

# Gateway features—INDIAN-ESKIMO PROJECT

*Forgive us our confusion dear readers, whoever you may be. Here two other students relate their experiences making a total of four contributing to this article and not three as previously stated. We hope these pages have helped you to see the situation of the Indians and Eskimos as they are today. C.A.*

## BEGINNINGS OF CHANGE

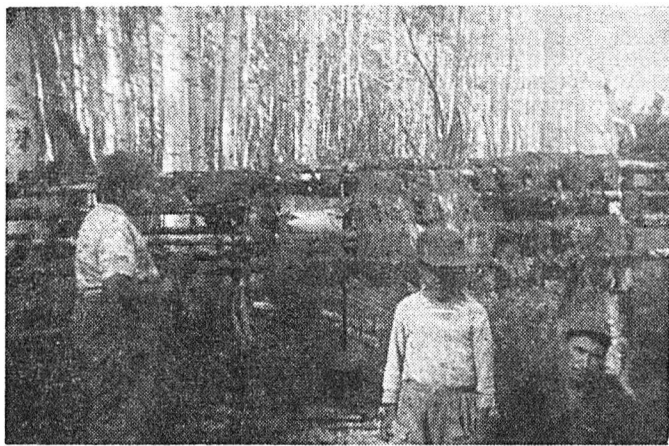
by Wilma Dohomey

Being faced for the first time with the opportunity of spending a summer in that mysterious land usually referred to as the "far north", I looked toward my venture with mixed feelings of apprehension and expectancy. It was a land of which I'd heard many romantic tales and of which I knew nothing.

The time came when I found myself in Fort Smith, now the capital of the Northwest Territories. From Fort Smith, my headquarters, I worked out to Hay River, Fort Resolution, Fort Simpson, and Yellowknife. My work consisted of doing a

economical to hire people from the provinces and pay their way north rather than hire undependable workers. This in fact is the case; however, I would like to present a different view of the story than that which is usually seen.

First of all the Indian-Métis have generally poor housing conditions which, coupled with inadequate clothing and poor nourishment, results in a state of poor health. A great many of these people either have or have had tuberculosis at some time of their lives. I would suggest then that poor health could



Drying moose meat

photo by Sylvia Esopenko

labor survey among the Indians and Métis people. The purpose of this survey was to determine the type of work these people could do, so that should the opportunity arise, local people could be hired for jobs rather than having people imported from "outside."

The living conditions in Fort Resolution were deplorable by our standards and yet were better than those of many of the Indian and Métis people in the North West Territories.

The houses were built from logs which had been cut at the Roman Catholic sawmill. These homes usually consisted of one room in which families of up to ten or more were living. Some of the houses were insulated with cardboard, some had just the rough log finish through which the cold easily penetrated.

Furniture usually consisted of a stove, cupboard, table, bench and two or three beds in one room. Some homes were very neat and tidy, others were filthy.

One of the things I was immediately aware of, mainly due to the noise, was the great number of dogs in the settlement. As the dog team is the main mode of travel during winter months, the dog population was probably greater than the human population. The dogs were tethered along the edge of the settlement, since many were quite vicious from having been underfed. Some have been known to break loose, kill, and partially devour a child before assistance came.

I found in many settlements that the Indian - Métis people have trouble getting employment. Most employers refuse to hire them, feeling that most of the Indian people are poor workers, lazy, and undependable. Many drink excessively and foolishly gamble their money. Employers claim that it is more

be a factor in their lack of ambition. Education, too, plays a very important part in the opportunities for employment. Many of these people have little or no education.

Also fur prices are low and food costs extremely high. White workers in the North feel that they must have a Northern Allowance to meet the high cost of living while the Indian probably would not make as much money in a year of trapping as a white man would make in two or three months.

Large families have become a burden on the Indian-Métis who have six or seven children and often more, making existence a constant struggle.

These people know no modern conveniences in their own homes nor do they have any hope of ever being able to afford them. Opportunity for wage employment in some settlements is practically non-existent.

On top of all this, the Indian-Métis sees the white man living in good homes, getting good wages and doing jobs that could perhaps be done by the local worker himself. Seeing no hope for ever getting ahead under these circumstances he probably loses any incentive he ever had. As a result one may find some settlements in the North living almost entirely on government relief.

This generation marks the beginnings of a change for these people because some of the young people are now receiving an education, and finding places for themselves along with the white employees. I believe with the increased opportunities for education, more and more of the young people will take advantage of this and within two, or perhaps three, generations the Indian-Métis worker will take his place beside the white worker in competitive employment.

## DIFFICULT TO ADJUST

by Sylvia Esopenko

The Driftpile Indian Reserve, a closely settled community of approximately 50 households, is situated along the shore of the Lesser Slave Lake. In most ways it is typical of small rural communities, consisting of a health center, a community hall, an Indian Day School, and a church. Everyone knows everyone else and secrets are impossible to keep.

I spent 3 months living with an Indian family and interviewing the residents of the reserve as part of an economic survey for the Indian-Eskimo Association. The experience of meeting interesting people and the novelty of living a life quite different from my own proved to be most exciting and adventurous.

Several residents feel that there is a definite need for a farm manager on the reserve. They recall the time, years back, when practically every man on the reserve was self-supporting as a farmer under the leadership and encouragement of a farm instructor. There is much good land which has been cleared and fenced but is going to waste with no one to work it. The band council has tried several methods during the past years to encourage farming but all have failed.

In his small community, amongst his own people, the Indian is a gay and happy individual. To live with him, one must possess a fair sense of humor because he loves to tease and ridicule others. The naughty and crying child is not disciplined by harsh words or a stinging slap but rather with laughter and ridicule. This creates a problem when he is sent to school and exposed to a discipline he does not understand.

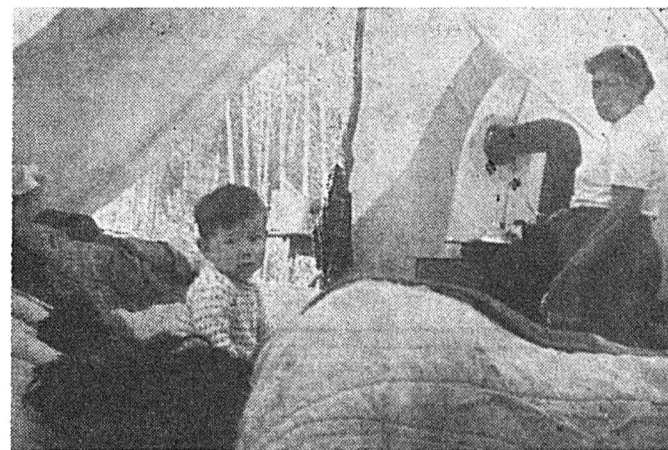
The family I lived with were very

their life on the reserve. Employment is scarce on the reserve and the men must seek jobs away from home. This is extremely difficult for some because of the strong attachment to their families. They usually resolve this by either taking their families with them to the job or working for very short periods of time so they could come home often. Neither way is satisfactory to the worker or to the employer.

During the winter most of the men are engaged in logging on the reserve, but during the summer there is no work available. Hence many travel to Lethbridge to work in the beet fields, while others will obtain temporary employment closer to home on farms, construction, and lumbering crews. There are only 5 farmers on the entire reserve.

Because of these difficulties, many families have grown dependent upon relief. They accept their cheque with little loss of pride and many strongly believe it the duty of the government to support them. However, it is the band and not the government that supports them in this case, but this makes little difference in their way of reasoning.

In comparison to some communities the people of Driftpile are relatively well educated. The majority of the population is under forty years of age and most of them have gone as far as grade 6 or 8 at the Indian Residential School. However the younger people are not doing as well as might be expected. As soon as they reach the age of 16, most quit school although they may have only gotten as far as the 5th grade. Some exceptional students continue and presently there are three high school students. Perhaps if these three succeed, others might follow their ex-



Morning before the hunt

photo by Sylvia Esopenko

hospitable and invited me to accompany them on their numerous hunting trips, business trips, and religious pilgrimages. Any bit of snobbery I may have sported before I had the delightful experience of living with these people, quickly disappeared after being put to the test of riding in the back of a dusty truck with campstoves, bedding and moosemeat. I felt rather uncomfortable at first, and tried to ignore the curious stares of passing motorists but I soon found out how much fun one could have on such a trip and sympathize with the people riding in stuffy, cramped cars.

The Indian people, many of whom could not fully understand my purpose for living amongst them, often mistook me for an Indian Affairs welfare inspector and proceeded to relate to me the depressing side of

ample. Four grade twelve students from a neighbouring reserve took part in the first Graduation exercises at the Indian Residential School last June. This was considered a great accomplishment.

The Indians were given the right to vote in the election held last summer. At first this was treated with great suspicion and some were certain that they would lose their "rights" if they voted. However, most of the band showed up on election day at the nearby community store. The older residents, unable to speak English, brought with them a picture of one of the candidates, handed out during the party's campaign. They showed the picture and asked the polling officer to mark an X by this candidate's name. Secret ballot? They didn't think it necessary.