

# Power Pole at Village's Ancestral Burial Grounds—

## Village of Nenana Protests Presence of Power Line Across Graveyard

By JACQUELINE GLASGOW  
Staff Writer

NENANA — It was September 7, 1972, the birth day of a chief. Yet the talk was not of birth days but of death days — of graves and bones, of old battles and stillborn babies, of

potlatches for the dead, and of boats that crossed the river carrying the dead to a burial ground long, long ago in the interior of Alaska.

It was a fall day suddenly turned chilly. The young chief of the village of Nenana, Mitch Demientieff, that day twenty

years of age, was protesting the presence of a power line in the ancestral Native burial place across the river.

The line runs parallel to the railroad track with two poles in the immediate vicinity of the cemetery. One pole is directly in the center, among the graves.

Most of the plots have wooden markers and neat white fences but many are weathered wood with names forever lost and many are no more than gentle humps of unmarked grass-covered ground.

A public land order issued by the Assistant Secretary of the Interior in August of 1960 withdraws all public land "customarily used by Indians, Eskimos, or Aleuts as burial places for their dead."

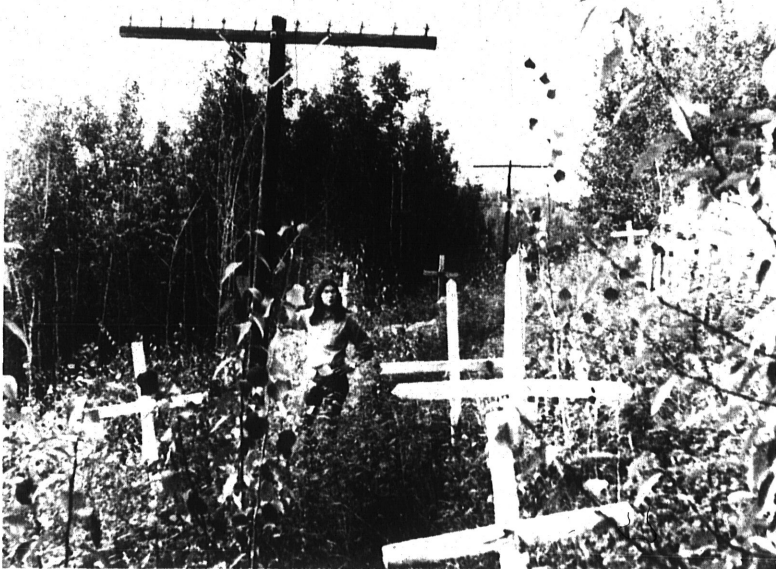
The withdrawal includes a "strip of land 330 feet in width surrounding the perimeter of each cemetery for the proper care, upkeep, and administration thereof."

Withdrawals are subject to existing easements and other "valid rights."

No one has yet unearthed the exact date the power poles were put in, nor exactly who owns them, and who holds the right of way.

Alaska Railroad has a right of way for 100 feet on either side of the track, and a 1918 map based on a survey made in 1916 shows the approximate course of the power line as "U. S. Tel."

(Continued on page 6)



UNUSUAL GRAVE MARKER — A mystery power pole in the midst of the

cemetery intrudes upon the quiet hillside. —Photo by JACQUELINE GLASGOW

# Power Pole on Burial Grounds...

(Continued from page 1)

Robert Jenks, land consultant for Tanana Chiefs, believes this is the route of the old telegraph line that was to have crossed the Bering Straits to Siberia.

Early attempts at a trans-Atlantic cable had been unsuccessful and engineers believed a cable under a shorter stretch of water might be feasible. After much of the line was built toward Siberia, a technological break-through occurred, the trans-Atlantic cable was completed, and the Bering Straits plan abandoned.

It is probable that the line was subsequently converted to government use and turned over to the railroad some years later.

According to older Natives now living in Nenana, the cemetery was formerly located directly across the river on the opposite bank of the townsite. Bodies were carried across by boat and buried close to shore.

When the railroad was built, it was relocated further uphill and track laid along the shoreline.

"I think it's terrible that the railroad ever moved the graves," said one of the older men of the village. "Some of them they just blasted out of the hill."

The present cemetery can be reached from Nenana by crossing a modern highway bridge, turning right along a short gravel road and climbing a steep hill.

It can also be reached by walking along the wooden railroad trestle over the river, past the spot where a marker and a little house announce that President Warren G. Harding in 1920 drove the golden spike that completed the Alaska Railroad. And again climbing an impossibly steep cliff.

When one hears the full story of the Native cemetery at Nenana, one might well ask: Into whose heart did President Harding drive the golden spike? In all likelihood, it may have penetrated ancient Indian bones.

Because many of the oldest

graves were unmarked, it was not uncommon for work crews through the years to uncover human remains.

Alaska Railroad's general manager, Walker S. Johnston, is investigating the history of the power line and removal of the original cemetery, which as yet he can find no documentation of in their files.

When notified of the conflict over the pole, Johnston indicated that this was the first knowledge he had of the problem.

"We'd be happy to look into it," he said, "and even if it isn't our pole, do whatever we can about it. For some reason," he added, "it's hard to convince people that the railroad is part of the community."

New to Alaska this year, Johnston has had 36 years experience with the railroads in the states and said he is not unfamiliar with problems of this nature.

"We have had dealings with the Winnebago, Crow, and Cheyenne along our railroad."

"Here's a social problem," he said. "Just count me in. We'll work on it."

Mitch Demientieff is not concerned about which was there first, the power line or the railroad. The Indian burial ground was there long before either of them.

The village is an old, old site. Former chief and longtime council member Paul George, uncle to the present chief, re-

(Continued on Page 10.)

# Power Pole at Village's Burial Grounds . . .

(Continued from page 6)

calls stories of old battles with Eskimos who stole their women and of a fierce warrior called Esau who was barely over four feet tall.

Uncle Paul also remembers the flu epidemic of 1919. "Many, many people died," he said. "In that time, there was not even time to build a coffin. The bodies were wrapped in canvas and put in the ground."

"This used to be a big community, but many people died of influenza. A few women survived, two or three men, and two children out of the whole village who for some reason didn't get sick."

Those who make up the village now came there from many other places. "A lot from the Wood River area, Holy Cross, Ft. Yukon, Cantwell; David Esau and Margaret John from Tolvanna. Susie Boatman has probably lived in the village longer than anyone."

Burial in Nenana today is done by family and friends. It is a community activity.

"Years ago," said Uncle Paul, "they used to cover them with birch bark. In Northway a long time ago, they used to

burn the dead. In Nulato and Kaltag the sleds, guns, and whatever a man owned were put into a little shack on top of the grave. No one was supposed to touch a dead man's things."

There was always a big potlatch when someone died.

"They don't do it because they're happy someone died," he said, "but to comfort the family."

As recently as last year a very large potlatch was held in Nenana. Potlatches are usually held in the Native Association Hall. There is always a gathering, if only for tea, coffee, and sandwiches. On Sept. 7 there was to be the burial of an infant who died at birth. The village would drop in later at the home of the family.

"That's another thing we need," said young Demientieff, "A clinic! We lost two babies this year."

Asked how many Native deaths occur in the village in a year's time, Mitch shook his head. "I don't know. We bury a lot of them."

One of the mothers who lost a baby could not climb the

steep hill to the cemetery for the burial. An old man who lost his wife was also too weak for the rough path uphill.

Part of the year it is possible to drive almost to the cemetery, but one road is closed in winter and the other goes only part way, and for some distance has to be traversed by foot.

"Picture six men trying to keep in step carrying a heavy coffin along railroad ties," said Mitch. "Then you've still got the hill to make."

Add snow and ice and the task becomes near impossible. The present cemetery has expanded upward. The older graves are mostly lower, newer ones higher.

Demientieff pointed farther along the cliff by the cemetery to two tall spruce trees close together, dark and brooding among the lighter golds of the autumn hillside.

"That's where I'd like to be buried when I die," he said, "right there between those two spruce trees. Sometimes I have to get away by myself and I walk up here on the hill or along the river. Sometimes I climb up and sit right there

between those two trees and think about things."

"Those poles have been there a long time. Maybe nobody ever thought about it. One day I'm standing there and I think about it. But I don't make up my mind what to do right away."

An old Athabascan saying is that a good chief is a slow thinker. The chief of Nenana is not a young man in a hurry, but after much thinking, he has come to a decision about the burial ground of his people.

"The pole must come down," said the young chief.

Several men of the village have considered taking a chain saw to it but are awaiting the outcome of voluntary action by the railroad and/or whoever owns it.

In the book "Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee," author Dee Brown quotes a warrior called Shunkaha Napin, Wolf Necklace:

"I never want to leave this country; all my relatives are lying here in the ground, and when I fall to pieces I am going to fall to pieces here."

Many relatives of the people of Nenana are lying in the ground.