

Fighting to defeat the repeal in Copper Center

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times

When Walter Charlie hears the word "discrimination" used to describe Alaska's subsistence law, he gets angry.

"Everybody says it's his rights," Charlie stresses from the lobby of the Ahtna Lodge, a few miles east of his Glennallen home. He has just returned from an unsuccessful day's hunt for moose.

"But I think it's my right! It's been my father's right, my grandfather's right, and his father's right . . . you know, one thing, people talk about this subsistence law and say it's discrimination. It's a law, it's not discrimination!"

Charlie, a retired railroad man in good health at 74, pauses briefly and, with a wave of his flannel-shirted arm draws attention to the modern hotel surrounding him. "This Ahtna lodge, it's owned by Native people. We don't see anybody come through here but then be told they have to go to the back door! That would be discrimination! If they had to go to a table out back.

"When I first came in Anchorage (about 1940) I went to a breakfast grill. They told me to get out! I came into Anchorage at midnight. I couldn't even get a hotel room. That's discrimination! I live with discrimination all my life. I sure don't like that word, discrimination! Just because we're trying to keep our rights, that's not discrimination!"

Charlie feels strongly enough about his rights as a subsistence hunter and fisher that he is actively fighting to defeat Ballot Measure November 7, the ballot initiative which would put an end to the subsistence law, when it comes up for a vote this November.

Charlie serves on the subsistence board for his area, which will pass out of existence Sept. 30 because of a lack of funding, and on the local Fish and Game Department advisory board.

"We had a voters' registration drive in here," Charlie

speaks of the Glennallen-Copper River-Gulkana area before the primary election. "Just before election day, I got on the phone and called just about everyone I could get a hold of. I was not the only one doing it. I guess we'll have to do it again in November."

Even without the subsistence law being repealed, Charlie has seen problems arise for the subsistence users, and has done what he could to help improve things. Although many urban Alaskans mistakenly believe subsistence users can take as much fish and game as they want at any time, they too are subject by law to seasons and bag limits.

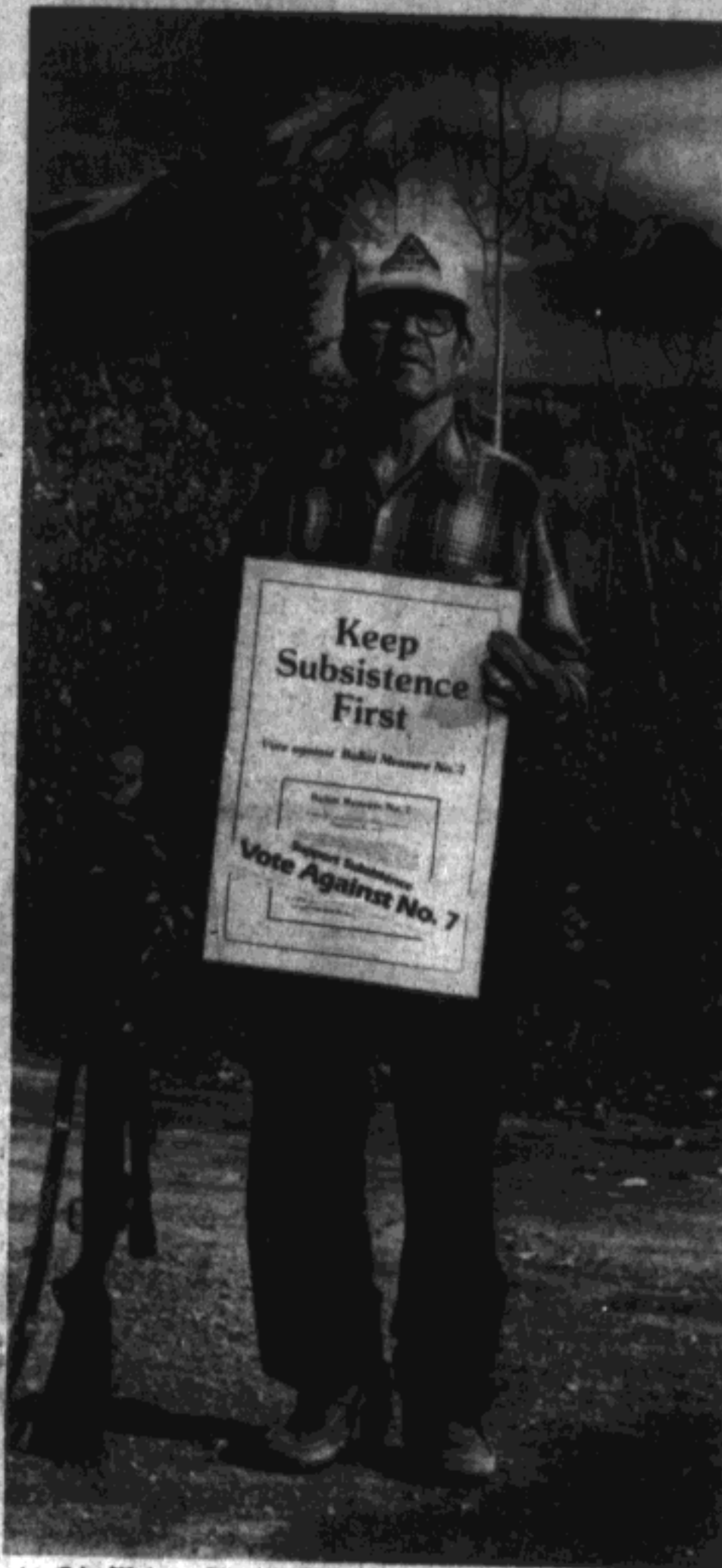
"They used to have a caribou lottery over here. Most of the people who wanted a caribou for subsistence couldn't get it." As a member of the fish and game advisory board, Charlie helped to draft the proposal which was approved in Juneau, resulting in 400 caribou being set aside annually for subsistence purposes.

"There's some people that's really for this initiative, something that's going to hurt a lot of older people. Older people, that's a food they really depend on. Other people can have lettuce and cucumbers; mix them with other fresh vegetables. They can be well satisfied. But the Native people have a different kind of diet, something we were raised with.

As for myself, I went away from home for 12 years. I never forgot my own food. I got enough to eat, but I still wasn't satisfied. Because the wild meat at our table — that's our table!"

Charlie lives in a log cabin with his wife and some grandchildren, sometimes more of them than at other times. "Sometimes we get 10 kids in the house on a weekend. I don't kick them out. They're good kids. Nice kids. I enjoy them around."

They too, must be fed. "Most of the people are not satisfied with store-bought food," Charlie stresses. "Even if they were, they couldn't



At 74, Walter Charlie is in excellent health. He attributes this to the hard work and good nutrition he has had through living a subsistence lifestyle. Now, he is fighting to keep that lifestyle alive.

afford it anyway."

Sportsmen and others promoting Proposition Seven often accuse Native subsistence users of wasting great amounts of wild meat. Charlie disagrees.

"The Natives don't just go out and shoot for a trophy. We go out, get meat, and bring it in.

"Today, I see a whole bunch

of horns go by (on passing vehicles) but no meat. Yet the state has a law: no wanton waste. I don't know if they enforce that law.

"A couple of nights ago, a moose was killed (by a sportsman). Them fellers leave a bunch of meat. A Native fellow salvaged it. If not, it would have gone to waste. When a

man kills a moose, he should take care of it! We find lots in garbage dump. About 10 miles from here there was a whole pile of caribou, their ribs just sticking out!

"I can't see where the subsistence people waste meat. Last year, four of us got two moose. The only thing we left behind was what come out of the stomach . . . we even take the bones, to the hooves. They make good soup!

"Big game guides. Most of them are against subsistence. But what are they doing? There's a law against selling meat. They get \$5,000 for a moose. But we don't get anything. We just use the meat."

Pressure is even now making life tougher for the subsistence user in Charlie's area. Not many hunters had yet taken a moose when Charlie spoke, and only three days were left in the season. Charlie remembers a time before 1930 when hunting pressure from the first influx of outsiders in search of gold had reduced the moose population so badly that they were hardly seen. After decades of abundance, Charlie believes from his own personal experience that even now there aren't nearly as many moose as a few years ago.

And the caribou, says Charlie, have gotten so alert and nervous from overhunting that they are almost impossible to hunt.

And then there are the ducks. "There's an island up there at Lake Louise. We used to call it Duck Island. Every year, the ducks come up and congregate. In the summer, they nest there. I never had been up there for a few years. Finally, I went back. I saw that someone had built a house on the island. There was not a duck in sight."

"I really felt bad about that. The way you used to see it, you'd go up, there'd be lots of little ducks up there; all kinds of birds. Now, nothing. I jumped on Fish and Game about it, but of course, they can't do anything. Why would anyone want a house in the middle of a lake?"