

Sesame Street Going to Bering Straits Village of Wales

By MARGIE BAUMAN
ANCHORAGE — Sesame
Street is going out to the Bering

Straits village of Wales as fast
as James Hendershot can make
that videotape roll.

Hendershot, an Alaska Public Utilities Commissioner, is the man behind the scenes in the Wales Experiment, a six month project to determine the effects and potential use of television in a traditional Eskimo village 60 miles east of Siberia.

Hendershot got the idea for the Wales Experiment more than a year ago, but it took a while to convince the communications media and others needed for the cooperative effort to get involved.

Now Hendershot, his wife and two teen-aged children spend hours of their "spare time" transferring Sesame Street and other television programs onto half-inch video tape for the experimental cable television.

Hoping to have the color sets in homes at Wales by Christmas, Hendershot had put some holiday programs on half-inch videotape, but it was two months into the new year before the sets were finally running. "I'm just real pleased that we did get it running," he said. "When we turned it on, it ran like a champ."

"Instead of just a coaxial cable, we have a television cable hooked into these sets. It senses what channel they are watching or whether the set is on. We had to put some little switches inside each set, which meant taking all the sets apart," he said.

Villagers at Wales, about 75 to 100 persons in 30 families, were advised in advance of the project and asked if they wanted to participate.

The Bering Straits Native Corp. agreed to foot transportation bills for a University of Alaska psychologist and sociologist testing the effects of tele-

vision on this community, which has had electricity for less than a year.

The 19-inch color televisions are just about the only electric appliance in most Wales homes and "it looks quite out of place, plugged into the wall with a whole bunch of wires," Hendershot said.

Just what the people of Wales think of their new televisions sets isn't certain yet.

"At first blush, the kids did run home and watch their favorite programs after school, but now they are staying at school again for arts and crafts," Hendershot said.

As part of the experiment, one television set has been given to the school, for use by the teachers during school hours if they obtain educational videotapes not being used within the community-wide program. Educational programs run on one channel from 2 - 6 p.m. and commercial programs are aired from 4 - 8 p.m., five days a week.

First reports of the television impact on Wales won't come out for at least six months.

"You try to get an early reading on this and you just won't know if it's accurate," Hendershot said. "In fact many people have said, and rightly so, that what we need is a two or five year run of tests, but I don't think my family could stand it."

Hendershot, his wife, Alida, daughter Donna, 18 and son, Dale, 13, develop most of the educational materials for the experiment, using the State Operated Schools library.

"We dupe 16 millimeter films onto half inch tape and develop the format, get it into a one hour format and ship it up, he explained. To put together a one hour program, it takes one hour of work "and there's no speed-up method," he said.

"The real tough thing is commercial program material," he said. "I didn't realize myself how difficult it was to come up with . . . and these televisions have an insatiable appetite . . ."

"Another problem is educational material. You can't find it. We just don't have massive libraries of topnotch educational material and you've got to be careful what you play as educational material or you'll lose interest quite quickly. And once you lose that interest, it's very difficult to get back," he said.

"Here in Anchorage they're playing the American series and the Civilization series, but really, is an Eskimo with a sixth grade education concerned about Greek culture? I think he might be in the future, but you've got to get him from Point A to Point B.

The problem is you've got Sesame Street and The Electric Company, which have nothing for the grown individual who has been deprived of any type of cultural stimuli. It takes a logical progression . . . or you lose interest," he said.

On the commercial side, however, Hendershot already knows westerns are a favorite. And when the project was first being discussed at Wales, there was a specific request for the television comedy "Hee Haw."

Television in the bush isn't something brand new anymore, but the Wales Experiment goes a few steps beyond that.

"We're trying to measure the effects of television on the community: trying to determine what turns them on, what type program materials they watch, what they really want to watch, not by asking them, but by watching what they watch," Hendershot said.

And reports on the Wales Experiment will go beyond that. "We're testing equipment too," Hendershot said. "Beyond that, we should be able to come up with a cook book method of providing a system of this type and the level of competence needed to run the system."

The report will also detail operation costs, so if a Native corporation elects to supply all their villages with cable television they'll know what the cost will spread to. "It might be feasible for some corporation to do this, but I don't know," Hendershot said.

Meanwhile, Hendershot is waiting for the novelty of television to wear off, before venturing up to Wales for a two week vacation and his own personal check into project Wales.

An engineer for RCA Alaska passing through the village tells him it is quite popular already. The engineer was camped out for the night in the cable television studio in the entrance to the village school.

At 2 a.m. one winter morning he watched the switchboard light up, as village residents checked the channels to see if anything was on.