

ALASKAN TRADER

Dennis Corrington knelt on the floor of the hut and spread out his wares: a Coleman stove, hunting knives, a down parka, rubber insulated boots and other wares. The Eskimo looked at the items, but they talked of other things: friends they both knew, the weather and hunting. Finally the man showed Corrington some carvings he had made and the trading began. An ivory bracelet was exchanged for a hunting knife and a soapstone carving for some children's tee shirts.

Alaskan trading dates back to the whaling and fur-trading days of the 19th century. For Corrington, it started in 1970, when he and his wife Mary, a former airline stewardess, opened the Arctic Trading Post in Nome, Alaska. Trading is not simple, Corrington, who speaks the Eskimo dialect, explains. It requires a lot of time and patience, traveling to the villages, sitting with an artisan in his home, appraising the work and silently letting trust grow. An appreciative grunt now and then is acceptable, though, and does not run up the asking price.

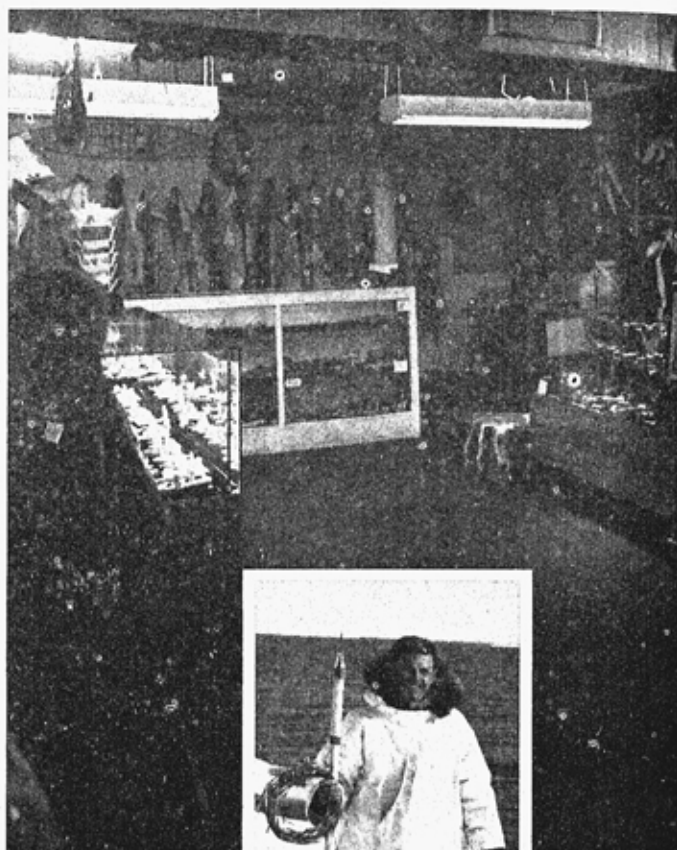
The Corringtons originally moved to Alaska to teach. He has both a bachelor's in education, '66, and a masters in education administration, '67, from the University, and she has a bachelor's in home economics, '66. "We put out applications all over the world for teaching positions and decided to either pick the place or the price," Mrs. Corrington says.

They had hoped to end up in the South Pacific or West Indies, but the pay there was mainly sun and surf. So they settled for the highest paying job offer; the William E. Beltz Regional Boarding High School in Nome.

A long way from a tropical island, Nome is 150 miles below the Arctic Circle and only 200 miles from the Siberian coast of Russia. One of Corrington's trading stops is Little Diomed, an Eskimo village within sight of Siberia. "It's all right to look at, but not even the Eskimos cross over now," he says. "The Russians started taking a hard line and held some of them for several days. They didn't harm them but they did scare hell out of them."

Teaching at the boarding school turned out to be an interesting but difficult assignment. The students spoke English as a second language at school. The Eskimo dialects, Yupik or Inyupik, were spoken the rest of the time, Corrington says. There also was a cultural barrier to overcome. The students come to Nome from about 30 different Eskimo villages scattered around Northwest Alaska. They leave home conditions that are primitive (no electricity or running water; large families living in one or two rooms; and a diet of Eskimo food, seal oil, whale meat and walrus; and "white-man's" food) and enter an environment that is similar to the school system that Corrington grew up with in St. Louis County. "It's a real cultural shock to them," he says.

Corrington and his wife taught for one year at the school. Then, Mary returned to aviation, working for a local bush



Above: Dennis Corrington with wife Mary at their Nome trading post, on a spring hunt and trading with Jacob Ahkinga at Little Diomed.



airline that serves the Seward Peninsula, while Dennis continued at Beltz as principal.

He became increasingly dissatisfied and critical, though, about the education that the Eskimos were receiving. "It's a mystery to me why Eskimo children need Latin to spear a Walrus. Indians and Eskimos should be educated to become leaders of Indians and Eskimos, not followers of white men," he says.

The natives caught on to Corrington quickly. The students at Beltz dedicated their 1970 yearbook "to Mr. Dennis Corrington. He has been our teacher, guide, counselor and principal. We feel that he has devoted his time and energy to our education because he has a genuine concern for the Eskimo community of North-West Alaska."

But the Alaska Department of Education did not appreciate Corrington's criticism. They tried to transfer him. He refused and resigned in 1970. The Corringtons then were faced with the decision to either take their savings and "retire" to a warm South Pacific island or to remain in Nome and start a business that has interested them since their arrival in Alaska; dealing in Eskimo arts and crafts. The spell of the Arctic won out.

"Our decision was made easier because of our personal association with many of the artisans," Corrington says. There are no roads linking the Eskimo villages and the airplane is a vital link between the villages scattered along the coastal areas and up and down the rivers, as well as with other parts of the state. "So, Mary's job with the airline allowed her to know most of the people along the Peninsula and I knew many of the Eskimo families through the students who had been enrolled at Beltz.

"Everything we have for sale at the trading post is either brought to Nome by the Eskimos or I fly to the villages to look for it." The Corringtons own a Piper PA-18 "Super Cub" that is ski equipped for winter landing. "We trade strictly in native-made items and deal individually with more than 300 craftsmen in 26 villages all over North-west Alaska," he says.

This means that the majority of their inventory items, ivory carvings, mukluks (Eskimo boots), parkas and paintings, are purchased one at a time. "We do have several carvers who produce on a somewhat regular basis, but even these can't be counted on."

The Eskimos follow a very seasonal life pattern, Mrs. Corrington explains. "When the first white men came to Alaska they couldn't understand why the Eskimos wouldn't appear for work if the geese flew overhead. But to harvest the bounty of the Arctic is a 2,000-year-old way of life for the Eskimo. When summer fishing, fall berry picking and duck hunting or winter seal and caribou hunting call, the carvers may put aside their tools and vanish for weeks at a time."

This hand to mouth pattern is still a major factor in the villages the Corringtons trade with. If an Eskimo feels a need for something, he sits down and carves a piece of jewelry or a figurine from walrus ivory or soapstone and trades his handiwork for a rifle, barrel of oil or whatever he needs.

"Our first year of trading with the villages was a hit or miss situation. If we arrived when a carver was carving we would be offered items for cash or trade, but if we arrived when everyone was hunting, we would return to Nome empty handed. The Corringtons soon learned the pattern of Eskimo life though and rarely returned empty handed. The trading post inventory now amounts to more than \$50,000 in native arts and crafts. Also, in addition to the Nome tourist trade, the Corringtons supply pieces to gift shops throughout Alaska and in some areas in the "lower 48."

Besides the prosperity of the trading post, the Corringtons have been rewarded with the friendship and trust of the Eskimos. "They are a fantastic people," Corrington says. "Very real and honest. I can go into a village with \$2,500 in cash in a pillow case slung over my shoulder and all the natives know what is in there and it's no sweat."

In addition to their business relationship, Corrington often hunts with the Eskimos in between trading trips. They have taught him to read the ice, wind and currents, all important to living on the Bering Sea. They teach in a casual way but you can learn much from them in their own environment, he says.

As for the future, the Corringtons are planning to build an Eskimo cultural center on a lot adjoining their business/residence. The center will include a museum displaying artifacts dating from 2000 years ago to the present and a full sized Eskimo village.

Although Corrington's occupation has changed since his arrival in Alaska, his interest in education has continued. Now as a member of the local school board, he helps to formulate the policy for the school he once ran as principal. Since his election to the board the school has shifted from a traditional system to a modified open classroom concept with curriculum offerings that relate to Eskimo language, culture and arts. And what about their South Pacific dream? Mrs. Corrington sums it up. "I hated cold weather in Missouri. But I love it living in Nome." □