

Records of Great Epidemic, Births, Marriages, Etc.—

Abandoned Mary's Igloo Center of Concern

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Staff Writer

In the isolated Immurak Basin area of the Seward Peninsula, an empty school house in an abandoned village is the sole vestige of hundreds of Eskimo people who lived and died in Mary's Igloo.

In 1917, 400 people lived in that village, isolated from the outside world by harsh terrain and difficult transportation. Then, during the winter of 1917-1918, influenza hit the village. Like many native villages in this part of Alaska, Mary's Igloo was devastated. Of its 400 or more residents, less than 100 survived.

The orphaned children of many destroyed families were scattered to the four winds - distant relatives in other villages, orphanages at Pilgrim's Hot Springs and Teller.

During World War II, Mary's Igloo was abandoned. In the abandoned school building lay the records of a once thriving community. Almost twenty years of births, deaths and marriages, of reindeer industry records and the written evidence of the daily lives of many people remained in the empty building, stored in filing cabinets, unguarded in case of vandals or wanderers.

During recent years, the Eskimo people of Nome and the Seward Peninsula have felt their past creeping away as death claims the old and the white man's culture steals the young. Perhaps, one day, scholars will find that epidemics weakened the native culture in some areas of Alaska, and left others thriving.

Today, whole chunks of the history of the Immurak Eskimo people hang by slender threads. For many years, the interior of the Seward Peninsula was isolated from the world - reachable only by tortuous routes. Today, increased snowmobile use, population, industry and projected roads bring outsiders into the sites of the memories of its people.

Many of the priceless archaeological remnants of the Seward Peninsula's native people will soon be open to the casual visitor - who may destroy them unknowingly.

Almost two years ago, the Arctic Native Brotherhood in the Nome area approached Laurel Bland for professional aid for a proposed project to take a historical and cultural inventory of the Immurak Basin area in the interior of the Seward Peninsula. Mrs. Bland, an expert in northern rural Alaskan affairs, lectures at Alaska Methodist University.

During past months, while the details of a project for this area has been worked out, funds have eluded the ANB.

Some small parts of the project have been carried out, through private funding. In November, Mrs. Bland returned to New Igloo (the newer site of Mary's Igloo) along with Myron Wheeler and others to retrieve priceless documents of the early reindeer industry in the Seward Peninsula from the now looted abandoned schoolhouse. The funding for this small emergency expedition came from the Legislative Council.

As funding falters, industry and intruders continuously enter the no longer isolated Basin area.

Mrs. Bland's cultural preservation project lists such sites as the only known Eskimo pictograph in Alaska. Among the sites to be found are the ancient landmarks of religious significance to the Eskimo people of the area, as well as the sites of their history.



MYRON WHEELER

Although the sites may endure, very soon the significance of many of them may be lost forever. William Oquilluk, born in Point Hope, is a man of over 75 who lived most of his life in this area. In his childhood and young manhood he was taught the ancient history and stories of his people. He was the drummer when the last Eagle-Wolf dance was performed at Mary's Igloo (about 1914) and is probably the only person alive who remembers the ceremony.

During the past months, he has served as chief informant for the project - pointing out and leading others to the locations of the chief religious and historical places of his people. Age and increasing infirmity make it vital that his part in the project be completed as soon as possible.

At present, the preservation project falters for lack of funds. For many months, Myron Wheeler, the highly qualified assistant project director, remained in Anchorage to remain free for the project and obtain necessary additional university training.

In the spring as funding was still not obtained, he returned to Nome.

Last winter, Mrs. Bland approached the legislature for a \$36,000 dollar appropriation for the cultural inventory project. A grant of \$5,000 may enable the project to work during the summer months.

The proposed inventory of the historical and cultural sites and monuments of the region - by photo, sketch and narrative could serve as a blueprint for future projects now being planned by other agencies.

Also, preservation of the perishable documents of the people who lived in the region during the last 100 years, will provide an invaluable source for future research. The proposal provides that they be stored in a locked file - microfilmed and preserved at the University of Alaska library. There, they can be closed to the public but available for those native people who require access - and for the scholars the native people allow access.

At present, with marginal funding and promises of technical assistance and aid from many agencies, the project hopes to begin work this summer. Without funding for an assistant director's salary, however, Myron Wheeler may not be available for the summer's work.

By this point, to keep the preservation project going, all of the interested individuals have advanced their own private funds hoping that some funding can be obtained for a full scale go ahead.

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Already, the first group of papers from New Igloo are on file for future generations, preserved from the tundra where they were found scattered on the ground being used as kindling in a traveler's shelter.

In the past days, the old of the community spent many years instructing their grandchildren in the history and sacred

places of their people. For many winters, the children and young men memorized the stories.

Today, after the invasion of other cultures and devastating epidemics, the old will die unheard of unless a concerted effort is made to record the places and the stories for future generations.

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