

Small Eskimo Woman Saves Drowning Boy on Kuskokwim

"It's just like Ell," says Dr. Paul Eneboe, "to jump into the Kuskokwim River, save a kid's life and then come to work the next day without saying anything about it."

The modest heroine is Mrs. Ella Kinegak, pretty young Eskimo mother, whose valiant rescue of Timothy Evon last week is the talk of Bethel, and particularly the PHS Alaska Native Hospital where she has worked for the past 13 years.

Her heroic deed came to light when Dr. Eneboe, USPHS physician and acting service unit director at the Bethel hospital, reviewed hospital admissions.

Five-year-old Timothy's record showed he had been pulled from the river in a lifeless condition and revived by Mrs. Kinegak.

Now, except for a touch of pneumonia from aspirating water, he is in good condition. He is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Evon, formerly of Kwigillingok.

About 10 o'clock on the night of June 24, unmindful of a raging thunder and lightning storm, Mrs. Kinegak plunged to her amputations in the icy swiftness of the Kuskokwim to reach a child being carried rapidly downstream.

Only the child's hand and occasionally his head could be seen, but then the rolling current swept him out of Mrs. Kinegak's frantic reach.

With 12-year-old Ricky Strauss helping her, Mrs. Kinegak then got a boat and rowed mightily to catch up with the child. Just as Timothy was again almost within reach, he sank from sight.

The Eskimo mother fished through the water with her hands to locate the drowning child while directing Ricky's efforts. When she found the child's hand, she flung herself from the boat into the swirling river to grasp him securely.

Somehow, Mrs. Kinegak, a tiny woman, found the strength to get Timothy into the boat, but he was then lifeless and not breathing.

Again in the boat, Mrs. Kinegak turned Timothy upside down to force water from his lungs. And as Ricky rowed madly for shore, Mrs. Kinegak applied artificial respiration to Timothy.

By the time onlookers on the shore reached to help bring the child in, he was breathing and beginning to be conscious.

The Kuskokwim along which Mrs. Kinegak lives, is running full, swift and bold now with strong currents and no gentle banks for shore. It is a greedy river, deceptively silent here where it runs deep but chews the banks and is undermining the very city of Bethel.

The brave mother, who has four children including one the same age as Timothy, tells of that night this way:

"I was going to have coffee...I was holding the cups...when a girl, Fanny Black, ran in and told me there was a kid floating down the river. I started running. There was a bunch of women standing there. I could see

his little hand sticking out of the water.

"I went out in the water, but it (the current) take him away. My husband came and he tried to get a boat that was there but it was too far back. I saw another boat closer and Ricky (Strauss) and I started pushing that boat. He tried to start the motor but he couldn't. No gas.

"I told him 'Row as hard as you can! and I helped him. I just wanted to get that kid. I didn't even know whose kid it was but I could see his little hands. I could hear his funny noise...like he was trying to cry and was choking. I rowed hard as I could.

"Ricky was so nervous and he kept saying 'We're going to lose him.' I told him 'If you don't want to lose him, don't talk...row! I don't know how long it was. We were almost to him when I couldn't see him anymore. I had to feel in the water for him.

"I don't know how I got in the water, but I got him and I got him into the boat. I'm so thankful for that little helper. He was so nervous but he listened to me.

"When I got the kid into the boat he was not even crying...not breathing. I don't know what I'm doing, I guess. It seemed like there was no help available.

"I don't feel it cold and he didn't even feel heavy then (when she pulled him from the water) but at the bank I can hardly lift him out of the boat.

"I didn't really think about anything but to get his little body. I didn't know I got cuts on my arms and legs and I was so tired. I don't even know if I swim. I just had to do something!

"Afterward I got sick to think of my two little ones. Suppose it had been one of them? I couldn't get over that."

Mrs. Kinegak and her husband John, a fireman at the hospital, began to work for the institution which became the PHS hospital shortly after their marriage

(Continued on page 8)

Saves Boy . . .

(Continued from Page 7)

about 15 years ago. Both are highly regarded by fellow employees and supervisors for the quality and dedication of their work.

Originally from Kwigillingok on the north shore of Kuskokwim Bay, Mrs. Kinegak says she used to swim in her childhood days on the coast. Her father was a strong swimmer, she says, even to going beneath the ice. He taught his children the skill.

Mrs. Kinegak says she took some first aid courses some time ago at the Bethel Hospital, but this is the first emergency in which she has put to use the techniques learned there.

Like most mothers, Mrs. Kinegak has kept first aid practices at the back of her mind for household emergencies. But she had never imagined a first aid situation which would require her to leap into the fearsome Kuskokwim!