

*For 16 months, a community of 550 on the Yukon Delta saw its children kill themselves—one after another. Dozens of people attempted it—eight succeeded. It touched everyone.*

# Alakanuk's suicide epidemic

**Alakanuk**—In March 1985, a young man walked out onto the tundra behind this Yukon River village and carefully, neatly shot himself in the heart.

"I guess I've always looked for a reason to do it," said the note near Louie Edmund's body. "And I found it."

The sound of the shot rolled across the flat delta land, through the supper time darkness of a cold spring day. It breached the walls and windows of the wooden houses, marking the moment as a beginning, for Louie Edmund had begun a 16-month suicide epidemic that ended the lives of eight young villagers.

In a community of 550, eight suicides is the equivalent of more than 3,000 in Anchorage. It is an unimaginable tragedy.

In a community of 550, every name on the roll of the dead is someone you know: Louie Edmund, 22; Melvin Tony, 23; Steven Kameroff, 19; Jerry Augline, 21; Karen George, 17; Benjamin Edmund, 21; Timothy Stanislaus, 25; Albert Harry, 29.

"I never went through this before," said Louie's mother, Adeline Edmund, who lost two sons before it was over. "My whole body hurt....I never did get mad at God (before) but I find myself getting mad at Him."

Alakanuk had known many unnatural deaths, yes. Too many. From violence and recklessness, on land and on the river. Most of the victims were drunk when they died. But none officially labeled suicide. Other villages had suicides but not traditional Roman Catholic Alakanuk.

The village looked for a reason for Louie's death. He was exceptionally bright, an honor student when he graduated from high school in 1982. He had gone to college in Fairbanks and planned to go back. But there was another side to Louie, one shaped by a childhood of alcohol and violence.

"We were a team of abused children," he wrote in his suicide note.

He was suspected of stealing. "I left a wave of uncaught crime in my past," the note said. "The future is shit. I've been clashed into a rapidly changing culture. Tried my best to keep up, but we're losing and the past histories of Americans (is that) Natives have lost all. And it's happening again and I don't want to see it when them land claims (illegible) breaks us apart."

Was Louie involved in a store burglary the night before he died, as suspected? Was he afraid of arrest or jail? Or just depressed by the suspicion? There seemed to be "reasons" for Louie's suicide and people were prepared to accept it.

"Being the first one, it was an oddity," said Sister Ann Brantmeier, a Catholic nun who has lived in the village for five years. "It was like, 'I can't believe he did and I don't know why he did it, but that was Louie and it just happened.'"

Nothing happened for seven months. But a new idea had been born, a new door opened. On October 2, Melvin Tony shoved the muzzle of a shotgun under his chin and pulled the trigger. Melvin was a quiet, pleasant man who rarely drank, but he was black-out drunk when he died. His blood alcohol was .35, three-and-a-half times the legal limit for driving. He had spent the drinking himself into a despondent stupor over a broken love affair and a baby lost to abortion.

Suddenly the village that never had a suicide had two.

After Melvin, the deaths came fast. At one point, five in 14 weeks, and as many as 40 attempts, ranging from gestures that were clearly imitative cries for help, to one where a father found his son hanging but was able to cut him down in time.

Grief flooded the village. And fear. Alakanuk families are all related, by blood or marriage. Few were left unscarred. Three of the victims were first cousins.

"I never heard of anybody killing themselves before, except for those big movie stars like Marilyn Monroe," said Valentina Black, a high school senior who lost two cousins and a close friend. "After Melvin killed himself, I thought maybe they were copying....It sounded and looked so crazy, all those people killing themselves, sometimes for no reason at all."

"It had a life of its own, it seems," said Ralph Baldwin, a high school teacher.

Each death stretched out for weeks as the bodies were taken from the village to Anchorage for autopsies. Before the mourning for one was over, someone else was dead.

"Some parents were openly asking their children to stop this, right on (CB) channel 11," said former Mayor Elizabeth Chikigak. "Like a plea."

Routine death, or what passes for routine death in rural Alaska, didn't stop during this time. Four people drowned, a young woman was raped and beaten to death, one died of illness, an unarmed 20-year-old village police officer was murdered.

"We hated to hear the CB," said Kitty Curren, who has taught in Alakanuk for 12 years with her husband, George. "We hated to hear a late plane. It meant an emergency. It meant death."

Then, in the summer of 1986, the suicides stopped. The epidemic was over and Alakanuk began to heal, slowly. But it was not the same village it had been. The people had learned things about themselves and their children, things they hadn't

known before. This fall some villagers agreed to talk about their experiences.

"We have to try to help other villages," said Mary Black, Valentina's mother.

**PEOPLE KNOW THE ENEMY**  
Alakanuk is 15 miles from the Bering Sea, strung out for four miles along the banks of a Yukon River slough. People get from one end of town to the other by three-wheeler, by boat or by walking along one of two rutted dirt roads. The villagers live mostly in the standard wooden Monopoly houses that dot the Bush, up on stilts here to protect them from flooding.

Twentieth century technology is the norm—chain saws and outboard motors, stoves and freezers, CBs, cable TV and a laundromat. In addition to more than 50 paying jobs, many families fish commercially. But the men still hunt seal, standing in flat-bottomed boats to hurl their spears. They hunt to put food on the table and to feel right—subsistence is both a responsibility and a religion.

Because of its location so far down the Yukon, problems caused by the intrusion of Western culture came late to Alakanuk. But they did come. Ask the villagers to name the worst problems and they'll tell you:

Alcohol.  
Not just in Alakanuk, in many villages. Ask why husbands beat their wives, why men are shot. Ask why women are raped and children hate their lives. Ask why love drowns in anger and guilt. The answer is always alcohol.

Alakanuk is officially dry—no importation or sale of liquor is allowed. But the law has little relevance where the drink of choice is brewed from sugar and yeast in five-gallon plastic pails.

Alcohol shapes most of the death and all of the violence in Alakanuk. Sister Ann estimates that about 85 percent of the adults abuse alcohol or marijuana or both. Many individuals are sober, alcohol counselor Arthur Chikigak said, but he couldn't think of a single family where everyone is sober.

Johnson Katchakoar, 81, remembers that alcohol first came to Alakanuk in the 1950s, brought down river by cannery workers and soldiers, a "traditional" feature at Fourth of July picnics.

"Remember how them Indians were in early-time history," said Mary Ayunerak, translating for Katchakoar, her father. "They take the whiskey, drink it like it was juice. That's how (the Yupiks) were....They drink it foolishly."

In the 30 years since, alcohol has laid waste to many villages. Elizabeth Chikigak, the former mayor, can list 38 alcohol-fueled deaths in Alakanuk since the late 1970s. But the effect of alcohol is much more complicated than people getting drunk and falling in the slough. Or beating up their parents. Or killing their neighbors. It is destroying the family, once the strength of the Yupik people.

Alcohol loaded the gun or knotted the rope in only four of the Alakanuk suicides, but nearly all those who died came from drinking families.

**'I REALLY HATE MYSELF'**  
Steven Kameroff, 19, was the third to die. He hanged himself in an empty dormitory at the boarding school in St. Marys. It happened January 22, 1986, shortly after Steven returned from a Christmas visit home. At his inquest, a witness said he was upset by his family's drinking during his visit, although he had gotten drunk with them almost every night. He had been expelled for a while from school for using marijuana but had asked to be let back in. He had no drugs or alcohol in his system when he died.

While he was home, Steven said he was going to kill himself when he got back to school. But he was drunk when he said it, so the threat wasn't taken seriously. Most people saw in Steven the nice boy he was, shy and self-conscious. His friends at Alakanuk High School dedicated their 1986 yearbook to him. "A fun loving, joyful person," the dedication says.

Here, from the last entry in his private journal, written a week before he died, is how Steven saw himself:

"I really hate myself. I really wish I had a pistol right now so when I feel that feeling again, that funny feeling, that way I act and the way I am. I hate it. I wish I was a bird in the air and get eaten by my parents. The way I feel right now, I'm going to commit suicide for sure. I took one full bottle of aspirin. Then I took it again. Didn't succeed. Try again asshole. You're too chicken, Kameroff. Eat your heart out or take two boxes of pills this time, you scar face....The way your life is going, you need help badly and quickly, before it's too late."

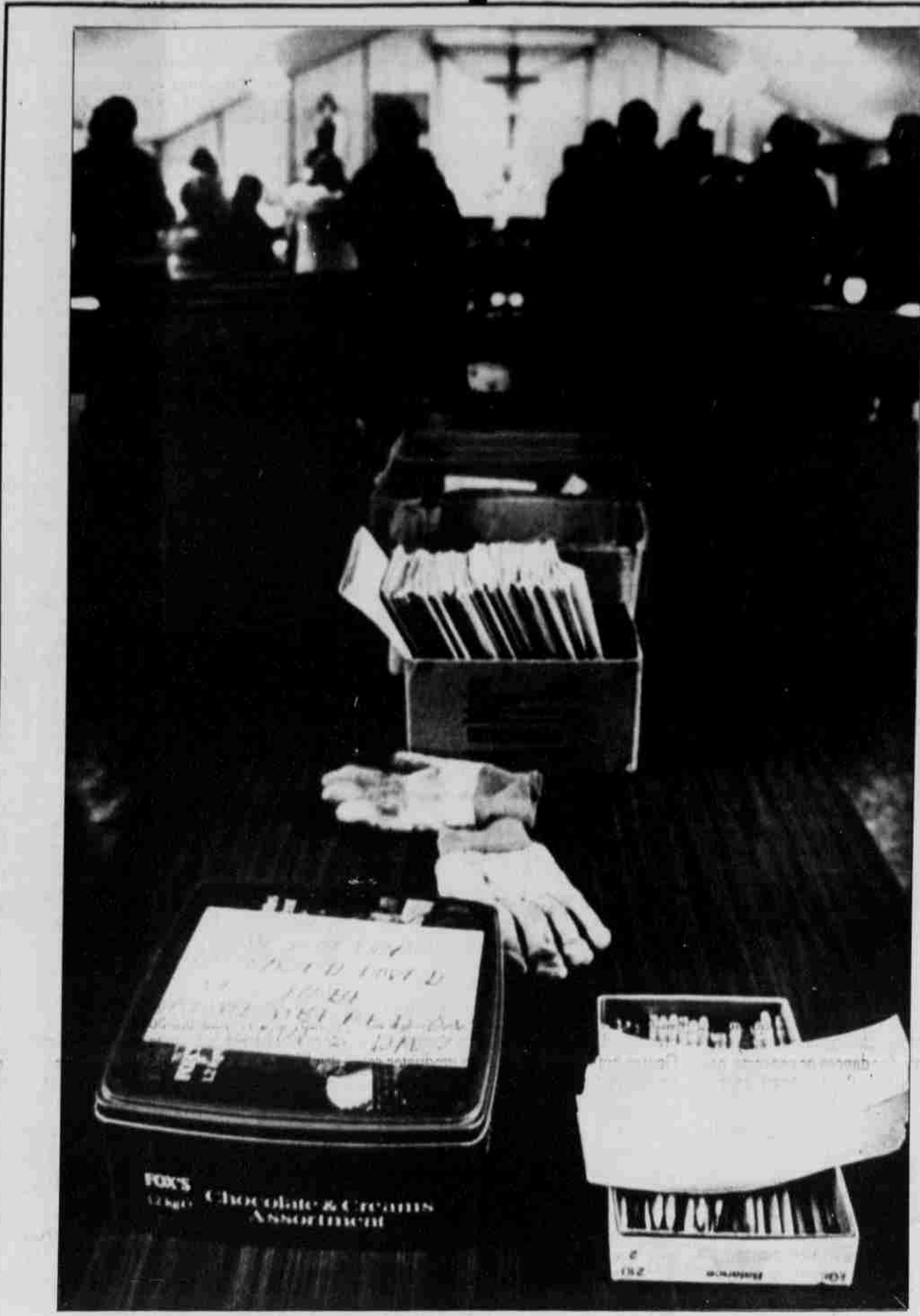
**FROM FATHER TO SON**

"Nobody suddenly commits suicide," said Tim Sergie, once a drinker and village drug dealer, now a city council member and minister of the Assembly of God Church in Alakanuk.

"It is not spontaneous. No one gets to hate their life instantly. No one loves instantly. It's a growing process that we walk through day by day."

Sergie had just finished Sunday church services. Outside, low gray clouds dropped early snowflakes into the thickening river. Inside, he remembered his past.

"My mother and father used to drink a lot," he said, "and I started drinking at a



Worshippers at St. Ignatius Roman Catholic Church in Alakanuk remembered their loved ones by putting their names in a box, placing the box on the altar and offering prayers.

very young age too."

"The most awful experiences for me...would be my father beating on my mother....I used to say to myself, 'I'll never be like my family, I'll never be like them.' And I became like them."

His parents eventually stopped drinking, but too late to save Sergie, now 34. He believes God is the only reason he survived his youth.

"It got to that point where I started hating my life. I wanted to quit (drinking) but I was incapable of quitting....I became like my father....I got to where I didn't love any more. I hated everybody. I hated what I stood for. I hated my life. I hated what alcohol was doing to me. I hated living....And after one especially hard night, I almost committed suicide."

"I remember. I wasn't drunk to the point where I didn't know what I was doing."

"That particular night, when I was really high, we ran out of dope. We ran out of booze. I was drugged and I wanted some more. And I was angry, and the first person who happened by was my wife....I hit her and I beat her and I threatened to kill her."

"And she said, 'It's OK. Go ahead and kill me.' So I took a shotgun. I loaded the shotgun and I pointed it right on her head....And I said, 'I'm going to kill her. And then I'm going to kill myself.'"

"And what she said—'Go ahead. We don't have any life.' And I realized....there was no meaning to what we were doing....There was no happiness, no love for each other, no caring. It was just existing....I took the gun off from her head and pointed it at my head and I was going to....push the trigger."

"It's easy. It's easy. I've tried many times...after the incident, while I'm out hunting, just to see how stupid it was. I'd go like that, and the trigger's right there. I could see it. I could push it."

"And I said, 'How did I not kill myself that night?'"

**CRIES IN THE NIGHT**

The fourth young man to die was Jerry Augline, two months after Steve Kameroff. Jerry was 21. He was big and would fight if he thought he had to, but he was also very shy. He made the cross for Louie Edmund's grave.

Jerry had lived for a while with Paula Ayunerak, then the village health aide, now regional health supervisor. "I practically raised him when his mom and dad

used to be drinking," she said. "Pretty soon, Jerry never went home anymore." In high school he lived for a while with the Currens.

Some people said they had heard Jerry sobbing that night, inside a dumpster. They found him the next day, by a pond out on the tundra, still alive. He died minutes later. He had shot himself in the heart.

Jerry's blood alcohol was .08, not legally drunk, most likely left over from heavy drinking the night before. A friend told police Jerry had been drinking a lot lately and talking about killing himself because he thought his parents didn't want him around.

**OUT OF CONTROL**

"Sometimes I used to be scared, when I was young, 12 years old or 11," said James Tony, brother of Melvin Tony, the second suicide victim. James' and Melvin's parents don't drink anymore, but they used to. James is 21 now, but he remembers.

"I didn't like those years, on weekends, 'cause everything used to go out of control. If I have kids, I don't ever want them to see me high, not ever, not once in my life."

Scared. Out of control. He left out angry. And ashamed.

"Young people bottle up their pain," said Arthur Chikigak, 30, the alcohol and drug counselor. They drink, like their parents, "to kill the pain that's inside....probably from their past, the abuse they had from their parents."

"A lot of the hurt they're going through, I feel it because I felt it too....I grew up in an alcoholic environment. My parents drank a lot. By the time I was in elementary....When they were high and talking bad about me, I'd leave and walk in the trees....The hurt would still be there, but it would make me feel a little better, just walking."

Once Chikigak drank and used drugs himself. Once the took his boat out on the river and tried to flip it, a suicide attempt that probably would have been called an accident if it had succeeded.

"I had been hollered and screamed at 'til I felt really small."

"I didn't go around telling people how I felt inside," he said. "I'd put up an act, like there's nothing wrong. I think a lot of the students are like that today. We're trying to reach them now. There's a lot of people who are willing to devote their time to help."

**THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST**

"Hey! Happy 1986," Karen George wrote to a friend on New Year's Day. "My year has finally come."

Queen of the prom, president of the student body, valedictorian of the class of '86. Pretty, self-confident and popular. Karen at 17 was Alakanuk's brightest star.

By May 1986, seven months after Melvin Tony's death, some people in the village understood they had a suicide epidemic on their hands. Sisters Susan Dubec and Ann Brantmeier; Paula Ayunerak; public safety officer Willie Smalley; some school staff and parents were watching for danger signs. But Karen George wasn't on anyone's endangered list. Drugs and alcohol were used in her home and she had what one teacher called "a small alcohol problem," but she was successful, a leader.

Karen's father had drowned several years earlier, another drinking death. In her valedictory address, she choked up when she spoke of him, telling the audience how proud her dad would be if only he could see her now.

Two days later, shortly after midnight, Karen walked out on the tundra behind her house and shot herself. Twice. She used a stick to push down the trigger of a shotgun. She shot herself in the shoulder first, then tried again and shattered her heart.

Because of the two wounds, police initially wondered if it might have been murder, but Karen's mother was able to settle the question. She heard the first shot, she said, and looked out a window in time to see her daughter fire the second.

Karen killed herself over boyfriend trouble. She acted impulsively and with little understanding of the finality of her act. The notes she left behind make that clear. Romantic, silly notes. Teen-age dramatics. "Bye everyone....I miss you a whole lot....But I've got to go."

Unfortunately every suicide leaves blame and shame in its wake. Karen's boyfriend was Benjamin Edmund, 21, brother of Louie Edmund, the first suicide.

Everyone knew Benji was going to kill himself. Some people tried to get him shipped out to a hospital in Bethel or Anchorage, but somehow they couldn't arrange it in time. His family and friends posted a 24-hour watch on him, but he told them, "If I want to kill myself, no one can stop me."

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