Rep. Hensley Appears in 'Today' Show

"I didn't fully realize that I was talking to so many people, other wise I might have been a little frightened," Willie Hensley told Tundra Times this week. That show is seen by 40-50 million people. Now I'm receiving big bunches of letters from Florida to Idaho."

On Mar. 19 last week, Eskimo legislator William L. (Willie) Hensley, D-Kotzebue, was interviewed by Hugh Downs, the moderator of the "Today" show, a nationwide National Broadcasting Company's morning program that emanates from New York City.

Willie Hensley was introduced to the nation as a full-blooded Eskimo who at the age of 28

Hensley on TV Show . . .

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has risen to the position of Democratic whip in the Alaska legislature.

"It is Mr. Hensley's mission not only to bring all of Alaska's native population into the 20th Century, but to insure that they receive their fair share of Alaska's land and natural wealth," Hugh Downs told his television audience.

When the actual video time came, Downs said that Hensley was the member of the Alaskan legislature, that he was a Democrat and, holds the position of a minority whip.

". . . All very interesting you may say," Downs continued, "But so what? So he is an Eskimo. And we are not used to seeing this particular minority group in any position of power in our country. That is precisely why we invited Mr. William Hensley to be our guest this morning.

"We want to find out something about a subject of which most of us have little knowledge. What is happening to the Eskimos and the Indians and the Aleuts who make up so much of the population of our largest state."

The answers to Hugh Downs' questions by Hensley were not available but the guest was asked a variety of questions.

The first question was about how much the white man has imposed his authority and his culture upon the original inhabitants of Alaska.

". . . First, your name is William Hensley," asked Downs. "You come from the village of Kotzebue. Right away we see that you've adopted an English name and your village is named for a European explorer. How much have your people had to sacrifice of their own culture to survive?"

Hensley was asked what proportion of the Alaskan population was Eskimo, Indian and Aleut; as an instance of what Eskimo children were up against, could Hensley tell the audience how he managed to get an education?

—that the biggest single problem with which Hensley is now involved is the issue of establishing ownership of Alaskan lands—would he tell something about that.

—that there was considerable unemployment among the native people. Why was this so? What are jobs which are available and what can be done to create more jobs?

Rep. Hensley was in New York to attend the convention of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association representing the Alaska Village Electrification Cooperative.

"I understand you are very involved in trying to provide electricity for more than 20,000 of your people who don't have it. Tell us something about this project." Downs asked Hensley.

Hugh Downs then mentioned the Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel and that Hickel has been one of President Nixon's most controversial appointees. Hickel was the former Governor of Alaska.

"He was not then, nor is he now, beloved by conservationists. How do you feel about him?" asked Downs.

Downs asked another question, "Would it be correct for me to say that Secretary of the Interior Hickel is in a position to do your people a lot of good, or a lot of harm, and that his good will is vital?"

Downs wanted to know whether there was a rage or a resentment amont the native people comparable to that which Black Americans feel; How many natives were in the Alaskan legislature and how many occupy positions of importance or power in the outer branches of state government.

"Finally," queried Downs, "When you refer to the 48 states which existed before Hawaii and Alaska became states, what do you say? In Hawaii they can say mainland. But how do you refer to us?"