

An attack of sanity

Fairbanks — (Friday, Oct. 3, 1980) — It's a beautiful, brilliant fall morning here, the kind of day that reminds you why people fall in love with Interior Alaska. I'm looking out the window of Chris Anderson's log cabin at the woods surrounding his house, trying to find the words to explain to my friends why I am no longer working at the Tundra Times.

This should be an easy job, as I have had a lot of practice at it. In twelve years, I have resigned my job at the newspaper exactly five times. My first letter of resignation was written this time of year in 1969. It was addressed to Howard Rock, when I joined the Navy after receiving my draft notice. If a position at the Tundra Times was an elected office, I could say that I have served five terms at the newspaper, four of them as editor.

This last term has been the hardest and most painful for me, but also the most rewarding. It took me to the Aleutians and the Pribilofs for the first time, and to Greenland and Sami country (Lapland) and to Paris, France and the mouth of the Yukon River. I doubt that even the President of the United States has been invited to join a luncheon of boiled trout in a Sami reindeer herder's tent or be hung by a rope over the cliffs of St. George Island to collect murre eggs. I would have even climbed Denali with Rob Stapleton last spring if I hadn't chickened out on that invitation. The job gave me a chance to visit my Ahnah's (grandmother's) birthplace in the Mackenzie River delta of the Northwest Territories of Canada last year.

There are some privileges associated with being the Editor and Publisher of the Tundra Times, I reminded myself last fall when Andy Klamser and I were riding the hydrofoil between Denmark and Sweden. I could cash a personal check at stores in Chevak, Barrow and St. Mary's. There have been some very satisfying moments, like being able to blabber on to a captive audience of 1,300 people at the Tundra Times Banquet.

But the job has also left me broke, underweight and too much of a regular in downtown Anchorage. The financial problems are a real bummer, but not nearly so bad as the politics of the position. People get really excited and upset with you when you are the editor of the Tundra Times and call the shots as you see them. I must have been a complete masochist to have called it quits and then gone back again four times.

This last term of my editorship has been the most pleasurable of them all. But it has also nearly killed me. Why did I do it? Why did I go back again and again? It sure beats the hell out of me!

A good part of the reason goes back to a cold spring night in April of 1976, when I held hands with a dying old man and made him a promise that his newspaper would not die with him. More than that, I guess I've been captivated by my firm belief that Native folks in our villages deserve to have their own newspaper voice.

These thoughts were weighing heavy in my brain as I sat at my desk early one morning in mid-August and convinced myself that it was time to move on again. In resignation letter number five, I told Chairman Agafon Krukoff that I was leaving and that I did not wish to die in office.

I have been thinking long and hard about some way of explaining to the people how I felt and why I did what I had to do. The explanation came to me as I was hunting

(Continued on Page Eleven)

● An attack of sanity

(Continued from Page Two)

a couple of weeks later with Eddie and George Edwardson and Otto Okpeaha at Iko Bay east of Barrow. I dropped a nice fat 32-point buck with a quarter-mile shot. Then the work began and the mosquitos magically appeared. We skinned and gutted the animal and cut it into two sections. We had to pack it nearly three-quarters of a mile to the boat. George immediately picked up the hind section, threw it comfortably over his shoulder, and easily packed it the distance.

Otto and I took turns packing the more unweildy front section over the long expanse of wet tundra. Otto and I struggled hard to get out that meat, trading the load every couple of hundred paces. When we were working, we were both glad to trade off the heavy burden.

Back at camp that night, laying comfortably in my sleeping bag and listening to the loons calling from outside the tent, I knew what I would tell our people about my role at the Tundra Times. "Friends," I would say, "I've been carrying this load longer than I should.

It's time now for someone else to pack the meat."

My vacation with the Edwardson's was a great adventure. I'm going to have to write about it sometime. While the Tundra Times board and staff were struggling over the heavy load I had tossed on their shoulders, George and Otto and I were stranded on a gravel island offshore from Cape Simpson in the Arctic Ocean, playing backgammon, shooting ducks, and scratching our heads over our busted engine, waiting to be rescued. The boys were getting restless out there, and I didn't tell them about my hopes that we wouldn't be rescued too early.

When I finally got back to town and a telephone, I called Chairman Krukoff and told him that I was "overcome by an attack of sanity" and wouldn't be going back to the Tundra Times. The paper is getting along fine, proving that I wasn't indispensable, and that we had lured some pretty competent people into the operation. As of this week, my involvement is reduced to that of a minor stockholder in the Publishing Company, as I transferred most of my stock to 30 individuals who gave me encouragement and support during my years of service. The future of the Tundra Times is placed in the hands of the Native people which it serves. That is the way it should be.

— Tom Richards, Jr.