

Willie Tukrook Cuts Mustard on North Slope

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By BETZI WOODMAN

Nothing in the young Eskimo's manner suggests the responsibility involved in his work with the BP Oil Corporation on Alaska's North Slope.

Yet, as one of three radio operators for the huge international British Petroleum firm, Willie Tukrook must act sharp to handle the communications.

We met Willie first in the small but bright dining section of BP's Mukluk Freight Camp. He was more interested in our reports of the whale-butchering we had seen the day before at Barrow, where his family now lives, than in talking about himself.

"Gollie, I think I'll go on leave," he joked.

Actually, however, Willie knows he must apply himself seriously to his tasks. He works the same 12-hours on, 12-hours off, seven days a week shift as the others in a drilling camp and he is well aware of the need of his employers to depend on his being there.

Although his supervisors understand the Natives' deep-seated love for the excitement of a whale hunt and satisfactions it gives to a man, they also must know an employee will be on the

(Continued on page 6)



SLOPE RADIO OPERATOR—Willie Tukrook of Point Lay is being employed as a radio operator by the BP Oil Corporation on the company's oil camp on the Arctic North Slope. Willie, 27, works 12 hours on and 12 off seven days a week. Plans are being made for him to get further training which will up his pay of about \$1,100 per month.
—BETZI WOODMAN Photograph

Willie Tukrook, Radio Man . . .

(Continued from page 1)

job day after day as expected.

"Each man is an important part of the picture," said one supervisor. "When he's suddenly not there when expected, it causes us much difficulty. We try to take special circumstances into account, but the work requires regular schedules. We value a man's steady dependability."

Later, we watched Willie at work. His "office" is a trailer dominated by constantly chirping, crackling communications gear. At the business end of the building are wrap-around windows which give Willie a big-picture view of the aircraft landing area and freight storage yard.

As the signals come, he grasps the microphone and becomes completely intent on the matters at hand.

Temperatures that day had suddenly risen to 40 degrees above zero and the runway which was solidly frozen the day before was suddenly rutted and full of small lakes with uneven bottoms.

Willie was asked to guide the twin-engine otter in for a landing in this muddy mess. During breaks away from the communications shack, Willie makes personal inspection of areas which he may have to describe later.

Even though one is aware that the once quiet Arctic Slope at Prudhoe Bay is now involved in constant activity, it still comes as a surprise to hear the steady message signals as camp talks to camp, drivers to camp or each other, or officials relay information from and to Anchorage through the company's new short wave station in the lower Chugach Mountains outside the city.

Keeping the messages straight, putting the right persons in touch with each other, making decisions on occasion on how to handle information are all important to the smooth operation of an oil camp.

A foulup in communications could cause chain reactions of difficulty which would result in great time and money loss, not to mention aroused tempers.

Another vital requirement besides dependability and conscientious attention to duty, said the supervisor, is confidentiality. Secrecy about everything involved in the company's work is most important to protect the great money investment of this highly competitive industry.

Not only has Willie measured up to these requirements, according to his supervisors, but he is

about to receive more technician training through BP Oil Company.

Upon successful completion, Willie will become a first class electronics engineer with even higher salary rewards than the approximate \$1100 monthly (plus room and board) received now.

At 27, Willie is "in the middle" of his family of three brothers and three sisters. He was born at Point Lay where he completed his elementary education. He went on to Mount Edgecumbe high school from which he was graduated in 1960.

After high school, he went home for awhile, living in Kivalina for a time, too. He spent his time in trapping for wolverine, Arctic fox and getting wolf pelts.

He joined the Navy in 1964 and his four years service and training there prepared him for the kind of work he is now doing.

During his Navy years, Willie was stationed part of the time at Adak in the Aleutians and also at San Francisco and Philadelphia. The larger cities did not dismay him except "you can't get any fresh air there," he says.

He liked the training and says it "came easily" as he studied. Such special skills are in great demand in today's work world and when Willie filled out his application for work with the State employment office, it was not long before someone came looking for him.

Willie does not consider his work difficult in spite of the long hours and concentration required. Like others, he gets a week off every so often to compensate for the grueling schedule.

He sees no reason why any Native could not prepare for jobs with the oil companies although "as far as drilling rig work goes, I can see why there are not too many Natives there.

"That work is very complicated and demanding. It's not a question of Natives not being able to do the work . . . it's just that few have ever been around such equipment to learn the techniques."

Later, when we watched a "joint changing" (adding a length of drilling pipe to permit deeper drilling) we understood Willie's comments.

Speed and skill required for this "whip chain" operation are formidable.