

WILL EKLUTNA SURVIVE?

By Pat McCollom

Photos by Mark Kissinger

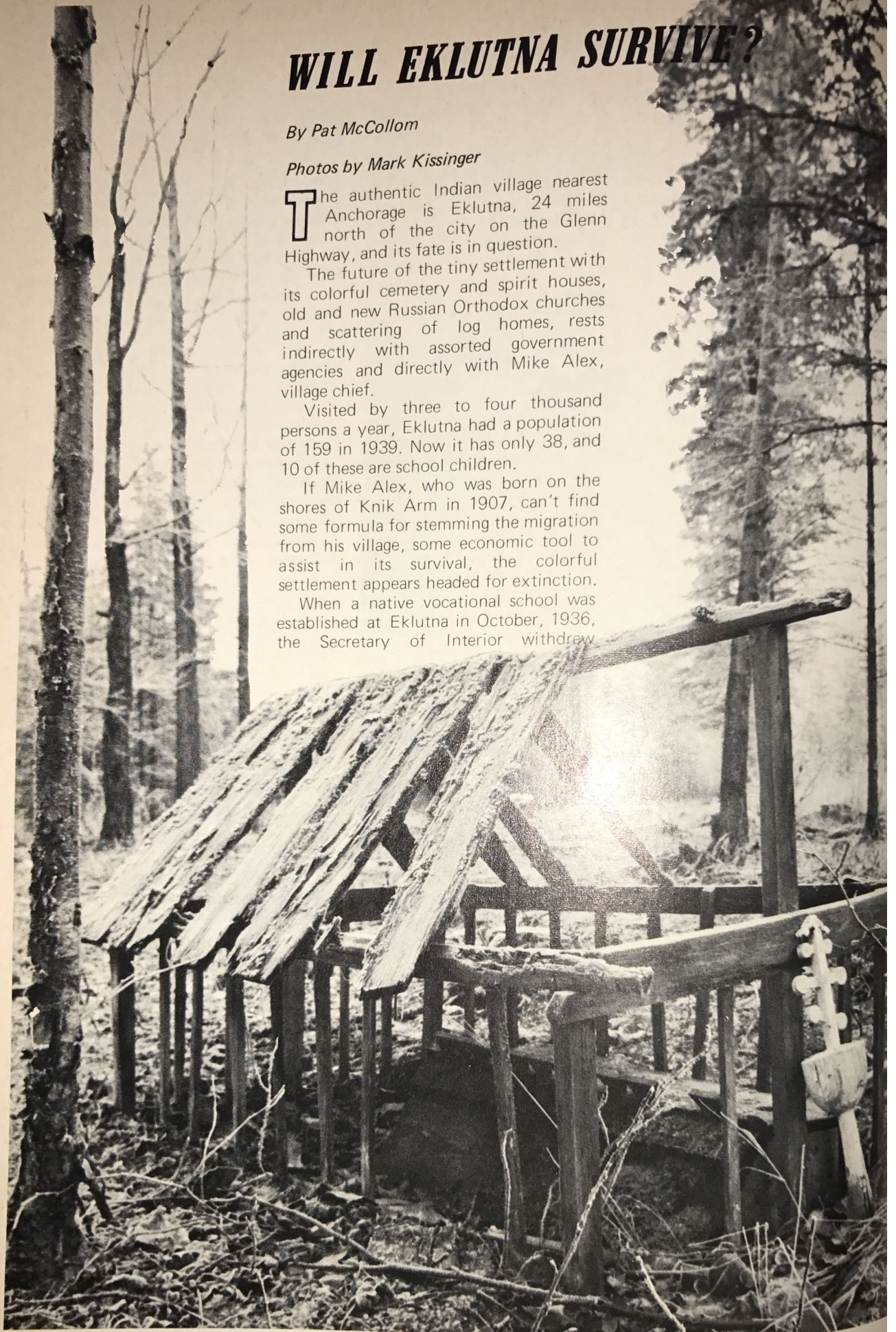
The authentic Indian village nearest Anchorage is Eklutna, 24 miles north of the city on the Glenn Highway, and its fate is in question.

The future of the tiny settlement with its colorful cemetery and spirit houses, old and new Russian Orthodox churches and scattering of log homes, rests indirectly with assorted government agencies and directly with Mike Alex, village chief.

Visited by three to four thousand persons a year, Eklutna had a population of 159 in 1939. Now it has only 38, and 10 of these are school children.

If Mike Alex, who was born on the shores of Knik Arm in 1907, can't find some formula for stemming the migration from his village, some economic tool to assist in its survival, the colorful settlement appears headed for extinction.

When a native vocational school was established at Eklutna in October, 1936, the Secretary of Interior withdrew



This Eklutna spirit house is being destroyed by the elements. Village chief Mike Alex lacks funds needed to repair all such houses in the Eklutna cemetery.

428,000 acres of land to the public domain "with the view of having them later reserved and declared an Indian reservation."

The school project faded during World War II and the buildings were condemned. On December 18, 1942, the Department of Interior acted to reduce the 428,000-acre withdrawal to 7,527. Since then other parcels have been assigned to various government agencies, and today the Tanaina Tribe of Athabascan Indians has 1,968 acres within the reserve. The Eklutna villagers have direct control over only 40 acres, which were purchased for \$900 at a surplus land sale in 1968. Although there are 300 residents on the tribal roll, only 38 still live in the village.

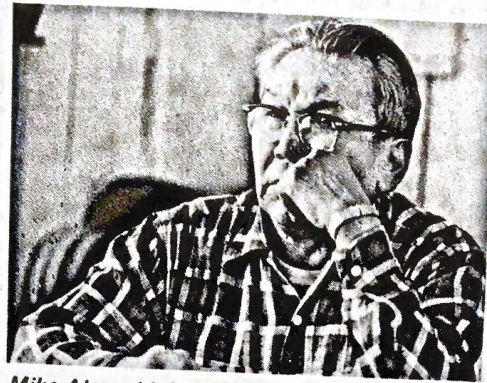
A new eight-mile route planned for the Glenn Highway between Peters Creek and its junction with the old Glenn Highway at Knik Crossing will take an additional slice from the slim 40 acres remaining to the Eklutnas. The community hall is within the new right-of-way.

Jack Spake, central district engineer for the Alaska Department of Highways, says that appraisals will start in late fall and if agreements can be reached with the Eklutnas, construction will begin in the spring of 1973 with completion in 1975. Spake feels that Eklutna Indians are entitled to money paid for right-of-way. George Ondola, president of the Tanaina Tribal Council, advises that the Department of Highways has already been granted a permit to proceed and there is yet no agreement with the Eklutnas.

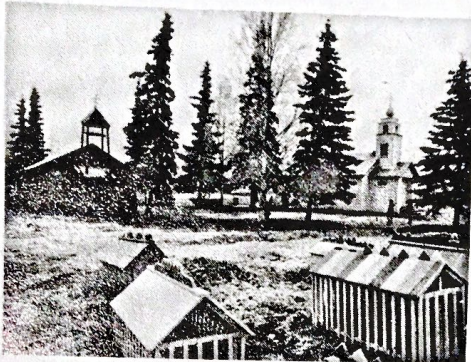
The Eklutnas can watch as gravel is taken from the Tanaina Indian land, but they never see the money paid for it. Roy Peratrovich, superintendent of the Anchorage office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, explains: "Because of the wording in the original executive order for Eklutna, all revenues from the reserve must go to the United States Treasury—none of it goes to Eklutna."

Two years ago the Tanaina Tribal Council sent a letter to the Department of Interior asking that Eklutna be granted a land charter under the Indian Reorganization Act. The council was informed that charters are no longer granted under the act, and that Eklutna can't qualify as a reserve because the lands are held in trust by the federal government.

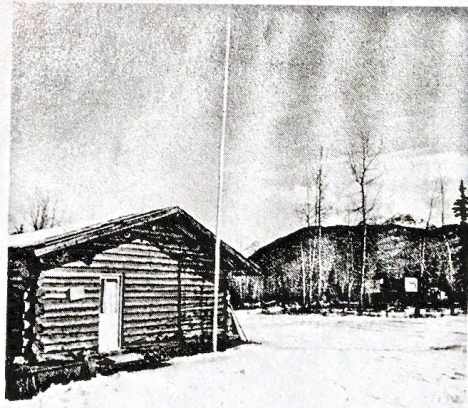
Superintendent Peratrovich has submitted a request to the Interior Department asking that it ratify Eklutna Village as a separate community and that revenues from the land be designated for use by Eklutna. There has been no response to the BIA official's request, possibly because of the native land claims issue. Peratrovich feels that the Eklutna Village request is "totally separate" from native land claims and should be granted on its own merits.



Mike Alex, chief of Eklutna village.



Old (left) and new Russian Orthodox churches at Eklutna. The old church, more than 100 years old, was disassembled and floated across Knik Arm by barge in 1923 to the new Eklutna village. Spirit houses in foreground have been gathered and rebuilt.



The village community center shown here will have to be moved to make way for expansion of the Glenn Highway. Note trucks at right traveling on present Glenn Highway.

Meanwhile, Mike Alex devotes his time and energy to the struggle to keep alive the village that was named after his father, Eklutna Alex, who died at 87 in 1953.

The ancestors of the present Eklutnas formerly lived in villages on Knik River and at the now-forgotten settlements of Nitah and Zdluiat on Knik Arm. The present village was officially designated as Eklutna in 1923. The name is translated from Athabascan as "the river emerging from among the knolls."

Retired from the Alaska Railroad, Mike now spends his time caring for the village, writing literature about the hand-hewn log church founded by Russian Orthodox missionaries more than

100 years ago, and in which Mike served as an altar boy. He arranges for the printing of postcards and slides for sale to the nearly 4,000 visitors who explore the picturesque church and cemetery.

Mike receives no salary for his village duties, and the only funds he has to maintain the area come from a donation box in front of the old church. During 1970, nearly \$1,000 was left in the coin box. Mike used this meager income to pay carpenters for constructing spirit houses, buy candles for the new church, and purchase \$480 worth of postcards.

Father Michael G. Oskolkoff, an elderly Russian Orthodox priest from Anchorage, often travels to Eklutna, donating his time to conduct Sunday services in the new church as often as his health permits. If the villagers wish to pay a priest, the money must also come from the coin box. When there is a death in the village, and the family cannot afford burial costs, Mike again turns to the donation box for financial assistance.

The Eklutna chief enjoys having people visit his village for a glimpse of the Athabascan culture. He has found that most visitors are considerate and respectful of the venerable old church and cemetery. He suspects that those who forget to drop a coin in the donation box have no idea how important such contributions are to Eklutna.

Among the hopes for Eklutna's survival are various traveler-oriented developments. A Bureau Of Indian Affairs survey in 1963 listed a tannery, outdoor amusement park, cabin sites and camping grounds along the Eklutna River as ventures which would assist the village. Chief Mike would also like to construct a service station on the Glenn Highway near the village but high interest loans have dimmed his hopes.

"The old vocational school site would be an excellent place to establish camping facilities," said Superintendent Peratrovich. He reported there is land available for a housing program that would attract former villagers back to Eklutna and relieve the tax burden they face in Anchorage. And such a housing project would provide temporary employment for the Eklutnas.

"Everything hinges on Eklutna having control of its own revenues," said Peratrovich. "I'm doing everything possible to see that revenues from the Eklutna lands be designated for use by the Eklutna people."

A widower for many years, Mike Alex has raised 12 children, only three of whom live at Eklutna. His son, Herbert, was among three men killed in the crash of a National Guard plane on Mount Sanford last February.

"My people are leaving their village," said Mike, "and I can't ask them to stay when there are no jobs and no housing."

Mike hopes there will be someone to care for the village when he dies. ■