

Non-Native Settlers in the Kobuk River Valley

All of the Kobuk River villages have small numbers of non-Native residents. These are primarily schoolteachers and church leaders, who remain in the area for only a few years before moving elsewhere. Although few settle here permanently, they do participate to varying degrees in community social life and subsistence activities.

Over the past two decades, however, a permanent subcommunity of non-Natives has established itself in the upper Kobuk River Valley, particularly in the village of Ambler. About fifteen years ago a small group of white settlers (less than ten people) established themselves near the Hunt River, seventeen miles west of Ambler. These people relied heavily upon subsistence resources, and began assimilating the life style of the nearby Eskimos, with whom they maintained frequent and amiable contact. Some of the original settlers eventually left the area, but they were replaced by others who remained. Within the last ten years, all of them have established residences in the village of Ambler, except for one family that remains in the original settlement.

The move to Ambler initiated a period of strong interdependence between the native residents and their new community members. Drawing on their deep respect and admiration for the Eskimos, the settlers quickly absorbed subsistence skills, knowledge of the land, food preferences, social patterns, and a general native living style. In a sense, these people became somewhat culturally hybridized, as they added an overlay of Eskimo culture to their own non-Eskimo background. At the same time, they influenced and assisted the Kuvvanjmiit, especially by helping them with matters relating to the outside world. They gave assistance with the growing volume of paper

work that confronted both individuals and the village as a corporate entity. And they helped people to formulate general decisions affecting the direction of their community.

This symbiotic relationship worked to the benefit of all concerned, but in recent years the need for it diminished. The native people have developed the skills to deal effectively with the outside world, and the non-native people have learned to subsist successfully on their own. Both groups are characteristically very individualistic and independent, so they have come to rely upon one another. Their open, friendly social interaction continues as before (some have married into local families), and strong feelings of mutual respect appear to be maintained.

It is important to note that the non-Natives have assumed a very low profile in village affairs. Nearly all remain uninvolved with local political matters and social factions, and none have established themselves in business enterprises. This unaggressive attitude, which is atypical for non-Natives in rural Alaska, has probably been the key to producing a harmonious mixed society in the upper Kobuk River Valley.

In 1975 there were twenty-nine permanent non-Native residents in the upper Kobuk region. Of these, sixteen were living in Ambler, a family of four was planning to settle there, a family of three was temporarily residing in Shungnak, and another family of four was living permanently (for the past fifteen years) near the mouth of the Hunt River. One non-Native person lived in Shungnak and another in Kobuk.

Not included here, because of their isolation, are scattered recent settlers in the upper Ambler River and far reaches of the upper Kobuk River.

All of the settlers obtain most of their staple foods by subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering. Their degree of involvement with a cash economy varies considerably, as it does among the Native people. One of the settlers, who lives almost exclusively on food from the land, requires only a few hundred dollars per year to purchase clothing, ammunition, and other incidentals. About half of the non-Natives follow an economic pattern nearly identical to that of the typical Native householders. Subsistence is their basic livelihood, and intermittent employment provides enough cash to purchase supplemental food and other basic necessities.

The Thompsons (a pseudonym) are typical of the subsistence-oriented settlers. They live with their children near the edge of Ambler, in a small and simple home with fewer luxuries than most Native households have. They do not own a snow machine, wood furnishes their only heat, they have electricity, and they almost never travel beyond Kotzebue. Their life revolves entirely around subsistence, and much of their food is prepared Eskimo fashion. Each summer Mr. Thompson is temporarily employed in the local region, but he earns barely enough cash to bring his family through the year. Still, the family is healthy and obviously very contented. Like some of the other settlers, the Thompsons still follow patterns that have otherwise become rare. For example, they go to spring camp far from the village for about six weeks each year to put up a supply of meat for the summer.

A few of the other non-Native families have retained stronger ties to the wage economy. For example, three families are presently supported by employment as teachers or maintenance personnel in local schools, and another family derives its income by providing an air charter service. Most or all of these people do not plan to continue full-time employment permanently. In fact, the majority have spent periods of years in the area without more than temporary work.

The non-Native settlers in the Kobuk River Valley represent a unique and interesting phenomenon. Like modern pioneers elsewhere in Alaska, they have adopted a subsistence lifeway in a remote area of the state. But they are much different in having partially assimilated the indigenous Native culture. In this sense they are most akin to the early American pioneers, who lived among the Indians and became very much like them. Opportunities for this kind of cultural hybridization in North America have been pushed to the northern fringe of the continent, where the last living indigenous cultures are to be found. The Kobuk settlers thus represent a final remnant of the American pioneer tradition.

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