

Editorial Comment—

The Energy Crunch And the Natives

The energy shortage throughout the United States is certain to affect the everyday lives of Alaska's Native people. This probably will be much more felt in the far northern regions of the huge sprawling state, say, the Arctic Eskimo regions and the Interior Athabascan Indian people. These people, through quite a few years now, have gotten used to using modern oil heat in their homes as well as skitting about through large areas of their surroundings using the handy snowmachine to go after their game for food. This means diesel fuel and gasoline.

We do not know, as yet, how the fuel cutbacks will affect the comparatively new mode of living but we do expect that some shortages will be experienced. Moderate shortages will probably not create serious situations but more than moderate cutbacks could cause some of the more remote villages to revert back to the days of seal or whale oil lamps to heat their homes. This mode of heating the Arctic abodes is still remembered by the older folks in some remote villages, which was very adequate when the sod type igloo was still in use.

If those Native people were to revert back to the use of the old type of heating homes, we also see some serious problems in gearing up for it. In the Eskimo areas, we see almost no problem in getting enough seal or whale oil since the sources of oil is still pretty much available. Athabascan Indians, we surmise, might have more difficulty in getting the oil, or suet, since the moose is not as plentiful as it used to be but they have an alternative. They have forests around them they can tap. We are worried about the Eskimos who have no forests at all.

If the Eskimos were to revert back to their old way of lighting and heating their homes — and many or all of them now have modern frame type housing which are actually not as warm as the old sod igloo — they would be in pretty bad shape. They have sold all of their seal or whale oil lamps or the collectors have taken them to the farflung museums in every corner of the world. Getting them shipped back to the remote settlements would be like pulling a baleen out of the bowhead whale.

What would be the answer to this monumental problem? Perhaps the Arctic Eskimos could once again ask their Canadian Arctic Eskimo cousins to manufacture the time proven oil lamp made out of talc or soapstone. This would once again establish a brisk trade which once flourished in the old days. The Canadian Eskimos could also have a big problem in gearing up for manufacture of talc lamps because they haven't made this product for a long, long time. The waiting period the Alaskan Eskimos would experience could prove disastrous.

But, anyhow, how will the energy shortage affect Alaska's remote villages?

— H. R.