Fairbanks remembers Les Viereck

By Chris Freiberg

Published Sunday, September 7, 2008

FAIRBANKS — To most Alaskans, Les Viereck is known for being one of the first climbers of Mt. McKinley and a vocal critic of a ’60s plan to use nuclear warheads to excavate a harbor on the North Slope.

But to the hundreds of people who gathered Saturday afternoon at Georgeson Botanical Garden to remember him, Viereck was known simply as a good friend and a loving husband and father.

“He was kind of like the Ent from ‘Lord of The Rings,’” said Viereck’s daughter, Sharon, referring to the humanoid trees from the famous novels and films. “He was never hasty, very cautious. That’s sort of how my father went through life.”

Viereck, who died last Sunday at the age of 78, was especially well-known for his love of nature. He spent three or four days a week on the Tanana River during the summer. It’s where his family decided to scatter his ashes.

Sharon recounted how she wanted to name her two sons after her father, but he always hated his given name of Leslie, thinking it was too much of a woman’s name. So instead, she named her first son River in honor of the Tanana, and her second son Parker, meaning “keeper of the forest.”

Though Viereck loved living in Alaska, it was far from his birthplace of Massachusetts. He was drawn to the then-territory while attending Dartmouth College, eventually driving a Model A Ford up the Alaska Highway to settle here.

He served in the Army at Fort Richardson in the ’50s, but longtime friend Dave Klein said Viereck wasn’t always crazy about being in the military.

“I remember discussing it with Les, and we both considered going to Canada, which was not as popular back then,” Klein said. “But he concluded that he had a lot to stay in Alaska for and we’d
It was while in the Army that Viereck and three other men climbed Mount McKinley. At the time, fewer than 10 parties had climbed North America’s tallest peak.

Viereck had asked for only a month of leave from the Army before making the ascent, but it took the group just that long to make it to the summit.

“The sergeant was really angry and wanted to place us on AWOL,” said George Argus, who accompanied Viereck on the climb. “But the base commander realized that if someone’s feats are written up in Life magazine, you probably don’t want to put them on AWOL.”

In 1959, after his Army service, Viereck took a research and teaching job at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. One of his first projects was to study the environmental impact of Project Chariot, a U.S. Atomic Energy Commission proposal to detonate a series of nuclear bombs on the shore of Cape Thompson on the North Slope, blasting a harbor from the tundra to promote the peaceful uses of nuclear power.

Edward Teller, the physicist who was the inspiration for Dr. Strangelove, traveled Alaska to promote the positive economic impact the harbor could have on the state, but Viereck and two other scientists publicized the likely disastrous environmental effects of the plan.

The project did not go forward, but Viereck and two other scientists at the university lost their jobs as a result of their criticism.

“He provided shoes that were way too large,” said his son, Walter.