

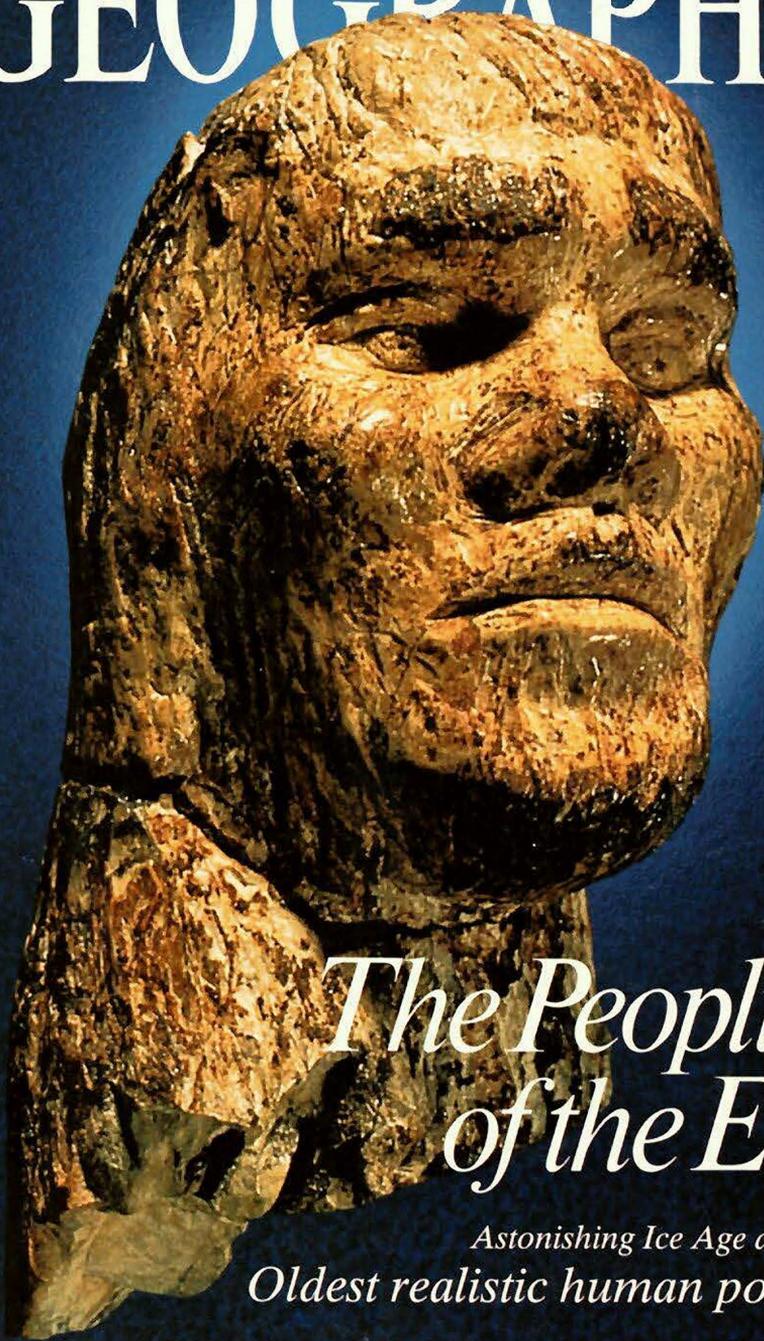
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The Peopling of the Earth

*Astonishing Ice Age discovery:
Oldest realistic human portrait?*

SEE "THE EXPLORERS: A CENTURY OF DISCOVERY" WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 12, ON PBS TV



Air Bridge to Siberia

Long barred by the Cold War from visiting friends and relatives across the Bering Sea, Alaskan Eskimos make a historic flight to Siberia for a reunion. If the thaw between the U.S.S.R. and U. S. continues, such visits may become commonplace again.

By WILBUR E. GARRETT
EDITOR

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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER



SPRING BREAKUP in the Arctic—always an occasion for celebrating—took a new turn this year as more than winter ice melted in the Bering Sea. On June 13 a 40-minute flight from Nome, Alaska, 240 miles west to Provideniya, Siberia, signaled a thaw in the 40-year-old political ice curtain between the Soviet Union and the United States. The trip—approved just

before the Moscow summit in May—allowed Siberian-Yupik-speaking Eskimos, one of four ethnolinguistic groups in Alaska's Eskimo population of some 35,000, to visit their ancestral homeland and friends and relatives they hadn't seen since 1948.

As the driving beat of drums quickened during a performance of Eskimo dancing, Alaskan Tim Gologergen, at left, leaped on stage and joined his hosts in a

session that had the Provideniya community hall jumping to an Eskimo beat.

"In the old days," Tim said, "it was only a 50-mile trip in a skin boat from St. Lawrence Island to Chaplino in Siberia. Every June or July three or four boatloads would visit. Our people would trade for furs, reindeer-skin clothes, tobacco, and winter supplies."

Tim—a civic leader from





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Savoonga and former major in
 the Alaska National Guard's Es-
 kimo Scouts—brought along a
 snapshot (left) taken in 1947 of
 Tataaq, center, a Soviet official
 who had led a party to Gambell
 looking for two Russians who
 had defected. Tim, right, told us,
 "They stayed two or three days.
 The guys had been there, but we
 didn't say anything."

Tataaq had died, Tim learned.
 But he did find friends and rela-

tives he hadn't seen since he last
 boated to Siberia in 1942.

The Friendship Flight carry-
 ing 82 Alaska natives, officials,
 businessmen, and journalists
 was the result of years of lobbying
 by Alaskans for regular contacts
 between Alaska and Siberia. The
 warm welcome—including a spe-
 cially designed poster—left no
 doubt that Provideniya also
 would welcome an end to the
 isolation.

THE VISIT was brief but good. The formality that first greeted the travelers quickly dissolved into a frenzy of getting acquainted, gift giving, and genealogical research. In the pin-trading competition, Alaska Airlines Chairman Bruce Kennedy's sagging lapels seemed to mark him the winner—and an honorary member of every trade union and school in Siberia.

The previous autumn a NOAA research ship had visited Provideniya. Three ports have been opened to U. S. fishing boats, and permission to crab in Siberian waters is expected soon. Joint Arctic research programs are under way. All point to lower tensions and reduced military budgets for both sides.

If U. S. and Soviet planners saw the Friendship Flight as a harbinger of business to come, for the Eskimos it was a sentimental visit to the past and a



WILBUR E. GARRETT (ABOVE AND RIGHT)

peek into an uncertain future. They had gone home to Siberia, where their roots and relatives are to be found, but neither they nor Siberia fit the old memories.

Since St. Lawrence Island lies much closer to Siberia than to the Alaska mainland, they had shopped, hunted, fished, and even found wives and husbands there until recent times. But the Alaskans are now politically, economically, even culturally American.

The sadness of good-byes was tempered by the promise of rebuilding Eskimo ties. Bernadette Alzanna-Stimpfle (left, at left) of Nome—whose husband, Jim, is considered the father of the trip—says farewell to new-found friend Nina Sergeevna.

Assuya Mumigtekaq (right) managed an impromptu family reunion by taking her cousin Mildred Irrigoo and Mildred's husband, Clarence, to her two-room apartment for a snack of reindeer meat and fish (both raw and frozen) and homemade bread slabbed with fresh butter. The small rooms were neat, well furnished, and included a TV set. Family snapshots were proudly shared to a background of Yupik dance tapes.

But gift giving proved a problem. None that the Mumigtekaqs

offered could be accepted. All contained fur or ivory banned by U. S. Customs. Irritated, Clarence Irrigoo suggested, "Let's meet out in the middle like in the old days. Then we can exchange all the gifts we want."

Spoken in the crowded confines of a small warm cubicle in a massive five-story cast-concrete building, the old hunter's attempt at humor pointed up a sad truth—not only would they never meet out in the Bering Sea again to trade illegally, but a major expansion of trade and traffic between these two shores could extinguish their fading culture. Of the estimated 2,350 Siberian Yupiks surviving, about half live on Alaska's St. Lawrence Island and half in settlements in Siberia.

The ancient Yupik coastal villages in Siberia, where the ageless rhythm of life brought whales, walruses, and seals to sustain them, were forcibly closed 30 years ago when the people were moved, integrated into Soviet society, and taught Russian. Assuya's two sons—seen in the photo she holds—are not hunters but soldiers in the Soviet Army.

Clarence's grandchildren may well meet their Siberian relatives "in the middle," but it might be as crew, guides, or dancers on cruise boats—perhaps even as their owners. If an American proposal is accepted, a weekly planeload of tourists will arrive from Nome, spend one day in Provideniya, and return along the Chukchi coast and across the Bering Sea via St. Lawrence on a cruise ship whose outbound passengers will have returned to Nome on the plane.

It will be a wonderful trip to a dramatic land and a great way to cement peaceful relations. And if passengers and crew are lucky and the season is right, they might even see a few whales, walruses, and seals. □

