

# Old Crow Indians keep their Old Traditions

By **FRANK KEIM**

We could hear the raindrops bouncing on top of the tent, and the wind whistling across the Porcupine River. But it was warm by the stove, and the tea

served with dried meat and grizzly bear tallow made our evening with Trapper Bill Smith and his wife, Tabitha Kyikavacheck, a friendly one.

Six of us from Project NOW, an after-school Native Education

program in Fairbanks, were visiting with Bill and Tabitha and others in Old Crow village, located in the Yukon Territory in Canada. We were learning about the traditional way of life still practiced in this

part of the country. We had flown up several days before from Dawson City where we had seen what the search for gold in the Yukon had done to that area. Old Crow was a healthy change, with most

of the people still living in the old ways, hunting and fishing and trapping according to the different season. While we were there, they had just finished caribou hunting and

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# Old Crow Keeps Traditions Intact...

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were getting ready to go rafting up North in Old Crow Flats.

During our week-long visit in Old Crow, Project NOW students and staff visited the school and learned from the three teachers that there was no local school board and that it was therefore difficult for the people to make changes in the educational program. As it was, children had to officially remain in classes until the middle of June and were prevented from going to the Flats with their parents to trap and hunt muskrats.

We also went over to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police headquarters and spoke with the constables about the various social problems in the village.

They indicated that drinking was the worst problem, especially of home brew since there was no official government liquor store in the village. Drugs were still no problem here, they said. Officer Roger Kyikavecheck, who had recently returned from R.C. M.P. also expressed his worry about having to deal with his own people if they break the law.

We attended Sunday Service at the local Anglican (Episcopal) church where Deacon Neil McDonald welcomed us with friendly talk. Afterwards we were shown some of the beautiful beadwork done by the women of the church.

We learned that the store in Old Crow was a cooperative and that although it was managed by someone from outside the people of Old Crow recieved a share of the profit every year.

Grafton Njootli, coordinator of the local CYI (Council for Yukon Indians) office, also explained their land claims proposal which he hopes will be an improvement over the Alaskan settlement. In his talk with us he emphasized the great danger that uncontrolled development presented to the traditional way of life in Old Crow. If roads and pipelines are built everywhere, he said, then the caribou and other forms of life would begin to disappear, and so would the lifestyle of the people. But they want to keep their old ways and so feel, rightly, that the only way to be able to do this is to be given legal ownership to their lands. This is why they are demanding a claims settlement from the Canadian Federal Government before and further development takes place in the northern Yukon Territory.

The most interesting part of the whole trip though was just visiting with the people of the community and learning about the old Athabaskan Indian ways-with Edith Josiem Dick and Marian Nukon, Martha Kendi, and Neil McDonald and Myra Kjikavecheck and Myra Moses who are both nearly a hundred years old and still going strong-and watching how the men were building their rat canoes and river boats, and how the women skinned muskrats and dried the meat for their dogs in the winter . . . and eating . . . dried and roasted caribou meat and the marrow from the long bones.

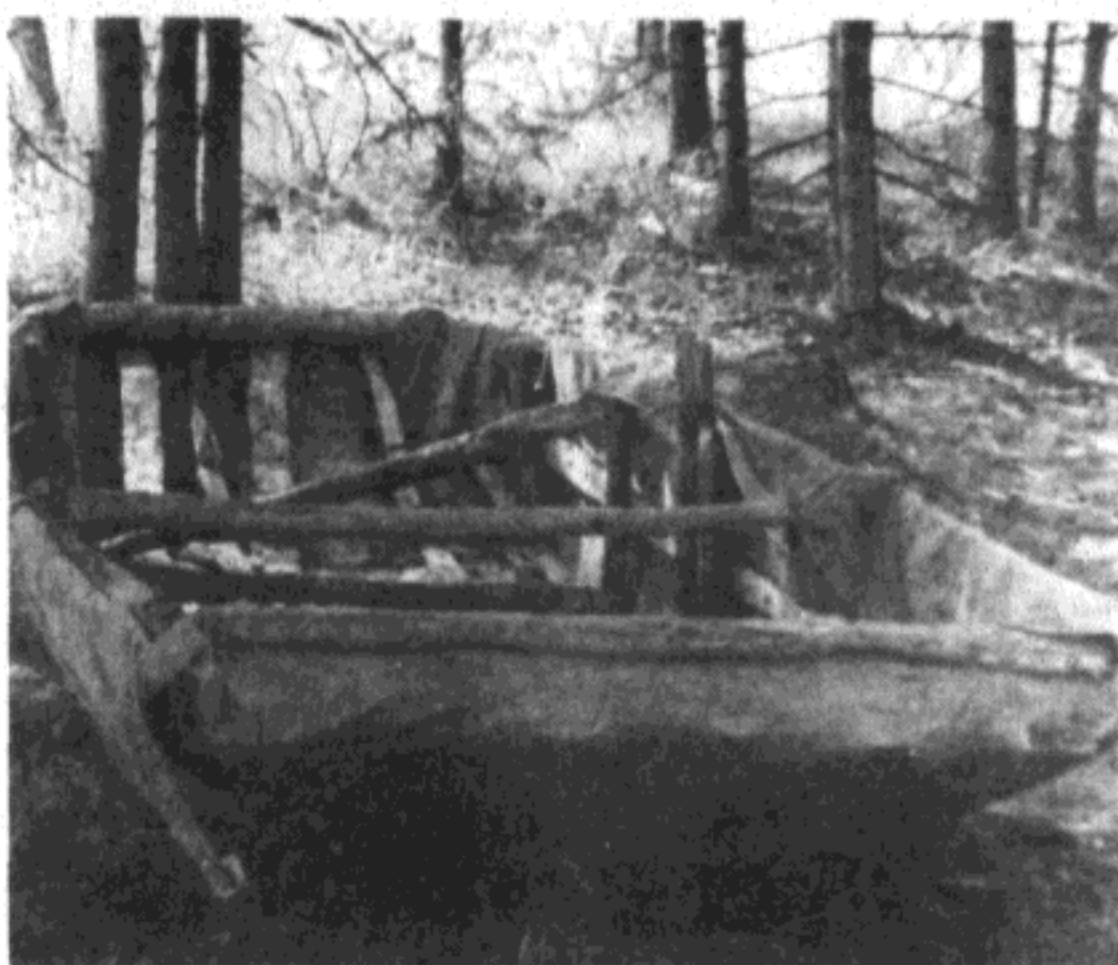
It was after Tabitha Kyikavecheck had shown us how to render the fat from smashed caribou knee bones when

Trapper Bill told us his battle with the Canadian government. He says that the Canadian government has no sovereignty in either the Yukon or Northwest Territories, and he has taken the government to court over

it. Apparently he has a case because the government has been spending hundreds of man hours and thousands of dollars trying to get to the bottom of the problem. If Bill wins his case, it means that another

treaty will have to be made with Great Britain, because he states that the Queen of England and not the Canadian government still holds legal sovereignty over Canada's northlands. The question of

Native sovereignty rights and land claims further complicates the problem. Good luck, Bill, and good luck to the people of Old Crow. And thank you for your friendship and hospitality.



**DOZHO TRITHO**-A traditional design bull boat, this one covered with a canvas tarp, was used by Athabascans of Old Crow.

-NADINE OBRIEN Photograph



**PROJECT NOW STUDENTS**-Some of the Project Now students are seen here in front of the pool hall at Old Crow. From left, are, Mae Grant, Linda Chaffee, cindy Jones, and Maureen Mayo. Not pictured is the student who took the photos, Nadine Obrien.