

She has seen 101 years of change

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

Inupiaq voices rise in spiritual song from the Friends Church in Kotzebue as Lena Sours sits in a nearby room and discusses the secrets of living a long and healthy life.

"I never smoke, I never drink, and my husband no beat me," says Sours, whose Inupiaq name is Suyuk. Whatever her ideas are on a long life, they merit a listening ear. At 101 years of age, Suyuk is the oldest living person in Kotzebue.

Bertha Lowe, who works with the Maniilaq non-profit association's Inupiat Iitqusiat program and who has spent many hours with Suyuk, is along to serve as an interpreter. Mostly, however, she needs only to repeat the questions in Inupiaq to Suyuk, who then answers in very good English.

"You live a good life," she continues. "Not a sinful life. I know myself that is more healthy and long living." Although Suyuk radiates the spirituality which the Inupiaq people had long before any white missionaries came to Alaska, she says she became a Christian when she was 18 years old, and she feels good about that.

"In the summertime, I never stay home much," she reveals more of her secret. "I get out. Pick berries; never stay inside much. But in wintertime," she adds with a nudge of her hand and a smile, "I never stay out much. I stay in, sewing!"

Her skill at skin sewing has brought Suyuk fame in Northwest Alaska. Not only did she win first place in the Womens' Traditional Parka event at the recent Northwest Native Trade Fair, but many of the other women competing in the event were also wearing parkas made by Suyuk.

Suyuk says she started making her parkas when she was about 20 years old. "I seen it, when I was a little girl," she remembers. "I look at it, I look at it! Everyday I look at the sewing. I want a desire to make that kind of parka, that's why I start."

Other than watching others, Suyuk says she had no real instruction on skins sewing. "My mind never forget much, once I seen it," she explains. It is difficult to say just how many parkas Suyuk has made over the years. For a time, she kept track of just the "fancy parkas" she had made, but after she hit 51, she quit counting.

"The first one was not so good," she admits. "But I look at it. The next time I do a little better. Then I start again." Reindeer, caribou, muskrat bellies and backs, raccoon, ground squirrels; these were just some of the skins which went into her fancy work. For plain parkas, she added wolf and other materials.

Today, Suyuk is dressed in



Lena Sours, also known as Suyuk, models the fur parka which won her first place at the trade fair. Behind her, younger Inupiaqs model other parkas made by Suyuk.

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a bright orange parka made of fabric. Her granddaughter, Lena Hannah, made the parka. "I don't see good now," Suyuk explains why she has slacked off on her own sewing.

As Suyuk speaks, people from many regions of Alaska and the Lower 48 gather at the airport to await an incoming Wien-Air Alaska jetliner to carry them off to the different places they want to go. Four such jets a day, divided between Wien and Alaska Airlines, come in and leave Kotzebue, weather permitting, and small planes continually shuttle in and out of the airport and off the lake as they transport people back and forth to the villages.

The day before, a shiny, speedy, blue mini-jet carrying

some top executives of ARCO, one of the largest oil companies dealing in Alaska, zipped down the Kotzebue runway.

The changes witnessed by Suyuk are almost unfathomable. White people and other non-Natives were seen only infrequently in the Northwest Arctic when Suyuk was young. The first one she recalls was a gold seeker who ventured into the country when Suyuk was already a maturing woman.

"It's good living, alright," Suyuk says of today. "It looks to me to be more easy for the old folks, alright. But even I don't want to see people just walking around; young ones, young men, waiting for someone to support them. Just walk around, drinking, drinking!"

"It's a lot different now. A lot of people never pick in the summertime. They're just walking around, waiting for money. It was very different. Because long ago, my folks were hunting, fishing, picking berries all summer long. They were not waiting for someone else to be helping . . . but we always try to help each other. It was a good life!"

Suyuk recalls the 10 years she and her husband spent herding reindeer near Selawik as particularly good years. There were a lot of fish, meat and furs to work with. People were friendly.

She also recalls the trade fairs, which drew Inuit people from not only Alaska, but Canada and Siberia. Food was provided for everybody, she

says, and many games were played. Running games, kicking games; many of the same games enjoyed today, but more of them. The fair would go on for weeks, maybe months, as different people wandered in from both the interior and the coast, to trade the goods they had for those brought by others.

There was a lot of dancing then. Some of those dances involved shamans having encounters with supernatural beings. Suyuk recalls, which displeased early Christian missionaries, who then worked to put a stop to traditional dancing. The dancing actually did cease for many years. Suyuk says, and the trade fair eventually ceased to exist.

Now, the trade fair has come back, thanks to the efforts of NANA, the Native regional corporation serving Northwest Alaska, and so has the dancing. It is stronger even than when it was stopped. Suyuk says, although she notes that some Christian-Inupiaq will dance and some won't.

Soon, Suyuk must leave, to go into the chapel and join in the worship which she holds dear. The elderly people from throughout the NANA Region have gathered here at the Friends Church to plan their activities for the next year.

There has been too little time to communicate very much of the wisdom and knowledge gathered in over a century of living. Or the pain, frustration and joys of bringing nine children and more grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grand-



Suyuk worships at the Friends Church in Kotzebue.

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children than Suyuk can count to live and die in a changing world.

She is pleased to see many of the traditions which have been important to her receiv-

ing new interest among these younger generations, but with some reservations. "Right now with a woman," she explains, "if she's sewing things, like mukluk, parka, it's just to make money."

It must be done with love, and pride. "I'm willing to help young ones. Even if I can't see good, I can show them how to measure, with their hands. How to make a good parka. I can show anyone."