

Pioneer furrier and film distributor have advertized with *Tundra Times* since '60s

by Louise Sagmoen

Tundra Times

DONALSON COMPANY

P.O. BOX 100 845

Anchorage, Alaska 99510

Phone 279-3025

For 23 years the above copy has appeared in the *Tundra Times* newspaper, making it the paper's longest running advertisement. Frank Donalson says he has never changed the advertisement, except for several address corrections.

Donalson said when he first selected the paper to advertise his subsistence fishing gear and skin sewing supplies there was no other paper that was directed exclusively to rural Alaskan Natives.

Donalson's history with *Tundra Times* goes back to 1963. "I went to the first *Tundra Times* banquet," he said in a telephone interview. In speaking of the communication gap between urban and rural Alaska Donalson said, "There was almost a complete void." In *Tundra Times* he found a way to reach customers he was seeking out. In reference to *Tundra Times* founder Howard Rock, Donalson said, "I knew him. Some of his relatives are still good customers."

Donalson explained how special his customers are. His products are made exclusively for the lady sewing little booties for the baby.

"We look at a skin through eyes of a Native woman," Donalson explained. In speaking of Barrow sewers he said, "They're fond of certain types of wolverine."

He knows what his customers

like and he enjoys working with them. "I like to deal with the people out there. A lot of times I can spot the exact village they were born."

Donalson also can spot the exact type of fur a customer needs. His supplies come from every corner of the earth. In his shop which is located in his home basement he has wolf skins from Russia and Canada. His blue fox comes from Finland. But he does have furs which come directly from Alaska such as beaver and red and white fox skins. His fur seal skins come from the Pribilof Islands. Pointing to a seal skin he said, "There's some controversy about these," although to the naked eye there only seemed to be a soft seal skin.

In 1955 Donalson began his business selling fishnets in Galena. Six years later he took his business to Anchorage. He now serves approximately 4,000 customers with a staff of four people.

In a telephone interview he explained that before the subsistence issue gained attention, his fishnets were made for subsistence users, not the commercial fishermen of Bristol Bay or Norton Sound.

While he says his main business is conducted through the mail, he does have customers come directly to his home such as Stanley and Leah Okpealuk. The couple, along with their infant children, Sean and Annie, browsed through the large selection of furs which Donalson has.

While Donalson has been a pioneer advertiser for 23 years, another one is Pictures, Inc. The little seal balancing a roll of film is familiar to many rural

Alaskans. The film company began business in Alaska in 1939 when a 16MM movie was sent to Kake, Alaska after the Principal C.E. Black requested one.

Although the company was owned by the late Merriman Holtz of Portland, Oregon, it has been doing exclusive business in Alaska since 1950, mailing feature movies and video cassettes to the Bush.

Pictures, Inc. manager Jerry Vandergriff explained why he chose to continue advertising. "It gives us name recognition in all the villages," he said, adding the paper also is a "Native pipeline around the state."

The two organizations are among Alaska's oldest mail order businesses besides being pioneer advertisers.