

# SEANKELLY

"There's No Place Like Nome," *Vice*, July 6, 2015.

**VICE**

## There's No Place Like Nome



*Headed south on Nome-Council Road at midday as the city ends.*

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**Photos by Alec Soth / Magnum Photos**

In 2003, a 19-year-old Native American woman was found dead in an abandoned gold mine in Nome, Alaska. Two years later, Nome police officer Matthew Clay Owens was convicted of her murder. Soon after his arrest, I was sent to photograph Nome for a magazine that went out of business before my essay was published. The place has haunted me ever since. More than any other location I've been to in the US, Nome evokes a feeling of frontier rawness. When VICE asked me if there was a place I wanted to photograph, my first choice was to return to Nome.

Part of what attracts me to the city is that it is a home for outsiders. Nome mushroomed more than a century ago when three Scandinavians struck gold in a creek. Soon thousands of prospectors, sex workers, and other opportunists arrived. Natives from villages in the region also made their way to the "Sin City of the North." It is also a place where visitors seem to disappear. Some have attributed this to the work of a serial killer, perhaps Officer Owens. Others have speculated that this is the work of UFOs. In recent years, researchers have concluded that the disappearances are the result of harsh weather and rampant alcoholism.

The first thing that disappears in Nome, it seems to me, is the natural law and order of things. Well after midnight, while the treeless city hovers in an endless arctic sunset, small children roam around town and couples make rafts out of icebergs. Nearly every morning one can find a sad lost soul passed out on the seafront rocks, nearly dead from one of the countless bottles of Monarch Canadian whiskey that litter the beach. ("What's the favorite drink in Nome?" the joke goes. "Monarch on the rocks.")

As a photographer, I've never felt comfortable photographing outside my culture. When I've photographed in a place like Beijing or Bogotá, I've felt like an invader or a fraud. While Nome feels as exotic to me as any foreign city, I'm also aware that it is a deeply American place created by outsiders for outsiders. This isn't to say I ever once felt comfortable there. But it does feel like a place in which I could disappear.



Floating house, also on Nome-Council Road. I made a photo of the same house way back during my first trip to Nome, and it was floating then. The deep freeze in winter keeps it exactly the way it is.



Eighty-two-year-old ivory carver James Omiak.



A gold miner, who calls himself Slope, in his backyard.



Brad's gold.



Kids roaming around town.



Aiden and Lonnie in the Nome Recreation Center.



Joleen Oleson at the Arctic Native Brotherhood Club's adult prom.



Tate and Dave from the band the Coler Family Experience at the Church of the Nazarene.



Emily Riedel, star of the reality television show Bering Sea Gold.



The Nome cemetery.



Two kids embrace on an iceberg raft they made off the city's downtown beach.