

# Subsistence foods heavily used in bush

By BILL HESS

Tundra Times

The small building shakes in a wind fresh off the Bering Sea. Outside, the rain does not seem to fall down to the soggy muskeg, but instead passes by like millions of tiny insects in a hurry to get somewhere else.

In this wind, there will be no planes coming into or leaving Kwigillingok. Inside, a reporter from another place moves in close to an oil stove, hoping it will dry out his wet clothing as an elderly Yupik Eskimo woman watches.

Suddenly she addresses the reporter in a language which he does not understand. His only response is a puzzled gesture. She repeats her question. "She wants to know if you would go to her house for a cup of coffee," a young

woman who accepts payment from all those who come in wanting to use Kwigillingok's only telephone, interprets.

The reporter is not a coffee drinker, but such hospitality is not to be shrugged off. He follows the woman through the fierce wind and over the board walk to her home. Inside, he soon finds himself feasting on wild-goose stew, with fresh berries whipped into Eskimo ice cream for desert.

Amelia Davidson, age 65, has grown up with the traditional Eskimo values of sharing. The storm will keep her guest in Kwigillingok for two nights. Her couch will be his bed, and she will feed him dried fish, salmon and salmon-egg stew, more dried fish, dried seal and lots of Eskimo ice cream.

Except for a bit of rice and noodles thrown in with

the stews; some salt, sugar, pilot bread and the tea with which Amelia Davidson supplements her meal, everything she serves comes wild from the land and sea.

Subsistence food. A source of nutrition protected by laws which guarantee that in times of shortage the people who need that food the most — the rural people of Alaska — will have access to it before the sportsmen and commercial fishermen.

That law is under attack now, by people who believe that their right to shoot a trophy moose for the rack which they can hang on their wall should be equal to that of Amelia Davidson's right to get the food with which she has always fed herself.

One of those persons is  
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PHOTOS BY BILL HESS

Like most Yupik Eskimo, Amelia Davidson and her grandson Charles depend on subsistence fish and game. True to custom, Amelia is also very generous in sharing what she has with others.



# Subsistence hunters promise to meet needs

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running for governor of Alaska. While he recently promised that everyone in Alaska, rural or urban, who needs game and fish to "keep body and soul together," will have it, he went one step further to say that in the entire state, urban and rural, there were really very few of these people. A mere handful at most.

A strange statement, the reporter thinks, having spent time in homes such as Amelia Davidson's all across the state. In virtually all cases, subsistence food has been the staple.

In Minto, there were ducks, moose, wild rhubarb, and beaver. Caribou in Barrow. Moose, salmon, sheefish and beluga in Kotzebue. Whitefish and potatoes in Ambler. Salmon, herring eggs, hooligan and berries throughout southeast. Seal in St. Paul. And that list is just for starters.

The Republican candidate for governor, Tom Fink, may not think many rural folk truly depend on wild resources

but two residents of Kwigillingok know better. They do not want their names publicized, but they do want to talk about subsistence.

"You have to get up early to get your seals," the older of the two, a man with teenage children, speaks. "Everybody likes to get their steam-bath at night, but if you stay in bed too long the next day, somebody's going to beat you to the seals."

The young man laughs. "I usually get started late." Still, he gets his game. Nearby is a poster in support of subsistence. There are two boxes on the poster marked "for" and "against." Ballot Measure Number Seven. "Against" has been checked.

"What worries me is that some of these old people aren't going to understand the language of the ballot," the older of the two speaks. "They might vote against themselves and not know it." The posters are up all over the village. It is hoped that all subsistence supporters will see it enough

times to know for certain that a vote *against* the proposal is a vote *for* subsistence.

However the vote turns out, and whatever happens after that, the two maintain that villagers will go right on living their subsistence lifestyle. "We have to," the younger one states.

"Before, the game wardens used to come over and bother us," the older one remembers an incident which he believes happened in the sixties. Game officials were chasing Eskimos down, confiscating their catches and taking away their weapons. In his words, terrorizing the old people, on whose land they had come. "Some teenagers shot down a fish and game plane," he remembers. "Then they haven't bothered us as much after that."

Similar or worse occurrences are hinted at by the younger man should the subsistence repeal become reality.

In all of the United States, there is probably not a more peaceful community than Kwigillingok. There is almost

no drinking here. There is no gambling, not even bingo. Church attendance is one of the more popular activities. The people are gentle, but a lifestyle is threatened.

Two days later and 300 miles away in Unalakleet, Sheldon Katchetag takes a break from the carpentry work he is doing on an addition to his father's house.

"Even if you order groceries, they won't be fresh," he speaks of the only alternative to subsistence foods in Bush Alaska; an alternative which is out of reach to most of the people who are unemployed seasonably employed at best.

"We need what we grew up on. We are what we eat. We need our fish, meat and our berries. It would be too hard to switch over to canned foods. It would be really hard to have a balanced diet."

"One cup of salmon berries has the equivalent vitamin-C of eight oranges. We're better off to try and get out and get what we need than to try and buy it in a store."

As if to illustrate his point, a woman in town showed up at work earlier that day with a single peach and a medium-sized bunch of grapes which she had purchased. Total price? Over eight dollars.

Katchetag has seen money come into the village in the form of Aid to Families with Dependent Children and while it has been a help, some bad things have come of it also.

"In our culture, we share. AFDC has brought about a feeling that 'that AFDC money is mine!' A brother might give some meat, but the one he's giving it too won't give anything to him, because of that money."

"Our land has always carried our whole village. Brothers and sisters, parents, everyone shared. In this town alone, I've got 50 or 60 relatives! We have always shared. But that AFDC money is contributing to the idea of the nuclear family, and breaking up the extended family. The extended

family is a way of life to Native people. But AFDC is shoving a wedge between them. 'We'll share with them, but they won't share with us!'

Katchetag also says that records of that money also create an illusion on paper that the community is functioning on a cash basis when really the far greater part of it is not.

"This is subsistence!" exclaims Pete Katongan holding a frozen salmon above his head. Pete is an Elder of Unalakleet, who lives a short distance from Katchetag.

"They try to stop it, I guess," he says of those seeking repeal of the subsistence law. "But they're not going to! We have to live! We got no money. We have to live subsistence!"

Katonagan is a little puzzled about why urban Alaskans want to eliminate the law. He does not see any of them being deprived of fish or game. "That's what they do from Anchorage. Every summer they come here, take fish. They get them." He disdains the idea that rural people no longer are truly dependent on subsistence resources.

"That's not true!" Katongan emphasizes. "How can a person get away from his living, from before, from long ago? Some people would get sick. Maybe me too. When people eat what they ate before, like seal oil, the body needs it."

"I'm a Republican, but maybe I have to vote for a Democrat this year," Katongan says everyone is going to vote. "They have to!"

He's hoping the Democratic candidate, Bill Sheffield, will be good. "Well, when they talk, they're good. When they're elected, they're no more good. They don't do what they say. I never seen that other guy (Sheffield). Maybe he'll be good. Better'n Tom Fink."

"I have my own teeth. Nobody ever make teeth for me, I have my natural teeth. I chew lots of dry fish, that's why. It's hard food. Hard food helps keep gums good."



Pete Katongan with frozen ducks pulled from his freezer. Katongan is a Republican who plans to vote Democrat this year. He is also going to vote against Ballot Measure Number Seven, which would repeal Alaska's subsistence law.



For the Yupik of Kwigillingok, seals are a major subsistence food.