

# Old Man, Young Woman And Researcher Capture Past

By JOETTE GETSE

Eskimo history is not dead. It's alive and well in the Imuruk Basin where a handful of people have taken the time to search it out and bring it into the present.

Located on the Seward Peninsula, the Imuruk Basin is the traditional home of the Kawerammut Eskimos. There, nestled in its mountain valleys, locked in by countless meandering waterways and hidden in old lava flows are the remains of the past, both ancient and modern.

The search for that past involves three very special persons who would come to find their lives intertwined by it.

Barbara Trigg, a vibrant young Eskimo woman who has been an active force in the Arctic Native Brotherhood, is responsible for the birth of the Imuruk Basin Project for she made the first discovery of historic documents there.

It was Barbara who brought together William Oquilluk, an aging Eskimo historian, and Mrs. Laurel Bland, an Anchorage woman with a special skill for research and a concern for the people of the North.

"It was on a trip to the village of New Igloo," recalls Barbara, "that a group of us discovered a few old buildings with some valuable papers in

them. The papers were mostly in old wooden files, but some were being scattered around the floor or frozen to the tundra outside."

The documents, records of the births, deaths and marriages of the people who once lived in the village as well as of their early reindeer herding associations, were important and Barbara Trigg knew they would have to be collected soon if they were to be saved from the weather and the casual hunter who might use them for kindling.

Just how the papers would be saved was a question she could not immediately answer. The village site is more than 100

miles by water from the nearest town, and the Brotherhood did not have the funds to finance an expedition into the bush.

But Barbara told her friend, Laurel Bland, about the papers and in order to make her understand just how important they are to the Eskimo people she introduced Laurel to William Oquilluk.

"Barbara and her father, Jerome Trigg, had been telling me for a long time that I would enjoy meeting William and reading the book he was writing," says Mrs. Bland. "They were right, for not only did I find the book a revelation about Eskimo history, but I considered it a work

of art. It compares with the Bible as that Book relates to the history of the Hebrews."

Born in Point Hope in the late 1890s, William Oquilluk moved to the Imuruk Basin with his family when he was still quite young.

There, his grandfather, Etornia, schooled William in the oral tradition of the Kawerammut people just as his grandfather had done to him years before. It would be William's duty to see that the history was preserved for younger generations.

But his task was made difficult by the changing life style of the Eskimos and their near extinction by epidemics. He could not pass on the stories he had so painstakingly committed to memory because there were few children and no village *sazlu* in which to sit and talk about the past.

In order to perform his role in life, William felt he must write down the stories and save them for a time when his people would again learn about their past.

Writing those tales took almost 60 years as he traveled around talking to any of the old people he might find about the things they remembered.

The first manuscript was destroyed by fire, and William was racing against time to finish the second writing when he met Laurel, who agreed to help him complete it and type it into an English language manuscript.

No easy task, the book took nearly five years to finish, says Mrs. Bland, a member of the AMU faculty, who has written many reports based upon her research for government agencies and community organizations.

"Every sentence had to be carefully reviewed with William to be sure that the meaning was correct," she says.

It was while preparing the manuscript for publication that William took Laurel to New Igloo to see what he was writing about.

That visit was all it took for Laurel Bland to become committed to saving the history of the Kawerammut Eskimos. In the next three years she would spend many months in the Imuruk Basin tracing the records and evidence of the past.