

# Igloo History

In the early Territorial Days of Alaska, a number of organizations formed for civic and social purposes. These organizations filled a gap in the absence of clearly defined government, including the lack of a viable court system. Often, the organizations provided food, shelter, medical and other assistance and encouraged civic order in government, the courts and education.

From the many organizations, rose the Pioneers of Alaska, who formed in Nome in 1907 to provide an "Alaskan Order". Chapters, known as Igloos, sprang up across the State, with Pioneers of Alaska Igloo #16 being established in Ketchikan in June, 1917 and received its charter in March, 1918.

The Igloo met at the Redman Hall in the early years. The members immediately showed their civic duty by hosting the visiting U.S. Secretary of Commerce, William C. Redfield. Meeting minutes of the time reported that "the reception (for the Secretary) was a success and that Ketchikan was now on the map to stay with a brilliant future promised".

The early members to the Ketchikan Igloo #16 read like a veritable "Who's Who" of the frontier community and included Axel Osberg, Peter Gilmore, attorney at law, Alec Brindle, founder of Ward Cove Cannery, Eugene Wacker, and Captain Eric Forss. By 1922, members determined that they needed their own meeting space and they purchased the now Pioneer Hall from the Arctic Brotherhood for the princely sum of \$4,000.00. The funds were secured through private loans made by the members who were later paid back by the membership's fund raising efforts.

Throughout the 1920s, Igloo #16 was instrumental in the growth of Ketchikan, advocating for various infrastructure projects within the region, including new schools, health care facilities, an "aeroplane"

landing site, a post office for Hyder, a Federal building, and a cemetery (later Bayview Cemetery).

In the 1920s, the Statewide Pioneers organization, known as the Grand Igloo, opened membership to women, albeit restricted to the spouses of the men in existing igloos. Immediately, the women of Ketchikan formed their Igloo in June, 1922. Charter members included another who's who of Ketchikan at the time. They include: Harriet E. Hunt; Wanda Zimmerman; Bertha Hunt Wells; and Martine Oaksmith.

The Pioneer Women, known as Igloo #7, are noteworthy for their social, civic and philanthropic activities. Early on in its history, Igloo #7 involved themselves in matters of community importance, including establishing a museum, advocating for an "institution for Alaskans in Alaska for indigent people with illnesses" rather than shipping them outside, and promoting a facility for widowed women "without means". They were equally involved in the infrastructure projects of the community, including the playground, hospital, public health clinic/center and schools.

Like the Men's Igloo, the women were committed to the welfare of community members. Starting in the 1930s the women consistently donated funds to the Salvation Army, March of Dimes, Forget-Me-Not Orthopedic Auxiliary, Red Cross, Girl Scouts and Pioneer Haven, Sitka Pioneer Home and a myriad of other community causes.

To support their deeds, they assisted the Men's Igloo with the Days of '98 fundraiser, constantly held bake/food sales, raffles, bingo, dances and cake and rummage sales. The minutes indicate a wide variety of raffle prizes, including a stove, radio, and Mixmaster. Later on a TV was raffled as well as other 'modern' appliances. A popular fundraiser at this time and into the 1970's was a "Pound Party" at which members brought to meetings a pound (or more) of food and groceries/goods for donation to the food basket gifts.

Just as the Pioneer Hall has undergone various changes over the years, Pioneer activities gradually changed to reflect the times. During

the midcentury years, donations now include the Ambulance Fund, Heart Fund, Cancer Society, Children's Home and Salvation Army. A variety of equipment (wheelchair, hospital bed) owned by Igloo #7 was available to loan out to community members. The Igloo also contributed to Ketchikan and statewide events, including the St. Michael's Church fire in Sitka, the Anchorage earthquake and the Alaska Centennial celebration during which eleven new members were initiated as a Centennial Group. The Women's Igloo also paid for and had installed a wooden bench on the dock by Ryus Float for people "to rest."

In the 1970s and 80s, the Women's and Men's Pioneer Igloos continued their advocacy roles on behalf of the local and State citizens. They vocally encouraged the passage of the State Longevity Bonus program, increase in Pioneer Homes throughout the State, including the Ketchikan Home, mining and logging issues, National Monument designation and the Alaska State Museum.

Thanks to the lobbying efforts of both Pioneers of Alaska Igloos and numerous community organizations, the Ketchikan Pioneer Home opened in November 1981. At the outset, Igloo 7 became a 'sponsor', hosting the open house. They hold a monthly birthday party for the residents and an annual Christmas Party complete with gifts...traditions started in 1981. They hold Spring and Fall tea parties. They also provided pet care support at one time.

Pioneers of Alaska continues to be civic and community-minded as described above, while maintaining a strong fraternal bond with its members. It is one of two fraternal organizations that continues ownership of its building. Deceased members of both Igloos are memorialized each year on Memorial Day (originally Decoration Day) at Bayview Cemetery, a tradition that started over 100 years ago when the Igloos were formed.

Maintaining the history of Alaska's pioneers is an important aspect of the Igloos. Both Igloos are involved in history preservation, providing regular programs of historical interest. They also offer annual scholarships to students wanting to continue their studies after high

school. This program, started in approximately 1995, has given thousands of dollars to students over the years.