

Captain Cecil "Moe" Cole and Alaska's Native Children



GIFTS OF CANDY — Capt. "Moe" Cole of North Star III is doing his yearly thing — handing out candy to Alaska's Native children. "Moe" has been doing that for many, many years.

North Star III's Capt. 'Moe' Cole ...

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"Boxer" which initiated the run in 1926.

But even more legendary is skipper Cecil W. Cole who shipped with the "Boxer" as a messboy in 1937 and worked his way doggedly through the ranks until last season he became captain.

To most Alaskan villagers, he's known simply as "Moe" and a good friend. As far as they can see, he hasn't changed since they encountered him four decades ago — an affable bear of a man who seemed to worry more about their welfare than his own and was a soft touch for the children.

"I started giving out bubble gum and red cinnamon candy," he recalls. "Found the kids were really honest. Oh, maybe one of them would line up twice, but I'd say, 'Have you had any cinnamon candy? Stick out your tongue,' and it would be all red. . . I'd leave a million dollars worth of nickels out and never worry about it with those kids."

Pretty soon Moe began giving out oranges, toys — anything he could afford or talk anybody out of that he thought the isolated youngsters would enjoy.

"One year I got a gross of mouth organs and kazoos. You've never heard anything till you've heard a village full of kids all playing kazoos," he chuckles. "Then one time I got seven dozen baseballs. No scrambling. Made 'em stand in a circle and tossed them out. If the ball hit 'em it was theirs."

In those days the Alaskan Eskimos and Indians rated among the world's most impoverished people and Moe could readily understand their problems. He'd come up rough himself, on the waterfront of Puget Sound.

"We never had much . . . never had much candy. I can remember going to the churches around Christmas time hoping to get some . . . as a kid."

"Was a typical drop out. Never got beyond the eighth grade. Another fellow got me a job on the "Boxer." Lied and told them I was 18. Was afraid they wouldn't take me if they knew I was 16."

At sea he prospered and was promoted. His paycheck grew, he married and soon had two sons to support. But he continued to plow a large per cent of his earnings back into treats for the Alaskans.

He doesn't talk of it freely. Ask him about his Diomedé Christmas party.

"Oh," he says, embarrassed.

"Well, you see I found out the kids on Diomedé didn't get many Christmas presents. Worried about it. My son was in a fraternity then and they raised \$50 for presents. Since then it's grown. This year on ship we've got about \$314 (in donations from Moe and his crew).

"My wife knows some wholesalers and last year she got four friends to help wrap. It's a lot of work. I guess there's about 40 kids. But they don't see many boats. You should see them lining the beach and cheering when we come in."

Moe knows almost all of them. He seldom forgets a name or a face.

"Hey," he hollers at a young man in Unalakleet. "Remember that time I tossed you the candy and broke your glasses and had to take 'em to Seattle to get them repaired?"

The Eskimo smiles and comes to shake Moe's hand.

"How's the leg," Moe asks another. "How's your mother?"

"Every time he sees me he says, 'I can hardly believe it,'" recounts Mrs. John Schaeffer who can recall seeing Moe first when she was a tiny girl. "My father used to help unload the ship and he'd bring home oranges from Moe. How we used to look forward to them."

Over the years the function of the North Star has shifted. At one time it provided a floating health clinic so Moe is up on almost everyone's medical history.

Later it began to bring building materials to replace traditional sod and underground houses and oil drums. Today the run furnishes new health clinics (fabricated buildings), ever increasing amounts of fuel for stoves and generators and tons of groceries.

Several villages which have no airports depend almost wholly on the "North Star" for freight and the responsibility weighs heavily on Moe.

"We've got to get in there," he worried last spring when he waited three weeks off the Arctic ice pack to make delivery to the northwest coast. "We've got their whole year's food supply."

But it's the people, individually, that concern Moe most. In off-season he visits Alaskans whenever he can. He can't pass a native hospital without stopping to see if there are friends there.

He visits BIA schools outside the state and spends considerable time writing to the parents of these youngsters

assuring the folks back home the kids are doing well, or telling them of the youngsters' needs (like ivory to carve).

The villagers follow Moe's career with equal concern. Oh, they don't know much about Cecil W. Cole.

A friend of Moe's from Seattle asked a Barrow man if he knew Cole and the Eskimo shook his head. Then, on second thought, he asked if the Eskimo knew Moe.

"Moe, yes! He's my friend," the native beamed.

"You say Moe's captain now?" A Koyuk resident queried. "I can remember when he was washing dishes. This is a good thing. But he doesn't seem much different."

Moe is passing out more candy these days. Through arrangement with the Bernal Candy Company of Seattle he now has 20 to 30 tons of it to deliver each year. Bernal donates it and all Moe has to do is hire a truck and talk some friends into packing it to the ship.

The Natives are a bit more affluent now, too. Moe often comes back from trips ashore loaded with dried fish and presents. He has a weakness for native foods but the gifts embarrass him.

"I never wanted anything in return," he protests. "In Wainwright last year they gave me a birthday party with a mountain of presents, a hind quarter of caribou, baskets . . . It was wonderful but I just didn't know what to say."

"We're proud to have something to give," one villager explained. "Moe, he was the only person who was really good to my kids when they were growing up."

And Moe continues to hit the beach with the same enthusiasm he had 30 years ago.

"Better bring a big bag and tell your friends to come," he instructs a pint-sized citizen of Elm who is encountering him for the first time.

"Are you married?" he kids a giggling seven-year-old in Unalakleet. "How's your wife? You don't like candy do you?"

Mrs. Theresa Riley watched Moe's recent landing on Shaktoolik beach with pleasure, then joined in the candy line with her wide-eyed young daughter.

"When I was a little girl at Deering Moe used to come and throw us candy and oranges. I wanted to thank him," she said. "And I wanted my daughter to see him. It makes for happy memories."



EMERGENCY CANDY CONTAINER — Resourceful little girl at Unalakleet makes use of her coat to stow candy by turning up the bottom. — Photos by LAEL MORGAN



BOY ANTICIPATES GIFT — Little Unalakleet boy is bringing a paper bag to take his gifts of candy.



COMPARING CANDY — The young lads are comparing the candy they received from their favorite Captain "Moe."