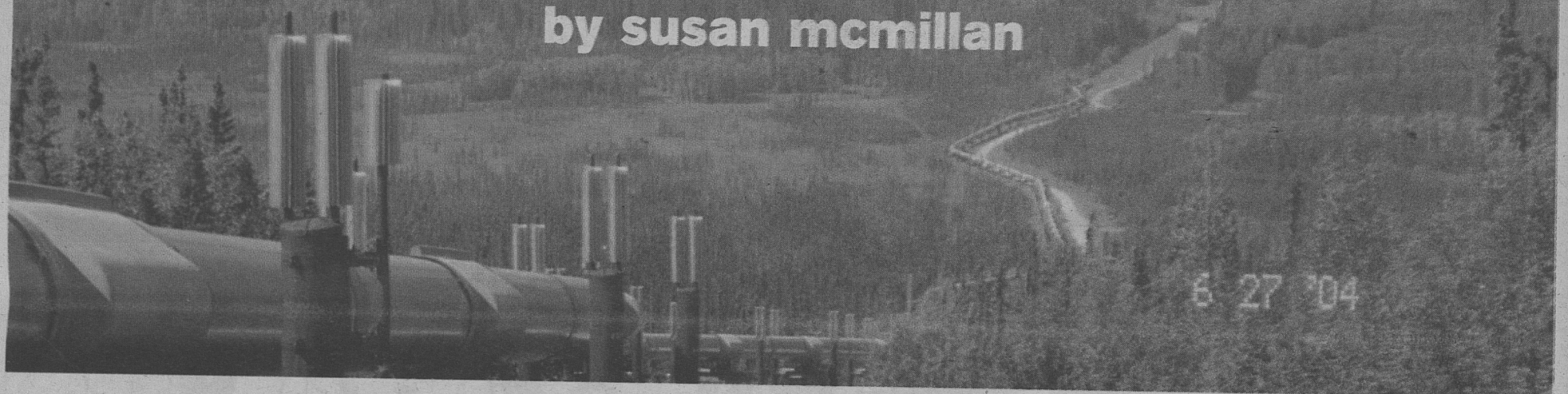


Strange Things Done in the Midnight Sun

by susan mcmillan



There are strange things done in the midnight sun by the men who toil for gold; The Arctic trails have their secret tales that would make your blood run cold; The Northern Lights have seen queer sights, but the queerest you ever did see Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge I cremated Sam McGee.

— Robert Service

When a single woman moves to Alaska, she is told that “the odds are good but the goods are odd,” referring to her chances of meeting a man — although that’s not *my* concern. But that phrase sums up a lot of Alaska. It’s a great and odd place, where there are some strange things done.

In our cabin, just north of Fairbanks and about 100 miles south of the Arctic Circle, we are as close to Tokyo as we are to Burlington. We are watching summer fade into fall. Soon the hills will be the brilliant gold of aspen and birch trees. Already, the night is creeping back into our lives. No more round-the-clock golf tournaments. No more midnight-sun baseball with the Goldpanners. The midnight road races are over and no one is mowing their lawn or boating at 1 a.m. anymore. The tour buses are here but will disappear abruptly with the tourists just after Labor Day.

Although it is sad in mid-August to

see the summer fade, it almost comes as a relief. After all, since May, the pace here has been too fast and the days too long. Activities frequently reach past midnight, leaving most of us tired and ready to let the endless sun finally set. Now, when I wake in the night, it is *dark* and sleep is easy. As we lose seven minutes of light each day, fall comes on quickly.

With the onset of winter comes that special day when more people go out to dinner and spend more money than any other day of the year. On this day the government mails out, or direct-deposits, the Permanent Fund Dividend checks. Alaska has no income tax and no state sales tax, and the government provides every resident a bonus for living here. The money comes from the millions of barrels of oil flowing down the 800 mile ribbon of pipeline that crosses the state. One year, each of us was rewarded with nearly \$2,000. We may already be deep in snow but October is a month to celebrate.

And the fun and games of winter will be here soon. Even downhill skiing is different here in Fairbanks. My favorite hill is Moose Mountain where there is no chair lift or even a tow rope. Your “lift ticket” gets you a seat on an old school bus for the five minute drive up the road to the top of Murphy Dome. Ski down, throw your skis on the rack, and hop onto the heated bus to head up for the next

run. This arrangement really works here.

In the deep of winter, intricate hand-carved ice sculptures are found all over town. The incredible display of figures, scenes, and even castles illuminated with colored lights brightens the long dark days. Businesses sponsor carvings so there is a surprise around every corner. There is even a phone booth of ice, equipped with a real payphone, and one parish always has a life-size crèche scene carved out of ice, on the roof of their church. The intricate carvings last for weeks, only softening and falling when the winter sun emerges for more and more time each day.

Like everywhere, people here love competition. The Iditarod and the Yukon Quest Sled Dog Races get international attention. Even the 2,000-mile Iron Dog Snowmachine Race gets some press outside the state. But the really fun races are the absurd local events. We just had the Red-Green Regatta where anyone can enter a homemade contraption to race downriver as long as the “boat” is made with duct tape. If the rig floats, it has a chance at winning.

The Rubber Duckie race is a fundraiser where 9,000 little yellow rubber bath tub toys are dumped into the Chena River to see which floats the fastest. This year, recently appointed U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), won second place in the rubber duckie

contest. (Could this be symbolic of her finish in the heated senatorial race?)

Another popular outing is the Annual Outhouse Race held at the Chatanika Lodge. To enter, you need an outhouse on skis fit to be pushed down the hill and round a steep corner to the finish. One person is seated and two push. Some of the rigs actually make it to the finish line without breaking up or flying off. It is great fun to watch on one of those brilliant, sunny winter days when you realize why living through the winter is worth every dark moment.

I learned that Fairbanks was different before I’d ever moved here. The ads for rentals read like this: Yurt, 14 acres, pets welcome, *no water*, \$250/month; or Cabin, \$350, includes elect/heat/propane/cable, pets welcome, *no water*. Lots of folks live “without water” here, just out of town. They haul water in for cooking and dishes, and shower at the gym or laundromat. In the city proper, outhouses were banned just five years ago. Here’s a secret though. A quick trip to the outhouse during a frigid arctic night may reveal the amazing Northern Lights. Indoor plumbing will never be this rewarding. ▼

Assistant Editor Susan McMillan and her partner are spending the summer in Alaska but promise to return to Vermont in November.