

Alaskan filmmakers ready to tackle native alcoholism

By **BETSY BRENNEMAN**
Staff Writer

Alaskan filmmakers Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling, winners of the blue ribbon prize at the New York Film Festival for two years running, say they now feel ready to take on something they have always wanted to do—a film on Alaskan native alcoholism.

In spite of the fact that the subject is controversial and touchy, Sarah Elder says that they are actively seeking funding and that it would be nice if one or more of the regional corporations would take the project on.

They are not interested in the usual agency-type, quick, intellectual analysis of the subject, but rather in "a compassionate look at it" through the eyes of one native community, "so the pain of the problem can be out in the open."

She feels it is the biggest tragedy affecting native people today and "nobody can get

their hands on it." Their effort would not be to provide a solution, but to examine the problem through film and sound as realistically as possible. "Somehow, if you look at things closely enough, you don't have to give a solution," she says.

The film would be an attempt to face the problem and maybe help in finding ways people could then deal with it, something that Elder feels hasn't been done enough in the past. She cites Gambell on St. Lawrence Island where their prize winners, "At the Time of Whaling" and "On the Spring Ice," were filmed. Gambell has chosen to go dry because "they saw what the future was" if they didn't, Elder says.

Kamerling and Elder also have recently received a grant from the Alaska State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts to do a film on Yupik Eskimo dancing. Although they have a village

in mind where they would like to film, the people have not yet been asked, and with the Kamerling/Elder policy of "community determinism" this is a must before the name of the location can be released to the public.

The dance film, scheduled to get underway in December, excites Elder because she sees it not just as a film about Eskimo dancing, but about how people *feel* about dancing. The film will attempt to examine what stimulates the composers to create new dance songs, how the children are taught to dance, what it feels like to dance in your first pottlach, and what it means to be a good dancer by Eskimo standards.

Their most recent film is on ice fishing in the village of Shungnak and is in its final editing stages now. The film, slated for release this fall, was shot from October to December of last year and is the last of three films financed by a grant from

the Ford Foundation and Atlantic Richfield.

The guiding principle of each of their films is what the pair call "community determined," a complex concept used to arrive at both the vision and method of each film.

Actual shooting on location is preceded by many meetings, both formal and informal, with prospective villages. Previous films are shown, discussion of what the film hopes to do goes on at the village council meetings and door to door. Then the filmmakers leave. The villagers are asked to make up their own minds among themselves whether or not they want Kamerling and Elder to help them record their way of life.

But that's only the beginning. After the filmmakers move to the village they stick to a standard of no filming of people for one month. They shoot the environment to get the villagers used to seeing them with their equipment and spend a lot of time visiting and talking about what the villagers want portrayed and what the best way is to go about it. "We're constantly asking for their help and advice," says Sarah Elder. Through it all, she says, "we want the truth because we want their participation."

As the audio tapes are recorded, they are played in the village and Elder, who is the sound recordist, listens and watches closely how people respond to the tapes. From that she gets the general flavor of reactions to take back with her to the University of Alaska's Center for Northern Educational Research where, with the help of a translator, she edits the film and sound track.

The copyright of the completed film is shared by Kamerling and the villagers, meaning 1) the people have control over the film as joint owners, and 2) they get all the profits, Kamerling and Elder taking out only their expenses. Profits go into an educational trust fund for villagers to use as they want.

The two are not new to filmmaking. Sarah Elder has an M.F.A. in cinematography, and Kamerling, who was a still photographer first, went to the London School of Film Technique. They met at an American Film Festival and found they had similar attitudes to films and to people.

Then, both lived in Alaskan villages before their filmmaking began. Elder was an S.O.S. teacher in Emmonak and Kamer-

ling was a VISTA volunteer in Kasigluk, living for a year in Ambler as well.

So both were familiar with village life which Elder says was extremely important. It was the biggest factor in knowing what to do with their films and motivated them to go ahead since "any films we had seen were not very authentic, they really didn't capture the emotional feeling of the villages."

Kamerling made a pilot film in Tununak for the Center for Northern Educational Research. Villager Andrew Chikoyak was the producer and it was the first try at community-determined films—obviously, it worked.

The Ford Foundation gave them a grant to make more community-determined films on the major native cultures in the state. Kamerling and Elder decided they wanted villages that were more traditional, remote and small so they could get to know the people better.

Atlantic Richfield joined in with funds for an editing machine and the Community Enterprises Development Corporation, which helps beginning small native businesses, lent them the equipment.

The two began with "Atka: An Aleutian Village," then on to Gambell, shooting about eight hours of film in a two-month period. When they got back to do the editing, they realized they had two films instead of one. "We just couldn't cut out all the good stuff!" says Elder. So they appealed to the Ford Foundation and got the okay to two films in the same location. Hence, two national film awards.

They shot about the same number of hours of footage in Shungnak, hoping that they might have two films, but it just didn't work out that way this time.

The 35-minute film will be in color with English subtitles, similar in style to the two Gambell films. However, it will feature more talking about general life in Shungnak, a village on the Kobuk River east of Kotzebue, and has "beautiful scenes of 50 weather!"

Their films are distributed nationally and attract a wide audience that Elder says cannot be isolated. The rental fee in Alaska is extremely low, \$15, and it seems everybody from schools, to corporations rent them. "In Alaska," Elder says, "we charge only maintenance costs, because these are films for Alaskans."



LEONARD KAMERLING (left), Sarah Elder and Assistant Soundperson Woodrow Malewotkuk take time out from filming in Gambell to pose for a rare moment on the other side of the camera.

Capital Selection Committee workshops

Over 195 people in Juneau, 35 in Ketchikan and 40 in Sitka turned out to attend the three Capital Site Selection Committee workshops held July 26th, 27th and 28th in their cities. Each workshop was highlighted by extremely vocal reactions against the capital move and as expected a majority of the questions directed to the committee concerned the potential costs.

In Juneau, Rep. Mike Miller and Jim Duncan expressed concerns that money spent for the capital move might take state and federal funds away from projects in Juneau, Ketchikan and other cities. Other issues brought to the committee's attention were: What happens after the election; what will be the planning authority of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough after the site is selected; will the move cause an adverse effect on the amount of federal funds available to Alaska; and what benefits will be derived by the state in opening up the western Susitna Valley to development if Mt. Yenlo is selected. In the non-economic area, Juneau residents also questioned the natural factors data as well as what the sociological character of the new city might be.

In Ketchikan residents again were concerned with the costs and who would pick up what

part. The committee carefully explained the cost categories and how they were developed as well as pointing out to Ketchikan residents that the total cost questions and exact planning data was not yet developed as the committee was only mandated to select sites and the preliminary cost data was developed at the request of the legislature.

The more detailed questions were contained in CSHB 801, introduced by the committee, but not passed during the last legislature. Rep. Terry Gardner of Ketchikan expressed his community's concern over the potential move from Juneau as well as what happened on the legislature's unsuccessful attempts to amend the capital move initiative during the last session.

Sitka's Sen. Pete Meland felt the new capital would become a "permafrost Brasilia" and most other participants again expressed concerns over costs. However, some participants also asked "what does it cost to keep the capital in Juneau," and "will that be more than the move."

Under the terms of the relocation initiative the Capital Site Selection Committee selected the three sites of Willow, Larson Lake and Mt. Yenlo, all in the Susitna Valley, to present to the voters on the

November 1976 general ballot. The site receiving the most votes will become the site for the new capital. The initiative further states that the legislature will provide for the planning of the new capital city and the move is to begin no later than October 1980.

High violent death rate

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butable to alcohol (acute alcoholism, DTs, alcohol poisoning, etc.). Deaths due to mental illness are also classified as violent although that category does not figure into the findings because of the difficulty of getting those statistics and lack of systematization.

Saying that there is a whole matrix of psychological, social and cultural factors that underlie their findings, Kraus reports that for natives and non-natives, chronic causes of death (heart disease, cancer, etc.) is lower than the national average and is remaining at about the same level. However, violent deaths for both groups are much higher than the national all-races pattern and are rapidly increasing.

Within the native population over the 25-year period, infectious diseases have gone down markedly due to better health

care. Violence used to account for the smallest number of Alaskan deaths. Today it is responsible for 32 per cent of Alaskan mortality which is atypical of the American pattern.

Since 1950, the divergence in death by suicide between the native and non-native population has quadrupled and native suicides are now three times more frequent than the national average. The non-native rate of death caused by accidents has also decreased while native accidental deaths have increased.

Native female deaths due to suicide have rapidly outnumbered male suicides. Kraus attributes this to changes in living areas from relatively safe villages to high-risk urban areas.

In terms of each of the four major native groups, Tlingit-Haida-Tsimpsian, Athabaskan, Northern Eskimo, and South-

western Eskimo, general trends show that homicide is decreasing in southeast Alaska while alcohol deaths there are the highest in the state.

With Athabascans leading in all other causes of violent death, Northern Eskimos usually are second, Tlingit-Haida-Tsimpsian third, and Southwestern Eskimo fourth. Because the Aleut population is so small, Kraus prefers not to use those statistics as significant comparable data.

He feels that the accident rate is going up sharply for natives due to alcohol, and that the influence of alcohol on the other causes of violent death is pervasive although usually difficult to pinpoint.

One can only speculate on reasons why the Athabascans lead the native groups in violent deaths, says Kraus. He guesses it has something to do with heavy acculturation and

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