

Koyukuk Gears Up for Annual Meet—

Mineelghaadzha Gathers Proxies

By MARGIE BAUMAN

KOYUKUK — A long-flat bottomed river boat moved swiftly up the Yukon River toward the Bishop Mountain fish camp, as smoke from a forest fire miles to the north at Huslia moved in, blurring the rail behind.

Overhead the evening sun, clouded by smoke, was an eerie red and those in the boat relaxed, talking over the noise of the boat motor and rush of air created by the speed of the boat through the calm waters.

Aboard were Ragine Pilot of Koyukuk and Merrelaine Kangas of Galena, in the midst of a last trip to gather proxies before the first annual meeting of Mineelghaadza, Limited, the Native village corporation of Koyukuk.

It was late Sunday, July 14 and the annual meeting was set for mid-afternoon the next day, at the community hall of the Athabascan village, more than 40 miles down river from Galena on the Yukon.

The two women had set out Friday evening from Galena for Koyukuk, arrived there early Saturday to make last minute preparations for the meeting.

Now, to be sure all eligible stockholders of Mineelghaadza,

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MERRELINE KANGAS, left and Ragine Pilot prepare for the first annual meeting of Mineelghaadza, Limited, at Koyukuk. The two young women went over 100 miles up and down the Yukon to get to the meeting and help collect proxies.

— Photo by MARGIE BAUMAN

Mineelghaadza . . .

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Limited would be voting, they headed for fish camps where a number of the stockholders were busy catching, cutting and drying fish for their winter food supply.

It was, they figured, all part of the job. Ragine, sub-regional representative for the Tanana Chiefs Conference at Galena, was the interim chairman for the business corporation at her village.

Merrelaine, as sub-regional representative for Doyon, Limited, was going along to be sure all business at the meeting was in accordance with the state laws governing corporate business in Alaska.

The law requires, among other things, that a quorum be established by persons present or voting by proxy, before the meeting can even begin.

In the case of Koyukuk, with 168 persons enrolled and 141 eligible to vote, a quorum of 71 was necessary. More important, Ragine and Merrelaine were anxious that no stockholders lose the right to vote because of the necessity of being in fish camp.

It was about midnight when they and several friends reached Bishop Mountain, after a quick stop at Last Chance, downriver from Koyukuk. Just about everyone at the fish camp was still up, waiting to haul in groceries arriving by boat from Galena.

The visitors were greeted with enthusiasm and after they checked with several families and filled in more proxy forms, Ragine, Merrelaine and the rest of their party sat down to a tasty midnight snack of freshly dried strips of king salmon and hot coffee, boiled over an open campfire.

An hour later Merrelaine and Ragine were off again, heading 12 miles downriver again for Koyukuk and some sleep before the meeting began. The boat was beached and everyone went ashore, up the steep bank to the log houses of Koyukuk, for some coffee and then sleep.

In the morning again, Merrelaine and Ragine visited homes in the village, reminding everyone of the meeting. Many chose simply to vote by proxy, though they attended the meeting.

Ragine gave a short report on land selection for the village — a selection which must be

completed by December of 1974. She also noted that initially Mineelghaadza, Limited had been allotted \$138,000 under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and that the money had been placed in the bank for the village by Doyon, Limited, to draw interest until the people decided how they wished to spend and invest it.

The stockholders accomplished in short order their responsibility for the meeting — the election of the first board of directors of Mineelghaadza, Limited.

Reminded by Ragine that those elected would be handling \$138,000 "of your money," the villagers nominated a total of 12 people to serve on the board.

The names were placed on a sheet of paper from a legal pad and pinned to the log wall of the community hall as the stockholders voted.

Those elected were Gerald Pilot, Leo Lornitz, Leo Kriska, Joe Nelson, Franklin Dayton, William Dayton Jr., Alvin Dayton, Flora Edwin and Ragine Pilot. The new board was expected to meet within several weeks to elect its officers.

But if the villagers had neatly accomplished their job, there were still questions in their minds concerning the full scope of a business corporation. There is no word in the Athabascan languages for "stockholder" and the whole concept of "the corporate process has been a bit confusing to the people in this small village.

"Some people still want to know 'what is a stockholder,'" said Liza Jones, a stockholder who will this fall be teaching Athabascan at the University of Alaska. Although the basics of the land claims settlement have been discussed before at Koyukuk, some stockholders still aren't sure about them, said Liza.

The problems of educating the people on the business of running a corporation, let alone the basics of the land claims act, is of course not unique to Koyukuk. Along with the successful financial management of a land claims corporation, this educational demand is one of the biggest challenges facing the land claims corporations today.