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Wednesday 3 May, 2006

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### Top Stories

## Country Dentist goes north to Alaska

Kelly Smith, staff writer

April 18, 2006

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**Debbie Herrick knew she was running out of time to catch her airplane flight as she tended quickly but carefully to a 15-year-old dental patient.**

This was not just any patient, and she was not trying to catch just any commercial flight to somewhere.

The 15-year-old was one of the dozens of Alaskan natives that Herrick, "The Country Dentist" from North Lake, had treated during the past 10 days in Shishmaref, Alaska.

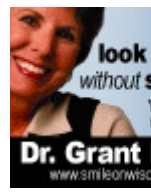
A bush pilot - one of the hardy, skillful aviators who fly across the Alaskan wilderness - was waiting at a nearby airstrip to take Herrick on the 45-minute flight south to Nome.

Before returning to Wisconsin, Herrick planned to spend a couple days in Nome in hopes of seeing the finish of the Iditarod, the 10- to 17-day, 1,150-mile, dog sled race across some of the most beautiful and rugged terrain on the continent.

If an outline of the state of Alaska were superimposed over a map of the continental United States, that outline would nearly stretch from one U.S. coast to another, according to Herrick.

Nearly half of the state's 640,000 people live in either Anchorage (pop.

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260,000) or Fairbanks (pop. 50,000). The remainder of the population, including about 100,000 Alaskan natives, are spread throughout the state's 570,374 square miles.

After raising two children and successful operating a dental practice in North Lake, Herrick decided she wanted to spend some time contributing her services to patients who live in undeveloped areas where there is a shortage of dentists.

After some extensive research, she decided she had two options - treating Native Americans in the Arizona desert or Native Alaskans in the northern wilderness.

She opted for Alaska because she was interested in working in an unfamiliar environment. She and her husband, Don, own a condo in Arizona.

She said one of the biggest surprises she experienced in Alaska was the weather.

"It is not as cold as you think. It doesn't feel as cold as Wisconsin," she said.

Even though the temperature often drops to double digits below zero, she described it as a "dry" cold that was not as chilling as the damper "wet" cold of Wisconsin.

But she said she was impressed by the vast whiteness of the frozen Alaska tundra.

She said that Alaskan natives are similar to Native Americans because much of their lives and spiritual beliefs are tied to nature, the land, wilderness and wildlife.

She described them as a friendly and caring people.

"Throughout the entire time I was there, I did not have an unfriendly experience with a single Native Alaskan regardless of whether it was a flight attendant, a patient or someone I met in one of the villages," she said.

Herrick believes that Native Alaskans are particularly susceptible to tooth and gum diseases and cavities because they may lack a natural immunity.

Most of their ancestors' diets were meat, fish and whale fat.

"There is nothing in meat, fish and whale blubber that would contribute to tooth decay," she said.

In addition, the natives used their teeth to assist them in hunting, fishing and making clothes.

"They used their teeth to cut fishing lines. They used their teeth to make mukluks (moccasins). They used their teeth as tools of survival," she said.

So, for years, she believes, tooth decay was not a problem for Alaska Natives.

However, she believes that the increase in native tooth decay paralleled the increase in the number of bush pilots traversing Alaska from the time it became a state in 1959 to the economic development boom in the 1980s.

As the number of bush pilots grew, so did the amount of sugar and soft drinks the pilots brought to give to the natives.

To compound the problem, dental care in the far northern regions of the state is limited.

There are no dentists, and the hundreds of natives spread over thousands of square miles must rely on dental therapists provided by the Norton Sound Health Corporation, the not-for-profit organization that sponsored Herrick's trip.

During the two weeks, Herrick estimates that she performed about 200 procedures. Each patient averaged about five to eight different procedures during a visit, she said.

The procedures ranged from cleaning teeth and filling cavities to performing more complex aesthetic procedures to help improve the natives' teeth and appearances.

She noted aesthetic procedures are often important to improve both the physical health of the teeth but also the mental health of the patient.

Improving someone's appearance can have a positive impact on his or her self-esteem, she noted.

She recalled performing an aesthetic procedure on a teenage boy, who "walked out of the office after the procedure a totally different person." He had been self-conscious about the physical defect.

In addition to dental procedures, she also brought to the Alaskan wilderness the "Tooth Fairy" demonstrations that she has performed for thousands of Lake Country school children.

For more than 20 years, she has visited area elementary schools dressed in her tooth fairy costume, carrying a giant tooth brush, five and a half feet in length, that she used to demonstrate to youngsters how to properly brush her teeth.

While in Alaska, she often worked 12- and 14-hour days during her visits to the villages of Shishmaref and Brevig Mission, both north of Nome.

She was usually transported from the airstrip to the health center by snow machine, the Alaskan term for snowmobile.

In Alaska, the snowmobile is not a recreational vehicle. It replaced the dog sled as one of the primary modes of land transportation in the north.

The Iditarod celebrates the accomplishments of dog sled drivers - called mushers - who in 1925 carried a supply of lifesaving serum to Nome from Nenana, about 700 miles, to help combat a diphtheria outbreak that was threatening the community.

Nome is a small scenic seaport community (pop. 3,505) on the south port of the Seward Peninsula along the Bering Sea.

During the dog race, it might be compared to Green Bay on a Packer Sunday. Restaurants, taverns and downtown business sponsor events that promote the Iditarod.

The mushers are required to stop for about eight hours at rest stations along the route.

During her stay in Nome, Herrick spent the night at one of those rest stations.

She assisted a team of paramedics who treated the injuries of some of the drivers in a snow machine race along the route several days before the first mushers reached the finish line.

She said some of the injuries were severe, since the snow machines sometimes reach speeds in excess of 100 mph.

However, she was not able to stay long enough to see the Iditarod finish.

Herrick reflected on her trip.

"I wish I could have stayed there for a year. If I could have stayed longer I think I could have done more to help with some of the dental problems than just filling the cavities," she said.

"All my life I had wanted to do some kind of missionary work. I am sorry I didn't go to Alaska when I was younger. I might have been a dentist who stayed there," she concluded.

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