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North to Alaska — but no Eskimos, little snow

By BEVERLY MILLS

Staff Writer

When friends heard last summer that Cary natives Dottie and Lew Grimes had moved to the Aleutian Islands region of Alaska, the news stirred visions of Eskimos and an icy, barren wilderness.

In their one-room schoolhouse in the village of Nelson Lagoon, the Grimeses serve as teachers, principal, guidance counselor and janitor for 21 students ranging from kindergarten to 12th grade.

Even though the village of 50 people has no grocery store, post office or television and only one satellite telephone, conditions are not as primitive as friends may have imagined.

During a visit with their parents last week — his, Mr. and Mrs. T.M. Grimes of Cary, and hers, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur H. Fleming Jr. of Raleigh — the couple disappointed a few friends by revealing that Nelson Lagoon not only has no Eskimos (the people are of Scandinavian descent), but that only one snowfall dusted the village last winter.

"Actually our winters are much like the winters here with temperatures staying around 32 degrees," Dottie Grimes said. "We had heard conflicting stories about the winds, but they weren't that strong either."

The couple's lifestyle, however, is a bit more unusual than that of your average schoolteacher. When the Grimeses moved into their rent-free apartment in the community's old schoolhouse, they knew they were stuck there for nine months. There are no roads in Nelson Lagoon, which is located on a



Staff photo by Senvy Norasingh

Dottie and Lew Grimes show off souvenirs they've brought to Raleigh friends

... objects are glass floats from fishing nets that wash up on the beach

spit jutting off the Alaskan Peninsula on the southwest coast bordering the Bering Sea. The mountains and the sea are five-minute walks away. Most natives drive four-wheel-drive vehicles, but the only transportation to Cold Bay, the

nearest point of "civilization," is by charter plane.

"You wouldn't want to take a flight over for a movie and dinner," Grimes said. "Round-trip tickets cost \$600 a person."

They have just ended a month-

long visit in North Carolina and will spend a month traveling in Europe before returning to Alaska to prepare for the next school term.

The couple had lived in Alaska briefly while Grimes was in the U.S. Air Force 12 years ago. They

decided then to move back at some point. Several years ago they mapped out a strategy for becoming marketable quantities in the barren lands of Alaska. Both were teachers and went back to school for certification to cover grades K-12, special education and administration. Experience with minority students would be helpful, they decided, so they spent three years teaching on an Indian reservation in Arizona.

Then they enrolled in summer school at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, lived in the dormitory and used the university placement service to find jobs. Both are 39, and they have no children.

The Grimeses said they settled into Nelson Lagoon life with few adjustment problems. The new school, finished in December, is a modern one-room building with a greenhouse, stage, media center and teaching area that is about the size of four regular classrooms.

"The hours are long and we like our work, so we really don't have much time to get bored," Grimes said. "I have to read everything I assign for six grades, and that takes a lot of time. And if the school toilet breaks, I'm the plumber."

Families at Nelson Lagoon earn about \$150,000 during the four-month salmon fishing season, Grimes said. They live in \$100,000 homes that are paid for, he said, and even with eight months of leisure, alcoholism is not a major problem, as it is in many areas of Alaska. Visiting in each other's homes and school activities are the major social outlets.

The school had its first high school graduates this year, and three students will enter college this fall.

Alaskans pay their teachers well, Grimes said, and the couple saves \$4,000 a month after taxes and expenses. Their total income is \$75,000 a year.

"There's nothing to spend your money on except food and long-distance telephone calls," Mrs. Grimes said.

They ordered a four-month supply of food from a store in Cold Bay and gave the grocer a standing order to ship them as many fresh vegetables as he could whenever the mail plane that comes to Nelson Lagoon each Wednesday had extra room.

"We always have salmon and caribou steaks that the natives give us," Mrs. Grimes said. "About the only things we really miss are ice cream and ethnic foods."

The couple usually makes a weekly trip to the community building, the site of the only telephone.

"We missed our friends and family a lot, and none of them could call us, so we called them," Grimes said. "Our telephone bills ran about \$100 a month."

The Grimeses said living in a remote area hasn't changed them much. They plan to live in various parts of Alaska until the state retirement age of 55.

"We didn't really re-evaluate our values because our values were the reason we wanted to go there in the first place," Mrs. Grimes said. "To me, anyway, what we do is not as unique as it seems on the surface."

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(Added by Lew: Free housing was a benefit; however, locally produced electricity was 3.25 times as expensive as in Raleigh. We had a part-time janitor and a part-time maintenance person; however, they were not in the building during classes. The janitor came in about 4:30AM to clean the building; therefore, if the building had a heating problem, it was dealt with early.

If a minor maintenance need occurred, such as a stopped up toilet, Lew could fix the problem in less time than his locating the off-duty maintenance person.

It was awesome to realize that you own whatever happens or doesn't happen in a school's entire program.)