

1988 Friendship Flight Linked Alaska, Russia



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Not many history books are written by eye witnesses. And that's what makes David Ramseur's new book, "Melting the Ice Curtain: The Extraordinary Story of Citizen Diplomacy on the Russia-Alaska Frontier," stand out.

Ramseur, a former journalist and staffer for Alaska Governors Steve Cowper and Tony Knowles and Anchorage Mayor and U.S. Sen. Mark Begich, was on the 1988 Friendship Flight from Nome to Provideniya, Russia, to reunite Native peoples across the Bering Strait, which he writes about.

The ongoing Cold War had kept the Alaska Natives from seeing their relatives in Russia for more than 40 years.

"Everyone was enormously touched (by the reunion), of course, and it underscored my interest in documenting this era," Ramseur said in an interview this week.



David Ramseur (Photo provided)

The Friendship Flight was one of several moves that helped to ease tensions between the United States and Russia and end the Cold War, Ramseur said, and he notes that Alaskans played a pivotal role.

The remarkable thing, he writes, was that the flight occurred only five years after Russia had shot down a civilian airliner over the north Pacific Ocean.

Ramseur, currently a visiting scholar in public policy at the UAA Institute of Social and Economic Research, will be in Sitka on Wednesday, July 19, to speak about his book at the noon Sitka Chamber of Commerce luncheon, at the Westmark.

At 7 p.m. that day he also will present at the Sitka Historical Society's 150th speaker series, at Harrigan Centennial Hall.

Realizing the historic significance of the Friendship Flight, Ramseur collected papers and photos at the time it occurred. When he decided to write a book about it he found his own collection was a big help in his research.

"I felt this was an important era in Alaska's history that had not been documented in any comprehensive way and I decided to write the book," he said. "It's an eye opener."



Within minutes of landing in Provideniya, USSR, Alaska Native Darlene Orr, left, met distant Native relatives she had never seen. Raised on St. Lawrence Island, Orr speaks Russian, Siberian Yupik and English and now lives in Sitka. (Photo provided)

Since that first trip to Russia, Ramseur has visited dozens more times and even lived there for a time in the early 1990s, he said.

"It's been a passion of mine for about 30 years," he said.

He pieced together the book with his own insights, hours of research over the past few years,

and more than 100 interviews on other instances of citizen diplomacy between Sitka and Russia.

“One of the great things about Alaska is our history is so recent,” he said.

He was able to interview people who were among the early pioneers of improving relations with Russia, he said.

Publication of his book comes on the 150th anniversary of Alaska’s transfer from Russia to the U.S. and at a time when relations between the two countries are in the news every day.

“I hurried to get this out this year while interest in U.S. - Russian relations is high,” Ramseur said. “I think a lot of Alaskans and Americans are interested in the U.S. - Russia relationship these days because of President Trump and Putin.”

In “Melting the Ice Curtain” Ramseur argues that while it’s hard to be optimistic about relations between the two countries, citizen diplomacy – like that of the Friendship Flight – offers some good lessons.

Alaskans and Russians in the far east have more in common than one might think, he said.

“We live a long ways from our nation’s capital and we don’t think our national politicians understand us very well,” Ramseur said. “We both experience similar problems that could be solved with similar solutions.”

The countries also have a tie – the arctic.

“About 40 percent of the arctic in the entire world is within Russian borders,” he said. “The arctic is very important to Russia and of course the U.S. is only an arctic country because of Alaska.

“It puts us on the front burner in terms of cooperation of Russia, in terms of figuring out ways to cooperate when it comes to managing a changing arctic.”

Ramseur peppers his history with photos that document events he relates, along with some wacky anecdotes.

“Lots of people are sometimes afraid of reading a book about history, but this one is told with some of the crazy unbelievable stories,” he said.

One of those stories is about how Russians used vodka as a deicing fluid when the regular product was not available, he said.

Released in June, the book is being well-received and the first run is sold out, Ramseur said. The University of Alaska Press, the publisher, has ordered a second run.