

Barrow forms new Chamber of Commerce

The growing town of Barrow, seat of the North Slope Borough, and more than 300 miles north of the Arctic Circle, is joining that fraternity of towns which support a Chamber of Commerce.

In Barrow, where the sled dog has been replaced by the "Skidoo" and where Native skills in whaling co-exist with abilities in computer programming, the 65 local businesses have recently decided to resurrect the Chamber of Commerce after nearly 15 years absence.

The City Office, and Mayor Nathaniel Olemaun have shown support of the Chamber through the planned construction of a traditional sod house. This house will be authentic in design and it is planned to be used for the Chamber meetings.

The city office will work in cooperation with Johnny Adams of the North Slope Borough Utility Department and with the counsel of the Elders, many of whom lived in such houses in their youth.

The houses were built of dried sod and placed over a frame of whale bone and driftwood. They faced south and were windowless in design,

except for a skylight window made of thinly stretched walrus membrane. Lamps, fueled by whale blubber rested on the floor. They provided heat and light to the 12 by 14 foot structure. These houses traditionally had a cooking stove in one corner and a bench for sleeping along one wall.

It has been said by Elders that these houses were never "drafty" compared to their recent counterparts. Sod house construction took into account wind direction, the path of sunlight, layering of construction materials (insulation), and fuel efficiency techniques which are being re-learned in today's energy hungry society.

Out of necessity, the Eskimo was perhaps our first "conservationist." Life in -50 degree winters was severe and mere survival demanded close attention to careful hunting and fuel conservation and rationing.

When finished, the sod house will serve as a reminder to all of the traditional ways and their timelessness. This unique structure will provide a meeting place for the Chamber of Commerce and a monument to the past for the curious visitors and investigators of antiquity.