

'Interesting Question'

Canadian On Claim

The Alaska Indian claim on 9,000 square miles of Yukon Territory, in Canada, has "certainly raised some interesting questions," according to a Canadian government spokesman.

So far the only reaction from Canadians to Alaskans claiming aboriginal rights over their territory has come with a letter from Gordon F. Gibson, Executive Assistant to Canadian Minister of Northern Affairs Arthur Laing.

Gibson wrote to O'Dean Williamson of the Bureau of Indian Affairs realty office here, answering a "courtesy letter" Williamson sent the Canadian government after the Alaska claim on Canada had been filed.

The Tundra Times has asked for comment from Laing himself and from Lester Pearson, Prime Minister of Canada, but so far no reaction is apparent.

Gibson indicated that the Alaska Claim, filed by Chalkyitsik villagers in early June, was the first land claim indicating aboriginal ownership extending across the international boundary between the two countries.

The "interesting questions," according to Williamson, were just what legal technicalities, and what precedents could be set, by the settlement of an Alaskan claim extending into Canada.

The people of Chalkyitsik filed a claim on 38,000 square miles of upper Yukon and Porcupine river country with the Bureau of Land Management office in Fairbanks.

Williamson, with the BIA, coordinated the villager's

claim filing.

The description of the claim, when plotted out on maps by the BLM, found 29,000 square miles of the claim in Alaska and 9,000 square miles in Canada.

The claim extending across the border raises questions on just how such as aboriginal claim protest could be settled, if ever.

The aboriginal rights question in Alaska is now so bewildering and complex it may be as long as 50 years before final settlements are made.

Special action by the United States Congress may be necessary to settle the claims, which now cover almost 60% of Alaska's total land area with a moratorium on federal transfer of title.

But what to do with a claim that extends across a border complicates the issue still further.

Although villagers in Chalkyitsik, 50 miles east of Fort Yukon on the Black River, filed the claim itself, the land protest was actually made in the name of all In-

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dians in northeastern Alaska. The people of these areas, the Kutchins of Old Crow and Canada and the Athabascans in Alaska, were of the same aboriginal stock and shared the same hunting grounds, in an area where a boundary line placed by the white man now cuts the two nations apart.

The U.S.-Canada border, when drawn, cut straight north along the 141st meridian. The line cut through hunting grounds shared communally

and in many cases, left members of the same families living in both countries.

The line cut across areas of old Indian society political control also. For hundreds of years people living in eastern Alaska were under the jurisdiction of Chiefs in western Canada.

The boundary did not actually impair people's means to a living, of course. For years Alaskan and Canadian Indians and Eskimos crossed and re-crossed the border at will.

The Chalkyitsik case is more of an academic test of legal procedures in handling land claims than an actual demand for ownership of Canadian territory by Alaskans.



CHIEF PAUL THOMAS—Chief of the village of Chalkyitsik, is pointing east toward Canada where people of the village are claiming some 9,000 square miles of Canadian soil.

—Photo by WALLY OLSON