

Eskimo reactionaries cry 'Back to the Land'

By Val Wake

While the world faces the commodities crisis, the people in Canada's Arctic have come up with a solution of their own. Although the move has been prompted by social pressures more than anything else, in these days of sugar and salt shortages it makes a lot of economical sense as well.

The decision is to go back to the land. From Fort Simpson to Frobisher Bay, in 70 settlements scattered throughout the Northwest Territories, in the Boreal Forest and on the Tundra, some 20,000 Eskimo and Indian people are seriously wondering if the 20th century is really all it is cracked up to be. Might not they be better off if they went back to the ways of their forefathers?

The choice of whether "to work for wages or live off the land," to use the words of the Commissioner of the NWT, Mr. Stuart Hodgson, has confronted the Arctic people in less than a generation, especially since the Arctic oil discovery in 1970. While some have accepted the profit and challenge of "working in the white man's world," there are a substantial number of Arctic people who are deciding that the old ways are best.

Take the Mackenzie River settlement of Fort Good Hope. This is Indian Country, the land of the Loucheux. High on its embankment, nestling in the stunted pines which soften the harsh lines of the basic government issue housing, the people of Fort Good Hope have made up their minds. Recently, the deputy commissioner of the Territories, Mr. John Parker, flew in to be met by a local delegation. Old men and young men, they came from both the settlement and band council, representing both the new and traditional form of government in the settlement of about 300. They told Mr. Parker that some 25 families wanted to go back to the land, to live by trapping and hunting as they had in generations past. Mr. Parker agreed and even offered financial assistance, up to \$10,000, to help the people to get started again.

The Fort Good Hope decision is significant. It is not an isolated piece of romanticism brought on by a sudden disenchantment with the ways "outside" but a hardheaded assessment of the settlement's chances of survival which is receiving growing Canadian government support. For Good Hope is within an easy day's walking distance of the Arctic Circle, 17 miles to be exact. It is the oldest settlement in the lower Mackenzie River Valley, established in 1805 as a fur trading post. For many years it was a lively centre



for trade, boozing and inter-marrying as the first strains of "outside" bloodlines were introduced to produce that characteristic Mackenzie Delta mixture which makes it difficult to find a "pure" Indian or Eskimo any more.

Local miracle

In 1859 Father Grollier arrived on the scene and tried to stop all that. He was not very successful but he did succeed in establishing the first Roman Catholic mission in the area. In 1870 work was started on building the wooden church of "Our Lady of Good Hope." It took five years to build and is an interesting example of local craftsmanship and religious dedication, as priests and brothers devoted their lives to decorating the church, right up until 1940. There is a story told of how one priest used wild flower dyes and fish oil to make his paints. In the pictures he painted was an illustration of the "Miracle of the Ramparts," when Our Lady appeared on the cliffs above the white water to warn a passing canoeist of the dangers below.

While the Church may have affected the spiritual life of the people it served, it did not change their day-to-day ways of making a living. River boat supplies were occasionally used to supplement one's diet but the main business was hunting caribou and trapping muskrat.

Settlement life continued along these lines until after the Second World War

when a white contractor moved in to help with the construction of a telephone land line from Hay River to Inuvik. But it was really not until the 70s that the people of Fort Good Hope found themselves facing the first serious challenge of life from the "outside."

Following the discovery of oil and natural gas in the Mackenzie Delta, the developers were not long coming in to explore the possibilities of getting the stuff south. In the winter of 1970/71, Arctic Gas started construction on a \$4.5 million Arctic test facility at Sans Sault rapids, less than 20 miles up river from Fort Good Hope. Suddenly the settlement found itself in a centre of activity which would have convinced the good Father Grollier, if he had been around, that the world had gone mad.

The river boats brought in more supplies than the Good Hope people had seen in a generation. A whole school arrived by lorry over the recently constructed bush road from the south. Young men went to the Sans Sault site and earned as much as C\$600 (about £250) a month. Honda and Yamaha motorcycles roared up and down the short dirt track which was the main street in the settlement. Father Labatt, at the Church of Our Lady of Good Hope, shook his head in bemused silence. The old people on the band council retreated within themselves while the settlement council tried to cope with the new expectations of the people it served.

Then as suddenly as it arrived the activity stopped. The youngsters came home to stay. There was trouble in clearing