

'I Consider Myself a Rip Van Winkle'—

Unique Historical Project

By MARC OLSON

"I consider myself a Rip Van Winkle who slept for 20 years and then discovered how things have changed."

These are the words of Tommy Ongtooguk, a Native of Northwestern Alaska who is working on a unique project for the preservation of parts of his disappearing culture.

Ongtooguk has completed one of several projected slide presentations on various aspects of Native life. The first 480 slide show consists of three main parts; the environment, the people, and systems of living. It is concerned with the changing of Native life, and traditional versus modern concepts of living.

Ongtooguk, who retired from the army after over two decades of service, was shocked at the changes that time had created in his homeland.

"It was a very sad thing for me," he says, "all I knew had passed away."

He returned to Alaska permanently in 1971, and soon began the media project on which he works so diligently now.



TOMMY ONGTOOGUK — The creator of a slide show on Native culture and program director for Mental Health and Alcoholism at Norton Sound Health Corporation relaxes in his office as he talks.

— Photo by MARC OLSON

Since he worked in food service in the army, he is very interested in the nutritional aspects of Native food, and has devoted a section of his first presentation to edible plants in the region. He has plans for more projects dealing with Native foods.

Others things he is covering include Native skills such as making a skin boat, spear, sled, kayak, and snow shoes, and food gathering methods, tools, and preservation. He has also worked on a series of cassette tapes by older people on food gathering.

Ongtooguk's show has been shown for the XYZ, Extra Years of Zest club in Nome, at the Rural Media Conference in Fairbanks, in Barrow, and for RurAL CAP. He has had several offers to appear on television, and the university of Alaska wants to buy a portion of his slide show.

Ongtooguk is project director of Mental Health and Alcoholism for Norton Sound Health Corporation, and is planning to work his shows and other projects into the media program of the corporation.

"This work is a means for adjusting," he said, and now after several years in Nome he is still adjusting, he says, but comfortably.

His purpose is to increase cultural awareness in the community, with an emphasis on school children. He also sees it as a means for the old and young to relate by "the older teaching the younger." He merges the modern with the old in the shows.

Ongtooguk sees cultural loss as a major factor in mental health problems and alcoholism in Alaska. He works closely with Dr. Leo Ingle and two counsellors,

Edna Ayek and Mark Brown in the mental health and counselling program that Norton Sound Health Corporation provides.