

How the Frontier Imagery of the Alaskan North Shapes the People Who Come

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Purpose

Many of us who migrate to the northern regions of the world sense that we have become different people in the North than we would be if we had chosen to live in more populous and developed regions. In this paper, I offer a grounded theory suggesting how the Alaskan North influenced individual identity during the later years of the twentieth century among people who identified Alaska with the cultural images of the American frontier. The Alaskan North, I argue, has been a sparsely populated and transient geographic region with a cultural ethos that celebrates stereotyped, romantic images of the American frontier such as individuality, freedom, pioneering, and opportunity. Migrants who came to Alaska with such a “frontier” mindset saw themselves as obtaining greater opportunity, enjoying wider experience in new and more demanding tasks and roles, making more of their talents, and making more of a difference to their society, than if they had stayed in the more settled regions from which they had come.

The frontier imagery that shaped the development of many migrants to Alaska in the last half of the twentieth century has diminished to a large extent, although its influence is still discussed in popular sources. *New York Times* writer Carey Goldberg captures this popular feeling in her aptly named 1997 article, “Alaska Revels in Frontier Image Though Frontier Slips Away.” The scholarly literature tends to denounce frontier thinking as oppositional to wilderness preservation (Haycox, 2002; Kollin, 2001). In urban Alaska the “frontier” has become a nostalgic memory, as Alaskan cities become like other American urban centres with big box stores, conventional housing, chain restaurants, and shopping malls. Environmental groups campaigning to prevent drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and the tourist industry seeking visitors who want to see an unspoiled natural environment, have both sought to present Alaska as a symbol of the “Last Great Wilderness,” rather than the “Last Frontier.”

Nonetheless, frontier imagery remains a significant feature in the iconography of Alaska. To illustrate its continuing importance, I compared the number of businesses using “frontier” in their names compared to other states, the United States as a whole, and in nations other than the United States. Direct translations of the word “frontier” were used in these comparisons, and each translation was checked with professors specializing in the relevant foreign language. In 1999, the word “frontier” appeared in 226 businesses in Alaska, such as “Frontier Plumbing Supply” or “Frontier Satellite and Security.” The use of “frontier” in business names turned out to be more common in Alaska than in any other state with the exception of Wyoming. For every 100,000 residents Alaska had over thirty-six businesses using the frontier as an attractive symbol in its business name. The United States had just over two businesses per 100,000 people with frontier names. Canada had slightly over one business using frontier symbolism for every 100,000 people. Other nations, such as Denmark, Australia, Germany, France, New Zealand, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Australia had fewer than one such business per 100,000 people. My point is that, in Alaska, the frontier image is still linked to a positive, inviting identity in the popular imagination.

As late as the 1970s, a frontier mindset with its emphasis on opportunity, self-sufficiency, and independence was still to be found among migrants. A community survey of Fairbanks in 1976, for example, found that 38 percent of the respondents said they had built or helped build their own home, and 47 percent said they had grown, hunted, fished, or gathered at least some of their own food (Kruse, 1976). Even in Anchorage, the most populous city in Alaska, a random sample of migrants in 1979 found such frontier imagery important in shaping migrants’ expectations of Alaska and influencing their decisions to relocate (Cuba, 1987). The most common reason for the decision to migrate to Alaska, Cuba found, was a psychological set emphasizing the independence and opportunity to be found in Alaska. The migration reason that scored the highest rating in this study was “a chance to be independent, to start something new.” Some respondents emphasized a more explicit frontier theme, “to live a pioneer’s life, to be self-reliant.”

I do not want to imply that the development of people who migrate to the Alaskan North is invariably positive. In my research, I found cases of people who used frontier imagery in their self-presentations in ways that masked disordered and deviant behaviour and mental illness. This is an uncommon phenomenon, which I will detail in the conclusion to this paper.

To examine the effects of a frontier mindset on the experiences and development of identity among migrants to Alaska during the last half of the twentieth century, this study used the methods of “grounded theory”—an inductive approach to the analysis of data, rather than the testing of pre-

formed hypotheses created before data collection. The intention of grounded theory, as described in major sources, is to develop themes and concepts based on intense study of purposively selected individual cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory emphasizes the analysis of the individual's perceptions of their own experience. The themes and concepts are generated through intensive analysis of data, usually interviews. The researcher writes theoretical memos identifying tentative themes found in the data, with these themes discarded or refined as other cases are analyzed. Important analytic categories emerge as data analysis progresses, with the goal of presenting an understanding of the phenomenon emphasizing the respondents' point of view.

The grounded theory I offer in this paper is based on seventy-five life history interviews with people who migrated to Alaska from 1959 through 1990 and for whom the frontier imagery of the Alaskan North was salient to their sense of self and to their pursuits in Alaska. Following the methodology of grounded theory, I selected "information-rich cases"—homesteaders, trappers, dog mushers, people who lived in the wilderness, and people who saw themselves as seeking greater economic opportunity in a sparsely populated setting in congruence with the advice usually attributed to Horace Greeley—"Go West, Young Man." In addition to formal interviews, I did countless on-the-spot interviews over a ten-year period and discussed the psychological effects of migration to Alaska with numerous students, some of whom did life history research as class projects. The Alaska and Polar Regions Collections of the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks provided valuable tape recorded interviews on the wilderness people who settled in the Yukon-Charley region during the early 1970s, and I was able to locate and interview four of these people about twenty years later to discuss the impact of their experience on their identities.

The semi-structured interview consisted of questions about what brought people to Alaska, what types of experiences they had had, how they would compare their achievements and identity to a "psychological double" (someone like them who had taken a different course in life, often a sibling or close friend in young adulthood). The interview closed with the provocative question, what they thought "the story of their life ought to say." The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

As is standard in social research, I offered interviewees confidentiality. To my surprise most wanted to be named. They were proud of the lives they had created in the Alaskan North and wanted author's credit for them. The names in this paper are actual names unless they are first introduced in quotation marks.

Using the methods of grounded theory, I have identified three significant categories important to analyzing the psychology of those migrants who come to Alaska and who identify the region with the cultural ethos of the American frontier:

1. Mindset of migrants (desire to be independent and start something new, desire for escape from obstacles perceived elsewhere, romantic worldview);
2. Demographic and cultural features of the Alaskan North (sparse population, high rates of migration and transience, indigenous populations, wilderness); and
3. Psychological changes in the Alaskan North (feelings of unusual accomplishment and of making a difference, experiences of being a founder, sense of freedom and authenticity).

In examining the effects of the Alaskan North on human development, I cannot stress too much that the psychological impact of a place depends on more than the actual features of the place. The psychological effects depend on what psychologists call the “set” as well as the “setting.” The “set” refers to a state of mind—the expectations, attitudes, images, and associations that a person brings to the place and uses as an interpretive framework. Just as a person can go into the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and see either the last great wilderness or an ugly stretch of barren land, so people can go to a community in Alaska and see either an enchanting northern frontier or a boring American small town. In the 1970s, many people still came to Alaska expecting the ethos of the frontier.

First, I describe the research background, emphasizing the ideas of Aron Senkpiel whom this issue of the *Northern Review* honours. Second, I describe the processes—why and how migration to the Alaskan North influences the ways in which people with a frontier mindset develop and change, and the sense of identity they create.

The Contribution of Aron Senkpiel: The Call for a Psychology of the North

Why don't you create a psychology of the North? Nothing is out there—nothing!” Aron said to me. He scented opportunity. His face radiated excitement. This was a chance to break new ground, to create a new field, to make a difference.

In a memorable seminar at the University of Alaska's Northern Studies Program in the early 1990s, Aron offered the beginnings of such a psychology. He identified two types of life histories in the North, which he called “Story 1” and “Story 2.” Story 1 is the story of people changing the North. These are the achievers who create institutions and develop enterprises—the frontier

narrative of conquest and accomplishment. Story 2 is the story of the North changing the people who come—the narrative of inner exploration.

Senkpiel not only offered the beginnings of a way of thinking about the psychology of the North. He also offered a methodological perspective. “Don’t lose the detail,” Aron advised. “Use case studies that allow you to write about actual people. A lot of the interest lies in the interesting people.”

I used “Story 1” and “Story 2” as a conceptual framework in my first efforts at analyzing the data from the seventy-five life histories. Some of the life histories fit reasonably well into these two categories. I offer below an example of each. But Senkpiel’s two story framework did not capture some important processes of psychological change in the North that emerged in my interviews.

Story 1: The Frontier Narrative of Opportunity and Accomplishment

John Reeves told no one where he was going. He just put a note “gone fishing” on the door of his college dormitory room in Florida, stuck out his thumb on Interstate 75, and hitchhiked to Alaska. Reeves traveled to Alaska carrying only a backpack, a shotgun, and a sleeping bag. A huge, muscular guy with a shotgun, John was not the sort that people stopped to pick up. It took him four weeks to get to Alaska but he only spent twelve dollars. Now Reeves can buy his own jet plane if he wanted to. He has a net worth, well, he isn’t saying, but most people put it in the multiple millions.

What first struck him about Alaska was the spaciousness, the newness, the opportunity. “Alaska was a whole new world. It was wide open. There’s a big land up there for a big guy. That’s how I was thinking about it.”

Florida? He had grown up there. “Florida was no big shakes.” He went back to the University of Florida but ended up leaving again.

Reeves was now a two-time college dropout, a distinction that raised no eyebrows in Alaska, and headed back to Alaska. After bouncing around for a while, he got a job hauling freight. One day, his boss asked him and his buddy if they wanted to buy his business for \$10,000. They managed to find a “frontier angel” who would guarantee their loan without collateral and they bought the business.

A few years later, in 1974, construction was starting on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. Cost: \$8 billion. Boom time on the frontier!

“Boys, I’ve got to tell you something,” said the guy who had sold them his freight hauling business. “So far you’ve been making sixty or seventy dollars a day. That’s going to change here real quick. You’ve got the exclusive contract to handle Consolidated Freightways air freight. That’s everything north of the Alaska Range.”

“What does that mean to us?” they asked.

“That means you are going to get rich. Your first delivery is sitting over at Reed Tool right now.” When Reeves and his buddy got to Reed Tool, they saw 40,000 pounds of drill bits. They didn’t have to lay a hand on the freight. They just had to sign the paperwork: \$1,500 profit in thirty minutes.

Reeves and his partner could hardly keep up spending all the money they were making. Swaggering into a restaurant, they would say, “We’re buying the drinks, everything for everybody. Give us the bill!” Did his partner need mosquito repellent? Well, sure, Reeves could have driven up with a case but it was so much more fun to hire a plane to buzz the camp and drop the case out the window. When the pipeline boom ended, Reeves didn’t have much left to show for it.

But he knew how to spot an opportunity, and the Alaska frontier in the 1970s was just bursting with opportunities for a man who knew how to spot them.

Driving down the highway one day, Reeves spotted an abandoned gold dredge. He stopped his car and hiked in to take a look. The dredge was a mess with beer cans thrown all over the ground and the windows smashed in. But Reeves had an idea. Built in Pennsylvania in 1928, Gold Dredge No.8 was one of the last working dredges in the region. Reeves found the local businessman who owned it and made a deal. He turned No.8 into a first-rate restaurant and tourist attraction. He brought other historic buildings to the site, such as a bunkhouse that was about to be demolished. He lived with his family in the rescued bunkhouse while repairing other buildings with the original tin roofs and old wood he salvaged from cabins the Park Service was demolishing.

Reeves discovered he had a passion for historic restoration. He bought other old buildings such as a log library on the Chena River that had been the site of historic land negotiations between U.S. Judge James Wickersham and the Tanana Chiefs. He purchased the last remaining turn-of-the-century gold camp still standing in Alaska—a deal that included thousands of acres of patented land in the Fairbanks Mining District. Reeves became one of the largest individual landowners in Alaska, a state where less than 1 percent of the land is in private hands.

Yes, Reeves got rich on the frontier. But Alaska is also the richer for the frontier history Reeves preserved. With his entrepreneurial mindset, Reeves would probably have done well anywhere. But he contributed more to his society restoring old gold dredges and historic buildings in Alaska than if he had developed one more amusement park in Florida. He still tools around Fairbanks in a beaten up truck wearing stained sweats and looking for deals—an example of the “interesting” people Senkpiel emphasized in his call for a psychology of the North.

An important point I want to emphasize with the John Reeves life history is that Story 1, narratives of changing the North, are not necessarily about the exploitation of the North. Many Story 1 narratives were tales of accomplishment—the delight of finding a new area of research, the excitement of building a new state, the satisfaction of protecting the environment or trying to do it right by the Indigenous people, the sense of doing it better this time in Alaska, on this next, new frontier.

Story 2: Inner Exploration and Change in the Alaskan North

“We were the quintessential baby boomers, and we were always warm.” That’s how Pamela Haskin describes the life she and husband Jeff left in Arizona.

“We were on our way to success in life, but we wanted more from life than a thirty-year mortgage and a new car in the drive. We didn’t want to get to the end of our life and say, ‘Well, we really had a nice house and we drove a new car all the time.’”

Jeff’s taxidermy business was making money, and Pamela had a good job as a medical secretary. In fact, Jeff’s business was doing so well Pamela had been thinking about quitting her job to work with him. Instead, she and Jeff decided to escape Arizona to homestead in the town of Central, Alaska. Their families thought they had lost their minds. You don’t leave a successful business and go to Alaska, and dutiful daughters stayed close to their families.

To get title to their land, they had to build a cabin and actually live on it for twenty-five months out of five years. When they moved to their homestead in October, several feet of snow had already fallen. Their land was off the road system, so they had to carry in all their supplies. They melted snow on the stove for water and bathed in a metal bucket. To build their cabin, they chopped down trees and peeled off the bark. They dug a hole and built an outhouse, its walls made from aluminum press sheets that the Fairbanks Daily News Miner sold for twenty-five dollars for a bundle of fifty. Since the ink was still embedded in the sheets, they could sit in their outhouse and read the newspaper. They joked about how little the news changed over the years.

When Jeff was gone for weeks at a time, working at the Prudhoe Bay oil field on the North Slope of Alaska, to earn the money they needed to build their homestead, Pamela faced her first test of the spirit. While cutting up chicken for dinner one night, Pamela sliced her hand, the knife cutting so deep she could see muscle beneath the layers of fat. She couldn’t stop the bleeding. She had no telephone to call for help, and she couldn’t walk out with a wound that deep and gushing blood. She wadded up rags to stuff in the wound and finally the blood stopped.

“Part of me hopes the scar will never fade away,” she said. “The scar reminds me of what I can do.”

Pamela Haskin’s life story is an account of inner psychological change. She found herself doing so much more than she ever dreamed she could. She developed a passion for writing. She wanted to tell people that, yes, they could leave family pressures and social convention behind; they could be what they wanted to be. *Guideposts*, a magazine featuring stories of hope and inspiration, started publishing stories about the tests of character that occur in a wilderness. *A Deliberate Life*, her account of homesteading in Alaska at the end of the twentieth century, casts her life as a parable of self-actualization and psychological change. She sees herself as “lighting a candle.” She tells classes of high school students, “You too can choose how to live. You too can break with the past. You too can live your dream.”

Pamela Haskin’s account of psychological change in the Alaskan North illustrates the difficulties with Senkpiel’s “Story 2” framework. First, her spiritual change had begun outside the North, in Arizona. This was a common theme in the “Story 2” people. Coming to Alaska in itself was an expression of inner change that had begun in other places. Alaska amplified these changes but did not cause them. Second, the Story 2 people, who had engaged in inner change in Alaska, often turned into Story 1 people—achievers who seized the opportunities of the Alaskan North. Pamela Haskin, for example, had never gone to college but she became a professional writer, drawing on her strange and new experiences as a homesteader in Alaska.

An account of how the North shapes the ways in which people change and develop, I realized, had to take into account a central experience so many of my interviewees emphasized—the expansion of opportunity so many people found in Alaska due to a sparse and transient population. A research literature on environmental psychology does consider the effects of wilderness as a restorative agent on emotional and physiological health, and spiritual growth and change (for a useful review, see Kaplan & Talbot, 1983). But this literature emphasizes relatively short wilderness sojourns as therapeutic experiences for special groups such as adolescents, prisoners, or business executives, and disentangling the effects of the therapy occurring on such trips from the wilderness experience itself has proved difficult. The most recent *Handbook of Environmental Psychology* (Bechtel & Churchman, 2002) does not address the effects of wilderness experiences and does not even include “wilderness” in its index of subjects. The primary emphasis of environmental psychology as a field has become effects of the physical environment, such as crowding and green spaces, on mental health and well-being and the practical application of findings to such fields as urban planning and the design of neighbourhood,

housing, and work environments (Bechtel & Churchman, 2002; Clark et al., 2007).

Environmental psychology did not address features of the Alaskan North emphasized in my interviews—for example, how the experience of living in sparsely populated places expanded the tasks people undertook and their social roles and sense of competence. While not ignoring the theme of wilderness in respondent interviews, I turned, therefore, to an earlier psychological literature on ecological psychology which, as Wicker (2002) points out in the most recent *Handbook of Environmental Psychology*, is no longer central to environmental psychology as this field has come to develop.

The ecological psychology research of Roger Barker on the effects of undermanned settings (later called “staffing theory”), and his speculations on the effects of frontier settings, highlighted many of the causal processes that my interviewees were reporting. Since this research is no longer well-known, I report it in detail.

Roger Barker’s Ecological Research on Undermanned Settings

Many remote, northern settings are sparsely populated. Roger Barker and his colleagues and students, such as Paul Gump and Alan Wicker, developed and tested a theory describing the effects of sparsely populated settings, which they called “undermanned settings” (Barker & Gump, 1964). Their crucial insight was that specific social environments in themselves had psychological impact. “Behaviour settings,” like classrooms and restaurants, affected what people did, what kind of experiences they had, and how they came to think of themselves. In their best-known study on the effects of school consolidation, Barker and his colleagues meticulously measured the experiences youngsters had in high schools of different sizes. Should small rural high schools be closed down and students sent to large high schools where they would have far more choice of courses and activities?

Small schools of fewer than one hundred students, they were astonished to discover, had different, perhaps even more growth-enhancing, effects on young people than large high schools of several thousand students.

1. Students were apt to participate in a greater variety of activities in small high schools. They tended to broaden their skills, rather than specialize.
2. Students were more apt to hold leadership roles in small high schools.
3. Students reported more satisfactions related to active participation and activity while students in larger schools reported more satisfactions related to passive spectatorship.
4. Small schools tended to draw marginal students into activities

instead of leaving them alienated on the sidelines. If the “odd” student didn’t come to the Friday night dance, for example, the dance wouldn’t have enough students to go on. Since people were needed for the show to go on, undermanned settings bred tolerance for odd ducks and people with rough edges.

To appreciate the influence of sparsely populated versus crowded settings, think about a school play with two leading roles and eight supporting roles. In a small high school with a hundred students, any student has a one in ten chance of getting a part in the play and a one in fifty chance of getting a lead role. In a high school of 3,000 students, any student has only a one in three hundred chance of getting a part in the play and only a one in 1,500 chance of playing the male or female lead.

In an evocative passage from “Big School-Small School,” Barker and his colleagues capture the thrust of their surprising discovery:

To an outside observer, a large school with many students is impressive: its imposing physical dimensions, its seemingly endless halls and numberless rooms, its hundreds of microscopes, its vast auditorium and great audiences, its sweeping tides of students all carry the message of power, movement, vitality, purpose, achievement, certainty.

In contrast, a small school with its small building, its three microscopes, its dual-purpose gymnasium-auditorium half-filled with students who assemble and depart, not in tides, but in a tangle of separate channels is not impressive.

The members of the fieldwork team were repeatedly impressed that the directly experienced differences between large and small schools were, in these respects, so compelling, like the differences between a mighty river and a meandering brook.

The developmental advantages of the large school turned out to be in part an illusion. In many ways, small schools had greater psychological effects. These were the schools that created leadership experiences, broadened skills, drew marginal people into the society, and made people feel needed.

While Barker did not study the North, he did write a paper speculating on the power of frontier environments based on his reading of frontier literature (Barker, 1979). Frontier environments, he theorized, would have even more developmental power than undermanned settings. Not only are frontiers undermanned, Barker pointed out, but they also have the following characteristics:

- Frontiers are strange and new. Migrants must figure out how to cope with tough problems they did not face back home.
- Frontiers are also unfinished. Institutions are underdeveloped. Individuals have the heady experience of creating institutions.

I have presented Roger Barker's view of the effects of undermanned settings and frontier environments in a positive vein. But Barker also recognized dangers and risks. Experiences of success might come sharp and fast. So did experiences of failure. In undermanned settings, people were often working at the outer edges of their abilities. People in small schools and small towns, Barker believed, would also have nagging feelings of self-doubt, the sense that they were only "big fish in a small pond."

Barker's research provided a conceptual framework that related 1) environmental characteristics to 2) personal experiences to 3) the development of skills, role experiences, and identity. Applying this framework to my life history data illuminated many of the mechanisms through which the Alaska North shaped migrants.

I present them at the level of themes, using case studies and examples drawn from respondent interviews as illustrations.

1. Since Alaska is sparsely populated and many people are transient, opportunities abound for people with talent. People experience easy entry and less competition. Formal credentials become less important than the skills to do the job.

The state of Alaska includes more than 586,000 square miles, approximately one-fifth the size of all the lower forty-eight states together. As late as 2006, the Census estimate of the Alaska population totaled just over 670,000 people. Yet Alaska, like any other state, sends two senators to Congress, elects a congressional representative, has a governor, lieutenant governor, the full complement of state agencies, and a state court system. Alaska has a state university system with major campuses in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau, with branch campuses in virtually every community. Every municipality has its own complement of public officials and voluntary organizations. Federal agencies, Native profit and non-profit corporations, non-profit organizations protecting the wilderness, and educational institutions—all create numerous important roles to fill.

Not only does Alaska offer numerous roles but opportunities keep opening up because of the high rate of transience. Even in 2000, when much of Alaska was losing the frontier turbulence of the period following statehood in 1959, over sixty percent of state residents came from somewhere else with Alaska having a higher rate of migration than any other state except the District of Columbia (Williams, 2004). The transience of population in Alaska means that the social structure is far more fluid than elsewhere. Migrants, especially those who go to a small town in Alaska, experience a far more open society than migrants who go to a small town in regions where the dominant families have remained the same for generations.

A state with a small and transient population creates opportunities, especially for people without the formal credentials they would need to do the job in many other places, as the following case illustrates.

An Unemployed Labourer Heads Alaska's Democratic Party

When David Guttenberg got an invitation to the White House, he figured he would be the only head of a state Democratic Party who was a labourer on unemployment. Maybe he should mention this to the President of the United States when they met.

Guttenberg came to Alaska and signed up to make big bucks at the Prudhoe Bay oil field. One day, while he was shoveling snow in the wind, his face and beard frozen with crusted ice, Guttenberg was called into the office. An auditor had seen his name on a list and wanted to meet him.

"He asked me if I were 'a member of the tribe.' What was a Jewish boy doing working construction? Why aren't you home being an accountant?" Guttenberg had broken away, escaped the expectations of his family and ethnic group. He discovered he liked working as a laborer—the physical feeling of being tough and able, the sense of accomplishment you got when you built a pipeline or a bridge or a school, and saw people using what you had built. He liked the down time where he could pursue his own passions such as politics.

At a labourers' union meeting in a northern town someone said to him, when he was sounding off, "If you care so much, go down to a Democratic Party meeting."

Nobody at the Democratic Party meeting knew how to do the books. They handed Guttenberg three grocery bags bulging with bank statements and bills. "You are treasurer now. Do the books."

Guttenberg didn't know how to do the books, but he figured it out. He kept stepping forward, and he kept stepping up.

"At one meeting in Washington, D.C., as head of the Democratic Party in Alaska, I found myself sitting next to Teddy Sorenson, President Kennedy's speech writer. Every word from his mouth comes out in elegant prose. I never graduated from college. I kept asking myself, 'What am I doing here? I don't belong.'"

But he did belong. In Alaska, the Democratic Party needed David Guttenberg. Whether he had graduated from college didn't matter. A lot of people in the North don't have the paper credentials ordinarily required for the jobs they are doing. What mattered was that David Guttenberg could figure out how to do the books.

2. Since the North is unfinished, ordinary people may have the heady experience of becoming “founders.”

My interviews are full of “founding” experiences and the exhilaration and sense of comradeship and community that comes from doing something valuable together.

From Underemployed Actor to Theatrical Legend

Lee Salisbury grew up in New York City, surrounded by the unemployed actors and directors who hung around his father’s bookstore, which specialized in theatre memorabilia.

“Don’t go into theatre. Don’t go into theatre,” his father warned him. “There’s no money in theatre. We know so many actors who are starving.” But Lee was already hooked.

In New York, Salisbury found he could only make a living in theatre by becoming a high school drama teacher. He did radio soap operas on the side and summer stock in New England. Then, through a relative of his wife, he got a job at the University of Alaska, a small university in the 1950s. To his shock, Salisbury found he had now become the head (and the only faculty member) of three entire departments: Speech, Drama, and Radio.

Alaskans were prime material for acting, Salisbury discovered. So many of them were characters right from the start. And he got so much appreciation.

“I was introducing theatre to the state of Alaska. We brought theatre to the capital and to Eskimo and Indian villages. Once an old miner came up to me and said, ‘You know that Antigone. She is like the state of Alaska, fighting for independence.’ Everything I did, everybody liked. It was all very flattering.”

In New York, Salisbury was a high school drama teacher. In the North, he became a theatrical legend. The Lee Salisbury Theatre at the University of Alaska is named in his honour.

3. Since Alaska is exotic, strange, and new, migrants feel their imagination and creativity surge.

So much about the North wakes people up. Many newcomers are fascinated by Alaska’s indigenous peoples, amazed at the northern lights, and curious as to whether liquid really does vaporize when you throw a cup of coffee off the porch at fifty degrees below zero. They are excited by the extreme cold, the white nights of summer, and the dark days of winter.

The new themes and materials in the Arctic, the dramatic weather, the meeting of cultures, stimulates the imagination. Alaska bazaars in the last half of the twentieth century portrayed, through physical artifacts, such processes of invention and cultural exchange—purses made from moose hearts and

moose bladders, earrings made from antler horn, business cards made from the thinnest birchbark, jewelry boxes made from the vertebrae of whales, sweaters knitted from the fur of sled dogs, Eskimo dolls sewn with dental floss.

4. The Alaskan environment creates national issues, unusual problems, and small markets with distinctive needs that create opportunity and spur local, individual innovation.

What if you are flying a small plane and your plane goes down in the bush? Nat Gerson created an original folding bowsaw so people could cut a new runway. Do you find it hard to exercise your team of sled dogs every day? Rusty Hagen invented a dog carousel. He built what looks like a merry-go-round in his dog yard, powered by an engine in his garage. Dog houses perch on the spokes of the merry-go-round and get a run. When they want a rest, the dogs can jump on the spokes and sit in their houses with their eyes bright and tongues hanging out. The dogs like the carousel so much that they push each other away to get a spot on a spoke.

Local issues, especially those related to environmental preservation, gain national attention and create opportunity for Alaskans to play significant roles that gain national and international attention. The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, the future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, wolf control—these are issues of national significance that propel local reporters, media people, and photographers into the spotlight.

5. The North stretches people, rather than specializes them, encouraging migrants to take on unfamiliar tasks. Often people discover talents they did not know they had.

Since people are scarce and work is plentiful, people tend to broaden rather than specialize.

The Broadening Effects of the Alaska North

“Why don’t you stay in Washington, D.C.?” Professor Jenifer McBeath’s friends asked her, when she spent her sabbatical working at the United States Department of Agriculture.

“Your research in Washington is well-funded,” McBeath told them. “But you are like well-fed animals in a zoo. I am like a lone wolf on the tundra. I may not know where my next meal is coming from, but I have the whole horizon in which to roam.”

McBeath was able to diversify her research in Alaska in ways she could not in Washington, D.C. In most research settings, bacterial, viral, fungal, and nematode disease of plants would be different specialties. Alaska, in contrast, has very few plant pathologists

and a lot of unusual agricultural needs resulting from the extreme climate. McBeath has moved from one field to another and made one contribution after another, such as developing a way to make sure potatoes are virus-free and making trading agreements for virus-free potatoes with her native Taiwan.

The scarcity and expense of labour in Alaska, and the romanticizing of frontier self-sufficiency, broaden people's skills. In the ethos of Alaska, knowing how to solve problems, especially tasks that require innovation, is a status marker. People who can get a car started at fifty degrees below, who can thaw out frozen pipes, get respect. "I went to a party and there were all these doctors and lawyers competing to see who could be the biggest grease monkey," said one astonished migrant to Alaska. "They were telling tales about how their small plane went down on the tundra and how they got the plane flying again by using something like a clothes hanger."

6. The remoteness of the North allows people to escape the shackles of the past, the racial and religious pressures, the scandals, the family controls that were holding them back.

My interviews are filled with stories of escape to Alaska. A few are dramatic tales of rebirth.

Bad Girl Gone Good

When I asked "Jane Wyatt" my concluding interview question, "What do you think the story of your life should say?" she titled her life story *Bad Girl Gone Good*. Her mother died when she was a child. Abused as a young girl, she escaped into fantasy. She should have been born in another age, she felt, where she could have gone west in a covered wagon. She became a drug addict, a single mother, and a college dropout.

When Jane visited her brother in Alaska she saw a new world, a white world of snow and ice, where she could start all over again. She sold everything and came back to Alaska with nothing but what she could carry in a backpack and a duffel bag.

In a remote Alaskan town with a population of fewer than a hundred people, she volunteered to serve on the emergency medical team. The town knew about her drug addiction but they needed an emergency medical technician. Jane's background didn't matter if she could and would do the job. When a small boy riding a three-wheeler hit a tree, Jane and her team treated him on top of the pool table at the local bar until the medivac chopper could get in. "Little children stay

very strong and you don't think there's too much wrong with them. But when they are going to die, they die very quickly."

Jane did the job so well that she rose to become squad leader. Arriving at an automobile accident, Jane's medical team found a woman lying in the road. The woman said she had heard an odd sound from her neck during the accident. This could be a spinal injury, Jane realized. They strapped the woman to a backboard and called an air taxi ambulance. If they had made a wrong move, the woman might have been permanently paralyzed.

Many serious accidents happen in remote northern towns where people build their own houses, mine for gold, fly small planes, hunt their own meat, and travel in temperatures reaching fifty degrees below zero or colder. The problem is that training for emergency medical technicians is based on urban assumptions, such as the idea that the accident will happen somewhere near a road. That's not true in Alaska's remote regions. Jane couldn't follow the book. She had to learn to improvise. With her rising success, her self-confidence rose.

Jane changed in Alaska because she wanted to change, she was needed, and she knew it. No one held it against her that she was once a drug addict. She isn't any more. The local Lion's Club gave her the "Good Neighbor of the Year Award" and she was named "Emergency Medical Technician of the Year" for her region.

People came to Alaska to escape a variety of obstacles and aggravations—parents who wanted to control their lives, racial and religious prejudice that limited their opportunities, the pressures of the "rat race," the pollution and plasticity of urban America. What they found when they arrived in the Alaskan North was a culture that romanticized escapes and provided alluring models of unconventional lives. The psychological effect was a strong sense of freedom and authenticity.

Escaping a Trap of Gold

I met Robin McLean, a young woman with an Ivy League education, at a Fairbanks bazaar where she was selling her hand-thrown pottery, each piece painted with wild displays of blueberries, cranberries, and bright gold daisies. Each plate was an original, none the same shape or size. As I chose my plates, I asked Robin our standard Alaska conversation-starter, "So why did you come to Alaska?"

While many interviewees had told me the frontier story of escape, no one had told it with more poetry and passion. I went out to the car to get a tape recorder.

To get respect in their social sphere, these young women had to get into an Ivy League college with demanding entrance requirements,

graduate from a professional or graduate school, and have a career in a major city like New York or Washington, D.C., competing with a high proportion of ambitious young people. In other words, to maintain their social status, they were trapped in a life with high status but high stress.

Robin had made all the right moves, graduating from the Ivy League college of Mount Holyoke and then going on to professional school in law. She didn't like living in a professional legal culture where people measured their success by how many billable hours they put in each day. But they were trapped, even if their trap was cast of gold. Robin went to Alaska to clerk for a judge but then decided to quit, to give up the law, and become a potter. She moved into a cabin in Sutton where she could take care of a historical park and live rent-free.

"I think that being in Alaska made me freer to make that decision," she explained, "because people here are very unconventional about their job choices and the systems or the schedules that they choose. Some people work six-months on and six-months off, go to Key West in the winter and fish in the Gulf of Alaska in the summer. Other people work two-weeks on, two-weeks off. It makes you think, wow, I don't have to have only two weeks of the year vacation. You can do something that you never imagined before."

"Out East I think people are crazy. It's liberating to be in a place where you don't have to be confined by your previous generation's work ethic, where you are not a failure if you don't do what they do. Now I do exactly as I please and I feel like I am becoming what I'm supposed to be. Who I am."

6. The beauty of the North, the open space, and the grandeur of the wilderness create spiritual, expansive feelings.

Over and over again, the people I interviewed talked about the way the natural beauty of Alaska affected their lives. When they saw open spaces without any human being, mountain peaks jutting into the horizon, or rivers winding through the wilderness like shimmering ribbons of light, they felt not just aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment but also psychological and spiritual expansion and connections.

"When you come up here to my cabin, you can feel the ground move," said Dante Foster. Would she have won a prestigious, \$30,000 a year Truman Scholarship or a highly competitive, all-expenses paid Marshall Scholarship to study in the United Kingdom or made *USA Today's* listing of top college students across the United States if she had stayed in Oregon?

"You feel like the trees are surrounding you and enclosing you, but you can crack that wide open, like two halves of a circle, and lay them out flat. There's an expansion here. Alaska just has this wide, open feeling."

For some, the wilderness strengthened spiritual feelings. “You see the trees and the rivers and you glimpse who God is,” said a trapper. “Beyond the edge of the road, it’s not a man-made world, a world that people believe they have ‘created.’

“People try to go fulfill themselves with fame and glory, with wealth and possessions and love, with all the avenues of ‘success.’ But this is meaningless, a striving after wind.”

7. The cultural ethos of Alaska celebrates the American frontier romance of freedom, individuality, and resistance to authority. The ethos of individual freedom amplifies whatever characteristics migrants arrive with.

“The Last Frontier” is Alaska’s nickname, written on Alaska’s license plates in letters of blue on gold. Alaskan literature, magazines, and newspapers romanticize frontier figures—trappers, gold miners, homesteaders, and dog mushers.

A few migrants who came to Alaska saw themselves as living out the life stories of the historical figures of the western and Alaskan frontier.

The Man Who Wore Animal Skins

Randy Brown was just eighteen years old when he decided to go “beyond the horizon” and live off the land. He and his friend Little John paddled their canoes eighty miles down the Yukon River and then dragged them another sixty miles up the Kandik River.

They were alone, hundreds of miles from any road, any medical help, any store. The only store grub they had brought with them was twenty-five pounds of rice, twenty-five pounds of beans and a five-gallon bucket of tallow. They were too far out to re-supply. Randy learned to hunt for his food and to make clothes from animal skins. The first time he made his own clothes the skins were so stiff he looked like a man wearing a cardboard box.

Randy and Little John learned first hand that a mistake could be deadly when Little John went hunting up on the Pingo River without extra footgear. It was twenty degrees below zero, and Little John’s boots had filled up with river water. He should have built a fire to dry out his feet and footgear. But being green, he made a run for the cabin three miles away. When he arrived, he had no feeling in his feet, which were frozen in his boots. Randy had to use an axe to pry off the boots.

“I went to the heart of life. I did it.” That’s how Randy saw his years in the wilderness. “I created my character.” Nothing again would faze him.

Migrants to Alaska who led far more conventional lives often had Walter Mitty fantasies of themselves as explorers and pioneers. Take “Mike,” a barber who had come to Alaska from Montana when a rival with a red Corvette stole his girl. In Montana, a local barber school was churning out graduates. Alaska, on the other hand, had no barber school. A Fairbanks barber needed an assistant so badly that he loaned Mike the money for a plane ticket. Mike made enough money to buy the barbershop. He delighted in returning to Montana and taking his huge family out for a steak and lobster dinner. To an outsider, Mike was simply the prosperous owner of a local barbershop. But Mike had a different image of himself. In his imagination, he identified himself with Felix Pedro, the Italian immigrant who had discovered gold in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Frontier Masks as a Disguise for Psychopathology

This paper emphasizes the positive development of migrants to the Alaskan North, but my research on the functions of frontier personas uncovered some individuals who used frontier imagery in their self-presentations in ways that masked, for themselves and others, disordered and deviant behaviour and mental illness.

In these cases in their benign form, a psychologically disordered but harmless individual embraces American frontier symbols and imagery—such as sporting a bushy beard, collecting knives and guns, and living in a cabin or tent in a hidden location in the wilderness—in an effort to create a dignified social identity of a modern-day “mountain man.” In its dangerous and pathological form, these men (virtually all in this category are male) use the imagery and symbols of the frontier to camouflage their disorders or psychopathology, and to divert society from the dangers they pose.

Such odd figures may seem to their audience just colourful and even amusing actors in the theatre of the frontier. But this assessment may be in error. A psychiatrist in Australia offers insight into this phenomenon in his analysis of over hundred cases of people who went into Australia’s outback. “The motivations of people who are drawn to the remaining frontiers of the world range from the adventurously realistic to the patently psychotic with infinite gradations in between. ‘Eccentricity,’ ‘robust individualism,’ ‘troppo’ are local labels for such people, any word except ‘mental illness’ which is taboo.” (Cawte, 1967: 149)

In the Alaskan vernacular, such sad characters are assigned the label of “end-of-the-rovers,” which is a familiar persona, particularly in small, remote communities. Their “mountain man” costume, so familiar in these communities, does not cue the audience to the threat these individuals can present. One such end-of-the roader, for example, murdered eight people until

the state troopers shot him from a helicopter as he attempted to flee deeper into the wilderness. “We tolerate and treat as neighbours some very odd people,” explained one young woman living in a small Alaskan community. “Like one of my neighbours has a giant gun collection. It’s his passion. We accept it. Because so many lives are unconventional, he fits in.” Such figures often seem to their audience just colourful actors in the theatre of the frontier, and are even reassuring since they are perceived as evidence that Alaska still represents the American frontier.

The Murderer Who Posed As a Mountain Man

“All he wanted to do was to get enough money to be independent and live in the wilderness,” said Michael Silka’s high school teacher after the tragedy. When he came to Alaska, he lived in a cabin and tried to live the “Alaska lifestyle” like many other eccentric drifters. First, his neighbour Roger Culp disappeared. When the troopers came to investigate, Silka claimed the blood on the snow by his cabin came from a moose he was cutting up. While the troopers tested the blood to see if it had come from a human being, Silka made a run for it. He headed for Manley Hot Springs, a remote Alaskan town with a graceful white bridge and a historical roadhouse built around 1907. Silka did look a bit strange, living in his car, talking about hearing clams, and staring at his steering wheel, but, hey, the people in Manley Hot Springs had seen a lot of other bushy-haired drifters.

People started to disappear. One woman reported that her husband and five others had gone down to the boat landing and none had come back. By the time the state troopers arrived, Silka had killed seven people as well as his Fairbanks neighbor.

Silka made another run for it. He was spotted in the wilderness in a slough off the Zitiziana River. He had chosen his battleground well. Hills and trees protected his back and flanks. Dead ahead lay flat, open ground, the only area of approach. When the state troopers’ helicopter descended, Silka stepped out from behind a tree and opened fire, killing one trooper instantly and wounding another. Before he could shoot the control lines and bring down the helicopter, a trooper got Silka in his sights and killed him.

In the lives of destructive people like Michael Silka, as well as in the lives of productive people like Lee Salisbury, similar factors—a sparse population, remoteness, romantic northern imagery, and social norms of freedom and tolerance for eccentricity—create conditions where individuals can have far larger impact, for good or for ill, than they would otherwise have on their societies.

Applications to Other Regions of the Circumpolar North

My case studies are drawn entirely from Alaska in the latter half of the twentieth century and it is for others to say whether the psychological processes I describe can be applied to other northern regions. There are grounds to believe that some of these processes may be limited to, or more intense, in the Alaskan North. The frontier romance, for example, is a quintessential American cultural motif and is not central to the symbols and imagery of other northern regions such as Canada's northern territories. On the other hand, some psychological processes may generalize to other regions of the Circumpolar North, especially the idea that sparsely populated and transient populations in remote northern settings create an abundance of opportunities to make a difference.

Aron Senkpiel's own life is an apt illustration. In the Canadian North, Aron Senkpiel became a founder, helping to create this journal. Northern Canadians, he passionately believed, should be able to pursue a college education "in the North, by the North and for the North." Together with his colleagues, he made it happen.

"Aron would likely say that most everything he did in the North would likely not have happened had he stayed down South," his wife Elaine Senkpiel told me. "Maybe he could have taught English down South and he would have done well no matter where he taught. But, the opportunities he created and that were possible here could likely not have been replicated elsewhere."

Aron Senkpiel's own life illustrates many of the psychological processes I have described in this paper. In the Canadian North, despite the lack of conventional credentials like the PhD, he was able to use his talents to make a mark and a difference.

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