

Youths pursue old interests

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times

Chipmunk rock and roll blasts out from the loudspeakers as third-grader Rosella Bartels zooms past the "Tyonek Chiefs" painting on the wall, rounds a corner and flies into the bleachers at the side of the gymnasium. "What size do you wear?" she asks a white stranger from Anchorage as she grasps the bench in front of her with both hands, her feet roll back and forth on the floor.

"Seven-and-a-half," he answers.

"We have that size! Come and skate!" she implores. "I'm too clumsy."

"Eeeay! He's too clumsy!" she jokes to a friend. There is no hostility in the joke, just a feeling of fun, and "let's all have a good time!" Quickly

she pushes off from the bench and joins her friends circling the gymnasium floor, who seem to be having a very good time.

These are the children of Tyonek. The greater part of them have gathered together every Tuesday and Thursday night for the past three weeks to roller-skate in the gymnasium of Bartlett School, where approximately 90 students from kindergarten through the 12th grade attend class.

Despite being caught in the middle of a dispute which has attracted national attention, these children are interested in the same things as are other young people across the world.

The dispute has been blown across the nation and perhaps the world by press reports. It has convinced many people outside of Tyonek that racism

rules the village and that white folk who walk the streets after dark do so at the risk of their lives.

"I come every night, because it's fun!" says sixth grader Betsy Chuit. "You can meet all your friends here," adds Vicki Chuit, fourth grade. "We talk about stuff. I can't tell you what stuff!" Boys, perhaps? Or is that still a year or two down the road? What do fourth grade girls talk about?

There is no evidence of racism here. The few white children of the village mingle freely with Indian youngsters. The visitor from Anchorage is greeted with great warmth and without suspicion, and Doug Emery, the white school teacher helping to chaperone the event, is treated with respect and fondness by the students,

and treats them likewise. He feels quite safe walking Tyonek's streets, day or night.

When the young son of another white teacher tumbles to the floor, two Indian children only slightly larger than himself quickly skate to his aid, lift him to his feet and roll away, arm in arm, on both sides of him until he regains his balance and his confidence.

There is little, if any, discussion of the Tyonek controversy among the students. Ask one about it and a typical response is a shrug of the shoulders and an "I don't know what to think about it." They have more important issues to discuss: boys and girls, skating tricks, whether or not bubblegum chewing should be allowed on the skating floor.

Yet bad fallout from the controversy surrounding them will be hard for these children to avoid. "They're the ones being hurt," says Bonnie McCord, vice-president of the village council and coordinator of the recreation program under which the skating has been organized.

"They're being drug into it, like it or not. A lot of them have been trying to ignore it, by not being a part of it. But basketball season is close. They're going to be going to different places, like Ninilchik, and Homer. A lot are wondering what they're going to be faced with. There's going to be friction. It's sad. There doesn't have to be!"

McCord's opinion is echoed by key people on both sides of the issue: they all agree they want the children and youth to just be allowed to go about the business of growing up. Yet still the battle rages.

And still the students go about life in their own way. "The Tyonek Flyer" is published and written by students in journalism classes at Bartlett School.

There is no mention of the Tyonek dispute in the paper, but some of the students do talk about things that concern them. One writes that the "most awful thing that ever happened to me" was "getting put on restriction for two



One skater gets a helping hand with his skates.



Bruce Puckett hooks on to the end of a chain of other students of Tyonek's Bartlett School. Despite the dispute surrounding them, the young people of Tyonek seem most interested in pursuing a normal, youthful, life

PHOTOS BY BILL HESS

weeks."

To another it was "when we played a 'no-loss' basketball season, then in the tournament, we lost one game." Still another described "When my sister got into a car wreck and I almost lost my favorite relative," as being the worst moment of a still-young life.

time.

Others wrote about their hopes and aspirations in life. "To become a professional basketball player on the Los Angeles Lakers," said one. "To be the richest person in the world," another longed. "To be the owner of an island of beautiful girls," another re-

peated a fantasy frequently dwelt upon by nearly half the population of the world.

"I am happy when everything goes right," wrote one student. "When my friends and I don't argue, And when it's a beautiful day out on a weekend. And I am also happy when everyone else is happy."

"I am happy when I am with my friends because they are crazy and lots of fun to be with," wrote still another. "They do weird and crazy things. When I am with my friends it's like I'm on an adventure. No two things are the same."

Others wrote about the

things in life which scare them. "I am scared when a bear is outside the door when I open it," said one. "When my mom calls me using my full name. And when my older brother finds out that I borrowed something of his, without asking. I am also scared when the teacher takes my test out first and has a very grim face."

"I hate it," added another. "When you say good morning and get a scowl back or when you wave and get no response." "I hate hugs," complained another. "Bugs are so creepy, crawlly and no good. They have long legs and bite you when you sleep." are really important to the youth of Tyonek. Along with rollerskating, the rollerskating program actually came into being largely through the efforts

of the students.

"I think one of the students in the committee last year was talking about it," explains Tim Chuit, the freshman president of this year's student committee. That talk turned to action, and with the help of McCord, the school the North Kenai Recreation Board and others, skates were finally brought in and the dream of a student became reality.

"It gives us something to do on Tuesday and Thursday nights," adds Barbara Widdfield, a high schooler and member of the committee. Eleventh grader Cyndi McCord skates about with a whistle hanging from her neck and a sharp eye on the other skaters, especially the smaller ones.

"I just pick up little kids who fall down," she explains her role. "I really enjoy it."

The committee also chooses the music to be played, mostly top-40 hits. And some Chipmunk rock and roll. The committee also sets the rules, designed to keep order in the gym, and to keep anyone from getting hurt.

Fourth grader Florence Chickalusion describes skating as great fun, but she is not totally happy with the rules. "You can't do stunts and stuff," she explains. "And you can't chew gum." This is a political issue of which Chickalusion speaks with great enthusiasm. "'Cause," she explains, "I like blowing bubbles!"

These are the important things. Yet the pressure is still there. One young Tyonek school journalist wrote down a favorite fantasy: "That everyone in the world would get along and they wouldn't fight over anything!"



Children come to the skating nights held at Bartlett School not only to develop a new skill but to associate with their peers of many ages.



Being a new skater, she is a bit shaky. She'll get the hang of it.

When the announcement "fancy skating" was shouted over the bullhorn, most skaters quit, but not this one, who tried his feet at skating backwards.