

ALASKA SCOUTING TRIP 1998

I was invited to Kaltag by Jim Friedman. Kaltag is two hours by bush plane from Fairbanks across the tundra plain. Located 500 miles from the mouth of the Yukon--the Amazon of the North. The Yukon is the largest river in Alaska, the 5th largest in North America. Navigable for 2000 miles, it was plied by sternwheelers in the goldrush era. Crossing the Arctic Circle twice, much of the river remains relatively unexplored.

The Yukon is home to Eskimos (Innuits?) and Athabascan people -- related to the Navajo. Kaltag was traditionally located 3 miles downriver. In 1912 the village moved to the current site, its high banks offering unusual protection from the river. New Kaltag was the last stop of the dog mail run --offering better communication and access to a local German? run store. The dog mail teams ran until 1935. Piped water became available to the small homes and log cabins of Kaltag about 10 years ago. The town has a diesel fuel electric generating plant and a small high school.

The cash economy came to Kaltag in a big way in the 70's. Men left for good paying jobs on the pipeline ---and to the lower 48 as elite firefighters. With cash people have become more dependent upon outside supplies and amenities. It's not uncommon to spend a \$100 for hamburger and chips to feed an extended family with 5 grandchildren.

Jim Friedman is a fortyish pudgy East Coast Jewish guy. Uninterested in bookish pursuits he escaped to Alaska in the 70's. He parlayed an electrician's job on the pipeline and a little gambling luck into a respectable stake. Today he owns a home in Manley Hot Springs and a ranch near Anchorage. He makes his living as caviar buyer and processor. He buys salmon roe --eggs--from native fishermen and exports them as caviar principally to Russia, as well as to high-end delis in the lower 48 --including Zabars in NYC.

There are about 900 Commercial fishing permits (where?). 2/3 are in the lower Yukon. In July 1998 District 4 was closed to commercial fishing. And the subsistence fishery was substantially below expected runs. \$30 million dollars of fish are "missing." The depletion of stocks is blamed on "overfishing" in the open sea -- especially by foreign "pirates" ---the *el Niño* effect, and negative impacts on the environment --- oil spills, logging etc.

Villagers dependent upon the resources could expect food shortages this winter, exacerbating poverty and already high rates of alcoholism, spousal and child abuse and suicide.

Jim's response to this situation was to consider producing a documentary --- a way to call attention to the imminent disaster. Local people had petitioned state and federal authorities. And plans are in place to break ground on a million-dollar fish processing plant this fall. This will provide jobs and income for community residents this winter. But it doesn't address the longer-term problem of alternative sources of economic development in the face of the possibility of continuing resource shortages. Nor does it offer alternatives to other isolated Yukon villages facing similar shortfalls.

Getting There

Alaska is macho country. Casual eavesdropping doesn't yield stock tips or HMO horror stories. You're more likely to hear about encounters with grizzlies and complaints about "too many rules and regulations below (in the lower 48)."

I left Orange County at 7:40 am. 13 hours later I took off from Fairbanks in a twin engine Frontier Airlines charter. The plane was carrying me and 1000 pounds of

salt. Mailing salt is subsidized by the government ---covering the cost of my transportation.)

The Frontier groundcrew kept asking how much I weighed --- my negligible 125 pounds wouldn't require that much fuel. The pilot --- not "Sky King" --- looked about 20 years old. He briefed me pointing out the survival kit in a hatch outside on the right-hand wing. He told me that I was the fireman as he pointed to the insubstantial looking fire extinguisher stashed under his seat. Our flight plan called for a two-hour flight through "partly cloudy skies" with a chance of rain.

At takeoff the river and wilderness looked serpentine, green --- Amazonian. But after two minutes we were in thick gray clouds. I knew there were mountains out there and I'd have felt safer if I could see them. But we were flying inside a dirty down pillow and the roaring of the twin props and the bouncing and shaking of the little plane was my whole universe.

When we finally broke through the land was electric green, the river huge. There were logged out strips and squares on a billiard table flat emerald plain. Further north hundreds of ponds dotted the marshy tundra landscape. The forest shrunk back to thin necklaces pointing skyward.

Coming in for our landing in Kaltag, Koyaanaisqatsi clouds blew past our plane. We came to a stop on the dirt runway and were met by a pick-up full of kids ready to help unload the salt. Jim came chugging up on a 4-wheel ATV ---all terrain vehicle.

Kaltag a village of about 60 families (280 people) is the last stop of the Yukon Itarod, the famed dog sled endurance race. At 9:30 p.m. on a bright, warm, midsummer "evening" it's hard to imagine the bitter chill of a town buried in snow.

Dinner is at 10:15. "Would I like to try some caviar?" Sandy, a friendly, feisty twenty-something, puts a baseball size scoop of brilliant orange roe on my paper plate. It's more caviar than I've eaten altogether in 49 years. Delicately munching my caviar on Sailor Boy pilot bread, I'm offered the main course--- bean and moose meat stew. It's a far cry from the lone bean and boiled laces of Charlie Chaplin's *Gold Rush*.

Violet Burnham is a strong, good looking woman of about 45 or so. She's outspoken in her criticism of men who are unwilling or unable to work as hard as women. Violet is the mayor of Kaltag. I talked with her as she cut two-foot salmon filets into strips for smoking ---creating salmon jerky. In the 60s she left Kaltag to live with foster parents in Fairbanks so she could go to high school. She is a psychologist and administers a community mental health program. Four counselors work on alcohol and drug problems and provide individual therapy. Programs include Adult Children of Alcoholics, Anger Management Workshops, and Suicide Prevention. (Violet says that there were 11 suicides from '85-91 and none since. Anecdotal reports of additional suicides and attempted suicides indicate an on-going problem.)

Violet says that the city government has a long-range vision --- that the city is responsible for developing the air strip, a community owned sawmill and low-cost housing. It's considering alternative economic development like eco-tourism.

On the other hand, the traditional tribal council is "just getting going." For 23 years it was responsible for resource allocation--- payouts from the state and federal governments---a locus of competition for jobs. (DOYAN?? is the regional Native Corporation set up at the time of the pipeline to administer the cash settlement which resolved native land claims.)

My last "night" in Kaltag was a river cruise. Jim was having a cabin built on his 18' aluminum boat. But the plexiglass was late in arriving by air taxi. It was after 9 p.m. when we finally corralled an alternative craft. Our party consisted of me and Jim, our pilot, Sandy Jim's twenty-something companion and Raymond. Raymond was born in 1920 and when sober a congenial old-timer. His grandson Lloyd is Jim's pet. But 4-year-old Lloyd already has been mauled by a stray dog; nearly drowned in the river; and sexually abused by a teenaged neighbor.

In the pleasant twilight we wander the river until 1 am. Sandy has no luck fishing with rod and reel. We make a stop at one of the few occupied fish camps in this year of scarcity. Downstream from the camp a 20-foot high "Ferris Wheel" turns in the current. The baskets in his fish wheel scoop up 20-pound salmon as they swim by, dumping them into a holding box. At the camp the kids are playing midnight basketball--- the hoop nailed to a tree. Strips of brilliant orange-red salmon are hung on drying racks --- like so much flame-colored laundry.

We cruise up a blackwater where the land is so flat, the current is invisible. No sight of moose or bear, a lone owl glides from her piney perch. The stillwaters reflect sky and trees in such clear symmetry that my snapshot has no readily distinguishable top or bottom.

My reverie is broken, as Raymond well into his bottle breaks into his favorite chorus: "I want a fat woman yodel le ee, yodel le ee oo." Soon to be followed by another pass at Sandy who seems to get a kick out of the attention.

When we returned, I tried to get some sleep, before my long trip back home the next morning. But I was camped out in the common area of our rented cabin. I slept fitfully, if at all while Buzz, a visiting retired barkeep from Philadelphia, and Sandy exchanged high-volume drunken harangues. The highlights included Sandy reaching for the loaded rifle hung over my pallet to demonstrate her prowess. And Buzz's incessant anti-Semitic declarations about my fitness to document events at Kaltag.

In my dreams Buzz mixed with stories I'd read about "Woodsman -the Sneaker" part wildman, part trickster. The Woodsman was a descendant of Indians who disappeared in the woods after violating taboos against incest and cannibalism. They're solitary creatures who assume the ways of animals. They are fast runners capable of vanishing instantly. Buzz had survived his first encounter with a bear in the kitchen of Jim's cabin, but maybe the Woodsman will get next time.

Production Notes

Character

Conflict

Economic Development

Poverty

Alcoholism

Fetal alcohol

Juvenile Crime

Domestic Violence

Child sexual abuse

Suicide

Family (Values)

Women's issues

Kids --

Working for Jim (9- and 10-year olds ---exploitation or meaningful activities in a culture where traditionally kids work.

Juvenile Crime

Elders
Mary Ellisons?? in 90's (Mary Nek Alaska)

B Roll

Scenics

Fish Wheels
Cleaning and smoking Salmon
Fish Counting Towers
Fish Camps
The River
Memorials--- Hats and T-Shirt in memory of passed Elders
Basketball Tournament
Women Salmon Berry picking
Bears at the Dump
Festivals

Family -Photos

Stock Footage

The Gold Rush

Eye of the Salmon Jim Mayer (Claire Schoen)

Michael Conford's Film

Ellen Frankenstein's Films see NewDay Catalog

Religion

Catholic

Baptist Missionaries

Traditional? April '99 Stick Dance for (or by) George Madros III. Bear Dance
and Wolf Dance

Equipment

Earplugs for flight

Rain

Community Leaders

Violet Burnham --the Mayor

John Madras -- Chief

Franklin Madros 72? --- Retired traditional chief (from 1953) (notes refer to
Goodman Thinakin or Franklin??)

School teacher--- only 1 ?? lives in the community year-round.

Thelma teaches 3-5th grades

Editing/Co-Production possibilities

KOCE --Presenting Station

AK PTV

David Glen

UCSD

Chapman?

Funding ITVS

POV

Peter Tauber/Marc Weiss