

Crowley Maritime cruises the Kuskokwim

by Alan Haig-Brown

There aren't a lot of roads in western Alaska. Fuel and bulky freight come by barges to ports along the shores of the Bering Sea and up the rivers. It is difficult country and the season is short with the ice going out of most Ports in late April or early May and coming back in around the end of October. The rivers are mostly uncharted, so it is the local knowledge of the skipper and crews that enables Crowley Maritime to service the villages. Building materials, machinery and the fuel to heat the buildings and run the machines all depend for delivery on the people and vessels of Crowley's western Alaska fleet.

The Seattle-based Crowley Marine Services tug Point Milne, brought the first mainline barge of 1995 into Bethel on May 19. For the next 435 miles up river to McGrath smaller barges are pushed by shallow draft tugs like the 68-foot Tanana Chief. There is no chart table in the wheelhouse of the Tanana Chief. Nor is there a radar, sonar, or Loran. There isn't even a compass. In place of all these navigational sides, Crowley Maritime employs Capt. Iyana Gusty to run the four-engine pusher tug.

"My dad never sent me to school," says the 62-year-old Yu'pik Eskimo, "But he taught me how to get by."

His dad also taught Iyana the slow easy ways of the river, ways that are gentle if respected and worked with, but that have forces far beyond anything controlled by man. In spring time the river often creates jams, causing the water to back up flooding the villages along the river like it did 145 miles up river are Aniak in April of 1995. By the time the Tanana Chief pushed the first barge load of fuel and supplies upriver in mid-May, the river level had dropped nearly twenty feet. At Aniak, a road had to be dug into the bank to allow cargo master Steve Marley to off-load the lumber, containers and other deck freight.

Like many non-Natives in Alaska, Steve grew up in the "Lower 48". He struck out for the last frontier, arriving in Bethel several years ago. Crowley offered Steve a part time job which grew into a full-time position as tankerman and cargo master, with

responsibilities for loading and off-loading both fuel and deck freight. His pride and joy is "Big Red" the giant forklift that he dances up and down seemingly impassable dirt river banks.

In June, when the sun never goes down, the days run into each other. The work of resupplying the villages by tug and barge, like that of the families restocking larders with dried salmon, is urgent but sets its own steady pace. Not a place for crisp white straw hats. Better something like the big soft old black leather hat that Steve wears with its layers of bug spray and dust.

One area in which Steve and Iyana maintain a fair level of precision is in the monitoring of the tanker scows that the Tanana Chief pushes up river. On their first voyage of 1995 they had three scows. The 165 X 40-foot Napamute with 186,000 gallons on board, the 119 X 34-foot Oiler No.1 with an 84,000-gallon cargo and the smaller Eek named for a down river village with 35,000 gallons on board. Loaded, the biggest barge draws over five feet. When the barge touches bottom, Iyana moves the barges back and forth across the face of a bar looking for a way through or he will sent a couple of the crew off in an outboard powered skiff with a mastered pole to check depths.

On this year's first trip up river they came on a bar about 100 miles short of their destination that they couldn't get over with the Napamute. When this happens the tedious job of lightening fuel up river with the little Eek is the only way to lighten up the big barge to get it over the bar. As a result of this kind of unpredictable delay the trip that started in Bethel on June 4, off-loaded the last of its cargo 435 miles up river at McGrath on June 18. In the land of the midnight sun the arrival of Crowley's tug and barge is a major event in the small town. On this Father's Day two of the town's women, Sally and Alexandra Turner bake a special cake for the fathers in the crew that can't be home with their families. Up and down the river Iyana seems to know everyone and to be known by everyone. He is a river captain.

Note: This is the first in a series about Crowley Marine's barge lines on the Yukon River. Look for our next edition for more. Alan Haig-Brown is a freelance writer from Canada.