

Lost VISTA Volunteer

And an Old Eskimo

Strange Encounter Leads Into Extensive Analysis of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act

Land's End Village
State of Alaska
September 7, 1973

Dear Howard,

Last week we had a visitor from a University in California. He was a pleasant fellow named Seth McGrafee, who said that he was an anthropologist. He was real interested in Native culture and customs and wanted to talk to some of the older people in the village. Well, I told him a couple of old stories and a few tall tales and darned if he didn't write them all down in a notebook. At first he said that he was doing a little summer research, but by the second day he said that it was going to be a thesis. By the third day he was going to write a book about our village and by the time he was ready to leave it was going to be a movie film, too. These young people sure do have a lot of big ideas when they first set foot here in these "primitive" villages.

He seemed a bit disappointed that we had snow machines, outboard motors, and rifles, but it was certainly nice that he was interested in the way we Native people used to live our lives. We did have some serious conversations about the problem of passing on our Native heritage to the younger generation, but he didn't really seem to understand all of the pressures on our younger people. They see an entire world beyond their grasp, while this young fellow Seth has the resources to travel freely between these worlds. This means that he can be interested in Native culture this week and be

back in California next week. Maybe if our young people had this freedom they would see how empty that world is if what Seth told us was true.

I asked Seth if he had read AN ACT yet and was surprised when he said no he hadn't. The three of us, Wally, Seth, and me got to talking about AN ACT and how it was going to affect Native life in Alaska. We asked him how the research he was doing was going to help Native people deal with these problems. At first he said that it would be necessary to preserve as much of Native culture as possible before it disappears. While this is a noble goal, it still misses the main problem. We are the Native people. What we do is the Native culture. How are we going to react to these changes? We can't always go back to the past, but we can and must have a voice in our future.

I asked Seth if anthropologists knew what the difference was between a village, a corporation, and a village corporation? Could he tell us what the difference would be in our lives if we had a profit or a non-profit village corporation? What would be the best set of by-laws to maintain, not preserve, Native values? We don't want a dead culture in a museum, we want a live culture here in Alaska. Maybe he should go and talk to some of the older men in Washington to find out what they had in mind when they wrote AN ACT. That is the kind of research we Natives really need.

Your friend,
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