

The KL7AK Expedition to Mekoryuk, Alaska

Amateur Radio is a vast and varied hobby, but for Rick, KL7AK; Bob, WL7QC; and me, it's all about understanding new cultures, making new friends and exposing others to ham radio.

From 3000 feet above the decaying Bering Sea ice came our first glimpse of the tiny Nuniarmiut, Cup'iq Eskimo village of Mekoryuk, on remote Nunivak Island. Our chartered Twin Otter airplane circled slowly before descending to the narrow gravel runway. Village spokesman Moses Whitman Sr met us there.

I'd been communicating with Moses for the past few months for permission to visit his island and give Amateur Radio demonstrations. Our arrival was greeted with enthusiasm. Rick, KL7AK, and I had long wanted to visit one of Alaska's *inhabited* remote islands (we're usually set up on deserted islands in the middle of the Gulf of Alaska).

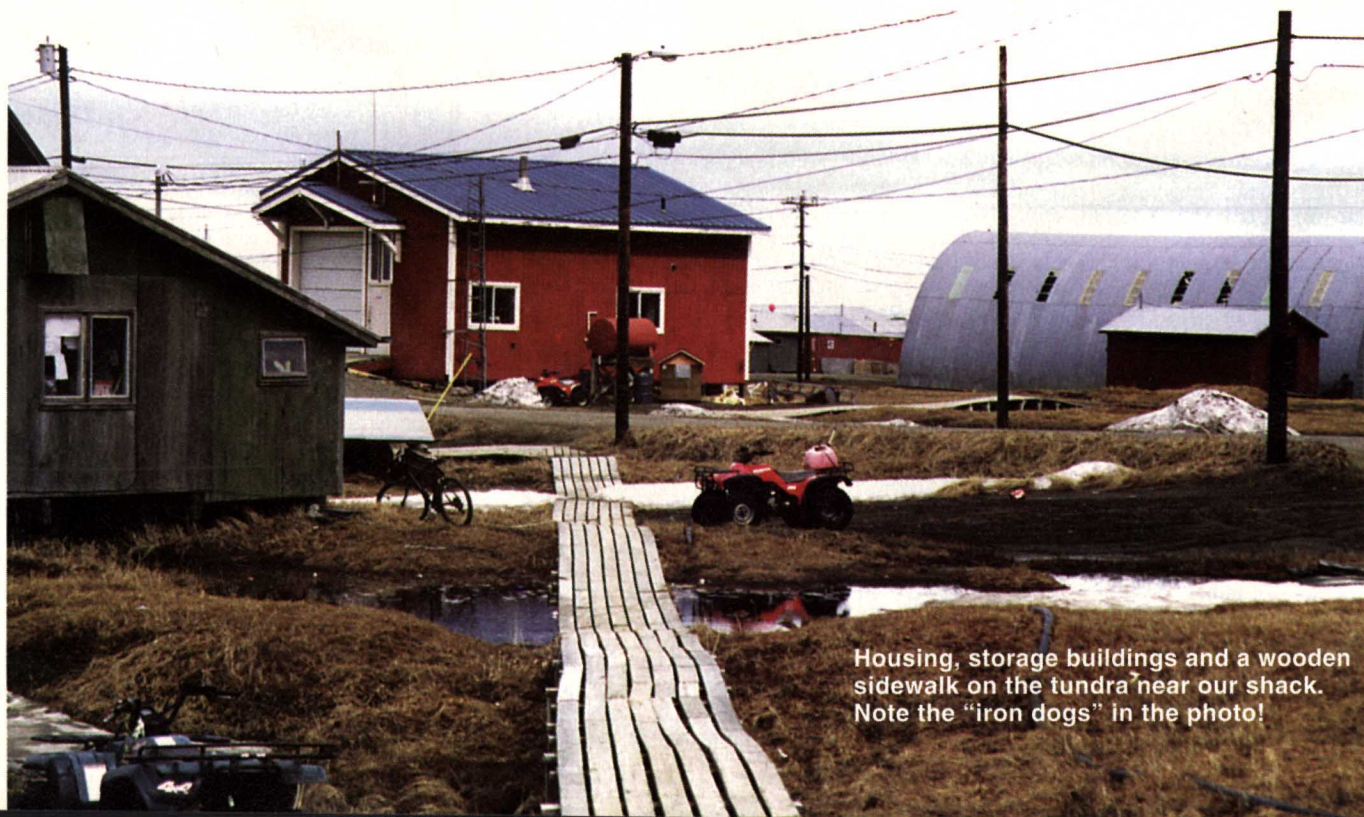
Part **DXpedition**, part cultural exchange, these ops discovered that making new **Eskimo friends** in Mekoryuk—a remote village off Alaska's west coast—was simply **unforgettable**.

Moses is an avid shortwave listener and knew the importance of Amateur Radio. CB and marine VHF radio are now common on the island. Rick and I also told Moses how sought after his island (AK-027S and NA-074) was among island-chasing hams. He mentioned that Nunivak Island had hosted hams only once, back in 1991. He agreed that the island's children would probably enjoy ham radio—and they did!

Setting Up

Marshy Nunivak Island is dotted with pingos (low hills or mounds forced up by hydrostatic pressure in an area underlain by permafrost). On the high tundra, the arctic winds whip tall yellow grasses while the lower areas glisten in murky swamp water.

Three Eskimo fishermen helped us raise the tribander in the persistent breeze. That done, we soon learned that ac power was close at hand. The island has its own diesel generator, complete with overhead power



Housing, storage buildings and a wooden sidewalk on the tundra near our shack. Note the "iron dogs" in the photo!

lines that supply continuous power to most homes and businesses (two stores, a police station, a post office, a clinic, city hall and the airport runway).

Using the "armstrong method," we pointed the beam toward the middle of the US mainland. At 2208Z on June 4, 20 meters exploded with weak signals when Rick, KL7AK, unkeyed our primary station (an FT-900 transceiver and an A3S beam) on 14.260 MHz. Propagation was marginal and QRM from the calling stations made things frustrating.

A steady S5 noise level plagued us before Bob drove a three-foot-long copper pipe into the ground, ran a short cable and connected it to the rig. To our amazement, this mostly eliminated the noise, which dramatically improved our copy on weaker signals.

Rick and Bob worked the pileup while I set up our secondary station (an FT-747GX and a 17-meter wire vertical). Unlike Bob, I wasn't so lucky in finding a decent ground connection on the icy, slushy tundra.

By now Rick could hardly speak. The pileup had worn out his voice! I took over for two hours and was also sporting a sore throat. Bob jumped in while Rick and I prepared supper—freeze-dried chicken and noodles (it tastes better than it sounds). In our first 24 hours on the air we'd made only about 400 contacts with ops in 21 countries.

Where Are We?

Until only a few years ago, Nunivak Island (60° N, 166° W), 30 miles off Alaska's west coast, remained wild, remote and virtually tourist-free. Mekoryuk, the island's only village, is 149 miles west of Bethel and 533 miles west of Anchorage. Those are air miles, by the way. There are no roads to Bethel except for a winter ice road on the Yukon River.

The population of this tiny village totals only about 200 people, mostly Nuniwarmiut, Cup'iq Eskimos who have inhabited the island for some 2000 years.

Best known for its musk oxen, Nunivak, Alaska's third-largest island, is home to more than 500 of these Ice Age beasts, whose fur provides fine wool called Qiviut. Reindeer roam freely on the island, half of which is classified as a wilderness area. Most families here engage in subsistence activities and most have fish camps. Salmon, reindeer, seal meat and oil are important staples. Most residents travel on ATVs (four-wheeled all-terrain vehicles), which are dubbed "iron dogs." They were everywhere.

Making New Friends

We camped out in sleeping bags at the lodge/community center. We put out the word that our door was open to anyone interested in learning about Amateur Radio. Several villagers stopped by and we soon learned that we were big news here!

Repeat visits by Juanita (8), Mariann (9) and Jonathan (7) seemed almost hourly. When Rick wasn't explaining radio etiquette to the youngsters, Bob was showing them great circle charts and talking about propagation (they knew what "skip" was from the village CBers). I was busy answering questions and capturing it all on video and film.

Our guests were fascinated by the incoming signals. One little guy said, "I'll bet you can't talk to Italy." Ten minutes later he left the shack in a flash to tell his mother he had heard two Italian stations!

Melanie and Jonathan did not pass up my invitation to say hello to Yuke, JA6LCJ/3, on 20 meters. Yuke was pounding in at 20 over S9. Other hams would often say hi to the kids in the shack, making them feel like celebrities. That made their day, especially when Yuke said he knew where Mekoryuk was!

Most of the children spoke English, while some of the elders conversed only in their native tongue. While walking on the tundra, the kids taught me a lot about their island. Melanie and Mariann laughed as a dozen Canadian honkers broke the silence—



Our shack. Musk ox hides can be seen in the background.

or was it when I said the tundra cranberries were bitter? The kids ate them like candy.

Musk ox hides hung everywhere in the village. Several homes had salmon drying outdoors on wooden racks. I mentioned that the abandoned machinery, appliances and other stuff scattered about seemed to be an eyesore. The young ladies explained that



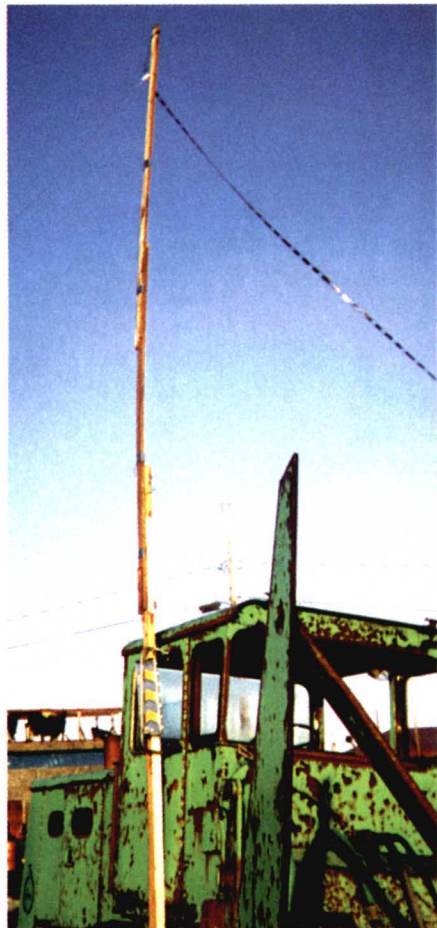
Proof of the pudding!
WL7QC (left) and
KL7AK (right).



Operator Mariann, DXing with KL7AK.



KL7JR (left), KL7AK (center) and village spokesman Moses (right).



A close-up of our improvised G5RV support mast.

their people believe that everything (objects, people and animals, excluding dogs) has a soul and is part of the community. This is important to remember when visiting the bush: "What gets here usually stays here."

Still raining and cold, propagation improved on day two. Ops in Europe and Asia were now making the log. I relieved Rick at 6 AM to inherit a huge pileup. Russ, VE6VK, ran lists for us for several hours, which helped hundreds of operators work us instead of being shut out because of QRM and QSB.

After a few hours, signals were strong enough for us to work split. Hundreds more QSOs poured into the log. Propagation was weird. We had to work long path or off the back of the beam—or both—to hear the many stations calling us. Russ, VE6VK, said he was experiencing the same from Calgary. Others commented on the situation as well.

Saying Goodbye

Early the next morning we were in a new world of sunshine and clear blue skies. Signals were mostly five by nine now, which made the pileups more manageable. At 7 AM we dismantled the beam and the primary station. Bob would take the gear back to Juneau on the morning flight. Rick and I would leave on the afternoon flight to Bethel, and then Anchorage.

I nailed a couple of scrap 2 × 4s together to make a mast to support our G5RV dipole. By now we had about 1700 QSOs with



KL7AK and the gang: Lindsey (left), Jonathan (center) and Mariann (right).

ops in nearly 70 countries, which wasn't too bad, considering conditions.

Mariann, Jonathan and Melanie dropped by to say goodbye. I promised to send them books so they could get started in Amateur Radio. Rick, Bob and I had experienced another exciting and unique radio adventure in Alaska. We had befriended the people of Nunivak, who made a lasting impression on us.

Being in Alaska is like stepping into a beautiful postcard. We re-experienced the Last Frontier and rekindled the spirit of Amateur Radio. Amateur Radio just might give me a good excuse to travel the Northland. If that's so, I'm glad I thought of it!

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3000 feet over the village of Mekoryuk.