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Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File); Nov 18, 1975;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1988)

pg. A18

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BY MIKE GOODMAN

Times Staff Writer

FAIRBANKS—You often hear of the \$1,000-a-week salaries, the adventure, the excitement along the trans-Alaska pipeline.

But talk to the workers themselves and you get a different story.

They complain of boredom, depression, idleness, rampant pilferage, union violence and shocking waste.

Some 200 workers interviewed by a Times reporter traveling Alaska dressed as a shaggy pipeliner told of an icy "rip-off" attitude.

Other pipeliners were evasive, however, conceding that publicity could ruin the soft working conditions enjoyed by some.

Teamster bus drivers, for example, are paid huge salaries simply for transporting workers to and from job sites, then sitting in their buses for 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

Often, though, they have the companionship of other workers, who frequently do little or nothing except nap in the buses, gossip, read paperbacks or play cards.

The shuttle buses, in many cases, serve as pipeline lounging areas for much of the work day.

An impromptu, unescorted tour by a Times reporter of a pipeline section near Fairbanks in mid-September confirmed massive featherbedding and lack of security.

A trash hauler at one of the camps—and his story was repeated several times—said he bartered away millions of dollars worth of prime lumber and building materials for thousands in cash.

He said he paid off one camp official with a half-gallon of Calvert whisky per load.

When guards finally demanded signed material release forms, the official supplied the trash hauler with a stack of signed, blank forms to fill out at his leisure, he said.

He is now in private business in southeastern Alaska. "What's the big deal?" he asked. "Everybody's doing it."

"Every homesteader and miner along that line got himself a new house, new equipment and enough firewood for 50 years.

"I've seen bootlegger trucks haul loads of building materials from these camps," he said.

Traveling in a pickup truck splashed with psychedelic artwork, the reporter cruised up and down the "restricted" pipeline route, sometimes receiving friendly nods from company officials.

A large equipment yard was entered without question. No guards appeared when the reporter, dressed in the scroungiest of clothing, pretended to tinker with engines and equipment. It was 11 a.m.

At least 10 workers were asleep in a nearby shuttle bus. Two hours later they were still asleep.

All earn \$1,000 to \$1,500 a week.

The number of sleeping or idle workers varied, but the scene was unchanged as the reporter traveled up and down a 20-mile area.

Pipeliners say featherbedding and pilferage are even worse in remote areas.

A mother flying into Valdez to meet her husband and son—both pipeliners—explained:

"Alyeska (the pipeline company) is like the government, see. They're getting rich off of us at the gas pumps, so it's okay to steal from them."

One Teamster driver near Fairbanks said he finally became fed up.

For weeks he had been hauling 25 surveyors to job sites and each morning he was issued 81 box lunches and several sacks of candy bars.

Complaining bitterly about throwing out food each day, the driver said he was warned by camp officials "in very convincing terms to mind my own business."

For the final few weeks of his Fairbanks tour the driver gave the excess food to the Fairbanks Rescue Mission, whose officials told The Times that the donation was well received.

Other truckers told similar stories.

"You can sum this here pipeline up in one word: J-O-K-E," mumbled a tired trucker just in from a camp near Fairbanks.

"My boss ordered me to take 18 hours for a 6-hour run. The money ain't worth it."

He nodded to sleep on a dilapidated couch on the second floor of a pipeliner hotel in Fairbanks, the Frontier Lodge, a two-story rough-hewn log building which features live country and western music—and Monique.

Monique, who has been one of the more popular hookers in this pipeline boom town, has vowed to go straight for the sake of her child and a boyfriend awaiting release from a prison honor farm.

The odds against her are enormous.

She managed to land a job last month as a cocktail waitress downstairs where pipeliners pack in nightly, shuffling on a makeshift dance floor to a blaring band.

Upstairs are 85 tiny sleeping stalls where pipeliners can flop down at \$10 a night. Most lodgers are new arrivals just in from six to eight weeks of desolate barracks life in the Arctic.

They are lonely, frustrated men seeking companionship and their pockets are stuffed with \$1,000-a-week paychecks.

And downstairs is Monique, the well-known ex-hooker trying to go straight.

"She's a good, honest whore. I sure hopes she makes it," said LaHoma Fleshman, the tiny blonde owner of the Frontier Lodge who orders the pipeliners around like a dorm mother.

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Pipeliner...icy job, icy attitude.

AP photo

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"The guys can bring a companion to their room but I don't allow no hookers to work out of this place." LaHoma insisted. She perched on a tall stool to watch the traffic up and down the rickety wooden stairs to the second-floor sleeping cubicles.

From October through April, the sub-zero months when all the stalls are filled, LaHoma rents floor space for \$10 a night, \$5 extra for pillow and blanket.

It costs \$20 to sleep on top of the frayed pool table—\$10 to sleep under it.

The 85 to 100 lodgers share three urinals, two semiprivate toilets and four tin stall showers in which the water turns scalding hot each time a nearby urinal is flushed.

Veteran lodgers learn to jump out through the tattered shower curtains at the slightest hint of urinal activity.

Newcomers leap out moments later, sputtering angrily.

And over the washing machine a sign advises: "Please Do Not Use The Hot Water. It Will Rust Your Clothes."

And over everything else is a sagging plastic sheet which sometimes protects the tenants from rain or melting snow dripping through the log roof.

"Well, they can always pay \$50 a night for some crumby motel!" LaHoma argues.

A bearded young pipeliner from Montana waited politely for a pause in the conversation.

"Miss LaHoma, ma'am, I met a real nice girl downtown and I was wondering if I could take her up to my room for a few hours so's we could listen to the radio and stuff like that."

"What's her name?"

"Tiffany. But she's no prostitute or anything like that."

"Okay," snapped LaHoma. "But remember, those beds may be wide enough for one and deep enough for two, but if she stays more than a few hours she pays rent like any other permanent guest."

He nodded vigorously and scurried off.

"What's a hooker named Tiffany look like?" LaHoma whispered to Monique.

Monique rolled her eyes in horror and limped off.

"I'm like a mother to these men," LaHoma explained. "I bank their paychecks and put them on a strict allowance so they'll have something to bring back home. Some even call me Mom. This is like a second home."