

Over 5,000 children taught —

Camp Fire classes challenge drowning

By ALISSA CRANDALL

The State of Alaska has the highest drowning rate of any state in the nation.

Alaskan villagers rely heavily upon the water, not only for their livelihoods and subsistence but also for transportation. Yet, due to the extreme cold, few Native children in rural Alaska ever learn to swim.

Victims could survive

Villagers drown accidentally when they fall in waters nearby, yet most could survive if they knew basic water safety skills.

In many regions of Alaska it is not so much a question of if someone will drown this year, but *who will it be this time.*

The isolation of the villages from medical and emergency services creates a special need for training of village residents in water safety and first aid techniques.

Since the summer of 1966, Chugach Council of Camp Fire has been conducting swimming, water safety, first aid, recreation, nutrition and village safety programs for the youth of more than 60 different Alaska Native villages throughout the state. This summer, 24 villages will be served starting on June 20 and ending August 14.

In their efforts to find new ways to serve the youth of Alaska, Chugach Council of Camp Fire recognized the problems involved with water safety in the bush as well as a general lack of recreation programs available to the villages.

5,000 Children Trained

Overcoming such difficulties as lack of funds, lack of good local instruction materials, high travel expenses and difficulties in communications to villages, Camp Fire began its first program in Nunapitchuk in 1966 with a two week session. The sessions are now four weeks long. During the last five years, more than 5,000 village youth have taken part in this summer Camp Fire program.

Swimming and water safety instruction takes place in whatever safe waters can be found nearby: gravel pits, rivers, sloughs, lakes and the Bering Sea.

Despite the cold waters (from the upper 30's to the mid-50's Fahrenheit), last year more than 200 children, from 31 villages served, passed their American Red Cross swimming and water safety tests. Hundreds of others learned enough to be able to help themselves or others in case of accidents.

In some villages, the adults, who never had opportunities like this in their youth, join in the swimming lessons.

All through the program there are nutritional snacks and some cook-outs and dinners. Fresh fruit is air shipped, which is a special treat in most villages.

Recreation and leisure time activities are varied and include such things as crafts, games, music, dance movies, cook-outs, overnight outings, nature hikes, fishing and boating trips, as well as times to just sit and talk.

Develop Positive Skills

One of the purposes of the program is to help youth develop interests and skills that will help them make more positive use of their leisure time.

Each four week session is taught by a team of two or three staff members along with Native youth to assist. Each team then moves to another village for a second four-week session.

The program staff is required to hold appropriate Red Cross swimming, water safety and first

aid certificates.

Camp Fire hopes to build a program that would make it possible to help older youths become qualified to teach swimming, water safety, first aid, nutrition and recreation in their own villages.

A trainee program for youth workers through the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) has allowed Camp Fire to hire youths to assist with the programs and receive assistance in the development of planning, program and management skills.

Staff members receive a week's orientation and training period near Anchorage before they go out to the bush, and are prepared to be flexible and adaptable to whatever situations may arise.

In addition to the CETA funds out of which trainees are paid, the funding for the Camp Fire bush programs comes from a variety of sources which include Indian Education funds, RurAICAP, Johnson-O'Malley, LEAA and Public Health. These funds are provided through regional non-profit corporations, school districts and state agencies.

Money Can't Meet Requests

There have been many more requests by villages for the Camp Fire program than there is money for. Over 100 villages have

requested the program, however funds were only available for 24 villages this year.

The villages that will be served are McGrath, Nikolai, Shageluk, Takotna, Telida, Holy Cross, Anvik, Grayling, Lime Village, Tanana, Minto, Kaltag, Ruby, Nulato, Koyukuk, Hughes, Allakaket, Upper Kalskag, Chuathbaluk, Tyonek, Lower Kalskag, Crooked Creek, St. Paul and Stoney.

Camp Fire has demonstrated that it is possible to swim in the lakes, rivers and oceans of Alaska, that it can be enjoyable; and that there are sets of water safety rescue skills available. Due to this program, residents of rural Alaskan villages have begun to realize that they can do something to reduce the extremely high rate of drownings in Alaska.

The biggest accomplishment is overcoming the fear of cold water and learning that people can breathe and move and do something in the water. Camp Fire has found that even in cold waters like the Bering Sea, people can increase their endurance and reduce the fear if they are willing to try.

Life-Saving Skills

These two skills can make the difference for someone who falls into cold water and may preserve a life. In villages where Camp Fire has returned, children



SAINT PAUL, Pribilof Islands, is one of 24 Native villages which will participate in the Camp Fire bush swimming safety program this summer. "Even in cold waters like the Bering Sea, people can increase their endurance and reduce the fear if they are willing to try," Camp Fire says.

—MARK KELLEY PHOTOGRAPH

have not only remembered what they were taught the previous year, but have improved their skills on their own.

In Egegik in 1976 a young boy had come every day of the program and was taught one day how to save a drowning person by holding out a stick or other object for them to grab on to. The very next day, he saved the life of another youngster by

using this technique.

It is with encouragement of events like this that Camp Fire hopes to be able to continue and expand its water safety programs to include as many Alaskan villages as possible.

Next: Coming in the Tundra Times, a photo page on the Camp Fire trainee program. Trainees learn to teach others how to save lives.