

The life and times of Fred Stickman

Editor's Note: Last week we ran a personal letter to Fred Stickman. The letter revealed plans for a book, "Alaska Crude: Journeys Through the Last Frontier" by Kenneth Andrasko. Excerpted is "the life and times of Fred Stickman." next week we'll have another surprise from Fred.

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"Ever since I gave up drinking it's been different. It gets lonesome here, and it's lonesome back at home in the cabin, too, these days. My wife died back in forty-three and I was going to get married afterward, but that woman, she was Episcopal. So she want to marry a man with a different religion, and it never happen. No, never got married again . . ."

Fred Stickman is an Athapaskan carpenter; an Indian for sixty-nine years, a carpenter for twenty-four. He was well dressed for the cold, in a royal blue snow-go suit that's great for the short trapline he still runs in the village of Nulato, down where the Yukon makes its big bend to the south. His muskrat hat covered a boar-bristle crewcut, and a face distilled from a thousand Alaskan archival photographs of dogmushers, caribou herders, and thieves.

Fred and a Norwegian carpenter from Minnesota were out by Mod 4903. He was putting up canvas side skirting, and it was easy to spot his pair of beautiful Athapaskan mittens with their traditional bright braided cords about the neck, so they won't be lost. From the darkness of the mod, their beaded beauty in Prudhoe's world of pure function was startling. Each bead acted as sole representative of a different color of the spectrum unknown here, in the perpetual mists of off-white.

"Yud going to write something up on all this fur the papers? It's a pretty intriguing place and operation . . ." Olaf inquired.

Fred's taught, withdrawn face rose sharply, "Oh you know me then, eh?" and leveled out into a placid pool of wrinkles. The delight of recognition triggered a sudden spread of idiosyncrasy, a return to himself, the freedom to live in the fullness of his usual world, not just a capsule version tarnished by the boredom and indifference of the Line. He tested Olaf's knowledge of his world, of all the letters he'd written to the editors of two prominent Alaskan papers, a constant flow for a decade.

Fred began talking about his most recent letter to the Fairbanks News-Miner, "Oh, about people with long hair." He motioned to his helmeted head and gestured to Olaf's beard. "And a lot of other things." Definite arrogance, while Fred struck a stance of notoriety by some stacked siding, obviously a man both well acquainted with and endeared to public attention. Even in Prudhoe! They want to talk to me, Fred thought. But Fred is not a journalist; as his life is his only story.

Fred Stickman is one beautiful, blazing soul locked in a lonely, consuming contra dance with system, law, and logic, running long into the night. A hero of sorts, one who translates his continuous dialogue with the white-man's world of hierarchies, efficiencies and machines into the language of the villagers. Stickman's prose is full of incursions on standard English; his letters are written on any scrap of paper. "You see, them editors are always crossing things out, they don't like it too much, Olaf. But the people in the villages, they always say to me 'Stickman! We haven't seen anything for a lo-onn-ga time. Why aren't you writing?' That's all we read in those newspapers." So I just write again, haaa, whatever's happened to me. Oh, I'll tell you—that letter writing is from the teachers in the church school, they had these little books about Jane and Mary, and that's as far as I got, oh I guess up to sixth grade. That and reading cardboard packages and newspapers . . .

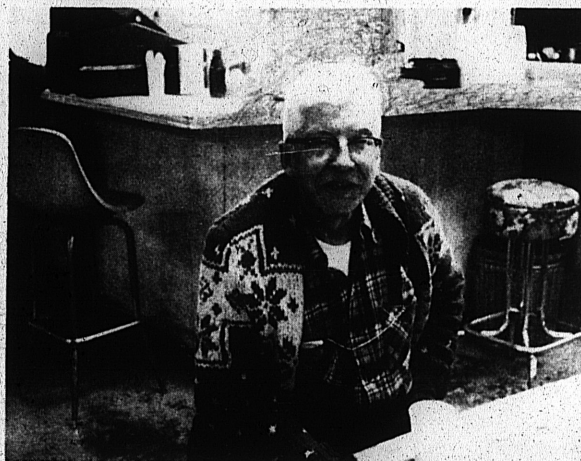
"Anyway, I had a good job at Nulato School, but I heard so much about the Pipeline I have to go to see it. You know you have to see it to believe it. It's a big thing . . . No more oil stove for me. I'll stay on the Slope right by the oil wells . . . I'm tired of living alone in a dirty old house . . . I just picked up The Tundra Times," the Alaskan Native newspaper, "to see the 'Heated Labor Hearing'." That's what I've been trying to tell the world. As long as the Union is involved in the Pipeline they're not going to be not much Native Hire. That much I know for sure. I've been bucking the Union for years. I remember, the time Peter Kewit and Sons wouldn't hire Indians at Galena 1955. They wouldn't hire my son. I've been bucking them for twenty-three years, and now I had to join them to go to work on the Pipeline . . .

"Well, I was raised poor. My mother always wanted to save money on everything, mostly grub. I remember the time we had no more bread out hunting. My dad gave me half a slice of bread then next day half a biscuit. Next day he cut it down to quarter slice and quarter biscuit etc. That's probably why I'm the same way. And when I see it here on the Pipeline, I have to write about it. As a carpenter for years, especially for the Air Force, I saved a lot on material, saved a lot on man hours. I didn't believe in coffee breaks. It's just a waste of money. They run a motor on the pickup truck not in use all day long at zero weather. People here don't think nothing of it here on the Pipeline."

In Prudhoe, trucks run day and night from September to May. After nine months the trucks are scrapped in a mass burial pit, and new ones arrive—once by barge or plane, now by road—to be junked nine months later.

This is the fourth time that the Superintendent tried to get rid of me . . . But I'm here yet. That's about what's been going on about the Local Hire. Course that's one thing the Pipeline ain't going to go through without the help of Outside people. Everybody's in the camps, even from Europe, South Africa, North, etc. But to me it stinks. I still smell him. I ran away from home before I got in trouble with the Fish and Game. Now I ran into trouble here again. They're must be the same kind of people that work for the state government. I mean them fellows make a big fuss about the oil spill. To me they can spill all the oil they want, as long as I'm making hundred a day here, with no rent, no grocery, no city tax. I heard they spend a million dollars because they didn't want to tear the Bears Den. That bear got hundred different dens around. I know because we used to hunt them. The state government people is nuts. Same way up around the Slope Bluff last spring. They didn't want to disturb the birds' nests. They spend another million's there. Them birds could go some where else to nest, that's nature. Who the hell wants birds or bear either. We want the oil to pour though. The hell with the oil spill. As long as we get that two percent royalty. I hope they throw that oil spill out of court. It looks to me like little kids playing, try to beat each other for nothing . . . Fred strode back out into the cold and dazzling white light of midday, to bark at the others and drive nails into the brittle wood that frequently splinters and cracks in the bitter temperatures.

One night of blistering cold, Olaf randomly "borrowed" a truck and stole off to Fred's room in another workers' camp some ten miles away. It was very dark. The auxiliary quartzite driving lights on top of the four-wheel drive had little impact on the whipped, rolling ice fog. Drifts and road looked precisely the same in the creeping night of darkest, lightest Prudhoe.



TT writer Fred Stickman

Fred was lying on his unmade bed in a T-shirt. His beautiful Athapaskan fur and moosehide mittens hung from a hook in the faded wall, and the blue snowmobile insulated overalls stood rigidly in a corner, a full suit of armor awaiting the dawn. The Union boss knew Fred well, and always arranged for him to live alone. This gave him plenty of time to read the newspapers scattered on the floor and extra bed, and the True Romance magazine—"the only one I Like . . ."—by the light of a single bare bulb. Fred relaxed and began to talk openly.

"So the other day was fifty-one below zero. I was out working. But we have space heaters here. Not like when I used to trap in a tent every winter, man that was cold. No time to build a cabin. Also the new Governor should look into how much a week Uncle Sam is stealing out of my checks without asking me—\$500 a week. Believe it or not. I could support at least four wives with all that money like long time ago. One medicine man had three wives, but when he got the fourth one, he started to have trouble . . . That's one man's opinion, but the reason I'm always writing is I don't like to see it happening to the rest of the young generation . . .

Fred talks easily about his most private worlds, and they begin to glow alive and free. There is something of the chieftain, of the shaman, the man of knowledge and visions that exudes from him as a master of his element, a wanderer in the woods and the rumpled ravines of the Athapaskan spirit world. "You know," he began again, "I knew you were like me, Harold, right away I did. I had a dream

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letters

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ALASKA magazine and its predecessor ALASKA SPORTSMAN. It is also the reason for the great pictures and material in THE ALASKA JOURNAL (history and arts) and ALASKA GEOGRAPHIC, also published by ALASKA magazine.

So . . . a lot of newcomers don't know us as well as we might wish . . . and they don't realize either that stories and photos they might possess could very well be happily published in one or more of our publications. That's the name of the game in Alaska . . . sharing . . . and we'd welcome a chance to publish more and more of those stories and pictures. Any copy of ALASKA magazine goes into detail about how you send in stuff and what we are looking for. The main thing is . . . we're still on the beat, from Ketchikan to Barrow . . . and we still keep looking for more and more material from you folks along the trail. Frankly we need it. Publishing three or four magazines and a book or so a month on Alaska subject material eats up an awful lot of copy. We'll look forward to hearing from more of you . . . and incidentally, you many who have contributed so much in the past . . . thanks. It's your magazine (s) and their successes have really been yours.

Sincerely,
Robert A. Henning
Editor & Publisher

REA recommendations

Alaska Rural Secondary Schools Forum

..... A Position Paper

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Resolved that:

1. Whereas our rural schools find themselves lacking personnel qualified to teach specific skills and whereas qualified talent in vocational skills vitally important to the life style of students in the respective geographical locations can be found in our villages and whereas this talent goes unrecognized due to lack of State certification, the Alaska State Department of Education be directed to provide regulations allowing local school districts to certify experienced individuals lacking formal training to teach in their programs.

2. The Alaska State Department of Education be directed to develop alternate solutions to school funding other than the FTE or ADM.

3. these resolutions may include, but not be limited to, a minimum level of funding (a "floor") for each secondary attendance center and the allocation of operating monies based on block or program approval rather than head count.

4. further, that sufficient funding be provided for planning and design of rural secondary programs, including the funding of pilot or test site programs, the results of which will be made available to schools and boards for evaluation and possible incorporation into their curriculums. Allocation of pilot funds will be governed by representatives of rural secondary schools.

5. In view of the condition of school facilities transferred from the State or Federal government to the new districts, that supplemental funding be provided through the Alaska State Department of Education to bring these facilities up to

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NOTICE

A Public Hearing on the Future of Alaska's Community Colleges will be held in Fairbanks on November 29th at the Ryan Junior High School Multipurpose Room from 7 to 10 p.m.

The Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education invites all interested persons to attend and express their views on the role of community colleges in Alaska and several alternative structures for the community college system. Written comments and recommendations may be submitted to the Commission office at Pouch F, Juneau, Alaska 99811.

The Commission will provide background information upon request. Phone 465-2855.

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