We Alaskans

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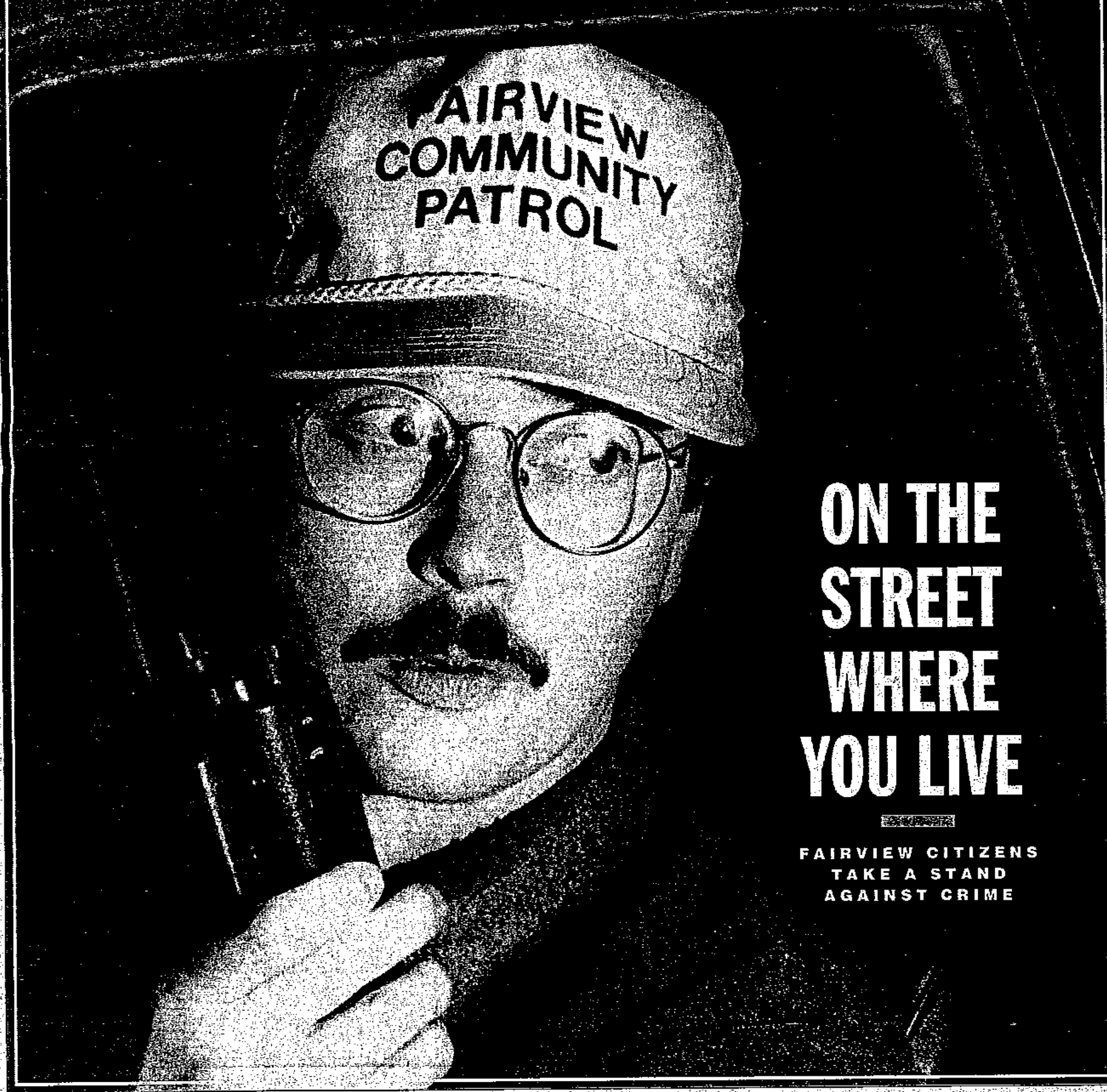
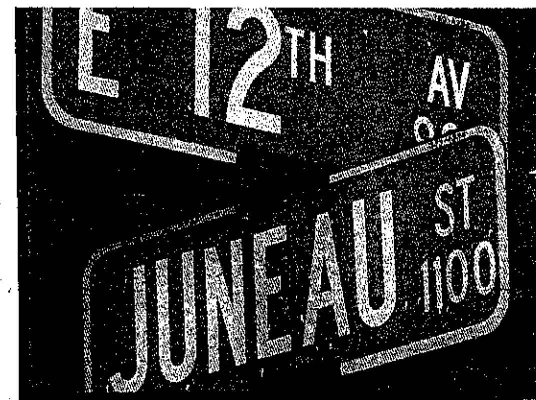


ON THE STREET WHERE YOU LIVE

FAIRVIEW CITIZENS TAKE A STAND AGAINST CRIME

ANTI-CRIME FAIRVIEW CITIZENS AIN'T GONNA TAKE IT ANYMORE



TAKING A STAND

BY DOUG O'HARRA ■ PHOTOS BY BILL ROTH

We were parked at 12th and Juneau. Behind the wheel of a small pickup truck sat Allen Kemplen, the coordinator of the Fairview Community Patrol. He watched his rear view mirror, looking back to where Juneau intersected 11th. Two young men were sauntering toward us up the middle of the road.

There were only a few homes on Juneau, old-style places with front porches on a block dominated mostly by empty lots and multiplexes. It was still early on a Friday night, yet most curtains and blinds were already drawn. Hundreds of people lived within the surrounding area, but you wouldn't know it. Empty sidewalks stretched into a gloom broken at intervals by lights that cast a weak and yellowish glow, like flashlights with dying batteries. The night felt cold and gritty, unwelcome.

The only sign of life that I could see were the two men. I glanced over the back of the seat: One of them had a hooded coat that obscured his face.

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The other wore a pair of white pants that almost seemed to glow in the dark.

Along with citizen-patrollers in two other vehicles, Kemplen had been watching the man in white pants for more than an hour as he appeared to sell drugs to passing motorists. And now he was striding purposefully toward us.

Only a few minutes earlier, Kemplen and I had been talking about the darkness, about how the dim old streetlights really didn't do an adequate job, how simple things like faulty streetlights could contribute to a neighborhood's decline. Kemplen, who lives a few blocks to the east, knows which corners have the bright, fresh lights over them. I live 10 blocks to the west, and I would hardly consider walking to the Carrs store on Gambell Street through streets as dark as these.

"There are a lot of shadows here," Kemplen had said. "When you have a lot of shadows, they attract people who kind of lurk in the shadows. And the shadows create a climate of fear, too."

But now neither of us was speaking at all. There was only the sound of the truck idling. The guy in white pants, now about 20 yards away, stooped briefly, then kept walking.

"He's picked up something," Kemplen said. "He's got something in his hands."

It's one thing to sit in a parked car and observe people on a street corner a block away as they get into cars, ride around the block and return to the corner — all signs of small-time drug dealing. But it's quite another to have those same people walk toward you with a hand-held rock or bottle.

But just as the man approached us, another vehicle in the community patrol — one that had been parked beyond 11th Avenue on Juneau Street — suddenly snapped on its headlights, changing the odds. They had been watching our backs, literally.

Did the guy in white pants empty his hands? I couldn't tell, though he kept walking toward us. As he and his companion strode past our driver's-side window only a few feet away, Kemplen didn't say anything. Then the man cut directly in front of us, close enough for an instant to touch the hood of the truck.

Kemplen and the man in the white pants made eye contact: A homeowner in a truck and some young guy on the street. They held the look.

As the man kept walking, turning his head toward Ingra Street, he thrust his arm into the air, making an obscene gesture at us with his finger. And then he and his companion were gone, hurrying toward the corner of 12th Avenue and Ingra Street, at Plaza 12 apartments.

Kemplen pulled his truck forward, and we could see that the man in white and several others were back at the same corner, where they'd been stationed off and on all evening. He appeared to be operating openly, not even worried that we were watching him. Yet this activity was only a fraction of what used to occur, according to Kemplen. Before the patrol became active a year earlier, he said, these corners would have been buzzing with drug dealers. Tonight there only appeared to be a few.

"If we weren't here, they would be out flagging people down," Kemplen said as he drove around the block, seeking a new spot with a better view. "I've come to the conclusion that the most important thing you can do is just be out here — on the street — showing a presence."

■

It's another Friday night on the Fairview Community Patrol. As they do most weekend nights, and some weekday nights too, Kemplen and about a half dozen other residents spend four or five hours patrolling the streets of their neighborhood, watching for signs of drug dealing, assault, burglary, car theft, vandalism or any other criminal activity.

With blue magnetic signs that say "Fairview

waiting. When they see the signs of suspicious activity — vandalism, people flagging down cars, parties at small apartments where people come and go with the speed of someone using a drive-through liquor store — they record license numbers, descriptions, anecdotes. Sometimes they record the scene with a video camera. Rarely do they actually call a cop.

Though the information is made available to Anchorage police, and has been used in at least one drug investigation, most often the payoff is less dramatic. Usually patrol members play a sort of cat-and-mouse game of passive disruption. The rules of the patrol strictly prohibit direct intervention: no getting out of vehicles, no confrontations. Just watch and record. Any victories are small and indirect: a sense of having cast just a little more light into the shadows. And maybe the drug dealers will decide to go somewhere else.

All of the patrol members live in Fairview. Most of them, like Kemplen, own their own homes. They say they would gladly spend their Friday nights inside those homes, but they feel the patrols have become necessary to protect their neighborhood from drug dealing.

"Right now, I want to raise my family, be a father to my kids, be a husband," said Kemplen, who was spending the evening of his 41st birthday on patrol. "But I realize that I have to do something."

■

This is my second night riding with Kemplen on patrol. I'm here partly as a writer, a reporter looking for a story. But I have been living on the western edge of Fairview since last spring, and Kemplen urged me to consider myself a resident doing my part.

Part of the problem for me as a reporter is that most members of the patrol don't want their names in a newspaper story. One veteran flatly refused to be identified even indirectly. In the past, participants have been harassed by the people they've observed. They've had their property vandalized, windows in their vehicles shattered after having their names appear in the newspaper or on television. In the end, my editors and I decided I should ride along, just as any other resident could do, and describe the experience from my own point of view.

I'd only recently become acquainted with the dangers of living in Fairview myself. For a year and a half, I'd lived in a house on a remote section of the mountainside in South Anchorage. The door to my place didn't even lock. Danger from humans seemed far less a problem than the bear scat in the driveway.

But last spring, I moved into a rental house near the Delaney Park Strip, right between a home that had been burglarized twice and an apartment that had once housed crack dealers. I still didn't think about getting ripped off or assaulted. But then my feeling of immunity was shattered a few months later, when I came home one day to find my front door kicked open and my place burglarized.

In the months since then, my sense of security has suffered even more, rattled by street sounds loud enough to wake you up from a sound sleep: gunshots to the east, an explosion to the north, sirens all around, people screaming at each other in the alley. A few weeks ago, police came pounding on our front door at about 4 in the morning. Someone had called 911 and given our address as the location of a man dying from a drug overdose. A few days after that, a neighbor called — a Yupik woman born on St. Lawrence Island. Did you hear that noise? she asked me. Was it a gunshot?

Yet, for all that, I live in one of the most secure sections of Fairview, hardly in the district at all. Indeed, the patrol vehicles rarely venture as far as my home, sticking almost entirely to the center of Fairview, an area generally bordered by Merrill Field to the east and the Seward Highway to the west. Juneau

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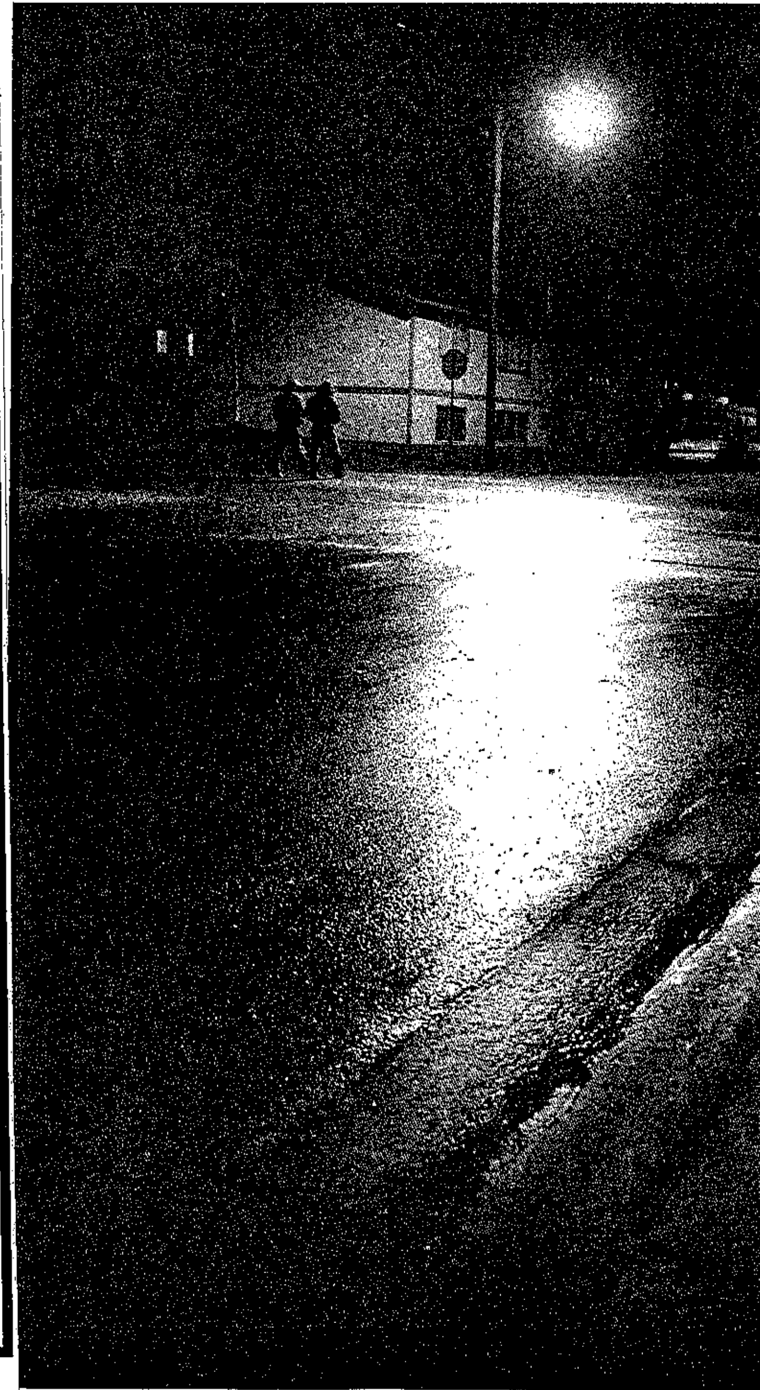

FAIRVIEW

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Street, one block east of high-speed Ingra Street, seems to attract the worst problems.

This area of town has a demographic profile of an urban neighborhood sliding into disrepair. One-fifth of the households show incomes below the poverty level — three times the rate of Anchorage as a whole. Compared with Anchorage, Fairview has twice the rate of single people living alone and more than twice the unemployment rate.

But, in many ways, the factors that make Fairview susceptible to crime are physical rather than social — problems that can't be easily solved by a half dozen community members driving around in cars. The neighborhood is laid out on a grid of wide streets. A vehicle can turn into the neighborhood from 15th Avenue, traveling at 40 or 50 mph, then pass through the neighborhood and connect to Ingra or Gambell streets. Someone who wants to buy drugs can speed in and out and be gone without much fuss.

One solution tried in Lower 48 cities is to create what urban planners call "defensible space" for residents by building cul-de-sacs and closing off streets. Indeed, the more affluent residential areas off the park strip — between C Street and Minnesota Boulevard — are cut off from the main thoroughfares with dead ends. Most suburban areas of town are characterized by curvy streets that terminate in quiet enclaves.

Kemplen — and some others in the Fairview community — would like to see cul-de-sacs formed in Fairview, especially along 15th Avenue. "There's no reason for (all of the streets) to be open to that busy street," Kemplen says.

But the most fundamental problem may be that Fairview is zoned for high-density housing — multiplexes, apartment buildings. Unlike Anchorage as a whole, where half of the households are owner-occupied, a majority of Fairview's households are rentals, owned by absentee landlords. Only one person in six has a financial stake in the property where they live.

"I think owner-occupied housing is a key issue of neighborhood stability," Kemplen says. "We've never had a drug problem in a home where somebody is paying a mortgage."

Most of the regular patrol members own their own homes in or near the high-crime section. Most of them became involved not because of abstract ideals about civics but more simply because they began to feel directly threatened by what was happening on the street where they live.

Kemplen, now the coordinator of the patrol, moved into the neighborhood a few years ago with his wife and two children. Shortly afterward, Kemplen was walking to Carrs, and a man approached him. Want some action? Want to get high? he asked. Kemplen declined and continued on his way. He never reported the incident to police either.

At the time, Kemplen says, he had a "live and let live" attitude.

"These guys are out doing their thing," he told himself. "I don't have any right to tell them what to do."

But his attitude slowly began to change. You hear the crack of a pistol in the dark, the echoes of someone screaming, the sound of glass shattering against pavement. You see strangers loitering on the sidewalk where your kids play and you begin to wonder: Who are they? What are they doing here?

Kemplen says the ambience of criminal activity began to wear him down: Boom boxes thundering from slowly moving cars. Someone pounding on his front door in the middle of the night. Two burglaries. A coked-out woman shattering the storm glass on a bedroom window, then screeching a man's name, then stumbling off into the night, oblivious to the blood dripping from her hand.

"After a point, you just say: 'Do I do nothing and endure this and take the easy way out? Or do I get active and get out there and try to do something?' If it's going to happen no matter what, why don't you at least go down swinging."

About a year ago, two other residents asked Kemplen, who has a graduate degree in urban planning, to help with the organization of the patrol. He says he originally assured his wife that he would just do the office stuff, the lobbying and record keeping. But he gradually joined in. And he doesn't regret it.

"We all must shoulder some responsibility for the health and welfare of our neighbors," he says. "Nobody is an island unto themselves. We all have to give a little if we're going to have a decent place to raise our families and just live in."

People in Spenard and Mountain View also have organized patrols. While they have different focuses — the Spenard patrol aggressively monitors prostitution and after-hours bars, for instance — the general goals are the same, according to Anchorage police.

"Policing is a community affair," says Anchorage police Capt. George Novaky, who works with the community patrols. "If the community does not participate in its own law enforcement, then nothing is going to happen. The question is — how far is the individual citizen going to go?"

Police can always respond to an emergency, Novaky said. But then they always leave, rushing to another call. It's the residents who remain.

To be sure, drug dealers and prostitutes change the character of a neighborhood. But doesn't the presence of people driving around in cars, recording license numbers and taking notes, also cast a pall over a neighborhood? What about an Alaskan's right to privacy — even the right to loiter on a street corner? Shouldn't you be able to visit whomever you want at any hour you please, without scrutiny by anyone?

Kemplen admits that there is a trade-off — between total privacy and a secure neighborhood. But he says he thinks the trade-off is worth it.

"People are naive in this community if they think their privacy is threatened by any of these community patrols," Kemplen says. "I think the public good is certainly served, and well served, by what the patrols are doing."

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And then there's the very real danger involved when private citizens try to observe coke dealers on the street.

Kemplen says he believes the risk is greatly reduced by traveling in numbers with multiple vehicles patrolling together, all of them connected with radio phones.

"I take a very conservative approach to this whole activity," Kemplen says. "The way I look at it is — I'm here to show that somebody cares, to be the eye and the ears of the police professionals, who are paid to take the risks.... I have no hesitation about driving away."

Still, there have been close calls, to say the least. Last winter, two patrol members were shot at while filming activity at an apartment on the west side of Gambell. Others have been verbally harassed. During the first patrol I attended, Kemplen and I were charged by a screaming woman, bellowing gibberish, wildly thrusting her arms in gestures of rage. We drove away before she reached the vehicle. Later in the same evening, Kemplen had a long, tense conversation with a drunken man about the video camera in Kemplen's hand. You get out of this car, the man kept demanding. We both stayed put.

Only the night before, another patrol member had been out alone, parked near 12th Avenue and Juneau Street. Kemplen, at home with his family, had been monitoring his radio phone when the patrol member radioed him to say he was being hassled. Kemplen listened nervously to the silence that followed. After calling several times, he rolled out, driving several blocks to the patrol member's last reported location.

It turned out that nothing bad had happened. After the people left, the patrol member had simply gone to get gas and forgot to tell Kemplen before he went off the air. Kemplen says he was relieved, but asked him never to do it again.

"That's one of the hazards of going out without

I learned that lesson myself during the patrol I joined, when a second community patrol vehicle flipped on its lights, illuminating the young drug dealer who approached our truck. In the aftermath, Kemplen drove around the block, coming up on 12th Avenue, parking at the intersection with Juneau Street, facing the action on Ingra Street.

After the two men headed down 12th Avenue toward Ingra Street, I relaxed. Kemplen commented on how a lot of the young men on the street try to make eye contact, then puff up, become macho. Kemplen said his response is always to remain cool, patient, non-aggressive.

"A lot of these people don't have very much of a life to begin with," he said. "You have to respect them. Some of these people, the only thing they have is some small amount of personal dignity. You have to give them some respect."

A little bit later, two other men approached our truck. One of them wore a New York Giants jacket and looked pissed off. As he passed us by, he turned and hissed: "You snitch!"

The two men disappeared into an apartment complex, leaving me jarred. But Kemplen was watching the scene at 12th Avenue and Ingra Street, one block to the west. A car had turned off the thoroughfare, made a U-turn, then pulled back out onto Ingra. At that, the man in white pants trotted out of sight, apparently moving after the car.

Kemplen began to follow, turning right on Juneau Street, accelerating until we pulled past the mass of apartment buildings between 12th and 11th streets. Nothing.

"I thought he might have motioned the car to pull around the corner," Kemplen said.

Then he called another patrol member. "F-1 to F-2," he said. "Have you seen those guys on 11th and Juneau, and the one with the white pants? ... Have you seen that guy around here before?"

"The one in the white pants?"

"That's a copy."

"All summer," came the answer. "He's been there all summer."

Kemplen thought about that for a minute. "Have you seen the guy with the New York Giants cap?"

It turned out that the man who'd called us "snitch" had been the one who hassled the lone patrol member the night before. "You've got to watch him," a patrol member told Kemplen over the radio. "He's pretty aggressive."

We drove around a little bit more, parking for a while down the alley and passed from view. Kemplen talked some more with others on the patrol, changed position, drove slowly up and down some streets. It had gotten late, about 1 o'clock on Saturday morning. Kemplen announced over the radio that he was heading home. It had been a fairly uneventful night.

During the evening, the patrol had pursued the guy in white pants. Perhaps disrupting what appeared to be an effort to sell cocaine. Earlier in the evening, two other patrol members had called Anchorage police when they saw a drunken man heave a bottle at a passing car. Police had come, then taken a man away.

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We later found out that he'd been charged with disorderly conduct. A police car had stopped once by Kemplen's rig, asking what was going on in the community. It's been fairly quiet, Kemplen told the officer.

But in Fairview, a quiet Friday night represents real progress.

Said Kemplen: "This is a climate that's produced by a community patrol."

■ **Doug O'Harra is the We Alaskans staff writer. Bill Roth is a Daily News photographer.**