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WORK OF THE BUREAU OF EDUCATION
FOR THE NATIVES OF ALASKA

By

WILLIAM HAMILTON
ASSISTANT CHIEF, ALASKA DIVISION
BUREAU OF EDUCATION

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WORK OF THE BUREAU OF EDUCATION FOR THE NATIVES OF ALASKA

By WILLIAM HAMILTON

Assistant Chief, Alaska Division, Bureau of Education

Through its Alaska division the United States Bureau of Education is developing and educating an aboriginal population of different races dwelling in widely varying regions and climates, many of whom are in a state of racial childhood and require assistance in adjusting themselves to the new conditions with which civilization has confronted them.

The problem goes beyond providing education for children in schoolrooms; it involves the uplifting of entire communities. The work includes the maintenance of schools, hospitals, and orphanages, the relief of destitution, the fostering of trade, the organization of cooperative business enterprises, the establishment of colonies, and the supervision of the reindeer industry.

The chief difficulties in administration are the remote and isolated character of the country, the great distances between the villages, the meager means of communication, and the rigor of the winter climate of most of the territory.

Subject to approval by the Commissioner of Education, the chief of the Alaska division of the Bureau of Education, with headquarters at Seattle, Wash., directs the activities of the bureau in Alaska. For purposes of school supervision the Territory of Alaska has been divided into six districts, each under a superintendent who keeps in as close touch as possible with the work in his district.

The field force of the Alaska school service during the fiscal year ended June 30, 1926, included 6 district superintendents and 159 teachers, and there were 86 schools in operation, with an enrollment of 3,703.

Transportation from Seattle to the remote villages for appointees, supplies, and building materials was for many years an undertaking of great difficulty. Partial solution of this problem was provided when the U. S. S. *Boxer*, a wooden vessel, formerly used by the Government as a training ship for naval cadets, was transferred to the Department of the Interior for the use of the Alaska division. This boat was remodeled and equipped with modern machinery and since

1923 has carried annually to the coast stations as far north as Point Barrow and to the distributing points at the mouths of the larger rivers teachers, doctors, and nurses, together with a heavy tonnage of supplies and equipment. On its return voyage it brings out employees whose terms of service have expired and carries reindeer meat, furs, and other valuable commodities which are sold for the Eskimos through the Seattle office of the Alaska division.

The care of the health of the natives of the community is no small part of a teacher's duty. The number of physicians and nurses employed in Alaska by the bureau is small for the task to be performed. In the great majority of the native settlements the teachers are the only "doctors" and "health officers," and the school often serves as a dispensary for the natives within a radius of several hundred miles. As part of the day's work, the teacher visits the homes in the villages to see that hygienic conditions are maintained therein, to show mothers how to care for and feed their infants, to demonstrate the proper ways of preparing food, to inculcate cleanliness and the necessity of ventilation, and to insist upon the proper disposal of garbage.

The scope of this work during the fiscal year 1926 is indicated by the following statement:

Community service rendered by teachers

District	Visits made to homes	Medical assistance rendered	Births reported	Deaths reported	Native population served	Number of teachers
Northwestern.....	2,424	2,809	64	23	2,106	22
Seward Peninsula.....	3,080	4,855	87	53	2,088	26
Western.....	2,887	6,364	56	36	1,874	30
Southwestern.....	1,627	1,470	39	20	1,140	23
Central.....	3,392	3,881	63	50	1,573	23
Southeastern.....	2,766	2,564	121	104	4,348	25
Total.....	10,066	21,943	430	286	13,133	169

One of the most effective agencies for the advancement in civilization of a native village is the establishment in it of a cooperative store, owned by the natives and managed by them, under the supervision of a teacher of a United States public school. It results in securing articles of food and clothing at equitable prices, in dividing among the natives themselves the profits which would otherwise go to a white trader, and in acquiring by the natives of self-confidence and experience in business affairs. Such enterprises are now in operation in 12 villages in widely separated parts of the Territory.

Until recently no systematic form of industrial education for Alaskan natives was provided within the Territory. In order to receive such training, for many years young Alaskans were sent to schools maintained by the Office of Indian Affairs in the States.

This policy was found to be unwise and uneconomical. The change of climate frequently had a deleterious effect upon the health of the children. Some of those who remained in the States found themselves forced into unfortunate social conditions. Many who returned to Alaska found it difficult to adapt themselves to their home environment. To meet the situation, the policy has been adopted of establishing industrial schools within Alaska itself. Industrial schools have already been organized at Eklutna, near Anchorage, on the Alaska Railroad; at Kanakanak, on Bristol Bay; and at White Mountain, on Seward Peninsula, all of which are strategic points. Eklutna, being near the Alaska Railroad, is readily accessible for pupils from the interior and from the upper Yukon region; it can also be easily reached from the settlements on the southern coast. Kanakanak will be the center for vocational training for the Aleuts and for the Eskimos of southwestern Alaska. To White Mountain will come the Eskimos of the northwestern region as far north as Point Barrow.

Included in the curriculum of these vocational schools are such industries as house building, carpentry, boat building, making furniture, sled construction, operation and repair of gas engines, marine engineering, navigation, tanning, ivory carving, and basket weaving. The native races of Alaska possess extraordinary dexterity, as is evidenced by the ivory carving of the Eskimos, the basket weaving of the Aleuts, and the totem carving of the inhabitants of southeastern Alaska, and with very little training they excel in all mechanical occupations. It is proposed to extend the facilities for industrial training as rapidly as funds will permit.

During the fiscal year ended June 30, 1926, the Bureau of Education employed in its medical work in Alaska 8 physicians, 22 nurses, and 1 first-aid man. Hospitals were maintained at Juneau, Nulato, Akiak, Kanakanak, and Noorvik; and contracts were entered into with other hospitals in Alaska, as well as in the States of Washington and Oregon, for the treatment of Alaskan natives. A large number of native boys and girls were brought to Seattle for special treatment and delicate operations. The service rendered in Alaska during the fiscal year 1926 is shown in the following statement:

Medical service rendered by nurses and physicians

Medical service	By nurses	By physicians	Total
Number of visits to homes	12,033	2,401	12,434
Number of patients treated	8,311	2,836	11,147
Number of treatments given	22,026	12,820	34,846
Number of births reported	117	60	177
Number of deaths reported	72	41	113
Total days of hospital care		6,969	6,969
Out and clinic calls		1,651	1,651

Notable extensions of the medical service during the biennial period 1924-1926 were the stationing of a physician at Unalaska, who during the winter months is the only physician in the entire Aleutian region, the employment of an itinerant dentist who rendered professional service to the natives in the villages of southern Alaska, and the furnishing of medical relief to inhabitants of the Yukon Valley.

Along the Yukon River and its tributaries there are approximately 4,000 natives, hitherto entirely without medical attention. To extend medical aid to these isolated groups, the bureau, in the period of navigation during the summer of 1926, operated on the Yukon and Tanana Rivers a floating hospital having on board a physician and two nurses, in addition to the crew. In its cruise the boat covered approximately 2,200 miles. More than 3,000 natives were examined and about 500 treatments were given.

Owing to the great expansion of the reindeer industry, it is not possible to state the precise number of reindeer in Alaska. It is estimated that there are now about 500,000 reindeer in the Territory, approximately two-thirds of which are the property of the natives. The average gross increase each year is between 33 and 45 per cent.

During the period from 1918 to 1925 more than 1,875,000 pounds of reindeer meat were shipped out of Alaska, most of which was the property of an incorporated company, with headquarters at Nome, which owns more than 50,000 reindeer. For handling reindeer meat, this company has constructed several refrigerating plants within the Seward Peninsula, and it operates cold storage barges along the coast. Use is also made of the natural cold storage facilities of Alaska, for in the areas adjoining the Arctic Ocean solid ice is found within 3 or 4 inches of the surface and extends to great depths. Each year, on its southward voyage, the Bureau of Education's ship *Bozer* carries a limited number of carcasses of reindeer belonging to the Eskimos, which are sold for them through the Seattle office of the Alaska division.

Steers for butchering sell in Alaska for from \$10 to \$12 a head. At Nome and St. Michael reindeer meat retails at from 15 to 20 cents a pound. Breeding stock is valued at \$18 to \$20 a head. The average cost of raising each animal is only about \$1 a year.

During the winter months the use of reindeer hides as material for clothing is general among white and native inhabitants throughout northern Alaska. The use for transportation of reindeer trained to the sled is not so general as it might be. It is stated that the dog team is better suited for use on the main trails, but that for cross-country travel the reindeer is cheaper and more practical. The average distance per day covered by a reindeer drawing a loaded sled

over a trail in fair condition is about 30 miles. When fed grain in addition to the forage he gets on the range, a reindeer may be worked steadily and driven over long distances.

The great increase in the number of reindeer and the wide distribution of the herds throughout northern and western Alaska have rendered it urgent that provision be made for the allotment of grazing lands, in order that the occupancy of such lands may be regulated and strife among the owners of reindeer avoided. Establishment of grazing districts in Alaska by the Secretary of the Interior is contemplated in a bill now pending in Congress.

When the work of the Bureau of Education in Alaska began 40 years ago, the aborigines were in absolutely primitive conditions. In southern Alaska and in the interior the natives lived in small, filthy hovels with little light and no ventilation. Along the shores of Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean their winter habitations were semisubterranean huts; when the warmer days of summer thawed the frozen soil, rendering these underground hovels uninhabitable, their shelters were skin-covered tents. The Eskimos still used rude implements of stone, ivory, and bone, and consumed much of their seal and walrus meat raw. Lamps filled with whale or seal oil, and with dried moss as a wick, were still used for heating and cooking.

With the steady advance through the years of the Bureau of Education's school system, and other civilizing agencies, these primitive conditions have gradually disappeared, except in some of the remotest settlements which the bureau has not yet been able to reach. In many of the villages, as the result of education, the old huts have been replaced by neat, well-furnished houses, the homes of self-supporting, self-respecting natives, thousands of whom are employed by the great canneries of southern Alaska. Fleets of power boats belonging to and operated by natives are of great service in transporting fish from the fishing grounds to the canneries. Many natives are employed in the mines. Others are pilots, trappers, storekeepers, loggers, or ivory carvers. For many years the Bureau of Education has appointed as teachers in its Alaska school service the brightest of the graduates of its schools. Girls showing special qualifications for medical service are received into the bureau's hospitals for training as nurses. Natives are employed as cooks, janitors, and orderlies in the hospitals. Natives are also represented in the legal and clerical professions. Throughout northwestern Alaska, and along the Alaska Railroad, native owners of reindeer, whose herds furnish an inexhaustible meat supply, are most important factors in the industrial and economic situation of the Territory.