

**"Forgotten People of the Modern World" -**

# **Neglect takes toll in Chevak**

*Editor's Note - A study commissioned by the House Finance Committee of the Alaska Legislature, released in December, pointedly reveals that air transportation in rural Alaska provides a lesser level of service than bush residents may have expected to receive twenty years ago. The sad shape of rural air service is graphically described in terms of marginal airstrips, disappearing navigational aids, woeful maintenance, and a cost to consumers of air travel at three times the national average in village Alaska.*

*This report, written by the Vice Principal at the Chevak Day School, describes the frustration experienced by rural residents at the condition of the airport - the lifeblood of the community, and the sense of abandonment the rural Alaskan feels in an age of "surplus oil revenues." The author first wrote the story in the local "Chupik" Eskimo dialect, and then translated it into English for the Tundra Times.*

**By JOHN F. PINGAYAK**

In this modern age who ever heard of people

clearing an airport with manpower - mainly with shovels? Several times the village of Chevak did just that very thing.

Chevak is located one hundred and five air miles west of Bethel. There are approximately five hundred people living in the community. There is a big Chevak Company Corporation store, an elementary and high school with one hundred seventy-five students, one public telephone, shower and laundry, clinic, a big recrea-

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tional center owned by Chevak Company Corporation, also hardware store, a traditional council building, village council building and AVEC generators.

People in the village mostly are subsistence hunters, fishermen and trappers. This year the people hardly got dried salmon for winter food, which most people depend on. Food is scarce this year because of the flood we had in the late fall of 1979. Some families diet on blackfish and whitefish. Still others who are unable to subsist successfully, buy canned food and once in a while fresh produce from the store. Believe me, some people are hungry right here in the village, and maybe in other villages too.

Our airport is greatly depended on by the whole community of our village. Since we

don't have enough meat, fresh produce canned goods, the people need a good airport which they can rely on through the fall and winter into spring and summer. Sometimes the airport is closed for weeks during the fall and in spring, because its poor construction results in erosion and softening due to spring thaw.

With approximately five hundred people, the village members are constantly going to hospitals for various clinics, check-ups and other medical emergencies. Others go to meetings and training. Every single day, weather permitting, we have a plane land here. The people therefore depend on the airport for their own livelihood.

The U.S. Mail depends on our airport three to four times a week, weather permitting, otherwise, if the checks and the money for the people do not come in, the houses of these

people will be cold and sickness would result; also without money a lot of children will be hungry. Since a lot of foods are expensive other families depend on mail services for food orders and other important goods for their family needs.

Our airport is constructed with a mixture of sand and mud and nothing else. It is dangerous, because of its condition, and also the construction. For this day of age, its more of a primitive type of airport. Another word, no technology is involved, for example: lighting and pavement.

Last year, we were hurt, saddened and filled with loneliness in the time of rejoicing, laughing and exchanging of gifts — Christmas Season — when a charter plane carrying students from St. Mary's high school came home for Christmas crashed several hundred feet from the airport.

Two girls killed and five others including the pilot were hospitalized, one girl is now paralyzed.

In memory of the tragedy, Wayne F. Hill, store manager called for volunteers to clear the airport on December of 1979. Over sixty people came and helped clear the airport despite the storm we had. The temperature was below zero with blowing snow and winds of about thirty to forty miles per hour. Its beautiful to see people still concerned for their fellow human beings in times of need. This is truly the Eskimo tradition: people helping one another. There had been other times when volunteers were called to clear

the airport and people still came. Our one caterpillar is no use broken. Several times men come here to fix it, but it breaks after a few hours of use.

How long must we wait for our airport to be repaired and reconstruct it with safety devices? When the rural villages ask for anything from the state, how long must we wait? Where are our so called representatives and senators of Alaska? How come when bigger cities ask for things they get what they want right away even they are expensive? We, the people of this village feel that we are among the Forgotten People of this Modern World.