

# VILLAGE OF GALENA ROLLS WITH THE PUNCH

## In the Process of Sprucing Up After 'Devastating Mess'

By LAEL MORGAN

GALENA — Last spring a lot of us wrote Galena off. A year before the little Athabaskan village had been hit hard by the Yukon River, inundated by 13 feet of muddy water and torn apart by blocks of ice as big as houses.

It was, in the words of its civic leaders, "a devastating mess," and so were negotiations that followed on rehabilitation. Despite promises of aid from numerous government agencies only the Small Business Administration had made good by mid-summer. The Alaska State Housing Authority (ASHA) Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Red Cross wallowed in red tape apparently deeper than the flood waters.

To unscramble the mess, the villagers chose two strong men: Jimmy Huntington, who has since become mayor of the town, and John Sackett, a self-retired legislator who would later become head of the Tanana Chiefs.

Using a calm, no-nonsense approach, these leaders quietly raised \$242,000 for flood rehabilitation and later sent back \$47,000 unspent.

Villagers voted 98 per cent for a new site at nearby Alexander Lake and weathered meddling from ASHA (which insisted they move 11 miles away to the Campion Air Force Base dump) to draw plans for a model city and select their lots.

Gravel beds are now being laid at the lake site for a road system and 30 low income houses to be built through the Alaska Federation of Natives housing program. There are also projections for a \$139,000 school, and \$250,000 post office and considerable private building.

The federal government has made it clear it will loan no funds for projects in the old village on the flood plain but many residents have elected to stay there anyway.

The business community is hard at work rebuilding the waterfront and several private homes of imaginative, flood resistant design are being constructed there.

### THE DIRTIEST, DRINKINGEST, DUMPIEST

Galena has long been known as the dirtiest, drinkingest, dumpiest town on the Yukon but reassessment is in order. Its 400 residents estimate their gross annual income at something over \$1 million. There is high year-round employment. Currently only 25 people are on welfare and five use food stamps.

Galena is the site of a strategic Air Force base (closest U.S. base to Russia) and two smaller Air Force installations.

The village has also been made home office for a 120,000 mile area covered by the State Department of Health and Welfare, regional headquarters to service 20 villages for the Rural Alaska Community Action Program and a major hiring area for the Bureau of Land Management fire fighting program.

In addition, it is a hub for air and river transportation. There is jet transport from Galena to Anchorage and Fairbanks and increasing barge service from Fairbanks. Air freight from Anchorage is 10 cents a pound as compared to 20 cents in northern bush country and barge transport can run as low as 3½ cents a pound from Fairbanks and 5 cents from Seattle.

An Alaskan bank is considering opening a Galena branch. The village has a privately owned electrical system and a phone system that is connected to the outside world and will soon be linked to five neighboring villages without long distance charge.

Villagers are allowed to use military base drinking water and to attend base theater which provides an excellent run of current movies. They can also pick up base television and radio stations.

Such "conveniences" make Galena far more sophisticated than most bush villages, yet the Athabaskan population still makes good use of subsistence hunting and fishing.

### THE INDIANS HAVE IT BETTER

"My father told me back in 1928 that the Indians have it better than anybody else," recalls Sidney Huntington, Galena council man and school board head. "We only have to work hard three months of the year . . . they can live all year on that."

"This is the richest, poor town in Alaska. Anyone who wants to, can work. You can live here on \$10 a month for utilities and catch all you need to eat in moose and fish."

Like most of the population, Huntington moved to Galena in the 50's to find work. He is a long time base employee, works 12 months instead of three, and supports his family of 12 quite handsomely.

He is an ardent believer in the American free enterprise system and scoffs government aid. Recently, working with his youngsters and a couple of friends, he raised a rugged two story log house in nine days. (A smaller village community hall took about three months and 50 men to build).

Sidney Huntington has elected to stay on the waterfront and is buying up as much property as he can there. He predicts the Alexander Lake site despite its gravel fill, will sink and that the villagers will eventually come back to the river.

Mayor Jimmy Huntington, his brother, takes an opposite view. He plans to move to the new site and is working hard to



LIFE ON THE RIVER AT ITS BEST — Sandrs Cleaver pulls whitefish from his net in Jack's

slough off the Yukon River.

—Photos by LAEL MORGAN

see that there will be no village land for sale there.

"It's our intent in any way possible to stop the land grabs," he explained. "We're suggesting leasing the land only. Not selling. That way we'll have the income for a good many years and get on a solid footing. If the villagers can sell, soon one or two people will become landlords over the land."

With two village sites, there is room for both views and many more . . .

About a quarter of Galena's population is white (discounting military and federal employees) and, while there are occasional rifts, the attitude is basically "live and let live" on both sides.

"Even if they hate you, they'd help you," observes Gene Steffin, white owner of the local liquor store, who's lived in Galena about 20 years.

"These are real good people and I stay here because I like them."

There is occasional disgruntlement with the military which rotates its base commanders every 12 months. Col. Gerald Evans, who became Galena base commander in March, has already had his share.

Recently he had the unpleasant job of ending base

shopping privileges to employees who live in the village, both Native and white.

"I got a letter from the Indian Council (signed by E. Notti, Alaska Federation of Natives) calling me a racist," he recalls gloomily. "And in fact my wife is part Indian, a Cherokee from Oklahoma."

In reply he wrote, "The base exchange privileges here at Galena were changed to conform with the U.S. Airforce regulations and Congressional law. During a recent Inspector General's visit this installation was severely criticized for not following these directives."

"It's hard to run a base in the Boonies," he said. "The Natives have always been dependent on the base which, or course, is just another headache for us. But my primary responsibility is to my troops. They come first. Whatever I can do to help after that, I'll do."

"A lot of us would like to see the village get away from depending on the base," allows Gordon Cruger who speaks from a village, rather than a military point of view.

Cruger operated the base water plant but he's been a village resident for a number of years and is currently wrapped

up in the Galena Sports Association (GSA).

GSA has proved to be an astonishing organizer of sporting competition — baseball, dog mushing and basketball — and has done much to get the village working together.

"I only wish our council did as well," Sidney Huntington said.

"These people are great to work with," Cruger reports. "They can work harder than anyone you've ever seen when they want to. They can take care of themselves."

Civic pride was recently wounded when an Anchorage newspaper pictured Galena as a dump where youngsters entertain themselves by "smashing muscatel bottles against Lucky Lager empties."

There is a lot of drinking in town. It's the only village for miles around with a bar, however, and Galena residents maintain much of the trouble there comes from outsiders.

As for the garbage, "A lot of it is a hang over from the days when you couldn't get a sheet of iron or a piece of board to build a coffin with," speculates Mrs. Beverly Huhndorf who was raised along the river and has just moved back because she and her husband, Max, believe Galena will be the "gongiest area on the Yukon."

There is a village clean-up now in process, she pointed out, and when people discover they can buy supplies when they need them, they won't save so much junk.

"Galena is getting more knowledgeable," Mayor Huntington maintains. "We have been dealt with by everybody telling us what is what. Now we've got a good, strong council and nobody tells us what is what. People running for the House and Senate are finding where the vote is coming from."

He digressed to talk about Native power . . . political power. Or maybe he wasn't digressing.

"We may be only 50,000 (Native people) but this town is going to count!" he promised.

It will certainly be worth watching.

(Mrs. Morgan is an Alicia Patterson Fund Award winner on leave from the Tundra Times in Fairbanks, Alaska. This article may be published with credit to Mrs. Morgan, the Tundra Times and the Alicia Patterson Fund.)



VILLAGE CLEANUP — Galena is going out of its way to lose its former title of "dirtiest

Village on the Yukon." A village wide clean up program is in process.