

# Gateway features—INDIAN-ESKIMO PROJECT

Last summer several students worked on the Indian-Eskimo Association Volunteer Project. With the current controversy over the low standard of living among the natives we thought it timely to ask three of these people to record their impressions gathered from first-hand experience. C.A.

## PAT-IN-NUVIK

by Patricia Kneen

I stood on a bridge and thought of the philosophical definitions of reality. Empirical evidence indicated that it was 1:30 a.m. It also indicated that the sun was shining out of a blue crystal sky. The strange glow gave the whole scene an aura of suspended animation. Even the houses in motley dress seemed to be crouching on stilts. Alice-in-Wonderland had nothing on Pat-in-Inuvik as I tried to make southern sense out of northern facts.

It was not just the sun's defiance of conventional behavior and the accompanying phenomena that confused me; it was the total revision of some of my most basic beliefs. It was not as though I were a greenhorn in the North since I had taught for two years in Frobisher Bay and survived some pretty jarring episodes. But this summer, working as a volunteer for the Indian-Eskimon Association, I suddenly found that the pegs and holes no longer matched.

I was assigned to the Rehabilitation Centre, a branch of Welfare Division which is a branch of the Department of Northern Affairs. The Rehab. is a place where people who are incapacitated because of disease or emotional maladjustment are given practical aid in adjusting to the environment in which they must live.

The problems encountered include alcohol, chronic unemployment, illiteracy, hopelessness, and lack of a star to steer by.

I talked to the people, attempted to assess their academic training and needs and plan suitable programs for them, and tried to understand them. The school is a sheltered place for a teacher; the Rehab. is not. I saw for the first time that one cannot drop a strange house over a man and expect him to know what all the gadgets are for and which door leads where.

Nor will he learn if you tell him. He will try, but if it is too hard and failure is too painful, he will just sit in a bewildered heap. You cannot know what I mean until you sit with that heap who is your friend. That is what I did this summer.

Sam tried not to drink. He knew what it was doing to his home. But he was young, strong, and had held a job before he went blind—on methylhydrate. He had no skills as a sightless man and, at any rate, there is an over-abundance of unskilled labor with sight. He will eventually learn Braille, but that is hard for a grown man with three years formal education in a language not his own. So he drinks, and sinks in remorse, then turns over a new leaf and blots it too.

**He does not need altruism; he needs self-respect, and that does not come wrapped in charity and kind words. It comes from being useful, and only the person who understands the whole problem of the North can make him so. The South must be adapted to the North before the reverse can occur.**

That was the heart of my summer. There is no room to tell of my work in the Rehabilitation Home Industries Shop where an Indian girl taught me the difference between good and poor mukluks, or of the sights I saw as I visited places like Tuktoyaktuk and Aklavik, or the way people lived (and I challenge the accuracy of the statements of both Mrs. Hardie, the Liberal M.P. for the North West constituency of Mackenzie, and Mr. Dinsdale, the Minister of Northern Affairs).

Nor can I tell of the Sunworshippers, who sat all night watching the sun skim the horizon and who put the ancient Druids to shame with their gleeful ceremony, nor of all the wonderful warm-hearted people I met, but I graduate this May. Guess where I'm going?

## "MOULA" AMONG THE INDIANS

by Don Harper

The north is truly fascinating. There is some very beautiful, and some very unattractive, country. I did not travel as extensively as did some of my co-workers, but I saw the muskeg around Forth Smith and Hay River, the majestic precambrian rock around Yellowknife, and a happy medium to these two (tending towards the muskeg) around

Fort Simpson.

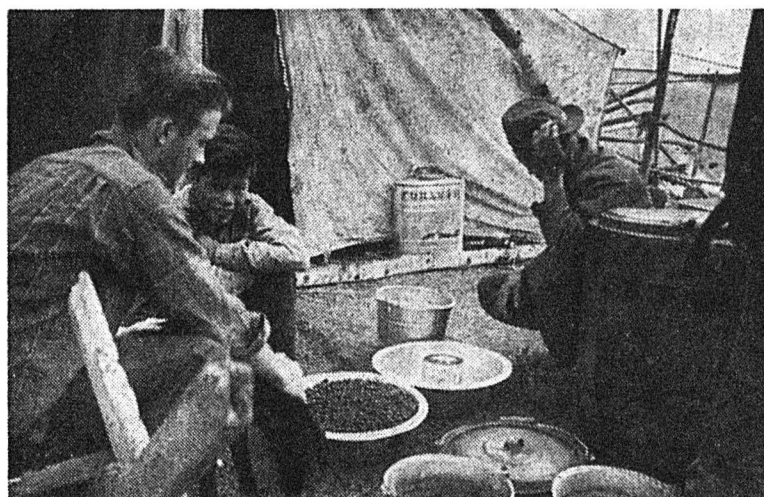
But my interest was mainly with the people: I came into contact with many Métis, some Chipewyan, and some Slavy Indians.

Some few of each group lived well; they had permanent jobs, and were educated or trained to a significant degree. The majority were not in this position.



Washing boiled clothes.

photo by Don Harper



Judging the berry contest.

photo by Don Harper

**The Métis lived under both extremes of the socio-economic scale. A few had good jobs and neat homes, but more lived in very poor housing. For example, a family of eight or more might live in a 12'x19' box-like "home" of one room. Many small shacks were constructed of discarded lumber and tar paper. Piles of garbage that had just been thrown out the door were evident in a few places.**

I simply cannot imagine living in one of these shacks in sub-zero weather.

Many Indians had small, well-built homes, constructed with assistance from the Department of Indian Affairs. Such assistance was not available to the Métis, at least not in the same quantity.

Excessive drinking was common to both Indian and Métis. And the price of liquor there was something terrible! The white man was almost as bad, but he could afford it.

My original assignment was to organize, and then attend as a recreational director, a Forestry Training camp at Hay River. Plans changed after my arrival in Fort Smith, and I organized three camps, near the towns of Fort Smith, Hay River and Fort Simpson. When the organization was finished, I spent two weeks at the Rabbit Skin River camp, 23 miles up the Mackenzie from Fort Simpson.

At this camp there were seven Indians, two Métis, and one white boy. The supervision was handled by a Fort Simpson school teacher, a middle-aged Indian who supervised the work projects and cooked, and myself for the two weeks I was there.

The homes the boys came from varied from bad to worse with the exception of those of the white boy and possibly the two Métis lads.

The campers were so dirty before the camp began that the doctor who examined them said to me, "If you teach them no more than the proper use of soap, your camp will be worthwhile."

At the camp I was known as "Moula", which in Slavy Indian means "White man". Immediately after my arrival at the end of second week, the boys played pranks to try and get my goat. Their favourite trick was to throw spear-grass seeds at my back. These small seeds stick to your clothing, and when they hit they feel just like a mosquito sting. Anyway, the boys had many laughs at poor dumb Moula as he went around slapping mosquitos that didn't exist.

At the end of the second week of camp we held an election for a camp leader. He was to act as a go-between for the boys and the super-

visors. The results were interesting. The white boy was elected unanimously, and though he was very clever, he was not really the logical choice from the standpoint of popularity or camping ability. There were two reasons for his election:—

- (1) He had the best formal education, and the others feared this.
- (2) They didn't want to offend the two 'old Moulas' who held the ultimate power of decision making.

**This white lad did an excellent job, replying to criticism from the boys by asking for their assistance and instruction. One Métis lad was quite vocal in his dislike for the Moula camp leader, and at times threatened physical action against him.**

At the end of the third week we held another election and this time the most able, and I think the most popular, camper was elected. He was an Indian lad named Gilbert Cholo.

Regarding education of the native northerners, I feel the present system is inadequate, or at least wrongly directed in many respects. Not very many have any desire to get a straight academic education, and I doubt if they would be happy with it if they did get it. As might be expected, they show a great interest in the outdoors. Skills associated with this type of work are quickly picked up. Gilbert Cholo, at 14, knew more about life in the woods than I could hope to learn in a life time. He had a grade four education.

Instruction at the camp was in the fields of construction (log cabins), fire-fighting, and cleanliness.

**Regarding the last, campers swam at least once, and as many as four times, a day. They were required to use soap each day. To most it was a novelty at first, and they would lather themselves up after the moula who was guarding had called "all out." Of course they had to take "just one more dive" to remove the soap!!**

Each Saturday was wash day and the boy with the largest number of garments on the line won a prize. Competition was fierce.

In summary, let me say that it was an extremely rewarding experience to work with these people. Their potential is far greater than their present condition would indicate. This was illustrated by Albert Horesay, our cook and works foreman, who was an extremely fine man, and an excellent worker. With appropriate education and/or training, such as is offered to an appreciable degree at Sir John Franklin School in Yellowknife, great advances can be made toward allowing these people to attain the standard of living that should now be theirs.