

Don't Deny Pride in History—

Man Pushes Important Native History

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Staff Writer

"Every child anywhere has a right to grow up proud of his heritage. I don't know a greater crime you can perpetrate against a people than to deny them a pride in their history."

When you live by this statement, as Bill Coperthwaite does, it may guide you as it did him on a three year campaign to help restore pride in heritage to Eskimo people who for many years have been denied it.

Alaska's rural schools, dominated by their orientation to the lower 48, often bury the culture of the Eskimo children who attend in their focus on the white culture outside. Eskimo children are taught a white view of Alaska.

Examples, say Coperthwaite, are numerous. For many years, in books and documentaries, Eskimo and Indian children learned that in 1741 Vitus Bering discovered Alaska.

The implication is clear. To the white world, Alaska and its thousands of native people had no history till the white man came.

To combat the psychological damage to children of learning these things, Bill Coperthwaite brought his first experimental Eskimo Heritage program to Alaska.

How does a Heritage program work? In the case of this one, Coperthwaite traveled from village to village - 13 in the past year from Togiak to Hooper Bay. With him, he brought his experiment - a program of films, slides, examples of Eskimo art highlighted by artifacts borrowed from the National Museum of Canada in Ottawa, the Peabody and Alaska State museums.

"Valuable artifacts which the the museum might not just send out by mail or freight, they will allow to be hand carried to the villages," Coperthwaite explained.

In the villages, Coperthwaite collected responses to his programs. Do the teachers like it? How do the children react? How do their parents and other villagers feel?

On the whole, he found villagers excited, interested and enthusiastic. Teachers wanted to know how such a program could become an integral part of the schools.

Improvement, Coperthwaite believes, must mainly come through teacher training. Teachers must be aware that the art on the walls of their classrooms should be Eskimo and their focus on history, literature, etc. on the children they are teaching and their culture.

After collecting responses, Coperthwaite will write proposals to various concerned agencies.

"I'm simply throwing some ideas before people," he says, "ideas which can go into teacher orientation, perhaps reinforced with a one week visiting program in the schools."

The Eskimo Heritage Program started three years ago when

Coperthwaite visited Hooper Bay in search of early Eskimo crafts for a project on handicrafts. Before this he had worked on handicrafts projects for OEO and other agencies in many parts of the world. In his native Maine, he had taught school, become involved in education.

In the villages, he found people concerned that their children were growing up ashamed of their heritage, ignorant of its richness. After talking with various people, he felt that with his wide contacts with various museums and universities he might be able to help.

Harvard University invited him to work on this as part of a PHD program in Education. So, he went.

At Harvard, while examining Eskimo materials for a year, Coperthwaite also developed the yurt. The yurt is unique - a "round building, held together by a tension band" in description.

"You can use it as construction, as a cooperation project between teachers and students, as various things. The spatial quality of the yurt is different

than any other room," Coperthwaite explained.

The first yurt he built at Harvard touched off wide interest and in the two years since about 50 have been built across the country, mainly as cooperative training projects in schools.

Sale of plans and buildings is controlled by the Yurt Foundation, which holds the patent to the invention. Coperthwaite channels his share of the funds into his Alaskan project - and it partly financed his trip to Alaska.

During his quest for materials, Coperthwaite discovered a severe lack of documentary films and photos about the Alaskan Eskimo and Indian People.

In Canada, the Canadian Film Board has produced an excellent series of ethnographic films on the Canadian Eskimos, showing numerous traditional activities. He used many of these in his experimental project.

One result of this Eskimo Heritage project may be encouragement to various agencies who have expressed an interest in this type of program.

One important one, the Alaska State Museum, is anxious to

use their excellent collection of materials to help the native people. They plan a Heritage materials kit to go to village schools utilizing parts of their artifacts collection.

As a visiting scholar this year at the University of Alaska, Coperthwaite also spoke with members of the Teacher Corps, the Rural Schools Project, the

State Schools and other agencies who could establish a program in Eskimo culture as part of their teacher training.

Hopefully, the time will come when Eskimo children, proud of their heritage, will be able to stand up and say - Vitus Bering did not discover Alaska. My ancestors did and know they are right.

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