

'Le Muktuk and A Shake to Go ...!'

By FRANK MURPHY

Despite bright August sunshine, there may seem to be a pall of gloom hanging over the community of Fairbanks. With the closing of the Tanana Valley State Fair on Aug. 20, Fairbanksans face many muktukless months before this delicacy will again be available to them.

Before the Tundra Times opened its booth at the fair and "gave away" muktuk in exchange for a donation, nobody knew what to expect. The controversy over fitness of native foods for public consumption had one side in the dispute anticipating high "sales" and the other side anticipating a high body count.

Neither side was right, but the FOM (Friends of Muktuk) made quite a few converts to the cause while there were no known fatalities attributable to muktuk eating. If there was one, it should have been this reporter, whose appetite always overwhelmed his caution.

In the course of five days, I consumed almost as much muktuk as I gave away but I didn't contract anything more lethal than a greasy chin.

About 320 tiny samples,

skewered on either side of a reassuring olive, were devoured by hungry fair-goers. Reactions were varied. Many, who expected the worse, were pleasantly surprised.

Some compared the taste to nuts, a fishy steak, watermelon rind, or bubble gum; but most proclaimed it wasn't like anything they had ever eaten. A limited number wouldn't say anything, but chewing determinedly and smiling weakly, would back away from the booth, presumably on their way to the nearest trash barrel.

A few teenagers tried to express both wit and worldliness by pausing over a plate of muktuk, wrinkling up their faces, and shouting "Eeeyuk!"

Since muktuk is made up of simple bands of black and white, and is visually quite charming, this attitude was unpardonable.

It was pointed out that they had probably eaten clams and liver, certainly not beauty queens of the food world, and furthermore, if it were called "le muktuk" and served at \$10 a portion, they would likely consume it with relish even if it was purple with green bumps and crawling across the plate in a last dash for freedom.

On the final day of the fair, a visitor from Chicago came to the booth and made inquiries as to the best way to prepare and preserve muktuk. He was in touch with a processor of novelty foods and quite sure that this Eskimo delicacy could be sold on a national basis.

So, who knows? In a few years, people may be driving up to stands all over the nation and ordering, "muktuk, with a shake to go, and side order of seal oil."