



WATER, WATER, WATER — One of the games Tanana Chiefs Conference swimming instructor Josh Weiser used this summer to get kids ready for a swimming lesson was to get them muddy, hot and ready for the water. These young Athabascans near Rampart, having seemingly crossed Death Valley crawling along on their bellies, seem anxious to jump into a cool Yukon eddy and get on with the lesson. Accidental drowning is a leading cause of death for young people in Alaska. The Tanana Chiefs Conference and the Camp Fire Girls are two organizations working to reverse the grim statistics.

—JOSH WEISER PHOTOGRAPH

Teaching kids how to swim along the Yukon

By **JOSH WEISER**

"Come in!" was the roar that went through the log cabin door in response to my three knocks. "Welcome to Rampart, young

feiler. Have a seat and belch out the good news!"

"I'm here, isn't that good enough?"

"Well, I can hardly celebrate until I know who you are and

what you're up to. Dam! My pipe went out again—you got a match?"

Sourdough Jack they called him. He'd first come to Rampart in 1918. In years past, he was a

gold miner, a trapper, he cut wood for the steam-ships, he's fished the Yukon, built fish-wheels and log cabins, he's a storyteller (of the third kind).

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teaching kids how to swim —

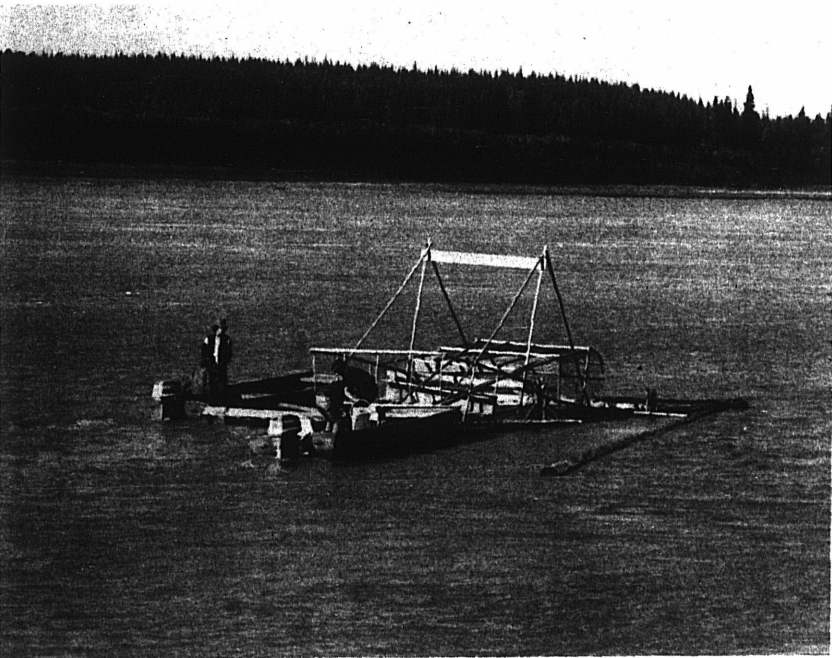
Doing the Yukon summer thing



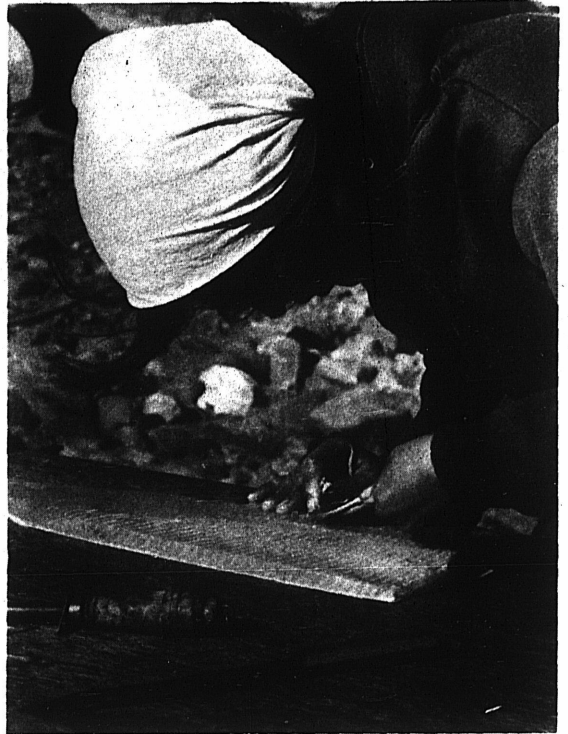
Yukon mud-baths are all a part of the fun.



A young life may be spared from the grim statistics.



Swimming skills are vital in everyday life on the Yukon.



This winter, salmon strips will help bring back memories of the Yukon summer.

Photographs by JOSH WEISER

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old Jack did it all and in his words, "All my life, I've been doing the Yukon Thing. What else is there to do in this country? But, I'll tell you, each summer the Yukon does its thing and could care less about your life or mine. It's no river to fool around with. Before you go out onto that river, you have to think first about what you're doing. I ask myself, 'Do I have enough gas? What is the condition of my boat? Do I have a paddle? Should I take some grub along? What is the weather like? Am I likely to hit large waves? Do I have matches?' I ask myself all kinds of questions. These days, a lot of young people do not ask such questions. They take the river for granted. Some will even take on the river while they're half-shot! So it doesn't surprise me that each summer, people drown in the big 'Yuk!' The river took six this summer."

That's when I piped up and said, "Say, that's why I'm here! I'm going to . . ."

He raised his hand indicating that I should hold my tongue. "I know you're a swimming teacher. I listen to KJNP and they told me all about it. You work for Tanana Chiefs in Fairbanks and this is the second year they've been teaching people to swim. You've just come from Beaver where you taught for two weeks, and before that you were in Huslia for two weeks. In Huslia, you swam in a clear water lake located about four miles outside of town. There was a loon that lived on the lake, and each day that beautiful bird helped you teach those kids. The water was sometimes on the cold side, but you always had a fire going that gave your kids salmon legs."

"Now wait a minute, how do you know all these details? How could you have known that . . ."

"Hold your mouth, boy!" he yelled, sitting up suddenly as if ready for an assault upon my curly hair. "I'm not through

reading your mind."

At this last statement, his serious expression instantly transformed itself into a roar of laughter. I was getting nervous. Nevertheless, he continued with his amazingly accurate mind-reading. "In addition to swimming, you taught first-aid and boat safety. On your off-time, you taught games for all ages from all over the world. You even had a drama class where your kids learned ways of telling and acting out stories, legends, folktales and village history. After two weeks, you picked your fanny up and flew it to Beaver where you did a repeat of Huslia. Ah, but not in a clear water lake and without the aid of a loon. You swam in a silty Yukon eddy. Still you had your fire and . . ."

"HOLD IT! HOLD ON THERE FOR ONE SECOND, YUKON JACK, . . . PLEASE!! (Sweat was rolling down my brow.) How did you know all this? You weren't there. Why, I've just met you!"

With a Cheshire Cat smile, he replied, "We old people have a few tricks which youth cannot comprehend. Let's just say that I 'caught the wind' and leave it at that."

As I turned for the door, Jack yelled out one last comment, "Josh, you come back after you recover from meeting me—OK?"

I nodded yes and passed through the door.

Man! Did I have goose-bumps over every square inch of my body. A little boy whizzed by on his shiny blue bike and yelled back over his left shoulder, "You look sick!"

After refilling my mouth with another dip of Copenhagen, my face found its normal color and I was ready to find the pulse of Rampart; to discover the people with whom I was to live and to teach swimming for the next three weeks.

Walking back towards the village, I had the warm feeling inside that it was going to be an exciting and busy three weeks.