

Flooding Interrupts Minto's Winter Food Supply Plans

BY ROY POPKIN

MINTO, ALASKA—A quarter-acre of ground next to the

tiny airstrip in this isolated central Alaskan village was piled high with Red Cross

supplies flown in over the weekend to help the natives get through a winter made more difficult than usual by the aftermath of the mid-August floods.

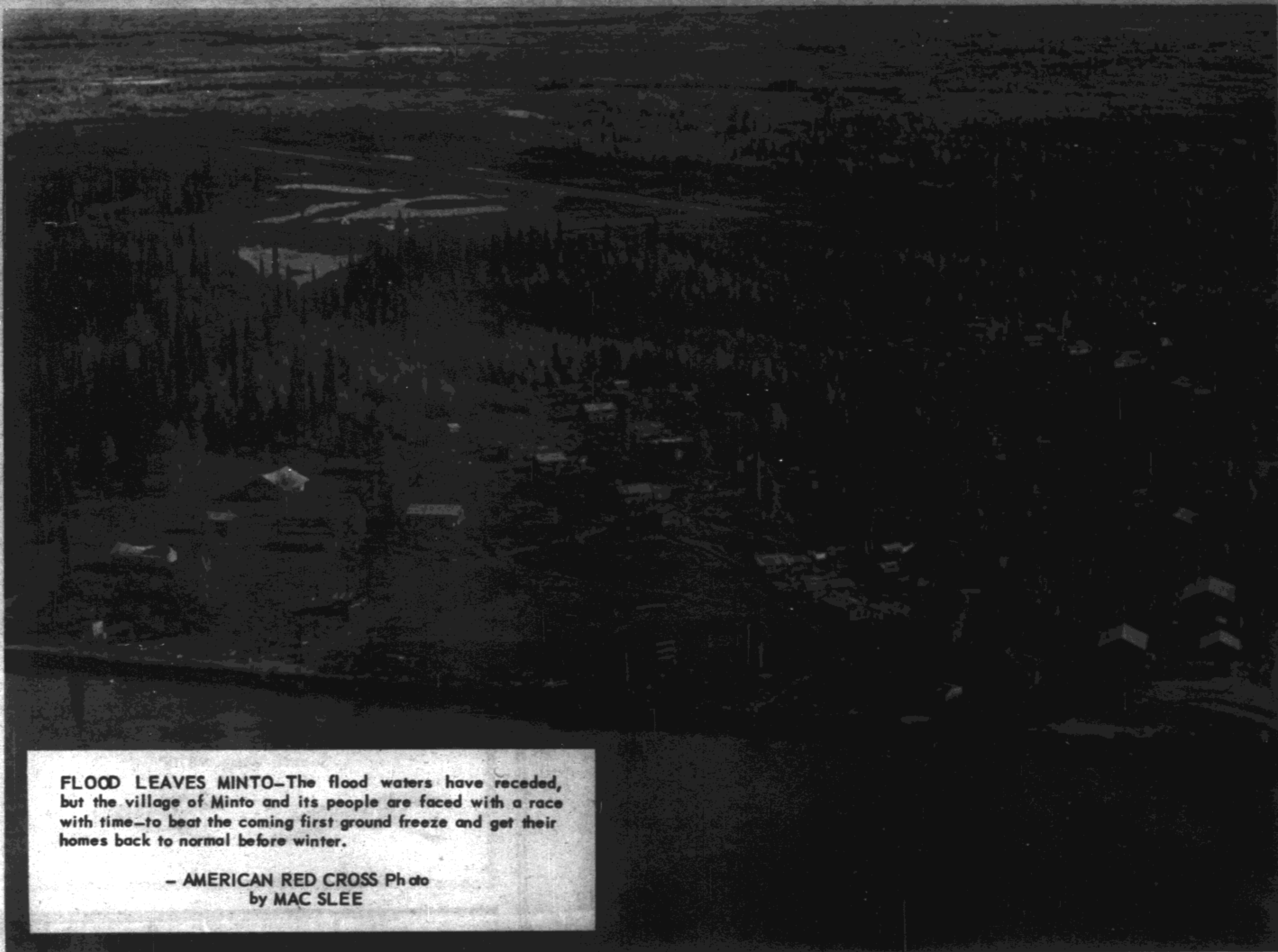
All day Saturday, small planes hired by the Bureau of Indian Affairs ferried the supplies to Minto from the Interior Airlines hangar in Fairbanks, about 50 miles away.

The supplies, which will be distributed by the Tribal Council to families whose homes were flooded by the Tanana River in August, included mattresses, metal cots, pillows, down-filled sleeping bags, coffee, canned foods, field jackets, heavy sweaters, insulated underwear, blankets, winter mittens, overshoes, wool scarves, heavy pants, mattress covers, and miscellaneous comfort items.

This special airlift of Red Cross relief supplies followed a visit earlier in the week by a team of Red Cross disaster workers and a representative of the Bureau of Indian Affairs who flew into Minto to see what progress the villagers are making with their recovery from the floods, which washed a foot or two of water through about half

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FLOOD INTERRUPTS MINTO'S WINTER PLANS



FLOOD LEAVES MINTO—The flood waters have receded, but the village of Minto and its people are faced with a race with time—to beat the coming first ground freeze and get their homes back to normal before winter.

—AMERICAN RED CROSS Photo
by MAC SLEE

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of the forty homes here, and to determine what help was still needed.

In most disaster areas, the Red Cross finds people faced with the aftermath of extensive physical destruction and mass evacuations, but in Minto the story of what the flooding Tanana River did to the people of this tiny, centuries-old Indian village is different.

The flood did only minor damage to the homes and the people's household possessions, but what it did do was to threaten the struggling community's immediate future, for the people of Minto face the immediacy of winter's coming with a shortage of food for themselves and their dogs and a shortage of fuel to keep them warm during the below zero months ahead.

The log cabins, two churches, school, general store and community hall which comprise the village of Minto are spread out over several wooded acres between a crushed gravel air strip and the dull-gray Tanana River, which together provide the only access to the community. No roads lead to Minto.

The village is not too far removed from poverty, although it is not unusual to see a television antenna, old-fashioned electric washing machines, modern stoves and other material indicators of so-called affluence.

These items, brought in by river barge or cargo plane, are usually paid for with wages earned by Mintoites who find temporary employment as forest-fire fighters,

as laborers for the Bureau of Land Management surveys, in a nearby sawmill or in the brief summer months when there is a demand for workers in construction and transportation.

Power for the electric appliances comes from a village-operated generator or from private generators owned by people such as the clergymen or operated by the school.

Communication with the rest of the world is conducted by shortwave radio during brief periods when the Minto radio—in the school—is scheduled for monitoring by the BIA, by bush pilots flying to the small airstrip, and by taking a boat to Nenana, thirty-three river miles away.

Flooding is not unusual in Minto, but this is the first time in the memory of tribal council Chief Peter John and the Rev. Gordon Olsen, a Minnesotan who with his wife maintains the small Assembly of God Church that the Tanana has flooded in summer.

In the weeks that have passed, most of the flooded homes have been cleaned out and some of the warped floor boards have been replaced or at least thrown out.

Further repair will have to wait for Spring for the villagers must devote all the time remaining before the freeze to hunting and fishing. As in larger Nenana and metropolitan Fairbanks, the grounds around the homes are littered with debris and drying furniture and bedding.

Shortly after the August



ESTIMATING DAMAGE—Minto's Chief Peter John (left) tells of his people's losses and needs to American Red Cross disaster representatives Jack Coleman and Roy Popkin. The Red Cross made a

complete survey of the village and assured the Chief that the organization would help.

—AMERICAN RED CROSS Photo
by MAC SLEE

flood, the Red Cross sent in food and cleanup supplies from Nenana, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs sent in other supplies.

Some of the Minto people took their boats down to Nenana to seek additional assistance from the Red Cross and BIA, and were given clothing and other aid. It is what is not visible in

Minto today that represents the urgent problem facing the village.

Right along the river bank is a rack on which just a few recently-caught salmon are drying.

In the elevated log caches and racks alongside a few other cabins a few more salmon may be seen. Normally, one might see

hundreds of salmon drying on the racks at this time of year, but the floods have limited the amount of fishing that can be done and destroyed most of the community's fish wheels, which sometimes caught as many as 4,500 salmon a day.

The shortage of drying salmon bodes trouble for the

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village, for fish are the basic food of the village dogs, scores of which are seen roaming the paths between the houses or chained along the riverside.

In Indian villages like Minto, dogs are part of the way of life, for they mean transportation to trap lines and wherever else one goes by dogsled in winter.

"Without dogs, you just wouldn't live through the winter," the village chief says. Minto's dogs are hungry today. The puppies spend most of their time lying around rather than playing, and the ribs of many of the older dogs are visible through heavy fur coats.

Emergency supplies of commercial dog foods are available in Minto, but the dogs don't like to eat it. The dogs of Minto need a supply of dried fish if they are to serve the people during the coming winter.

Although there are plenty of oil and gasoline drums around, there is not much fuel left in the village. Because fire wood must be cut and hauled for a mile or more, many of the natives have converted their cooking and heating stoves to oil so they will have more time for

trapping, but oil is in short supply.

Gasoline for their boats is being rationed because there is little left. And only one more river barge is scheduled to make the trip from Anchorage to Nenana and back before the freeze, so the villagers are faced with obtaining more expensive fuel from Nenana or Fairbanks, from which it will have to be transported by small boats or by the small cargo planes which fly from Fairbanks to the Minto airstrip.

The chief is also concerned about his village's winter food supply, for the floods drove the moose away from the still flooded and marshy flatlands of the Tanana Valley.

The village men are out hunting their winter meat supply, but with relatively little success.

There is little moose meat being cured or stored in Minto this week. And it takes at least three moose to feed a family with several children.

He himself went moose hunting last Friday but his boat broke down. "If I don't get a moose soon, I'll be pretty skinny by Spring," he says.