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Rod and Sunni Hilts – Before They were Seldovians !

by Charity Winters



Few people have as interesting an Alaskan life story as Sunni and Rod Hilts. From the California college life to a hamburger joint in Kotzebue, to raising five children in Seldovia, they have a story that is certainly worthy of publication. Of course, things have settled down a bit in more recent years, but considering that they have two teenage grandsons under their care, it certainly can't have settled down too much yet!

Both Sunni and Rod were born in Los Angeles, CA. However, it wasn't then that their lives began together. Sunni's family went on to Washington State, where she grew up, while Rod was busy growing up in San Jose. It was during their freshman year at Biola University in California that they first became friends, later engaged, and finally married in March of 1961.

They spent their first few years of married life in Hollywood and had their first child, Robin. In 1963, the Hilts decided to give Alaska a try. It was something they had always wanted to do and they promised their families that they would only be gone for a year. Rod had a degree in Music Education with endorsements in both elementary and secondary education and he was hoping to use this to find himself a good job. However, "It seemed that every door was closed in Alaska for a job for Rod," Sunni exclaimed. So they decided their next plan would be to drive to Anchorage and wash dishes until he found a job.

In the meantime, Sunni had had two more children of her own – David and Peter. The Hilts had now been in Kotzebue for three years. Their promise of one year was out the window after just a short time in Kotzebue. "We loved it! It was a 'grand adventure'" explained Rod. The native people, their lifestyles, the traditions, fur clothing and boots, all wrapped up in the "freedom, freshness, and farness" that only an Alaskan village north of the Arctic Circle can offer had captured them. Alaska had become their home.

Soon it was time to leave Kotzebue. Rod enrolled in a Masters program in Fairbanks and the family relocated there. Then it was off to Noatak for a year and then a principal/teacher position in Kenny Lake for two years. It was there that they had their 5th and last child, Laurel. Then Rod and Sunni started scoping out the Kenai Peninsula, hoping to move to a slightly warmer climate. Their goal was Homer. But there weren't any jobs in Homer. So, they were told, spend a year in Seldovia, and then you can go to Homer. They were reluctant, until they came around the bend into the Seldovia Harbor. "Forget Homer!" said Rod, "Thank God," said Sunni. Without a doubt they knew that they had found the perfect spot for their family and they have never left since that day in 1970.

Kotzebue, however, was still fresh in their hearts. With much of

Sure enough, Rod soon received a phone call about a job in Kotzebue. He was asked to join a pilot BA program that supplied music education to rural Alaskan communities. Once he arrived in Kotzebue he was informed that they had neither instruments or classroom for him and the principal (who had little faith in the program) had decided that presenting the music program to the teachers' classrooms was his responsibility. Needless to say, the teachers were as open to the idea as the principal was, so Rod spent the first half of the school year in the teacher's lounge trying to figure out what to do! Finally, the third grade teacher had a nervous breakdown and Rod, thanks to his elementary endorsement, was offered the chance to switch positions with the women. So, he was finally able to work, while the nervous women relaxed in the lounge. The program only lasted one year.

In the meantime, Sunni had begun a nursery school in the local hospital. It was there that she met Della, an adorable Alaskan Native orphan who suffered from diseased lungs from a form of TB when she was little. At 5 years old, she weighed 35 pounds and had only about two-fifths of usable lung. She was not expected to live to adulthood or ever have children. Sunni fell in love with her and once Rod had met her, they started taking her home from the hospital on visits. Soon she was living under their care and the Hilts began the process of trying to adopt Della. At first, Public Health informed them that it was impossible. Once theirs, Della would become legally white and lose all of her native health benefits – and Rod and Sunni would be left with bills they could never afford. Della continued to stay with them and growing up under the love and comfort of a family soon made her stronger and stronger. The doctors kept extending her life expectancy and they were amazed at her recovery. And then another amazing thing happened. A bill was passed that allowed Della to keep her native health benefits even if adopted. She soon became Della Hilts.

Della's family still there, they still felt that it was "home". They began thinking up a way that they could afford to spend their summers in Kotzebue. Eventually they came up with the plan to begin the Hamburger Hut, a small take-out food restaurant serving simple fast foods. The same year they moved to Seldovia, they opened the Hamburger Hut in Kotzebue (a 8x4 shed, a freezer, and a Coleman stove) – the first take-out restaurant north of the Arctic Circle (as far as they know). It was a hit with the locals. People from all over would come for a burger. Since they were on the water, boats and floatplanes would pull right up to the building for their meal. "The line [of customers] wouldn't stop for hours!" exclaimed Sunni. All the children worked there, earning their money, sometimes bringing up friends to help. The following summer, the Hilts also began to commercial fish to supplement their income.

For 20 years, the Hamburger Hut and commercial fishing made for a very full two months in the summers. Finally, Laurel the youngest stated that she was tired of flipping hamburgers all summer. The business was sold and the family began spending summers in Seldovia. But a year and a half ago, they made a visit to Kotzebue with Della's children, Dustin and Darin and Laurel and her daughter, Devin. It had been only 12 years after ending the Hamburger Hut venture, things were different, but people still remembered them!

Rod has since retired from teaching and now works for Seldovia Village Tribe as the grant writer. He helped create the Alaska Tribal Cache, which now sells jams and jellies and many other things across the state. Sunni has been on the Kenai Peninsula School Board for 4 years and the travel keeps her busy. Both are part of the Booster Club and have been longtime members of the Seldovia Bible Chapel. With strong family values and ties, they have continued to raise their grandchildren here as they have their children and will always admit that it is a wonderful place for both!



Almost all of the Hilts family visiting together in Seldovia. Picture to the right was taken when the Hilts had the Hamburger Hut in Kotzebue....you know those Alaskans and their ice cream!

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