



THE ICE LANDING STRIP—on Fish River was covered by a foot of water less than two days after this photo was taken. White Mountain School, at one time, housed in the large white building in the center, later replaced an orphanage in the two-story structure at the top left, and the teacher's house is pictured between them. The building with boarded windows at the top was formerly the orphanage dormitory.

—Photo By Yvonne Mozee

White Mountain School is Center of Life for Fish River People

Photos By Yvonne Mozee
Story By Laurie McNicholas

The Fish River people of White Mountain awoke one morning this spring to find

their ice landing strip covered with water from the slowly rising river. Billy Komakhuk and others waded to the runway in hip boots, poking holes through the ice at its edges to drain it temporarily. Late that afternoon, pilot BooBoo Swanson landed a ski-equipped plane on the crusty runway to pick up three passengers for the 25 minute flight southwesterly to Nome...That was the last plane that landed at White Mountain for ten days, until the mud

dried and the dirt landing strip atop the hill became usable.

Suspension of air service, the only transportation to the village, is a perennial problem at break-up time, but the season itself is welcome. "Finally spring come," said Agnes Komakhuk. "I hear birds this morning—first time—and I like it." She teaches the Inupiaq language to children ranging from pre-school age through the

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White Mountain School is Center

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eight grade at White Mountain School. Her task is difficult, because English is the dominant language in the village, but she is determined to preserve the White Mountain dialect of Inupiaq. She develops illustrated materials as teaching tools, and speaks only Inupiaq with her husband, Billy and their children when they are home.

Seasons determine lifestyle

The school is the center of the village life in winter months but winds move outdoors in spring. There are frequent sightings of northbound birds--

swans--geese, cranes; the anticipation of picnics on the limestone mountain for which the village is named, and preparations for a summer of fishing at camps along the river. Workers are hammering together the last of 11 new houses provided by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and families can hardly wait to move in. The houses are plumbed and wired for the time when the community acquires a source of electricity and a sewer system. Both services are currently available only to the school and the teacher's house.

The students release their energies on the school's outdoor basketball court and hitch rides on snowmobile drawn sleds, councing joyously through the mud and slush. They haul water from the river to their homes and carry buckets of mud to their new greenhouse beside the school. four nights a week, they sell popcorn and hot dogs during showings of Hollywood films in the old school, now used as a post office and community center.

Trip to Hawaii

This summer the children will learn to be farmers and greengrocers. With the help of their teacher, Brian Paust, they will grow vegetables from seed in the greenhouse, transplant them to terraced land near the school, then harvest and sell their crop of cabbages, potatoes, carrots, and turnips. They plan to add the vegetable profits to their concessionary earnings and blow the whole kitty on a two-week trip to Hawaii.

Their parents have voted unanimously to request that a high school be established in

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White Mountain is a Microcosm . . .

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White Mountain next fall by their school district, the Bering Straits Regional Education Attendance Area, a move that Paust supports. While teaching at the regional high school in Nome, he observed that a number of students from villages could cope with the changes that they experienced in a new environment away from their families. This year he accepted two tenth graders into his one-room class of sixth, seventh and eighth graders when the two returned home from high school in Unalakleet because they felt that their educational and emotional needs were not being met. Paust's wife, Majorie, teaches first through fifth grades in a classroom adjacent to his.

He helped develop one of the first state-supported village high schools in Kivalina, using an integrated teaching method for such fundamental subjects as the sciences. At White Mountain, he plans to integrate Biology lessons with experiments in the greenhouse (perhaps hydroponic tomatoes next year), and will combine chemistry lessons with photo processing in the school's well equipped darkroom.

Postsecondary education

White Mountain already receives postsecondary educational services. The University of Alaska's Northwest Community College at Nome established a learning center in the village early this spring as a pilot project under the direction of Dr. Vinon (Ray) Chohan, head of the department of business and public administration. Fifteen students, including several of the village corporation officers, signed up for courses in math, accounting, typing, and English. Each course is divided into three modules (a sequence of lessons on cassette tapes with accompanying textbooks and workbooks), which permits individualized learning.

Every two weeks, Dr. Chohan flies to Nome to provide students with instruction and testing. The center operates three nights a week at the school under the management of Jack Brown, who returned to White Mountain recently after 10 years in the U.S. Army.

Paust serves as supervisor, helping to answer students' questions. "They are preparing for a time when they will have money to invest or start businesses," Paust said. "Aquaculture projects are a future possibility, because the river is fed by natural hot springs." The clear waters of Fish River, which cuts a squiggly course through a forest of spruce trees, yields salmon, trout, lingcod and occasionally sheefish or stray seals. Paust believes that the agricultural potential of the region has been overlooked, and he plans to experiment with hybrid seeds developed by the University of Alaska that are especially productive in the area.

Ashenfelter studies business

Among the students who are taking courses in business management are Willa Ashenfelter, who is employed as a community health aide by Norton Sound Health Corporation. She is also enrolled in an associate of arts degree program for community health aides through which she earned credits from the college while learning the uses of microscopes at a two-week workshop this spring in Nome that was arranged by the health corporation. Northwest Community College is part of the University's Rural Educational Affairs division.

Several of the learning center students left White Mountain for construction jobs after a few weeks of classes; others will spend the summer netting salmon at their fish camps along the river and hunting for game. Their modularized course will permit them to resume lessons next fall. The college plans to operate the center from October through April of the coming school year, Chohan said, and will establish learning centers as requested in other villages of the Bering Straits region.

Alaska similar to Africa?

Chohan, who is of East Indian descent, was born in East Africa and lived there until 1971. There are many similarities between conditions here and in Africa," he said. The needs are similar. Even the philosophy, surprisingly enough, is similar. Africa has village corporations, regional corporations, and a national corpor-



AGNES KOMAKHUK—a bilingual instructor at White Mountain School, presents an Inupiaq lesson. She teaches the Inupiaq language to children ranging from pre-school through eighth grade. Her task is difficult because English is the dominant language in the village.

—Photo By Yvonne Mozee

ation. The people want to learn how to run retail businesses and handle agricultural products."

Rosemary Lincoln, a teacher aide who conducts classes for pre-school age children at White Mountain, is enrolled in an associate of arts degree program in Early Childhood Education under the direction of Dr. Robert Purvis, who is responsible for the college's teacher education programs. Eve McAllister, a certified teacher who monitors specially funded programs for the Northwest Regional Resource Center in Nome, provides inservice training to Mrs. Lincoln in cooperation with the college during visits to White Mountain School. Such cooperative efforts help to stretch travel budgets.

Bilingual Education

Miss McAllister, who taught for two years at a teacher training school in Laos, sees parallels between her work in that country and in Northwestern Alaska. "Especially when you get into bilingual education and the influence of one language on another, the teaching patterns are remarkably the same," she said.

"I'm really amazed at White Mountain," said Christie Long, home economist for the University of Alaska's Cooperative Extension Service in Nome. "So many agencies working together and not worrying

about their territories. (Paust) has pulled together a lot of resource people without a lot of friction." She helped him to identify a relatively inexpensive growing medium for the vegetable project (mica peat, which costs \$18.75 per eight cubic feet by the time it reaches White Mountain), and to locate a funding source for money to buy seeds. At Paust's request, she also taught his students how to make bread, doughnuts and cinnamon rolls.

Federal funds and inter-agency cooperation are critical to educational services in the region, because state funding of the college, the regional resource center and the schools reflect the small populations they serve. "There are only \$660 of state funds for instructional materials in the school's budget this year," Paust said. "Federal funds

gave the school a darkroom." They were also used to hire Mary Kokochuruk, who recently received training as a cook at Seward Skill Center, to prepare hot lunches for the students. The Early Childhood Development program at the school is federally funded, too.

White Mountain is a microcosm of the fundamental changes taking place in rural education throughout Alaska and in other parts of the world. For the first time, its people are receiving postsecondary education delivered to their village through an outreach program from their state university; exercising local control over their school and teachers; arranging for their teen-agers to attend high school at home if they wish, and receiving educational services that are integrated through various agencies.



WILLA ASHENFELTER—studies a blood sample during a workshop on the use of microscopes. She is enrolled in an associate of arts degree program at Northwest Community College for community health aides who are employed by Norton Sound Health Corporation.

—Photo By Yvonne Mozee