

Alaskan tells off famous physicist

by Vern Metcalfe

In the *Tundra Times*

My friend Janie Leask writes a column for the *Anchorage Times* that appears on Sunday, which is one reason I buy that issue. Also penning an offering in that Sunday issue is one Clem Tillion, former legislator.

One can recognize how much I treasure these offerings when one remembers that the *Times* led the fight to remove the capital from these precincts, and your scrivener vowed to never line the pockets of one Brer Robert Atwood.

Mr. Atwood is, of course, the publisher of the *Times*. Which sort of leads into the honors paid by Janie Leask to the late Howard Rock, founder and for many years publisher of this statewide newspaper.

In her column of Aug. 9, Ms. Leask told of how all of this came to be and also reminded this writer of an incident that occurred during my tenure as the first state director of Civil Defense.

I've often described this particular job as: "A very dirty one, but someone had to do it." Rarely has there been a more apt description.

It was also my first taste of government employment, and after four different tries I can assure the audience that a bureaucrat I'm not. I feel that can all be traced to my upbringing, which allowed for speaking my piece before being led to the woodshed.

Be that as it may, I found myself during the summer of 1960 being invited to the Governor's Mansion by

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the late Bill Egan to attend a soiree honoring, if that is the word, one Dr. Edward Teller, known as the founder of the hydrogen bomb.

I was quite taken with the invitation, inasmuch as Gov. Egan was quite stingy in such invites — at least to me — and it marked the one and only time I received such exposure during my 20 or so months on the job.

Out of sight, out of mind: In this case, the Gov. needed someone to confront this Hungarian emigre who had achieved notoriety by building a bigger, if not better, instrument for wiping out mankind.

The reason for the eminent physicist's visit was to convince Egan that we really needed "Project Chariot," which would have carved out a deep-water port at Cape Thompson utilizing a small — if there is such — atomic bomb.

It seemed that Gov. Egan had a veto power over such an exercise and decided his director of Civil Defense should be on hand to listen to Dr. Teller and assorted other proponents of such a drastic ditch-digging effort.

I was introduced to Dr. Teller as Gov. Egan studiously avoided him and listened to how all of this would be achieved.

I must admit I was somewhat in awe of all of this, inasmuch as I knew of no good reason for any type of a port that far to the north and west. And besides that, I'd been inundated with all types of materials relating to fallout.

If you were around in that time and place, you would remember that you were being scared half to death by public disclosures of the results of fallout. If you were also around as recently as a bit over a year ago, you will see the end results of that nuclear plant accident in Russia, which proved the theory.

As noted, I listened. And after the good (that is the wrong adjective) physicist dictated how Alaska would gain this deep-water whatever, I mentioned — Horrors! — the danger of fallout. Dr. Teller would have none of that and told me that my concerns were unfounded. He said he had devised a "clean" bomb, and that furthermore, there were few humankind to

be concerned with in the immediate vicinity.

Now, I rarely get rude with people, famous or otherwise, but the Teller effrontery was such that I heatedly pointed out that we did have Eskimo people up that way, as well as large herds of various animals such as caribou and various denizens of the deep.

All of which contributed to the care and feeding of our citizenry. And that "clean" bomb or not, there would be fallout, and I could see the folks and animals being lit up like a pinball machine from various forms of radiation.

Well, now, Edward Teller obviously was not used to peons speaking out with such disregard for his eminence and after several (I guessed) obscenities voiced in his native tongue stalked off.

A greying secretary or aide dressed me down in very plain English about my disrespect for this world-renowned scientist, and I looked over her shoulder and saw Bill Egan grinning from ear to ear.

Now I'm sure that Howard Rock and others had input into the veto of Project Chariot, but I must claim some credit for all of this. As I departed the soiree, I told Gov. Egan there was one thing Dr. Teller had told me that I felt should be of concern. He asked, "What, pray tell, would that be?"

"Well, he told me not to worry about fallout drifting across Alaska. He would wait to detonate until the jet stream was blowing toward Siberia."

Now it can be told.