

"THE ESKIMOS: A CANADIAN HUMAN RESOURCE"

NOT A DECLINING RACE: Whether the Eskimos of Canada have in the past been a declining race may be open to argument, for proof one way or the other is not available, but that they are not now a declining race is shown by population statistics since the 1941 census, the Minister of Resources and Development, Mr. Robert H. Winters, said in an address on, "The Eskimos: A Canadian Human Resource," at the annual convention of the Canadian Construction Association, Montreal, Que., on January 19.

After extolling the engineering ingenuity of the Eskimos, Mr. Winters proceeded to discuss what he called some of the Eskimo "myths" that had been developed in recent years. He spoke, in part, as follows:

"One (myth) is that the Eskimos are a declining race, rapidly dying off. This appears to be based on conversations which visitors have had with Eskimos who tell tales of their ancestors living among groups of 30,000 or 40,000 natives. The evidence is not available to refute these statements conclusively, but equally there is no reliable evidence to support them. If we search the records left by explorers, some of them 300 years ago, we find that they all spoke of the sparseness of the Eskimo population.

"Authoritative figures for the Eskimo population of Canada became available only with the census of 1941, when nearly every Eskimo was reached and given a numbered identification disc to overcome the difficulty of counting people who are nomads and whose names are in many cases remarkably similar. The official 1941 census total of Eskimos in the Northwest Territories and northern Quebec was 7,178, but because some of the returns were not received until after the compilation was made, this figure should be raised to about 7,700. The 1951 census for the same regions shows 8,646 Eskimos, a gain of slightly over one per cent per year for the 10 years.

"Supporting evidence for this increase is given by the vital statistics records which have been kept since family allowances have been paid to the Eskimos. They show population of 8,378 in 1948 - 8,437 in 1949, 8,550 in 1950, and the census figure of 8,646 in 1951. To this should be added the 847 Eskimos in Labrador, who had become Canadians since the census of 1941. That the Eskimos have in the past been a declining race may be open to argument, for proof one way or the other is not available, but that they are not now a declining race is shown by these figures.

"Two other misconceptions are closely associated with this one. One is that the change in the Eskimo's eating habits from caribou and seal meat to bannocks made out of flour and other 'white man's food' has greatly weakened his resistance not only to the scourge of tuberculosis but to other ailments such

as measles and the common cold. It is stated that deaths from these diseases, particularly from tuberculosis, have greatly increased. The second misconception is that this change to 'white man's food' has resulted mainly from the payment of family allowances.

"There are several points I would like to make. In the first place, it is by no means clear that tuberculosis and other diseases are on the increase among the Eskimos. The Deputy Minister of National Health and Welfare, recently pointed out that federal health authorities who deal with tuberculosis among the Indians and the Eskimos are not in a position to demonstrate whether the disease is increasing rapidly among the Eskimos or not. While they know what the situation is at the present time, they have no reliable previous figures for comparison. It is known, however, that the death rate from tuberculosis of Indians and Eskimos together has been cut in half within the last few years as the result of increased health services.

"It must also be remembered that a more aggressive programme of case finding among the Eskimos is being carried out today than ever before. This obviously means that a larger number of cases of tuberculosis are being discovered and treated, but it is certainly not evidence that the disease itself is increasing.

"It is by no means certain, too, that the resistance of Eskimos to disease has weakened. There have been cases on record, going many years back, of disease wiping out whole settlements of Eskimos. It is quite probably true that epidemics spread more rapidly nowadays than formerly, but that can well be explained by the increasing ease of contact between settlements arising from improved transportation. It should also be remembered, on the credit side, that improved transportation has made it possible to deal far more effectively with the epidemics if and when they occur.

"It isn't true that the trend of the Eskimos away from their natural food to 'white man's food' came as a result of family allowance payments. The trend is probably not as widespread as is often suggested, but to the extent that it exists it started long before family allowances. At certain times it resulted from the Eskimo receiving a large income when prices for white fox and other furs were high, and finding that it was easier to trade part of this income for 'white man's food' than to go hunting for his more traditional food. On other occasions the trend has been due to the opposite cause, to a scarcity of game, making 'white man's food' the only alternative to starvation...." Mr. Winters explained that since their inception, family allowances have been made to Eskimos in kind and not in cash.