, a remarkable man whose fame and notoriety was so widespread that even two decades after his death, people burst into laughter when his name is mentioned.

But Archie was more than a colorful character of the Last Frontier. He symbolized the transitional period of the Arctic. Arriving above the Arctic Circle before the airplane changed the face of Alaska, he died at the end of the heyday of the wild and reckless days on the Northern Frontier. He was the consummate frontier businessman, con and character combined. As such, Archie Ferguson shaped an incredible chunk of American history that will never be again.

Physically, he was a sight to behold. In his younger days, he could have been described as thin and wiry. By the time he reached his prime in his 50's—weighed around 190 pounds—he was most appropriately described as "short and built like a potato" [1]. He stood all of five-foot-four and in his middle-ages, that was probably the dimension around his girth as well. Other descriptions which applied to him included "gnarly," "dumpy," "roly-poly," "dwarfish," and "impish." He looked like

one of Santa's middle-aged elves who had somehow escaped from the drudgery of North Pole toy-making to opt for the good life in Kotzebue.

If his physical features did not put him in a class by himself, his voice surely did. Archie didn't talk; he cackled, "like Donald Duck." [2] He usually wore a belt that was too large for his waist size and left the end of it dangling in the wind. He never walked anywhere; he ran. He was always singing the same few, distracting bars of a song no one knew, the lyrics of which Archie only knew one word: "today." He couldn't "carry a tune in a bucket," Baptist minister Richard Miller remembers, and was always "rocketing about from one thing to another." [3]

Comically, Archie ran around so much that all of his shoes had their toes turned up. When he came into his restaurant from the snow he would put his wet shoes under the oil stove. As the shoes dried, the toes would curl up on their own.

He was always laughing, telling stories, most of them about himself, epitomizing the fine Alaskan art of absurdity—treating absurd notions about Alaska as if they were the unvarnished truth. His high pitched, whiny voice was always going "the one speed he had," former Alaska Gov. Jay Hammond remembered: "full throttle." He would converse at great length on any subject, whether he knew anything about it or not, and just as often, answered his own questions before anyone else has the chance to break into the conversation.

Archie spoke a strange English. He "Archie-fied" words, slaughtering the English language unmercifully. "Siberia" invariably came out "Serbia". "Cabaret girls" became "carrot girls". "Cessna" changed in his lingo to "Cessn". "Meteorology" was always "metricology". "Navigation" was nadigation" and "Manchuria emerged as "Mankura".

There was absolutely no word Archie could not mispronounce. [4] Adding to his unique verbal style, his pithy speech pattern was punctuated with vulgarities, a great number of them broadcast over the radio, a personal failing of which the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) was constantly reminding him and concerning which they maintained a growing pile of complaints against him.

Archie's date and location of birth, like much of his life, remains a matter of conjecture. According to his death certificate, he came into the world in "Fallmont, Ohio". However, no such city exists on any map of Ohio and the Ohio Historical Society has yet to discover its whereabouts. [5] Other sources, including Archie, list his birth place as Fremont, Ohio—where a birth certificate for Archie does not exist—and the date of birth as Jan. 24, 1895.

Fremont was exactly the kind of place to attract an entrepreneur like Archie's father, Frank R. Ferguson, known throughout his life as simply "F.R." There had been a gas boom in the area between 1886 and 1891 followed by an oil boom. But with the oil boom came lots of people and F.R. probably felt the urge to

move along to a less confining community. [6]

By 1900, Archie's family had moved west, to Beaverton, Oregon. Here the family of three children, Archie, his older brother Warren and sister by the name of Juanta—spelled in a non-traditional manner—settled for the next 15 years while the parents ran a small store. It can be presumed that the children were educated in the local school but Beaverton Schools could "find no information" on any of the Fergusons. [7]

Though some people interviewed stated that the older Fergusons were missionaries, there are no documents to substantiate this claim. More likely, F.R. and his wife, Clara, were restless entrepreneurs. F.R. had held a number of jobs, including working for the railroad, from which he saved a nest egg that was used in opening a Beaverton store. Then, in 1915, the family went north to the Territory of Alaska, first to Douglas, then Nome and finally above the Arctic Circle to the village of Shungnak.

For most Americans, the Arctic is probably the least understood region of the world. In fact, it would probably be a good bet to say that most people know more about deepest, darkest Africa than that acreage of their own nation that stretches from the Arctic Circle to the Arctic Ocean and the Chukchi Sea.

The prevailing attitude is that this region is nothing more than a vast, featureless, wind-swept, landscape covered with deep snow drifts during the six months of winter and virtually impassable with chest-high tundra during the summer. Wolves, of course, travel in packs of several hundred and attack caribou herds mercilessly leaving half-consumed corpses scattered like hillocks on a plain with no other features but horizons in all directions. Then there are the solitary polar

bears stalking unwary Eskimos, who, in turn, hunt the herds of penguins whose only escape is to dive into the open water leads in the ice pack known as polynas. Further, common perception continues with the exception of the Eskimos, the only human life north of the Circle are the truckloads of oil company employees who care more for getting the oil out of the ground than any environmental damage their companies may cause.

None of these views of the Arctic is accurate though each has a grain of truth—with the exception of the penguins. Penguins live in the Antarctic, not the Arctic.

To burst a few more bubbles of perception, in terms of precipitation, the Arctic is a desert. Fewer than a handful of inches of rain or snow actually falls each year. While the Arctic does have blasting storms, the snow in the drifts has been blown in from somewhere else.

[1] Helmicks, *BUSH PILOTS*, page 75.

[2] Potter, *FRONTIERSMEN*, page 154.

[3] Jay Hammond.

[4] Sam Shafsky.

[5] Archie's Death Certificate indicates he was born in Fallmont, Ohio. The Ohio Historical Society was contacted and stated that no such town exists. A search for the 1900 Census also indicated that the Fergusons were no longer in Ohio.

[6] Handout from the Fremont, Ohio, phone book. Fremont, incidentally, was the hometown of President Rutherford B. Hayes. He died there in 1893. Known by a variety of epithets including "His Fraudulency" and "Old 8 to 7," his was the third and last-to-date electoral tie in a Presidential election. He was known by these names because his electoral victory was secured by a vote of a special committee of the House of Representatives. The special committee of 8 Republicans and 7 Democrats voted "8 to 7" on all disputes thus electing the Republican, Rutherford B. Hayes to the Presidency.

[7] Beaverton Schools to Levi, Ferguson Collection in the Steven C. Levi Papers, UAA Archives.

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