

Profile of Stebbins Village near mouth of Yukon River

—Photos by MARJORIE VANDERVELDE

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Charley Steve, and other old timers, can recall when there was no village between Sourdough Point and Washington Bluff. There was only an Eskimo home or two along that Bering Sea coast at Norton Sound where Stebbins, Alaska, now stands.

Mrs. Rosy Matthias, kneeling to cut out slippers from sealskin, on the floor, straightened up and said, "My folks lived here when the Nelson Island Eskimos settled here."

Eventually Rosy had married Austin Matthias, an exceptional hunter whose prowess was inherited by their sons. And Rosy now teaches two daughters to sew skins and make baskets.

This is the life pattern. (Population 180 when families aren't at hunting camp or fish camp.) A rise on the tundra terrain, that bounds the off-sea side of the village, is called Steven's Point. Some say the name Stebbins derives from Steven's as the Eskimos would pronounce the word.

Why did Nelson Islanders select this section of coast for a settlement?

Stan Jack and Charley Steve agree on two reasons: (1) Great piles of driftwood wash ashore, including logs with which to build cabins. And, for burning when stove oil gives out. Some say the logs come from up the Yukon, but as long as they are there, the people don't care where they come from. (2) Fathers of the present generation at Stebbins figured it would be convenient to be near St. Michael 12 miles away by tundra, longer by sea, where they could buy white-man canned goods and ammunition.

Some of the original log cabins are still in use at Stebbins. Some BIA (Bureau Indian Affairs) housing is appearing, with more to come. And one prefab Capp house in under construction! As for the BIA plywood precut houses, time may prove them less functional than the log cabins. At least the NWT Housing Corp. is reverting to log construction which they believe more durable and maintenance-free.

Stebbins' thin line of houses that hug the coast are separated just enough for the first row to act as a snow fence, piling mountainous roller-coaster drifts in the only, long-and-narrow street. Uncut by a path of any kind, this serves as an obstacle course for the snowmobiles, called snow machine or snow machinuk. There are no words in the Eskimo language for this wondrous vehicle, nor for its mysterious internal parts. So if one wishes to refer to them in Eskimo, "uk" is added; as in "pistonuk" or "enginuk"; or you fall off the "damnuuk thinguk!"

Knee-high rubber boots are essential for everyone in the village, for they must spend two-thirds of their lives plodding through those "main street" snow drifts without benefit of paths. Or, falling through the melting drifts into ice water.

There are no roads in this region, but something better: great open expanses of tundra and sea, across which the snow machines can zoom on ice and snow the better part of any year. Seal hunters hitch a canoe to their snow machine and drag it out to open water, when the

break-up comes. Or they hitch on a long sled, loaded with camp equipment, when they travel to hunt waterfowl on the Yukon marshes. Or, big game farther up the rivers.

But Andrew, a young hunter with good aim, keeps his rather-famous dog team. And Paul Pete, also an expert hunter, drove his dog team until five or six years ago. Through the short summer, boats powered by outboard motors are used. Charley Steve sometimes uses a 50 hp Mercury AND an 84 hp Evinrude. In season, some use their boats for commercial fishing.

The people depend on wild meat and fish for the bulk of their food. But there is now a steel-structure store, and a few homes sell canned goods and stove oil.

Stebbins owns a herd of reindeer kept on nearby Stuart Island. It becomes a problem to keep herdsmen who will protect the animals from wolves, especially in hunting season when the herdsmen, too, feel the call of the wild.

There is now a small clinic, staffed by Jessie Katcheak, trained as a health-aide and with a phone to the "outside". During the year a doctor visits the village. But Charley Steve still knows the old cures. He makes up batches of medicine from a plant that grows wild in



An Eskimo dance at Stebbins.

watched Ignatius and his father, Austin, head for the sea with harpoons and guns. They returned after midnight with three of the big seals. The next day there was plenty of raw liver dipped in seal oil; as well as plenty of fried blood-red meat.

A well-equipped BIA school has come to Stebbins. The teachers become an integral part of the community. The school brings employment to some. Gerty Pete, another sewer of skins, cooks the school lunches. Louis, the maintenance man, keeps the building shipshape. Stebbins women serve as teacher-aids.

Village men find employment with the state forest fire fighters in season, usually working out of McGrath. Sometimes they are called "outside" to help fight fires in Oregon or Washington. Freddie Pete, Stebbins' smoke jumper, has 60 jumps to his credit. But he'd rather race his Skidoo across the tundra.

In 1970 a fire fighting plane carrying 27 Stebbins men, crashed killing four. There is a memorial to them in the village cemetery. And, not far away

frozen whitefish.

Of all the dances, at potlatch and otherwise, the Stebbins matriarch Ida Bouchan is considered the authority on Eskimo dancing. Her hand movements are graceful as the "hula hands". Ida is also a long-time midwife, assisting recently with the difficult birth of Ronna Henry's baby. Christina Steve is also a village midwife, having presided at births for many years. Most women are now flown out to hospitals for childbirth, but some choose to remain at home. It is not uncommon for babies to be given away; nor for children to be informally adopted, in this village.

One of Stebbins' cutest babies has to be two-year-old Anthony (Nick) Begich Jack, named for the Alaska representative Nich Begich who was killed in that plane crash with Hale Boggs. I called this 2-year-old by his middle name until he started calling himself "Begich". He's such a hardy little guy that he plays in the snow bottomless and barefoot—then climbs to the kitchen table and delivers long, senatorial speeches. He's going to make a great politician for Stebbins and Alaska some day.

Draped outside Stebbins homes on drying racks, and fanned by sea breezes, are the stretched sealskins, reindeer hides, braids of Tomcod fish, halved salmon and trout, and long "jerky" strips of big game. Taste for birds varies regionally. At Wainwright, we're told, the people eat snowy owls; and at St. Lawrence Island, gulls. But in the Stebbins region they prefer cranes.

To be present here at spring break-up of May is to catch the fever pitch of excitement. Far out at ice floe rim, seals are coming out to sun. Stebbins hunters say they can look at the sky and tell where the clear water is. —How far they must drag their canoes.

Farther out, toward St. Lawrence Island, Eskimo hunters are out in their umiaks with binoculars, to spot the walrus herds. Later there may be more walrus ivory for the carvers (the supply is low now). Lily Amonglook, who does a precision job of splitting walrus hides to make umiaks, will be busy with new hides.

Some of the Stebbins hunters have, previously bagged walrus.

Now, with the spring break-up, the village people keep watching the sky and cocking an ear upward.

"When will the birds fly?" They ask over and over again.

It is as though they fear the flyways, like the caribou routes, have changed.

At long last a shout starts at one edge of the village, spreading to the other: "Here they come. The birds are flying!"

And there they are. The sky is ribboned with snow geese and Canada geese in fluttering V's. There are wild ducks, too. And the splendid gray cranes with the red crowns. Suddenly, against the blue of the sky you see a pair of pure white swans, the

most regal of all. And your heart skips a beat. You wish them safe passage.

Some birds settle down on the tundra to rest and feed on cranberries from last fall's crop, shriveled by the winter snow. Ptarmigan are already there, changing plumage from winter white to tundra gray-brown.

From somewhere a familiar bird song sifts down, and a Stebbins child calls out excitedly, "The first robin!"

By evening the tundra expanse echoes with squawks, pumping sounds, and organ-like calls. Spring in the far north!

No Eskimo couple responds to this and all the natural surroundings more than Benedict and Minnie Katcheak. They are experts at all facets of that life; and they have the only permafrost "cooler" left in the village.

The bush-hopping plane, and the BIA Ship North Star III which brings supplies annually, are Stebbins' links with the outside.

There is, of course, the weathered mini-post-office and its two or three mails a week. —As opposed to the U.S. Reindeer Postal Route originating at St. Michael in 1890.

I am pleased to count Postmistress Christina Steve among my valued friends. She works at skin sewing and seal butchering when not busy with the mails. And she has made what may be the most beautiful fur parka in the whole of Alaska, which she wears for special occasions. —Such as the recent graduation at a boarding-high-school attended by Mary Pete, who has been a straight-A student. The whole village is proud of Mary, and of Ana Maria Jack who has been enrolled at Alaska Methodist University.

Christina (midwife, fur parka designer, and Stebbins' postal service) was left without a mother when she was 3. Her substitute mother taught her to keep a clean house, in addition to the usual Eskimo arts. Her father taught her, "Always welcome strangers and feed them whatever you have. Try to be nice, and fill their stomach, even if they have only one eye, one arm, or are unpleasant."

When Christina married and had a family of her own, she also adopted several children. And, has been kind to motherless children.

A Stebbins woman who had a rugged childhood tells us, "My mother died when I was 6. I'll never forget how kind Christina was to me!"

As a child, Christina knew what it was to live in a hut with mud outside, and a skylight window in the roof made of transparent walrus intestines. But now she and her husband are having a prefabricated Capp house shipped in! —On their own.

This couple believes that their people were stronger and better when they did for themselves, as in the old days. Not that they would have the old days back again, but they'd like to see the old self reliance return.

This, then is a profile glimpse of Stebbins Village, settled by Nelson Island Eskimos. The same winds and currents that brought their fathers the beneficial driftwood logs (and do so today) also bring occasional devastating storms. —Such as those of November 1965 and November 1974.

But, as they say in one Eskimo idiom, "Anomarmat!" (Nothing can be done about it!) And that coastal stretch between Sourdough Point and Washington Bluff makes a satisfactory spot for Stebbins Village.



Mrs. Hunt sharpens her 'women's knife' then butchers seal.

these remote sections. The condensed essence is dark in color, potent to taste.

One of the men said, "When I hurt here (pounding his chest) IT make me feel better."

Charley adds, "something else. We make poultice with seal oil in a mitt. Like when at hunting camp, a shot broke up a man's fingers. We keep his hand in seal oil, in a big mitt. It make him not so much pain. 'Til we get he back."

A comparatively recent arrival from Nelson Island is Mary Matthias, a soft-spoken mother of several little ones. Some say she makes the most arty baskets, though all Stebbins baskets have a well-earned reputation.

Mary told us, "My grandma taught me to make the raincoats from walrus intestines that are dry and almost transparent."

But other women would rather make soup of animal and bird intestines. So they do.

Mary's husband, Ignatius, keeps her supplied with seals to skin and cut up. Even the baby has fine fur mukluks and parkas with decor of wolf and wolverine fur. One evening we

from it are the exposed skeletons of the long-time dead, some with rifles or hunting knives beside them and unmolested.

Village business is taken care of by Mayor Gabriel Tom and his council, including Henry Bighead and his daughter Jeanie, Stanley Jack, Tim Snowball, and others. This council doesn't have the headaches of those outside. For Stebbins doesn't have streets, a sewage system, nor water supply (water is hauled by each home in the shape of chunks of ice from ponds, most of each year). The council has unique problems of its own though.

The annual potlatch is held here, or at a neighboring village, Kotlik. A king or queen or potlatch reigns. Two years ago when Therese Jack was three years old, she was selected queen. She was showered with gifts such as a brand new kitchen stove, a set of dishes, and a washboard. —All grown-up size. For weeks before potlatch, quantities of food are prepared for the feasting: tubs of berries, barrels of herring in seal oil, dried salmon and trout, seal and