

Woman: White Culture Impact Traceable to Native Mental Ills

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following talk was delivered by Sophie Wirth before the Farthest North Press Club in Fairbanks last week.)

By SOPHIE WIRTH

There is no doubt that mental illness and retardation are serious, grave problems among the native people of Alaska. The keepers of statistics tell us that personality disorders are the third leading cause of hospitalization of Natives, behind accidents and respiratory diseases.

Mental retardation among Native children is higher than for any other part of the United States, and 50 per cent of it is traceable to damage from infectious disease in early life.

I'm here to tell you that mental illness, depression, psychosis, and other disorders are directly traceable to the crushing impact of White culture on the Natives.

I'm going to simplify the problem to make my message clear.

There is no doubt that when the white man began making inroads into Alaska, his TOOLS and machines were vastly superior to the tools of the Natives—and I'm speaking about things like guns, and gunpowder; televisions; radio; transportation; construction methods; and technological devices.

But superior tools and mach-

ines do not equal superior people and social structure—nor do inferior machines and tools mean inferior people and social structure.

But the white technology set about changing Native life in such a way as to make it unmistakably clear that Natives were inferior AS A PEOPLE. For example, the educational systems established by the whites supposedly for the benefit of the Natives have refused to include courses on Native history and culture; have refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Indian and Eskimo languages; and were based on white suburban teaching methods and techniques used in the Lower 48.

Also, the religious systems pressed on the Native people were highly critical of Native beliefs and traditions—discarding them as either evil or unnecessary.

While my people may have had machines and tools and ways of doing things that were not as sophisticated and as complex as the whites, they were NOT inferior people. They had a culture which was remarkably advanced—they had a social organization and structure which permitted them to live at peace with one another (which is, by the way, far superior to anything whites have ever been able to do)—and

they had worked out a way to live in harmony with their environment, a magnificent achievement.

But the Native people have been made to believe that it was they themselves who were inferior—and have been subjected to the overwhelming effects of a mass inferiority complex.

This has led to the mental illness problems we know about. The jarring cultural collision, and white technological superiority leads to:

1. mental illness, arising out of depression and shame and inferiority;

2. alcoholism—a sickness itself—but more, an escape from inadequacy.

3. meekness in the face of white paternalism and aggression, followed by deep shame and helplessness, and then to alcohol and mental sickness.

I think that white culture—now that it has already crushed and destroyed the Native way of life—must at least recognize what it has done, and assume the burden of remedying the defect. Part of the remedy is treating mental illness, mental retardation, and alcoholism—with clinics, hospitals, doctors, rehabilitation—BUT, most importantly, an understanding of what they have done, and a resolve not to commit the same insensitivity again.