

THE OUTDOORS PAGE



ALASKA PHOTOS COURTESY OF SETH KANTNER/WWW.SETHKANTNER.COM

Left: A photo collage of a caribou antler and Howard Kantner in native fur skins and bone sunglasses, 1961, with background photo of migrating caribou filling the river.

From the banks of Swan Creek to the slopes of northern Alaska

By STEVE POLLICK and JEFF BASTING

It is a long way, literally and figuratively, from a childhood along the banks of Swan Creek in South Toledo to an adulthood in the remote, isolated Kobuk River valley of northwestern Alaska.

It is far more than just a physical journey of 2,400-odd miles. It is a quantum shift from modern, pampered urban living to the rugged, unforgiving life of subsistence hunting.

But that is exactly the path chosen by Howard and Erna Kantner, who lived like and with the Inupiat, the northwest “Eskimos” or Inuit people, for 23 years, raising two sons in a pole-and-sod-walled, blast-frozen “igloo” in a hillside above the Kobuk.

Dogsleds, moose meat, fur parkas, and rifles. Raw fish, dried fish, hurricane-velocity winds and blizzards, frozen hands running traplines. Plenty of days below zero.

This time of year, up there, it hovers around 30 to 40 below, or colder — sometimes 60 below — and actual spring, not calendar spring, is more than two months away. The sun just teasingly peaks above the southern horizon for a few hours each day.

“I knew I was going to leave [Toledo] when I was 5 years old,” said Howard, now 76, about his free spirit and wanderlust even as a boy along Swan Creek. He graduated from Central Catholic High School and left town in 1953 in search of the far horizon. He and Erna, now living in Hawaii, return to visit relatives occasionally, most recently last fall.

At his uncle’s place in California, a man working on the roof told the young Kantner that Alaska might be the place for him. So he drifted to Fairbanks, in the interior, enrolling

in the Alaska College of Agriculture and Mines. There, he said, “the guys looked like girls and the girls looked like guys.”

He was homesick but was out of money, so he stayed, got a degree in wildlife management. Built a log cabin, ran a dog team, did seasonal work for fish and game and forestry. “It wasn’t very romantic.”

But romance found him in 1960, when Erna, a Cleveland native tired of the bigness of Ohio State University, showed up to teach biology.

Howard went alone up to Kotzebue on the northwest coast to live a year with an Inupiat couple. They

hunted and fished every day. “Once I went up there I could never, never go back. It was my dream to live that way.” In the year, Howard said, “I made \$100 and a case of trout.”

He and Erna, however, first drifted around southern Europe for about a year — he also had a notion he wanted to see Israel. Their first son, Kole, was born in Spain in 1964, but they continued to travel,

touring in a Volkswagen Beetle. “We followed the snow to northern Europe.” They shipped the Bug to the States, drove it to Fairbanks, and headed northwest with four others. “I had always heard of the Kobuk,” Howard said.

Indeed, he used a book by anthropologist J.L. Giddings, *Kobuk River People*, as something of a month-by-month lifestyle template as they learned to live the traditional ways of The People.

“We lived more Eskimo than they did,” Howard said of their lives in the ‘60s and ‘70s, when native peoples were quickly shedding the past for machines and junk food and oil-heated, conventional village homes. The old men, the native Toledoan said, used to come to their sod house on the Kobuk to nourish yearnings

for the old ways

“We ate the old way.” Meat, three or four times a day. Bear, moose, caribou, rabbit, beaver, muskrat, ptarmigan, lynx. The latter, Howard said, “was better than turkey at Thanksgiving.” But, “if it wasn’t fat it wasn’t good.”

Northern pike, whitefish, trout, burbot, grayling, raw or half-charred on the top of a glowing wood stove, also fed the family. Seth, their second son, now 45, was born in the sod igloo on the Kobuk. An accomplished writer and photographer, he still lives on the land where he grew up. His book, *Shopping for Porcupines*, vividly describes the Kantner family life on the tundra.

Howard speaks of winds roaring off the Baird Mountains down the nearby Hunt River valley at 80 mph. “I remember it blowing me over. I couldn’t stand up.” At another point in a conversation, he notes, “freezing to death isn’t so bad. It’s the thawing out.”

About 25 years ago, health issues — Erna suffered a brain tumor, with ensuing surgery — brought their tough but idyllic lifestyle to a halt. “We decided we’d better have a change,” Howard said. They went Outside, to the Lower 48, bounced around to the Oregon coast, found it, of all things, too cool. A friend invited them to his farm in Hawaii and Howard went to work there.

The Kantners ended up buying a three-acre farm on the big island, where they raise 70 kinds of tree crops, from coffee and macadamia nuts and passion fruit to breadfruit, cassava, and bananas. “It’s what I like to do.”

“I was pretty uncomfortable for about three years. It was really a good decision, but I resisted change. It will never replace Alaska, but I’ve kind of moved on,” Howard said, turning the topic to his wife. “It’s her turn now, in Hawaii.”

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Erna and Kole Kantner in front of tunnel entrance to snow-covered sod home, 1965.

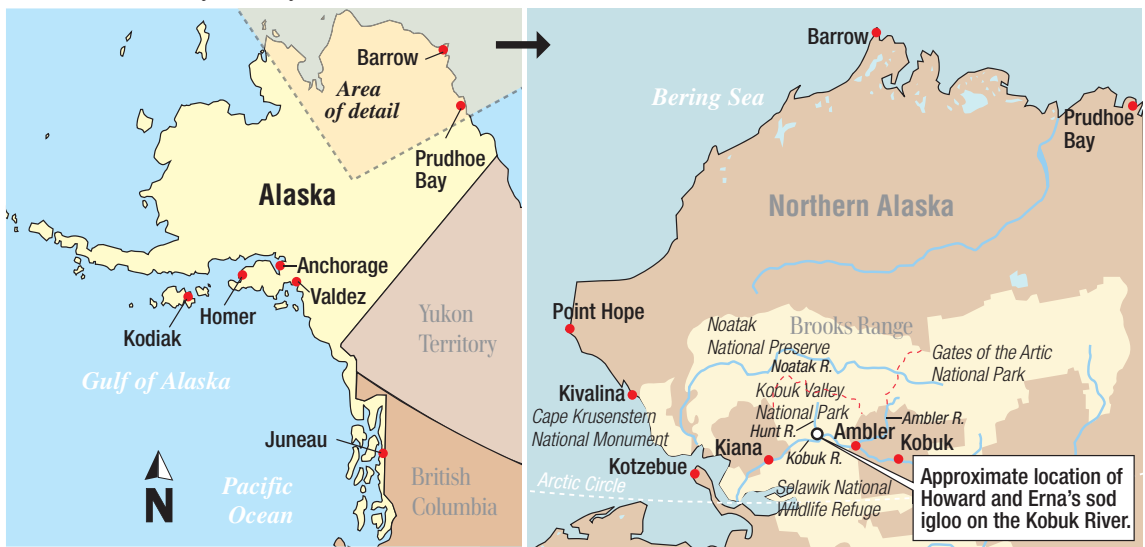


Seth Kantner wrapped in a caribou hide to keep warm while his parents finish field-dressing a caribou kill, 1967.



Kantner family, Howard, Erna, Seth, and Kole, at the home of friends in Ambler, Alaska, 1969.

Below: Area of northern Alaska and detail of Kobuk River area where the Kantners raised their family for 23 years.



THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY

The Kantners, Erna, 71, and Howard, 76, at the home of relatives on a visit to Toledo last September.