

Living In Alaska - The End of Winter

By Kate Conley

Kate Conley, a former city employee with Vernonia and a resident of Mist, recently moved with her family to the small town of King Salmon, Alaska, on the Aleutian Peninsula. Kate is working for the local government there as the Borough Clerk for Lake and Peninsula Borough. We hope to publish periodic updates from Kate about her adventures and daily life in Alaska.

I was warned that the winters are very dark here. Maybe because I grew up in a place called Mist, but there was more sunlight this winter than I expected. On December 21st the sun rose around ten and set about three. That was, of course, the shortest day. Since then the days have been six minutes longer each day. Sunrise and sunset seems to last a long time.

The borough has dorms for itinerant workers and teachers here for in-service meetings. Workers who specialize in boilers or technology do not abound in the local population, so these specialists have to be flown in and accommodations are scarce; the borough is able to save money by providing housing in the offices. We spent the first month in these "dorms" because housing here is at a premium. Shipping in lumber and supplies is expensive. During the winter, all the inns and lodges are closed up and any houses not rented before the freeze are winterized and not rented out again until thaw. We were fortunate to find a house available on December 31st from a family that had moved here from Kansas in the fall. The father was to be a first year teacher who by December had enough and was moving home. The house would be available and the owner needed someone in right away. Leaving a house empty when the temperature dips to 30 below is serious business.

The school district (which is run by the borough) has fourteen schools, each serving K through 12. The number of students per school varies from nine students to sixty-five with a total school district enrollment of 366 students. The entire borough population is around 1,500 citizens. In addition, each of these communities is completely independent and not accessible to one another except by boat or plane (or snowmobile when the waters freeze). Being school district management is a logistical nightmare and requires someone who doesn't mind flying in little planes.

This area is feeling the recession this year that the government insists we are not experiencing. The cost of living here is no longer offset by the proceeds of fishing. Fishing used to be very lucrative. In 1997, a salmon fisherman in Naknek could expect to make up to \$80,000; now a fisherman is lucky to make \$30,000 in a season. Being resourceful, the fishermen have had to expand their season by fishing for many types of fish and now a man that fishes for eight months can make what he made in three months ten years ago.

The price of fuel is the biggest crisis faced by villages in the bush. It is causing these small communities to become

extinct. Our borough services seventeen communities with populations that vary from 205 to five. Each community has to be independent. They supply any infrastructure the community receives. For example, Igiugig is a village of fifty-six citizens in the winter. The village council provides road maintenance, sewer, water, airport maintenance, and diesel powered electrical service. Most communities have diesel powered electrical plants. Each community orders their fuel to be delivered by barge in the fall of the year and stores the fuel in tank farms.

I feel bad for Vernonia homeowners. I know the sewer bills seem outrageous, but let me put a bit of perspective on things. In the little villages in Alaska they do not pay for water or sewer for the most part. Most are on wells and have septic systems. What they pay for is heat. Keep in mind that the temperatures here can get to 50 or 60 below and being without fuel or electricity can be a serious problem. I pay \$4.00 per gallon for diesel, but in the smaller villages, they are having a crisis and are paying around \$17.00 per gallon. This winter has been really bad because the barges did not deliver the usual delivery of fuel in the fall. Fuel is flown in, in 55-gallon drums, and is very scarce and expensive.

These villagers often live on only subsistence and fishing. Their incomes are about \$35,000 per year. That does not sound so bad until you know that for every \$100 Portlanders spend on food, villagers spend about \$240. They supplement their food with subsistence, meaning they hunt, fish and gather food.

The weather is very different here and so is the tolerance for it. In Oregon when it snows, even a little skiff, schools are closed. Not here. We have seen snow, sleet, hail, ice storms and freezing rain. Still, the kids go off

to school. The only reason they will close school is for a power outage (no heat = kidsicles) or if the wind chill gets down to 60 below. On Kelsey's first day, I took her to school and when she went to board the school bus that evening, the driver did not want to let her on because she did not have her snow pants! It is a requirement that a child must wear boots and snow pants if the weather is below zero. Trust me, the drivers do not budge on this rule. Show up with just sneakers, no ride. Show up with jeans and a coat, no ride. The kids' lockers are filled with snow gear. I do not know where they put their books.

The bars are popular on Friday and Saturday night, and churches are popular on Sunday morning. There are three bars in Naknek and one in King Salmon. Each town has its own liquor store. I understand alcoholism is a serious problem here and several villages have declared themselves dry or "damp." The difference is that it is illegal to possess alcohol in dry villages, while it is only illegal to sell alcohol in damp villages. There are serious and significant penalties for bringing in alcohol to dry villages. The good news is there are eleven churches in Naknek and King Salmon. The service we attend has a congregation of less than ten people. There are two radio stations available here. One is Alaska Public Radio Network and the other is a Christian channel.

In March we had finally acclimated to the cold. The last few days have been in the mid 30s. The snow is melting and disappearing. My husband admitted he hasn't worn his long johns for three days. Kelsey is just wearing a hoodie to school and I have given up the hat and mittens. I am told not to get used to this warm snap as it will turn cold again before we see a real spring, but it gives one hope.

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