

Whale of a Job

Nearly ten years ago, in our August 3, 1964 issue, we carried a lengthy editorial beginning on page one. It was entitled, "Dying on the Vine."

It described how government agencies through concerted policies and efforts had purposely sought to kill off small villages in Alaska, particularly in the Arctic.

The agencies attempted to force the consolidation of villages by refusing to put schools in small villages and provide other services.

By the time our editorial "Dying on the Vine" was written back in 1964, most villagers, in fact, a majority of Alaskans had become outraged at the Bureau of Indian Affairs policy that forced Alaska youth to be transported thousands of miles from their homes to Mt. Edgecumbe, near Sitka, to Chemawa, Ore. and even so far away as Oklahoma in order to get a high school education.

The policy was designed purely and simply to drain off the small communities most valuable resource, its youth, leaving the villages to decline, to die on the vine.

Then slowly, but surely the dreadful policy of the Bureau of Indian Affairs was overturned. Throughout the sixties, many Native associations were formed and at meeting after meeting, in conference after conference, Native leaders stressed they wanted their children returned from far away boarding schools, they wanted their children to retain strong home and community ties.

The State Legislature, in a package of bills authored by then State House Speaker (now U.S. Senator) Mike Gravel authorized a program for a few large regional high schools. That program was later modified to provide for a number of smaller high schools in bush areas.

Eben Hopson, mayor of the North Slope Borough, in a statement of policy, said throughout the eight years of working to create the North Slope Borough, "We had the same thing in mind. Through the maximum of local government, we wanted the maximum of self-determination.

"We wanted the right to send our children to schools operated by our own people serving on a local school board. We wanted a high school within our area. We wanted to give our children the finest possible education, an education good enough to equip them to improve their world, even as we were attempting to improve our world."

Now less than two years since the establishment of the North Slope Borough, the borough has established a tax base of \$766 million; elected a five-member school board and taken over schools in Anaktuvuk Pass and Point Hope, plus negotiated for the take-over of schools at Barter Island, Barrow and Wainwright. Initial planning is under way for the building of a high school.

In addition the borough is encouraging the repopulation of former villages such as Point Lay and Nooiksut which the former government policies forced to "die on the vine." The Slope Borough is promising to build and maintain schools in these communities.

The North Slope Borough and its Mayor Ben Hopson are to be commended for their leadership, initiative, and courage. They are well on their way to their goal of providing the best possible education for their children. Amazingly, they have done and are doing one whale of a job.

- T.A.S.