

First of a Series:

MIKE GRAVEL ON THE NATIVE POOR: Alaska's True Disgrace

EDITOR'S NOTE: This first installment of a six-part series serializes Mike Gravel's essay, "Alaska's Native Poor" in his new book, "Jobs and More Jobs". Former State House Speaker Gravel, known for his interest in rural Alaskan problems, was the originator and guiding force behind passage of the state's Regional High School bond issue in 1966. Now a candidate for the U.S. Senate, as well as an author, Gravel deals squarely with the problems of government and people in bringing an end to the poverty of Alaska's bush country.

By Mike Gravel

This essay deals with Alaska's true disgrace — the poverty of its Native people. This is a subject being treated to descriptive analysis by news media all over the State, and it is hoped that exposure of this problem has alarmed Alaskans in every city and village of the state. This essay attempts to augment that alarm.

To Alaska's Native people, the decade of the 1960's will probably be remembered as the time when their story was told, and when other Alaskans began to listen. But in the frozen hinterlands of rural Alaska, the 1960's will also be remembered as the decade of rising expectations and the decade of inadequate solutions. For in the 1960's, our Native people have felt their first successes, but also their first frustrations.

Indeed, it matters little how well that story has been told; and it matters little how inadequate the housing is, or the employment is, or the education is; and it matters but little that the conscience of Alaska and the nation has been moved by this story, since the struggle with life and the environment continues, unabated and no better. Alaska's Native poor are still choked with poverty, and the

elements for their renewal are not yet present.

It is not the purpose here, and I should hope that it is unnecessary, to recite the appalling statistics of poverty in rural Alaska, in order to stir public sympathy. We have all been adequately startled. It is certainly more at issue to discuss what is being done, and under what pretense, what guise, in the name of progress. Because progress is a very relative term.

Let me suggest, at the outset, that there has been a dramatic shift in federal and state policy toward rural Alaskan people in the last 5 to 10 years. But prior to these changes, there is a long history of vacuous bureaucratic thinking which is comparable only to the thinking of exploiters and colonialists, and this thinking was part and parcel of U. S. policy. But the Alaskan Natives refused to repeat the travesty of the United States Indian — and began to demand a change in those policies for themselves.

Yet today, some of these very same policies live on with us like the sins of another generation, in villages scattered all over Alaska. Those who deal with rural problems either accept these policies or attempt to work around them. Yet the bulk



AT GOLOVIN — Near Nome on the Seward Peninsula. Golovin's small population turned out en masse to meet Mike Gravel in 1966. Here, he talks with youngsters in the village. —Tundra Times Photo

of them are based firmly on several presumptions, all of which are false, and these presumptions do not lend themselves to uprooting very easily. And many present-day policy-makers for rural Alaska are completely unaware of these presumptions, which form a pall around their judgments, like subliminal advertising. I am suggesting to those people, like Louis Pasteur suggested to doctors years ago, that their greatest enemy is quite invisible, and quite unrecognized by them.

For these purposes, I have assembled four basic presumptions which are presently playing roles in the continued formulation of policy in rural Alaska, where the bulk of our Native poor reside. These presumptions follow, with certain explanations and, where necessary, comment:

Everything is Actually OK

There is the strange but persisting belief that the Alaskan Native is really in pretty good shape, relatively speaking, and there is no sense getting excited about solutions to problems that have existed for centuries anyway.

One of the basic policies evolving from this dream is that minor adjustments in the governmental framework will clear the problem up. However, it must be noted here that approximately

50 years of minor adjustments have been met with only worsening conditions among Alaska's Native poor, prompting some of the best administrators in government to give up the service for something more satisfying.

The second and more significant policy is that government agencies and programs, which have been operating for years, do not need radical alteration or redirection, but just need more money and people to work for them. This is the game of "increased appropriation" played in Congressional halls every year or so.

The consequences of program-standardization, which is what we are experiencing, is that many government agencies operating in rural Alaska adopt the "stand by and wait" approach, in the hope that conditions will break their way. The result is that for all practical purposes the bureaucracy has become parasitic in some respects and the Native people have been made parasitic in other respects. Meanwhile, the population has soared, aggravating the housing, educational and health problems, and some vital areas of concern have been left untouched and unexplored, as if they didn't exist.

(To be continued,
Next Week.)

Remember Mike Gravel?

He's remembered widely in Alaska's bush country for his efforts in bringing regional high schools to rural parts of the state. While state House Speaker in 1966, then Representative Mike Gravel became interested in the education and economic problems of Alaska's bush, and pushed through a \$5.6 million bond issue to meet the costs of the program. Many Alaskans also remembered Gravel for his wide-ranging, in-depth campaign through the state's rural regions in a 1966 bid for the U.S. Congress.

In the 1966 campaign, Gravel visited more villages and met more rural Alaskans than any candidate for office in Alaska's history. Travelling by light aircraft from Yakutat to Kwethluk, to Mekoryuk, Noorvik and Gambell, Gravel travelled extensively to get a first-



Mike Gravel
hand look at Alaska's village problems.

Now a successful Anchorage real estate developer active in a booming commercial and industrial growth on the Kenai Peninsula, Gravel wrote down his thoughts on Alaska's economic problems in a collection of essays, "Jobs and More Jobs" of which Alaska's Native Poor is a part.



STEVENS VILLAGE — These girls may never get a chance to go to high school. —Tundra Times Photo



AT KIANA — Mike Gravel meets and talks local problems with Kiana people during a visit to the Kobuk River community. —Tundra Times Photo