Athapaskans Along the Yukon

One of the few women in her village able to perform the ancient Athapaskan songs, Karen Esmailka (right) hopes to pass them on to her daughter, Whitney. In remote villages like hers along Alaska's Yukon River, such traditions are in danger of being swept away forever by a flood of modern problems.

By BRAD REYNOLDS

Photographs by DON DOLL

IT'S EASY, they said. Nothing to it. Wearing snowshoes is just like walking, they said. But with my face two inches above the snow, my feet twisted over my head, and my body wedged between two willows in minus 20° weather on an island in the frozen Yukon River, it did not seem all that easy.

Ellen Peters, kneeling in front of me on snowshoes, looked up from her rabbit snare. "Are you OK?"

Ellen has been snaring rabbits most of her 70 years. Small, less than a hundred pounds, she agreed to take me, a man twice her size and half her age, along to help on this trip.

Athapaskan Indians like Ellen have trapped, fished, and hunted along the middle Yukon River in north-central Alaska for at least 2,500 years. It is called the Koyukon region, and the Athapaskans who live there refer to themselves as *Dena,* "the people."

In Ellen's village of Nulato, on the banks of the Yukon, we hooked a wooden sled behind the new Bravo snowmobile her son Mark had bought with money earned from fighting forest fires. I balanced on the runners of the sled while she drove the Bravo out of town, onto the frozen Yukon, and three miles upriver to her snares. Ellen has two stickers pasted onto her snowmobile's windshield: "Mothers Against Drunk Driving" and "Don't Drink and Drive."

She came to a stop at a small island, and we put on our snowshoes. I struggled. Ellen slipped hers on, dropped a hatchet into an Army pack, slung it over her back, and lit a cigarette while she patiently stood waiting for me. She wore quilted snow pants, a homemade parka, mittens, mooseskin mukluks. Sunglasses protected her eyes from the harsh snow glare.

We plunged into thick willow growth, following a snare line Ellen knows by heart. She pointed out willows that rabbits had gnawed and showed me broken branches where moose had brushed by with their huge racks of antlers. When she meets a moose on her trail, she stands quietly until the animal senses her presence, then she stamps her feet and whistles to scare it off. She also pointed out the tracks of fox, ptarmigan, and wolf.

As I pant and flounder in her wake, she moves steadily ahead, smoking cigarettes and whistling "Amazing Grace" as she peers through the willows at her snares. She ties a noose of wire onto a willow in a rabbit trail, setting out about 30 snares along a two-mile stretch. Today Ellen will find only two rabbits caught in her wire snares.

There used to be lots more rabbits, she tells

BRAD REYNOLDS and DON DOLL, both Jesuit priests, continue their study of Alaska's native cultures begun with "Eskimo Hunters of the Bering Sea" in the GEOGRAPHIC's June 1984 issue.

Fox tracks in the snow are the only signs of activity when the temperature falls to 35 below on a February night in Ruby, an Athapaskan village of 200 people.

Nicknamed "gem of the Yukon," Ruby was home to 10,000 at the turn of the century, when many Indian villages were overrun by white gold seekers.

Bath night turns the Pitka house into a madhouse—and tests the ability of Joann Pitka to juggle her three sons in and out of the tub. With a snowstorm raging outside their home in Kaltag, her husband, Randy, clears a path (right) to the family snowmobile, which he uses to take his older boys to school during heavy weather. Despite the high price tag, most Athapaskans find a snowmobile cheaper in the long run than keeping a dog team.

me. Her people used the fur to make socks, coats, and mitten liners, roasting the meat or cutting it up for stews and soups. Now she snares them just for the meat and for the pure enjoyment of being on the river.

"As long as my legs are good," Ellen says, "I'll keep doing this. I really like it."

INDIANS of the Athapaskan language family stretch from Alaska's interior across northern Canada to Hudson Bay. They have been traced as far south as northern Mexico. The Navajo and the Apache speak languages identified as Athapaskan. Whether their ancestors migrated from an original Athapaskan homeland across the Bering Strait or developed their culture in place in the Alaska-Yukon-British Columbia region is still a matter of debate. In either case the Athapaskans have occupied Alaska for a very long time, even longer than the Eskimos.

The Koyukon region, largest Athapaskan area in Alaska, is home to some 2,400 people. It stretches 375 miles along the Yukon River, from Beaver to Kaltag, and includes remote villages scattered up the Koyukuk River, which empties into the Yukon about 25 miles below Galena.

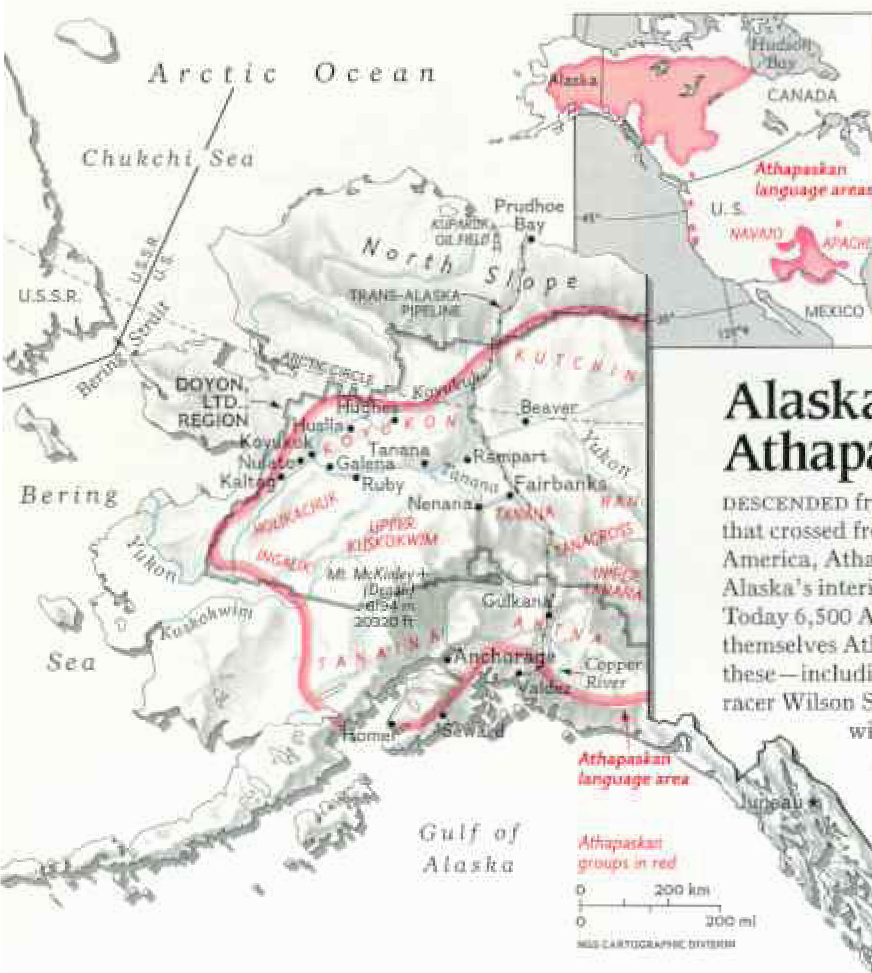
The population of these villages varies from under a hundred in Hughes to about a thousand in Galena, including the Air Force personnel stationed there. Two F-15 fighter jets scramble out of Galena as part of our frontline defense system guarding the border between the United States and the Soviet Union.

No roads connect these villages, so transportation is by air or on the river. In summer riverboats and barges ply the Yukon, which flows brown with suspended sediment. Over a mile wide in places, the Yukon in winter becomes a winding white highway traversed by snowmobiles and dogsleds. The river ice can grow more than four feet thick.

In the 19th century the Russians discovered that the Koyukon region was prime country for beaver furs, and they established trading posts along the river, including one in the village of Nulato. The Russian influence lives on in Athapaskan families with names like Demoski and Demientieff. It is not unheard of to see Indian children with bright red hair running through a village.

I FIRST CROSSED this country by plane, en route from Fairbanks to Yupik Eskimo villages on the Bering seacoast. The view below was mesmerizing. Snow-topped hills and mountains covered with spruce, birch, and aspen rolled down to the wide, white, frozen Yukon River dotted with islands thick with willow and spruce. Moose, chest high in snow, fed on the willows at river's edge.

On one of those trips to visit the Eskimos—the largest group of native Alaskans—I was informed, to my surprise, that the state is also home to nearly 23,000 Indians. Eager to explore the secrets of their survival in this



The Athapaskan language family

Linguists have traced the vocabulary and grammar of Athapaskan from Alaska to Hudson Bay and the American Southwest. Navajo and Apache are in the Athapaskan family, which spread as Indians fanned out after herds of game.

Alaska's Athapaskans

DESCENDED from wandering bands that crossed from Asia to North America, Athapaskans had settled Alaska's interior by 2,500 years ago. Today 6,500 Alaskans consider themselves Athapaskans; 2,400 of these—including champion dog racer Wilson Sam (below) and his wife, Eleanor—live in villages on the Yukon and Koyukuk Rivers, where the Koyukon Athapaskan language is spoken.

beautiful but harsh land, curious to learn how they are adjusting to 20th-century changes, I returned with my partner, photographer Don Doll, to meet the Dena.

Dena, over the centuries, have learned to survive by living in harmony with nature. They learned to live off what the land and river provide. In the Koyukon region you do not try to dominate nature, but work with it. Everything along the river has its own time and season: Salmon are taken in the summer, moose in the fall; caribou herds pass through during winter. The surrounding forests provide fuel for stoves and lumber for building cabins and fish wheels.

Now the Athapaskans must learn new lessons of survival, but in an environment much stranger and harsher than any they are used to. In less than a generation's time they have moved away from their subsistence life-style along the river into the high risks and corporate stress of the late 20th century.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 allocated 962.5 million dollars and 44 million acres of land for distribution among 13 corporations representing the native peoples of Alaska. Each native village was also incorporated, and a hundred shares of stock were issued to each qualifying native person.

The settlement terms were, at the time, foreign concepts to most Alaska natives. As a villager in Nulato remarked, "One day we were Indians standing on the bank, watching the river go by. The next day we were corporation members."

In the old days no one would have dreamed of laying claim to the land. It belonged not just to Dena but to the moose, caribou, bears, and the birds as well. The river was shared by the fish in it and the people on it. But today strips of orange tape, marking plots and subplots, flutter along the banks of the Yukon. Signs nailed to trees warn of private property and against cutting wood. Villagers find themselves buried in a blizzard of corporate papers. Even the hunting and fishing they have depended on for thousands of years are increasingly subject to licenses, permits, and regulations.

Bankruptcy, unemployment, and alcoholism are making survival problematic for many Athapaskans. Faced with frightening changes in their life-style and an uncertain future, many find they are drowning, figuratively and literally.

SUICIDE among Athapaskans has reached epidemic proportions. The rate for young native men is more than five times the rate for nonnative men. Alcohol floods their villages. Father Bill Cardy, a priest serving several villages on the middle Yukon, testified about the effects of alcohol on village life to Alaska's Alcoholic Beverage Control Board. He recounted that testimony to me. "Eighty percent of our people who use alcohol use it destructively. In two years I have buried 16 young men and women. Alcohol was reportedly involved in all 16 deaths. In 22 months I have witnessed only four natural deaths."

Beer and whiskey can be ordered from Fairbanks liquor stores that cater to the villages. Getting alcohol out to the Yukon is not cheap, but it finds a ready market once it arrives there. I saw one man in Galena pay $24 for a case of beer and another $24 to fly it to a village downriver.

At the Native Hospital in Anchorage I talked with Vicki Hild, who coordinates the fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) program for the Alaska Native Health Board. Among Alaska natives the number of babies born with FAS is more than double the national average. "Right now we have one of the highest rates among the populations studied," she noted. In one region she followed closely for a year, one out of every four babies was born with fetal alcohol syndrome.

Don Doll and I drove to that region. There in Gulkana, an Athapaskan village near the Copper River, we met Frank and Pauline George and their three children, Margaret, 15, Kelsey, 6, and Amy, 3.

Kelsey (page 61) was born with FAS, three weeks premature, weighing only five pounds, his lungs and eyes permanently damaged. He had to remain in the hospital a month before being taken home. Kelsey and his sister Amy, three years younger, are about the same size. Both are energetic. But Kelsey suffers bouts of bronchitis and catches colds easily.

"It's a miracle he lived," Pauline said. "The rest didn't make it. They were too small." Four other babies born to the Georges all had FAS. "Their blood was too much alcohol," she explained. "I never knew anything about this FAS, or that drinking could be that bad."

Both Frank and Pauline are recovering alcoholics. Pauline, born of alcoholic parents,

began drinking with them as a teenager. "It was my mom, my dad, and me," she said. At 19 she married Frank, who was 34. They moved into the little house at the bottom of the hollow and continued drinking together. "I used to go into the village every morning and get a bottle," Frank recalled.

Both went for treatment after Kelsey was born. They are still pulling their lives back together. "The kids are happy for us having stopped drinking," Frank said. Pauline nodded and looked at her son. "Every once in a while it makes me cry to see him suffer," she said. "He's got a lot of hyper in him. That's because of the alcohol. There is nothing the doctors can do."

On Mother's Day I climbed the hill above Nulato to the cemetery overlooking the river. Ellen Peters and her granddaughter Carla were at the graves to offer food to the spirits of Ellen's four children buried there.

The old woman and the young girl cleared a patch of ground near the white crosses and gathered a pile of dry twigs and sticks. A strong, cold wind coming off the still frozen river made it difficult to start the fire. It took several tries before they had a blaze, burning most of the cardboard box in which they had carried the food.

As the flames grew, Ellen put food onto four paper plates. She served roast moose, dressing, gravy, and salad, speaking to her dead young as she set plates of food into the fire: "Here my children, I hope you like this food." She explained to the dead Stephen that at present she had no money for cigarettes, so he would have to settle for the chewing tobacco she sprinkled over the fire.

With her fingers Ellen dug four holes in the mud around the edge of the fire. Pulling a whiskey bottle from a sack, she poured some into each hole. "Stephen must be thirsty," she told her granddaughter, "look how that goes down so quick." And she poured a little more into that hole.

Photographs of her children line the walls of the small frame house she shares with two of her grandchildren. Of the 15 children Ellen bore, only six are living. Five died in infancy. "Alcohol," Ellen said, waving her hand toward photographs of the others, "these all died from alcohol.

"People used to die when they were old,

"I dig just enough gold to pay my bills," says Bill Carlo (above) as his granddaughter picks through a panful worth $10,000 from his mine near Rampart. "Anytime I run short of cash, I go dig up a little."

His measured approach is shared by Darlene Lord (left) and her mother, Anna, as they cut strips of king salmon—a dietary staple for Athapaskans during the winter. Chum salmon are now caught by commercial operators mainly for the roe (right)—a prize dish to Japanese buyers, who pay top dollar.

The dead come calling in spring during the Stickdance, an ancient grief ritual kept alive in the villages of Kaltag and Nulato. The community dances around a pole draped with furs (below). Then the family of each villager who is to be mourned in the Stickdance dresses a selected person in clothes symbolizing the deceased. He or she represents the dead person, visiting friends to say the good-byes so rarely exchanged in this land of quick and unexpected death. Thus Joseph Semakan, who died in a snowmobile accident, bids farewell to friends—through Albert Evans (left, at right), who built the fence around Joseph's grave.

and we would go to say good-bye and they would tell us stories about their lives. Those were good, happy deaths," she recalled. "But now they die so quick. We don't have time to say good-bye. It's all that dope and alcohol. It's no good."

THE RIVER IS QUIET and smooth and strong at nine o'clock on a summer evening. The sun remains high over the Yukon as Pat Madros and I head upriver to start his fish wheel. Pat points out five red foxes playing on the shore. Trees starting to change color splash bright red and orange on the hills above us. "I love this river," Pat tells me over the drone of the motor. "I could ride it for weeks."

Arriving at his fish wheel, Pat ties his boat to a log. When he pulls out a plank wedged beneath one of the wire baskets, the wheel slowly begins to turn.

He explained that a fish wheel runs on the same principle as a paddle wheel. Floating logs are lashed together into a rectangular frame. Two wooden uprights support an axle that revolves with two wire-mesh baskets and two wooden paddles. Each dips into the river, being pushed by the current: first a basket, then a paddle, then the other basket. Salmon swimming upriver are scooped up by the baskets and dropped into a wooden box at the side of the wheel.

The fish wheel, turning by itself, requires no tending. We found something hypnotic in watching the big wheel turn, splashing into the cold, muddy Yukon. When the fish are lifted out of the water, they flop and thrash in the basket; the sound can be heard halfway across the wide river.

When Pat untied his boat, he did not start the engine, content to drift downriver toward home, enjoying the Yukon in the evening light. "In the fall when we're hunting moose," he said, "sometimes it's so dark when we come back, all you can see are the mountaintops."

The next morning, although it was cloudy and cold, we returned to the wheel with his wife, Mary. They tossed salmon into two plastic bins they had brought along. They had caught about three dozen, most about 20 inches long, a few closer to three feet.

Back home Mary flattened a cardboard box onto the table next to their smokehouse and began cleaning fish. She cut the head, tail, and fins with three deft slices, dumping them into a bucket to be boiled for dog food.

Pat watched for a while and offered to help. He picked up the curved fish knife and chopped at the tail, clearly not familiar with work usually reserved for women. Though his wife tried showing him how to do it, he soon cut his finger. Mary sent him inside, saying, "Men are not good for cutting fish."

IN 1973 limited-entry commercial fishing permits were introduced to regulate Alaska's fishing industry. Along the middle Yukon permits are granted for 74 gill nets and 159 fish wheels. With many more applications than permits, these have become a valuable commodity. The going price for a gill-net permit is about $9,800; for a fish-wheel permit, nearly $13,000. As the price escalates, fewer Athapaskan fishermen can afford permits, so outsiders buy them.

While most Athapaskan families in the Koyukon region still spend their summers drying fish for the winter, those with commercial permits spend their energy harvesting eggs from the fat bellies of female salmon ready to spawn. Processors from Japan have moved in to buy the roe. Salmon roe is as popular in Japan as sirloin steak in the U. S.

Jerry Felton is manager for Towa America, Inc., which operates out of Galena. "One hundred tons of roe go through this district each year," he told me, "and we get the majority of it." Each morning of the season he sends a boat up and down the river to buy roe from the commercial fishermen. Back in Galena it is cleaned, soaked in brine, sorted by size and quality, and crated to be flown first to Anchorage, then to Japan.

Competition for the roe has increased. Plants offer four to five dollars a pound. An average fish carries just under one pound.

Pat Madros has built his own roe plant near his father's traditional fish camp, 25 miles below Kaltag. A plywood cabin among the trees just above the Yukon serves as home for Pat and his family during the fishing season. Collaborating with the buyer for a Japanese company out of Anchorage, Pat pays cash for eggs delivered to his camp.

Felton admitted that harvesting the roe is sometimes looked upon with suspicion by Alaska natives, who are used to getting the most out of what they harvest. The temptation is to grab the roe and dump the fish, wasting good food.

In the village of Kaltag the commercial fishermen formed a cooperative. They sought a better price for gas and oil by buying in bulk and a better position to bargain with the

Prime money-maker for Athapaskans is the North Slope oil-drilling operation run by a subsidiary of Doyon, Limited, the corporation created to manage 12.5 million acres covered by the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Yet to Doyon president Morris Thompson (facing page), the jobs created are more valuable than profits—"Full-time jobs in the villages are virtually nonexistent." Native Alaskans (above) make up 45 percent of Doyon's oil-field work force.

Life in a ready-made town takes some getting used to for residents of Nulato, who were relocated to high ground after Yukon River flooding threatened the old village (above, in background). Federal officials, who supplied the new houses shipped from Seattle, insisted on the hilltop location.

Since the new Nulato doesn't have plumbing, residents must bring water from the river to their homes—a chore that gives 13-year-old Patrick Madros, Jr. (right), a welcome excuse to drive the family snowmobile.

roe companies. Not that that helped in 1987 when they signed a contract with a company offering to buy both roe and fish. The buyer cemented the deal with an initial $10,000, and the Indians began delivering their roe and fish to him. But at the end of the season the dealer told them he was broke, and the 15 members of the Kaltag Fishermen's Association found themselves out $75,000 and with no stockpile of fish for the winter ahead.

THE CORPORATION for Alaska natives in the Koyukon region is Doyon, Limited, with acreage larger than Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts combined; when title is conveyed, the corporation will be the largest private landholder in North America. "Doyon" is a Russian loanword meaning "chief."

Besides the corporate responsibilities to its shareholders, Doyon has the added responsibility of promoting their social, cultural, and personal interests in all its business ventures. For instance, any land deals must consider the subsistence needs of the villages included in the project.

Doyon has made major investments in oil exploration on Alaska's North Slope. Doyon Drilling Inc. Joint Venture owns four big oil-drilling rigs and leases them to companies like ARCO Alaska, which prefer the leasing arrangement to the expense of owning the rigs. Doyon Drilling's crews operate the rigs, and nearly half its employees are shareholders in the parent corporation.

In early spring Don Doll and I visited Doyon's Rig 14, drilling in the Kuparuk oil field. Daily flights shuttle ARCO and Doyon employees between Anchorage and the North Slope. A 90-minute jet flight took us to Prudhoe Bay, where we boarded a Twin Otter for a 20-minute hop to Kuparuk.

A Doyon truck took us the final 15 miles over gravel roads to the rig itself. Oil flows from the wells to a central processing facility that then pipes it to Prudhoe Bay. From there it is funneled into the trans-Alaska pipeline, which runs 800 miles to Valdez, in south-central Alaska.

Rig 14 rose up out of the flat, snow-covered tundra like a golden skyscraper. It stands 182 feet high, 100 feet long, 52 feet wide. Amazingly, this 2.4-million-pound structure moves from site to site on eight gigantic tires, each 12 feet tall and 3 feet wide.

Jim Spaulding, "tool pusher," or boss of the rig, took us to the "dog house," the rig's command central. The drill penetrates down 90 to 120 feet an hour, piercing as much as 10,000 feet of earth in a week. Its precise depth and location show up on the geolograph, which records the drill's depth at one-foot intervals. "It costs ARCO $100,000 a day to drill a well," Jim yelled over the drill's pounding, "so they want to know they're getting their money's worth."

The crew numbers 50, counting those on the rig and the support staff in the three-story modular living quarters, also on wheels. Everyone works a 12-hour shift, which means two employees for every job: cooks, maids, janitors, roughnecks, and roustabouts. When not working, they can relax in the recreation center, playing pool, watching

A river of grief washes over family and friends during the funeral of National Guardsman Justin Patsy (left). He drowned in the Yukon trying to catch a falling boat motor.

Hauled downriver by the boatload (bottom), alcohol brings a different kind of grief to Athapaskans. Recovering alcoholic Pauline George (below) lost four babies to fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). Her son, Kelsey, was born with FAS-damaged lungs. "We drank right along with his sickness," she recalls with a shudder.

cable TV or a movie, or just unwinding in the sauna. Meals are served four times a day.

Athapaskans applying for work with Doyon Drilling far exceed the number hired. I met Lenny Lewis, a "roustabout pusher," or foreman, and a Doyon shareholder. Lewis commutes between the oil rig and his home in Quilcene, Washington, every two weeks. "Up here I work hard, and down there I play hard," he told me. "At home I like to kick back in my hot tub and drink beer.

"Oil rigs are rough on a marriage. My wife, she's glad to see me come home, but after two weeks she's glad to see me go."

Before signing on with Doyon, Lewis worked on oil rigs in Texas, where he earned $30,000 a year. With Doyon he has doubled his salary. "For guys coming out of villages, $60,000 is a lot of money," he said. No wonder young Athapaskans along the Yukon talk admiringly of their brothers and cousins working "on the slope" and dream of the day they can join them.

ONE COLD, GRAY DAY I went to the state-run Alaska Vocational-Technical Center in Seward. Here I met the students—15 young Alaskans from villages in the interior, Doyon shareholders being trained for the oil rigs.

Superhighway of Alaska's interior, the Yukon River is plied by speedboats during the June race to Fairbanks. Winter traffic is by snowmobile. More than linking remote villages, "rivers are vital to our well-being," says an Athapaskan teacher. "If I can't get to the river once a year, I don't feel whole."

"I'm lucky to be alive," says Roger Huntington of Galena, who once spent weekends at his hunting cabin (top right) tending traps set for marten (above). Badly burned when his plane crashed in the bush, Huntington tore off his flaming clothes—then hiked seven miles in zero-degree weather for help. More than a year later Roger wears a plastic mask and body suit to help heal the skin grafts covering his body.

Robin Renfroe, from the Tanana Chiefs Conference, showed me around the campus. While the Doyon corporation can offer Athapaskans paying jobs, Tanana Chiefs (or TCC, as they call it) ensures that they gain the skills needed for those jobs.

Robin was TCC's director of training. She told me they had 120 applications for the 15 openings in the 11-week course and interviewed 45 young men and women. Once you are enrolled, TCC provides tuition, room and board, transportation, steel-toed boots, and a monthly stipend. Most of the $1,600 cost comes from federal grants.

While helping people learn specialized skills, TCC also promotes traditional native resources and crafts through its Alaskan Resources, Commodities, Trading and Investment Corporation (ARCTIC). One ARCTIC project was a candy company that provided jobs for village Athapaskans who gathered and shipped wild berries to their urban counterparts in Fairbanks and Anchorage to turn into delicious chocolate-covered candies.

ARCTIC's marketing and sales specialist, Kathy Mayo, showed me other company products, including potpourri, herbal teas, and spruce cones, all collected by villagers,

packaged in birchbark baskets and miniature dogsleds made by them, and distributed for sale to department stores and souvenir shops.

In Galena I attended an agricultural fair sponsored by TCC. As people brought their entries to the community hall, Amy Van-Hatten, who organizes this fair and others in Athapaskan villages, showed me through a vegetable exhibit. Radishes were as big as fists, turnips the size of pumpkins. Amy said TCC sells seeds and tools to the villagers at cost. The Alaska soil is rich, and though the season is short—from early June until late August—the sun shines almost constantly.

"We have only one livestock entry," Amy said, leading me to a wire cage. Inside sat the biggest, blackest rabbit I have ever seen. A hand-lettered sign explained that Shadow was the pet rabbit of the kindergarten and first-grade students at the Galena school. Laughing, Amy said it probably deserved a purple heart in addition to the blue ribbon on its cage.

Most Athapaskan villages have primary and secondary schools, usually housed in the same building. Teachers, many from outside the state, arrive in the fall for the nine months of school. Students take the usual academic subjects, plus electives like home economics, woodworking, and computer studies. During the long winter months basketball games in the school gymnasium are a popular pastime for the entire village. Competition is fierce. Teams travel up and down the river by snow-mobile for weekend tournaments.

Maurice McGinty, from Nulato, has served as teacher, counselor, and principal in schools along the Yukon. He earned his master's degree in education administration from the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. McGinty said that while the schools are good at what they do, they are not designed for teaching the skills needed in village life. "A lot of boys would like to go out and trap if they had the skills, but there's no one instructing them.

"We're teaching them academics for moving on out," he explained. "In some cases we have kids who bloom and shine—and they go into the outside world. But if they bomb out, we've got nothing to offer them back here in the community. And that's a real letdown. Once you lose motivation, you lose self-esteem. And once you've lost that, there's nothing. That's when they go for the bottle."

I ATTENDED the Spring Festival in Fairbanks, sponsored by the Yukon-Koyukuk School District. About 200 students—most of them Athapaskans from villages scattered throughout the interior—compete in spelling, reading, mathematics, speech, and performing arts.

Each of the 11 schools in the district holds its own competitions, then sends its champions to Fairbanks. Although the school district provides food and housing, each school has to pay for transportation. Kaltag sent 24 participants; its plane bill came to $7,300.

I heard the Kaltag children's choir on stage in Fairbanks' Alaskaland Civic Center. They were performing a song that urged Indian youth to achieve great things in their lives. Then they sang "La Bamba" in Spanish, accompanied by maracas and drums.

City ways are required study for Joe Wright and Stephanie Alexander (left), whose backcountry school district sends students to Fairbanks each year to learn skills such as opening a bank account or applying for a job. A second taste of the city comes during Spring Festival, when students usually clad in blue jeans stage a fashion show (below). But moving to the city after graduation, says a school official, "is a transition a lot of our kids have trouble making."

On the last night of the festival the organizers mounted an awards banquet and a fashion show. A dozen girls and four boys had volunteered to model clothes they selected from the racks at J C Penney. Staring hard into the dressing-room mirrors, they combed their hair and fiddled nervously with their unaccustomed apparel. The music started, and, as they had carefully rehearsed, they sauntered one by one onto the stage. In front of a wall-size mural of spruce and birch trees they turned and posed for their appreciative audience before scampering back to the safety of the dressing rooms. Flashes from the cameras of fellow students, teachers, and parents gave the feel of an opening in Paris.

Bruce Kleven calls such experiences learning "urban survival skills." He helps run a program to teach them to Athapaskan youths. High school students from the villages spend two weeks living and working at the school district's headquarters in Nenana, about an hour's car ride west of Fairbanks.

They work with a journeyman printer and professional reporter, studying graphic arts and journalism while producing an issue of the school district's newsletter, *Han Zaadlit-l'ee*, "we live on the river." The students provide stories, poems, and reports about their own villages.

They also take field trips into Fairbanks to sharpen such urban survival skills as using a bus schedule, obtaining a driver's license, making hotel reservations, filling out job applications, opening a bank account, ordering food in a restaurant and then calculating the tip.

"The idea is not to make seasoned city dwellers out of these students," Kleven explained. "The thrust is to expose students to situations and conditions they will face whenever they leave the village. Remember, our students live in one of the most remote areas in the U. S. They are ill-equipped to function in Fairbanks."

DON AND I spend our final days with the Koyukon Athapaskans at the Stickdance—a traditional weeklong memorial for their dead. It is said to have originated near the Yukon tributary of Bear Creek. There, according to legend, a man received a vision of the Stickdance in a dream after the rest of his family died, leaving him to mourn alone. Today the ceremony is observed in only two villages on the Yukon: Kaltag and Nulato.

It can take months and even years for a family honoring deceased members to prepare for a Stickdance—saving up gifts to distribute, choosing the people who will represent the dead they honor, making the clothes that will symbolize that identity.

Each evening of the week of the Stickdance we join the people who come to the community hall carrying traditional foods—moose, salmon, beaver, rabbit, ptarmigan—for the shared meal they call a potlatch. Afterward the women stand in a solemn circle, eyes downcast, swaying in place as they chant songs composed for the dead.

The hall becomes fuller each night as friends and relatives from other villages on the river arrive. Night by night the intensity of the mournful songs builds.

On Friday night, amid loud singing as the women dance in a circle around the hall, men carry a tall, thin spruce tree—stripped of branches and bark and wrapped in ribbons—to the center of the room. Wolf, fox, and wolverine furs are draped on it as the people surge around, chanting and dancing in a tight circle.

Their hypnotic chanting and dancing continues nonstop through the night. Laughter erupts and tears stream as the people remember and grieve for their dead during the long hours. Arguments and fights break out as some try to drown their grief and anger in alcohol.

By morning the exhaustion is tangible; some fall asleep despite the noise and constant movement around the stick. As part of the tradition, men force their way through the dancers to tear the skins and ribbons from the stick. Once it is stripped, they carry it out into the village, still chanting as they snake between the houses down to the Yukon. There they break the stick into pieces and hurl them onto the river ice.

Immediately the chanting stops. Eerie quiet descends over the village as people return to their homes to sleep.

On the final night—Saturday—those representing the dead are ritually dressed in their new clothes. With eyes downcast, they leave the village hall in a somber line to shake the spirits from their clothing at the river's edge.

I sit with Ellen Peters on the floor of the hall as we watch them leave. She tells me that she plans to honor her own dead children at Nulato's next Stickdance, which will be held in two years.

"I'll start getting ready this spring before I put my garden in," she continues. "Because it will take me a long time. I'm not young. And I'm tired." But it is more the weariness of grief, I think, than loss of vigor.

The departed return from the river, file in silently, and sit in a row in the hall.

Suddenly the mood changes. The excitement of the traditional distribution of gifts sparks a night of celebration.

The next morning those who have assumed the identity of the dead move through the village, shaking hands with the villagers, sharing food and drink, and saying farewell.

ALTHOUGH THE VILLAGERS faithfully tried to adhere to the age-old rituals during the Stickdance, much of the meaning and symbolism behind the ceremonies appeared to have been lost. Originally there were 14 songs to honor the dead spirits. One has been forgotten, and today the other 13 are only vaguely remembered by a handful of elders. During the Stickdance these remaining songs were played on a cassette tape.

The Athapaskans we met along the mighty Yukon represent a culture that has struggled to survive for thousands of years. Their plaintive songs for the dead sound ever more poignant as parts of their heritage erode before their eyes. Amid calls for increased control over their own lives and welfare, Athapaskans recognize that, although as a people they are survivors, not all among them will weather the current cultural transitions. The unrecognized symbols and half-remembered chants of the Stickdance mourn not only those lost in the past but also those who will be lost to the future. □

Living in the twilight world between old ways and new, Athapaskans in Kaltag play night baseball under a midnight sun. Games in Athapaskan country often last deep into the night, played with the same gusto it takes to survive here.