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Basil Hedrick, Terry Dickey

Steven Lay, reporter

1980s

Series: University focus

University of Alaska campus in Fairbanks, Alaska

Steven Lay said a bit of Alaska is returning to the state more than 100 years after it left. Coming back to the state for a short visit are artifacts collected in the 1880s. They were collected in the lower Kuskokwim and the lower Yukon Delta by Edward Nelson for the Smithsonian Institute. More than 350 items are included in the special exhibit at the University of Alaska museum. The exhibit is entitled Inua spirit world of the Bering Sea Eskimo. Nelson was a prolific collector according to Dr. Basil Hedrick, director of the museum. Hedrick said the exhibit is known at the Smithsonian Institute as the Nelson collection. Nelson was a young naturalist who was sent to Alaska in 1877 as a meteorologist. He traveled and gathered collection materials for the Smithsonian. Hedrick said he did this with a vengeance to the point that it is one of the finest collections of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Alaskan Eskimo materials from the southwestern Bering Sea area that resides in the Smithsonian. Lay said the items show the spiritual attitudes among the Eskimo as well as the daily lives of the period according to Terry Dickey, coordinator for education and public service at the museum. Dickey said the title, Inua, implies that the Eskimos believed that all living things had a spirit or Inua and all of these living things could take on a human form and they could therefore communicate with the Eskimo. He said a long time ago the Eskimo believed that all people could communicate with these living creatures and the spirit. That power was gradually limited to the shamans. It was the duty of the shamans to initiate contact with the animal spirits to assure there was a supply of food and the animals were treated with respect. Lay said it is an insight into the region's Eskimos as they lived before contact with white culture. Hedrick said Nelson was prolific in his collecting. Nelson covered something like 3,000 square miles. He traveled by dog sled and collected wherever he went. He collected dolls and carvings. Dickey said Nelson made observations about the life of the Bering Sea Eskimos. He said what is important about this is the photos and observations and the objects he collected were done prior to the rapid cultural changes which were brought on by the gold rushes and the spread of Christianity at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When Nelson was in Alaska particularly the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region there were about 3,000 people back in 1877. Today there are at least 20,000 people. It is a glimpse of the prehistoric Bering Sea Eskimo people. Lay said there is also a supplemental educational program at the museum. There will be guided tours of the exhibit. The visit of the collection to the state is possible through the efforts of Senator Ted Stevens.