Mead Treadwell
Participant

As Chairman of the Alaska Historical Commission focused on Alaska's unique anniversary, this year, the 25th anniversary of the Friendship Flight between Nome and Provideniya Russya, to celebrate the historic occasion. As part of that celebration, we asked people who were on the flight to reflect and share. This article and the others in this publication, captures those memories.

There are three important reasons to celebrate the opening of our border between Alaska and Russia, which began with the exchange of Friendship Flights between Nome and Provideniya, and the Russian return visits between Magadan and Anchorage in 1988 and 1989.

First, the flights were a significant milestone in the end of the Cold War. Our so-called “ice curtain” came down well over a year before the breach in the Berlin Wall, toward Russia. We had a “iron curtain” which divided Eastern Europe. Alaskans helped make this happen. We can be proud of hastening the end of a nuclear standoff that, at best, threatened misery and death to millions of people, or at worst, could have ended human history altogether.

Second, the opening of cordial relations in the Arctic region begat significant circumpolar cooperation. That is none too soon, because the Arctic which became accessible on a political basis in the late 1980’s became much more accessible on a physical basis with the ice retreat of the last decade. The Northern Forum, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, and the Arctic Council allow Arctic residents to work together to protect our common environment and to forge a common, sustainable future. These flights created a neighborhood in the North.

Third, and perhaps most important, is what the era after the Friendship Flights has allowed on a people-to-people basis across our border in the last quarter century. Alaskan and Siberian Yupik families were reunited. New families, with Russian and American parents, have been formed and children have been raised. Many Russian and American students have studied at each other’s Universities. Russian ships have helped deliver fuel to keep Nome residents from freezing in a dark winter of 2012. Alaska Eskimo whaling captains now work together at the International Whaling Commission to maintain indigenous whaling with their Chukotka counterparts. Our National Park authorities work together in the Bering Region, and the Bering program helps keep the door open. Alaska contractors and oilfield workers play a major role in projects across the circle and Rotary Clubs regularly do good works across the border. Russians join athletic events here, and Alaskans compete there. Tourists have come to engage with the people, cultural and archaeological wonders and flora and fauna of both sides of an ancient land bridge responsible for the original settlement of the Americas. This good list could go on and on.

By celebrating these friendship flights we celebrate the people who made it happen. Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev toasted Lyenne Cox, whose August 1987 swim between the Diomede Islands was a precursor to these flights, at a White House dinner. Alaska Performing Artists for Peace founder Dixie Belcher, of Juneau, used the magic of song to charm Gorbachev’s spokesman Gennady Gerisimov to come to Alaska to see the opportunities of cooperation. Nome resident Jim Stimpfel waged an endless campaign of faxes to leaders on both sides of the Bering Strait, and Ken Wells, a Wall Street Journal writer and Jeff Berliner, then writing for UPI, made the prospect of an open border a front-page story. A group of us, including myself, Stimpfel, Leo Rasmussen, former Governor Wally Hickel, Nome Chamber President Neil Colby, State Chamber President Dave Heatwole, University of Alaska’s Vic Fischer, ISER economist Gunnar Knapp, and State Division of International Trade leaders Ginnia Breitford, Dan Dixon and Bob Poe went to work. Native leader, and State Senator Willie Hensley helped push. The Siberian Gateway Project was born. Bruce Kennedy and Jim Johnson of Alaska Airlines joined the cause, seeing potential new routes, and Alascom’s leadership joined seeing potential new telecom connections. Ben Sheardown made us aware of mining prospects that could grow from accessibility. Then Sen. Frank Murkowski, and his assistant Jessica Gavora, lobbied the White House. And then-Governor Steve Cowper seized the idea, and when our efforts became an official objective of the State of Alaska, the mission was accomplished.

The two flights themselves produced magnificent memories, some chronicled here. I have many from that day, but never in my life to that point would I have thought I would experience what happened later. In years that followed, I’d continue on page 2

Jim Stimpfel
Participant

Before I came to Nome I met my wife Bernadette Alvanna who’s from King Island in Fairbanks and followed her to Nome. I used to listen to some of the elders in the King Island talk about the early days of crossing the Bering Strait. It was 1886, and I wasn’t telling any houses so I said, “Gee, you know that sounds like fun.” So I started writing letters to our Congressman and people like that and I started talking to other people in Nome.

I remember one late August day that year, I went up to the city dump to dump the garbage and I noticed that the wind was blowing toward the ice retreat of the last decade. The Northern Forum, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy, and the Arctic Council allow Arctic residents to work together to protect our common environment and to forge a common, sustainable future. These flights created a neighborhood in the North.

So later I thought to myself. “Maybe I should go to the weather service and get a helium balloon? And my wife was a bilingual teacher at the school and she was doing a class with the kids and we thought, “Well, let’s send some messages of friendship from the kids in the elementary school. Let’s put some messages written in English, Inupiaq, and Siberian Yupik.” And we had a woman named Astrid Smart, who was a German. She knew a little bit of Russian, so she translated some of the letters to Russian. And we even had a woman write in Cyrillic! We made a little bag of goodies with sugar, tea, sewing needles, thread, chewing tobacco, because when I’d listened to the elders going over in the boats, I heard them talk about trading. I thought it would be a nice little bag of trading items going across the Bering Strait.

In November we filled the balloon with helium and we launched it. We didn’t want it to go too high so we tied some rocks on it so it float about 200 feet above the water. We launched it off and it went across and then it came back down again. It cooled off and it started bouncing across and I was watching with my binoculars as the balloon was going over. And I saw this boat come rushing up to it. I said, “I see, whose boat is that? And this boat came up to it and grabbed the balloon and grabbed it with a knife, throwing it on board. It was Tim Gologorgan who got real excited. He opened the bag of goodies and saw the Russian handwriting and said, “This is from Russia! This is from Russia!”

So, I followed him down the coastline with my binoculars, down to his camp. And he gets out of his boat and I come running up to him and Tim’s really excited and says, “Jim, this came from Russia! I said, no, Tim. I’m trying to send it over.”
Before the Friendship Flight initiative, the Soviet Union was a basket case, financially and physically, the collapse of the Berlin Wall having caused a groundswell of people yearning for change. In 1987, I flew to Little Diomede to attend a meeting with President Jimmy Carter to announce the Friendship Flight initiative, an effort to help develop tourism in the area. The initiative was a big deal, and it was clear that the two nations needed to work together. The idea was to fly Alaskans to the Soviet Union to help them see what opportunities there were for economic development. It was a spectacular success. The first trip was to the Soviet Union, and it was a total success. The second trip was to the Soviet Union, and it was a huge success. The third trip was to the Soviet Union, and it was a huge success. The fourth trip was to the Soviet Union, and it was a huge success. The fifth trip was to the Soviet Union, and it was a huge success. 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I was born and raised in Katukiu, and we moved to King Island when I was a war baby. They had built a DOW [distant early warning] system, we were quite unaware of the true situation. The town was a Russian village, so the last I heard of my mother was when she married a Russian man. I grew up in Russia, and I still have my patch. They wanted us country people to report any unpiloted aircraft. Whenever we saw such a plane, they would cancel the telegram office and let them know. The military made sure we had at least 100 people in the neighborhood. And we knew our own people lived a couple of miles away on King Island, but they were trade and for the people from St. Lawrence Island. We had no contact with people who managed reindeer. Of course, they wanted to keep it secret. I never thought to get there. I also had a chance to visit the Russian government building, and it was almost impossible to get into. It was a fascinating trip in November of 1979 and it led me to more impressions of the country.

Twelve years later was the Friendship Flight. After that it was an amazing speed in the change that began to happen. I remember we banned the contact between the U.S. and the Soviet Union because of the Cold War. It was difficult to get to the Soviet Union and I visited Alaska, and I visited Russia, and I still have my patch. They wanted us country people to report any unpiloted aircraft. Whenever we saw such a plane, they would cancel the telegram office and let them know. The military made sure we had at least 100 people in the neighborhood. And we knew our own people lived a couple of miles away on King Island, but they were trade and for the people from St. Lawrence Island. We had no contact with people who managed reindeer. Of course, they wanted to keep it secret. I never thought to get there. I also had a chance to visit the Russian government building, and it was almost impossible to get into. It was a fascinating trip in November of 1979 and it led me to more impressions of the country.

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Chet Walukiewicz

In 1988 I received a call from a woman representing the Russian Cultural Center of Anchorage. A "tovor" is an envelope with a special design on the hand side see picture above. It contained a letter and a cancellation. The idea was to participate in the Friendship Flight. My wife and I were both a member of the Anchorage Philatelic Society, Alaska’s oldest Stamp Club.

The problem was the flight was to take place in two weeks, short notice for the flights to the Russian Far East. We wanted to know how to pull it off. I had worked on underwater research with the state and the US Army Alaska and other projects for the NOAA. I had an historical moment because the Berlin Wall had just fallen. We were anxious to see how the press coverage was there.

The passengers were divided between the natives, the politicians, the press corps, passengers, and my brother-IN-law. I was the only one who was able to communicate and wrestle relationships with the press to help the flight’s success. The day we landed was an unbelievable day. We were treated like royalty by the Russians. When I look back I realize that it really opened up the East-West relationship for me. The Russians came over a year later.

We had a print of the Van Zyle map, which is a late 19th century international dateline at Little Diomede we had. I was able to secure their first meeting. We started a friendship between the people of Russia and Alaska in an instant. They had never seen an Alaskan before. The press coverage was there.

The friendship flight was the first crack in the cold war. I was a Russian history buff. We would only be successful if six officials on both sides signed off on the covers – and we had to work through a language barrier, but somehow they knew exactly what was wanted and we were able to pull it off.

Bob Poe Voyager

The call came early on a Saturday morning. It was Governor Cowper. He said, “Yes, the Russians just called, they want to fly to Nome on your flight. Very good. I am very happy. It’s a first. What in the world are you going to do.”

I responded, “I will do my job to pull this adventure together. It sounds as though my work is over.”

Bob Poe Voyager

On the flight back to Nome that day, our small group was ecstatic with our success. Both the governor and the mayor of Nome expressed their joy at what we had accomplished. Everyone involved in the flight was proud of the effort.

Elisha Miller Participant

We are coming tomorrow, arriving at 11 am. We will need all the help we can get. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity that I hope we can pull it off.

With that affirmation received and with the special greetings of the Alaska Ambassadors, the plane arrived in Provideniya. The Mayor greeted us cordially and told us that we had paid for our plane. One of the pilots had only his license’s for us.

I felt again appeared in positive dress. My guide for this first-find mission (someone who generally had good luck on the flight) was Governor of Port of Provideniya, Alexei G. Tolstein. Mr. Governor, I remember me and I remembered him.

We gathered in his office and each of us were given a gift. I was given a very nice watch. It was the best gift I could have had. And he called. This is the perspective I leave with. We were small town local leaders, friends, fast friends, lasting friends, friends for life. This was the last time we met. We could. The projects that followed the 1988 flight have had to be carried out in a rough and often divided world. The approach that was used in 1988 was a big step. Looking back 21 years later, we established border cooperation, joint projects among countries. Even though some of the projects are not as strong as some did. Some get started then our small group of executives will have both the goodwill and the opportunity to pursue projects in the Russian Far East. It is a tremendous feeling.

We too, with the Tumen River Delta Project. All the way from the very first inkling of it, that this project has moved. We are interested in obtaining any film footage from the Friendship Flight. Yes, we will. We will do our best.

Armstrong Miller Participant

For over 10 years in the air we have never been so far in the air. We have never been so far from home. We have never been so close to our family. We have never been so far away from our family. We have never been so close to family. If we would have a Russian family, we would...
That's how secret it was, we couldn't find Alaska to what we called at the time, taught us on the short flight from Nome, pushed our passports into their hands dubbed the Friendship Flight, the entire been rounded up to promote a form rapid-fire Siberian Yupik language and and the political leaders placed souvenir Frank Murkowski into a swarm of people leaders and Alaska villagers and Senator us walked with Governor Steve Cowper, across the International Dateline in the Alaska Airlines jet had landed on June 14 literally. I looked just like her: blonde Olga reached out to touch my hair, Ginna Brelsford 8 having the demos, and we knew the Another thing we did was few of us had relatives over there they'd never suddenly they became Russian and out kayaking or hunting one day and the Nome area having a dad or uncle the beauty of our Divided Twin. Another personal memory I have from for the friendship flight. It was for us. Piece by piece, young adults in Possession of Alaska Airlines. The actual flight to me was one of the most the heart wrenching things I've ever seen and we'd been there the Nome area having a dad or uncle out kayaking or hunting one day and suddenly they became Russian and not knowing what happened to those people. The whole thing was about reuniting the families, not only those lost, but the guys from the islands that had relatives over there they'd never met from centuries ago. The whole thing was neat. When we landed, to the crowds, many of them in relatives with relative, some lost and some just relatives they'd never met was incredible.

Another thing we did was few of us had cooked up an idea to have a dog race and the idea was generated and it never been dealing with the Russians for God knows how many years. The Olympic committee was considering doing sled dog demonstrations to be included in the Olympics, which had been done in 1925, but not since. Then they ended up having the demos, and we knew the Russians would want to participate. A couple of us challenged the Russians at the meeting to a dog race and they accepted and a few weeks later we had Russians sitting in our living rooms talking about a race called the “Hope Race.” It took a couple of years to organize and the first race was held in 1993 and is still continuing today, in a different format. The race went from Nome to Teller and Wales. In Wales Russians in Aeroflot helicopters picked us up and flew us across the Bering Sea, we ran dogs from Uelen to Anadyr. The race was from 1,000 to 1200 miles. Another personal memory I have from the flight, was that I'd taken over 50 to 100 of Alaska posters we'd published for years. I wanted to give them all to the people, not necessarily to the officials, but just the people. I had left one of the meetings and gone out to the bus and been transported in from the airport. I stood alongside the bus and was passing out a poster to people as they walked by and within 3.5 seconds, I had 100 people around me, pushing and shoving, grabbing at me and the posters and things. I'd have some hair experience about them, but they were just as Hell, I'm just scared. All of a sudden from out of the crowd, a hand came through and grabbed me and pulled me through and it was KGB. There were Irish KGB around, looking and watching and he saved my bacon. He told me we don't that here because we will be mauled. Another scary experience after the Friendship Flight was that I was almost arrested during the “Hope Race”. There were only three people who officially headed up the race, Leo Rasmussen from Nome, Jerry Tokar from Anchorage and me. We each had our assigned duties and were dealing with the sports committee in Anadyr. I was the only official from the three of us that physically went on the race and we were stuck in a checkpoint because we'd lost a musher and were there for several days waiting for a helicopter to try and find her. At one point, a helicopter showed up, we thought it was ours to use. It wasn't. Several Iowa-based briefcases and an AK-47 got out of the helicopter to arrest me. Apparently some Russians had one of the board houses where the racers kept supplies and had stolen methyl alcohol, or Heat, which we used for our dog cookers. So they went and died and it held me responsible. A Nice Russian I had met on a previous trip to Siberia to organize the race, stepped in and sort of saved my bacon, although I don't think they were really going to arrest me. I think they just needed to make the point that they were in control. Without that friendship flight, we would not have had the “Hope Race”. I had worked with the artist for the friendship flight. Because of my life-long interest in the Siberian husky, I wanted to know more about them in Siberia. The husky had been imported in early 1900's into Nome from that area. I shot gurned letters to every museum and university in Russia asking to meet somebody in Provideniya for the friendship flight. Somebody from the University did meet me and she was an expert on the Chukchi Native and the Siberian husky. I would never have done anything more with the Russians except for the friendship flight if it hadn't been for that connection. It was a very, very wonderful time – an absolutely wonderful time, and a memory of time gone by.