

Greatest Since 1927-

New Minto Holds Great Potlatch

By WALLY OLSON

The new village of Minto was the scene of one of the largest potlatches held in this area since the one sponsored by Chief Thomas in Nenana in 1927. An estimated 500 people were in the new village.

Guests came from Copper Center, Northway Tanacross, Fairbanks, Nenana, Fort Yukon, Chalkyitisik, Ruby, Stevens Village, Anchorage and Huslia.

The term "potlatch" is often used to refer to two entirely different types of celebrations. There is the frequent "gathering" which is celebrated at various times of the year, especially over the holidays.

But the potlatch at new Minto was the traditional ceremony to memorialize the residents who have died within the past year.

This potlatch was to commemorate the deaths of Moses Charlie, Timothy Charlie, Louis Silas and Catherine Jimmy, all of whom passed away during the preceding year.

The emphasis at Minto was on the traditions of the Athabaskan way of life. Most of the speeches were given in Athabaskan. The singing was entirely in the native tongue.

Some men such as Peter John,



MINTO POTLATCH—Three elderly men are happily drumming and singing at the recent potlatch held at new Minto village. The potlatch is said to be the greatest since the one in 1927 held at Nenana. About 500 people attended from many villages.

Melvin Charlie, Andrew Isaac, and Walter Northway spoke to they young people both in their native tongue and in English to remind the young not to forget their past, but to also live in the modern world.

Even the making of Indian Ice Cream was carried out in the traditional manner with the young men stirring while the old women sang songs of encouragement.

Every morning the people gathered to sing mourning songs for the deceased. Following the evening meal, the mourning songs were sung again, but this time they were followed by joyful dances to show that the mourning period was over.

The singing and dancing continued through the night and the teenagers often danced until breakfast time.

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Beginning last fall, the villagers began to save moose, ducks, bear and other meats to provide food for the celebration. During the winter months the women sewed boots and mittens and other items to present as gifts at the potlatch.

In addition, the visitors all brought food to help provide for the nearly 6,000 meals which were served over the four-day celebration.

One of the elders who had passed away, Moses Charlie, had relatives from the Tanacross-Forty-Mile area. At the gathering it was learned that Catherine Attla from Huslia, who had come for the celebration, was a relative of Moses' wife, Bessie.

In this way; the celebration turned out to be a renewal of old ties and relationships from Huslia to Northway—the entire interior of Alaska.

Fred Ewan and others from Copper Center said that they had heard of the famous songs and dances from Minto, but that this was their first opportunity to participate in them.

Many of the speakers at the potlatch said that the young people must learn to be proud

of their heritage and their traditions. Several said that they wished that the young people would retain the language.

Commenting on this, Dr. Michael Krauss said, "The only way that the native languages will be preserved is to have the old people speak nothing but their native language to the very young."

The songs and dances will be lost if the native tongue is abandoned, and so he recommends that they preserve their language and customs. America has been the traditional "melting pot," but if the diversity of ingredients is lost, then the strength is gone.

The "potlatch" at Minto, then proved to be another big step for the native people. The Rev. Walter Hannum and David Paul of Tanacross celebrated the Episcopal Communion Service for the deceased, and later joined in the dancing to mark the end of mourning.

It was symbolic of the old and the new—pride in the past, but looking towards the future. The potlatch was not a sign of assimilation, but composition—the old and the new.