

History of Alaska Tent & Tarp

Alaska Tent & Tarp, as it is known today, was originally named Alaska Canvas Supply and Commercial Sewing. Vern Johnson, a Fairbanksan who had come to Alaska at the age of 17 started the business in the late 1940's. In his early days, Johnson traveled in and out of Fairbanks by dog team on trading trips to Alaska Eskimo villages. One of his stock trading items was rabbit (snowshoe hare) snares....and that earned him his Alaska moniker, "Rabbit Snare" Johnson. In the early days, many men and a few women had nicknames that described something about their personality or habits. Johnson is still well remembered in Fairbanks among the old timers. The business was initially headquartered on the Old Steese Highway. There, Johnson fixed zippers, sewed ruffs on parkas for the military, and sold wall tents, tarps and canvas covers, among other products.

After some years at that location, Alaska Canvas Supply and Commercial Sewing moved in the early 1950's to its Front Street in Graehl, a suburb of Fairbanks on the north side of the Chena River. As Rabbit Snare Johnson entered his 70's, he was ready to retire. He sold the business to Fairbanksan Bill McIntyre, and then took off to Sequim, Washington. McIntyre remembers that in 1971, the main part of the business was just a 20' X 40' shack with some sewing machines. "I also wound up with a bunch of junk cars buried under the snow," McIntyre remembered. The winter when he bought the business was the deepest snow ever recorded in Fairbanks. "The place was like a treasure chest of early Alaska items when I began to go through it."

A lifelong pilot, McIntyre added wing covers to the products carried by the business he renamed Alaska Tent & Tarp. As he began to dig into the business, he added more and more products useful to Alaskans. Needing more space, he built an addition on the back of the retail store in 1973. That space is currently used for sewing and fabrication. But more space was needed as the pipeline project spooled up. The concrete-lined pit in the fabrication facility is approximately where the old building stood. "I got into trouble with Irene Sherman when I was ready to build the geomembrane fabrication facility," McIntyre laughed. Sherman was a real Alaska character with colorful language and equally colorful dress, still remembered by older Fairbanksans.

McIntyre said he needed to get rid of an old building that Johnson had turned into apartments. After the tenants left, he approached the Fairbanks Fire Department to take it down with a controlled burn. They were delighted with the prospect of some valuable training. Irene Sherman wasn't so pleased. "You can't burn this building down," Sherman railed at McIntyre. "It's a historic building." McIntyre said he knew it was an old building, but at the time – 1975 -- it had only been on the site for 20 years or so. It turned out that the building had been the old Healy Hotel. Rabbit Snare Johnson, who had worked for the Alaska Railroad in one of his many jobs, had worked out a deal where the hotel was cut into sections and moved to Fairbanks on flatcars. It was reassembled at the Front Street location. But it had to come down, because that was the only space on the property for the new fabrication facility. So, down it came. The concrete-lined pit in the fabrication facility is approximately where the old building stood.

With the coming of the Pipeline, Alaska Tent and Tarp was swiftly buried in new work. McIntyre said it was obvious that he badly needed some additional managerial help, so he convinced Craig Salsbury to join him as a part owner. Salsbury had formerly operated College

Cobbler near the University of Alaska. “These were the early years of synthetic fabrics,” McIntyre remembered. “Pipeline contractors were trying to do all kinds of things with fabrics that just wouldn’t work in Arctic conditions. Out-of-state contractors learned after the first winter that Alaskans really did know a few things about how to get work done in deep cold. We built a can-do reputation for making North Slope oilfield fabric products that worked.”

McIntyre said that Alaska Tent & Tarp’s use of railcar quantities of canvas products attracted the attention of the Canvas Products Association International, who asked him to speak at their annual convention in the mid-1970’s. At that time, businesses elsewhere in the country were switching over to synthetics, so a business increasing its canvas trade was of great interest to the group.

“We designed and manufactured all kinds of unique things for pipeline contractors,” McIntyre said. “The main issue was shelter and retaining the heat of dozers and other equipment. We designed and built all of the hundreds of portable welding shelters used on the pipeline.” After six years of dramatic changes in Alaska Tent & Tarp, McIntyre sold the whole operation to his business partner Craig Salsbury. McIntyre continues to live in Fairbanks where he now flies for a living.

Today, Alaska Fabrics, Inc. dba Alaska Tent & Tarp (our full legal name) operates from its long Alaska experience of “covering Alaska” with traditional materials, but also use new high tech fabrics that can withstand Arctic conditions. With oil companies and service companies needing environmental protection products, Alaska Tent & Tarp began making membranes in 1975. The company added the well-known Arctic Oven in 1987.

In 1995, Alaska Tent & Tarp was purchased by Jim Haselberger. An active outdoorsman, Haselberger enjoys hunting, fishing, camping and flying his Cessna 180 and Piper PA-12. Before coming to Alaska Tent & Tarp, he worked as Director for the Fairbanks Office of the Governor during the Hickel Administration. He was CEO for North Country Credit Union from 1978 through 1989. Haselberger, who hails from Marshfield, Wisconsin, came to Alaska on May 1, 1975. His wife Sandy moved to Alaska with her family in 1962. Her father owned the Lignite Coal Mine, and Sandy Creek near Healy is named for her.

Haselberger has been President of Fairbanks Rotary, and is a Past Chairman of the United Way Campaign, Past President of United Way, and was on the Board of the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce. He currently serves on the Board of the Catholic Schools of Fairbanks. Alaska Tent and Tarp actively gives back to the community during the year through United Way and other community projects.

Alaska and the North is our home and we are proud of our community and our state.