

Stereotypes, stories, myths and men

One of the many aspects of Native culture that did not change with the arrival of the white man in Alaska was the sexual proclivity of the Natives. Sexual intercourse was viewed as a natural function and performing it did not carry any of social or religious stigma of shame which the Christian religion tried to inject. Sexual relations were open, frequent and un-restrained, a fact of life terribly distorted by Hollywood movies (*and the book editor thinks this book may continue some stereotypes and distortions!) which insinuated Eskimo men would "share their wives" with travelers. This was a grotesque over simplification of what was actually occurring.

Sexual intercourse was widespread with some taboos but little regard to race or age spread between the participants. As a result, when family trees were drawn, their trunks and outstretched branches were so intertwined with so many other trees, the expression 'one big happy family' had a real meaning North of the Arctic Circle.

While the Eskimos were doing publicly what many whites were doing privately, this did not mitigate the social stigma in the eyes of the whites. Eskimos were grossly discriminated against in the same way as the Blacks of the Deep South. They were often required to sit apart from whites in public gatherings and inter-racial marriages were looked upon as miscegenation.

For the unscrupulous white males in the Territory, however, they thought the free sex attitude of the Native was a satyriast's dream come true. Here were women of every body type and facial configuration free for the taking. And take them the men did, to the point that the genetic family tree of Alaska contains as many non-Native as Native genes. Regardless of the efforts of the missionaries, singularly or combined, the "indoor sportsmen" of the Northland made the concept of alleged superiority of European morals laughable.

In Kotzebue specifically, a good example of the

pride with which some white men expressed their sexual prowess was Paul Davidovics. A legend in the Arctic in the 1930's, Davidovics used to carry the mail by dogsled from Nome to Barrow. So famous was he, that Will Rogers was going to interview him after he and Wiley Post had gone to Barrow to visit Charlie Brower. The visit never occurred for Post and Rogers died in August of 1935 in a lagoon south of Barrow.

A storyteller *par excellence*, the "world (did) not have paper enough to copy all the stories that Paul told," reported Father Llorente. One of the few that has been recorded, and probably is true, was of a night when Davidovics was lost in a driving storm. More dead than alive, he stumbled on an abandoned shack where he immediately sought shelter. He fed his dogs in the dark and then crawled inside his sleeping bag using a log on the floor of the cabin for a pillow. When he awoke the next morning, he discovered that the "log was not a log at all; it was a frozen, dead man."

In 1939, Davidovics was invited to the Golden Gate International Exposition, dubbed the "San Francisco World's Fair." (Some residents think earlier.) Before his introduction, he had been quite boisterous in his claim of having "99 children," an allegation

that quite possibly could have been true. But, as the Exposition was in San Francisco, and the Lower 48 was in the grip of a serious case of sexual repression, the Master of Ceremony attempted to down play Davidovics' record as an indoor sportsman and introduced him as a man with "25 children."

But Davidovics was not to be denied any of his paternity. When he made it to the podium, he was incensed. "Dammit!" He said to the crowd. "I said 99!"

Depending on the source, Archie's arch-rival in Kotzebue, Louie Rotman, was either an amiable, bland businessman who rarely smiled or he was one of the most disliked entrepreneurs in the Arctic. "Only the people who knew him didn't like him," said Jack Lee of Lee's Flying Service, "he was only interested in making money." Gene Joiner, the Kotzebue eccentric referred to Rotman as the "virtuoso of the cash register." On the other hand, Sam Shafsky, who had worked for him, found him "a shrewd individual with a heart of gold if you were a friend."

While it could be certainly said of both Archie and Warren that they, like Louie, were "only interested in making money," the difference was that the two brothers were blessed with personalities that made it hard to dislike them. Louie was regarded as cold and unfeeling thus giving others the impression that all he cared about was making a profit.

It didn't take much to start a spat between the Fergusons and Louie. If it wasn't something one of them said, it was prices at their respective stores or what was happening in the villages where their stores were in competition as well. In a lot of ways, the three men were similar. There were all about the

same physical size, had the same temperament, were in the Arctic for the same reason, had Eskimo wives, had stores in many of the same villages, were sexually interested in the same women and probably could not have lived anywhere else on Earth and been so happy.

But in other ways they were very different. Louie was a drinker, Archie and Warren were not. Louie was frugal with his money; Warren was not. Archie was not. Louie was a passive man and while Archie was a "lover not a fighter," Warren was a boxer. Warren was such an aggressive fighter that once Logan Varnell, miner and seasonal worker had to break up a fight between Louie and Warren over a woman. For good reason, Varnell believed, Warren might damage Louie with more than a bloodied nose.

The older of the two Ferguson boys, Warren, was particularly well-liked in the Northwest. A boxing enthusiast, he used to hold July 4th matches on the Ferguson barges, events which were very popular with the Eskimos. There was also a touch of grandiose in Warren. In April of 1936, as an example, he hitched "100 dogs" to move a mining elevator 1,600 feet to a new location. Undoubtedly, with a mischievous smile on his face, Warren asked the reporter from the *Nome Nugget*, "Some 'horsepower,' what do you think?"

But the Ferguson success story was not without its dark clouds. Tragedy struck in the latter half of the 1930's. One of Archie's children, Stanley died early in the decade when he fell down a flight of stairs and broke his back. Archie's and Hadley's second and last child, Glenn, died of pneumonia in June of 1935. F.R. passed away in Oct. of 1937, and his wife followed him the next year.

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