

Lael Morgan—

Extraordinary Writer

By KENT BRANDLEY

Lael Morgan, Alaskan journalist extraordinary, breezed through Fairbanks this week on her way to the Sierra Madre mountains of Mēxico by way of Venetie, Arctic Village, Dot Lake and Tetlin.

A lovely lady and a proper Bostonian on one hand, and a gun toting tough customer on the other, Ms. Morgan thrives on excitement and is electric with energy.

Probably no journalist alive today is more thoroughly familiar with Alaska and Alaskans than she is. While many others know more about their specific specialities, she is an expert on the state as a whole. She is on a first name basis with every politician in Alaska and has friends in most every remote village of the state.

Her considerable talents as a photo journalist have been recognized by the Juneau Empire, the Daily News-Miner, the Tundra Times, United Press International, the Los Angeles Times, National Geographic, Doubleday

book publishers and Alaska magazine.

The comely blonde receives numerous offers of marriage by

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Lael Morgan . . .

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lonely males enchanted by the 49th State and her writing. She modestly takes time to answer them with a polite "no" and a plug for her latest book.

Ms. Morgan, staying here with the Jim Dalton family as she usually does, sat still long enough for a brief interview before journeying to Tepic, Mexico on another special assignment for National Geographic magazine.

There she will complete a story on the Huicholes Indians, a remote peyote culture tribe never conquered by the Spanish nor converted by the Catholic Church.

Before flying to Mexico, she will complete photo stories on four more Alaskan villages as part of an enormous assignment for Alaska magazine related to the Native Land Claims settlement.

Lael just came back from Savoonga (on St. Lawrence Island) and Elim (out of Nome). The people of beautiful Elim are not accepting the Native Land Claim settlement, Lael reports. They are keeping their original reservations and rejecting the government money. Why shouldn't they? The village of about 200 people controls 340,000 acres of prime timber land.

So far, Lael has been to 64 villages for Alaska magazine. She started on the North Slope and worked her way down. She still has roughly 156 more villages to visit of the 220 under the Native Land Claims Act.

Alaska magazine will print a monthly article on each of them and then compile them in a book with maps showing exactly what areas the Natives own.

Lael says she is trying to show what the Native people want to attain. The problem is complicated, she says, with five different Native languages and dozens of dialects. She notes a tremendous difference of lifestyle among the tribes, viewing the Tlingits as active capitalists and the Athapascans closer to Socialism.

"It's so much fun talking to the old timers," Lael says. In each village she tries to capture some history.

Lael's latest book, published Sept. 1 by Doubleday, is entitled "And the Land Provides." It is a story of Indians, Aleuts and Eskimos in transition. Doubleday is also publishing the second edition of Ms. Morgan's "Women's Guide to Boating and Cooking."

She has a photo story in the current issue of National Geographic, about Atka Island in the Aleutians. Having seen most of the great land, this is Lael's favorite spot. She was to have spent a month there in 1972, but "the boat only comes once a month, and it forgot to come," so she remained two months. She says the people are fine and the scenery magnificent.

With all of this travel, there are a few problems. She got off at one or two remote airfields recently not knowing exactly where she was at, too embarrassed to ask. Travel has been somewhat rough. Many of the villages have no scheduled transportation.

In one day she was snow-blinded, frost bitten, and sunburned.

This month, she will experience temperatures ranging from 50 below zero with 50 mile an hour winds in the Arctic, to 90 above in Mexico. "Just when I was getting used to going without mittens," she moans, "Now I'm going to blow it all again."

She's been on her latest Alaska assignment since April Fool's Day and often she doesn't touch base for a month. "Where do you shower?" we asked. "Shower?" she laughs, "What's that?"

Lael is resourceful and has been known to resort to bending regulations when necessary. At Point Lay there were no passenger flights and she wanted to leave. She and her friends unloaded 11,000 pounds of freight from a Herc in an effort to convince the crew to take them back to a less remote airfield. After considerable begging, the pilot said it would be okay if they promised to hide if the FAA man came. He did come when the plane landed and true to their word, they laid flat on the floor to avoid him.

She has had a few hair raising experiences like the plane out of Bristol Bay that kept running out of gas.

Lime Village up out of Sleetmute was one of the most fantastic places on her itinerary. It is inhabited by migratory Athabaskan people.

Even before she became a journalist, Lael had a yen for adventure. In between jobs in Alaska she and her husband bought a boat and sailed around the world.

Witty and vivacious, Lael would make a good book herself. At Point Hope she was cook for a 12-man Eskimo whaling crew for a month. She wanted to go out on the water, but women are generally forbidden on the boats as it is considered bad luck.

She had to be content to cook on a Coleman stove in a tent on the Chukchi Sea.

Lael has had her share of minor skirmishes with the law in the course of her duties. One incident, previously publicized, resulted from a misunderstanding at Los Angeles International Airport. She called the airline in advance because she wanted to take her Colt Woodsman automatic with her to the Aleutians. An airline employee instructed her to simply present it at the ticket counter.

"I've got a gun," she said to the clerk upon checking in, and suddenly she was grabbed from behind by two security men. No less than seven members of the Los Angeles Police Department arrived to question her and search her, as a large crowd gathered to stare. "I realize I'm a dangerous criminal," she smiled, "But who's minding the town?"

"Don't be flip," they warned her, she could be cited for a felony. The misunderstanding was resolved after they checked her ticket, found it was paid for by National Geographic, and she was bound for a wilderness area. Lael was turned loose and the pilot kept the gun until she got off the plane in Alaska.

Another celebrated incident resulted when as a dewey-eyed neophyte in Juneau she took a photograph of a prisoner in a court house corridor. The prisoner was manacled and the judge thought publication of it would prejudice the outcome in the defendant's favor. He warned Lael if the photo were published she would be held in contempt of court.

Chuck Hoyt was editor of the Empire then and he maintained the press had a right to take photos in the corridors. He published the picture and Lael was held in contempt. The case was finally dismissed, the newspaper won.

Lael is enjoying some financial success from publication of her two books, but she laughs, she could be paid the most for the one she won't write about the private lives of Juneau's politicians.