

River town readies for once-a-year ice classic and \$ \$ \$

NENANA—During the last days of April and on into the middle of May, large crowds congregate on the riverbanks of the Tanana to watch for a miracle. It's an annual phenomenon Alaskans call break up, one of nature's most splendid spectacles.

Every warm April day brings more water on top of the solid

river ice until one day—nobody knows just when—the strange rumbling and crunching sound of swirling ice floes topples a tripod set out in the river, about 300 feet from shore. Moving 100 feet downstream, the magic marker dramatically signals the end of winter and heralds the official beginning of spring in the Great Land.

A cable attached from the tripod trips a large clock, especially designed for the Classic, which records the exact time of the beginning of breakup. The clock is started about a week before the Ice Classic Committee, elected by the Nenana townspeople months before, thinks the ice has even the merest chance of going out.

Once the clock is running, a 24-hour armed guard ensures that no eager stage hand or practical joker has a chance to rewrite the script, as directed and produced in a full color extravaganza by Mother Nature.

The earliest date of break up was back in 1940 when the curtain rose on the spring spec-

tacular at 3:27 p.m., April 20. Mother Nature kept her fans waiting in 1964 when the star of the show refused to set foot on the cold stage until 11:41 p.m. on May 20. Last year the ice went out at 12:46 p.m. on May 6, the sixth time for that date in the history of the Ice Classic.