

Theodore Ryberg
Box 5089
College, Alaska 99701

Schoolwork is Foreign to Gambell Students

By MADELYN SHULMAN
Staff Writer

Empty of children, the seventh/eighth grade classroom in Gambell looks about the same as a classroom anywhere in the

United States. In the front of the room, a green tinted blackboard is freshly washed. In the back of the room, a modern sink and counter provide hot and cold running water. Molded plastic chairs, circa mid 1960s

balance precariously each night atop functionally modern wood and metal school desks.

Outside the big picture windows, the students live in oil heated homes of driftwood, scrap lumber and tarpaper.

There, the heat comes from oil stoves. Water is hauled from the well, the heavy buckets balanced on a pole across straight Eskimo shoulders.

In the dim morning light, old women go down to the

edge of the nearby ocean to collect clams and mussels, seaweed and sea vegetables to add to their diet. Behind the anachronistic modern school building the ocean laps closer each

(Continued on page 7)



WHERE WILL SHE GO—Just entering first grade, this little girl's world in Gambell, Alaska is living her Eskimo language and culture; bounded by inadequate housing and isolation from the rest of the world. On the edge of United States territory how well does the white oriented school system serve her?

Gambell Students:

(Continued from page 1)

year.

"The older children find it difficult to relate to their schoolwork," explained Gambell principal Bob McHenry. Their books, their schoolwork, are all very much the same as the standard curricula in the lower 48. Cheerfully, the seventh graders read fifth grade editions of schoolroom Reader's Digest. They study math problems with apples and oranges and read about young people who climb trees, mow grass and live in brightly painted tree shaded houses on quiet suburban streets.

In Gambell, there is only the ocean, the endless pebbled beach on which the village is built, the towering long, low mountain, the walrus hunts and whaling boats, the fisherman and the welfare checks.

Next week, 36 of the children from the Gambell school will go to Oregon—for six weeks in another world. The entire third, fourth and fifth grades from the school are going. For six weeks, the children will be scattered in classrooms amidst other white and Indian students. A special fund will provide new clothes bought in Oregon and designed to make them blend into the local classrooms.

Paid for by Title I funds, the trip is part of a cultural enrichment program—to help the children to "relate" to their schoolwork.

"Up to the fourth, grade the the kids are on an even keel," explained McHenry. "After that bilingual kids have a tendency to 'drop off' due to an inability to relate to their schoolwork."

Most of the children who will go on the trip speak Eskimo in their homes. A few have been to Anchorage. Many have never been off St. Lawrence Island. They will go strange places—Nome, Anchorage, Juneau, Sitka and Oregon. For some it is like a forthcoming trip into heaven, described one parent.

"She talks about nothing else," one mother said about her little girl who is going to Oregon. Till the wee hours of the morning, excited children whisper in soft Siberian Eskimo dialect about a trip into another world. It is eagerly awaited, partially feared. One question remains. After their trip, living with rural families, seeing the way people live outside, what will the 36 Eskimo children think of their village? The poverty? The ever-present wind and sea?

Doug Crispin, the brand new seventh grade teacher in Gambell worried about this effect. This year, he and his wife are new to the village.

Methodically, he can point to problems in his curriculum. A seventh grade science book is beyond his youngsters' experience. Their reading material is foreign.

One night during my stay in Gambell, I watched a seventh grade youngster eagerly reading a children's book, translated from Swedish, about two Eskimo children in Greenland. As an aunt read the book, the entire family listened intently. Somehow, the Readers Digest doesn't get taken home that way.

"How can I convince these kids that they should continue school and go on to high school asks Doug Crispin. "Why should they?" If they become hunters and ivory carvers, like their fathers, what use is high school. Many children go away to school to Mt. Edgecumbe, Nome High School, Anchorage. Many return. They drop out.

ISEGR researcher Judith Kleinfeld is one of a team of researchers studying dropouts from the boarding home program. The dropout rate for Gambell students is high—espe-

cially in Anchorage and at Mt. Edgecumbe. They seem to adjust better in Nome.

Principal Bob McHenry is trying to start a ninth grade class in Gambell, using the services of a local missionary who is a certified high school teacher. Most people in the village agree with the idea. The idea of their children having an alternative—not having to stay home and do nothing or go away to school—is very attractive.

Last year, the idea stopped at Nome school board. In the meantime, children continue coming home from school, joining the young people in the village who don't quite know what they are doing. Last week, Wien agent Gerald Kanooka, planned to go to Nome for a BIA meeting, and inquire about the chances for starting a ninth grade in Gambell.

In her first grade and "beginner" classroom, Mary Crispin teaches children who may or may not understand her lessons in English. She and her husband spent two years teaching in the Peace Corps. She is used to speaking with large, enthusiastic gestures.

As their lesson last week, the first graders and "beginners" composed story books. They drew the pictures and told their stories to Mrs. Crispin who wrote them down. The books are filled with houses, brothers and sister, wild animals. Often, they have few words—symptomatic of how much that child can express in English. One little girl, a sad eyed brown haired child writes brilliantly imaginative stories. Other children struggle.

"There is a great difference in the children among those who went to Head Start and those who did not," explained Mrs. Crispin in classifying her "beginners" versus first graders. Head Start teachers are all native women who have attended a special course in Fairbanks. Most have high school diplomas.

Next year, the first grade in Gambell may be part of a new bilingual program, similar to that in the Bethel area. Teachers assistant Susan Campbell is being groomed for the role of Eskimo teacher. Together, she and Mrs. Crispin plan lessons, discuss methods and motivation.

Many Gambell children come to school early in the morning—to wash up in the school bathroom, one of the few in town with running water. After school, except on nights when there are special classes, the building is locked. Often, the children play on the front stop, finding shelter from the ever-present Arctic Ocean winds in the sheltered area next to the big wooden doors.

"Of course its an alien element in this town," comments a BIA teacher. "But its been here so long it's a part of the village. The people accept it.

The question remains whether the children each day compare their tiny homes to the brightly lit school. On their newly forming scale of values, how will their traditional life and culture place?

