

# Alaska Dispatch News

Opinions

## Hustle and acumen keep improbable Alaska book publisher alive

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*Flip Todd pauses in the stockroom of Todd Communications on Monday, May 15, in Anchorage. (Erik Hill / Alaska Dispatch News)*

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To say it is difficult to make a living as an Alaska book publisher is an understatement. Only one person I know of has done it: Flip Todd.

Todd's company, **Todd Communications**, handles most of the Alaska books you see in stores, in one way or another. If you have a great idea — your brilliant first novel, a tale of outdoor adventure or a pioneer memoir — you're likely to find your way to him at some point.

In the vast ecosystem of American industry, this tiny niche lies far from the sun. But some hardy creatures survive even in the North, where others would die. That is Todd's story.

He has learned to support new writing, and the 18 people he employs, through a dying medium in a minute market.

Todd is a fourth-generation journalist. His great-grandfather was an 1890s muckraker. His father, Alden Todd, wrote eight books.

"I can remember being in high school and promising myself that I would never be a writer," Flip said.

He would have avoided his fate but for the cold.

Todd came to Alaska in 1969 hoping to work on the trans-Alaska oil pipeline but the project was delayed and he ended up fixing tires in Gakona. Compared to working outdoors at 20 degrees below zero, even writing obituaries for the Anchorage Times sounded good.

He began making friends and collecting stories in that job, building an encyclopedic knowledge of Alaska history. As the Times' business editor during the full-throttle years of pipeline construction, he got to know industry leaders grappling with explosive growth.

Those connections and the excitement of the time launched a career as an independent freelance writer for national publications.

Even for big-time magazines, however, Todd still didn't enjoy writing. But freelancing is a small business and he expanded into other business opportunities.

In 1978, he began putting out the Alaska Directory of Attorneys. That led to a business producing corporate annual reports, work previously done outside Alaska.

To publish the reports faster, Todd bought an expensive color scanner that could prepare photographs for printing, the first such machine in the state.

But loan payments on the scanner were killing him. He had to scramble for business to feed it, including producing his own calendar.

Selling calendars put him on the road in an RV to visit gift shops all over Alaska. Those sales calls created relationships that allowed him to become a book distributor.

He's the largest now, with warehouses in Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau. He offers stores same-day delivery on 1,500 books and 500 other items, such as DVDs, maps and, still, calendars.

None of this has been hugely profitable. Todd has survived by holding down expenses and working smart.

His search for the lowest printing prices for his calendar led him to Asia. Touring printing plants, he learned how to pick vendors to balance cost, quality, lead time and shipping.

Now Todd owns Alaska Print Brokers, which matches clients all over the United States with printers internationally. On one of scores of Asia trips, he also met his wife, Wiranda, in Thailand.

In 2014, I wrote a [centennial history of Anchorage](#) that Todd published and printed in China (we no longer have any business relationship). I was impressed by his low costs compared to other publishers. He shaved the numbers relentlessly.

"A lot of people get into the book business who are romantics," he said. "We've taken a little more businesslike approach."

Last year, Todd approached Mike Dunham to write a pair of books for the 150th anniversary of the Alaska Purchase. Dunham had never written a book but recently retired from the Alaska Dispatch News after 25 years reviewing books and covering arts.

His new books are ["The Man Who Sold Alaska"](#) and ["The Man Who Bought Alaska,"](#) biographies of Tsar Alexander II and Secretary of State William Seward.

Todd's instructions to Dunham were practical. He wanted books that would appeal to tourists.

"He knows what people are willing to buy," Dunham recalled. "He said, 'I want them short enough so they can be read on the plane ride back to Seattle.'"

Besides brevity, the books have covers with photos of Alexander and Seward that seem to look at each other on display racks. Dunham was skeptical, but he has seen how the paired covers catch customers' attention.

He said the books sell themselves.

If they do well, Todd will profit. Dunham and Todd have a traditional publishing contract, in which the publisher pays to produce the book and takes most of the financial risk and reward.

Many, many more books about Alaska are published at the authors' cost. They used to stack up on Dunham's desk.

"Most Alaska fiction isn't worth going past the second page," he said.

Homesteading memoirs could be even worse.

"They're written so poorly, they're almost impossible to read," Dunham said. "People need to hire editors, for God's sake."

Todd offers that service. More than 40 authors a year hire him for some part of publishing their book — editing, design, printing, storage and distribution.

Evan McKinney was one of those self-publishing clients with his book "[High Iron to Fairbanks](#)," a historical novel about the building of the Alaska Railroad.

For McKinney, the project was a hobby. Now retired in Montana, he worked for the Alaska Railroad and wanted to share his love of its history. Todd made it possible, with editing, design and production.

"And also the distribution system in Alaska," McKinney said. "I knew nothing about it."

Summer's flow of visitors could make McKinney's book profitable. It is a fun read.

The late Verna Pratt self-published "Field Guide to Alaska Wildflowers" and it became a classic. Todd printed and distributed it for her.

I wonder how long Todd can keep this going.

He is resolutely old-fashioned, wearing a suit every day to his book-lined office. He disdains ebooks as unprofitable. The world seems to be moving on.

But there's still something about a book.

*The views expressed here are the writer's and are not necessarily endorsed by Alaska Dispatch News, which welcomes a broad range of viewpoints. To submit a piece for consideration, email [commentary\(at\)alaskadispatch.com](mailto:commentary(at)alaskadispatch.com). Send submissions shorter than 200 words to [letters@alaskadispatch.com](mailto:letters@alaskadispatch.com) or [click here to submit via any web browser](#).*

#### **About this Author**

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Charles Wohlforth's column appears three times weekly. A lifelong Anchorage resident, he is the author of more than 10 books, and hosts radio shows on Alaska Public Media. More at [wohlforth.com](http://wohlforth.com).