

AKLAVIK

1972

Aklavik is situated in the Mackenzie Delta and extends for a mile and a quarter along the low, south and west banks of the Peel Channel, one of the main navigation channels in the delta of the Mackenzie River.

The settlement is about 70 miles south of the Arctic coast and the Beaufort Sea and is a meeting place of river tugs and coastal schooners. It is 1,170 miles northeast of Edmonton and 35 miles west of Inuvik.

GEOLOGY AND PHYSIOGRAPHY

Because of the great load of sediments which the Mackenzie River carries, its delta is spectacular. It is one of the most remarkable physiographic features of Canada.

The northern portion of the Mackenzie River Delta is in the tundra while the southern portion is in the boreal forest. In the Aklavik area, trees line most of the higher banks, however, inland from these banks, the land is covered by a marshy vegetation or muskeg. White spruce grows on the higher ground in the upper delta, whereas willows and alder form an almost impenetrable thicket in the lower parts almost to the Arctic coast. Balsam, poplar and some black spruce grow in the southern portions of the delta. North of Aklavik the forest growth decreases and gradually disappears.

ACCESS

Docking facilities are available for float-equipped aircraft in the Peel Channel in front of the settlement as well as a land strip for wheeled aircraft.

RELIGIOUS FACILITIES

The Anglican Church was established in Aklavik in 1919 and the Roman Catholic Church in 1926. The Pentecostal mission (Christian Assembly) was established during the 1950's. The Anglican Church has the largest formal membership.

HISTORY AND REMARKS

Small trading posts were established in the vicinity of Aklavik about 1910, originally on the east bank of the river. In 1912 the Hudson's Bay Company purchased the Northern Trading Company's store and established a post at an Eskimo camp named Pokiak located midway between Herschel Island and Fort McPherson on the Pokiak Channel of the Mackenzie River, opposite the present site of Aklavik. With the arrival of other trading companies, the settlement expanded and spread across the river to its present site. Aklavik is Eskimo for "place of the barren land grizzly bear". Major developments after 1918 (the true beginning of Aklavik at its present site) included the establishment of an Anglican mission in 1919, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police post (moved from Herschel Island to Aklavik) in 1922, a Royal Canadian Corps of Signals station in 1925, a Roman Catholic mission in 1926, and, also that year the relocation of the Hudson's Bay Company store from Pokiak. In this way Aklavik became

the chief centre of the Mackenzie Delta and by 1931 the population of the settlement and the surrounding area had reached 411, of which 180 were Indians, 140 were Eskimos and 91 others.

With the expansion of the Anglican and Roman Catholic hospitals and residential schools, and the intensive trapping of the whole Mackenzie Delta area, the population increased steadily. The concentration of activities led the federal government to open administrative offices to provide more efficient administration for the regions. By 1952 Aklavik and the surrounding region had a population of about 1,556.

Most of the Eskimos in the area originally came from Alaska. The more recent arrivals are commonly known as "Alaskan" Eskimos. Generally, Eskimos who arrived in the area prior to 1951 are referred to as "Mackenzie" Eskimos.

Almost all Indians in Aklavik speak the Loucheux language of the Athabaskan linguistic stock. Most are part of the Fort McPherson Band.

The first airplane landed in Aklavik on July 1, 1929. It was a Fokker Universal piloted by C.H. (Punch) Dickins flying for Western Canada Airways. In December of the same year a contract mail service was inaugurated. The pilots on the northern part of this flight were W.R. (Wop) May and I. Glynn-Roberts, flying Bellanca aircraft and carrying four tons of mail, which had to be flown in relays.

THE MAD TRAPPER

The most famous manhunt the Canadian North has ever

known started in December 1931 when RCMP Const. Alfred "Bruce" King and Special Const. Joseph Bernard set off from Fort McPherson up the Rat River to investigate complaints received from Loucheux Indians that their traps had been robbed by a white man called Albert Johnson. When the police reached Johnson's fortified cabin he refused to let them come in and they went to Aklavik to obtain a warrant for arrest from Inspector Alexander N. Eames, commanding officer of the RCMP for the western Arctic. Accompanied by Const. Robert McDowell and Special Const. Lazarus Sittichinlis, King and Bernard mushed back to Johnson's Rat River stronghold. When King tried to serve Johnson with a warrant he was shot and seriously wounded. Bundling their fallen comrade on to a toboggan, insulated as well as possible against -45°F temperatures, the Mounties returned to Aklavik, 80 miles away, in 20 hours. King underwent surgery and recovered. A special posse was then assembled which included Sergeant "Haps" Hersey and Frank Riddell of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals; trappers Karl Gardlund, Knut Lang (who later became a member of the N.W.T. Council), Ernest Sutherland and Noel Verville; RCMP constables "Newt" Miller from Arctic Red River, McDowell, Bernard and Sittichinlis. Inspector Eames was in command of the expedition, equipped with 42 dog sleds drawing toboggans laden with camp gear, siege gear, food rations, bundles of dynamite, ammunition, and a small arsenal of pistols, rifles and shotguns. The posse arrived at the mouth of the Rat River on January 9, 1932. During

the battle which ensued Knut Lang climbed on the roof and set off a big charge of dynamite which only opened a hole large enough to look through the cabin's thick frozen sod roof. The men failed to enter the cabin, however, and had to retreat to Aklavik leaving Miller and Garlund behind to watch Johnson who somehow managed to escape - apparently without food or dogs. The trapper was subsequently hunted down by Miller, Gardlund, Riddell and Verville but when found he shot and killed Miller. He then escaped to the mountains along the Yukon-N.W.T. border. Inspector Eames decided it was necessary to request air support from Fort McMurray where W.R. "Wop" May and his Junkers monoplane were stationed. It took three days for May to reach the place where Miller had been killed. The plane was used in tracking Johnson, who covered his trail by travelling in the wake of a migrant herd of caribou, walking without snowshoes so that the animals' tracks would conceal his own. When finally found, Johnson shot and wounded Sergeant Hersey of the Royal Corps of Signals, before being shot and killed himself ten minutes past noon; February 17, 1932.

The true identity of "Albert Johnson" has remained a mystery even to those who sought and found him. That he was a thief and murderer, all agree. The newspapers dubbed him "The Mad Trapper of Rat River".

His body was flown by Wop May to Aklavik for burial outside consecrated ground.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

The major economic activity in the Mackenzie Delta is

fur-trapping. While other fur-bearing animals, such as fox, lynx, and wolverine are taken, muskrats are by far the chief catch. Beaver pelts are also important as a source of income. The caribou in the Richardson Mountains are a significant source of meat.