

The 'Other Village' Revisited

By HAROLD SPARCK

Editor's Note — The writer is Director of Nunam Kihlutsisti, "Protectors of the Land," of the AVCP-Calista Region. This series is a sequel to "The Other Village" published in this newspaper in 1977. The series discusses the effect of dependence on imported, high-cost energy on subsistence lifestyles of the region's villages.

In recent years, compassion and legislative action by both the State of Alaska and the Federal legislative bodies have keyed on supporting the rural Alaskan lifestyle. Through specific State legislation, and in pending federal D-2 legislation, rural people who support their families through harvest of the local natural resources will be given both a priority in wildlife allocation, and a say in the mechanism of determining how the allocation will be managed. Both legislative policies answer a blatant oversight rural Alaskans have labored under past State management of wildlife, where mainly urban, recreational and commercial interest dominated wildlife allocation in the distribution system.

Now while basic subsistence rights through priority allocation have been identified, a second, and more difficult issue should surface. This innocuous and complex issue, is the relationship between the subsistence lifestyle and rural energy consumption.

Fueled by large scale capital growth, and inflationary increases in heating oil, electricity and gasoline, the villages are facing a newer, and more difficult problem, one not easily solved by legislative findings and policies geared to non-cash subsistence items. The village-family, faced with both a subsistence harvest to feed the family, and apying for the exorbitant rises in both home heating, electricity, and gasoline for their outboard motor and snowmachine often must make a choice during the peak summer subsistence harvest period.

The family must choose whether to work seasonally and obtain cash when it is available and delay their summer harvest of wildlife, or harvest the wildlife when it is normally plentiful, forego seasonal employment, and make out the best they can during the winter through trapping and/or welfare to pay for their energy and needs. Current policies of the State and Federal government do not make this decision easier for the village family, but pressure this decision by both direct and indirect influences on the village's economy.

Construction of publicly funded capital projects helter-skelter in the villages, inadequate planning for fuel purchase, transportation, and storage, increase kilowatt demand, and a failure to address substantial price and cost differences between rural and urban energy costs, has already severely disrupted the rural village economy.

Sympathetic legislators and administrators to the plight of rural Alaskans on the subsistence, the rural energy crisis will demand substantial involvement in both manpower and finances from both the Federal and State government. Energy self-sufficiency, the keynote to the rural village at the turn of the century, should be made the goal of all public policies and planning for the rural villages.

In the village of Chevak, 1974's fishing year was very late, High winds and a late Ninglik-fak river break-up prevented the village from first leaving its own river, and then crossing Hooper Bay to catch migrating salmon in the western mud flats of that bay. When the men finally got across the bay, there was twenty eight of them. Their small boats, and old torn



ESKIMO FISH CAMP

NPS Photograph By ROBERT BELOUS

nets, were merely extra appendages to their nimble fingers and mends, for the gear was by commercial standards, both inadequate and obsolete.

But the men worked hard, with efficiency, and harvested enough salmon during a two week period to see their families through that winter. Salmon, herring, seals, and birds made up their diet during that time. Work for cash was extremely scarce, and consisted that year of longshoring, cannery, firefighting, and some construction. Oil was \$38/drum and gasoline \$45/drum at the village's only private store and electricity 14cents/KWH from AVEC that winter. The men faced the winter at least with food, and trapped heavily for oil money that winter. Some families figured out the mail and printed form mess and obtained both BIA and State general assistance. Once again, the village got through the winter. It is often amazing when the village gets through the "modern" winter.

By 1978, only three men fished with any success. Fishing was just as difficult, a poor chum salmon run and high winds, as in 1974, but in many cases, both gear and boats had improved. New 100-300 foot nets were available; metal and plastic boats had replaced the narrow wooden boats. Speed, aided by larger motors, now dominated the subsistence harvest. A hunter's time, was now governed by the workweek and the cost of gasoline. The facile minds of the rural families, not mechanized by formal education, had adopted to the white man's world, and had cashed in. Work was more plentiful from a new variety of sources. Village corporation construction, Economic Development Administration make-work construction, BIA construction, CETA financed village construction, and numerous other projects dotted Chevak's summer work-life. And there was a reason.

Oil was \$78/drum, and gasoline .85. A kilowatt hour of electricity was \$.34 KWH. Freezers now existed, and some refrigerators also. Winter weatherization programs helped solve some problems with shoddy state and federal private housing projects. But yet with

all this outside financial help this new capital wealth, this cash economy, the villagers were still reading water. They just managed to pay for their oil, their gas, and their electricity and there was normally nothing left. Cash has replaced harvest as the important summer adventure, but the hand-to-mouth subsistence existence that marked their grandfathers time, now marked their cash existence. Government did not help.

Government, in its haste to solve short term problems, was creating newer, long range problems. Replacements for the food that was passed up in the field in June for a hammer and mail cost three times as much the following March from a can, far exceeding the subsistence food in cash value and was mediocre nutritionally. People have unwillingly traded one lifestyle for another because of energy pressures, for the majority of villagers abhor welfare, but fuels and energy must be purchased. Held within an endless spiral of escalating costs, and with no alternate resources to select their energy from, the villages are locked into an endless battle that will continue to devalue life and culture.

Families that lived out of store in 1978 were paying from \$450 to \$800/month to buy carbohydrate substitutes while missing protein rich dried salmon, seal and herring. Dental caries, chronic ear drainage, and respiratory infections, illnesses linked by medical researchers to recent changes in the rural diet, and social ills brought on by sucking a pilot bread crackers in February instead of gnawing dried saal meat, are now normal winter conditions of the rural village.

The houses are sometimes warm, the snow-machines often have gas, the light bulbs and radios normally work, but life has changed in a way without internal village control. Life has changed from the outside in, the immensity of trying to turn about economic conditions brought on by higher energy costs is currently beyond the ability of the rural village to manage.

— To Be Continued —