

# Ms Fohn-Hansen braves Arctic wilderness

By TRESHA RUSSELL

She had intended to stay just one year. But when Lydia Fohn-Hansen left Fairbanks on Dec. 13, to reside in Olympia, Wash., she had braved the Arctic wilderness for 50 years. A noted home economics professor and pioneer Alaskan, the popular Fohn-Hansen was feted many times in recent weeks for her numerous University and community accomplishments.

Fohn-Hansen was born in Iowa in 1892. She adventured to Alaska in 1925 to teach home economics at the Alaska Agricultural College, which later became the University of Alaska. While teaching at Iowa State College, she was attracted to a notice advertising teaching positions in the Alaskan Territories.

During an interview with Dr. Bunnell at Iowa State College, she decided to make the long trek north. "There was a pioneering spirit in me," she laughed. "After all, I was the granddaughter of Iowan pioneers."

At that time, the college consisted of the Main Building, a dormitory and a small place for girls. "It was more like one big family — you participated in all the activities, the plays,

the commencement..."

Lydia received her first dog sled ride from a young Norwegian, Hans Fohn-Hansen. Two years later, in 1927, they were married in a quiet, civil ceremony. Lydia had originally thought she would spend just one year in Alaska, but the one year teaching commitment led to a lifetime in Fairbanks.

During those early years, she taught craft and other home economics courses to town and bush village women. Complications with superiors were non-existent. Life in Alaska was a fresh, untamed thing.

"I had no one tell me what to do, simply because no one knew what to do — life in the Alaskan Territories was different, and no one really knew what methods to use," she said.

About five years after first coming to Alaska, Fohn-Hansen became the director of the University Extension Service. In this capacity, she began offering short courses for women, was instrumental in establishing 4-H clubs in Alaska, and also instituted "Homemaker Clubs." Designed to help instruct women in various home-making skills, the Homemaker Clubs still operate today; in the Fairbanks area there are now more than 20.

In 1937, Lydia moved to the Lower 48 with her husband, Hans, who was then very ill. Following his death in 1938, she returned to Fairbanks, and resumed her teaching career at the University of Alaska.

Fohn-Hansen's years in the Extension Service were filled with enthusiastic zeal. "It was an exciting time for home economics. There were so many different discoveries being made. Better ways to freeze, dry and preserve foods. Improvements made in nutrition. Research done on fabrics. And the war brought even more discoveries and better ways to do things."

Following her retirement from the University in 1959, Fohn-Hansen was honored with a round-the-world trip, sponsored by friends. "Every place had its charm, its own appeal," she reminisced.

Returning to Fairbanks nine months later, Lydia continued to teach weaving informally, and maintained a dedicated interest in the Weavers' Guild, the Episcopal Church, and other groups. She participated actively in numerous organizations up until her recent departure from Fairbanks. Angie Geraghty, a Weavers' Guild member described Lydia saying, "She is always helping."

Fohn-Hansen's colorful career has given her the unique oppor-

tunity of observing Fairbanks develop from its gold rush days to the city it is today.

Citing the pipeline boom as a good thing for both the city and the state, Fohn-Hansen said that she was optimistic about the future of Fairbanks. "Fairbanks has been on the verge of extinction several times in its brief history," she said, "but each time, it survives, and then it comes back even stronger."