

Refuses Mother's Request for Snuff

"Mother, this is no time for tobacco. You just have to go without it for now."

This was what Howard Luke told his mother at the height of the flood in Fairbanks that started on August 14.

"I had been very busy during day and night rescuing people from rooftops, porches, and from out of the water all over Fairbanks," said Howard Luke this week.

Luke, an Athabaskan Indian from Nenana, had indeed been very busy during the flood. He had driven his riverboat day and night with little sleep through the streets of Fairbanks as did many other boat owners in the city.

"I'm quite sure I saved at least one person's life," he said, modestly. "On one trip, I came around the Northward apartment building. I heard a girl hollering for help. I saw her on the east corner with water up to her waist.

"She started wading toward us along the building then somebody hollered, 'Don't cross there!' but I guess she didn't hear. All of a sudden she disappeared into the water.

"I took my boat toward the place where she went under. The water was very muddy, you know. I saw something come out of the water a little bit. It was her shoulder. I grabbed and pulled her into the boat. The girl fell into the deep hole the big rains made earlier."

The girl told Howard Luke

a little later that he had saved her life.

TREACHEROUS CURRENTS

When the floodwaters poured into the city, the streets became canals but canals with swift, treacherous currents. Maneuvering boats was a tricky business and Howard Luke and his fellow boatmen had to be good.

Luke's long experience in boating on rivers in the interior stood him in good stead. He had been right hand man for Johnny Anderson of Fairbanks on the annual Yukon 800 Marathon, a grueling race of 800 miles up and down the Chena, Tanana, and Yukon Rivers.

Luke's boating skill was not quite enough maneuvering the flood-filled streets with cross currents, relatively calm arcas, and swirls.

"The currents around the new Penney building were real bad," said Luke. "I had a boatload of women and children when swift current hit the bow and swung it right straight into the back-end of a pickup truck."

The impact smashed part of the bow.

"I hauled a lot of people and many of them wanted to pay me but I didn't want the money. I was real happy to help but I hope I can get a loan somewhere so I can repair the boat. I need it very badly," Luke said.

Howard Luke operates a fish camp 18 miles downriver as a tourist attraction in conjunction with the tour steamer, sternwheeler Discovery.

"I lost over a hundred pounds of smoked salmon strips in the flood. My camp was flooded. My mother helps me out selling baskets and other things at the camp. I could of made some money out of those strips and now they're no good. They're sour now and not good for anything," he said.

Another unusual mishap occurred as Howard Luke drove his boat when the water got deep on the streets of Fairbanks. It was difficult to detect anything underwater.

"We got hung up on a parking meter on one of the trips and loosened some boards on the bottom of the boat. It was hard to get off that thing but we finally got off by rocking the boat," Luke recalled.

HEROIC SERVICE

Rescue activities by such men as Howard Luke, other boatmen, Army Air Force helicopters and private helicopter pilots was a heroic effort during the great flood. They moved thousands of people to safe places.

A friend who helped Luke on some of the numerous trips said of him:

"That Luke is a cool man. He never once got excited."

And what about the request for tobacco by his mother?

"You see, my mother chews snuff. She ran out of it, forgot it, or something," Howard Luke said, chuckling. "When I refused to get her some cans of snuff, she got mad at me for a day or so."