

Why technology has fared poorly in the Bush

(Editor's Note: This article, which we have had to divide into four parts, was written by Harold Sparck of Bethel. Sparck for several years, has been associated with Nunam Kitlutsisti, the environmental program of the Association of Village Council Presidents of Bethel. He argues eloquently that the "Other Village" has in recent years grown up alongside the traditional village of rural Alaska because bureaucrats and technocrats have consistently neglected to fit capital construction projects to the budgets, maintenance capabilities and esthetic viewpoints of villagers. The "Other Village" is thus built of community halls, houses, laundromats and other public facilities which the indigenous population often did not ask for, hasn't the money to maintain and which has trapped many villagers in a new seasonal lifestyle which lacks the integrity of life before economic development projects began making inroads.

BY HAROLD SPARCK

Tala joined the mainstream of modern life in 1969 when bulk storage tanks for gasoline and oil first arrived. Progress in rural Alaskan villages takes many forms. At that time, the local store had the only radio and it was responsible for preparing the way for the village's men to travel to Bristol Bay canneries to work in summer. The men had to earn enough money to replace the subsistence foods they normally caught during this period, principally, salmon and herring. When the men returned, the store held their checks, banks being nonexistent. The men drew from their checks in a form of barter with the store for goods, heating oils, and gasoline.

The cycle began. To heat their homes the men had to work during that part of the year when both fish and

line. Now, instead of thinking about harvest, the men thought about employment to pay for fuel and gas. Using wood for home heating was out of the question because it is normally gathered in summer during fishing season, following storms in the Bering Sea, or by dog team during the winter along wind-beaten beaches. The men were away working during summer, and gasoline was too expensive in winter, so the oil cycle increased.

In 1976, the village of Kongiganak ran out of stove oil in January and the men used their snowmachines to journey to the coast to harvest wood. They used so much gas that when seal hunting time arrived in April there was no gasoline, and they incurred further expenses in the form of debt against the summer's cannery or commercial fishing wages to allow seal hunting to take place. The men locked themselves into an endless circle of needs. As the people came to depend on fuels, they relinquished their old ways. A lack of fuel, formerly a luxury, became a crisis.

The above-ground frame houses that replaced the subsoil mud houses were inadequate against the wind and created a greater need for fuel, and then the shortages began to hit. As each village expanded its fuel needs, which far exceeded their stored fuel capacities, supplies began to diminish. The small barge outfits that supplied local village fuels began to pick and choose who they delivered to and when. Cash customers, meaning the growing public

of fuel. The problem was not unappreciated by the government. The social service branch of the Bethel B.I.A. agency undertook a special fuel social welfare program. Instead of dispensing general assistance funds for emergency clothing or food, the agency arranged to fly drums of fuel oil into villages with public funds.

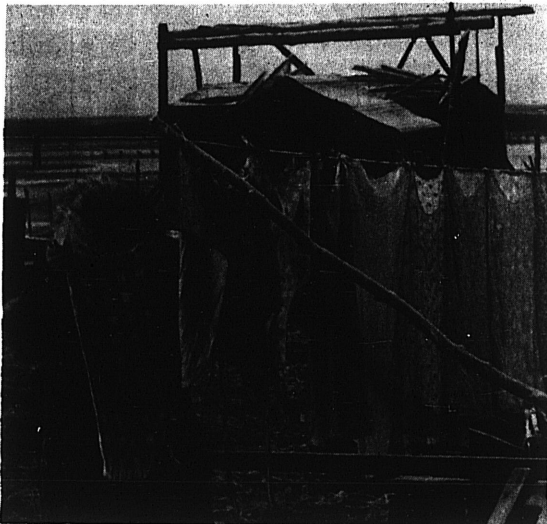
None of these difficulties stopped the growth of the imported fuel economy. It continues today without an appreciation of the tenuous relationship between the villages' ability to plan, manage, and maintain, and the public need to build regardless of the consequences. To date, the public sector has made no attempt to stop and look at its activities. Agencies still rush pell-mell to complete projects in their own little sphere without looking at the villages' technical competence, administrative competence, energy resources and financial situation. In short, nothing has been learned by the recent past, and the near future looks bleak.

One would expect that in a village like Tala, which has run out or been short of both stove oil and gasoline in the past, that some objective evaluation of the village's ability to sustain further growth would have been made prior to initiating any new public works project. If a decision to precede with further growth was reached, the taxpayers could expect every effort would be made by the project sponsor to consolidate existing facilities and structures to improve the overall competence of the village to handle its own affairs. This preplanning would thereby relieve the public sector of the burden of endless subsidies. This has not happened.

In regard to energy, the new public school in Tala was built with no expansion of the school's oil storage capacity. In the past the village had established a relationship with the local school's agency to loan fuel from the school's surplus if the village ran short. This excess had cushioned the village in the past four years of shortage. In order to produce the electricity for the new school, which doubled the village's prime consumption rate, a new generator with a capacity of 300/kw, and a circuit box of 300/kw were purchased by the rural Alaska Village Electrical Cooperative, A.V.E.C. Due to internal A.V.E.C. supply and maintenance problems, neither the generator nor the circuit box was ever installed and the village peaked over the rated output of the present circuit box in winter 1976, causing brown-outs and the loss of technical equipment.

Now the new school has to operate in shifts so that only parts of the jungle of energy intensive teaching aides can be used at any one time. A.V.E.C. ordered new fuel storage tanks, but the fuel cannot be "loaned" to the village because the B.I.A. subsidizes the local utility, statewide at \$700,000 and A.V.E.C. has committed these fuels to each village school's needs even though the utility cannot supply electrical needs. The village would like to pur-

danger. The village moved the location of the new community hall three-eighths of a mile away to a remote section of the village. The interior of the massive hall, by village standards, now requires an additional 40-50 drums of stove oil to maintain room temperature during the winter. When the village asked if the school's agency was going to move the bulk tanks away from the school and dike the area, the village was told that the agen-



THE TRADITIONAL VILLAGE

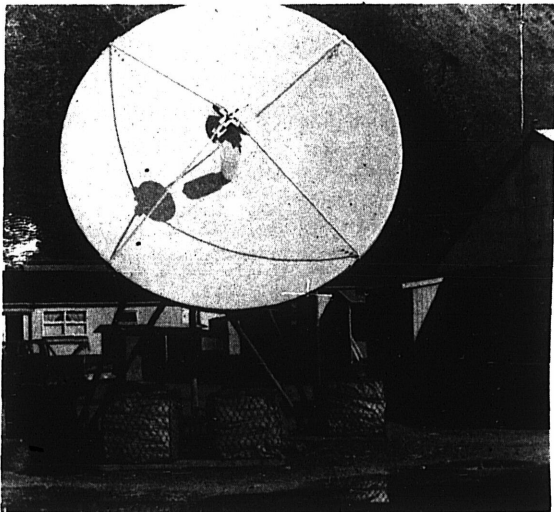
chase the waste heat from the utility's diesel plant but this, too, is decided to the B.I.A. school. The B.I.A. schools do not use the waste heat but B.I.A. administrators are reluctant to allow anyone else to use the energy in case the waste heat may be required in the future. The result is that no one is using the waste heat at present or will in the near future. The waste heat, 65% of the generated energy, is currently blowing in the wind.

The villagers have watched these events and learned a lot. The people only have their place in the universe and their labor to sell. The villagers are in a bad bargaining position, and they realize that they cannot be stubborn people who do not wish to learn how things operate in their "other" village. They try to make the best of a poor situation. When some agency offered a community hall, someone in the village accepted. When the lumber arrived, the council decided that the building should be located near the utility in the hope that waste heat would supply the building and save the village the cost of importing more heating fuel. A B.I.A. agency representative learned of the plan and informed the village that the hall could not be situated in the chosen location because it would be a fire hazard to the new school. The 17 buildings and 22 bulk storage tanks already surrounding the school were not, however, considered a fire

cy always took care of these situations. The agency moved the tanks approximately 30 yards closer to the school, and they are now even more of a fire danger.

This is the agency way. It appears arrogant and senseless to the village. It is too technical, too expensive, and too urban. It is out of place in a rural village, yet it is the only way the public agency knows how to spend its money when agencies do the job themselves. It is doing the job themselves or contracting to outside construction firms with no village coordination that brings on the danger. The public agency does not think it can wait. Legislative appropriations are made each year, and the money for some unknown reason must be spent each year. Time and education, the two invaluable ingredients in any work program in a rural Alaskan village, are quickly forgotten in the haste to complete this year's adventure in gift-giving. The consequences to the public and the village are not considered.

The one fact normally by-stepped is that the public sector, which differs from the rural Native village in its perspectives and attitudes, cannot continue to reach beyond the social, and technical means of the village. For the most part, the discussion of the quality of life in villages has been left out of the develop-



THE "OTHER VILLAGE"

work were available. The men used surplus funds to pay for store-bought food when the natural foods ran out. They gave up their dogs because they were too time consuming and required that a person stay in the village to fish during the summer, so the men picked up snowmachines to gather wood and hunt during the winter. The paychecks also went for gaso-

sector in the villages, were served first, and if time permitted, the villages who paid piecemeal or on credit would be served. The shortages began to hit in 1972 when demands far outstripped available supplies. Fourteen villages ran out of fuel in the spring of 1973. The next year, more than 30 villages, and the following year, more than 40 were either out of or short

● **"Other Village"**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE TEN

ment discussion. The villagers have a unique way of dealing with decisive and ineffectual action by agencies. They do not cooperate. The project is built, and the villagers do not use it. The project was designed by absentee managers, produced by imported engineers, and perhaps constructed by local contracted labor. It is in short a gift, not of the village's making. All the

village has tied into the "other villages" project is its cash labor and some part of its land base. The village does not owe anything to the project, and treats the project disrespectfully.

Two very glaring examples of this phenomenon occurred in the relatively urbanized community of Bethel where the city is currently planning not to use the multimillion-dollar dock facility built by the public sector in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong way. The se-

cond example of this faceless effort by the villagers is the Bethel Heights housing project. A pioneer turnkey housing project, scheduled to build houses at \$6,000 each in rural Alaska, has finally reached an average unit cost of \$61,000 in 1974. The people the project was built for, the rural, uneducated, and cash-poor Native Alaskan, wouldn't move into the houses in 1968-69, and did not move in until 1971 as a class. That was the action of the Native bystander.