

Sans coffee, strike-bound, fish lice, but still flying —

# Hakkila presents views on rural jet 'service'

*(Editor's Note: Tundra Times Advertising Manager Jack Hakkila is in Gambell on St. Lawrence Island this week. Enroute to the Bering Sea island community, he wrote this commentary on the airplane and sent the dispatch to us from Kotzebue.)*

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Once again I am ready to depart. This time further west than I have ever been before, to St. Lawrence Island.

The stewardess has just announced that after we reach cruising altitude, we will be served orange or tomato juice, there is no coffee this morning.

Alaska certainly is a place for the Spartan existence. Where else can one board an hour and one-half flight at 7:40 a.m. sans breakfast.

We are streaking past the control tower to take off. Two Wien Boeing 737's stand out amongst the other planes there. Two have departed before us.

As we rode up just before 7:00 this morning, I was struck by the view coming in from the

Anchorage International Inn along the new four-lane highway. Past the new control tower, over the top of the terminal building were five tails with the bright yellow Wien insignia.

Other than a few old Reeve planes on the other end of the terminal, the airport was deserted.

Inside the terminal was an endless line at the Wien check-in as passengers were ready to embark for not only Nome and Kotzebue but Fairbanks. Prudhoe Bay, Barrow, Kodiak and an endless list of other points on the Wien schedule.

There were fishing poles, guitars, cats, amongst the regular duffle bags, suitcases and accordians.

I am a little dismayed. Ross Clements at Wien ALPA told me I could fly with Great Northern at 9:00 a.m. They would serve a hot meal. For some reason, I, like most Alaskans who have lived here any length of time associate Wien with bush travel and never thought of another airline when I purchased my

ticket to Gambell.

We are just breaking out over the weather as we head west.

This plane seems somewhat cleaner than the one from Fairbanks to Anchorage. No fish lice obscure the view through the window. I asked our stewardess yesterday if they ever fumigate the planes. She asked if the bugs were inside the plane or between the windows.

When I replied that they were very plainly inside the plane she explained that it was very difficult to keep the planes clean as they alternately haul fish and passengers in the same plane.

That probably explains why the air conditioner was leaking over the front seats. They must require a heavy duty unit to keep the fish.

Fortunately the elderly gentleman with his daughter had seated himself further back in the plane.

I first noticed him at the ticket counter appearing as would any other tourist headed for Minnesota. He appeared not to ask any special courtesies. Then at the ticket counter I became immersed in conversation with Hannele Koivumaki the ticket agent.

She is from Kuopio, Finland, having lived in the U.S. for only seven years. I showed her a postcard from my niece from Oulo. Then I became confused as I stumbled through a maze of incoming passengers while we boarded through Gate 3. Later I saw these same people on my flight. They were only checking in at the ticket counter to re-board on their flight from Kotzebue.

The black stewardess has just

asked if I would like orange or tomato juice. I shall have the tomato, probably somewhere over Galena, as she is currently only stocked with orange.

I first noticed her when I sat down and thought to myself that she has that mischievous look in her eye reminiscent of young Maria Trapp in the "Sound of Music."

In any case as I walked through the gate and over the asphalt in Fairbanks on my way to board. The elderly gentleman and his daughter were suddenly at my side.

I looked at him carefully and asked, "You're Sig Wien, aren't you?"

"Yes."

I then remarked that he obviously wasn't boycotting Wien.

"Is there much boycotting going on?"

"Yes," I replied.

He then introduced me to his daughter and asked how long I had lived in Alaska.

Where else but Alaska would the elderly owner of a major airline insist that a passenger board before he and his family?

The Wien Strike certainly leaves me with mixed feelings. As an economist, it is obvious to me that this should be a very profitable airline. And as an Alaskan, I have sat in the back of Twin Otters, flipped over in the

turbulence in a Cherokee Six and landed on skies when a bush runway was closed to wheels. I have sat beneath my luggage on two attempts at a downwind landing and have witnessed innumerable accounts of friends killed in plane crashes.

Where does one draw the line between profit and safety? And what are the rewards for those who fight for what is right?

The generation of pioneers is still around us in Alaskan aviation. They should not be treated casually. The world knows too few Wiens or Gillams, and far too many who would make the world over for the sake of change.

One of the most discouraging of aviation's pioneering stories is that of Harold Gillam. Having pioneered instrument flying into the Kuskokwim country and having led many search efforts for missing flyers including an interminable one for the missing Russians during World War II, Gillam himself froze to death weeks after going down in the mountains near Annette Island. No one searched for him after the first few days.

No first class exists on this flight, but if flying in the back of a combination freighter and passenger plane is good enough for Sig Wien, it is good enough for me.

The descent is into Kotzebue.