

Salvation Army: an ever-ready presence in Alaska

by Margaret Bauman
for the *Tundra Times*

As a child growing up in Haines, Carlton Smith saw the Salvation Army in action, helping to assure that needy children in that Southeast Alaska town had a Merry Christmas.

"They were very much involved in putting together the town Christmas program for kids," said Smith, a Sealaska Corp. board member who chairs the Salvation Army's Anchorage advisory board, "Every needy child in town got something."

Board member Margaret Nelson, who grew up in Juneau, said she was attracted to the advisory body by a desire to give back a little of the help the Salvation Army gave to her grandmother in Sitka.

"They helped when she needed some things, mostly with reading and writing and filling out forms, and understanding what they said," said Nelson, now an Anchorage publicist.

The most important contemporary issue (for the Salvation Army) is drugs and alcohol, said Smith. No issue hurts the Alaska family more."

In an address to guests at a Salvation Army luncheon Dec. 13 at the Sheraton Anchorage hotel, Smith read excerpts of a letter of thanks from a parent who recalled his childhood with an alcoholic mother. "I always looked forward to the Salvation Army food basket," he wrote.

Many folks who grew up in rural Alaska recall getting Christmas gifts from Operation Santa Claus, a cooperative effort involving the Alaska Air National Guard and the Salvation Army. The 1995 Santa Claus trips went to Gambell, Nome, Kotzebue, Bethel and McGrath, said Mike Schmickrath, the Salvation Army's public relations officer.

The Salvation Army followed

the gold rush to the Klondike back in the 1890's. Evangeline Booth, daughter of the founder of the Salvation Army, arrived in Skagway in July 1899, to care for the fortune hunters and adventurers in the gold fields.

Over the years, Salvation Army workers branched out all over Southeast Alaska, to Metlakatla, Saxman, Wrangell, Petersburg, Kake, Angoon, Sitka, Hoonah, Juneau and Haines. Today they are also in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, Kodiak, Seward, Unalaska, Homer and Cordova.

Army staff in rural areas operate small food banks, soup kitchens and thrift stores. They work with Alaska State Troopers to provide vouchers for food, lodging and gasoline for stranded travelers, and refer those in need to their extensive facilities in Anchorage. In addition, emergency shelter, religious services and youth programs are offered, army staff said.

"We are there for anyone who needs us," Schmickrath said. "We do everything in the bush on a needs basis." Area residents need to tell their local non-profit corporation what their needs are, and then we evaluate the situation and see what we can do, he said.

A recent project was a holiday luncheon in Kotzebue for elders, including gifts and a visit from Santa Claus.

"We work very closely with the United Way and the United Way with us," Smith said. "And we have plans to work with the Alaska Federation of Natives. The philosophy I'd like to see advancing is a cooperative approach."

Major Harold Brodin, divisional commander for the army in Alaska, said the organization is considering facilities in Bethel, Barrow, Kotzebue and Valdez. Each division of the Salvation

Army is being challenged to double its programs and the people it serves, he said.

The Salvation Army is the state's third largest charity, administering a \$14 million budget. Thirty-two professional people, including Alaska Native corpora-

tion executives, serve on the organization's advisory board, advising on key policy issues.

While major alcohol, detoxification and long term rehabilitation facilities are in Anchorage, along with the Booth Memorial Youth and family Service program, a

number of clients served are from rural Alaska, Smith said.

Expansion of the army into rural Alaska will depend a lot on donations, but the organization is optimistic. "People in Alaska are very generous to the Salvation Army," Schmickrath said.