Alakanuk's suicide epidemic--Continued from page 4

He was right. Five days after Karen died, he slipped away and shot himself.

Now every parent was frightened. If kids like Karen and Benji could act so crazy, whose children were safe?

"It was scary," recalled Chikigak, the alcohol counselor. "You never knew who was going to be next. It was frightening, a feeling of not being able to do anything about what was going on in the village."

After Karen's death, one of her teachers said she had made no real plans for her life after school. Maybe she would go to a training program, she had said, maybe not. Maybe she would get married and have a baby, a friend said.

But maybe she would become just another bored and aimless village youth.

In a 1964 article, anthropologist Seymour Parker described Alakanuk in the first stage of acculturation. Villagers were borrowing Western technology but adapting it to Eskimo needs. Children wanted to become hunters or housewives. They could be what they wanted to be and were respected for doing so. They were successful in the eyes of the community and in their own eyes. They had self-esteem.

But unless something was done to avoid it, Parker warned, Alakanuk would soon find itself in the second stage of acculturation. The youth would begin to adopt Western values. They would look at themselves, at their parents and their lives through Western eyes and find it all of little value. They would aspire to professions Westerners valued, but wouldn't be able to compete successfully for them. They would come to despise themselves and their world. They would have no self-esteem.

Village kids love their parents, said Kitty and George Curren, the teachers. "But they don't admire them."

FEW JOBS, LITTLE TO DO

"There's nothing to do but only drinking," said James Tony, brother of the second victim. "They think drinking will make them have fun." James used to drink and smoke marijuana, but says he doesn't do it anymore. "Everybody's emotional feelings would pour out," he said. "Some people would get into fights."

After kids graduate from high school, there's not much for them to do in the village. James is luckier than most. He has a part-time job giving fluoride treatments to Head Start children. But in general, few local jobs are available to people his age. He helps cut wood for his father's sauna and is trying to organize a youth club, but in his eyes, that's not a life.

There are also a few ways for kids to have fun in Alakanuk—no community center, no place for dances or concerts, no bowling alley, movie theater, hamburger hangout, no library. But there's always a bucket of home-brew around, to dip a cup or two or six from.

James has plans for his life, but to have plans, he must leave Alakanuk. In preparation, he has been to Mountain Village four times for computer courses, to Anchorage for a vocational program called RSVP, working for two weeks as a clerk at the state human rights commission. A bright, ambitious young man, he feels he has learned a lot that will serve him in the future.

"I learned how to use the streets, how to use the bus—to get on and off, how to ask for help. I learned how to use a postage meter."

Like many others his age, James wants a future more like the life he sees on television. He wants to move to Anchorage and get a job.

"I would do anything to live there," he said.

NEW SURVIVAL SKILLS

Alakanuk High School sits above the beach, around a curve in the shoreline—a big, yellow Pandora's Box. Yupik children go there to learn things their parents don't know in a language their grandparents don't speak.

"We're the major change element here," said Principal Mike Hull, a 10-year veteran of Bush education. "From 8:30 to 3:30, we are the value system. We set the standards for whether they succeed or fail, which may be different and not always in harmony with what's going on in the village."

The school raises expectations, then sets the children back down in an environment where their hopes cannot be fulfilled. "We're part of the problem," Hull said.

Even so, he believes school is the Eskimos' best hope for survival. Yupiks must master the skills of the invading culture, he said, then turn around and use those skills to fight the invaders, to keep from being destroyed.

"For the Yupik nation to survive, it has to become Anglo so it can defend itself....defend its right to life the way it wants....They have to take our culture and come back."

In the process, "some people are going to be lost."

Longtime teachers George and Kitty Curren agree with Hull. Two of the suicide victims sought refuge in their home, lived with them for long periods. Four of their five children married Eskimos.

Nothing angers George faster than a suggestion that Eskimo villages are economic dinosaurs, doomed to extinction. A town of 550 people can support any number of small businesses, he said. A barber, a baker, an optometrist. A family can combine a small business with subsistence hunting and fishing and make a good life.

The school prepares kids for more education. Never mind that few actually go to college and fewer graduate. The school does no vocational training or counseling, nothing to help kids make successful lives in the world right outside the door.

"You tell kids to graduate from high school. Then they graduate and so what? I think the poor kids are batting their heads against the wall. Is that the only choice? To sit in your house and drink and watch TV?"

The Currens teach a business course in which high school students run a snack store every day after school. They learn to order stock, keep books, make change. George hopes one day to help graduates set up successful village businesses.

SOBER AND LONELY

On June 25, 1986, the night he hanged himself, Tim Stanislaus wore a T-shirt that said, "I got drunk and lost in Alakanuk, Alaska." Which was just about right. His blood alcohol was .23.

Tim's death puzzled people even more than Karen George's. He was so very bright, a success, the Yupik teacher at the high school. But those who knew him well say he was two people: During the week, an impressive achiever, but on weekends and during the summer, a staggering drunk and drug user. He wanted to be a leader and sober, but he needed his friends, and they drank.

"He couldn't walk that line," George Curren said.

Walking the line means staying sober and off drugs when your friends are drinking and smoking. Frederick Joseph walks that line every day. He is part of a budding sobriety movement, encouraged by the Catholic sisters, by Paula Ayunerak, by Chikigak, the alcohol counselor and others.

Joseph was a heavy drinker by the sixth grade. By ninth grade he was also smoking marijuana. Once he stayed sober for more than a year, then fell off the wagon, hard. "I guess I got crazy. I started not caring about anything....My girl couldn't talk to me anymore, couldn't communicate with me anymore and I couldn't understand why. And it led to hitting her, slapping her. And....I broke her arm by kicking her. And then I tried suicide."

Joseph ended up at the Alaska Psychiatric Institute in Anchorage for a month. "I was too depressed, lonely, unwanted, not cared for...I went through emotional stages, regretting everything I did." He returned to Alakanuk sober and determined to remain so.

The hardest thing about sobriety, Joseph said, is the aloneness of it. His old friends still drink. His girlfriend won't come back to the village with their two daughters until she's sure he is serious about staying sober, so he is alone. Each night he walks the village, counting the hours and killing them, visiting safe places—the priest, the alcohol counselor, the police station, the Sisters.

"I try to find a job. I read the 24-hour book (from Alcoholics Anonymous). I read some chapters of the Bible...I feel a lot better than I used to feel. I think a lot more than I used to think."

Across the river, Sally and James Leopold have been sober for a year. It's a little easier for them because they walk the line together with the help of their children. Their home is clean and tidy, the atmosphere relaxed. Outside, a cold sleet blows in the wind. Inside, Sally washes dishes. On the radio, Willie Nelson sings, "San Antonio Rose."

Even in a story about eight suicides, Sally Leopold's family history is horrifying. One of her brothers beat up their father, who died. The brother went to jail. Another brother killed a village police officer Her sister and mother drowned in separate incidents while drunk. Another sister was killed in one of the bloodiest murders in lower Yukon history. One of Sally's babies accidentally suffocated during a family drinking session.

Still, Sally and James didn't stop drinking until she almost died from an ulcer.

The Leopolds have eight children, from a baby to a 19-year-old boy. The older ones have vivid memories of their parents' drinking. Cecelia Leopold, 13, said she used to get scared when Sally and James would "fight, argue with each other. Loud. We used to go to our auntie's house. Sometimes we used to stay out until they sleep, then come."

"I hardly used to cook for them," said Sally.. "I never used to think of their stomach or clothes....When we used to drink, they hardly used to come home from the school. Now that we quit, they listen to us more than they used to.

"Sometimes I think of the past, you know. It was living in the darkness. Now everything is so bright, it seems."

But not all is bright. In November, one of Sally's sons was charged with raping an old woman—his aunt. For a few days after that, alcohol beckoned the Leopolds back to oblivion, but they clung to the light.

BREAKING THE PATTERN

"It's one thing to stop drinking," said Sister Susan. "You stop drinking, the problems are still there. The parenting skills are gone, children still have a poor self-concept....Just like it took one or two or three generations to get to suicide and the problems we have now, it's going to take one or two or three generations to get out of the problem again." Fifty years, she estimated.

Maybe it doesn't have to take that long for everyone. Tina Black, 17, is one generation away from an alcoholic grandfather. "He got drowned, maybe by drinking, when he was in his camp," said Tina's grandmother, Agnes Shelton. "One of my boys was drowned with him. It was very hard for me."

Shelton was a non-drinker who preached abstinence to her children and chose a non-drinker for her second husband. But for a while it looked like the familiar pattern would assert itself anyhow. Her daughter and son-in-law, Tina's parents, drank. Twelve years ago, Tina's mother, Mary Black, stopped drinking and Tina's father eventually stopped drinking in the village. In this family, the destructive cycle seems to have been broken.

Tina is a top student at the high school and president of the student body. She seems a sensible girl, having the usual teen-age rough spots with her mother but close to her father. She drinks occasionally at parties, she said, but never in kill-the-bottle bouts. She seems undaunted by the high school stars of yesteryear who are in the village, doing nothing much..

"Sometimes I think it's stupid," she said. "They're just hanging in town. They can be anything they want....I don't want to hang in the village, doing the things they do, partying."

THE END AT LAST

While Tim Stanislaus was hanging himself in Alakanuk, Albert Harry, an Alakanuk fisherman who spent his winters in Anchorage, was dying in a bed at the Alaska Native Medical Center.

About 2:45 a.m. on June 24, Albert went into the bathroom of his Anchorage apartment, sat down on the floor with his back against the closed bathroom door, and fired a revolver into his right temple. Three people, including his brother were in the next room. He lingered for a day before he died.

A few weeks earlier, Albert had called his brother back in the village and said he was going to kill himself. Through the phone, his brother heard the mechanism of a gun. The night he died, Albert had been drinking heavily, vodka and beer. He left no note. One of the men in the next room was so drunk he slept through the suicide.

With Albert's death, the epidemic ended.

SILENT HURT

In the early morning the village is silent except for the crunch of feet now and then along the frosted paths. The air feels good—cold and wet against the skin. More snow has fallen, but the river is still liquid, not yet an ice highway. Early risers smile, say hello. If something bad happened last night, it remains behind closed doors. If people are troubled, the trouble is hidden away. The village is silent.

But silence is an enemy. People don't talk to each other about their feelings and have little understanding that they can reach out and shape the future.

"They never talk to us, those young people, when they have problems," said Agnes Shelton, the grandmother who has never been a drinker. "It's too bad. I just don't know how come they do that....Their minds get them scared to be alive sometimes after they do something wrong....Some always never have a good home....Some always getting tired of moving around when the parents drink too much."

When people get drunk, "a lot of words pour out," James Tony said, hurtful words. Guilt and shame are part of every hangover. Silent hurt radiates from those who have been abused.

Even healthy teen-agers in healthy families have trouble talking. "It's hard to tell your parents that you love them," Tina Black said, "to tell your grandparents that you love them. I don't know why."

Chikigak, the alcohol counselor, Sisters Susan and Ann, John Thomas, who runs the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and others are trying to get people to talk. Progress is slow, but it's there. Two years after Louie Edmund's death, members of the Edmund family have begun talking to each other about it. Last month, 15 young people showed up for an overnight retreat.

Adults in the village did not immediately rally around suicide prevention efforts. Few appeared at a suicide prevention workshop last year. Many people in Alakanuk seem to view violence and early death the way they view bad weather and poor fishing—as natural disasters. As for shaping the future, how can you stop a snowstorm? "We'll just have to wait and see what happens, won't we?" one woman said.

'I QUESTION WHY'

It's late, nearly midnight. Adeline Edmund has stopped at the Sisters' house on her way home from work at the village sauna. She is a small middle-aged woman with short black hair laced with silver. Sorrow animates her face. Her silence is intense. She has heard that a newspaper story will be written about the suicides. She lost two sons and has some things she wants to share.

"Some days...I question why, why could they, after they care so much for us...There's some days it's really hard. You can't take it anymore...Some days it's really strong that I don't want to live no more. Then God comes."

"Write it down," she says, for other villages to read and learn from. Stop all the hurting in the home, she says. "Stop all the blaming. Try not to get mad even when they get mad at you...Love is the most important. If you're not loved..."

'THEY WANT TO BE LOVED'

Will there be more suicides in Alakanuk? Probably, say the people most likely to know. But not another epidemic. "I don't think our village is at a trigger point anymore, that if one happens, there's going to be five. I think we're past that," said Sister Ann.

"I think (the young people) see that the suicides didn't accomplish what they thought they would. Yeah, there was that glory of everybody over the bodies, but I think that's not there anymore."

Still, an empty space remains in the hearts of the young, said Sergie, the Assembly of God pastor. "They want to be loved. They want to be shared with. They want caring....And if they can't find pleasure, love and caring in any direction, well, what's the use of living?"

"When I stayed with one who was going to commit suicide," said James Tony, "I had to keep saying, 'Come on, everybody loves you. They don't act like it, but in their hearts they love you.'"

"They say, 'Aaaagh, who loves me? Nobody loves me.'"

"I say, 'Well, I do.'"

Here, the city sells it

Fort Yukon—The single biggest source of income for city government here is not taxes. Nor is it state revenue sharing or federal grants.

The single biggest source of money is a cramped, windowless metal shack near the west edge of town. Before vandals got it, there was a plastic sign on the roof. It said, "Community Liquor Store."

For 11 years, the city has owned and operated the only package store in the Yukon Flats region of Interior Alaska. Over the years, the cash register inside the little shed has rung up sales of beer, wine and spirits in the millions of dollars.

Sales this year are expected to exceed $560,000, from which the city will take a profit of nearly 20 percent.

The people who run the government here have a theory: The citizens of Fort Yukon like to drink, and there is no way, in a town on the largest river in Alaska, with a busy airport, that anyone can keep out booze. So, they reason, the people of the town may as well own the liquor store and get some benefit from it. Otherwise, they say, there'll be no less drinking, just bootleggers or private store owners getting rich off it.

"A lot of people say it's a hell of a thing," said Dick Carroll, the gruff, cigar-smoking city manager who, at one time or another over the past 20 years, has also been mayor, councilman and president of the school board.

"(They say) we sell liquor, we cause the problems....I always tell the social services: You find the city $125,000 and we'll give you our license. We wouldn't want it. But we need that particular income."

Fort Yukon is one of three towns—the others are Tanana, northwest of Fairbanks, and Kake and southeast Alaska—that have taken advantage of a state law passed in the 1960s allowing "community liquor stores." Of the three, Fort Yukon is easily the largest operation, with sales nearly four times either of the others. Under the law, no other liquor stores or bars are permitted in towns with city-owned stores.

Two clerks keep the Fort Yukon store open from 1 to 8 p.m. every day except Sunday. Carroll, the city manager, is in charge; he spends a couple of hours a week on the phone doing business with Anchorage and Fairbanks distributors and pilots.

The store contributes about $110,000 a year to the city treasury, a fifth of the total city budget for this town of 738 people. The money goes into the general fund and helps maintain streets, street lights and the landfill. The store earns more money than the city collects through its sales tax.

DRINKING ACCEPTED

A portion of the profit—$15,000 a year—goes to the Upper Yukon Behavioral Health Center, a clinic that offers alcohol counseling and referral to a Fairbanks detox program. The money pays part of the salary for Louise Springer, an Athabascan alcohol counselor, to warn people about the consequences of heavy drinking. There's a lot of heavy drinking in Fort Yukon.

Roger Hughes, the physician's assistant who runs the health clinic, said most of the cases he sees somehow involve booze. In the year he's been here, he's treated the victims of stabbings, snowmachine accidents, a shooting, domestic violence, child abuse and fetal alcohol syndrome.

"Look, I was a medic in Vietnam," Hughes said. "That was a picnic compared with what we do here. There seem to be a lot of accidents. But the thing is, it's become normal...It's like, 'So-and-so got run down and killed by a snowmachine last night' 'Well, was the guy drinking? "Oh, well, that's OK.'"

Almost every household in town has a serious alcohol problem, Springer said, but it's hard to get people to seek counseling when heavy drinking is so readily accepted.

Last January, 29-year-old Sonny Williams collapsed in the living room of his brother's house in the middle of town. By the time medics arrived, he was dead, choked on his own vomit.

"He just drank himself to death," said Jerry Carroll, one of four city policemen. "He used to have a job, but then he started drinking, and he was just drinking and drinking and drinking and drinking until he dropped dead. He drank quite a bit. He drank day and night."

Last summer, a two-year-old boy drowned as his parents were heading downriver to Birch Creek after a visit in Fort Yukon. His parents and a friend had been drinking heavily, state troopers said, and no one could say whether the toddler fell out of the boat or was left behind when they stopped along the way. They only knew that when the boat was unloaded at Birch Creek, young Virgil James was gone.

On New Year's Day, 1987, James James, Virgil's 26-year-old cousin, was walking along a Fort Yukon street when he was killed by a snowmachine whose driver was drunk. Within a couple of weeks last winter, five Fort Yukon residents were hospitalized after hit-and-run snowmachine accidents.

"People walk in the ditches in the wintertime," said Tom Knutsen, the local magistrate. "They're afraid to walk on the road."

Fort Yukon is a collection of log cabins, government-built frame homes, dirt streets and a few government and commercial buildings scattered between the airport and the Yukon.

While there are more jobs than in many villages, unemployment is high, especially among Natives, and many families depend on food stamps and other public assistance. Don Young, Alaska's sole congressman, lives here for a few weeks each summer.

The town is a commercial hub for a half-dozen surrounding villages: Beaver, Chalkyitsik, Venetie, Arctic Village, Birch Creek and Stevens Village. People from all over the Yukon Flats fly, boat and snowmachine to Fort Yukon to buy groceries and visit relatives. They also come to buy booze.

DISPUTE OVER THE STORE

The city's liquor business has been the source of a bitter, long-running argument among residents.

The store opened in 1975 after voters approved a community store initiative. But four years ago, another group formed to shut down the store and ban the sale of liquor. Led by the town's three churches and others, supporters won by a vote of 135 to 122 and the store closed in December 1984.

Fort Yukon didn't stay dry for long. Within weeks, snowmachines were regularly roaring down the ice-covered river to the liquor store at Circle, 70 miles south. Bootleggers thrived. The price of a case of beer rose from $20 to more than $50.

While some people—especially kids and older residents—couldn't afford the higher prices and drank less than before, many kept on drinking, according to Carroll, the city manager.

The Reverend Ron Starr, the local Baptist preacher, recalls that some of the people who voted to keep booze out may have been interested in sobriety initially, but he said many began reconsidering once booze was outlawed.

Within weeks, there was talk of reopening the store. In August 1985, Fort Yukon voted again; this time it was 158 to 53 to reopen. By early 1986, the store was back in business.

Although some people remain fiercely opposed to the store, there appears to be no serious talk of trying to close it again.

A small group of bootleggers makes sure that liquor is available even if the store is closed.

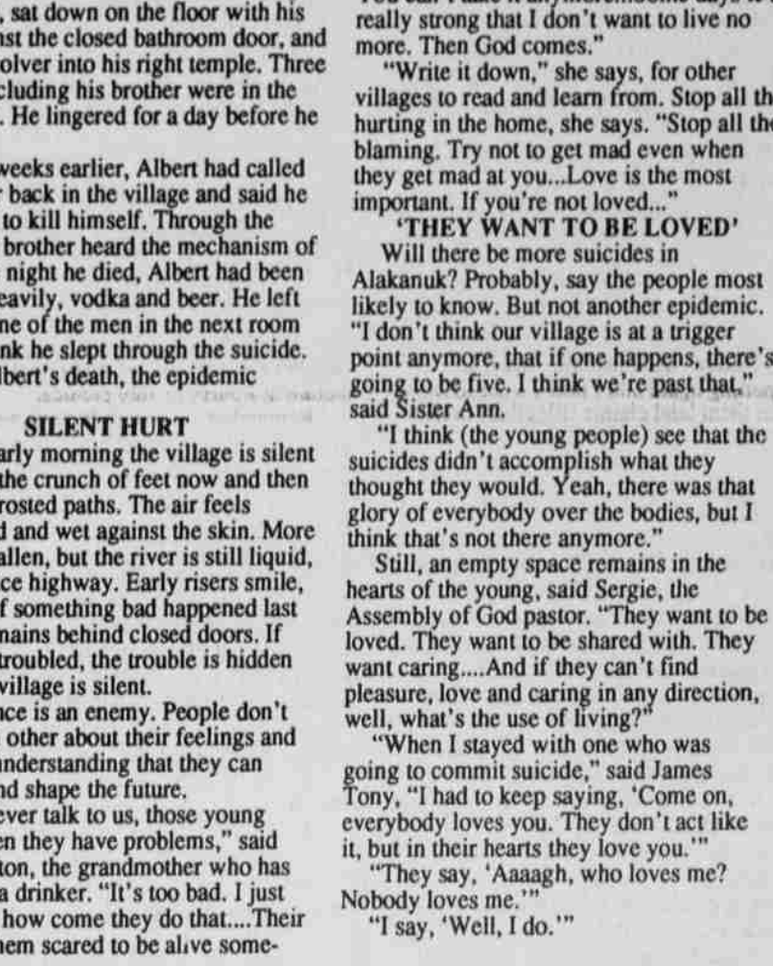
One night recently, a young man sat in the GZ Lodge, a Native-owned restaurant and hotel, and finished his last beer. The lodge doesn't sell booze and the store was closed.

"Well," the young man said, turning to his wife. "It's Kenny time." He explained that Kenny is a bootlegger who sells beer for $48 a case.

Carroll, the city manager, insists that liquor is exaggerated as a cause of problems in Fort Yukon.

"A lot of people here observe a lot and say, 'My goodness, it's terrible,'" he said. "If I want to go out and drink, I don't want nobody telling me, 'You shouldn't drink,' or 'It's gonna bother your health.' Dammit, I've lived my life and they've lived theirs, so leave 'em alone.

"If he wants to go out and get a bottle of booze and sip on it all day, more power to the man, I figure...If that's the way he wants to enjoy his final days, then, hey, that's fine."



Joe Herbert, first chief of the village of Chalkyitsik, pauses outside the city-owned liquor store in Fort Yukon after buying a bottle of port.