ARCTIC ATMOSPHERE

Kugaaruk, Nunavut September 11, 2011, Issue 6

The westerly view from Kugaaruk School encompasses half the town. The Miseks' rented duplex faces the school on the far right.

Remote Amenities by Aine Misek

Accessible only by air or water, Kugaaruk isn't rural — it's remote. Add that fact to the arctic climate and you have to reformulate modern living methods all the way down to the plumbing.

If exposed to heat from a building or pipeline, permafrost, the underlying soil and or rock that remains permanently frozen in polar regions, thaws and structures sink. To avoid that problem, buildings in Kugaaruk are built on stilts, wood piles or, in the case of some larger structures, thick gravel pads.

No underground piping exists. Tank trucks haul water and sewage to and from each building. The hamlet's water supply comes from inland lakes. The sewage trucks, known as the "honey trucks" for their fragrant aroma, take the waste to a leaching pit south of town. All water and sewer tanks are housed indoors to prevent freezing during the winter months.

An annual sealift delivered by a Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker, the only large vessel that sails into Pelly Bay from the Arctic Ocean, provides the hamlet's annual fuel supply for power, heat and transportation. The fuels are stored in giant tanks south of town.

Three diesel generators provide Kugaaruk's electricity. The generators' waste heat is used to warm the school. Electrically operated furnaces burn fuel oil to heat the other buildings. Until the early 1990s, fuel and supplies were delivered by air only, which added greatly to costs.

Telephone, internet and cable services are delivered via satellite. Hamlet food comes by plane and the annual sealift.

Koomiut Co-op, established in 1966, operates the sole store in town, which sells everything from gasoline, auto parts, Inuit artwork, furniture, underwear, rubber boots, groceries and cigarettes, to slushies. The Co-op also runs a huge portion of the hamlet's other businesses, including the hotel, banking services, cable TV, freight services, trading post services for animal skins and ivory, property rentals (including our duplex), general contracting, heavy equipment, sea kayaking tours and a coffee shop slated to open this fall.

Most of Kugaaruk's other entities are government related — the school, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment, the health centre, the post office, etc. Kugaaruk's residential and business phone number listings take up less than a page and a half of the phone book.

Doesn't sound too different from a multitude of North American small towns, except they aren't often linked only by an airplane or an eight-hour snowmobile ride, weather permitting.

Kugaaruk's hockey season disappears with the snow, leaving many youth looking forward to the next time the hamlet's ice skating arena opens, as one resident expressed with graffiti on the water truck shop. This season's ice will be bumpy since the Zamboni didn't make the 2011 sealift deadline.

Ups & Downs Sept. 3 – Sept. 9, 2011

Data unavailable this week.

Sunrise = 4:59 a.m. Sunset = 6:53 p.m. MDT

Source: Environment Canada, Station Kugaaruk A, Nunavut

Intermixed cloudy and sunny days

Night Owls

by John Misek

"Quick, get under the bed! The commies are coming!" I think those were my first jumbled thoughts following a rude awakening by a Cold-War-style air raid siren blast.

I had been sleeping comfortably. "No that's crazy," I tell myself, as I push the deranged hypothesis out of my mind. We do live in housing constructed sometime during the DEW Line era, but the network of radar stations built at unbelievable expense to warn of a USSR raid has been out of service for years.

A few, slightly more reasonable, hypothesises jump into my mind and are ruled out before the siren stops. I roll over and manage to fall asleep again.

Only in the morning am I informed that the siren sounds each school night to mark the start of Kugaaruk's student curfew. Anyone under the age of 18 is not permitted outdoors after 10 p.m. on school nights – a nice idea but one rather difficult to enforce.

Children, many much younger than 18, still stay out unsupervised – all night in some cases – and enjoy the midnight sun. And they don't need the sun to play the night away. Now that the sun sets around 7 p.m. MDT, the night owls are still out and about. In class the next morning those who have been out most of the night *really* need sleep. Not a new problem for teachers anywhere, I suppose.

At least children in the North are up running, fishing, jumping all over giant packing crates (way too high for people of any size to climb), biking like mad, shooting hoops and doing wheelies on their dirt bikes. Better than staying up all night glued to video games.

Maybe they should just forgo the siren.

Mari plays in the "backyard" of her new home. The duplex's fuel oil tanks are located on the center of the building. The red structure to the left is the Kugaaruk School.

Gravel roads and trails meander through Kugaaruk. The hamlet's unofficial main street is home to the Koomiut Co-op with its arched red roof, pictured on the left.

Kugaaruk's health centre, staffed by nurses and support personnel, meets the immediate medical needs of the community. Doctors and specialists visit the community at various times. The nearest hospital is located in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, roughly 1300 kilometres (800 miles) away.

Canada Post is housed in a couple of rooms within this multipurpose building. Post office boxes are limited, but more are expected in this year's sealift.