

Bethel sees many changes over last 50 years

by Gloria Simeon

I was born and raised in what is called "Bush Alaska"- Bethel. When I was a child, the total population of Bethel was 500. It has now grown to 5,000, with the population half "Native" and half "non-Native."

Bethel had the basic services to meet the needs of the non-Native population. Running water, which is delivered, flush toilets, post office, hospital, schools, fuel service, banks,

police department and a court system. It was and is a regional center for the outlying villages, which number approximately 50 and are mostly populated by Native People. The population of the villages ranges from 50 to about 500.

Within the past 20 years, much has changed in our villages. Before, there may have been one telephone in the village, you were lucky if you were able to get through to the person you needed to speak to, undependable

electricity, no medical services. The villages had tribal governments which met as needed.

Until the Molly Hootch Act of the 1970's, village children were required to leave their homes to receive their secondary education at boarding schools. Since the passage of the Act, the State of Alaska is mandated to provide each village which had a school age population of at least 10, with a school. This began a massive

Page 10, please

Bethel sees many changes . . .

Continued from page 2

construction boom in the villages which lasted about ten years.

.Our villages now all have what are considered "modern" schools. They also have post offices, clinics, which are staffed by health aides who are trained to provide the very basic of health care services, some form of village government, tribal and/or

state; a utility company which provides electricity, a telephone company and of course access to television, either cable or satellite.

However, village life is hard. With no sewer or water, most people are dependent on rainwater or river and lake water. In my experience as a board member for the Lower

Kuskokwim School District, we have found that rain water is corrosive enough to eat pipe and there are traces of heavy metals in the well water which are very expensive to filter out. The schools or a central village well may allow for the availability of treated water, but it must be trans-

Page 11, please

Bethel sees changes . . .

Continued from page 10

ported individually. The disposal of human waste is also a problem. We live in an area that is very wet and marshy.

There is no major transportation infrastructure other than by air. Mail, grocery, clothing and sometimes even fuel must be delivered by air. In the summer and fall, barge companies haul fuel and major supplies and equipment.

All of the changes within the past twenty (20) years have affected the traditional lifestyle of my People. Not all of these changes have been positive.

It is our men who have been affected most of all. Their traditional role as fishermen, hunters and trappers; providers for their family, is no longer the same. Federal and State regulations have diminished the take of these food sources. Unemployment is as high as 80% in our villages and a welfare state has been created, leaving people with too much time on their hands. Village life is not the same life we see on the television. We have come to believe that our self-worth and esteem is measured by outside influences. The values of the traditional subsistence lifestyle are shifting to the values of western dominant society.

Our Native men are committing suicide in record numbers, in the 16-24 age bracket or they are in jail. The Native population of Alaska is approximately 16% of 500,000, yet our men are 40+% of the prison population. Who is there to provide for our women and children?

Life in the big cities is easier, cheaper. You can find more opportunities, such as education, employment, decent health care, water and sewer, toilets, transportation and stores.

I, myself recently moved to and urban center. Not because I wanted to, but because of my son, who had needs which could not be met in a rural community. Once he got a taste of the city life, he decided that he does not, at this time, want to go back home. It has not been easy to accept this new lifestyle or to adjust after living in a community where I new everyone, where I have my family close by, where I have access to the land and resources which I depend on. And all the noise, always the noise.

Over the years, I've seen many of my Native People leave home. For educational pursuits, for jobs, for love and to be with their non-Native mates. But my feeling is that I can go any place in the world, as long as I know, in my heart that I can always come back home. To my land, to my People, to all that keeps me connected to who I am as a Native person. My Native-ness is not dependent on where I am, it is with me, in me all the time. I believe this is the way of all Native Peoples.