

Alden Roberts has lived on the street for 17 years. He eats at Bean's Cafe, carves wooden kayaks for pocket money. Mostly he drinks. "I don't know why I'm alive," he says. "Lucky?"

He lives on the Avenue



Alden "Buzzy" Roberts sits on a bench along Fourth Avenue. "I used to try to stay away from the booze. There was six, seven months there one time - a few years ago," he says.

By Larry Campbell
Daily News Reporter

On a wood slat bench in front of the Sunshine Mall, in the gut of Fourth Avenue, Alden Roberts sat with his shoulders hunched. He looked discarded, like someone who was supposed to care about him had had a change of heart.

He was bundled in two jackets — one he borrowed, one he found somewhere, just like the cracked leather shoes he wore. He must have combed his black hair at least once earlier that day because a part was still there, and the beard stubble wasn't too long yet.

Roberts was awake and starting to sober up. He was starting to smile a little, which made his onyx eyes squint. Even that sick feeling in his stomach was going away. "Buzzy," as his friends know him, was alive for another day and ready for another drink. Make that a lot of drinks.

THE SLIDE

Roberts is 48, an Eskimo and an alcoholic. He is a minority within a minority. Of the 12,000 or so Natives who call Anchorage home, about 400 are down-and-outers like Roberts, according to the Salvation Army's Clitheroe Center for alcoholism treatment. Those 400 are scattered all over downtown, Mountain View and Spenard, not just on Fourth

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Alden Roberts

Avenue, wandering through dark little working man's bars.

If he quit drinking, Roberts said, he could probably find a job, get a real place to live, feel well all the time.

But he hasn't quit. So he wanders the Avenue, sleeps in the woods or a friend's bed, feels sick most of the time.

"I used to try to stay away from the booze. There was six, seven months there one time — a few years ago," he said, a big grin on his face. "Stayed all winter at the Salvation Army. But that was winter."

He coughed hard and laughed. "Summer came, and it was too hot to stay indoors. Gotta get out. Got out and saw my friends down here and I was drinkin' again. Bad habits."

He was born in Unalakleet, but his family moved to Anchorage when he was 14. Roberts' eyes brightened when he talked about his young days — the old junior high downtown, hawking newspapers on the sidewalks of the Avenue when it was a hub for busi-

ness and professional offices, stores and night life. He graduated in 1959 from Anchorage High.

The slide into the neck of the bottle really began after that. The Bureau of Indian Affairs told Roberts he could go to a trade school in Chicago and learn drafting, maybe even become an engineer.

Instead, he waded knee-deep into the bars and the booze there. Those extracurricular activities shoved school aside and seduced him in Chicago for nine years. He came back to Anchorage, glanced at the job prospects and kept on drinking. Somehow it made the whole fast-paced world just a bit easier to bear.

"Sometimes I think the generation after mine is better off," he said one evening, nursing a cup of scalding coffee. He batted his eyes slowly, like old men do. "I mean, they're more in step with what's going on now, more up to speed, you know what I mean? I mean, people around my age, we weren't used to having so many others around, rushing around all the time. We had to try to catch up. Some did. Some didn't, like me."

"I'm an alcoholic. I drink just too hard. My whole family does. I've been down here 17 years and seen 53 of my friends die, including one of my brothers. I don't know why I'm alive. Lucky?"

Roberts said he's been rolled and robbed, sick and dirty. Gashed his arm one time fighting gang of young toughs in an alley. He fell in the urine and mud in the dark and the arm got infected. "Swelled up to look like Popeye's arm," he said.

The last time he quit drinking was in 1980, when he spent 18 months in prison for knifing a man. The last real job he had was in 1979, working in a cannery at Dutch Harbor.

MEET ANOTHER DAY

But Roberts gets by. Bean's Cafe is always there to hand out meals. He carves sometimes, turning little lumps of wood into kayaks with seal hunters aboard, spears poised. "Good way to make a quarter, instead of panhandling. I would never go on welfare. I don't like asking people for handouts." Other times, he just hangs around his

drinking buddies. Somebody's always got a bottle and is willing to share a little nip in the alleys and alcoves around the downtown malls. Up the Avenue, down the Avenue, all night long.

Then he wanders off to sleep somewhere. One night it might be the Brother Francis Shelter, if he isn't too drunk and get there early. Sometimes it's a friend's house in Spenard.

Sometimes it's down by Ship Creek, among the willows along the railroad yard.

"You don't get cold if you just keep warm and dry. Just keep away from rusty nails and cuts and

bites. Other human beings bite sometimes. Fights and stuff, you know.

"Am I happy? Naw, I'm sick all the time. I'm miserable. I'm a dyin' man. Thought I was gonna die last week.

"But I figure, gotta keep on goin'. Meet new people and keep out of trouble. Meet another day."

Then Buzzy groped around in the big inside pocket of his long overcoat and pulled out a bottle of Night Train, a cheap wine. He glanced over his shoulder, then wrapped his lips around the bottle neck and snapped his head back.

Woody on hand for poetry reading

Warm Springs author, poet and artist Elizabeth Woody will be on hand for a poetry reading and book-signing on December 11 and 12 in the changing exhibits gallery at The Museum at Warm Springs.

Woody, whose painting and lithographs are currently featured in The Museum's Tribal Member

Art Show, has published two volumes of poetry and is featured in several collections, including "Talking Leaves" and "Circle of Nations."

Poetry readings will begin at 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. each day. For more information, contact Jeanne Thomas, 553-3331.

Part 2 of a series

Artists Respond: A People in Peril

In 1988, the Anchorage Daily News ran a ten-part series of articles describing the bitter social struggles of modern Native Alaskans.

Native Alaskan artist Susie Bevins Ericson was so moved by the series that she created a four-piece installation that graphically illustrated her personal response to the issues examined in this series.

After a solo exhibition at the Anchorage Museum of Natural History, Ms. Ericson convinced the Visual Arts Center of Alaska to invite native artists in Alaska and Washington to respond to the series. The resulting show — "Artists Respond: A People in Peril" — includes 14 wall hangings, three framed po-

ems, 11 framed photographs and four sculptures will be featured in the changing exhibits gallery at The Museum at Warm Springs from January 15 to March 11.

Excerpts from the Pulitzer Prize-winning series are being reprinted with permission from the Anchorage Daily News in order that prospective visitors will understand the purpose and context of the artwork in show.

The Warm Springs community is invited to submit their own responses—photographs, letters, poetry, artwork, etc.—for inclusion in a display to be exhibited in conjunction with the show. For more information, contact Exhibits Coordinator Roxanne Casey, 553-3331.

'Tundra Crossing'

Something happened to me
As I made my way across the tundra.
I started out as a happy Eskimo boy,
Living free; hunting, fishing, and trapping.
I learned how to pick the right greens
and berries;
Draw and carve Eskimo legends,
Gather eggs,
And speak Inupiat.
I had free access to the outdoors.
I roamed the land as a nomad.
I could live in minus 31-degree weather
With the wind blowing.
I was free as the wind, with no boundaries,
No impact studies,
No surveys,
And no disease.

Then one day, someone came by the village
And brought a piece of paper
Which said that I had to go to school,
And if my parents did not send me to school,
They would be violating and breaking the law.
The messenger said that in order for me to grow up
As a law-abiding citizen, acceptable in society,
I must go to school.

That school was hundreds of miles away,
A government school.

The messenger said the government would
Take good care of me until I had finished school,
Or became old enough that the government
Was not responsible anymore.

My parents asked the messenger
"When will we see him again?"
The messenger's answer,
"The government does not transport children
From the school to the village.
You should be happy.
Your child will be receiving an education.
Wait until he is finished,
Then you can see him again."

I stayed at the school for nine years.
I lost all my Native ways.
Today, as I sit here with my bottle of wine,
A derelict,
I say to myself,
"Something happened to me
As I made my way across the tundra."
Fred Bigjim
Seagayuk