

Face of Consumerism in Bush Is Definitely Changing

By JACQUELINE GLASGOW
Staff Writer

A mail order for supplies comes into Fairbanks from a distant Eskimo village above the Brooks mountain range where no highways, no railroads, and only an occasional plane arrives once or twice weekly... maybe... if the weather is good.

Anyone with a preconceived image of "bush" Alaska immediately pictures a rustic supply of animal traps, long underwear, kerosene lantern, cloth flour sacks with XXX stamped on them, and perhaps candles, rifle ammunition, or tinned milk.

All of these things do, indeed, still go out to the bush. But the weekly plane load may also include such sophisticated items as frozen Chef Boyardee pizza dinners, a SONY tape recorder with a selection of the latest tapes, a pair of bright purple, high-fashion ladies' flared slacks, an eight-foot velveteen sofa, or a 4 cycle mini-bike.

The face of consumerism in the bush is definitely changing. Merchants supplying the bush will tell you there is very little difference in the buying habits of bush Alaskans and their city counterparts anywhere.

For the Alaskan today, no matter how remote his permanent home, flies in and out of the bush regularly. He has encountered in some form and in some place all of the vast and diversified array of products produced and marketed throughout the world.

And those products which make life easier, more luxurious, and just plain more fun have filtered through the system to



IN CASE THE MAIL DOESN'T COME — Many bush stores carry only a limited supply of popular items, to supplement individual orders that are flown in from Fairbanks and Anchorage. Business and housing needs compete for space.

Rachel Sikvayugak, owner of the largest store in Anaktuvuk Pass, does her chores in the living area of her home, while a customer browses in the shopping section.

— Photo by FRANK MURPHY

some surprising corners of Alaska.

How they get there, what the consumer pays, and what it costs to get them there is another part of the story. Our stereotyped image of the bush has a dog sled with a valiant and brave driver mushing hundreds of miles through a blizzard with a load of supplies.

Today's bush customer may, in fact, pick up a telephone

which bounces off a satellite orbiting the earth in outer space, place a call to the nearest merchant, and have the order flown in the next day or at least in the same week by air.

Like the old stereotype, this too is an idealized image. Deliveries to the bush are not all that regular, smooth, and expedient. Since a large portion of freight to the bush is dependent on aircraft, mother

nature still plays a part and the goods arrive, "God and the U.S. Weather Service permitting."

There is no simple, centralized, uniform, streamlined buying and selling system for the bush. Like the rest of America, bush trade flourishes on free enterprise, competition, and cash and credit. The guy who gets the business is the one who gets there the fastest with the mostest at, hopefully, the lowest price.

Every imaginable method of modern merchandising exists in the bush. There are local, privately-owned stores. There are village co-ops. There are chain stores. There are mail order catalog sales. And there are still a few trading posts where you can exchange furs for goods.

Chances are that the bush customer utilizes just about each and every method in the course of a year. He knows what he wants but he may have to search around to find the best place to get it.

Merchants who invest in catalogs find that it pays off. The more sophisticated bush customer likes to see what he's getting or at least get some idea of choice and price.

J.C. Penney Co., a comparative johnny-come-lately to Alaska, puts out a simple 18 page, black and white catalog, complete with photos, and data on sizes, color, horse power,

or whatever.

Initially the company mailed out small quantities addressed to the Postmaster or Postmistress with a request to distribute them to villagers.

Word spread, friends showed the catalog to friends, requests for more catalogs came pouring in, and today, out of the Fairbanks store alone, Penney's does a healthy \$1500 to \$2000 volume of bush sales weekly.

What is your single most-wanted item, Penney's was asked? The Personal Shopper smiled. "Pampers' disposable diapers!"

Not only is the face of consumerism in the bush changing, some other parts of the anatomy are also experiencing something new. Given the scarcity of good dependable water systems, disposable diapers are a boon to bush mothers. Progress!

But orders do not stop with diapers. J.C. Penney's gets requests for cocktail dresses, too. Each letter is carefully read and a diligent sales person makes a choice of what the customer needs. If, in fact, they do not have the item the customer wants, they will often make a call to a fellow merchant to try to fill the order.

Are there many complaints? Overwhelmingly, the merchants responded with "no" or "rarely."

"Bush people are easier to please than any other segment of the population," said a typical storeowner.

Cash, credit, or COD? Merchandise is shipped in all ways. Many regular bush customers establish accounts for everything from groceries to hardware to furniture.

A letter sent to Lindy's Grocery store in Fairbanks reveals another aspect of the bush customer. Enclosed with the list of foodstuffs the buyer wanted was a sizable check.

The letter read: "Sense I don't know what you want, don't know what to send. If I send to much, send me change. If not enough, don't worry, I aight no crook."

The letter proved to be true. Of ten major suppliers interviewed, not one complained about bad checks. "We just don't get bad checks from the bush," said one.

"I think most people in the bush are very honest people," said another. "We have never received a bad check that I can remember."

The individual hand-written requests that arrive from the villages hundreds of miles away are not always easy to figure out, however.

One customer wrote Lindy's and asked for "an undisclosed amount" of something. After much head-scratching, the mail order clerk used his best judgement.

Another letter said: "I'm in a bad dog food shortage bind and if you could send me ten 50 lb. sacks of Purina Dog Chow, I would appreciate it immensely. (So would my sled dogs.)"

Another letter to Lindy's asked for a wash basin, a simple enough request. Although Lindy's did not carry such an item, they called Samson's Hardware to see if they could fill the order.

Then they looked at the dimensions of the "wash basin" — 23 x 42½ x 10½. What the customer wanted was not a wash basin but an old-fashion tin bathtub. And Samson's did have such a thing: \$31 plus freight!

Both Samson's Hardware and Lindy's Groceries sell a large volume of goods to Anaktuvuk

(Continued on page 8)

TO ALL INTERESTED PERSONS

THE SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF ALASKA IS NOW SOLICITING APPLICATIONS FOR THE POSITION OF ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR WITH THE ALASKA COURT SYSTEM, DUE TO THE RESIGNATION OF ROBERT N. REEVES, EFFECTIVE JUNE 30, 1973. ANNUAL COMPENSATION FOR THE POSITION OF ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR IS \$33,000, WITH HEALTH AND RETIREMENT BENEFITS UNDER THE STATE OF ALASKA EMPLOYEES' HEALTH AND RETIREMENT PROGRAMS, AND SICK LEAVE AND ANNUAL VACATION AS DETERMINED BY THE SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF ALASKA.

ALL INTERESTED APPLICANTS ARE REQUESTED TO FURNISH A DETAILED BIOGRAPHICAL RESUME, WITH PARTICULAR EMPHASIS GIVEN TO LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE. APPLICATIONS SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO THE OFFICE OF CHIEF JUSTICE, 941 FOURTH AVENUE, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA, 99501, NO LATER THAN 4:30 P.M., MAY 18, 1973.

/s/ JAY A. RABINOWITZ
CHIEF JUSTICE
ALASKA SUPREME COURT

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