

New book delves into politics of melting of the Ice Curtain

By Maisie Thomas

The Bering Strait represents both the closeness and the distance between the United States and Russia: Big Diomed is geographically less than three miles from Little Diomed, but time-wise an entire day ahead. That two countries separated by just a few miles of frigid water could be so isolated from one another by political ideology can seem almost incomprehensible. "Melting the Ice Curtain: The Extraordinary Story of Citizen Diplomacy on the Russia-Alaska Frontier," published earlier this year, examines the complicated relationship between the United States and Russia and how "citizen diplomacy" in cities such as Nome and Provideniya ultimately overpowered tensions in Washington D.C. and Moscow.

"It's an unlikely and incredible story of the success of citizen diplomacy," said its author, Alaskan David Ramseur.

What makes "Melting the Ice Curtain" even more interesting is that Ramseur is not just writing about citizen diplomats—he was one. Ramseur sometimes weaves his own biography into the story, which provides a personal and unique perspective on what would otherwise read as an account of a distant event. Ramseur visited the Soviet Union and Russia several times, including as a passenger on the historic 1988 Friendship Flight. He even lived there in 1993, working as a volunteer media advisor for Boris Nemtsov, governor of Nizhny Novgorod. "After I first visited the USSR, I was hooked on the country's mystique and the hospitality of its people," Ramseur wrote in an email to the Nome Nugget.

"My pack-rat tendencies finally paid off," Ramseur admits in his acknowledgements section. He is referring to his garage, which collected Russian newspaper clippings, reports and more for over 30 years. Ramseur had the foresight to recognize at the time how important the Cold War era was and began collecting material when he started going to the USSR in the late 1980s. These resources, including his ticket from the Friendship Flight and briefing documents on Russia prepared by Alaskan governors, formed the basis of his initial research.

He did not rely on his resources and memory alone. The author conducted over 130 interviews, including several with Nomeites, and

scoured historic files. Research took Ramseur about a year and included visits to several archives across the country.

Getting material from the Russian side was more difficult, Ramseur said. He was able to contact Konstantin Kobets, the former governor of the Magadan region, who was willing to answer his questions through a translator. "That process was time-consuming, but gives the book balance with the Russian perspective of the era," writes Ramseur.

He said his main challenge, however, was creating a comprehensive history that is readable and compelling while remaining useful for historians. On this count, the book succeeds—though the material is complicated, the stories are so gripping that the reader does not lose interest. Ramseur said he was forced to pick and choose as he decided which stories made it into the book and which had to be omitted because they did not provide the desired effect.

An instance is a story in Chapter 11 about two men who defected from the Soviet Union on Little Diomed. Though the event only took a few days, "it was a dramatic incident that I believe gives readers a flavor of the tensions of the era."

Though most chapters are relatively short, each section provides thorough insight on a specific aspect of the topic. In the prologue, Ramseur gives a brief history of the Bering Strait region, beginning 30,000 years ago, when indigenous peoples crossed the land bridge that connected the two continents. He moves on to the early days of Russian exploration into Alaska to the eventual purchase of the land by the United States.

None of the political changes between the U.S. and its eastern neighbor had much of an impact on the people of the Bering Strait region until the Soviet revolution broke out in Chukotka in the 1920s. Travel across the Strait was restricted for the first time. "Alaska and Soviet Native peoples continued their interaction until global politics thousands of miles away interrupted their time-honored means of existence," writes Ramseur.

The saying "blood is thicker than water" remains true in the case of the divided families of the Bering Strait—they had been crossing the water for centuries. But after travel was restricted, families became separated for the first time. This is when

citizen diplomats, many Nomeites among them, stepped in. The main purpose of the 1988 Friendship Flight was to reunite families separated by political boundaries.

Ramseur credits Nome with playing an integral role in breaking down the Alaska-Russia ice curtain. Jim Stimpfle, in particular, was a key figure in the book. "The persistence of Nome (and Bering Strait) area residents deserve enormous credit for their persistence and vision in reaching across the Strait to their Russian neighbors," Ramseur wrote.

Remembering the "persistence and vision" of average citizens is perhaps more important now than ever. He timed book's release date for 2017, the 150th anniversary of Alaska's purchase from Russia. While Alaskans and Americans are contemplating the meaning of the purchase, current political events once again call into question the relationship between the countries. "Relations between the U.S. and Russia have rarely captured the attention of the world as (they are) now," Ramseur explained that he wanted to document and expose the world to positive era of progress, which he hopes will serve as a model for U.S.-Russia relations.

Ramseur noted that U.S. and Russia have a very different relationship than they did in the 1980s, as Russian President Vladimir Putin is not welcoming to Westerners. Nevertheless, Ramseur suggests that President Donald Trump turn to Alaska as a model for successful U.S.-Russia relations.

"The Trump-Putin 'bromance' provides a unique opportunity to



Photo courtesy of David Ramseur

MELTING THE ICE CURTAIN—Longtime Alaskan David Ramseur, pictured in the Russian Far East last summer, recently authored "Melting the Ice Curtain: The Extraordinary Story of Citizen Diplomacy on the Russia-Alaska Frontier."

reset the worst relations between the United States and Russia since 1962," he said. Ramseur has hope that the Ice Curtain era provides us with lessons for "overall relations" and wants readers to come away from the book knowing that regular citizens can bring about international change.

The best area for collaboration, Ramseur believes, is managing the changing Arctic. Because of Alaska, the U.S. is an Arctic nation, and Russia claims ownership to close to half of the world's Arctic. Another area he thinks provides a "great opportunity for cooperation and interaction," is through rekindling and fostering relations between the Native peoples on both sides of the Strait.

Ramseur, who lives in Anchorage, moved to Alaska in 1979. He is cur-

rently a visiting scholar in public policy at the University of Alaska Anchorage's Institute of Social and Economic Research and serves on the board of the Alaska World Affairs Council.

He has worked as a politics and government reporter in both Juneau and Washington D.C. for the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner and the Anchorage Times. He then held a variety of positions for Governors Steve Cowper and Tony Knowles and Senator Mark Begich. These jobs included press secretary, communications director, chief-of-staff and foreign policy advisor.

"Melting the Ice Curtain" is available in many Alaskan bookstores, as well as online through Amazon and the University of Alaska Press website.

New classroom construction progresses at Northwest Campus

By Maisie Thomas

Construction is underway on a new classroom building for Nome's Northwest Campus. The building will replace four smaller classrooms built by construction students in the early 1980s. "We moved those four buildings under one roof," NWC Director Bob Metcalf said. The consolidation of several buildings into one will allow NWC to save money on heating during the winter months.

The new building will have parti-

tions, which allows the size of each space to be adjusted. Metcalf expects the construction to be completed by Thanksgiving.

The plan is to move in before the holiday and begin use in January. "We're really excited it will be a great resource for us and for the community," Metcalf said of the new classroom building.

This construction project is phase three of a four-part renovation grant awarded to NWC three years ago.

The federal Title III funds are designated in part for the renovation of Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian educational facilities.

The first phase, Metcalf explained, was exterior work to complete the main campus building. The next step was interior and exterior renovation on the university outreach building. The next and last phase will be work on the Seppala building, which houses the ceramics studio.

Intoxicated man injured by self-inflicted gunshot

By Maisie Thomas

A man inadvertently fired off a gun on July 27 in Nome, injuring himself. Lieutenant Nick Harvey with the Nome Police Department said the NPD received a report about an intoxicated individual harmed by

a self-inflicted gunshot. "It wasn't a gunfight," Harvey said.

NPD did not release the name of the individual.

The man was transported to Norton Sound Hospital. His condition was unknown as of July 28.

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