

# Fur Rendezvous: Fifty years of tradition

Rendezvous, a French term meaning "to gather or meet by design", is deeply rooted in the American tradition. The Anchorage Fur Rendezvous combines the best elements of the many early gatherings of hearty mountain men and Indians who tamed the wilderness, extracting treasures.

Annually, trappers agreed to meet in a designated place sometime in the early spring to exchange their winter's kill for cash, whiskey and supplies. Deprived of the luxuries of civilization for all but two weeks of the year, a lot of living had to be compressed into a short time and there were no

By the 1930's, the Rendezvous was relegated to history books and cheap romance novels. But in the rear car of a train bound for Anchorage from Fairbanks, the fire of those early celebrations was rekindled. Vern Johnson and a group of his athletic cronies were gathered in serious conversation. They had just trounced the Fairbanks hockey team in a meet that had brought the whole town out to watch the competition, in spite of the biting cold. The city was loyal to its own and it galled Vern Johnson to know that such was not the case in Anchorage. The sweat soaked team vowed to change all that...and so they did.

On February 15, 16 and 17 in 1936, the first "winter carnival" was held. It featured skiing, hockey, basketball, boxing and a one-dog children's sled dog race down Fourth Avenue. Nearly three thousand souls, Anchorage's entire population, turned out for the bonfire and torchlight parade. There was nightly dancing at the Elks Hall, Charlotte Manning was crowned queen, and there was a mukluk dance on ice. The "winter carnival" had everything but a name.

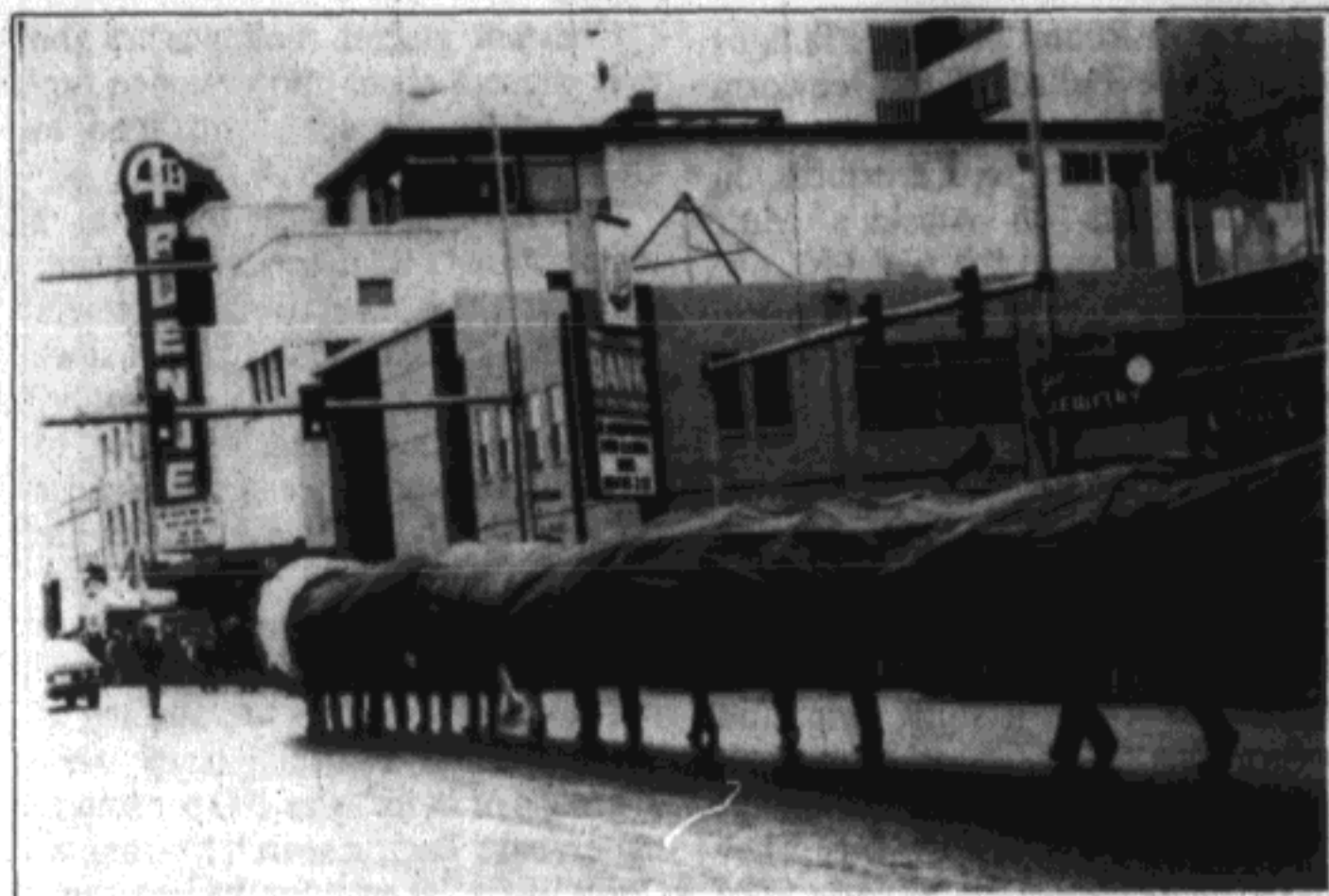
The area was dependent on mining, commercial fishing and furs for its livelihood. Furs were Alaska's third most valuable industry in those days. Thousands on mink and fox were raised throughout the state for their skins. In addition, several hundred trappers sought this valuable prey. Tom Bevers, the local fire chief, felt that this business should somehow be incorporated into the celebration. He concocted a scheme to bring buyers and trappers together for a week or so of trading, competing and generally "whooping it up". Local merchants made money, folks had fun. It was a success and the carnival got a name — FUR RENDEZVOUS. It was 1938.

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holds barred. They danced, drank, brawled and gambled — sometimes with their lives. The Rendezvous also drew Indians who had hopes of bartering their wares for the white man's goods. Company dealers were there ferreting out the best deals for their furs which were destined to grace the shoulders of the rich living far away in other worlds. Rendezvous was life, death and furs mingled with the smells of cooking pots, ripening pelts and gun powder. It was an era of romance.



Leonard Huntington, of Galena, made a good showing when he took fourth place in 1983. Tundra Times photo



The iceworm makes its way down Fourth Avenue during the 1977 Rondy. Note the snowless streets. Tundra Times photo

That same year, Clyde Ellis assumed the management of the fledgling festival. Since most of the events were free, his most critical problem was to raise some cash. A raffle was the answer, and so the young ladies vying for the title of Fur Rendezvous Queen and hence, "Miss Alaska", bought their way into the crown and fur-lined robe through the sale of tickets for a 1938 Packard. Grace Bailey, by dint of superior salesmanship, became the queen that year, though the identity of the lucky Packard winner has been lost in the mists of time.

The fur auction was the main attraction of the early celebrations. Trappers recognized the advantages of selling directly to fur buyers thus eliminating the middle man and greatly increasing their revenues. By 1939, airlines offered to bring fifty pounds of furs, at no cost, along with any trapper attending the festivities. A special train from Fairbanks was added to the schedule and there wasn't a place to stay in Anchorage. Folks opened up their homes to strangers and it wasn't unusual to see well-dressed buyers sleeping in the hallways and on table tops wrapped in their stylish furs. Those lucky enough to find rooms in the existing hotels, were forced to sleep in shifts, but nobody seemed to care. The streets were full of the most fashionable trend setters from New York to the most rugged trapper from the bush, each soaking up the Rendezvous.

In spite of the shift in the emphasis of the celebration, sporting events continued to flourish. Nearly 200 visiting athletes joined the trappers at the Rendezvous to compete in both indoor and outdoor events. And, of course, the children's sled dog race continued to be a popular attraction.

In 1941, the festival's emphasis once again changed as rumors of war spread across the land. Uniforms were everywhere and planes filled the skies. The military joined the Rendezvous celebration with 26 units from Ft. Richardson taking part.

By 1942, the war was upon us. Rondy, as such, was suspended, though it reemerged at Ft. Richardson as Bonanza Days. It was here that the festival's first melodrama was born. Folks just couldn't face both a war and a long dark winter without some kind of celebration. It had become too much a part of their lives.

As Anchorage grew in size, the character of Rendezvous changed with it. In 1946, the Chamber of Commerce adopted the new 'Rondy'. Profits from the now financially successful festival were earmarked for a new civic center. By 1946 enough money had been raised to help build the Sydney Lawrence Auditorium.

Nineteen forty-six was a banner year in yet another way. The first sled dog race for adults was staged. Though it was not an instant success, the race was to become the cornerstone event of the celebration, eventually evolving into the richest single competition of its kind in the world!

The festival grew by leaps and bounds, and in 1953 it was turned over to the City of Anchorage. For several years, like an orphaned child, Rondy was managed by first one organization and then another until Greater Anchorage Incorporated was formed to take on the management responsibility. Since then the Anchorage Fur Rendezvous has gained international fame with visitors from around the world converging on Anchorage each February. It has received both national and international press attention with segments aired on all major television networks, as well as feature articles in a wide range of publications — from THE WALL STREET JOURNAL to GOOD HOUSEKEEPING. It takes an excess of 4,000 volunteers working for nearly a year to put on Rondy. This figure, however, is probably well below the actual number who give time to one or more Rondy activities...from the CB'ers who control parade traffic to the service organizations who sell the collector buttons. Fur Rendezvous really is produced by the people of Anchorage.

Today, Rondy is governed by a forty-member board of directors made up of people from all walks of life...working together to celebrate the beginning of the end of dark days, frigid nights and cabin fever. But most important, the initial spirit of fellowship and fun has remained through the years and today the Anchorage Fur Rendezvous is a festival second to none!



Reggie Joule of Kotzebue attempts to take pictures and keep his balance photo by Steve Kakaruk