

## Red Spirit Called Me Home

*By Sheila Johnson*

For as far back as I can remember, there had been a deep longing in my Spirit to experience the region and the people of Alaska (now our 49th state). I give my grade school geography teacher full credit for increasing my desire to visit this place known for its unusual beauty, narrow green valleys, creviced mountains, breath-taking blue and clear lakes, bald eagle habitats, mutual exchanges of nocturnal and daylight hours, the blue thunder of the icebergs, and extremely cold weather.

As some of you may remember, I grew up in a very hot and dry climate in El Paso, Texas. We rarely had snowfall; we had hills that were referred to as mountains; and two seasons: hot and very hot. Why this El Paso native yearned to touch, feel and breath Alaska was beyond my understanding and that of my parents and family members as well.

I collected every piece of literature that I could find about Alaska; the walls in my bedroom wore National Geographic cover photos and center spreads of Juneau and other Alaskan cities. I dreamed of boating on the lakes, and I dreamed of challenging my will power to stay awake with only a few hours of sunshine and sleep with a minimum of dark hours. I wanted to flirt with danger in the sight of the great white bears, and witness those same bears catching their prey in the laughing waters. Oh how I yearned to be there!

Over fifteen years ago, my then husband and I ventured to that magical country of beauty, known as Canada, as a surprise birthday gift to me on our way to Alaska. When we entered the beautiful province of Vancouver (where we would embark the cruise ship), I was overcome by the cleanliness and friendliness of our neighbors to the north. Aha! All the rumors about the almost-perfect Canada were true! We saw only three hours of night—Aha! It was a definite test of will power and mystifying tales of nocturne were true! After one day at sea, the waters began to roar with the sound of thunder—Aha! Blue was indeed a loud color!

When we disembarked in the beautiful city of Anchorage, the yearnings of my heart greeted me with excitement as if to ask, “What took you so long?” I was immediately at peace, and every wonderful question posed by my soul in the past about Alaska began to be answered one by one. From the red, sun-kissed faces of my native tribal people, to the handmade quilts that mirrored those crafted by my Grandmother; to the hand carved totem poles; to the strong aroma of fresh fish boiled, seared, and fried; to the smell of Chinook coffee, to the peace pipes displayed and sold; and to the red earth that I had only seen existing in the clay of the South, I was fully nourished. Perhaps I was sleeping in my geography class when the lesson discussed the Native Indian tribes who built Alaska; maybe I just wasn’t listening when my teacher talked about the people – my people who outlined my face! It was my ancestors’ blood, sweat and tears that brought life and experienced sacred death there *on* and *in* my native land. That was the greatest Aha! moment of my life! Aha! I had arrived home.