



Special to The Forum

Chad Carpenter, an Alaska resident, is the creator of the popular comic strip Tundra.

Touting his Tundra

Alaska cartoonist's success comes with hard work

By Nick Thomas
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The people of Alaska can take heart.

True, they can no longer claim to live in the "Coldest State with the Hottest Governor" — no disrespect to current head, Sean Parnell, of course — but they can still boast being home to one of the hottest comic strip artists in America.

Based in Wasilla, Alaska, Chad Carpenter's Tundra, which has appeared in The Forum since January 2008, has just been picked up by its 300th newspaper.

Not bad considering the outdoors and nature-themed comic ran in just six papers a mere three years ago.

We recently tracked down Chad at the Anchorage weekend market, where thousands of summer tourists were weaving their way through a sea of white tents, hunting for bargains and souvenirs. From the long lines forming at Booth 126, many were also Tundra fans making the pilgrimage to Alaska's largest city to see Carpenter, who has been a vender at the market for the past 17 years.

Making their way to the front of the line, a couple from Nebraska was thrilled to come face to face with the Alaskan artist. "We have a son with a sense of humor like yours," boasted the husband, holding out a book to sign.

"Oh really?" replied the 42-year-old Carpenter.

"There's therapy for that, you know."

While recognition is commonplace today, Carpenter remained largely in obscurity throughout Tundra's early years.

"Back in 1991, I drew 36 strips and showed them to the features editor of the Anchorage newspaper," he explained. "A week later, he called to say they'd give it a shot."

But over the next 15 years, Tundra was only picked up by a half-dozen newspapers in Alaska. Then, in 2006, Chad hired marketing director Bill Kellogg to attempt the challenging task of self-syndication.

"Bill has done a tremendous job meeting editors face to face and getting Tundra into hundreds of publications," said Carpenter. "He also created a line of Tundra calendars, T-shirts and greeting cards, and taught me merchandising is where 75 percent of the money is!"

Kellogg is not surprised by Carpenter's success. "It's due in large part to Tundra being a well-drawn and consistently funny comic strip," said Kellogg from his office in Anchorage.

"Editors frequently tell me it's the funniest strip they have seen in ages."

Although not a native of Alaska, Carpenter moved to America's Last Frontier state at age 2, when his father took a job with the state troopers' Fish and Wildlife division. A constant doodler as a kid, Carpenter attended Wasilla

High School, a few years behind the school's other famous alumnus, Sarah Palin.

While it may seem tempting to use the ex-governor in the occasional drawing, "I don't do political humor," explains Carpenter. "Besides, Sarah lives just down the road from me and could 'TP' my house if I got her mad."

In his early 20s, Carpenter briefly moved to Florida and met professional cartoonists for the first time. He became friends with Mike Peters who draws Mother Goose and Grimm.

"Mike told me to draw what I know," said Carpenter. "Well, growing up in Alaska, that meant the mountains, snow, animals, outdoors, fishing, hiking, ... and Tundra was born."

Although, he says, the strip was almost called When Nature Calls.

"I really wanted a one-word title that was catchy," says Carpenter, who went with the geographic term for regions of low temperature and short growing seasons, and to which he returned in 1991.

While Tundra is unique, the single-panel strip about animals in quirky situations is sometimes compared to Gary Larson's Far Side, the popular syndicated cartoon that ran from 1980-95.

"I've never met him, but was aware of his work, although I was never really into single-panel strips," says Carpenter. "So it's bizarre that I'm drawing

them now!"

Long retired, Larson was always reclusive which, says Carpenter, is not unusual for cartoonists. Still, Chad ventures from behind his drawing desk more than many to promote his work.

"Cartoonists tend to be private people," he says. "I don't like to be the center of attention, but I do want my work to be."

Last year, that acknowledgement came from the National Cartoonists Society, which awarded Tundra the best newspaper panel. In another 2008 honor, the Alaskan state government bestowed Carpenter with the lofty title of Alaska Cartoon Laureate.

"Gov. Palin was supposed to be at the award presentation, but the same day John McCain announced her as his VP running mate!" says Carpenter. "I guess I can forgive her for skipping out."

On being named Cartoon Laureate, Carpenter says he was surprised.

"I don't know how that happened," he says dryly. "It must have been a slow day in the Legislature. But I was thrilled with the honor."

Nick Thomas is an Alabama-based freelance writer and teacher.