

Children Write About Deplorable Housing

WASHINGTON, D.C.—“The wind blows hard and comes under our house, up the cellar and pushes up the old linoleum. It also gets around thirty degrees below zero, with winds gusting up to forty mph.”

That was the way an eighth grade student at Covenant High School in Unalakleet,

Alaska, described his home in a letter to Senator E.L. Bartlett (D-Alaska).

As a project the student and his 12 classmates wrote Senator Bartlett about housing conditions in Unalakleet, a small fishing village on Norton Sound in Western Alaska, less than 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle.

They wrote to Senator Bartlett, because, as a 13-year-old boy said, “... you are the one who is trying to pass the bill about the Housing Program.”

The student was referring to a bill introduced by Bartlett last session which would establish a special native housing program in Alaska.

Senator Bartlett said he would show the letters to the members of the Senate Housing Subcommittee when they consider the bill.

“The letters, better than could the most eloquent spokesman, describe the shocking housing conditions in our native villages and the hopes of the natives for a better way of life,” Senator Bartlett said.

One student wrote, in a poignant understatement, “Our house is only 20' x 18' and is a one-room house. It is very small for a family of eight. Sometimes when we come home from basketball or someplace it is very cold.”

More than one eighth grader expressed concern over rough wooden floors in many of the houses.

“When the children are running around barefoot, they get splinters from the wooden floors,” one correspondent explained.

But the difficulty in keeping houses warm was the main concern.

One boy wrote, “The floors are like big ice cakes when we step on it. We all want to get up in a nice warm house.”

Another said, “Some find it hard to heat up their houses which have cracks in the floor and walls where the snow blows in and makes it even harder yet to heat.”

And “...when there is little heat often it will escape through tiny cracks where there isn't much insulation.”

The effect of the poor housing on the village was not lost on the children.

“The people that have gone away and come back to visit find that they haven't a place to stay, so they usually return to the place they have come from.”

The same letter stated in a sentence the reason why necessary repairs are not made.

“The people who have lived in their old house are sometimes too poor to get materials to build another house.”

When Senator Bartlett introduced his bill he explained that not only were the people

of Alaska's native villages too poor in many instances to build new homes, but that existing federal housing programs were inapplicable because federal building standards were too high for construction costs in Alaska.

“The basic problem is not a need to build handsome, airy structures which might be possible in other areas of the nation. The basic problem is that our native people need warm shelters, and you cannot get any more basic than that,” Senator Bartlett observed.

A 13-year-old girl summed up the feeling of the students simply with the observation, “I think many people in this village would be happier if they had better housing.”

Twelve students favored enactment of a housing program. The thirteenth student, while supporting a government program, thought the residents of Unalakleet would “appreciate their houses more” if they built their own homes rather than if the government did “it all for them.”

Under the Senator's bill, as much work as possible would be done by the residents.