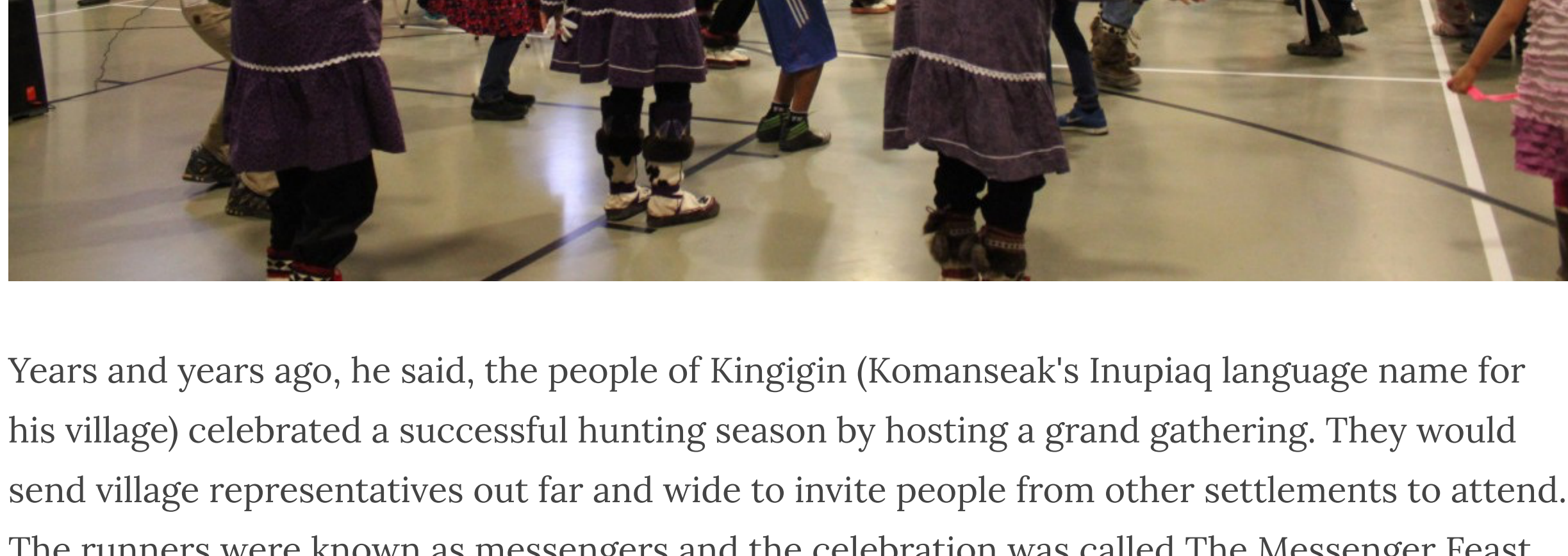


Wales' Kingikmiut Dance Festival ends in marathon session (*Regional Flavor!*)

Story by Keith Conger
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 Published in the Nome Nugget newspaper 09/17/15



From the edge of the school gym in Wales, Alaska – sometime between late Sunday night and very early Monday morning – Luther Komanaseak proudly watched his local dance group from a metal folding chair. Walrus-skin drums were banging loudly and rhythmic kuspuk-clad Native dancers filled every available space. Komanaseak, one of the village's community leaders, took a moment to talk about the origins of the annual Kingikmiut Dance Festival at which his relatives were performing.



Years and years ago, he said, the people of Kingigin (Komanaseak's Inupiaq language name for his village) celebrated a successful hunting season by hosting a grand gathering. They would send village representatives out far and wide to invite people from other settlements to attend. The runners were known as messengers and the celebration was called The Messenger Feast.

The western tip of the Seward Peninsula, which is also the westernmost tip of mainland North America, is home to about 150 Kingigin residents. Komanaseak said for around 60 years, Native dancing, which was a vital component of these celebrations, went missing from his village.

When whale hunting ended, the dancing did too. The current dance festival is the modern day version of this feast.

A Revived Tradition

Anna Oxereok, President of the Native Village of Wales, says the absence of drumming and dancing spanned many generations. The reintroduction of this form of community celebration happened in 1989 through the local school, she said.

One of the key figures in the resurgence was Faye Ongtowasruk, an elder who passed away this summer. The three-day, 2015 Kingikmiut Dance Festival was celebrated in honor and memory of this prominent and influential leader.

Kingigin drummer and dancer Sherman Richard remembers the reintroduction well. He was in second grade when Ongtowasruk and several others began teaching school children. He said dancing became popular again after it was presented to the community at the Christmas program that year. Sherman has participated ever since.



In 2000, Kingigin revived the Messenger Feast tradition by inviting its neighbors to a modern dance celebration. The social gathering this weekend marked the 16th Kingikmiut Dance Festival. Although the historic Messenger Feast took place mid-winter, the present-day Wales version occurs annually on Labor Day weekend, toward the end of summer.

Today, messages are no longer sent by foot. Rather, Wales Tribal Coordinator Vanessa Tingook and her assistant Julia Ongtowasruk use the United States Postal Service as messengers by sending out letters to prospective dance groups.

To help pay for the event, Oxereok said the Native Village of Wales applied for and was awarded a grant from the Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation's Outside Entity Funding program. NSEDC Communications Director Laureli Ivanoff says the Kingikmiut Dance Festival has received funding through OEF since 2010 – this year in the amount of over \$40,000.

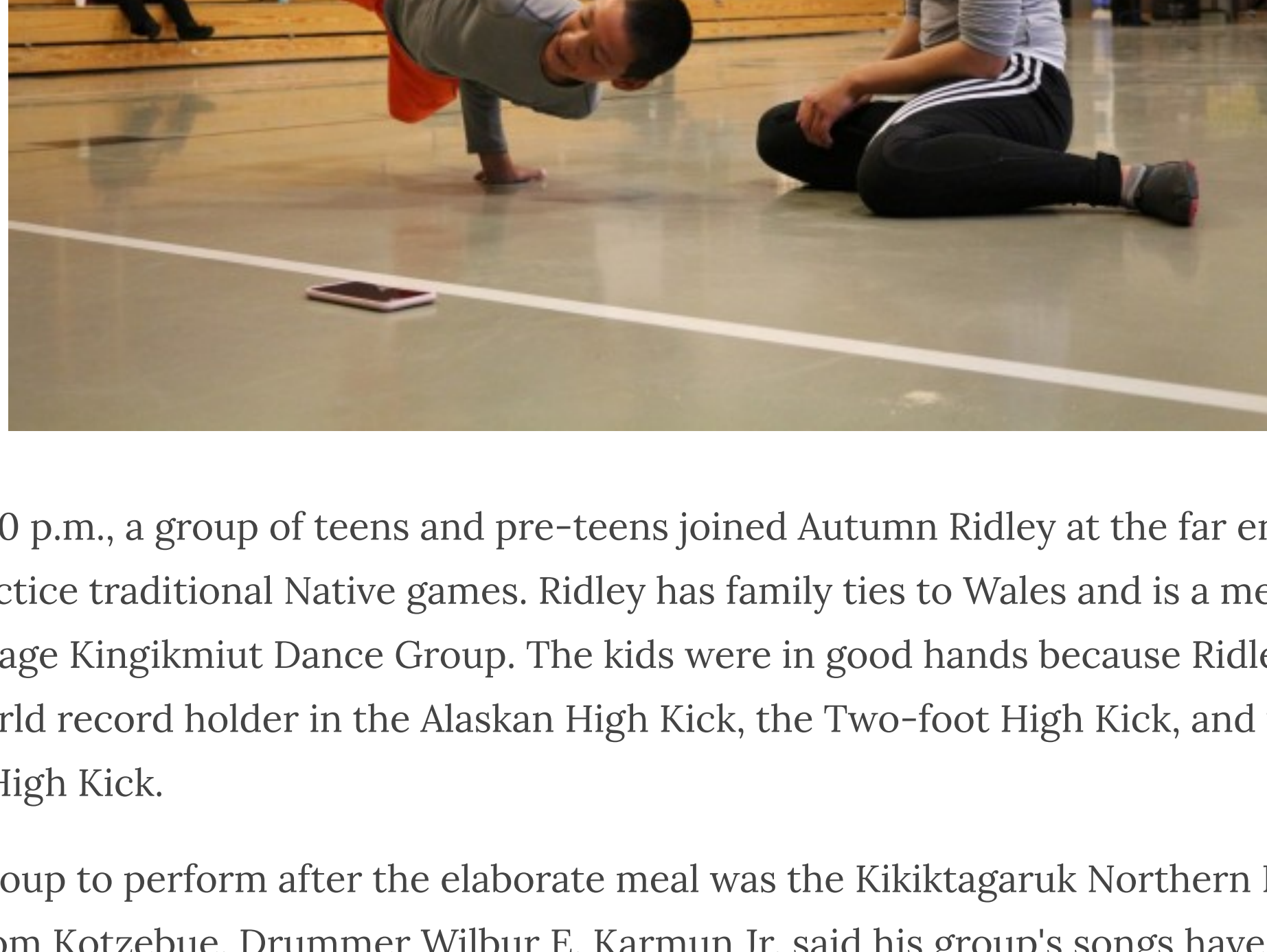
Kotzebue, Point Hope, Savoonga, King Island, and Anchorage dance groups accepted invitations for the 2015 event. Last year the festival was visited by a group from as far away as Anaktuvuk Pass. Oxereok says each village brings something to contribute to the closing day feast, and local reindeer herder Davis Ongtowasruk, Faye's son, donates meat.

The closing day

Sunday marked the final day of the get-together. Little activity occurred on the streets before the dinner hour. Many of the festival-goers were heeding the advice of Richard, who suggested they sleep extra long to prepare for the "Grand Finale" that night.

According to Tingook, Friday's session lasted until around 2:00 a.m., and Saturday's dancing and drumming went until 3:00 a.m. the next morning. Last year, the Sunday finale didn't conclude until around 10:30 a.m. the next day.

The school was relatively deserted all Sunday morning and afternoon, except for the kitchen, where a dedicated work force of Kingigin women spent the day preparing food for the feast.



Around 3:00 p.m., a group of teens and pre-teens joined Autumn Ridley at the far end of the gym to practice traditional Native games. Ridley has family ties to Wales and is a member of the Anchorage Kingikmiut Dance Group. The kids were in good hands because Ridley is the current world record holder in the Alaskan High Kick, the Two-foot High Kick, and the Alaskan One-Foot High Kick.

The first group to perform after the elaborate meal was the Kikiktagaruk Northern Lights Dancers from Kotzebue. Drummer Wilbur E. Karmun Jr. said his group's songs have northwestern Alaska origins, from Wales to Kivalina. Dancing and drumming were mainstays of the trade fair that occurred in Kotzebue.



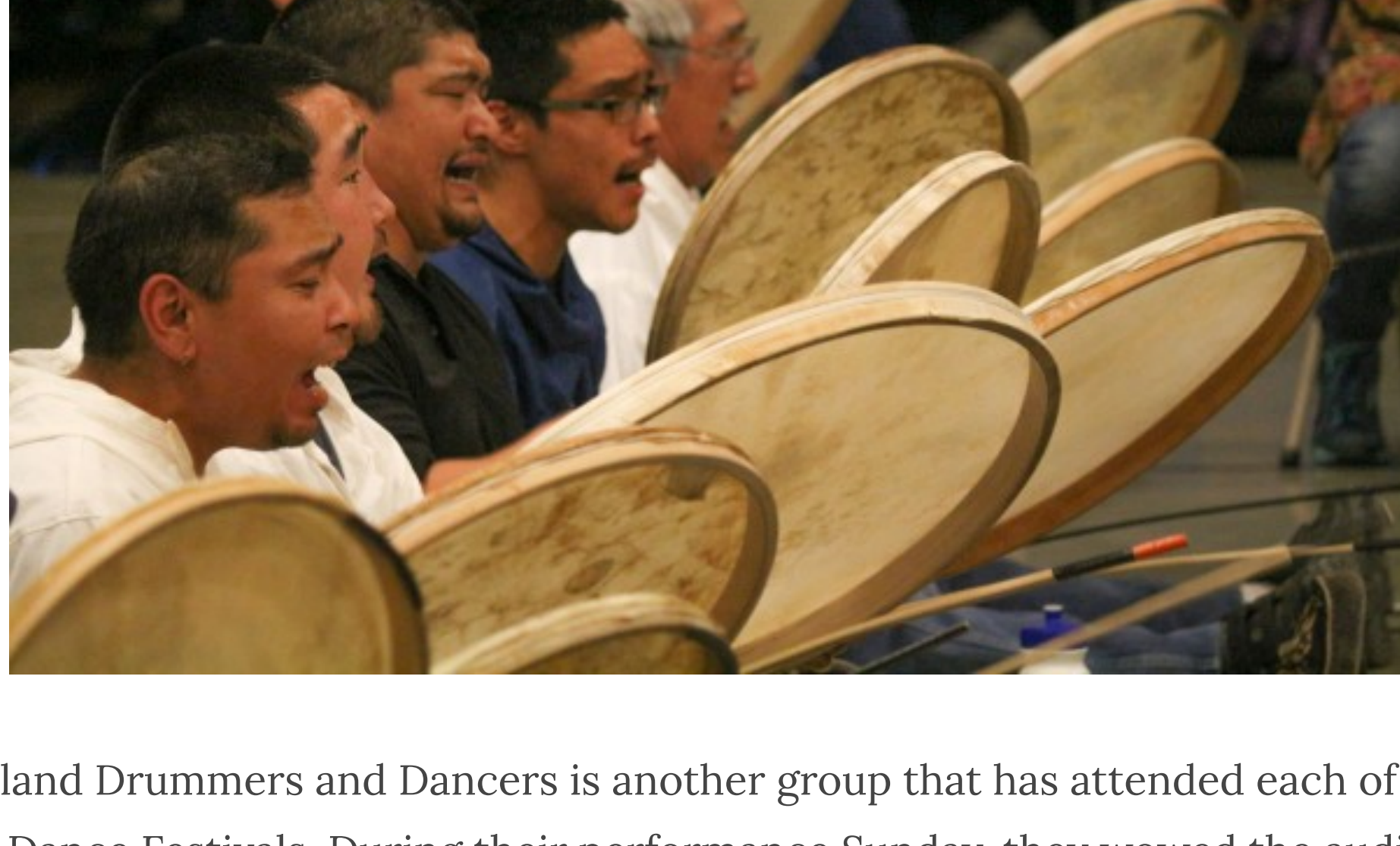
Karmun says his group is fresh off performing for President Obama. When the President arrived in Kotzebue on Air Force One last week, the Kikiktagaruk Dancers were there on the runway to greet him. The group presented the Commander in Chief with a specially decorated drum.



The Anchorage Kingikmiut Dancers have never missed the festival. Drumming member Greg Nothstine was raised in Nome and attended first through fifth grade there. His mother grew up in Wales. Many of the tunes his group performs are traditional Kingikikmiut songs, but they have composed original ones as well.

Nothstine is particularly fond of the "Seal Poke Song," also known as the "Float Jacket Song." (A poke is an inflated sealskin attached to the harpoon line used in whale hunting. It prevents the whale from diving). The Alaska Kingikmiut Dancers gave the song to the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium for their *Kids Don't Float Campaign*.

The dance group from Savoonga represented Saint Lawrence Island this year. Savoonga drummer George Noongwook said the tradition of Native dancing has never been interrupted in his village. His group's songs come mainly from Savoonga, Gambell, and Russia.



The King Island Drummers and Dancers is another group that has attended each of the 16 Kingikmiut Dance Festivals. During their performance Sunday, they wowed the audience by having the men sit in a line on the floor with their backs to the bleachers, while the women sat opposite them on a row of chairs.

King Island drummer Bryan Muktoyuk says festivals such as the one in Wales provide his group with an opportunity to present traditional "bench dances." They are his favorites. Muktoyuk was introduced to these songs by his grandparents when he was growing up. He said this arrangement was once typical in the "clubhouse" on King Island, where seated women danced from benches around the room's periphery, and men sat and drummed from below.



The last two groups listed on the performance schedule were from Point Hope and Wales. Nothstine said it is typical for one dance group to give a song to another as a gift. Many years ago, Wales presented some of its songs to Point Hope. When Wales sought to revive its dancing and drumming traditions, Point Hope gave the songs back.



The Grand Finale

By the time the Wales Kingikmiut Dance Group concluded its scheduled session, the clock on the gym wall had read 3:00 a.m. While some festival attendees headed for their beds (including this author), many stayed for the Grand Finale.

Richard said there was a short break after the scheduled performances, and then drummers from all dance groups positioned themselves on chairs in a U-shaped configuration along three walls of the gym for the closing extravaganza. There were 10 to 12 standard songs that all the groups knew, so for a while, everyone joined in. When the participants exhausted the familiar songs, groups start sharing. Richard said that when songs are shared, they become part of the new group's repertoire.

At 8:30 a.m. Monday morning, nearly 15 hours after the beginning of Sunday's activities, the Grand Finale, and thus the 16th Annual Kingikmiut Dance Festival came to a close.