

WILLIE HENSLEY CAMPAIGNS

Eskimo Legislator Springs Into Politics Via Simple Background

By KENT BRANDLEY

He was born in a shack on the fringe of the frontier and educated with the hill folks of Tennessee. Then he went off to Washington, D.C.

Nope, it's not Davy Crockett or Abe Lincoln, but Alaska's Willie Hensley, and he may be the first Eskimo ever to serve in the U.S. Congress.

The dynamic young legislator from remote Kotzebue is looking more and more like a winner according to the statewide polls. Time magazine declares the 33-year-old graduate of George Washington University "has a better than even chance."

Because Alaska is unique, says Hensley, the 49th State's lone Representative must also be unique. "Who ever is there is going to be visible," Hensley says of that one vote among 435 Congressmen. "And visibility sometimes means power."

Hensley was born in a drafty tar paper shack in Kotzebue in 1951. There were about 500 people there then, and no electricity or plumbing.

He was adopted by his grandparents, John and Priscilla Hensley, who eked out a subsistence living by hunting and fishing. While Kotzebue was the hub in his early life, the Hensleys actually lived about 15 miles out of town on the Little Noatak River.

they hunted caribou and caught sheefish under the ice.

During the colder months the family lived in a sod hut at Itkatuk (that means shallow water in Eskimo). When the sod house became too damp in the springtime, they moved upriver where the muskrats were, and lived in tents. In midsummer, they would move back to the coast to fish and hunt seal.

The family kept busy drying whitefish, catching sheefish and rendering seal oil. It was a tough living. When the adults miscalculated, the family might go for days without food.

Willie recalls one time his sister, his grandmother and himself were the only ones left in town. The food was all gone. The children slept a lot, and Willie recalls he thought he was dreaming when he heard an outboard motor approaching. The others had at last arrived through the spring breakup with a boat load of food and other goods.

The Congressional candidate lived in the Kotzebue area until he was about 13. He went sporadically to school. Sometimes school didn't fit into the lifestyle too well. But Willie was

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Senator Willie Hensley and his wife Abby.

His grandfather used a chicken wire fish trap to catch sacks of whitefish in the fall. In winter

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more curious and perhaps a little brighter than the average youngster.

His first teacher, and an early influence on his life was Eunice Logan, who taught for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Mrs. Logan, now retired and living in Juneau, still remembers young Willie.

Virginia Powell, a black woman who Willie remembers fondly, was his third grade teacher. He actually promoted himself to her class simply by showing up because his closest friends were there. She never realized for a month that he skipped the second grade, but by then she was convinced he was bright enough to remain with her. Mrs. Powell still teaches at Mt. Edgecumbe at Sitka.

In those days, if an Eskimo child wanted to go beyond the eighth grade, he either went to Mt. Edgecumbe High or he didn't go at all, unless he was lucky enough to have relatives in Nome or Fairbanks. But for most Native youngsters the eighth grade was the end of formal schooling.

A Baptist missionary named Dick Miller had other ideas for Willie. If he could travel 1,000 miles for a high school education, why not make it 3,000? Miller helped Willie enroll in a Baptist owned community school that would take him for \$400 a year, room and board included.

It was a strange place for an Eskimo boy, with most of the students coming from the hills of Tennessee. Willie stuck it out until he graduated.

Although he was of small stature, Willie was neither too light to fight nor too thin to win. He played left half back (No. 45) for the high school team.

"I was a speedy little mutha, too man," he laughs. He also excelled as a broad jumper, lettering in football, basketball and track.

Not only an athlete, Hensley was also a top student, and graduated with scholastic honors.

From Tennessee, he returned to Fairbanks where he attended the University of Alaska for two years and studied business. He then went to George Washington University (four blocks from the White House) in Washington, D.C. There he switched to economics and graduated with a BA degree in political science.

He returned home in 1966 to do graduate work at the University of Alaska. At that time, the Tundra Times was trying to get Native people into politics. Having been in Washington the past three years, where politics was part of his daily diet, Willie responded.

He knew Senators Bob Bartlett and Ernest Gruening and Congressman Ralph Rivers. He announced as a Democrat for the State House and was elected the State House and was elected from Kotzebue in 1966. He was re-elected in 1968 and became State Democratic Party Chairman in 1969.

Meanwhile, Willie considered dropping politics and becoming a lawyer. He attended the University of New Mexico Law School during the summer of 1967, and UCLA law school during the summer of 1968.

But in 1970, he ran for the State Senate, seeking to represent the vast sparsely settled Arctic and northwestern region which comprises the top one third of Alaska.

In the State Legislature he obtained funds for eight new high schools and an elementary school in Nome. Several airports,

a \$2 million port for Nome, a \$2.5 million pioneer's home for Kotzebue and funding for two broadcast stations at Kotzebue and Barrow are also to his credit.

He sponsored and had passed a rent control measure designed for heavy oil impact areas. He was instrumental in "developing cities" legislation, and the Historical Preservation Act.

Hensley served as chairman of the Health, Education and Welfare Committee on the House side and as a member of the powerful Senate Finance Committee.

He was vice chairman of the Committee on Community and Regional Affairs in the Senate and served on the Joint Pipeline Impact Committee. This committee designed the basic regulatory and tax structure for oil and gas development in Alaska.

Hensley was also instrumental in drafting the state's right of-way leasing act, which created the Pipeline Commission, a body with fierce teeth.

"I want the people of Alaska to benefit from this experience," he says. Stressing issues, Hensley says one of the main questions is "Whether we are going to control these forces in a fashion that will improve life in Alaska in the future."

Hensley feels his Republican opponent, Don Young of Fort Yukon, is not independent enough when it comes to the oil companies. "Oil companies have controlled whole countries," Hensley warns.

"Who can deal with the issues more effectively?" asks Hensley. He says the answer can be based on his record and that of his opponent. "Young hasn't adequately taken care of the problems of the state. No initiatives have been taken."

As for Young's claim to credit for pipeline legislation, Hensley says the groundwork was done by others, and that U.S. Senator Mike Gravel deserves most of the real credit. "Young opposed the key amendment by Gravel. He lacked faith and confidence."

Hensley says Young is still avoiding issues in the campaign and simply asks voters to "Keep Young."

"But why? Ask Hensley. He says the state's energy needs and housing needs are critical. He points to power outages in villages and towns around Alaska and to population increases and economic woes.

Hensley says transportation is an important issue. He suggests a "relatively minor" additional federal subsidy be given directly to the Alaska Transportation Commission for distribution to air taxi operators to enable them to give increased service to Alaskan villages. Improved mail contracts could also help the taxi operators, Hensley says.

He would push for a railroad connection from Alaska, linking the state with the lower U.S.

through Canada.

Problems of all Alaskans are similar, Hensley maintains. Housing, water, and sewer as well as energy are statewide concerns. "The challenge is doing everything possible to solve these problems."

"Alaska has to have an ag-

gressive Congressman," says Willie. "As the lone man on the house side he has a lot of area to cover. He has to be aggressive and show some initiative."

Hensley says a candidate must give insight into where he is

going in order to provide some consistent pattern in his moves.

"The real challenge is to maintain the independence in our state actions in economic and industrial growth. There are many more forces at work on Alaska now than we used to have."