

# A better life

From the bench overlooking the Minto Lakes, it is almost hard to believe that the life followed by Neal Charlie, subsistence hunter, trapper, and fisherman, is threatened. The wilderness out there looks wild, vast, virtually untouched. It is hard to imagine a great machine composed of government, people, industry and technology crunching its way through that land; dividing it and subdividing it until a man raised on moose, fish, duck, beaver, porcupine and wild fruits and vegetables worries about a future of pork chops and hot dogs.

No roads can be seen, although somewhere out there a road has been built despite the wishes of the people who depend upon the wild resources there to make their living. Charlie rightly feels that the "first people" should be listened to and their wishes heeded, which in this case they certainly were not.

Driving away from Minto, it is still somewhat hard to imagine. It takes about three hours to get to Fairbanks, traveling on a dirt and gravel road. Part of that road takes you above treeline where patches of snow still remain. Other than the road, there is little sign of man.

Only three vehicles are met on the road during the first hour and a half and out here, even that seems like a traffic jam. There is the pipeline camp finally, and the silver ribbon of the pipeline itself, which so changed Alaska, snaking across the hills. Yet the camp is deserted; all seems quiet and peaceful.

The next sign of humanity is two tents pitched in a camping area just off the road, with people who look like tourists milling about outside. It seems like a good idea to wave, but they do not return the greeting; they just stare. The threat seems a little greater as the distance to Fairbanks narrows. Enough cars pass by that you lose track of the number, and soon you are in town on a beautiful, 80-degree day. People scurry about in cars, on bicycles, and busily eat hamburgers at McDonald's.

The drive continues. At a hamburger stand between Nenana and Cantwell a big, round man who got out of a lavish home on wheels calls a brown-skinned man who waits on him "chief," and acts like he knows something the server doesn't.

Denali is out. Beautiful. Hanging up there like it's going to fall on you. Tourists pose for pictures at roadside rests with the mountain behind them. Then you are out of the park, and traffic is getting crazy. Hordes of recreational vehicles line the rivers and streams of the Mat-Su Valley as thousands of pleasure-seekers hope to hook king salmon in what was once subsistence country.

The traffic nearing Anchorage is so bad that sometimes you have to go very slow, and there is no room to pass. Your young son takes to counting the boats sitting on top of and behind other vehicles. In less than an hour he tires out at 90. You pass Eagle River, where homes which were not there a few months ago are slammed in next to each other, and many more are going up.

Then you are in Anchorage, crossing Fourth Avenue on your way to Tundra Times.

You think of Neal Charlie, the peacefulness of Minto, and of his frustration over what is happening to what has always been Athabascan land. Anchorage was once peaceful, and it was once Athabascan land; a short time ago.

What can stop this growing, churning mass of humanity looking for a better life from overflowing all bounds

and spoiling the better life for people who already have it?

Maybe nothing, but it would help if governments, such as the North Star Borough, which have been around a very short time indeed, would pay attention when very old governments, such as the village of Minto, make a statement — like not wanting a road built into its prime subsistence area.

—B.H.