

3-30-1972

Arthur O. Roberts' visit to Alaska


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To: Keith Sarver
Phil Martin
Earl Perishe
Harval Hadley 

From: Arthur O. Roberts

Date: March 30, 1972

Re: Alaska Visit

It was the last day of the mid-year sessions of Alaska Yearly Meeting, held at Noatak March 12-16. Pauline Harvey, pastor from Noorvik, presiding, pointed out interesting statistics which were posted on a large blackboard. Five hundred and seventy visitors came, 135 of them on snowmobiles, 333 by airplane and two by dog team. The dog team had consisted of 11 dogs and was driven by a family from Noorvik, about 150 miles away. Returning from the conference to Kotzebue by sled we passed that dog team and I thought how rapidly the old ways are being replaced by the new in the land of the Eskimo. In addition to the Friends from the other nine villages, Kotzebue, Noorvik, Selawik, Kiama, Ambler, Kivalina, Buckland, Dearing and Shungnak, there were representatives from the new Friends churches begun last year at Anchorage and Fairbanks. The conference had been preceded by several days of Christian fellowship involving Christian people from other villages as well, including Point Hope, Barrow, Noma and others. These were Christians from Episcopal and Pentecostal churches. I had come the farthest, having flown in from Portland via Anchorage for the last three days of the conference, representing George Fox College primarily on an educational mission, but Northwest Yearly Meeting and other "outside" Friends fraternally as well.

The yearly meeting sessions were concerned with several matters including extension work at Fairbanks and Anchorage, each of which now has gathered a nucleus of Friends, mostly Eskimos, in these cities. The Friends were disturbed about the moral problems facing their youth including the predilection to the use of liquor. Individually and as a church they protested the proposed establishment of a bar at

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the University of Alaska in Fairbanks which a number of their young people attend. They discussed some of the effects of the native land claims settlement upon their churches and the new relationships to the government agencies which this settlement brings. They are concerned about the education of their children, in the State schools, in the Bureau of Indian Affairs' schools outside, and through George Fox College.

I met with the Board of Administration to discuss ways by which the college could strengthen the educational opportunities for their young people and adults. The Board of Administration and the Yearly Meeting approved in principle a working relationship between George Fox College and the Yearly Meeting whereby the college can offer accredited courses through the Bible School at Kotszebue and extension programs. They expressed appreciation for the short courses led by Paul Mills of our religion faculty earlier in the winter and their anticipation of subsequent short term courses by the college. Officials will draw up letters of agreement whereby the terms of this relationship are specified.

Upon our return to Kotszebue Earl Fariho, director of the Bible School, and I visited with local school officials and Alaska Native Association leaders to discuss our plans for offering college credit courses in Kotszebue. It was my privilege to visit also with Abraham Bible and wife, newly appointed workers. There is general interest in a Kotszebue Center for George Fox College both on the part of the church and the community. To offer accredited courses which meet physical and social needs of the community should provide greater acceptance of the leadership role of both the church and the Bible School.

The Eskimo Priscas enjoy their singing. This I had learned while attending the yearly meeting sessions this past summer. They are an open, sensitive people, quick to confess their faults one to another, and to share the good news of salvation

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in praise and testimony. Although I preached both at Neatak and Kotsabua, I felt more ministered to than ministering.

The village of Neatak is beautifully situated upon the Neatak River, ringed by mountains and all covered with snow. The nights were cold and crisp with the stars shining brightly through the clean air and the feathery Northern lights. The days were bright and sunny with only a trace of snowfall one day. Temperatures ranged from about 10° above to 30° - 40° below. As an outsider I came to appreciate the wisdom of the Eskimo people who have learned many ways to adapt to the environment. I appreciated the mukluks fashioned of caribou by one of the ladies and the parka with a wolf fur ruff to keep my face warm. I appreciated the six hour sled ride back to Kotsabua, so refreshing after the more familiar patterns of highway traffic and urban clutter. Standing on the back runners of the sled (pulled by a snowmobile, however, rather than dogs) I saw the wilds in all their pristine purity and enjoyed seeing moose track, caribou track, hearing the whirr of ptarmigan as they flew up out of clumps of trees, and the snowshoe rabbits bounding across the snow. I appreciated the thoughtfulness of people who lent me fur caps, mittens, and down-filled jumpers to keep warm on the cold ride through the snow. I learned later that in one valley the chill factor was probably 100° below 0°! Well, a little frostbite is not too much to pay for such a thrilling adventure.

Most of the members of the churches in the ten villages are Eskimo and services are generally conducted in that language. Yearly Meeting leaders and mission personnel are concerned about the extent to which Eskimo and English can jointly serve the needs of the people. At the present time some of the young people know neither language adequately and this fact aggravates the generation gap. Parents seem less inclined now unquestioningly to send their children outside to the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. They are more interested in developing local schools in the villages. Eskimo consciousness may very well be the precipitating

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factor to the inclusion of Eskimo as a basic spoken language, at least. In this connection the church feels keenly the loss of Wilfred Ziball, a Wycliffe translator who had done much to prepare the way for an Eskimo Bible in the Kobuk dialect used by the Quaker villages. Mr. Ziball was killed last November in a plane crash which also took the lives of other church leaders including Emory Harris, whose wife Phyllis and her family, have remained at Kotzebue to assist in youth work.

I was impressed by the increased effectiveness of this youth program. Progress seems to have been made even over last summer. I am sure that the days and years ahead are crucial in the life of the church as the Eskimo people make the transition from a subsistence to a cash economy.

Acculturation is a two-way street. While it is true that some of the Eskimo young people have been leaving the faith of their fathers and succumbing to the temptations of modern society, as elsewhere, the fervent faith of the Eskimo Christians has succeeded in reaching some white people for Christ. Bob Uhl, for example, stayed on in the Arctic after World War II, and married an Eskimo woman and adapted to the life of the Eskimo and became a hunter and a trapper, living off the land in native style. Just a few years ago he became converted and is now an active and enthusiastic Christian. While at Nekeak I met an anthropologist from Brown University, Dr. Anderson, who has been spending a year in Noorvik. He participated in the Yearly Meeting and considers himself a Quaker now. The Arctic brought to him not only a cultural interest but a more active faith in Christ. With the spread of the Yearly Meeting into the major cities of Alaska, Fairbanks and Anchorage, the church has shown its willingness to adapt not only to village life but also to the life in the city. Many changes will occur the next decade as the impact of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement and the North Shore oil discoveries are fully known. This will be a greater impact than the gold mining which precipitated the development of missionary activity in northern Alaska during the last years of

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the nineteenth century. Let us hope and pray that the 2300 Eskimo Quakers will be able to extend their faith in the hearts and lives of many additional people, Eskimo and white.

AKK:sm