

BEWARE OF FRAUDS

By MARILYN RICHARDS

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. That old adage

has a double meaning for consumers in Alaska.

People living in the bush have often gotten a bad deal when it comes to buying necessities and luxuries. Sometimes produce ordered would arrive spoiled or a new snow machine or outboard would break down and there would not be a service station or parts available for it for thousands of miles, and more money is lost. Usually the villagers are told it is their fault for damaged goods and not the responsibility of the business ordered from or the carrier that brought it.

Ed Noonan, an attorney with the Alaska Legal Services office in Fairbanks, is warning villagers

of the dangers that could happen after the initial land claims checks are given to Natives.

Noonan foresees many bad business practices in store for villagers by door to door salesmen and merchants selling faulty products to rip off the land claims money. Contracts are another special problem, too.

Most businesses, Noonan says, that can get away with one unreported case, which could be yours, have already a long list of victims. "All they're interested in is profit." A case Noonan worked on was when an air taxi service which had been illegally charging interest to a passenger's long overdue bill. Noonan said they could not legally do so since they did not give prior notice to the passenger before traveling that they would charge interest. Noonan said he stopped that practice but now the air service legally charges interest because of a sign in his office states he could and will.

"I will take a case from any person in any village unless he can get a lawyer from some place else or afford one," Noonan said. Last January, when he stopped in Kaltag, a small village on the Yukon, he acquired 25 new consumer cases. Most villagers are defenseless because of lack of knowledge of law and by people who don't care if they're breaking it.

Besides the problems Noonan forees in some village consumer protection cases such as the door to door salesman, the pot and pan handlers, other fraudulent practices and the like; a major problem in the villages is the lack of banks.

Many villagers endorse a check or deposit them in local stores, whether the stores be cooperatives or privately owned enterprises. They either deposit them for future credit or towards their balance sometimes. Noonan says sometimes the villager does not even owe the store money but the store will not return the check to the villager. A case he is now working on is similar to that one because a woman wanted her money back for a new pair of eye glasses and the store would not return it.

Other help for village consumers who suspect unfair business contracts, faulty merchandise and the like, besides Alaska Legal Services, is to write to the Attorney General's office in Juneau, Fairbanks, or Anchorage, Noonan says.