

# 'Muktuk' of ATG Fame Farms Near Unalakleet

By SHEILA TURNER

Twenty-six years ago Col. Marvin R. "Muktuk" Marston was in the Arctic converting Eskimos into soldiers.

Now he's back, trying to turn them into farmers. Still strong willed and energetic in his seventies, he returned to his own successful farm near Unalakleet 14 miles inland on the North River this week to cultivate a crop of potatoes, cabbages and turnips.

"I learned from the Rev. Mr. Larson 20 years ago that the ground doesn't freeze where a river refills," Muktuk explained. I am convinced

that several river delta areas in the Arctic would make good farms. The season is short, but the long hours of daylight make up for it.

"With farms, the people would not have to pay the white traders 40 cents a pound for potatoes. They could raise their own crops and keep the profits in the Arctic."

Muktuk realizes, though, that it's no easy job to convince hunters to let moose run right by their noses while they stay home to plant and harvest their crops.

"I'm looking for three dedicated dirt farmers with

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missionary spirit," Muktuk said. "I've picked out three large tracts on the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers I'll provide seed, and fertilizer to any man willing to invest two years in teaching, and convincing Arctic people to farm.

The farms' produce could be sold for fish and ivory carvings, according to Muktuk's plan.

Actually, farming is not new to him. Long before he ever got the idea to organize the Alaska Territorial Guard, he liked to plant trees and produce at his family home in Seattle.

"I just finished a walnut coffee table, made from a tree I planted when I was a boy. It is the first walnut tree grown in Washington State, far as I know."

In 1941 Marston organized what he regards as "the most elite scouts the world has ever seen." Fighting the opposition of politicians and white traders, he trained 2,700 natives from Barter to Aatu as defenders of the North country. "They were the finest soldiers in Alaska," Col. Marston said. "Not one native ever refused to serve or ever deserted," though I couldn't pay them anything.

Muktuk's men probably were also Alaska's most unusual soldiers. Two of his best troops were Margaret Panigeo and Laura Beltz Wright who he insists could handle rifles better than any man. He listed them for the army's benefit as "M. Panigeo and L. Beltz" since women were not allowed to serve.

The scouts watched for incendiary bombs dropped on Alaska by Japanese balloons. They would find live bombs, wrap them up, and carry them around on their sleds for days without knowing what they were.

Muktuk Marston traveled thousands of miles by dog sled, signing up troops, teaching them to drill and helping them construct armories which the community could use in any other way it chose.

He helped register thousands

of natives to vote in national elections. The voting upset politicians and traders who didn't want to see natives gain political power or become economically independent. Though Muktuk equipped his men with the cheapest army surplus equipment available, a commanding officer yielded to pressure and suddenly "needed" the native rifles elsewhere.

"I slept on the problem of how to save my army," Muktuk recalled. "I believe you can find all knowledge within if you can draw upon it. In the morning I woke up laughing. I knew I had that officer. I suggested to him that white men were not immuned to certain germs carried by Eskimos. Suddenly he lost interest in disarming my men."

Muktuk earned his name in a muktuk eating contest at Point Hope. One version of the story is that he sat down to dinner with the biggest eater at Point Hope. At 2 a.m., Colonel Marston rose.

"You give up?" he was asked by the biggest eater.

"Oh no," he replied. "I'm just going for some catsup!" Muktuk became a much loved figure in the Arctic.

After the war, he retired from the army, returning briefly in 1947 to help convert the Alaska Territorial Guard into the Alaska National Guard. He now is a real estate man at Anchorage, but he hasn't forgotten his scouts.

Recently he convinced the state that every member of the old A.T.G. should be decorated. A medal was cast, duplicating the recruiting poster design drawn for natives by Rusty Heurlin during World War 2.

The medals soon will be issued with ceremonies to all former scouts or their survivors.

"Organizing that guard was the best assignment any soldier ever had, Muktuk said. His only regret is that his men never had a chance to battle directly with the Japanese. He is convinced "It would have been a glorious victory for us."