



# Goose Girl lives in many worlds

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times

The Goose Girl sits in the passenger seat of the car. "I poured the concrete here," she notes some buildings off the road. "I did these buildings, too," she says a little farther on, "and I poured concrete out at the International Airport. A small job out in the middle of the runway. That was a lot of fun!"

The Goose Girl? Pouring concrete? The svelte model with the delicate features from the ARCO commercials? Yes, and the Goose Girl — 28-year-old Diane Benson, Tlingit Indian — is loaded with many more surprises.

Benson is a student at the University of Alaska in Anchorage, has a strong interest in broadcasting, stars in TV  
(Continued on Page Seven)

Diane Benson in the Parka she wore for ARCO's "Goose Girl" commercials.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS



# 'Goose Girl' lives in many worlds

(Continued from Page One)

commercials, likes to write, is a model, a mother, an advocate of Indian child welfare, and she had some really wild times driving truck up on the Haul Road during construction of the pipeline.

Her strongest interest, however, is drama and theater. Benson has acted in a number of plays, and recently directed "The Tiger," a play which originated on Broadway. She received a good review on the play in the Anchorage Times.

Her most recent performance was as "Babe" in Crimes of the Heart which was performed at the Hiland Mountain Correctional Facility in Eagle River. What Benson is really looking forward to seeing is more Natives in theater.

"Theater is a wonderful way of expressing things to people," Benson explains. Natives, she says, have much to express and in their different cultural ways have long had a tradition of expressing themselves dramatically, through song and dance. Benson hopes to be involved in the founding of a Native theater group.

"We would do actual plays about us in our different forms; in Anchorage, in the villages, whatever. As Natives, we've got a lot of things that are not being expressed.

Sometimes, however, it is hard to dramatize Native experiences and feelings so that they are understood by others unfamiliar with the traditional cultures of Alaska. In her studies of drama, Benson has basically been alone as a Native. Although she has earned the respect of her acting peers, there have been some awkward moments. Like the time she chose to fill an assignment by doing a mime of a woman skinning a seal.

The other class members were puzzled by what she was doing. They did not understand it, nor easily accept it. "You've got to consider your audience," the instructor lectured her. Yet it was that audience to whom Benson had hoped to bring a little more understanding of Alaskan cultures.

"Regardless of our teachings and our backgrounds, we've all got to get together," says Benson, who feels that ethnic and cultural differences are important and should be prized, but that people should communicate and try to understand each other.

"I was really bitter toward white people," Benson recalls a time not so long ago. Bitter enough to refuse to have a white girl as a roommate, and to refuse to speak English at certain times, although she had never become fluent in Tlingit.

Benson's father was a logger in her native Southeast and she was often placed in foster homes while he went off to work. Her mother left Alaska when Benson was three. Benson cared little for many of these homes, and would often

run away. The streets of Ketchikan became her life, she says.

"I would steal to get something to eat. I would get in trouble; I was beaten up by white kids,

"You do different things," she recalls how she survived. "Sometimes you roll some white wino." The police were always something to be watched for, and although Benson readily admits she got into her share of trouble, she believes the law in Ketchikan was unduly harsh with Natives.

Benson recalls hiding in a bomb shelter one day when a policeman suddenly burst in. "He held a gun on me," she remembers. "He told me if I made a move, he would blow my head off!" Benson, who had just run away from home, was 13 and completely unarmed.

"We would retaliate by wearing Tlingit clothes." That seemed to agitate the establishment greatly, Benson explains, especially at school.

The bitterness could not go on forever. "I got tired of racist things," Benson explains. "I got tired of hating, of holding grudges! 'You could spend that energy on other things,'

I told myself. 'That's a lot of energy you put into hate...'

"Being down on white people, does that make you feel good? Like when my son (three-year-old Latseen) comes up, and gives me a hug, that makes me feel good!"

There were "little rays of consciousness," in the sixties, Benson says, but they did not go far enough. An attitude was advanced that "we are all the same, so let's get along."

"I'm not just this empty shell of a person," Benson disagrees. "I'm a Native! I'm Tlingit! I'm female! I like to write, to do drama, drive a truck, and do different things. I want to say I'm Native! I'm also a human being, let's get along! You tell me about your world, and I'll tell you about mine."

While most of the drama that Benson has been involved in has not dealt with the Native world, she is still looking at theater as the way to tell other people about her world. Yet, although Benson has received some small amounts of money for her role in the "Goose Girl" commercial and other small ad roles, she does not see acting and theater as a realistic way to make a living

in Alaska.

"I'll do theater in the winter, and in the summer, I'll make my money driving trucks," Benson explains.

Benson's truck driving days began with the Alaska Pipeline. She started out in a warehouse as a teamster, but quit when she got a teamster "A" card which would allow her to drive, because she wanted to prove she could do it. A woman was not easily accepted as an equal by the macho men who made up the majority of the drivers.

Not everyone was hostile. When she got her first job, a tough, grizzled old trucker quickly summarized her lack of experience. "You've never drove a truck before, have you?" he asked. He could have used that knowledge to quickly eliminate her in favor of a man. All he had to do was go to the foreman.

"He said he admired my guts, and told me he would teach me to drive in one hour."

Benson started out driving a water-truck, used to keep down the dust which plagued the pipeline roads. As long as she did her job, and did it well, she was okay. But she could

not slip up, there were men watching, waiting to cut her off for a mistake which they would have forgiven in a man.

Benson graduated from just working a water truck to hauling pipeline parts. Her big test came on a thirty-five below zero day in the Brooks Range. A mechanic had worked on her truck earlier that day, and she had been instructed to drive to the end of a pad with a creek just beyond. The wind was blowing, driving the snow over the ground in near white-out conditions.

When Benson hit her brakes, she discovered they were nonexistent. She collided with pipeline structures and there was no one to help her for miles. "I practically totaled the truck," she recalls, "and my glasses were all busted up."

Benson hiked for two-and-a-half miles before being picked up and taken to camp. Her model's face was swollen terribly and bleeding. The mechanic tried to say the accident had been her fault, but Benson held her ground.

"It was almost enough to make me quit," she recalls. "They were ready to medivac me to Fairbanks. I said, 'no, if I'm medivaced, I won't come back!'" She stayed in camp, propped up with pillows for a week. Afterward, she was issued a new truck. "It was a beautiful, white Peterbilt," she recalls "I thought I had died and gone to heaven!"

Pipeline life was tough on women in more ways than just job pressure.

One time some of the men came down with venereal disease. The decision was then made that all of the women in camp would be given shots. They were gathered together, and given a lecture. No way, said Benson, she would not submit to the shots. "I know what I do," she explains.

Another time, a burly man attacked her in a parked bus, fully intent, Benson says, on raping her. "I told him that if he touched me, every Native man in camp would be after him, and they'd skin him alive!" He backed off.

In recent years, Benson has driven concrete mixers, and poured concrete. Despite her experience on the pipeline, she still had barriers of sex and racism to cross. When she first started working, a superior let her know she was not wanted. "If I hear any complaints about you, I'll have you fired!" she was told.

There was one complaint but it was balanced by two compliments. Benson was never fired. While there may still be some pockets of resentment, a trip to the workplace with Benson reveals good will as she is greeted with friendship by the other workers. ... only they don't call her Diane, Ms. Benson or even Benson. They call her ... "The Goose Girl."



Diane Benson, her son Latseen, and a concrete-mixing truck. Benson got her start as a trucker driving the Haul Road during pipeline construction days.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS