

Northern Innovators



When he was shoving an antenna mast into a 40-mile-per-hour wind on an April day in the early 1970s, 30-year-old Alex Hills did not anticipate that the lessons he was learning on Little Diomedede would someday help people talk with each other using computers that fit in their pockets.

Hills, now 70, is a Palmer resident who learned the complexities of ham radio signals as a boy in a New Jersey attic and honed his skills while installing communications systems throughout Bush Alaska. He lived in Nome, Kotzebue and Bethel, flying to satellite villages of the big hubs as he helped improve the limited communications systems of the 1970s.

Tall as a point guard, the professorial Hills used his Alaska problem-solving skills to develop the first Wi-Fi network at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Hills did not invent Wi-Fi, but Wireless Andrew, the child of his imagination, became an extensive wireless network, one that techno geeks copied and improved upon.

On Little Diomedede Island, Hills was—with the help of locals more practiced at sticking to a metal roof in a big wind—installing a VHF radio system so villagers could have contact with mainlanders on the Seward Peninsula and the rest of the world. The very high frequency radios he was powering up replaced the village-staple shortwave