

Tuluksak determined to have preschool

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times

There is no preschool to serve the three- and four-year-olds of Tuluksak, and no funds to start one. Yet Anna Phillip, the young vice mayor of the small village some 50 miles up the Kuskokwim River, says that money or no money, there will be preschool this year in Tuluksak.

"Lots of mothers ask me, 'why is there no preschool or Head Start in Tuluksak?' Phillip explains. "Other villages have them."

Phillip, who was a bilingual instructor for first graders in Tuluksak last year, believes preschool is very important to young people living in the Bush. "Education is important for the kids before they get into grade school," she says. "It is hard for kindergarten teachers to teach kids to work with their hands if they don't already know how; hard to teach them to hold a fork or a spoon."

"It is easier for grade school to teach the kids other things if they already have learned these. Plus, the kids will know more when they come to grade school, so they will learn more."

A nurse visiting Tuluksak encouraged Phillip to contact her state legislators about funding a preschool in the village. Last year, there were 13 three- and

four-year-olds in the village, and this year, there will be 16 three-year-olds alone.

Phillip acted on the nurse's suggestion, writing letters to four different state legislators, in which she included a neatly broken down budget for rent,

salaries, supplies, snacks, emergencies, travel and per diem totalling \$58,060.

State Sen. John Sackett, co-chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, wrote back to Phillips, informing her that both the state of Alaska and

the federal government make funding available for Head Start and other preschool programs, but that the Legislature does not directly fund individual programs.

Sackett encouraged Phillip to seek funding through the Association of Village Council Presidents and Rural CAP. Phillip followed his advice and was told that neither of those groups had funding available for Tuluksak right now.

The funds may become available in the future, but Phillip does not intend to wait.

"I'm still going to start this program," she promises. "If there are no funds, then I'll be the teacher. I'll let the mothers come in and help me. We can make money by having bake sales, rummage sales. The money will go into snacks for the kids."

"We're thinking of letting the fathers make furniture. There's a lot of empty houses in the village, I'm sure we can get one." The parents of the children who will be involved already have expressed a willingness to help, Phillip says.

In fact, they have had some practice. Last May, with a little assistance from the Department of Community and Regional Affairs, early childhood development consultant Diane Suskind visited the village and gave a workshop on conducting preschool.

Then the villagers took over part of the city office building, decorated it, put up a mock hamburger stand and an imaginary school bus with posters of George Attla running his dogs for windows, and held preschool for one week. Phillip was the teacher, with help from mothers of the students.

"It was nice," Phillip recalls. "The kids really loved playing with each other. They learned how to use their hands, how to brush their teeth. The parents came in; they were really excited; ready to help." All the work was voluntary.

Phillip noted one young girl who was so shy when the class began, she would come into the doorway, and refuse to move. After being taken to a classroom table, she would just sit there, unmoving; not eating, not participating in any activities. "By the last day, she was running, laughing, playing; she was the noisiest kid in the class," Phillip remembers.

"That's important, for kids to get out of their shyness before they go into grade school. That's why we want a preschool in Tuluksak."

Recently, Phillip participated in a preschool workshop in Anchorage, along with Suskind and other people involved in preschools, both from Alaska and Outside.



Anna Phillip in Anchorage after attending a preschool workshop.

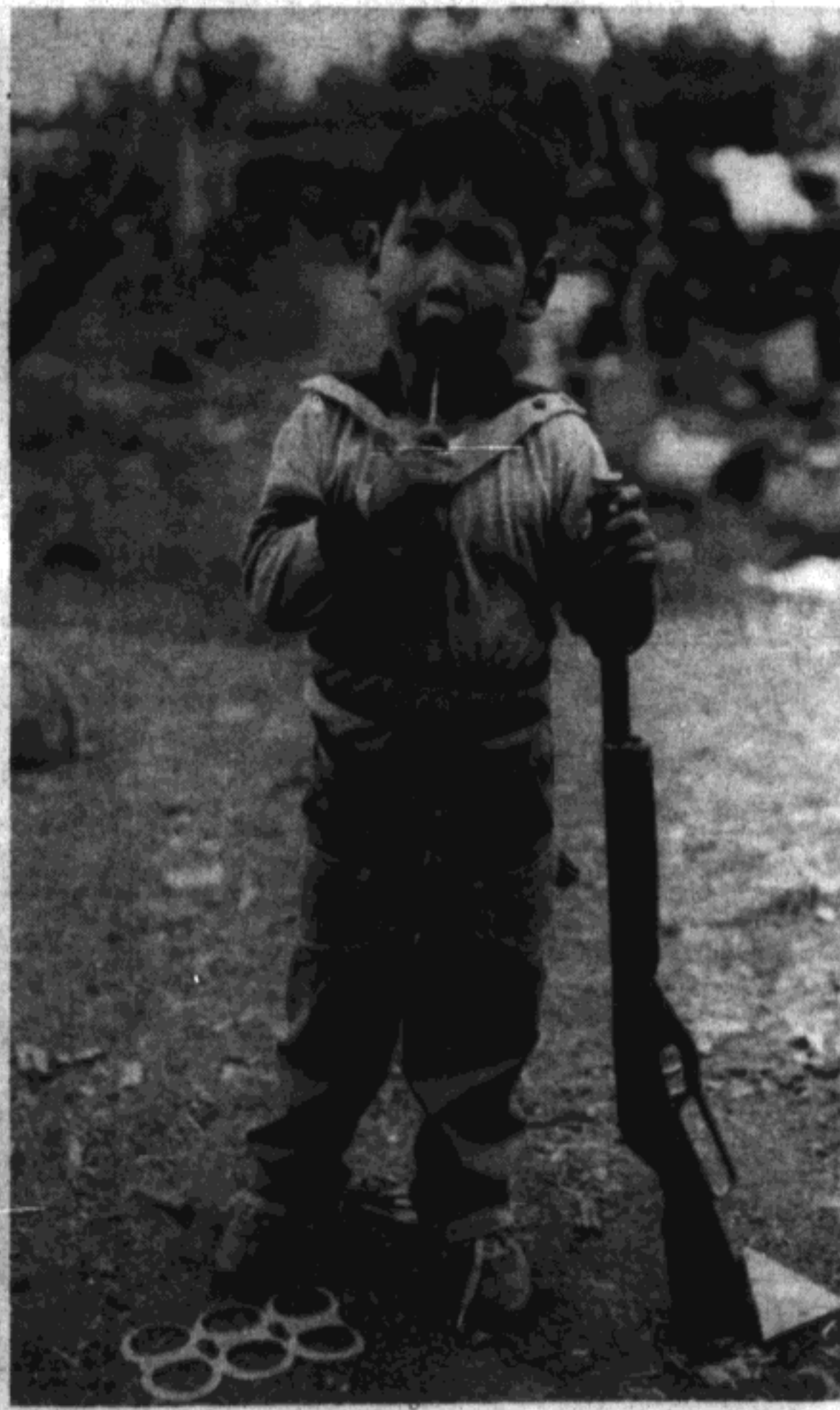
Although she is single and has no children of her own, Anna Phillip has a strong interest in the children of Tuluksak, and is determined to start a preschool for them. Phillip also has an interest in photography, and when she puts both interests together, she comes up with some outstanding shots of Tuluksak children, of which these three are a small sample.



When Joan Geerhart came to a one-week preschool session, she was very shy.



Tuluksak children scratch their messages in the mud during a storytelling session.



Eric Phillip of Tuluksak, with BB-gun and sucker.

PHOTOS BY ANNA PHILLIP