

*The Dear Sourdoughs*

*by*

*Sister Merilu Vachon, S.P.*



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## *Dedication:*

To the John Vachon family who knew and loved the Alaska Sisters of Providence;

And to all the dear Sourdoughs who served in The Great Land.

## *Acknowledgements:*

As I look at the finished copy of THE DEAR SOURDOUGHS, my heart holds a depth of gratitude to the following:

—to Sister Lucille Dean, S.P., Provincial of Sacred Heart Province, whose constant support and encouragement smoothed rough spots in the road of writing;

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All pictures, except that of the frontispiece, are courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of Providence, Seattle, Washington.



THERE ARE SIX ALASKAS

# Preface

For the most part, “history” is made by little people who seldom recognize their places in its unfolding. After living out their lives, they move into oblivion, leaving to later generations the task of unearthing their endeavors to establish towns; erect institutions; and by their labors, to leave the hallmark of their lives stamped on the findings of history-hungry researchers.

The early history of the Sisters of Providence was penned by Mother Marie Antoinette, the seventh Superior General of the Order. Her work finished before the opening of the 20th Century. The pace of life increased with the opening of new houses, the acceptance of new apostolates, and the foundations of our works on foreign soil. In time it became apparent that a gap had opened in our history, which resulted in the creation of a team to bring Providence History up to date.

The members of the Providence Historical Team met in October of 1974 to establish areas of history to be covered by our collective works, and to set a cut-off date in the recounting of them. We chose to close the era at 1920. Because the termination date of Fairbanks’ St. Joseph Hospital occurred in 1968, the proposed cut-off date had to be extended in the history of their hospital.

It was the aspiration of this fifth book of Providence History to tell the stories of two Alaska hospitals, as seen through the eyes of those who worked in them. Holy Cross and St. Joseph hospitals were two of the earliest Providence health care institutions in Alaska. They served Nome and Fairbanks until the exigencies of time and economy forced their closing.

The author knew four of the five subjects whose mini-biographies make up the contents of these pages. Researching meant delving into House Diaries, perusing tapes of oral histories; and combing the treasuries of pictures and letters. These, coupled with personal memories, added flesh to the dry bones culled from the carefully written pages of the House Chronicles of the Nome and Fairbanks hospitals.

Because this is a history meant for the family of the Sisters of Providence, there will be few footnotes and no bibliography. This is simply an account of how four, among many sisters, opened health care houses in the wilds of our 49th state during the early days of the 20th Century.

Since Alaska is the setting of this volume, it would be well to speak of the topography of the state. The fallacy that Alaska, The Great Land, offers *only* perpetual ice and snow, clings to the minds of those who know it only as a spot on the map. The *Milepost* (28th edition) explains the topography of the land mass the Aleuts called The Great Land.\*

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\**Milepost*: All-the-North Travel Guide. Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., C. 1976, Box 4—EEE, Anchorage, Alaska 99509

# *“There are really six Alaskas:*

## SOUTHEASTERN

Alaska’s panhandle country extends 500 miles northwest to southeast from Icy Bay on the Gulf of Alaska coast, to Dixon entrance, 35 miles south of Ketchikan . . . Southeastern is a moist country of fjords and glaciers and mountains where the annual rainfall is 35-155 inches . . .

## THE GULF COAST

This region curves 650 miles north and west from the panhandle . . . It has tremendous geographic variety—including fertile river valleys, rugged mountain ranges, volcanoes, glaciers, islands, both continental and costal climates, and tidal variations up to 34 feet . . .

## ALASKAN PENINSULA, THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

This is the longest, farthest south and farthest west of them all. The Alaska Peninsula extends 550 miles southwest from Mount Illiamna, on the west shore of Cook Inlet, its tip at False Pass. The Aleutians reach from there 1,100 additional miles toward Asia . . . The region has bad weather—rain, near-constant winds, lots of fog—and claims 57 volcanic mountains.

## THE BERING SEA COAST

Often called Western Alaska, this 122,000 square-mile expanse reaches north from Bristol Bay to the Arctic Circle and includes the massive Yukon-Kuskokwim River Delta, the Seward Peninsula and many Bering Sea Islands . . .

## THE ARCTIC

This area is the same size as the Bering Sea Coast, and is bounded on the south by the Brooks Range, on the north by the Arctic Ocean, on the east by the Canadian border and on the west by the Chukchi Sea. The waters of this region are frozen over for seven to eight months each year, and the land is frozen continuously. This permanent freezing (permafrost) extends to depths of more than 2,000 feet in some areas; only the top few inches or feet thaw during the brief summers. The mostly flat coastal plain, commonly known as the North Slope, is broken by thousands of nameless ponds and lakes; wildlife in this area is somewhat sparse, except for two large species—polar bears and caribou—which have major populations in the Arctic. The



region is arid; with cold winters (down to -60 degrees F) and cool summers. Barrow has less precipitation than any weather station in Alaska, 4.48 inches annually.

## THE GREAT INTERIOR

Alaska's interior country is south of the Brooks Range and north of the Alaska Range; a vast 166,000 square-mile area drained by the Yukon River and its three major tributaries: the Porcupine, Koyukuk, and the Tanana . . . Along the way is an incredible water foul area, the Yukon Flats . . . which each fall is abandoned by 35 million ducks and geese . . . Biggest visitor attraction in this region—and for that matter in the state—is Mount McKinley Park.”

Nome is located in the Arctic region, and Fairbanks is in the Interior.

Alaska is a place of many challenges. Mankind is never taken to her heart as do the warm and hospitable Hawaiian Islands. Alaska dazzles and tolerates settlers during the summer months and seemingly dares them to manage an existence in the months of driving snows and temperatures that may plummet to -75 degrees in winter.

During these months in the North, the days are bright and clear when ice crystals shine like diamond's dust in the air. There are nights when stars cover the skies like scattered jewels, and one stands in wonder tracing the constellations or the path of the Milky Way. Often the Northern Lights hang like long lace curtains to switch and weave across the skies.

Alaska offers summers that are as lovely as the winters are severe. The main attraction is the long periods of sunlight in the arctic regions. Temperatures are surprisingly mild during these days, and because of the long hours of sunlight and the presence of moisture in the earth, vegetables grow to an enormous size. The main attraction of the Alaska State Fair is a contest in which cabbages are grown for size. The largest solid head weighed in at 75 pounds, and 20-pound cabbages are a commonplace.

Robert Service, in the Sourdough vernacular of the *Spell of the Yukon*,\* spoke for all who come to The Great Land, and dare to meet her challenges:

The winter! the brightness that blinds you,  
The white land locked tight as a drum,  
The cold fear that follows and finds you,  
The silence that bludgeons you dumb.  
The snows that are older than history,  
The woods where the weird shadows slant;  
The stillness, the moonlight, the mystery,  
I've bade 'em good-bye - but I can't.

There's a land where the mountains are nameless  
And the rivers all run God knows where;  
There are lives that are erring and aimless,  
And death that just hangs by a hair;

There are hardships that nobody reckons;  
There are valleys unpeopled and still;  
There's a land - oh, it beckons and beckons,  
And I want to go back - and I will.

---

\*Service, Robert, *The Spell of the Yukon*, Dodd, Mead & Company, 79  
Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y., 10016. C. 1941.

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# Prologue

The wind was terrific.

It carried the rain and salt spray against his face with all the force of a cannon blast. His ship rolled and pitched; its sails billowed like a miniature storm cloud, and the masts creaked as it sailed north-eastward. He pulled the edges of his cap lower and blinked away moisture as he searched the sea. What lay ahead in the stormy waters of the North Pacific, with its alternating calm, fog, rain and wind?

Vitus Bering swore softly. It was this wretched weather that made his joints ache to the point he wondered what he—a Dane—was doing on a Russian exploration expedition. He shivered more from exhaustion than cold. He thrust out his chin to search the stormy waters, and try to pierce the fog streamers that snaked about everything, then went below and dropped wearily on his bunk.

This was his second trip into the eastern seas. He hoped to solve the riddle of the existence of a land mass that lay east of Siberia. There were various reports, some documented by credible seamen, and endless scuttlebut about the problem, and Czar Alexander II, piqued by the unknown, had engaged his services and outfitted ships to settle the matter. Should the rumors prove true, Russia would lay claim to the land, but for Bering, much of the fire of adventure had gone from the whole transaction.

The first sailing brought nothing but sickness and frustration, and left him weakened by scurvy. He closed his eyes wearily. He was sick and old and as far as he could calculate, he was 2,700 miles from home base in Okhotsk, Siberia, and 9,000 miles from St. Petersburg. And what had he found so far? Nothing! A man had to be a fool to chase about in these angry waters for another man's dream. Sleep claimed him and the ship struggled on in the howling wind and stinging rain.

The next morning found the rain replaced by an overcast sky, and a light fog that twisted in a restless wind. The appearance of a gull and scattered pieces of driftwood promised the proximity of land. Excitement and tension mounted. The crew peered ahead to starboard and port, squinting into the wind, and suddenly the wind shifted and sunlight flooded the area. There, to starboard, a magnificent mountain peak glittered in the sunlight. The crew lifted a noisy cheer and Bering hobbled to the gunwhales, blinking at the sight. Clad in centuries of snow, it stood aloof and unconcerned at the men who gazed in amazement. It was truly a sign from heaven, and it proclaimed the presence of a great land mass. Bering named it Mount St. Elias in honor of the day, July 16, 1741.

## II

Bering didn't live to reach St. Petersburg (Moscow); he died on shipboard on December 8, 1741, before reaching the Siberian home base, Okhotsk, and was buried at sea. The ship's log and his reports revealed everything of the perilous journey and its final discovery.

## I

The establishment of the fact that Russian seamen had discovered this vast territory meant that it must be colonized if Mother Russia wished to hold it.

The natives of the Aleutian Island chain, where the Russian fur traders set up forts, called the land Alyeska—meaning The Great Land. The Russians managed to make “Alaska” from the difficult word, and so it came to be named.

The Russians recognized a golden opportunity in the Alaska waters, rich in fur-bearing animals, and were quick to establish trading posts in Sitka, Yakutat, Attu and Adak. Sitka was the largest settlement and later became the capital of Russian America, a city which could boast of the wealth and pleasures of the Old World.

But Alaska lay half a world from St. Petersburg, and while Czar Alexander was interested in the fur revenue, the forts and colonies had become too expensive to support. When the Crimean War broke out, Russia found her coffers dangerously depleted.

In 1856 England and her allies defeated Russia in Crimea, and Czar Alexander looked for a market for Alaska. He directed Edouard Stoeckl, the Russian Ambassador in Washington, D.C., to sound out the idea of the sale of Alaska. Russia needed money and the United States desired to expand.

However, the American Civil War broke out in 1860, and put an end to further negotiations. Russia never looked for another buyer—in fact, no other nation would have been interested.

In 1866, Czar Alexander corresponded with Stoeckl to again offer Alaska for sale to the United States, for not less than seven million dollars. William H. Seward, Secretary of State under President Andrew Johnson, was noted to be an expansionist, and he was determined to have Alaska for the United States.

Seward and Stoeckl began negotiations in March of 1867, and after a certain amount of international dickering, the world’s greatest real estate deal was closed on October 18, 1867.

The Russian flag went down and the Stars and Stripes went up at Sitka. The United States had purchased Alaska for seven million two hundred thousand dollars—about two cents an acre.

America as a whole found the purchase ludicrous. It was too far away; it would be too hard to defend; it contained nothing but snow and ice. For years Alaska was little more than a giant step-child, until the gold, furs, timber and fish proved that The Great Land would pay for itself many times over.

Russia sold a rich section of the Western Hemisphere, and the United States didn’t now what to do with it. Fifty years after its purchase, Alaska was granted Territorial Status and given the right to send one representative to Congress in 1917.

## Joe Terrigluck

Little Joe sat cross-legged on the cabin floor. He carefully pulled apart thin strands of caribou sinew which his mother used in sewing mukluks or clothing.

Now he sat with his hands idle and looked off into space, quite lost in his thoughts. He walked ahead of the men through the soft new moss of May. The others panted to keep up with him on the hunt for the wild birds. He'd be a hunter. Aye, one of the best.

"The muscle thread, Dreamer, and a very, very fine one, please." His mother's voice held annoyance.

He jumped. The haze of his daydream faded, and he turned bright brown eyes to his work. He made three muscle strings before she was satisfied, and deftly stitched the sole to the upper of a slipper. When the muscle dried, the shoe would be strong for indoor wear or on summer tramps on the tundra.

Joe's father, Big Joe, and a hunting party would leave the next morning. Wild birds nested in the marshes five miles from town. Little Joe longed to accompany them, but his father was reluctant to let the little boy come. He knew the child could not keep up with the men, and the terrain was hard to cover, so Big Joe decided that the boy would wait.

Annie told her son to go play, he was so slow he made her lose time. She smiled as he rose and handed her the sinew and knife. He snatched his cap, and opening the door, he turned toward the sea.

A big black and tan Malemute rose and walked with him, his breath making a cloud of mist above his head. Little Joe laughed and began to "smoke" the cold air, making all the motions he had seen his father and friends make as they pulled on their pipes.

He met his friend, Charlie Aluckanak, and the two of them walked with the dog to the edge of the sea, where they sat on a rock and pretended they were old men. They talked about a successful hunting party and blew streams of smoke from their imaginary pipes.

Finally Charlie asked in Eskimo, "Do you go on the hunt with Big Joe?"

Joe shook his head. "He say me too little."

Charlie felt sorry for his friend and absently scratched the dog behind the ears. "Too bad," he said. "Maybe next year he will let you carry jerky and shotgun shells."

Joe looked at him. He wasn't too little to do *that* this year. Maybe he should suggest it to his father. He smiled at Charlie and rose to his feet. "I go to ask him now to carry jerky and shells."

Charlie watched him trudge toward the shack, kicking a rusty can ahead of him. Charlie sighed and looked about for something to do. He patted the dog's nose then started back along the beach.

Joe planned as he walked. He really could be a help to the hunting party, he could easily cover the five miles to the marshes; he'd prove himself a hardy member of the hunting party.

Annie looked up as Little Joe entered. Such a fine man-child she had! Already in his eighth summer, he was growing strong in spirit and body. He passed her without speaking and crossed to this father, who was oiling his gun.

Annie remembered the boy's birth at Holy Cross on a night when the bitter cold snapped the nail heads in the cabin walls; the dogs howled to a ghost moon and the Northern Lights burned in red and gold streamers across the sky. Indeed, such a display promised much for a man-child born during the dance of the Spirit Lights.

Three years later Big Joe moved his family to Buckland, about two hundred miles northeast of Nome, where he worked a trapline, bringing in a supply of pelts to trade for merchandise.

Then a rumor spread that someone had found a scattering of gold dust in an off-chance pan near Nome. Hunters and trappers began to drift into Nome to see how much truth there was in the story. They tramped the hills testing, testing for colors, and rarely found any.

Nome was a quiet Eskimo village, where a few white men lived to operate the Trading Post or trapped and hunted for furs that found a ready market at the Spring Rendezvous.

So, Big Joe and his family traveled south to Nome to find work. By this time there were two children; Little Joe had a baby sister, and the need for cash was very great indeed.

Annie threaded her bone needle with the sinew thread, and began to stitch a pattern in porcupine quills on the instep of a soft mooseskin slipper. Big Joe was speaking quietly but firmly in the guttural tones of an Eskimo dialect. "No. Not 'til you have seen two more summers. Do not ask me again, my son."

As he looked at the child, he saw the despair in the little boy's eyes, and added, "But you—you can be the first to see our return and can run and tell the whole village. Yes you have sharp eyes, and you shall tell the people of our return."

Well, it was cold comfort, but Little Joe knew there was no shaking his father from his decision. He would watch from the big rock for the hunters and run to tell the villagers that the men were coming with strings of ducks, geese and other birds.

What excitement there would be! At the end of each hunt, everyone gathered round to see the kill and watch the division of it among the hunters and their families. Each man dropped the load he was carrying in a pile, and then began the distribution. Then the women in their bright summer parkas moved in to claim their share and take it home.

Little Joe knew how his mother would prepare a bird for supper. She built a fire in a small outdoor trench, and next she plucked and dressed the bird, then smeared a thick flour paste on it. When the trench-fire had gone to coals, she pushed them aside and laid the bird among them, then she raked the coals over it, and let the cooking proceed undisturbed. By the time the coals became ashes, the bird was ready to eat. She cracked open the flour-shell to reveal tender and tasty meat.

Thinking of it made his mouth water. He was so tired of fish.

He stepped outdoors and looked up and down the road. A pale sun had started its daily climb, and a sharp wind hurried about helping to melt the sea ice. Soon the men would prepare the umiak for the walrus hunts. Little Joe knew better than to ask to accompany the men on *that* trip for the work was dangerous and there was no room for him either in the boat or on the ice floes.

He trotted down to look at the ice. How much had evaporated since yesterday? Cautiously, he walked on it and found it slushy near the shore but deeply honeycombed farther out. He turned and plodded back. His mother would tan his pants good if he got his mukluks too wet.

From down the beach Charlie Alukanuk hailed him and Joe turned to meet him. For a few minutes they stood together laughing and pointing, then they set off to investigate what Charlie had found.

## II

“Help! Help!”

One of the native children ran down Front Street calling, “Help! Help!” The men loitering there simply stared at him and wondered why he didn’t wait to receive any, then they shrugged and returned to their talk.

Charlie Alukanak panted and ran, as in a bad dream—a seemingly endless race where he never covered much ground no matter how hard he tried. But this wasn’t a dream. Little Joe was hurt, and badly. He had to get Big Joe, or someone, to come and help him.

He reached the Terrigluck shack a picture of fright and anguish. Through gasps for breath, he told of an accident at the new mine shaft where Little Joe was bleeding. Big Joe stood and strode from the house, then began to run with all the fleetness and long strides of the native hunter. Annie was not far behind, and Charlie hurried to keep up with her. His legs felt wooden and in his eyes were the fright and horror of what he had seen.

They stopped a short distance from the village at a spot where men blasted to prepare a new shaft. Little Joe lay on the ground, a folded coat beneath his head, and a handful of cotton over his left eye. Blood and powder burns covered most of his face.

As Big Joe neared, those gathered about the boy stood to clear a path for him. The foreman kept repeating, “I don’t know where he found it. We try to . . . God knows we try to be safe here. I just don’t know where he got it.”

Big Joe glanced at him then bent to his son. Little Joe looked dazed, his right eye half closed, and he moaned softly. Big Joe picked him up and turned back to the village. The foreman stepped to his side. “I don’t know where he found it, Joe, we try to keep the caps away from the kids. I don’t know *where* he found it.”

Charlie, with Annie Terrigluck, stood in the crowd trembling and breathing heavily. He looked at his friend as Big Joe strode past. Little Joe looked so small; he hung from his father’s arms like a hurt puppy—all arms and legs and very quiet.

As the crowd dispersed, Charlie stood caught in a milky mist where people moved about aimlessly; it was bewildering and frightening. A fussy little man kept saying he didn’t feel responsible for the accident. No one paid any attention to Charlie, they tramped past him, or around him, until finally one of the men pushed him and told him to get along.

Charlie wondered where Annie had gone. Would Joe die? What *was* that thing about the size of a .22 bullet, but held fire and the noise of a thunder



clap? He had found it in a pocket of that coat hanging on the tree. There. Would he go to jail for taking it? Where had they taken Little Joe?

Big Joe ran with his son to the tent that served as a doctor's office, and laid the boy on the table. The doctor, a weary looking man, who smelled faintly of "hooch," hurriedly washed his hands. He removed the stained cotton and carefully examined the eye, then straightened and looked at Big Joe.

"You know, of course, that he has lost the sight of the left eye. All that can be done now is to keep it clean and free from infection." He struck his hand on one of the tent's uprights and looked bleakly at Joe. "This kid needs more than I can give him. Much more. Like a bed with clean sheets, proper nursing care and medicine . . ." His voice trailed off and he turned to collect dressings. He snatched drawers open as he continued, "What this place needs is a hospital, a *real* hospital, with nurses and enough supplies to care for the accidents that happen in this God-forsaken spot."

He laid out dressings and looked gently at the little boy. "Oh hell, Joe, send in your wife and I'll show her how to take care of him."

Annie was waiting outside the tent flap. She entered and bent over her man-child. Her eyes brimmed with worry and questions as she looked at the doctor.

"No, he's not dead," he reassured her, "he has slipped into the land of quiet dreams for a while. I'm going to show you how to bandage the eye and how to take care of it."

She watched the gentle hands sponge Joe's face and eye, then apply the dressing. "Wait with him till he wakes up," he spoke gently, "and then take him home. Remember, *keep this clean.*"

She squatted on the floor beside the table, and the doctor turned to other work in what the weekly paper, the *Nome Nugget*, called "the farthest north medical clinic."

### III

Out at the shaft site, work progressed as usual, and Charlie felt as if he were in a dream where people moved in slow motion. Suddenly, he shook violently and turned to hurry toward the village. Then, as he broke into a trot, racked by sobs that shook his frame, he ran faster and faster as the hurt in him grew until it seemed about to burst and shatter him. He knew only that he wanted to leave the fright and horror of all this behind him, and didn't notice the black and tan Malemute running beside him. Both of them raced down the length of Front Street until they came to the native homes. Here, Charlie crawled into a fifty-five gallon gasoline drum. The dog followed, and Charlie realized he was not alone. As a huge sob broke from his throat, he reached to the dog, buried his face in its fur and cried, and cried and cried.

## *Northward Ho!*

It was June, 1902, and the day was blue and gold.

The *S.S. Senator* steamed slowly out of Cape Flattery, Washington, 127 miles from Seattle, and heaved northward for Umiak Pass, in the Aleutian Chain. This would be a journey of 1,537 miles across open water, where sight of land was a mere memory. Standing by the rail and watching Washington State disappear from view, Sister Mary Conrad recalled incidents that had brought about this journey that she and her three companions were making into the gold fields of Nome.

Sisters Roderick, Lambert and Mary Napoleon chose to stay below. They were French-Canadian sisters, who had traveled from Montreal across the vastness of North America to Vancouver, Washington, where they joined Sister Mary Conrad on this trek to the North American winterland.

It all started early in 1901, when Father John Baptiste Rene, S.J., the Apostolic Prefect of North America, wrote to the Providence Motherhouse in Montreal, requesting a group of nursing sisters to come to Nome and staff a small hospital. By this time the population of that city had stabilized into 2,000 winter residents and 20,000 to 30,000 summer dwellers. The city demanded a more adequate health care service than that which a single doctor and his small hospital could offer. Indeed, there was a desperate need for competent nurses.

At the time the request came, the Providence General Council found it impossible to comply. There seemed to be a never-ending demand for the services of the sisters, and Mother Marie Antoinette, the Superior General, reluctantly refused the request.

It was that towering Providence missionary, Sister Joseph of the Sacred Heart (then seventy-eight years old) who in 1856 had headed a band of Providence nuns to lay the Western Foundation, who had written to Mother Marie Antoinette: "If in making a foundation, we wait until we do not have to deny ourselves, we shall never take on new work, for we shall never be without work."

Sister Mary Conrad smiled, remembering the Western Foundress who had died in January of this year. She had known the holy nun so well from her novitiate days in Vancouver, Washington. How like Mother Joseph that was! And how true!

Reverend Father Jean Baptiste Rene, S.J., remained undaunted, however, and continued to plead for help from the sisters, whose work he witnessed in the American West. Doctor Edward Rimminger, the pioneer Nome physician, wrote promising he would discontinue his small hospital on the arrival of the sisters. On July 12, 1901, the City Council of Nome passed a resolution that petitioned for the help of the sisters, and outlined ways in which the community could support their efforts. Other Jesuits in northern Alaska continued to plead for the sisters, "who knew how to take care of humanity's spiritual and corporal needs at the end of the world."

The General Council reconsidered the request, and in late 1901, granted approval for a conditional foundation at Nome, Alaska.

So, only 35 years after the United States' purchase of Alaska from Russia, four Sisters of Providence sailed from Seattle on June 1, 1902, and headed north to bring health care to the miners, prospectors and citizens of Nome.

From the beginning the Nome foundation was under the direction of the Montreal Motherhouse, from whence the sisters were sent to staff the institution. Sister Mary Conrad had been "borrowed" from the Western Province as Superior of the little company.

The clear day sparkled with a brisk breeze, and the *S.S. Senator* rolled through the water with a comfortable swiftness, leaving Washington State farther and farther behind. Sister Mary Conrad stood looking down at the clean, sharp wake the ship cut in the blue-gray water. She was short of stature, and muscular, as befitted the daughter of a German farmer, who early in life learned the discipline of work by helping about the house and farm. Her physical strength was matched by her keen mind and strong will. In her own way, she looked upon life as a worthy opponent, her eyes sparkling with the adventure of the challenge she quietly flung it.

Her features were generous and dominated by straight black brows and dark eyes. One saw her complete devotion to goodness and right in the set of her mouth and the line of her jaw. The religious habit did not hide these qualities. The white coif about her face served to heighten the compassion that stood in her eyes at the sight of misfortune or grief; or the radiance that lit her face while she prayed. She smiled readily and spoke with a shade of her native German.

Her hands were square and capable, and could turn to cooking or fancywork as the occasion demanded. Sister Mary Conrad Kratz was a leader, and the Providence Superiors were quick to recognize and utilize this quality.

Now she pulled her shawl about her shoulders and began to walk the length of the deck, her mind in a turmoil of memories.

Looking back over her fifty years, she could recall the little town of Langenbruken, Baden, Germany, where she was born, the eldest daughter of Conrad Kratz and his wife Theresa Huhn. She smiled wondering why on earth the town was given a name that meant "long bridge" when, as she remembered, there was no such bridge in it. It was the home of her early childhood, and she could remember the first time she saw the beggars, whose custom it was to go to a house, stand at the door without knocking, and holding their sacks in evidence, begin to recite the Our Father. Mrs. Kratz knew what they needed and set about preparing things to help fill the sacks. Little Louisa watched with big black eyes, and when her mother had finished, asked for a slice of bread and butter. With it, she ran after the retreating beggars as fast as her little legs would carry her. How one slice of bread and butter would satisfy the group never entered her head, she knew bread and butter was good for hungry folk.

One of her early responsibilities was to take the flock of village geese to pasture in the forenoon. Her mind puzzled over the fact that the geese never needed to be gathered up to return home at four o'clock. They simply rose, fluffed their feathers, and walked back, each returning to the barnyard that was home. How did they tell time, she wondered.

The Kratz farm was of moderate size and included chickens, geese and a cow. On a nearby hill, Conrad Kratz had a small vineyard and a hop yard.

Thoughts of America were never far from the family dreams, and the parents' concern for two uncles and the oldest boy, Edward, lived there in Tumwater, near Olympia, in Washington Territory. As the time drew near for his return to Germany to take up his military duties, or find a substitute, Edward wrote home asking his parents to sell everything and come to America. They did as he suggested, and on November 13, 1860, Mr. and Mrs. Kratz and their seven children left Germany for New York.

Ah! She knew steamer travel well! She had scampered about the ship during the fourteen days of ocean travel, her nine-year-old mind delighting in the adventure of the journey.



*Sister Mary Conrad (Kratz) first Superior of Holy Cross Hospital, Nome, Alaska.*

New York seemed a fairy city of towering buildings, crowds of people, and noisy street vendors. She remembered a brief stay there, and then there was more steamer travel south to Panama City. The trip across the Isthmus of Panama was a lark to this child who knew and loved animals, and she straddled the mule with easy good fellowship. After that they had navigated the Pacific Ocean to Washington Territory where the family found a permanent home in Tumwater, Washington.

Sister Mary Conrad's eyes misted at the thought of how on the journey from Panama to Olympia, two of her brothers had contracted Panama Fever. Her mother quietly prayed and worried as the trip continued. One boy recovered, but the other, her beloved Stephen, died two weeks after their arrival at their new home.

There was no priest in the vicinity of Tumwater to bring the Last Rites to young Stephen, or to offer the Requiem Mass for his soul. The lack of the comfort of religious services at such a difficult time, was a great blow to the Kratz family. Mrs. Kratz worried that the children would not persevere in their faith, and with her prayers made a vow never to eat flesh meat for this intention; a vow she kept for the rest of her life, and her children kept and cherished the Faith of their Fathers.

Now she looked across the vastness of the restless water. Here she was afloat on another journey. But this! Sweet Heaven! This was a trip to the top of the world, where they would live and work among gold-crazed men in a climate that teetered between severe cold with periods of darkness and long summer sunlight, punctuated by monstrous mosquitoes.

She nodded as the thought that everything in her life prepared her for this trip: homelife with a family of younger siblings and life on a farm in the American West that was raw and hard. She had learned how to make do with the minimum, and devise ways of using everything—the making of soap and candles, preserving food, baking bread, and turning a neat hem with needle and thread. These were regular homemaking lessons for all young ladies, and Louisa Kratz had been well trained.

Sister Mary Conrad could remember that during those early days a priest was able to visit the region perhaps once a year, and when he came, the neighbors for miles around gathered at the Kratz home for the celebration of Holy Mass. Every Sunday, though, the Kratz family recited the Mass Prayers; and Lenten regulations were stringently observed. There was no light singing or music, it was truly a time of penance, prayers and sacrifices.

She and her sister, Anna, attended school at St. Joseph Academy in Steilacoom, Washington, where she came under the tutelage of the Sisters of Providence. It must have been while she was there that the thought of joining the Order came to her mind, for during the summer months of 1871 she broke the news to her family.

So it was with an understandable sadness that her parents saw her off to Vancouver, Washington, in 1871 to join the ranks of the Sisters of Providence. Finding that the western novitiate was closed until the final approbation of the Order's Constitutions, she helped care for the orphans of the sisters' teeming charitable works and studied under the guidance of Sister Dorothy.

In 1872, on December 8, she was the first American recruit to enter the re-opened Novitiate at Vancouver, and pronounced her First Vows in 1875. That was twenty-seven years ago. She smiled again to herself and turned to walk the length of the ship.

Meanwhile, she had worked at many areas of the Pacific Northwest: she took charge of the Indian children at the orphanage in Tulalip, Washington; and cooked for a year at the home of her Novitiate, Providence Academy; she served as almoner for the poor at St. Vincent Hospital in Portland, Oregon; and as Superior of four hospitals: St. Mary Hospital, Walla Walla, Washington; St. Mary Hospital in New Brunswick, British Columbia; St. John's Hospital in Port Townsend, Washington; and St. Vincent Hospital in Portland, Oregon. Now she traveled north as the Superior of another hospital, in a new and strange land. She prayed in her native German, that

God would be with her little band, and that the work destined for them would be to His glory and the good of His children in the frozen North.

Gulls in various shades of gray and white circled above the ship, following for scraps flung into the sea. They glided effortlessly on the wind, sailing as easily on the air currents as the ship on the blue-gray water. The sight of them never failed to amaze her, how these birds stayed aloft so effortlessly. Somehow their raucous cries were less strident here where the expanse of wind and water carried the shrillness to the far reaches of the Orient.

Sister Roderick stepped from the cabin doorway and joined Sister Mary Conrad on her rounds of the ship's deck. The air was sharp enough to bring a glow to their cheeks and to grant them a hearty appetite, as they paced and nodded with smiles to those who were likewise occupied.

For the most part, the passenger list comprised those destined for work in the mines and in the city of Nome itself. There was a constant need for bakers, butchers, sales clerks, lawyers, longshoremen, bank tellers, teachers, musicians, cooks and machinists. This trip carried a great number of bankers and mine executives who hurried north after the winter to see to the pressing needs of their businesses. The unusual part of the manifest was the four nuns on their way to Nome to open a hospital.

In asking about the two other sisters, Sister Mary Conrad learned that they had remained in their staterooms. They did not wish to watch the land disappear, even if the motion of the ship was not too unpleasant. So, she and Sister Rodriguez walked and spoke of what might await them at their journey's end.

That evening, following supper, the four retired to their cabins, and after night prayers, sought sleep at the end of a very full day. The ship's timbers creaked; the engines throbbed; and voices spoke in quiet conversation in the passageway. These sounds, coupled with the gentle rock of the ship, lulled them to sleep.

All was well aboard the *S.S. Senator*.

## II

At times the Pacific Ocean contradicts its name, when contrary winds and dull skies join to make the waters anything but "peaceful." So, it is not surprising that there followed a couple of days of rough weather that kept the four sisters below and at the point of death with seasickness. It is an illness that makes one so miserable that passage into Eternity seems a blessed relief. The Chronicler of the little band wrote the sisters in Montreal, that if they did not know whereof she spoke, they should come to Nome just for the experience of becoming acquainted with the malady.

But now the *Senator* moved along smoothly and the passengers enjoyed the continued sunlight and keen sea air. At one point, the Purser called their attention to a massive rock that projected from the water, which he called Priest Rock. As the ship approached, they found that it resembled a priest, clad in cassock and surplice, his hand raised in benediction. They gazed at it, marveling that the action of wind and water would fashion from granite this symbol of God's love, right here, in the Pacific Ocean.

If it was a symbol of peace and blessing, it was also a warning. From here it was not long before the *S.S. Senator* entered the waters of Unimak Pass, that narrow channel between Unimak Island and the Krenitzin Islands of the Aleutian Chain. Here the waters of the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea met with towering waves and mounting winds. There were times when not-too-timid souls were certain the steamer would capsize. The action of the pitching and rolling was so violent as to almost hurl the passengers from their berths, and the four frightened nuns moaned with seasickness as they prayed for deliverance from a watery grave in the far reaches of a land God had seemingly forgotten.

A weary time, indeed! The little steamer seemed doomed to flounder as it struggled through the lashings of the two great bodies of water as each seemed determined to roar and challenge the other for territorial rights. Seasoned travelers even found this passage rough, and no one blamed those who were near death with fright and seasickness.

The ordeal lasted two hours, which seemed an eternity to the travelers. Then, on Sunday, June 8, Feast Day of Bishop Ignace Bourget, the Order's Founder, they berthed at the welcome port of Dutch Harbor, on the Aleutian Chain.

This little coaling station was a welcome respite after the terrifying cross of the Pass. Everyone gathered to watch the docking and planned to debark at this first Alaskan port. The little village of Dutch Harbor stretched along the shoreline before a humpy mountain. Little houses, each with a red roof, sat prim and snug to take satisfaction in the thought that they housed government officials and their families. Here, the ship would spend a day taking on coal and water for the rest of the trip, and leave the following morning.

When the gangplank was lowered, the passengers streamed off to enjoy the feel of solid earth beneath their feet, and to examine the village and its environs. The sisters welcomed this opportunity to step ashore, and they became a wonder to the amazed dock workers and the natives who gathered to watch the steamer arrive. As they walked beyond the village, the sisters came upon a meadow of wild flowers. There were stands of flaming fireweed, yellow dryas, fluffs of Alaskan cotton, and the colorful Alaska grass (*poa artica*). Sister Lambert was the first to find a clump of the delicate wild roses. They eagerly gathered a few, and prepared a bouquet for the little shrine they had erected in one of the staterooms.

The following morning, the Captain weighed anchor and the *Senator* steamed into the Bering Sea, beginning the last lap of the trip over 650 miles of open water. Refreshed somewhat from the break in the voyage, everyone looked forward to their arrival in Nome.

Nome! This was the topic of all conversation on shipboard. The bankers, mine owners, and Nome businessmen gathered in little clusters in the lounge or at the rail and talked endlessly of plans for the city's expansion or beautification; of new areas that could be developed; or creeks, farther in the hills, that might "show color" were it possible for a man to reach the spot. The talk went on and on, until the practical and the fanciful became

entangled, and dubious dreams took stage center. Everyone, regardless of his business, was eager to sight land and reach the end of this journey.

Then, the following morning, disaster struck!

### III

The ship's doctor slid into a seat at the Officers' table, and nodded his good morning to the Captain. He accepted a cup of strong coffee and in a few words broke the alarming news that he had discovered a case of smallpox on board. His beetling brows met in worry. General anxiety spread quickly among the passengers, and the group of sisters tried to accept the inevitable delay as another barrier put in the way of the good they hoped to accomplish, once they reached Nome.

On June 11, 1902, the *Senator* steamed to the end of the roadstead, two miles from the Nome shore, and all on board could sight the city across the water. Shortly after the Marine physician boarded, he was informed of the case in sick bay and he immediately ran up the brilliant yellow flag that indicated quarantine. He ordered all the barges, canoes, and rafts that had gathered to help the passengers ashore, to leave at once and not return until requested. Then he vaccinated all on board.

For three days the Port authorities discussed whether or not to have the ship return to Seattle without letting anyone ashore. Finally, the ship steamed off to Sledge Island, seventeen miles southwest of Nome, where for five days everyone fumed and called down maledictions on those who saw it necessary to bring about this delay. It was not till June 19 that the order was given to put into Nome again, and the weary passengers sighted Nome for the second time and wondered if they'd be permitted to reach the end of their long journey. After what the Sister Chronicler terms "some ridiculous disinfection," they were allowed to debark.

And with this they were faced with another nightmare!

Debarking was anything but easy and pleasant. The roadstead ended two miles from shore because of extremely shallow water near the docks. Everything, passengers and freight, had to be lightered from ship to shore. The wind and waves were untamed, even on mild days, and the action of the water alternately moved the landing crafts against the ship or away from it, leaving a stretch of open water yawning at those above. The trick was to descend the rope ladder from the *Senator*, and leap on the waiting craft, when it was carried against the steamer.

Because of their religious state, and with an eye to deference, the ship's Captain directed the sisters to leave the ship first, while all gathered at the rail to watch their descent, and to cheer their efforts. It was nerve-wracking and frightening to say the least, but somehow the four nuns made the leap and stood to watch the rest of the passengers follow them.

After the windy trip to the shore, there was no one, not a soul, to step forward and welcome the four religious women who had crossed the northern face of the Western Hemisphere to bring comfort and medical aid to Nome's sick and poor. Was it because no one knew of their departure from Seattle on the *Senator*? Had the mails failed to reach those who were so



eager to have the services of these women? Where were those who had made such bold promises to help in urging the sisters to come?

As she scanned the faces on the shore, Sister Mary Conrad beheld the hardened, curious faces of the miners; indifferent Eskimos; the stalwart citizens; the curious; the bored; the enterprising. No one smiled; no one spoke to them.

Clutching their handbags, they turned their steps to the city and saw in the distance the steeple and cross of the Catholic church. "Come," said Sister Mary Conrad, with her usual vigor and directness, "we shall go to the church first, and offer our travelers' prayers, and then we'll find the Pastor."

They suited the action to words, and started to St. Joseph Church along Front Street amid the hustle and business of the City of Gold.

On their way, they met Fathers John Van der Pol, S.J., and Rogation Camille, S.J. The two priests didn't seem surprised that the sisters had arrived and looked travel-stained, and near to tears with loneliness and disappointment. Father Van der Pol took them to St. Joseph Church, where he opened the tabernacle and blessed them with the very presence of the Blessed Lord Himself, as he recited the words of the hymns sung at Benediction.

One can guess at the state of mental and physical fatigue of these four women who, in letters to the Motherhouse, admitted to shedding copious tears as they prayed at the foot of the altar, six thousand miles from Montreal and all that was home and warm and safe.

As they left the church, the sisters followed Father Van der Pol into the priests' house, where he prepared tea which he served with Pilot Bread, that hard dried biscuit the sisters were to learn was the staff of life for both miners and Eskimos. Sister Mary Conrad asked to see Doctor Edward Reminger, the town's only physician, and Father dispatched an Eskimo boy to ask the doctor to come and meet the sisters. Before very long, the good man was there to greet them.

Doctor Reminger owned a small hospital, which, anticipating the arrival of the sisters, he had named Providence Hospital, the first of many so named to dot the Pacific Coast. Now he wanted to turn it over to the sisters at once to give them a place to stay and to bring competent nursing care to his patients.

The sisters visited it and found it too narrow and poorly situated for their purpose, but accepted the Doctor's offer. He immediately dismissed his four nurses, and the sisters found their lives had taken on a new twist in this far-off section of the Church Militant.

Nome by this time boasted of telephones, electric lights, and four or five newspapers, but only Front Street, which held most of the business establishments, could claim a clear roadway; the rest of the town had narrow, crooked streets and flimsy shacks and tents. There were numerous log cabins for the homes of wealthy citizens, and the frame buildings housed banks, a couple of hotels, and government buildings. Tents dominated the town, and the streets were crowded with horse teams, dogs, children, and miners.

Within four days, the sisters decided to purchase another building for the hospital. There was much about Doctor Reminger's hospital that did not

meet the satisfaction of the trained and fastidious sisters. They found a structure that would meet their needs, with a few major renovations. It was a frame building of good appearance, and measured 55 by 26 feet and had two stories. Once a hardware store, it stood on ground not far from the Catholic church; and it included a number of smaller dependent buildings. The house cost \$5,000 and required repairs that came to \$1,000. The sisters bought all the movable equipment from Doctor Reminger for the sum of \$1,100 and began work. For a total of \$7,100 the Sisters of Providence opened a house of healing in Nome which, as directed by the General Council, they named Holy Cross Hospital.

Such a staggering debt demanded begging tours to help defray the cost of opening, but such tours were certainly no novelty to the four who had covered gold camps, the lumbering operations of the Northwest, and the barracks of Vancouver's Military Post on paydays. All helped support the works of caring for the sick, the orphans, the elderly and the indigent of the areas in which they worked. Placing their confidence in Divine Providence, they suddenly felt better about working in this land where the sun never sets from May to August.

#### IV

The city of Nome stretched along the shoreline in houses, shacks and tents. Nearer the water stood large warehouses, hotels, stores and government buildings. Farther back, the Catholic church, with its steeple and golden cross overlooked the town; a beacon to winter travelers.

Behind the city stretched a vast flat country five or six miles deep that led to a chain of hills and mountains. The tundra was covered by a soft creeping moss that resembled coral in structure, and shared the area with clumps of yellow-brown grass that rose from the ground in clusters, one to two feet high. These, the Alaskans called "niggerheads" and they made the country impractical for travelers and were the despair of explorers. Just the effort of walking across such an expanse was exhausting even to the hardiest. There were no trees to be seen within a radius of 75 miles of Nome; and the whole aspect of the area was one of desolation and emptiness. Several small rivers flowed from the hills and mountains, to empty into the Bering Sea; one of them, the Snake, flowed through Nome at its center.

But for those who stumbled through the tundra, they found, upon close inspection, about fifty varieties of wild flowers, thin-stemmed and pale of color but offering a delightful fragrance as if to make up for their deficiency in sturdiness. The blueberries and low- and high-bush cranberries offered a double pleasure. Harvesting them gave the sisters a picnic-outing, and the jellies and jams made from them tasted well on hot pancakes or homemade biscuits. Indeed, everyone understood why the bears enjoyed this abundance of the tundra.

For the most part, the citizens of Nome were strangely unfriendly. Oh, they were respectful enough, but their indifference seemed incompatible with the protestations of interest accorded them with the desire to have a sister-staffed hospital in their midst. It could have resulted from the fact that

the majority of them were non-practicing Catholics, and that the finding and keeping of gold blinded them to all else that made for the comforts of civilized living.

Crime was rampant; the police were few, and greatly overworked and underpaid. Those who had found gold in likely abundance were in constant fear of attack by "claim jumpers" who thought nothing of strengthening their arguments to the attaining of a good claim with the actions of fisticuffs or a gun. Each night crimes were committed that could not be solved, mainly for lack of police force, or the time to follow them up, before another series of crimes had been placed on the police blotter.

The gold was abundant. The miners found it in nuggets and gold dust. They removed the ore and dirt and placed the dust and smaller nuggets in a "polk" or tubular bag made from canvas or moose hide. This they took to the bank, where it was weighed and credited to their accounts. When the process of melting and making the gold bars was completed, these were transported, under heavy guard, to the boats returning to Seattle or San Francisco and thence to the government mints.

During the winter people kept only a small amount of gold—a fact prompted by the fear of those who had killed without blinking. Even at the time of the final shipment of gold, there were usually attempts to murder for the gold bars.

Nome's population varied from winter to summer. From two to three thousand in winter, it grew to ten or fifteen thousand in summer, and was made up of people from all points of the globe. It seemed that one heard the languages of all parts of the world spoken in the streets and in restaurants. All, all were pressed by the same drive: to earn a part of the yellow metal that laid in frozen earth, or earn a livelihood from those who worked the mines and the sands of the beaches. In most instances these latter fared the best.

## V

It was the Eskimos who startled the sisters who had come from the fastidiousness of Montreal to this last outpost of civilization. The Eskimos lived by hunting and fishing, and every day meant working to bring in rations for the day's food. Because of the intense winter cold, they were forced to live in small skin houses or shacks that could easily be heated with a minimum of fuel, and since time immemorial they had used the skins of animals for fashioning their clothing. With inside plumbing an undreamed of luxury, and warm water for bathing beyond belief, it is little wonder that the sisters found them unexcelled in a lack of salubrity. Succinctly, the *Chronicler* writes: "Cleanliness is not their attribute, and on that, they are not known to have an equal."

The hospital patients were victims of mine accidents, or of those who used knives or guns to settle an argument. The house histories mention cases of fire victims, the diseased, hunting accidents, and those in need of minor or major surgery. With each patient, the sisters sought to bring him to think of the condition of his soul, and there was sincere joy when one long absent from the Faith was at last brave and honest enough to ask to see the priest.

The constant summer sunlight at first seemed strange and unwelcome to the sisters, while they understood how it affected the Nome people. The children never stopped playing, and one could hear their happy laughter and shrill piping at all hours of the "night." No one seemed to mind that they were not home for supper; and like the other wild things of the northland, they found nourishment where they would, and dropped their play to catch a few hours of sleep before they were up and away with another game. Every family in the village cared for any of the children that might be with them at the time, so none was neglected, and for the most part, all were loved. Their happy faces and melting brown eyes spoke of a carefree outlook on life.

For the mature Eskimo, this was a time for fishing and preparation of the catch for winter storage as food for the family and the dogs that provided transportation. Everywhere in the native section, there were long racks hung with drying fish, the winter staple.

In the hospital the sisters prepared a place for the Eskimos, whose ailments seemed mostly those of accident, the exigencies of daily living, and those ills that came with mixing with the white man. According to custom, Holy Cross Hospital reserved a ward specified for the native patients, where they received the best care and attention they had ever experienced. Poor and unclean as they were, these were God's dearest children and the sisters saw to it that they had the best medical care.

The sisters had hardly settled into their new establishment when work of a new kind demanded their attention. In the city jail, a young Irishman named Hardy had been found guilty of murdering the Sullivan brothers over a claim disagreement. Upon hearing that there were sisters in the city, he begged them to come to visit him. So, the sisters made it their work to pay him regular visits during the time waiting his execution. Although he vehemently declared innocence, he found that with the kindly help and comfort of the sisters, he could remember his long-abandoned faith, and with great simplicity he returned to the practice of it.

On the morning of September 18, 1902, young Mr. Hardy received Holy Communion and went to the gallows, protesting his innocence to the end. It was a sobering day, indeed, and the pen of the Chronicler trembled as she recorded it. Such great concern for the unfortunate made a deep impression on the people of Nome. In the two months after their arrival, the sisters had become a symbol of love to the poor and those in trouble.

On September 29, 1902, two new sisters arrived, Sister Anselm from Missoula and Sister Benoit from Montreal. One can imagine the joy this occasioned. This time, when the sisters arrived, there was a happy delegation waiting to welcome and escort them to the new little hospital.

There was, however, reasons for their arrival. Sister Mary Napoleon had been recalled to Montreal for reasons of ill health, and Sister Mary Conrad traveled to Seattle with her. The little group waved them off on October 3, 1902, sending their prayers and good wishes with the travelers through the horrors of seasickness and the terrors of crossing at Unimak Pass.

Then the living of one day at a time moved into gear commensurate with the tempo of Nome life. The sisters found a sort of therapy in their work and the visiting of the sick poor in their homes. Quite often clerical visitors came from Fairbanks, or some of the surrounding villages, and often the sisters

were surprised and heartened by visits from those who had come from the States or, more frequently, from travelers from the Motherhouse. All were doubly welcome and accorded the best hospitality with the delicacies the French-Canadian nun can concoct from seemingly nothing.

The little band read and re-read the letters from their absent Superior and daily wished her back with them. And soon the days so filled with the care of others became shorter, and with this came the promise of icy winds and snow. Then it was time to bring in the long pipes that carried the water to the hospital from the hills. Drinking water cost 25¢ a five-gallon bucket, and melted ice and snow was used for bathing and laundry purposes. Life took on a slower rhythm when this part of the earth seemed to go into hibernation with the famed Alaska bears.

## *Winter Comes to Nome*

One morning, as the sisters hung the weekly washing on the outside lines, the cold air quickly froze the dangling sheets and wet clothes into a strange collection of mobile statues that twisted in the wind. The young Eskimo who carried two buckets of coal to the kitchen range, stopped to look at the sky and sagely pronounced there'd be snow before supper time. Sister Bujold studied the sky hoping to learn how he did it.

Then she turned her eyes to the young man who had predicted the weather. Joe Terrigluck, a strong young Eskimo, was readily available for the endless outdoor tasks to fire the stoves and help with the heavy work of the laundry. She smiled at his sturdy back as he trudged to the kitchen. Joe's left eye was blind, the result of a childhood accident. Eskimo living required two good eyes, but he managed to live, work and hunt as if he had both eyes. He was quiet, as was the Eskimo way, but he enjoyed the games and fun the village had on regular occasions. His work for the sisters gave him a sort of status—who else in the village knew how to take care of a cow? Or how many were able to enjoy the warmth of the laundry room in winter? In his own way he felt a loyalty to these strange white women who had come so far to help the people of Nome stay well. He banged the buckets by the stove and turned to leave for another load. His bowed legs in tight-fitting skin pants seemed almost too spindly to support the weight of his body. Sister Lambert thanked him, and he nodded in return.

And Joe was right.

By 3:30 the sky held an eerie light cast by a half-hearted sun glowing above the overcast, and softly the snow came. At first great white flakes fell in lazy circles for about half an hour, and then the smaller ones began to appear and dropped with a steadiness that was almost monotonous. The dogs curled up nose to tail in kennels or shelters, and drifted off into sleep where the song of the wolf wavered through their dreams as the snow settled on their heavy fur. Nome felt the peace and quiet blessing of the First Snow, and if some of the miners grumbled that this would curtail their work, others were grateful that the winter sabbath had set in, and they had found snug houses for the winter.

Of these, those who had funds enough to see them through the winter but had no place to lodge till the spring breakup, some asked to board at the hospital. The sisters, with a dearth of patients, were happy to have this means to support themselves and further their apostolate.

The river flowed into the sea more slowly, while the ice formed at its edges, and each day moved further and further to the middle of the water till it became a highway for sled travel. The Bering Sea, too, fell victim to the icy clutches of Ol' Man Winter, and with a sort of surly defiance accepted the icy blasts that slowly solidified the water. But not without a good deal of reluctance. Upheavals and lashings formed ice ridges that created a veritable winter wonderland and a marvel of ice sculpture that was the despair of those who had to travel on it to hunt seal and fish.

But life went on in Nome, winter or no winter, and at Holy Cross Hospital there was no interruption of the routine so carefully established. There were

the daily Liturgy, morning and evening prayers, meditation and thirty minutes of Spiritual Reading that touched the day at regular intervals and blessed the daily rounds of the wards, kitchen, laundry, and business office.

On Saturday afternoons the Catechism classes gathered at the church to learn the mysteries of the Catholic Faith under the sisters' guidance. In truth, Father Van der Pol and Sister Mary Conrad knew there was a need of a Catholic school in Nome, for the Saturday classes had grown with happy children eager to learn. This was a plea that Sister Mary Conrad had put before those in authority while she was Outside. If a hospital could take root in Nome, so could a Catholic school.

With winter the accident cases fell off, still there were patients who came just because of injuries received from a claim dispute, or the favors of a Dance Hall Queen. Many accidents resulted from buzz saws, double-bitted axes, or the fires that struck the small shacks and flimsy wooden structures so easily.

With the closing of the waters came long months of twilight or brief hours of a watery sunlight. Life moved along in a short day that might be accompanied by strong winds and blowing snow that was treacherous to a traveler. Many a Sourdough owed his life to the beacon of the lighted cross atop St. Joseph Church, that could be seen for twenty miles. The Eskimos called it "the white man's star." Winter meant infrequent mail service that required months to reach the sisters who longed for news from the Motherhouse.

In the winds that tore down from the Kougarak Mountains, or wrestled with the snows blowing off the Bering Sea, the small houses and shacks struggled to keep a footing. They shook till the residents felt they would be flung into the middle of the vast stretches of the tundra. The sisters, who struggled to keep the big house warm and their dependents comfortable, could easily see that they must build more substantially. It was a thought that gave them something to plan and prepare for at the advent of spring and the time for building.

With the closing of the waters, the work for the miners meant a lessening of the working hours. Oh, they worked, all right, but started later and quit earlier. The men underground thawed the frozen ground with steam, or by building a fire in the shaft or tunnels, then they loosened the rock, sand and gravel and hoisted it to the top, where it was dumped near the shaft to wait the spring thaw and the return of water to wash out the gold. Great piles of "pay dirt" stood near the mine shafts at the creeks. Hard work, it was, and cold and dirty, but the craze for gold was strong enough to negate all discomfort.

With time for rest and relaxation, men found many ways of using it. There were political clubs and businessmen's clubs which channeled their energies into various civic projects. And Nome was not without the more sophisticated "clubs" where men might go to smoke, read, play cards, or carry on an endless conversation. The poor men's clubs were the saloons where a few tables were reserved for card games that might run on for days.

For the women, it was a time for calling on friends for an afternoon of pleasantries, or the meetings of bridge clubs, literary or musical societies.

There were sewing circles where a group worked for church and civic charities, and Holy Cross Hospital knew the benefits of such groups each year as the Christmas Social or Winter Carnival brought a handsome return to help with the sisters' work.

Aside from this, there were wonderful community card parties so planned that each player met about fifty people during an evening. These rounds of Christmas parties were long, long remembered for their happy times.

For the children, as long as they were not burdened with school, every day was a holiday, and they were never at a loss for entertainment. They had their own dog races, when each promised himself he'd become Nome's Number One Dog Musher; or a snowshoe race which made one feel clumsy as a bear. Each carried a "picture stick" in his mukluk to draw pictures in the snow. They were inventive, indeed, in finding ways to occupy their play time.

Traveling theatrical companies included Nome in their circuit, and played to the great delight of men and women who had been too long from the theatres of the States, and who enjoyed the songs and dances of the vaudeville acts that accompanied the skits or serious plays offered.

While the sisters did not take part in these gala events, they had their own means of enjoyment and recreation. There were hours set aside for visiting the sick in their homes, or looking in on any that might be in straightened circumstances. There were days when the highest point of the month was the mail sled that brought bundles of letters from the Motherhouse and home. This made for much to talk about, and relive with their dear ones. Sew-ins, as they might be called today, gave the sisters time to make clothing, quilts and knitted wear for their dear poor; or they brought all their French-Canadian know-how to the art of preparing pastries and other goodies for their patients and friends as surprises on holiday occasions. The convent had a phonograph and a fairly substantial supply of records with all the familiar French hymns, songs or operatic offerings. If one had to stop and crank the machine regularly, the joy of good and familiar music wafting on the northern air was ample reward. While it is true that the first years of establishing the work in Nome was lonely and difficult, it must be remembered that in time the sisters made good and loyal friends who brought a true Alaska friendship and help to the little group so far from home.

For the Eskimo the winter months were harder, bleaker. The small houses never seemed warm enough; food was carefully rationed; and the men traveled each day to breathing holes for seals, or into the frozen sea for the polar bear, while the women and children took turns at the ice holes fishing for tom cod. Those fortunate enough to work among the white men could be sure of a meager wage that would insure a more substantial larder and some of the luxuries of the white man.

One of these was Joe Terrigluck. Among his peers, he was an important and fortunate man. At gatherings, his voice, so quiet and dignified, was heard and accompanied by sage nods. He was one who had steady work, and who had much comings and goings with the priests and the holy women of the church. Like his fellow Eskimos, his nature was docile and loving, and he



found his way into the fold of the Catholic Church where his quick mind gathered and accepted the dogma and teachings of a religion from far-r-r-away.

The clergy, of both Catholic and Protestant faiths, worked diligently to conquer the Eskimo language and its multitudinous dialects, and to incorporate it into the prayers and hymns so familiar to the white adherents of the Faith. Joe's singing voice was true and of a high baritone quality. At village gatherings he was often asked to sing the songs of Eskimo folklore.

But it was the dancing the Eskimos loved and delighted in, and in this way the history of their people was told and retold in song and dance patterns that had been handed down through the years, and which were strictly followed. Only the Eskimo could understand and appreciate the deep mysteries of the story telling.

Each village had its own ritual for the performance of the dances, but all shared in the ancient songs and dances of their race. All participated. Sometimes only the men danced; or only the women; at rare times, the group was mixed, and often the children joined the group to tell a story in the graceful motions of the hands.

Since the hands told the story, the dancers always wore gloves. They were simply homemade mittens, or elaborate feathered and beaded pieces that covered the hands and arms. If a dancer had no gloves, he clutched circlets of grass woven with white feathers to hold the viewer's eyes on the motion of the hands.

The women never moved their feet, but swung their bodies and moved their hands and arms in lovely graceful motions, while their placid faces and thoughtful eyes told of their concentration on the story line. The men, on the other hand, jumped, leaped, stamped and gyrated as they enacted the parts of polar bear, walrus, foxes, or the wily hunter stalking his prey.

The dancers were accompanied and governed by the beat of the drums, several of which were used, and which were made by bending strips of wood into a circular shape, over which was stretched the drum head, usually made from the lining of the stomach of a walrus. A straight handle, bound to the hoop, made it possible for the drummer to hold it up so that it could be easily struck with a long thin willow strip, much like that used for carnival balloons. There was one lead drummer, and the others kept perfect time with him.

Everyone sang. The drummers, the dancers, the spectators, and the joy of the moment negated the cold wind and the almost endless night outdoors. In this way the history and culture of the elders passed on to the minds of the younger people. Each grew to know and appreciate his heritage and to help establish it more firmly in the minds of the children gathered that evening.

## II

One afternoon Doctor Reminger bundled three of the sisters into his dog sled and took them for a ride. It was customary for the owner of a team to "work his dogs" on days that they were not used for a trip. The dogs, always

chained to their kennels, needed the exercise of a good run and the workout of pulling the loaded sled for an average run.

The sisters, dressed in their warmest cloaks and scarves, sat single file on the blankets and canvas that covered the slats of the sled, and snuggled under the heavy blankets and fur robes. The dogs barked and jumped with the excitement of being off and running. Doctor Reminger had eight dogs in his team with a strong Siberian Husky leader, who kept the lines between the dogs taut. This prevented the entanglement of harness, or as often happened, a fight among the team that could cause delay, damage and the weirdest entanglement of ropes, harnesses and dogs than can be imagined.

Once the Doctor released the anchor rope and called "Mush!" the team was off in a cloud of snow. The iron runners of the sled slid and slithered along the hard snow-packed road, and the wind whistled in the sisters' ears to find cracks and places to creep under the robes. The Yukon sled, being low, bumped and bounced along the trail, while the Doctor alternately ran as he clutched the sled handlebars, or stood on the extension of the runners, calling directions to the leader.

It was not long before the dogs had run the starch from their legs, and they settled into a steady trot, an easy swinging lope that could be maintained for long distances. But this was just an exercise run, so after five miles or so, the turn-around spot in the trail gave the team room to face about and return to kennels and the rest they had earned.

THEN did they run!

With tails waving over their backs and tongues flapping like flags, they tore along the trail as the breath from their lungs made frost on their muzzles and chests. The sisters arrived home with red noses and shining eyes, and a novel experience to write home about. The Doctor's parka fringe was frosted from his hard breathing. As he helped the sisters from the sled, he promised to take those who had to stay home on the next run he made with the team.

If the sisters were stiff and sore from the continual bumping and slapping along the trail, they made no mention of it and gathered in the kitchen for cinnamon toast and hot cocoa. The warmth of the hospital was welcome, and they took up their duties with fresh vigor and happy hearts.

### III

Alaska is thought of as a place of continual ice and snow, and while this concept is erroneous, the fact that winter lasts for eight months is cause to give rise to it. With snow and ice being the state of affairs for a greater part of the year, and with traveling a necessary part of the lives of the inhabitants, it is only fitting to devote a word here to the animals that made traveling possible.

Dogs!

The very lives of missionaries, prospectors and natives often depended on the instinctive caution and wisdom of a team of intelligent dogs. There have been tributes read and statues raised to dogs that proved heroes in the line of

duty. In New York City's Central Park there stands a bronze statue of Balto, the brave lead dog of the world-famous musher, Leonard Seppula. His team carried the life-giving serum the last grueling lap of the rush to Nome when a diphtheria epidemic threatened to wipe out the town.

Of Alaska work dogs, there are two main breeds, the Siberian Husky and the Eskimo Malamute. What we must remember is that all dogs are descended from wolves. This is a fact that may be proved by examining the teeth of the animals. The teeth of all dogs, regardless of breed, are exactly alike, except for size, and all are identical in structure with those of the wolf.

But Alaska dogs, those which are bred and trained for work in the winter hauls, are still very close to their brother, the wolf. The Malamute, so named from an Eskimo tribe that lived near Kotzebue Sound, is grizzled or brown in color, and bears a black "mask" about his eyes, a characteristic that makes him stand out clearly as a breed.

The Siberian Husky first came to Alaska in the 1890's when the United States Government worked to bring in Siberian reindeer meat to replace that of the whale, which was being depleted in search of whale bone to use in women's corsets. There was a good deal of traveling across the ice between Siberia and Alaska, and the Siberian Eskimos found that their Husky had a high trading value. Alaskans regarded the dogs as a breed superior in strength and temperament to those of the Malamute.

The Husky's name came from a slang term ascribed to the Eskimo by the white men who traveled among them. "Esky," they were called, and their dogs were called "Esky dogs." One may easily see how the word "Husky" formed from that.

The Husky is of more recent wolf breed, and most pups are a product of a Husky and a pure wolf, the best coming from a female wolf and a Husky dog. He has the wolf characteristics in build, shape of face, approximate size, color and slant of eyes, pointed ears and full furred tail. These dogs are keen and perceiving. They have short legs and powerful chests that give the Siberian Huskies their superior pulling power. Their eyes may be blue, the color all wolf puppies are born with, or they may be golden and slant like the wolf. They have large feet, and have great stamina and may travel as much as seventy-five miles on one dried fish. A Husky combines the wolf's wild nature and the dog's canniness. The Eskimo breed their sled dogs for their spirit of independence, as well as for the wolves' sensitivity. These qualities are a vital necessity in the team's lead dog.

The true Siberian Husky lacks the "mask" of the Malamute, and is a clear white, black and gray in color. In most instances, its fur is shorter and smoother than that of the Malamute.

A strong rapport must exist between the team's leader and his owner, and the wise driver will respect and accept his lead dog's judgment in most instances. There have been countless tales of how the leader's instinct proved best over the driver's orders, when threatened by danger of soft ice on or near a river's overflow covered by light snow which the driver could not see; of his keen sense of smell proclaiming unseen danger; or of his devotion to a hurt or incapacitated owner.

When the airplane was new to Alaska, and a crowd gathered in Fairbanks to watch a landing in the ball park, someone turned to the resident priest and

remarked, “Now *that’s* the kind of dog team you should have, Father.”

The priest looked at the miracle of engine, fuselage, and wheels and answered smiling, “Yes, but it can’t look back over its shoulder and wag its tail at you!”

But this is the story of 1903, and we’d best get on with it!

## *Sourdoughs and Cheechakos*

The bitter winter passed and spring had returned for a week or two, and the little group of sisters found themselves in perpetual sunlight again. The mines opened with a vengeance. Outsiders returned to look after businesses, and the population swelled with the usual number of greenhorns and hopefuls. Nome hummed with summer activity.

Then, on July 5, 1903, terror shouldered its way into the hearts of all. An aged and weathered structure bearing the proud if fanciful name of The Golden Gate Hotel, stood just a block from Holy Cross Hospital. Here, by some accident lost to us, a fire started that quickly engulfed the building and spread to those surrounding it. The hospital was in the direct line of the flames that picked up energy with the slight wind and tossed sparks and flying cinders right and left. The whole town was in danger, and men and women rushed to man the bucket brigade that struggled to help the pioneer fire department.

It was Sister Anselm who made a solemn promise to St. Anthony asking the safety of the hospital and all in it. Suddenly the wind changed and the hospital was spared, leaving the sisters thankful and more than just a little frightened. In this way the city, too, was saved, and merchants and inhabitants at once began to clear away the debris to rebuild, for there were services to render and people to support. It seemed that more people had come to Nome than left it on the last boat out the previous fall.

The hospital found itself tending the burn victims and those who suffered accidents from the fire. Everyone breathed more freely now that the danger was past. The sisters offered grateful prayers to St. Anthony for his protection.

The Feast of St. Vincent dePaul (July 19th) seemed brighter and warmer than ever, for this was the day that marked the return of Sister Mary Conrad. The little Community gathered at Front Street to wait her arrival, knowing from her letters that another sister would be accompanying her. Each on shore prayed for the safety of the sisters during that leap from the boat's ladder to the barge, and it was well they did, for when the landing craft approached, they found to their dismay, that poor Sister Mary Conrad hadn't judged her timing and had fallen into Norton Sound. She was wet, chilled and her starched head dress was wilted beyond recognition. Sister Barnabas, the new sister from Montana, was deeply concerned, as were all on the barge.

The sisters hurried the travelers home and saw to their comfort. Sister Mary Conrad, after changing into dry clothing, was bundled up and urged to drink the scalding coffee always ready on the stove.

They sat about while Sister Mary Conrad told them all the news. She spoke of her year away and of the messages she brought from the Community in Seattle and the Pacific Northwest. While at the Provincial House in Vancouver, Washington, she had had an opportunity to visit with Sister John of the Cross, the First Assistant General delegated to visit the Providence Houses in the West. So many good wishes and loving messages came to them from the Motherhouse.

She looked into their eyes and read there the joy of knowing that Mother Assistant General had come to the American West, but how they wished she'd come to visit them in their newest work at the top of the world! Her heart reached out to them and she was happy in thinking of the surprises she had stowed in the trunks waiting on the docks, and as soon as she stopped shivering, she'd open her traveling bag, and distribute the letters and notes entrusted to her for them.

Then the lively talk began. They told her about the fire and their escape due to the intercession of St. Anthony; of the winter boarders whose payment helped tide them through the long cold months; of Blind Joe's coming baptism and First Holy Communion; of the coldest day of the past winter and how the dogs howled at the moon when the nights were cold; of those patients who had returned to the Catholic faith while in the hospital; of the proceeds of the Bazaar held by the Ladies of the Hospital Guild, and what a blessing that donation was when the coal supply threatened to end; and of those who had been ill among them and what remedies brought them back to health. All these incidents made up the warp-and-woof of their lives, and Sister Mary Conrad's dark eyes smiled at them as the bittersweet of the coffee warmed her. She added her prayers of thanks to those said to St. Anthony for her escaping a watery grave two miles from shore.

Meanwhile, Sister Barnabas simply listened and smiled, as she warmed her hands about the mug of steaming coffee. So this was Nome! It had been an inauspicious beginning with the poor Superior falling into the icy water. The streets and teaming inhabitants with a generous sprinkling of Eskimos, was such a strange contrast to Montreal, or to Montana, for that matter. This was the place that God had chosen for her to do His work. The love and gratitude in the eyes of her fellow sisters brought secret tears to her own as she listened to the happy questions and answers that swirled about her head.

Sister Lambert seemed unusually pale, and her soft voice held shades of a long struggle with indisposition and the need to return to the Motherhouse. In her heart Sister Barnabas rejoiced in the knowledge that soon two more sisters would arrive and this dear one could return home.

A month later, on August 12, Sisters Florida and Belanger arrived to swell the ranks and help with the increasing duties in and about the hospital. Sister Lambert left the same day, when the steamer returned to Seattle. As they waved her off, their hearts and prayers accompanied her through days of sea travel for a safe return to the warm welcome of the Motherhouse, where climate, familiar food and extra rest would strengthen her and restore her to good health.

The new sisters faced the unusualness of the continual sunlight; the giant mosquitos; the rough humor and rougher language of the prospectors; the treeless, grassless landscape and the starkness of the frontier life. And they fell into the daily rounds of hospital duties as if they had lived there always. They marveled at the ease with which their sourdough sisters had adapted to this new world of work and prayers, and wondered at the origin of the name given to newcomers to Alaska—Cheechakos.

It was Doctor Reminger who explained it to them.

The first white men who came to Alaska from Russia settled mainly in the southern portion of The Great Land. The first two Americans came to

Alaska from "Chicago." The Aleuts and Tlinget Indians struggled with the word, and the best they could manage was "Cheechako." The Indians thought each newcomer came from the same place, and so gave them the name. Easily the word slipped into the language, and in time was the accepted term for "greenhorn." Tradition held that a Cheechako must live for a year in the territory and see the ice go out to earn the appellation "Sourdough." This referred to the crock of sourdough each prospector kept on a shelf in his cabin, and from which he took the starter to make flaky biscuits or "flapjacks."

## II

The late summer of 1904 was one of unusual warmth and heartcatching beauty. The days of eternal sunlight were passing, and now one could watch the sunrise and feel the nearness of God's power in the lighting of the sky with clouds of burnished gold, pink, and pale chartreuse. But that was only part of the joy! Before long a light breeze would freshen the air and set the wilderness shrubs trembling on the tundra, and awaken sleepy birds to the chatter and joy of a new day. Already the streets hummed with activity as the Nome citizenry went about diurnal tasks of starting a new week.

Gertrude Nestor, younger daughter of John Nestor, the bookkeeper at Nome's Wholesale Liquor Store, smoothed her pinafore as she walked down the dusty street to the General Merchandise Store. The family dog followed her. It was Monday, and at home the clothes in the brass-bottomed boiler bubbled on the kitchen stove. Among other things, Mama needed two bars of laundry soap.

The prim little girl smiled in greeting an Eskimo who passed her with a nod. That was Blind Joe, the sisters' handyman, and he occasionally attended the Catechism classes with the advanced group on Saturdays. Joe was smart! He never said much in class, but when questioned, he always knew the answer. He would be baptized on December 8th. She skipped with her red curls bouncing in the sunlight. She loved anything that added ceremony and a festive atmosphere in the church or village, and Joe's joining the Church offered plenty of reason to rejoice.

Such activity was going on in the church-hospital area! There was talk of a Catholic school opening, and of two new sisters coming to teach. Gertrude had sat wide-eyed as visitors spoke of this, and of the small house Father Van der Pol bought for it. Her parents were happy to have more than the Saturday Religion classes, and wished her to study in a Catholic atmosphere.

Gertrude entered the store. It smelled of ground coffee, dry onions, smoking tobacco and dust. Many people milled about making purchases. She walked to the counter, her eyes barely reaching above it, and waited her turn. In time the bewhiskered owner placed fat hands on the counter and leaned over and smiled at her. "What can I do for you, Miss Nestor?" His voice was loud, but kindly.

She smiled, liking the grown-up sound of "Miss Nestor," then, "Mama needs two bars of Fels-Naptha and five pounds of sugar." She tipped her

head back to look at him. She liked the way his smile crinkled the corners of his deep blue eyes.

“Sugar and soap coming up!” he boomed as he moved along the shelves, and her quick mind leaped to the image of such a mixture. She wrinkled her small nose and waited for him to bag the order.

She was eleven years old and small for her age. The family had moved to Nome last year, where Gertrude attended the public school. Sister Mary Conrad instructed her in the Catechism for her First Holy Communion, and it was the Prefect Apostolate, Father Raphael Crimont, S.J., who confirmed her on the same day.

On her way home she passed the little house that Father Van der Pol had purchased for the school, and she longed to peek in the windows to take stock of the rooms, but Mother had said to hurry.

John Nestor, aside from his bookkeeping duties, had invested in some mining interests, but nothing much ever seemed to come of it. He was a man of gentle disposition, whose great joy was his home and family. The rough and dangerous life of those who mucked for gold was far from his liking. He often declared that the smart ones were those who found the gold and took it outside to make life easier.

The Nestor family lived two blocks from St. Joseph Church, and each Saturday Mrs. Nestor prepared loaves of crusty white bread and thick brown pots of baked beans. It was the weekly duty of Gertrude to take a pot of beans to the sisters, and her brother Tommy's to carry a loaf of bread to the priests, who declared it was more like cake. After these deliveries were made, each returned with a stick of candy or a homemade cookie.

So any day Nome expected the two teaching sisters. Several men and women of the parish donated time and materials to prepare the school building for the opening of classes.

One bright Sunday morning in September, Gertrude and her friends played house and were having a High Tea when a noisy group of little boys ran by screeching that the boat was lightening passengers to shore. Everyone turned to join the sprint to Front Street, hoping that this boat might bring the sister teachers.

A cluster of sisters joined the usual crowd of the curious Eskimo children and dogs at the water's edge. The bright sun reflected on the smooth waters of Norton Sound, making the children squint and frown as they gazed toward the steamer two miles out.

Sure enough, the barge slowly pulled away and moved toward the shore. One of the sharp-eyed boys recognized the white-bonnetted nuns and shrilled, “They're here!” and raced off to tell the Pastor.

What a joy it was to see the two smiling faces of Sister Mary Odile and Sister Michael of the Angels among the crowd. The Nome Sisters moved forward to welcome them and take their bags, while the children followed at a respectable distance, whispering and giggling. There were eight Sisters of Providence in Nome now.



### III

Everything was ready in the new little schoolhouse on Tuesday, October 4, 1904. Sister Michael of the Angels stood in the schoolyard ringing a large handbell to call the groups of students into the sacred halls of learning. She smiled into the eyes of native and white children alike, her happy Irish face bidding “begone!” to the fear and uncertainty she saw there. They clustered about her, showing her the new pencils, slates, tablets of lined paper, or smart new pencil boxes they received for the occasion.

Standing in the crowd, Gertrude Nestor said nothing but looked at the sister who rang the noisy bell with such relish. Gertrude liked the white headdress and the blue-and-white striped apron sister wore over her black habit, and wondered how sister managed to look so fresh in the dust and grime of Nome. But then, sisters could do anything, and Gertrude adjusted her curls as she dropped into the straight line sister asked them to form in front of her. School! It was going to be fun! She swallowed and hoped she’d have a seat somewhere in the front. Being small was such a bother! Papa had paid \$4.00 for a month of school, and she had resolved to make every penny count!

Gertrude Nestor attended St. Joseph School for two years. When her father thought it was best to look elsewhere for employment, he moved his family to the States. So, his little daughter became a part of another classroom, and her auburn curls tossed in the winds of another schoolyard.

It is interesting to speculate that during those years in Nome, the seeds of a Providence vocation took harborage in her heart, and were to flower later.

As a young woman, she worked in Seattle, Washington, for ten years as an accountant for the Northern Pacific Railroad. On July 17, 1918, she entered the Providence Novitiate in Vancouver, Washington. When she pronounced her first vows, she did so as Sister Ursula Maureen, and for many years she served in the business office of many of the Order’s hospitals.



*St. Joseph School, Nome, Alaska.*

*The little girl at the extreme right of the first row is Gertrude Nestor, who later became Sister Ursula Maureen of the Sisters of Providence.*

## New Horizons

The days slid by, as days do when work for others is the pattern of life. The Chronicles speak of patients, long indifferent to their faith returning to the practice of it, and of leaving the hospital with a spring in their step that recovery alone did not cause. There, too, are recorded the comings and goings of sisters to work in Alaska's most famous city.

In these pages one reads of retreats, congés, outings, visitors, First Communion, births, deaths, begging tours and activities to benefit the hospital. One must read closely and with the heart to find veiled references to the isolation and loneliness endured by those who were 7,000 miles from their homeland.

July of 1905 marked the beginning of the third year of the sisters' residence in Nome and by this time they felt adjusted and were sure of meeting any exigence that might present itself. By now they had grown to enjoy *cafe au lait* made with canned cream; and the pungent odor of burning Buhack seemed a friendly, blue, curling incense that kept mosquitos at bay; the perpetual sunlight held promise of endless hours to accomplish tasks and pursue hobbies.

One afternoon, Sister Barnabas answered the doorbell to find a messenger boy from the Western Union holding a familiar yellow envelope. A telegram! Her heart leaped to her throat. What on earth could it mean?

On the way to the Superior's office, she told herself it was foolish to presume only the worst. Sometimes these yellow packets held happy news, and why was she being so silly as to think this one might be otherwise.

Sister Mary Conrad was sitting at her desk, pouring over the account books. When she looked up to greet her, Sister Barnabas saw a trace of worry in her eyes. They were still trying to pay the last of the winter's coal bill, and Sister prayed this would not reveal an added burden to her Superior.

"And what have you there, my Sister?" Sister Mary Conrad spoke in French tinged with the roughness of a German tongue.

Sister Barnabas handed her the envelope and spoke cheerfully, "Good news, I hope, Sister."

Using her pectoral cross as a paper knife, Sister Mary Conrad slit the envelope and quickly scanned the single-line message.

"Mon dieu!" she breathed, "It's really going to happen."

Sister Barnabas, on her way to the door, turned and asked, "*What's* going to happen?" Sweet Mother! She knew it was bad news!

"Our Mother General is coming to Nome! Mother Marie Antoinette is *really* coming to Nome!" Sister Mary Conrad's eyes were shining and Sister Barnabas reached to take the message and read it for herself. "Arriving August 2, via S. S. *Senator*. Sisters Benoit and Benedict Joseph accompany."

The two nuns looked at one another, a thousand thoughts tumbling through their minds. This was a blessing from Heaven, indeed. There were so many things that needed to be presented for permission or clarification; and, of course, the visitors must have a complete tour of the mines and see at first-hand the prospecting procedures. Oh, there would be much for the

travelers to tell the Montreal sisters about this Alaska mission. Now, what to do about sleeping arrangements and meals during the visit. How wonderful that they were really coming at last! Mother Marie Antoinette had accepted this mission and now she was coming to make a personal inspection of it. Sister Mary Conrad's heart sang with joy and gratitude.

That night at the Community recreation what a burst of happy chatter broke upon hearing the news. Everyone began to talk at once, their cheeks pink with excitement. Visitors they had had from time to time, but to have their beloved Mere General from Montreal! This was a wish come true!

Such a frenzy of cleaning, sewing and menu planning set upon the little band, and they worked with high spirits. Of course, Mother General could not wave a wand and make all problems disappear, but the thought that she was coming North to see them in the place of their work lightened all their burdens, and made all worries less fearsome.

The Montreal visitors arrived on August 2, 1905, but the happiness of the moment was shadowed by the departures of Sisters Anselm and Michael of the Angels.

The sharp eyes of the General were quick to appraise, evaluate, judge and decide. She placed herself at the disposal of the sisters, and entered into their plans for trips to the mines, berry picking, picnics and visits to the Eskimo section of Nome. Here she studied the Eskimos at work and laughed with the children at play. Easily she entered into the life style of Nome and her presence was a joy to everyone.

But she brought news of change. Sister Mary Conrad was named the Superior of St. John's Hospital in Port Townsend, Washington, and she would leave shortly after the arrival of her successor, Sister Monaldi, who was bringing Sisters Gregoire and Dunstan with her.



*Nome foundresses with Mother Marie Antoinette, Superior General of the Sisters of Providence. No. 1 - Mère M. Antoinette. No. 2 - Sr. M. Conrad, Supre. No. 3 - Sr. Rodrigue. No. 4 - Sr. Napoléon. No. 5 - Sr. Lambert.*

## *Outside*

Sister Mary Conrad knelt on the floor before her trunk, looking for a small box as she unpacked. She laid aside her winter clothing, stopped to brush a pair of seal skin slippers, and having found the box, opened it. It contained an ivory polar bear, his head lifted in challenge, a dead seal at his feet. She rubbed it gently, savoring the smooth coolness of the ivory and the perfection of the work. Blind Joe had given it to her before she left.

She sat back on her heels and looked about the room. She was back at St. John's Hospital in Port Townsend, Washington. This had been her first building project in 1890, and she remembered the begging tours she and Sister Mary of Nazareth had launched to raise funds for its construction. It seemed that Houses of Providence, both schools and hospitals, were raised by the blood, sweat and begging of the sisters. People were good and generous, and the houses grew slowly and surely to the Glory of God.

This had been her room thirteen years ago and though some changes had been made, it still caught the morning sun. Cradling in her hand the ivory bear, she rose and crossed the room to the window. It was good to see trees and lawns again, and robins busily foraging for breakfast. A small mosquito buzzed near her head, and she brushed it away, saying half aloud, "Tiens! midget, in Nome you'd be laughed out to sea!"

Three bells sounded and she left the window. Unpacking would have to wait, that bell called her to other parts of the hospital. Her first day back had begun.

Her work at St. John's was intense, as it always was with her, and in two years Providence pointed to another move. This time to St. Joseph Hospital, in Vancouver, Washington, which brought her back to the city of her Novitiate. Sister Mary Perpetua replaced her in Port Townsend.

At Vancouver, guiding the construction of a new St. Joseph Hospital was to be her work, and with her usual dispatch she set her face to the task. On July 28, 1909, construction began. If there were begging tours for this undertaking, there were younger nuns to travel and collect. Sister Mary Conrad stayed home to attend meetings, make decisions, and watch the new building grow.

Bishop Edward John O'Dea, third Bishop of Seattle, officiated at the laying of the cornerstone on November 7, 1909, and blessed and dedicated the new building on March 20, 1911. It was an edifice, five stories high, and stood on the block behind towering Providence Academy, giving the effect of twin edifices, one of education and the other of health care.

On March 23, 1911, seventeen patients moved from what was to be named Blanchet House and settled in the new St. Joseph Hospital, the third building of that name to care for Vancouver's ill since it was founded in 1858. It was the best and busiest hospital in Washington's oldest city.

The new hospital with its growing number of patients demanded an increasing number of nurses, and the time seemed right to open a School of Nursing in connection with the hospital. Acting in accord with the Provincial Council, Sister Mary Conrad gathered the best teaching corps she could find, and soon young women from across the Northwest entered to

study with the sisters and doctors of the hospital staff. The school officially opened in September of 1911.

Halloween came and went with the usual amount of harmless tricks laid to the ghosts of early Vancouverites; then Thanksgiving prepared the way for Christmas; and before one really knew it, the New Year of 1912 was upon them. Sister Mary Conrad stood with another sister looking at the Silver Thaw that endangered the trees and utility lines. They could do little more than pray and hope for the best, and the chilly air drove them indoors. Time never seemed to stand still, and there was no end of demands on their time and energies. Occasionally Sister had a letter from Sister Florida, who had come to serve in Nome in 1903, and who was the Nome House Chronicler. A letter in her frankly Spencerian handwriting always brought joy, for she turned a neat phrase, and had an eye for interesting and unusual details of Alaska living.

## II

Early in April of 1912 came an Obedience for Sister Mary Conrad to leave St. Joseph Hospital and go to Seattle where she was to be Almoner at Providence Hospital. This was a position she held for twenty-eight years, and the last of her active duties. Seattle was thriving and sprawling in all directions, and Providence Hospital was growing with it.

Sister Mary Conrad's first decision was to form a group of women to sew for the poor. These Ladies of Charity (often called the Gray Ladies from the gray uniforms they wore) gathered once a week with Sister Mary Conrad to make clothing, wash and repair donated articles and help implement plans for providing food, clothing and lodging for her dear poor. Sister often helped locate employment for those who came for help, and was deeply concerned that the facilities for good recreation be readily available for her charges. Parents and children alike anticipated the picnics she organized, and talked of them long after.

She visited the homes, always bringing hope and love to those who were ill, and some small surprise for the children of the family. Those who accompanied her on these trips were impressed with her faith and simplicity, and her genuine love and concern for the unfortunate ones she served.

Sister Mary Conrad's office was on the first floor of the hospital, and one passed it on entering. Outside the door she placed a chair upon which employees and regular donors left contributions for her work, or where one might sit to await her coming. That chair sometimes proved a trap for unsuspecting donors. It is a bit of Providence history that Mr. Frank Sullivan, in the hospital on business, dropped his warm overcoat on the first chair he saw before meeting with the Superior. The "chair" was the one outside a closed door and was innocent looking enough, but upon completing his business, Mr. Sullivan returned to find his coat gone. Sister Mary Conrad had given it to a man who came for help, and the coat fit him nicely. Upon Sister's explaining, Mr. Sullivan had the grace to laugh at the way his coat had gone a-charitying. This was the beginning of a friendship that benefitted her poor and brought each to admire the other.

It was Frank Sullivan who, at Sister Mary Conrad's suggestion, became the principal benefactor of Mount St. Vincent when the Sisters of Providence bought property in West Seattle to build a Home for the Aged, and a large building to house the Providence Infirmary, Novitiate and offices for the Provincial Administration.

### III

Her stout German heart finally gave out, and in 1940 she had to leave Providence Hospital to retire to the Sisters' Infirmary at Mount St. Vincent. Here she spent hours in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, and in taking part in the Community recreations. She kept busy at sewing and performing light tasks for her cherished poor, until in 1948 she was forced to spend her days either in bed or in a wheelchair for her visits to the chapel.

In January of 1948, her friends and the Ladies of Charity gave a special luncheon at which she was feted and honored, a trial to her humility indeed. It was a day of excitement and great happiness in meeting friends and reliving the times they had spent together, but the evening found her weary. On October 22, 1948, the *Northwest Progress* carried a picture of her and a résumé of her life under the caption "Sister Mary Conrad, 97, may be the oldest member of the Diocese."

At the Infirmary, she enjoyed having the sisters visit her, but after a few minutes of general conversation, she asked them to pray with her. A lifetime of closeness to God and supplication for the welfare of others came to full flower, and she thumbed her way around the Rosary until she lapsed into a coma on the morning of October 31, 1948, about one hour before her death.

The news of her illness spread quickly among the parishes of Seattle, where prayers rose to Heaven for her. The sisters gathered in her room to offer the prayers for the dying, and to recite her favorite prayer, the Rosary. In several parishes pastors announced that she was dying and in others, later, Masses were offered for the repose of her soul. She was ninety-seven years old, and had spent almost seventy-six years in Religious Life.

On November 3, 1948, the chaplain of Mount St. Vincent, Rev. Robert Dillon, officiated at the Solemn Requiem Mass offered for her dear soul, and her body was laid to rest in the sisters' plot in Calvary Cemetery, Seattle.

And what of Nome? By this time Holy Cross Hospital had been closed for thirty years, and the sleepy little town rested on the shores of Norton Sound, dreaming of its past glory, and holding in its history the memory of a valiant woman who long ago came with her group of sisters to begin a House of Christian love and healing.

Now Heaven was richer for the dark-eyed, energetic Religious who entered the Gates to greet relatives and friends to join them in the praise and adoration of the Triune God.

## *Nome Again*

Alaskan Septembers are bargains in beautiful days. The earth, aware of autumn, offers bluer skies with larger clouds, and the sun stays a-bed longer each morning but rises to shower sunshine like golden coins on Beggars' Boulevard. This was the time of the last berry picking and the time for the fall hunt for ducks and the big Canadian geese that winged in long arrows from their summer feeding grounds. The work at the mines was feverish, for soon the waters would freeze, and the gleaning of gold from the earth hoisted from the shafts must wait till spring to be washed and stored.

At the end of August, the sisters had completed a begging tour of the mines and returned with an amount which ensured a coal supply for the winter. These tours were an Adventure in Trials. The roads or paths were rough, often muddy, and traveling was done on horseback or on foot. The sisters spoke in a mixture of English and French Canadian which made the men smile. But many of them took advantage of the sisters' visits to buy one of the "tickets" offered for a donation toward the operation of the hospital, or for the new hospital the sisters planned to erect within two years.

These tickets were actually a sheet of paper 8½ x 11 inches which insured the men a place in the hospital for a stipulated time: one month for \$3.00; six months for \$12.00; twelve months for \$24.00. Each ticket bore the following explanation:

"Let a few dollars of your wages go to Holy Cross Hospital, and when you get sick or injured, you will find in its wards the best treatment you can get in Alaska. This price includes Board, Medicines, Fresh Milk, and Liquor, as ordered by your doctor, as well as the use of Bath rooms and Operating room. You choose your own doctor, and settle with him for his services. Your own doctor decides when you are to be admitted or discharged. You may secure a private room, while at the Hospital, by paying \$1.00 a day in advance. Present this card (signed by yourself at the time of purchasing), when coming to the hospital."

If the men were rough, grimy and malodorous, they were kind, and saw the wisdom of the primitive hospital insurance. The sisters' little black bags began to fill with moosehide polks of gold dust and good-sized nuggets. Word of their coming spread quickly from one claim to another, and often there was a man stationed to greet them and escort them to the owner.

The miners, for their part, found themselves feeling gawky and awkward in the presence of the soft-spoken women who dressed in black. Sometimes the sight of them recalled disturbing memories of a neglected religious faith, or of having dealings with such women in clean, antiseptic-smelling rooms in Outside hospitals. Ah, yes, they knew the needs of these women who spent months each year raising funds to further their work. Secretly, each hoped he wouldn't have to cash in his ticket after a nasty fall down a mine shaft, or the settling of a dispute with knives or clubs.

So, they gave of their scrabbling in the muck and cold, and somehow felt safer as they returned to work. Each knew that his gift of hard-won gold would insure that his name be placed on the list of "benefactors" for which the sisters prayed nightly. If anything would keep the bears from the grub

cache, and the claim jumpers from their diggings, the sisters' prayers would do it.

## II

The fire burned most of the night of September 15, 1905, and the smoke-grimed inhabitants stood in the shambles from the near-futile attempt to save Nome's business district.

The two Ladies of the Evening, who precipitated the terror, cowered in fear and chagrin, hoping to be forgotten in the general let-down. It began as a blazing argument between them over an incident neither could remember now, but which grew to loud and richly embroidered name-calling. One of them had grabbed a lighted kerosene lamp and flung it at the other. The crash of shattered glass and the darting fire of spilled kerosene sobered the Ladies, and stung them into a panic that sent them scrambling and screaming into the street. In a surprisingly short time the building towered in flames and created a wind that sent sparks to the other flimsy frame buildings in its path.

Now the men from the Nome Fire Department gathered at the Bar and Grill, where beer wet their parched throats and lifted their spirits. Over and over the men discussed the origin of the fire, and the dangerous episodes connected with it. They added details at each telling.

A cub reporter of the *Nome Nugget* moved among the men taking notes, sorting the truth from the fanciful, laughing and talking with them, then he hurried to prepare the front page of the morning's edition.

Rebuilding the city began immediately, and the city fathers promised stricter fire regulations and a building code that insured more durable structures. Life and work at Holy Cross Hospital continued unruffled with added burn victims, while they prepared to welcome one Superior and wave farewell to another.

## III

September 18, 1905, dawned just like any other Monday with a clear sky and a bit of wind from the Sound. The day was special in that it would usher in the new Superior of Holy Cross Hospital. Each sister felt strange at the loss of Sister Mary Conrad, and greeting a new sister who was called Monaldi.

When she stepped from the landing barge, those standing nearby saw a tall woman in her middle fifties who was straight and gracious. She carried herself with an air of gentle kindness and authority. Only Sister Mary Conrad knew her.

Sister Monaldi, born Marie Celanire Farfard, came from a family of sixteen children, five of whom died in infancy. Of the remaining eleven, one son and three daughters generously answered the Divine Call and dedicated their lives to the Service of God in the care of His needy and neglected children. The Farfard home was one of deep faith, industry, frugality and



loving concern for one another. The priest-son, a member of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, had worked among the Eskimos of Northern Canada until the rigors and hardships of his apostolate produced an exhaustion that brought death to him in his thirty-fourth year; a martyr to the work among the winds and isolation of the bitter northland that seems so impersonal when one looked at the map.

With joy and pardonable pride, Norbert Farfard and his wife Eleanor saw the oldest girl off to the Providence Novitiate to become Sister Mary Hedwidge; the second daughter followed her to the same novitiate two years later, and took the name Monaldi at her Religious profession. Three years later their younger sister joined the Providence ranks and became Sister Aristide.

A gentleness, tact, prudence, discretion, and a mien that spoke of walking with God marked all three women. It is a point in fact that all possessed outstanding administrative qualities, which the higher superiors of the Order quickly appreciated and utilized. A spirit of economy, order, and organization marked Sister Monaldi's Community living. All who knew her were impressed by her just and enlightened judgment, coupled with a deep love and devotedness to the Community.

For five years after her Profession in 1869, Sister Monaldi served in the vicinity of the Motherhouse. Then in 1874, she set her face to the American West, and the early missions of Montana knew her ministrations for five years. Next, Obedience called her to Washington Territory and she traveled to Walla Walla and then to Colville, a trip that demanded three weeks of rough travel in many modes of transportation. She worked here for eight years till she was called to the Superiorship of St. Joseph Academy in Yakima, Washington.

The foundation days of this school were marked by agonizing hardships, and Sister Monaldi labored with efficient love to stabilize this work of Providence. In five years the world seemed to be in an upheaval with the moving of the Academy to North Yakima, into a new building on 4th and C Streets.

History has a way of sneaking about and moving in and out of our lives so that it silently becomes a part of our heritage without our being fully aware of it. Washington Territory became Washington State in 1889, the year that Sister Monaldi was called to Port Townsend to administer St. John's Hospital, where for sixteen years her kind and wise guidance left its mark on those with whom she worked.

Sixteen years in one place almost makes one take root!

Then, in 1905, came the letter with the little red seal on the back which indicated that it was from the highest authority in the Order. It assigned this ever-ready Sister to a task in a struggling little hospital at the top of the world—Nome, Alaska! If she had any thoughts of her new assignment, it must have been that she wished she could speak with her oblate-brother, Desire, whose experiences she yearned to tap.

The mail brought a clutch of personal letters, a plethora of bills, notices, and an invitation to help the Nome firemen by buying tickets or giving a donation to their annual Dinner Dance.

The letters promised news from Montreal and the Pacific Northwest. Selecting one addressed to her, Sister Monaldi picked up a letter opener, fashioned from a caribou horn, and slit a long envelope postmarked Port Townsend. The other letters she placed aside to take to the dining room for distribution. The house was quiet, the patient census down, and for a few minutes Sister was back in the old haunts in Port Townsend. Outside, a dog barked a challenge to another sniffing his way down the street, and the school bell jangled imperiously at the end of the block. Inside, the floors creaked with footsteps and expanding heat, and a motor hummed quietly in the basement. It was washday, and when the bell rang three times, Sister Monaldi would don a blue striped apron and go downstairs to help. She glanced out the window and was happy to see sunlight that would speed the drying.

Her brown eyes scanned the pages hungrily, and she smiled at the news or Community gossip the pages held. Indeed, personnel and patients of St. John's Hospital missed her and she missed the green lawns and abundant trees of northwest Washington.

But for her, God's work was here, and she folded the letter quickly and slipped it into the pigeonhole marked "unanswered" in her roll-top desk. Now, something must be done to help the men of the fire station. How many times had their quick and devoted work saved Holy Cross Hospital? She pulled a ledger from the lower shelf of the bookcase and fingered the line of entries. The pages showed careful entries, in the spidery handwriting of a thorough Sister Bookkeeper, and Sister Monaldi nodded as she studied the sheets. Yes, there would be something for a donation for the Fire Department, God bless it. She closed the book and turned to replace it, when the Community bell sounded three times, and she knew it drew her to the laundry.

She opened a small cupboard and took out her carefully folded blue apron. The strings had been precisely wrapped about the top of the folded garment, and as she shook it out, it fell into gentle pleats that covered all the skirt of her black habit. Dropping the Community letters in the apron's big pocket, she left the office, her face calm and her step unhurried.

On September 21, 1905, Sister Monaldi had an opportunity to witness the generosity of the Nome citizens, when a wealthy miner named Major French, came to the hospital with a double gift for the sisters. The first was a handsome cow, valued at \$100, a gift they accepted with heartfelt thanks. This would make two cows to supply milk for the patients. In Nome milk sold at \$1.00 a gallon, so the sisters rejoiced, even if hay cost them a horrifying sum of \$40-\$50 a ton. Mr. French also offered them two stalls in his stable in which to house their cows during winter.

And there were other benefactors that helped with the heavy operating costs of the hospital. The Electric Company donated light and always made the necessary electric repairs in the house. The Water Company each spring

repaired the long pipes that were laid out to bring the water from the hills, and saw to the correct functioning of the faucets, then supplied water free for the five months of summer. At the approach of winter, the pipes were gathered up and stored, and the company no longer functioned, but left it to individuals to carry water from a source three miles from town.

Two huge horses pulled the sled, which was commonly called "the water wagon," and during storms and inclement weather the driver placed a blanket on each horse. A small stove in the center of the sled prevented the water, in massive containers, from freezing. Customers paid twenty-five cents for each five-gallon bucket of water.

This was hard cold work for men and animals, but it served a great need for the Nome people, and they, like the sisters, were grateful. The hospital Chronicler states, "In winter we have to pay because it (the water) is so hard to get . . . the poor people employed in this hard work surely earn their pay." It is easy to imagine the amount of water that must have been required for cooking and drinking; it took a great deal of melted snow for bathing and laundry. Assuredly, there was no waste in the use of water!

Life moved smoothly and quickly with annual retreats; visits of missionary priests on their way to or from parish villages; civic benefits for the hospital; religious feasts and holidays; and the operation of Saint Joseph Parish School, where twice yearly the pupils prepared an evening's entertainment for the enjoyment of relatives and friends.

Life of the hospital revolved about the patients, some of whom were victims of mine accidents. The Chronicles are replete with accounts of men who had fallen down fifty-foot mine shafts, or who were crushed by heavy equipment. One October, Sister Monaldi helped with two Irish Catholics brought in by a bewhiskered man who chanced upon them when a couple of "claim jumpers" were in the process of taking their prosperous mine. The assailants, a father and son known as Bounds, had guns, which the miners didn't, and by the time the miners were rescued, both were badly wounded. One died a few days later. The cryptic House Chronicles account ends there, and we never learn the victims' names or whether or not justice was brought to the Bounds men who attempted to gain riches by force.

The pages of the Chronicles hold accounts of sled dogs attacking masters; of families, the victims of house fires; of patients in the last stages of tuberculosis; of men—"mushers"—who stumbled in on frozen feet from the trail; of the usual run of operations and illnesses that afflict mortal man; and in one instance the hospital recounts a train accident that brought a sad case to the hospital.

The Wild Goose Railroad was well named. Built in 1900, the ties and tracks were laid right on the tundra, which in summer is soft and spongy. At times the roadbed sank and slipped out of alignment to cause serious accidents. One morning in 1906, a young man was brought to the hospital a victim of such an accident. The boiler had fallen on him. He was literally cooked to death and was completely unrecognizable. Though of Catholic parents, he had never been baptized, and the Chaplain had hardly time to administer the sacraments of Baptism and Extreme Unction before the man died.

During their care for the sick, the sisters planned a new hospital, because the present one was too small. It stood in need of expensive repairs which, if done, would not be adequate to serve their needs. So, after much thought and prayers, the plans for a new hospital were drawn up. Locating a piece of property not far from the parish church, the sisters bought it for \$5,000 and laid out their garnered funds from the begging trips, the city-sponsored bazaars, socials, festivals, monetary offerings, and the scrimping and saving of every possible penny.

Early in August of 1906, the foundation was laid. Taking advantage of the continual sunlight, the men worked 'round the clock to have the exterior completed and the interior ready for patients by November.

It proved to be quite a day. Kind people supplied carriages or helped with stretchers to bring the patients to their new hospital. True, the painters and carpenters were still at work in other sections of the house, but the sisters had ample room to move about, good light, airy rooms, and they could boast of having a Community Room and a Refectory for themselves. Life was indeed getting easier in this far-off mission!

By May of 1907, the chapel was completed and the sisters moved in for Mass and time of quiet prayer. The walls were white with a pale green trim, and above the gold and white altar, a statue of Our Lady of Seven Dolors stood in a niche. Just like the Motherhouse!



*Chapel, St. Joseph Hospital, Fairbanks, Alaska.*

No matter that the begging tours had to continue to pay off the debt, they lived in a new and well equipped hospital. Nome was proud of the new Holy Cross Hospital.

The arrival of the first boat in the spring, and the departure of the last one in the fall, gave occasions for great public interest. The school children, dismissed, joined the crowds hurrying down to the water's edge to welcome or wave off visitors.

The *S.S. Corwin* was always the first boat. An icebreaker, it arrived through the ice loaded with passengers, much freight, and heavy sacks of mail. This last included packages, magazines, newspapers, and all second- and third-class mail. Only first-class mail arrived during the winter when dog teams made slow progress across hundreds of miles to those waiting for news from Outside. It is understandable how eagerly everyone waited for spring and the arrival of the *S.S. Corwin*.

On September 12, 1908, the sisters had a double joy. It was the Anniversary of the Final Approbation of the Rules of the Order, a religious holiday within the Community. A telegram from Seattle told them the official visitation would be made by Mother Aristide, Assistant General and blood sister to Sister Monaldi. It had been sixteen years since they had seen one another.

On September 23, the Feast Day of Mother Emilie Gamelin, foundress of the Order, the *S.S. Senator* brought the delegated visitor and her two companions. What were their thoughts as they gazed over the gunwales of the *Senator* and saw the rope ladder that would lead them to a barge which must be gained by a precarious leap? Sisters Daniel and Louis Henry quailed within. This last sister was to replace a sister recalled to the Motherhouse.

Two miles across the water waited a delegation from the hospital, and the shoreline must have seemed very far, indeed, to the sisters fresh from Montreal. But somehow they made the barge landing, and in time the shore, where the beloved black habit and sparkling white headdresses shimmered in the sunlight. Sister Aristide struggled with tears of happiness and joy as she reached to greet her older sister, whose brown eyes brimmed with love.

How proud the Nome sisters were of their new hospital, as they conducted the visitors about the house. The evening recreations offered accounts of happenings at the Motherhouse; with stories of Alaska legends; the Eskimos; the missionary life in the Arctic; and incidents of life at Holy Cross Hospital. Mother Aristide listened intently, quietly searching the eyes and faces of each. She saw there the brave determination to fulfill the wishes of higher Superiors despite the long winters, the cold, and the privations of many sorts. In her heart she blessed them, and made mental notes of things she would remedy when the occasion presented itself.

During the visit there were times for a tour through a gold mine; a trip to town for shopping; a visit to the Eskimo village; and a ride on The Wild Goose Railroad. The visitors were amazed at the contradictions found—that of muddy streets, lighted with electric lights; of stores that stood behind false fronts; of shops and bakeries that offered all the conveniences of the day, but at prices that made them gasp. They saw the lack of trees in a vast expanse of tundra sprinkled with delicate flowers; the flaming sunsets over the waters of Norton Sound; of women clad in the latest fashion who

shopped beside Eskimo women wearing skin parkas and mukluks; and the amazing fact that, even with a wind, the temperature was not much colder than that of Montreal at this time of the year.

But all happy times must come to an end. On October 12, 1908, Mother Aristide and Sister Daniel left to return to Montreal. They stood on the landing barge and watched the gathered sisters grow smaller and smaller as they moved out to the *Senator*.

Time moved inexorably into the Halls of History, and it was on Wednesday evening of February 3, 1909, that the city of Nome buzzed with anticipation of a gala event. Mr. Dobbs, a photographer and representative of the motion picture business, held a benefit for the hospital. He offered an evening of enjoyment in this newest form of entertainment. In a large hall he strung sheets on a wire, set out rows of benches, and was ready for business. What did they see on that sheet-screen? It couldn't have been more than spots of history-making events in the Nation's Capitol; the current fashions; fun day at Coney Island; and perhaps a single reel of slapstick comedy. In any event, the hall was crowded, and the following morning Mr. Dobbs presented Sister Monaldi a check for \$600. The *Chronicler* succinctly states: "Since the patient census is low, and money also, everyone who helped in this deserves our heartfelt gratitude." One feels the stirrings of Hollywood, even though at this time all films were made in New York.

## V

Joe Terrigluck tramped through the tundra cradling his gun in his left arm, and swinging a kill of rabbits. This was a good year for rabbits, the meat was white and tender, while the pelts sold well, or could be used for clothing. He brought his catch home and dropped them for his wife to skin and dress, then hurried to his work at the hospital to fill the wood boxes before supper.

He was thirty-one years old, a man in his prime, and one who held a place of respect among the native villagers. Married to a young woman of the village, he had fathered two sons. He knew peace that tonight there'd be rabbit stew for supper.

An east wind blew. He lifted the hood of his parka and snuggled his face in its warmth. The sky, milky and splotched with dark clouds, told of a storm that threatened snow. Nome had enjoyed a long, soft autumn and now, by mid-October, it was time to think of winter.

He strode quickly along Front Street with its bustling people, dray carts, hucksters, dogs and children; and turned left at Steadman Street three blocks from the hospital. He went to the kitchen door and mounted three steps (he kept his axe on the screened porch there), then turned to the woodpile.

The hospital stoves burned coal, and they needed kindling as a starter.

Wood was not native to Nome, which crouched on a treeless tundra, but was the gift of the Bering Sea. Spawned by the Pelly and Lewes Rivers of Canada's southern Yukon Territory, the mighty Yukon flowed 2,100 miles northwest across Canada and Alaska, gathering to itself the waters of four

great Alaskan rivers—the Tanana, Porcupine, White and Koyukuk—in draining an area of 230,000 square miles. At the delta it dumped into the Bering Sea, a daily offering of one billion tons of silt and a very generous offering of trees, stumps, and brush that the swirling waters gathered from the spring floods or the eroding riverbanks.

At the sixty-third parallel, the flotsam joined a like offering of the Kuskoquim River that entered the Bering further south. The logs and chunks of wood tossed about in the saltwater till a generous wave brought them to a beach, where the larger pieces were eagerly gathered for building purposes, and the smaller ones served as firewood.

Joe tested the edge of his axe, eyed the chunks of wood in the pile, and turned his good eye to the task at hand. He selected a large piece and his axe bit into it. In two heavy swings it fell apart and he quickly divided it into smaller pieces. It smelled faintly of salt and ocean air, and he laid the axe to the next piece. Working hard, in a way that made his blood tingle, Joe prepared enough for three of the five wood boxes and returned to finish what was needed for the last two. He was tired and longed to get home to supper.

The piece he selected and laid on the block was a twisted and sorry-looking specimen that seemed to have a will of its own. Joe swung the double-bitted axe and the piece fell sideways a second before his axe struck, causing the bark to fly and reveal knots and irregularities in the grain. He grunted and lifted it to the block again, making sure it would stand for his stroke. It did, and the swing partially halved it. He swung the chunk on the axe and finished the cut, then picked up a half to split it again.

The grain ran irregularly and obstinately, and he muttered a brief prayer to the wood spirits before he lifted the axe again. This time it glanced wildly from the wood and splinters flew in a shower. Joe felt a sting in his right eye, and blinked furiously for a moment. Each time he felt a sharp sting in the lid and pain shot through his head like a flame. There was something in his good eye and the pain stabbed a series of searing colored lights in his head, and both eyes watered profusely. He moaned and stumbled to the kitchen door.

Sister Belanger wiped her hands on a clean towel and looked at him. She could see the wood splinter that pierced the eyeball. Her heart ached for this man who was in danger of losing his one good eye. She admonished him to keep his hands away from his face and guided him out the kitchen door and down the hall to the Superior's office, where he sat like a small boy gasping with pain.

Sister Monaldi examined him, then turned to telephone the doctor. They moved Joe to the examining room, and while Sister Monaldi bathed his face, another sister laid out the necessary instruments. Doctor Reminger hurried up the steps and strode down the hall. Hearing his footsteps, Joe felt a surge of relief. The doctor-man would make his eye well.

At 6:30 Joe was in bed in the Eskimo ward, and two of the sisters left for his house in the Eskimo section of Nome. Normally, the Eskimo is philosophical about life, but worries about his home and family rose to the top of Joe's mind and stood there like an invisible foe.

At the Terrigluck shack, two little boys and a fat puppy met the nuns. Over a Yukon stove, a woman stirred a kettle that smelled wondrously good. Joe's wife was pregnant. She looked up from the cooking with eyes that spoke of hard work and the asking of little in life other than the means to feed and clothe her family. Now she came forward and smiled at the sisters. Sister Monaldi explained what had happened and how the doctor had treated Joe. He was in the hospital and would be home in a day or so. From behind pieces of furniture, solemn-eyed children watched, sensing the seriousness of this visit.

The sisters were quick to appraise the shack for adequate bedding and furniture, in the event that the family stood in need of such items. They told the woman that the doctor had given Joe something to make him sleep and prepared to leave, promising that she could come to see Joe in the morning.

When they opened the door, large snowflakes drifted from the northeast. They pulled their heavy mantles tightly about their shoulders and stepped into the wonderland of crystallized droplets. In silent prayers they called a blessing on the lives of this good man and his family.

After a few days Joe was able to return home, but he came regularly to have the doctor examine the injured eye and change the dressing. In time there was no further need of the dressing, and his vision, in Joe's words, was "pretty good." He went about his daily rounds at home and the hospital for several months till it became apparent to everyone that he wasn't seeing very well.

Father Bellarmine LaFortune, S.J., whose sole apostolate was the spiritual welfare of the Eskimos, was concerned about Joe and set in motion events that might save Joe's sight. What good are sightless eyes to a man who lives by hunting and fishing?

One morning the priest, Sister Monaldi and the doctor consulted about this, and they decided to send Joe to Seattle for examination and further treatment by specialists. So Joe, in the company of a public health nurse, journeyed to the Great Outside.

He was back within the month, able to see only light and dark, and with the word that nothing further could be done to save the vision of his right eye.

Shortly after, his wife gathered her three children and moved away, where she sought means of support in the world's oldest profession. Joe was disconsolate, and it took the combined efforts of Father LaFortune and all the sisters to lift him from a deep depression. The priests prepared a small cabin for him and took care of him.

In a surprisingly short time, Joe learned his way about the hospital and grounds and performed many of his usual tasks, the most important of which was the tending of the hospital's cows.

As Blind Joe, he became one of Nome's "characters" and enjoyed the friendship of all the visiting missionaries and the town's prominent citizens. He was the special protégé of the hospital sisters. Always a basically good man, he attended daily Mass in the hospital chapel and took part in all religious ceremonies. One could usually find him sitting in the back pew, left side, saying his Rosary at 3:30 in the afternoon.



Regularly he made his way to the Eskimo village with the assistance of a stout walking stick and the hand of a child. Here he sat in the sun or the warmth of a cabin and talked with friends who had traveled or knew of others who had and who might have news of his family. The news was always meager, often disheartening.

But no amount of difficulties defeated him, and his life eased into one of a daily round of work and prayers at the hospital with visits to downtown Nome or the village, where he delighted in the festival of the blanket toss or the vigorous native dances. His clear, true baritone lifted and soared with those of the dancers and the drummers, and occasionally he stepped out to take part with the men in a native dance, his face shining with happiness.

His great love was music and to be allowed to play the sisters' phonograph marked the high point of each day. He handled the records without scratching them, and he could change the steel needle as if he had two good eyes.

Joe was militantly proud of his heritage and to prove the abilities of the Eskimo race, he trained himself to do many tasks about the hospital that observers found incredible. He could mop the kitchen floor and leave it without wet spots; or wash the dishes in the kitchen; sweep a corridor; and even change the washer in a faucet. Truly, he seemed to have new eyes! He made one rule: His tools or things he worked with **MUST** be left where he put them, and woe betide the person who moved the pots and kettles he arranged on the kitchen shelves! He stormed right to the top and complained strenuously to the Superior.

A naturally happy and pleasant man, he was keenly sensitive about his affliction, and roundly scolded those whom he thought were making fun of him or who were thoughtless of his inability to see. The sisters often felt that his simple faith and many prayers brought a special blessing to the hospital, and they loved and cared for him in a special way.



*Joe Terrigluck (Blind Joe)*

The hospital Chronicles for 1910 open with an air of foreboding that cast a long shadow. The annual begging trip was harrowing in the extreme, and the annalist was careful to give it a rather extensive account on the long-lined pages of the House History.

On July 2, 1910, Sisters Mary Odile (a vertran of these trips) and Louis Henry departed Nome by boat. The destination was Candle, a mining camp located on the southeastern shore of Norton Sound. This journey would take them across the Arctic Circle into another gold-rich region. A trip of one hundred fifty miles as the crow flies, meant many more by water travel. With some trepidation the sisters waved off their companions. Everyone knew the dangers that must be met, and no one knew when they'd return. Many prayers sped to Heaven for their safety.

Seven weeks later, on August 23, the Night Sister opened the door to find two extremely weary sisters desperately glad to be home. Their clothes told of the hardships they had endured. The Night Supervisor hurried them into comfortable chairs, while she fussed with luggage and the precious yellow dust, the reason for their long journey.

The following morning they recounted the events of the trip as they sat about the breakfast table. The little Community listened with wide eyes and grateful hearts that their two companions had come to no harm and were safely home. Sister Odile did most of the talking, and Sister Louis Henry filled in the gaps while she declared flap-jacks and wild honey never tasted so good. "Don't tell anything till I get back!" admonished Sister Bujold, as she left to refill the coffee pot.

They had left by water and found the summer storms a first obstacle. For many days the pilot battled with the violent winds and the strong currents which kept the ship from making any headway. As the tempest increased it threatened the lives of all on board, and the sisters prepared themselves for death. The Chronicles state with smiling sympathy, "They made so many promises (to Heaven) to be saved from a watery grave, that a whole year will not suffice to fulfill them."

It seemed a lost cause, this struggling with the wind and water, and the two sisters pleaded to be put ashore so that they could continue on foot. Once there, it seemed all danger and trouble would be behind them. This proved their extreme fright and apprehension, for one knew they'd find it hard going across the tundra on foot. But no one could bring them to change their minds, and the weary pilot put them ashore. As he put back to sea, he watched the two black figures face into the wind and start off along the beach.

Sisters Mary Odile and Louis Henry felt their hearts settle back into place and their breathing return to normal as they felt the good earth beneath their feet. Now on to Candle!

Well, hardly!

They walked miles and miles along the beach knowing only that they must go north, and seeing only occasional Eskimo shacks. One can imagine the supplications that must have risen to Heaven as they plodded along, tired and hungry.

When it seemed they would fall from exhaustion, they came upon an empty cabin which Sister Odile recognized as one belonging to Mr. O'Brien, a former patient at Holy Cross Hospital. The sisters stumbled into it, grateful for a dry place to rest and rebuild their energies. After a supper of boiled rice, they slept on piles of hay, hoping to resume their way as soon as possible.

When they were able to move on, Sister Mary Odile left a note for Mr. O'Brien, telling him they had used the cabin and the reason for their journey. Then they set out again, tramping the tundra in the general direction of Candle.

O'Brien, on his return, found the note and immediately hitched horses to his wagon and set out in pursuit of them. Sure enough, they were moving along the little track looking more like gypsies than nuns.

"Sisters," he asked, "what on earth are you doing here?" Reaching down, he helped them climb into the seat and smiled at their weary and heartfelt thanks. They told him of the challenges of the trip so far, and he shook his head in near-disbelief. The wagon rolled and jolted along the rough track, but the sisters felt as if they were riding on a cloud, and their sore feet in very worn shoes rejoiced at the rest.

O'Brien took the sisters to the region of the mines in the area, where they spent a few days offering the hospital "tickets" in exchange for funds, then they continued their way to Kougarok, another mining area where they again asked for donations.

The sisters never reached Candle, for by this time the poor dears were so exhausted they returned home via the road and an early vintage automobile. The Chronicles give no account of the funds collected, only that "They were happy to have accomplished the task imposed on them by Obedience."

An understatement, indeed!

## VII

Blind Joe and Charlie Aluckanak sat on the bench in front of the *Nome Nugget* Office. Neither of them said much, each enjoying the other's company. The early morning was balmy and bright, and Joe lifted his sightless eyes to the sun and sniffed audibly. "Wind, she change," he stated. September days often brought sharp weather changes.

Charlie grunted and looked at him, then: "You think?"

Joe nodded and turned his head slowly from side to side. With deep conviction he added, "Today coming change."

Again Charlie asked, "You think?"

"I know," Joe answered quietly. "By'm bye you see."

Mac, who worked on the *Nome Nugget*, hurried along the wooden sidewalk clutching a handful of scribbled notes, his mind on newspaper business. He paused by the two men who sat in front of his office. "Hello Joe . . . Charlie. What do you know?" It was a rhetorical question such as people ask in passing, but Charlie looked up and, squinting against the sun, offered, "Joe, him say big change come today."

Mac stopped in his tracks. What was this? He tipped his cap back on his head and moved in front of Joe. "What do you mean, Joe, big change?"

Joe continued to move his head slowly. "Bi-i-i-g change come from over water. I think Mr. Mac like news?"

"You bet I do, Joe," he answered. "When will this change come?"

Joe shrugged. "By'm bye," he repeated.

Mac shook his head and entered the *Nugget* office smiling, but knowing a sense of prickling interest. The native had an uncanny sense about such things; he must keep this in mind.

Joe and Charlie sat and smoked while the life of Nome moved on around them. By mid-morning a strong wind sprang up that increased in velocity, and threatening clouds rolled in from the Sound. Shortly after, the city was electrified by the distant blast of a steamer whistle out at the roadstead. This signalled a steamer waited for the landing crafts. The City Light Company whistle underscored the news that a ship had come ahead of schedule, and the general rush to the shore was on. The *S.S. Senator* was making an early stop.

The wind had changed, as Joe predicted, and the water was extremely rough. Only those passengers destined for Nome could debark. The landing barge returned to shore with a small group of people who eyed it with longing, as the waves splashed over the craft. There were two white-bonneted nuns in the group, and word ran through the waiting crowd that new sisters were coming for Holy Cross Hospital. Why? There had been no word of changes in the hospital personnel.

So, it was with some surprise that Sister Monaldi answered her call bell to find two sisters from Seattle in the vestibule. Sisters Fredolin and Amalberge stood smiling and sea-sprayed. Sister Monaldi greeted them and asked the usual surprised questions. As they moved to the chapel to say the Traveler's Prayer, they spoke quietly.

When the prayer was finished, Sister Fredolin asked to meet with all the sisters, and the General Call ricocheted throughout the house. Seven long rings brought everyone to the Community Room. Sister Florida, who had been missioned in Nome for seven years, was thunderstruck to find her own blood sister, Sister Amalberge, in the midst of those gathered about the Superior. Such happy greetings; such a flurry of questions; such a great aura of joy flooded the little Community.

Sister Monaldi rapped gently with her ring on the table and calling a halt to the exclamations and tears of joy said, "Sisters, let us sit down, please, and our visitors will explain everything."

With a sense of impending solemnity, they settled into chairs around the long table. Sister Fredolin took a sheaf of papers from her copious pocket and cleared her throat. "My Sisters," she began, "we come to you for two reasons. First, I must tell you that Sister Amalberge is here to replace Sister Alype who is named for St. Vincent Hospital, Portland." She waited for a second round of exclamations and questions to subside. Sister Alype seemed to be looking for a place to escape, and the urgent tones of Sister Fredolin's voice brought her back to the present moment.

“And the second reason, my Sisters, is . . .,” she paused and took a deep breath, “is that I come to take your Superior from you.”

There was a general grasp, as everyone looked at Sister Monaldi. Sister Fredolin shuffled her papers and spoke again. “The General Council has accepted a second Alaska Mission. I am here with three other sisters who, with Sister Monaldi and me, will go to Fairbanks to take charge of a hospital there. Sister Monaldi will be our Superior.” She laid out the letters confirming her account.

“Our Superior?” It broke from the heart and throat of Sister Florida, and was repeated by several others.

Then someone thought to ask, “Where are the others you spoke of?”

“Still on board the *Senator*; the water is so rough that only I and those who came to live here were allowed to leave.”

There was a general murmur and a good deal of small talk about that, then Sister spoke again. “It is with the deepest regret that I must tell you the *Senator* leaves tomorrow after lunch for St. Michael and I must take Sisters Monaldi and Alype with me.”

This time no one spoke; there was nothing they could bear to say.

Quickly, to forestall any further emotionalism, Sister Fredolin spoke, “Sister Mary Gregory will replace Sister Monaldi, and since the time is short and there is much to be done, I think it best to let our travelers start to do the necessary packing.”

With that, everyone galvanized into action.

Sister Florida wiped tears from her eyes and took her sister by the arm to lead her to the guest quarters; Sister Monaldi and Sister Mary Gregory went to the office; others organized the packing; and Sister Bujold took Sister Fredolin to the kitchen where she prepared coffee and fresh bread with rose-hip jelly.

As they entered the kitchen, Sister Bujold found Blind Joe standing by the kitchen door. She moved Sister Fredolin his way and spoke, introducing her to their “St. Joseph.” He nodded in recognition, and then spoke simply, “So, big change, she come, eh, Sister?”

“Yes, Joe, big change, she come,” answered Sister Bujold, and she told him of the change in Superiors, explaining why it had to be. He nodded and turned to leave. He’d tell Charlie Aluckanak about this; he, too, liked the tall prayer-woman.

In the Superior’s office, Sister Monaldi allowed herself a moment of reflection. How she loved Holy Cross Hospital! It had risen under her hands, and was the product of the prayers, work and collections of all of them. She loved every crack and cranny of it! But, God called her to another field and she had precious little time to sit here reminiscing, Sister Mary Gregory must be helped with her new assignment.

They left the hospital to make the rounds of Nome’s business houses where Sister Monaldi presented the new Superior to the bank president, the leading merchants, and all who had dealings with the hospital. Sister Mary Gregory was no stranger to most; for five years she had worked at Holy Cross as Assistant Superior, and she knew the finances and the challenges of the operation of the hospital.

Word of this change spread like wildfire through town, and Mac at the *Nugget*, looked out the front door to find Blind Joe sitting on the bench, as if to underscore his prophecy of the morning. Mac opened the screen door and leaned out. "Joe," he said, "you're priceless!"

Joe didn't move his head, this didn't make sense, all white men were crazy!

Meanwhile at the hospital, the parlor filled with friends who came to say good-bye. This was a blow of the lowest kind. Sister Monaldi was a special person. Always it seemed Holy Cross Hospital had been a part of town, and it was five years since this beloved nun came to them. It was she who had built the new hospital, and whose spirit was behind all the devoted care they found in it. No matter who came to its doors, Sister was always ready to listen to sad stories; find a few dollars to help in a tight situation; or quietly say just the right word to ease a sorrowing heart or a troubled conscience. What had they ever done before she came? And what would they do now that she was leaving?

Throughout the house there were hurried footsteps while the sisters packed her trunk and suitcase; or finished hand washing or waiting mending. Sister Alype, who had arrived two years ago, divided her time between her dear patients and the assistance of Sister Louis Henry. Everyone moved in a daze; this couldn't be happening! Sister Florida even felt a strange resentment toward Sister Fredolin who had precipitated this state of affairs, and tomorrow would take their Superior. Once she met Sister Gregory in the hallway and said softly, "It's good to know *you* will be our next Superior."

Sister Mary Gregory patted her shoulder. "Poor Sister," she thought, "she will miss the kindly Monaldi."

The day wore on and everyone felt a trifle dizzy with the events that cascaded upon them in such short and rapid succession, and they were grateful for a few minutes in which to have a last visit with their two travelers before supper.

The following day, all the sisters, except the one who had to stay to "keep house," accompanied their Superior to the Front Street boat landing, where one of the Nome citizens who had a new gasoline-engined boat waited to take the three sisters across the water to the waiting *S.S. Senator*. As the boat pulled away from shore, there were more than a few who wiped tears away. Sisters Monaldi, Fredolin and Alype waved till those on the shore became small black dots, then they looked at the cross atop St. Joseph Church and this bustling, barren town. Nome had been a spot of hardship, happiness and many graces; they'd not forget it easily.

After climbing aboard the *Senator*, they found Sisters Flavienne, Agipit of Pologne, and a shy young sister named Mary Domitille. What a sense of relief these three knew now that their future Community was complete, and the next stage of their journey would bring them to the Golden Heart of Alaska—Fairbanks.

In time, the *S.S. Senator* blasted a farewell to Nome, and steamed out of Norton Sound on a southeasterly course to St. Michael. Sisters Monaldi and Alype stood at the rail till the shoreline faded, then went below to their cabins. The waters purred by the prow of the ship; a flock of gulls followed

screeching in eternal hunger; and the sun stood bright on the western skyline, it would be some hours before it dropped below the horizon and a rosy twilight settled over the sixty-fourth parallel.

# Fairbanks

The year was 1901; the month, late August.

An old bull moose lifted his fifty-pound rack and sniffed the air. He stood knee-deep in a quiet pond and his jowls dripped with the water-lily roots he munched. A strange sound blasted the afternoon air, and for a minute he stood motionless, listening, sniffing, dripping.

Strange sights and smells had of late invaded his territory, and now this curious sound rolled across the stand of birches and evergreens. It was not the challenge of another bull moose, nor the noise of forest creatures, and something in its raucous resonance made the hair on his hump rise. Once again the sound exploded and the moose moved slowly from the pond to quietly vanish among the trees that edged it.

Ten miles further northward, another listener looked up from a stream and wondered at the sound. He was Felix Pedro, who with various partners had hunted, probed, panned and sifted through the creeks and gravel beds of central Alaska, and had found what seemed to promise pay dirt in this spot.

The bandy-legged little Italian gave his gold pan a final swish, flung the contents back into the stream and strode to rummage in his camp for field glasses. He climbed an evergreen and faced south. A slow grin spread over his swarthy features as the glasses brought into focus the smoke and stack of a riverboat, about twelve miles away. Again the boat whistle tore through the air, and the agile man scrambled down the tree to find his partner coming toward him, equally excited.

"Tom, it's a riverboat, about twelve miles south," he spoke quickly, "I'm going to see what's there."

Gilmore gathered his tools and moved toward the small tent set in the undergrowth. "This might be a chance to buy grub, Pedro," he offered, "it's a helluva long way to Circle City for supplies."

Pedro nodded. Circle City lay one hundred forty miles northeast, and if the strange boat offered an opportunity to restock their supplies, this was indeed a stroke of good luck. Carefully gathering his black pan, shovel and pick, he followed Gilmore to store them, then settling his hat on his head, and shouldering his gun, he set out ahead of his partner in the general direction of the boat whistle.

The mosquitos moved in clouds about their heads; small animals scurried to shelter at their approach; and on a distant hill they saw a black bear eating blueberries. Pedro stopped and looked for landmarks saying, "We'd better remember this place and get some of those berries, if the bears don't clean them out first."

Gilmore nodded and slapped at mosquitos.

The area was without sound, except for the occasional cries of birds, the constant hum of mosquitos, and the noise of their movement through the underbrush. The sun slid to a soft late afternoon.

Later they emerged from the forest onto the banks of what was known as the Chena River. Men's voices and the noisy chugging of the steamer's engines broke the primeval silence. Pedro and Gilmore stopped and looked over the situation.



Five men and one woman moved about on the opposite shore unloading a few supplies from the riverboat that bore the graceful name of *Lavelle Young*. A few boxes, cases, and bags lay on the high riverbank. The woman, standing in the sunlight, her back to the forest, was building a small fire as a smudge against the mosquitos.

In the early evening light Pedro and Gilmore moved down their side of the river and shouted for attention. The six opposite froze in surprise, their faces a study in alarm, disbelief, and amazement as they turned in the direction of the sound of other human voices in the wilderness. The woman tossed a handful of grass and green leaves on the brisk blaze, creating a pleasant smelling smoke, and moved to stand beside the tall man, clearly the leader of the group.

His name was Eldridge T. Barnette, and his dream was to establish a trading post at Tanana Crossing, on the main line between Valdez and the Klondike gold fields. He had purchased supplies for the post and chartered the *Lavelle Young* to travel to the crossroads of the Yukon. But the boat could not navigate the Bates Rapids on the Tanana, and Captain C. W. Adams declared he would go no further and endanger his boat with the possibility of running aground on a sandbar in this late-season shallow water. Barnette would have to be satisfied with unloading here, at the furthest part of navigation, and perhaps next year try to make it to Tanana Crossing. It was at this point that Pedro and Gilmore hailed the group on the south bank of the Chena.

One of the men, Ben Atwater, launched a canoe and paddled swiftly across the water for them. The steamer snuggled to the bank and its engines shut off for the night. The two prospectors spent the evening aboard and enjoyed exchanging experiences with Captain Adams and the Barnettes. As the evening wore on, Barnette could see that the river had possibly handed him a plum of good fortune. Pedro and Gilmore were careful and competent prospectors, and seemed to be about to find pay dirt. If this were true, there *could be* a stampede to Tanana Valley. But it seemed a fragile and distant possibility. Meanwhile, seven miles to the south there was an Indian village which would need supplies in exchange for pelts. This would give him a stockpile for a trip to Seattle, and those Indians would spread the word to others of the new place to trade.

He slept better that night, and the next morning the unloading of supplies continued with dispatch. Barnette decided to temporarily set up his post where the steamer had docked. Pedro and Gilmore bought supplies and returned to work at what is now Goldstream, twelve miles north. The days were getting shorter and the sunlight with them. Both parties had to return to important duties.

In time the *Lavelle Young* pulled in her gangplank, the engines huffed and the sternwheeler slowly turned. She shrugged away from the shore, churned into the channel, and with a final blast of the whistle, rolled away, the wheelpaddles flashing in the sunlight. Those on shore watched, feeling strangely empty, and Mrs. Barnette found tears on her cheeks.

The men set up tents for supplies, and then prepared a cabin for the Barnettes. The wilderness rang with the sound of axes biting into trees, and the nasal whine of saws that trimmed and shaped them for the house. Life

moved swiftly and winter promised to come early. The crew erected another house and a log store, and then dug in for the winter. Someone referred to this spot as “Barnette’s Cache” and the name stuck.

One morning all awakened to find snow falling and the river running more slowly. Winter had come, and in no time the few buildings and tents were covered with snow. The smoke that rose like pale ghosts into the sky, gave proof of the fact that a new settlement marked this spot.

## II

March of 1902 found the Barnettes planning a trip Outside. Leaving Frank Cleary (Mrs. Barnette’s brother) in charge of the Cache, Barnette’s last orders to him were to demand cash for merchandise. Then loading the trade pelts into a dog sled, they took the Valdez Trail to the ice-free port of Valdez, where they boarded a steamer for Seattle. Here, they sold the pelts and replenished their stock of trading goods.

Meanwhile, Pedro appeared one April day asking for supplies but had no cash with which to pay. Cleary, sensing that Pedro was verging on a strike, filled his order and charged it to his own account; a kindness Pedro never forgot.

In July Pedro was back again for medicine. He was near exhaustion and was deeply disturbed by the presence of men who followed him, fearing that if he found gold, they would stake claims in the area before he could share his good fortune with his friends.

One evening later that month, taking advantage of the midnight sun, Pedro and Gilmore worked quietly so as not to be heard by the men on the other side of the hill. They sank a shaft to bedrock and there found the object of their seven-year search. In the bedrock lay several feet of glittering gold. Pedro named the strike Discovery and marked the date: July 22, 1902.

Once again he returned to Barnette’s Cache and quietly reported his good fortune, and his friends, Costa and Cleary, hurried out and laid claims in the area. News of the strike traveled so fast it seemed the winds blew the scent of gold to all parts of Alaska, and the stampede was on. Eager prospectors from Circle City, Nome, and Dawson hurried to the Tanana Valley to try their luck—again.

The Barnettes, meanwhile, made their way back via the long boat trip from Seattle to St. Michael. They unloaded supplies and hired a man to rebuild the small but high-powered, flat-bottomed boat they purchased in Seattle. With this they would continue their journey.

At St. Michael they met Judge James Wickersham. He was in need of a place to settle his Court and Recorder’s Office for all prospectors of northern Alaska. It was Wickersham who planted an idea in Barnette’s mind that later proved to bear great fruit.

Wickersham, who greatly admired Charles Fairbanks, the Senior Senator from Indiana, suggested that Barnette name his new settlement after that gentleman, who later became Vice President of the United States under Theodore Roosevelt (1905-1909). Wickersham promised in return to locate his Court and the Recorder’s Office there.

The new boat, the *Isabelle*, named for Mrs. Barnette, was finished and loaded with supplies. The Barnettes headed it up the mighty Yukon to follow the earlier dream that still haunted the intrepid merchant.

The Barnettes' destination led up the Yukon, into the Tanana River, and into the Chena, where Barnette planned to pick up his crew and continue up the Chena, past the rapids and on to Tanana Crossing. An old dream, true, but one that promised him a bonanza.

In August the *Isabelle* steamed up the Tanana and into the Chena. Unusual activity became more and more apparent as they steamed the seven miles to Barnette's Cache. A mining stampede was in progress, and the Cache was the hub of it. In the five months they had been gone, the word of the gold strike had reached all parts of Alaska, and had called to men and women from the Outside as well. Barnette was aware of this, but had no idea of the magnitude of the Rush.

Surprised and understandably pleased, he immediately changed his plans of continuing to Tanana Crossing, and made his camp the business center of the new gold rush. Barnette's Cache was renamed Fairbanks; Judge Wickersham opened his office on the lot Barnette gave him; and the new city was born. Pedro's discovery had started a mining industry that topped all other mining districts in Alaska. A grand total of \$200,000,000 in raw gold was taken from the region, and Fairbanks set about growing into a lasting city.

The prospector, judge and the merchant were too busy to be aware of their partnership in this bit of history.

### III

By the year 1903 Fairbanks was stretching and growing at a remarkable rate. Its growing pains were mellowed to a degree by the arrival of a gentle little French priest. Father Francis Monroe, S.J., traveling to Circle City in 1903, had decided to push on and visit the new settlement of Fairbanks. He was amazed at the activity, and wrote his superiors at once that the new town needed the attentions of a Catholic priest. He was advised that one would be sent at once. However, it was not till 1904 that Father Francis Monroe was recalled from St. Michael to go to Fairbanks and build a church.

The Fairbanks people watched with growing admiration as the work on a little church progressed amid harrowing difficulties, while the priest worked at construction and/or fundraising. They appreciated his drive and quiet determination to erect a House of God on the edge of town for the growing number of Catholic people moving into the area.

In 1905 disaster struck the new town in the form of a flood. The sensible little Chena suddenly choked up and boiled over its banks. It spread water and flotsam through the streets and into the buildings, causing desperation and a great deal of mess.

As the water receded, everyone cleared and cleaned and began again. In true pioneer spirit they helped one another through this crisis. One who walked the muddy streets with help and concern was the pastor of the Catholic church.

The following year, in May 1906, a second disaster visited the town—one named Fire. The blaze started in a second-floor dentist office, and in a matter of minutes it spread to other buildings. The wooden structures were tinder-dry and the fire protection sadly inadequate. Before the destruction was brought under control, four square blocks of the business district were destroyed. The city was saved by Volney Richmond, manager of the Northern Commercial Company, who ordered “one ton of good slab bacon” in the company warehouse be used as fuel for the boilers to keep up the water pressure in the hoses.

The next morning, while much of the area still smoked, the businessmen began to rebuild, and work went on much as usual, with the bank doing business in a tent. Alaskans are made of stern stuff. Fire and water may wreak havoc, but they dig in and take command of the situation till life and order return to normal.

Jo Anne Wold pays tribute to this attribute of the early Alaskans in her historical sketches *Fairbanks The \$200 Million Gold Rush Town* when she writes:

“How the first settlers unload their few belongings on the riverbank surrounded by a howling wilderness and in eight years create a town with a school, churches, sawmills, hospitals, all manner of businesses, steam heat, a public water system, telephones, sixty-four miles of local roads, forty-five miles of railroad, a federal court and three newspapers, is worthy of consideration.”

Yes, indeed!

One of the hospitals mentioned in 1906 was a two-room log house that perched on the north bank of the Chena. Woefully inadequate for the demands made upon it, the doctors and a committee of leading citizens urged Father Monroe to build a community hospital. He had raised a church in the face of tremendous odds; he certainly could manage a hospital! They promised financial support and hearty good wishes.

In the spring of 1906 work on the new hospital was underway but was interrupted by the Great Fire which wiped out the finances of many who had pledged substantial funds. The valiant priest secured a loan and the work went on. The new building measured 76 by 42 feet and had three stories above a basement, with accommodations for forty patients. The building was insulated with sawdust from a nearby mill and Father Monroe himself saw to all the details of the construction.

On November 22, 1906, the St. Joseph Hospital was inaugurated. One may imagine that having the best and most modern hospital in northern Alaska was one of the blessings the people counted on this Thanksgiving Day.

Father Raphael Crimont S.J., Prefect Apostolic of Alaska, residing in Fairbanks, sought the aid of a group of nursing sisters, but circumstances militated against their arrival. It became necessary to hire local help to operate the new building during the first year. This meant great expense and many cases of unsatisfactory service.

By this time there were 5,000 people living in Fairbanks and Chena City, located seven miles below Fairbanks, and twice as many on the surrounding creeks, where feverish activity went into the search for gold. The services of

the hospital were in great demand, and the Jesuit Fathers were kept busy with the duties of the hospital administration added to those of Shepherds of Souls.

In 1907 the Sisters of St. Ann consented to administer the hospital temporarily, and did so for one year. In 1908 a group of Benedictine sisters took over and for two years tended the sick and injured of the new town.

During the first four years, the hospital treated 1,500 patients, most of them surgical and long-term hospital cases of men injured in the mines. At this time the Federal Government had not yet done anything to help Alaska's indigent, and the hospital was financially unable to meet the great demand for charity cases.

The new hospital was strapped with a debt of \$30,000 when Father Crimont succeeded in acquiring the services of five nursing sisters from the Providence Motherhouse in Montreal.

With a monumental number of problems, the two priests prepared to welcome the sisters on the last boat to arrive in October, 1910.

## *St. Joseph Hospital*

October 1, 1910, broke to the glory of an Alaskan golden day. The heralds of winter prepared Fairbanks and its environs for the advent of the Ice King, and the hills that surrounded the Tanana Valley were burnished with the golden splendor of birch and aspen leaves.

Everyone in town seemed bent on making the most of these last days of Indian Summer. The benches along Front Street, between Cushman and Lacey, became the roosting places of elderly men who sat exchanging stories of the "good ol' days;" the children played outdoors till frantic mothers called them in to don heavy sweaters and wool toques; and housewives were grateful to the autumn sunshine which gave them an open air dryer for clothes that flapped on wire lines.

In the distance the tooting of a riverboat drew loungers and spectators to the riverbank near the landing of the Northern Commercial store. A riverboat always promised news and excitement, and people gathered to jostle one another near the area of debarkation.

The sternwheelers that plyed up and down the Yukon and into the Chena in the run between St. Michael and Fairbanks made the trip in two weeks if the weather, the water level and the sandbars of both rivers permitted. Now a sleek white boat shouldered its way to berth by the long shed that proclaimed itself the Northern Commercial warehouse. Indian deck hands importantly threw cables to those waiting on the shore, and the gangplank nosed out over the space between shore and open water.

Standing among the curious and spenders of Time stood Father Francis Monroe, S.J., and Father Raphael Crimont, S.J., who were present for more than curiosity or lack of something better to do. As the passengers streamed onto the shore, they searched eagerly for the sight of black habits and white linen coifs.

Suddenly, speaking in his native French, Father Monroe said softly, "Les viola!" (There they are!) as he spied the sisters. They came ashore single file and smiled at the two priests. Sisters Monaldi (Superior), Fredolin, Flavienne, Agipit of Pologne, and Marie Domitille looked travel weary and extremely glad to be standing on firm land. The last two sisters were of temporary vows, and one, whose shy smile betrayed her youth, gazed with apparent surprise at the hustle and bustle of this nine-year-old mining town.

The priests escorted the sisters a short distance across a wooden bridge that spanned the Chena, and ushered them into St. Joseph Hospital. Here, with justifiable pride, they introduced them to the staff of Benedictine sisters, who prepared to turn over the administration to Providence hands. The sisters of both orders lunched together, and then began a tour of the hospital.

To the four sisters from Montreal, the building was small, clean, and certainly adequate for the busy little town; to Sister Monaldi, fresh from Nome, the lay-out of the house was wonderful. She remarked on the handiness of the laundry and adequate storerooms in the basement, the proximity of the business district of town to the hospital, and the ample ground that offered room for a vegetable garden and the luxury of flowers.

The hospital stood on what was known as Garden Island—a section of Fairbanks surrounded by the Chena Slough. It was named for the flower and vegetable gardens that abounded and some boasted of cabbages grown larger than a man could span with both arms, which weighed from 19 to 75 pounds. “Mon Dieu,” murmured Sister Domitille, “that would serve to feed all in St. Joseph Hospital for a week!”

The transition of administration moved smoothly and by October 10 the city buzzed with the work on a bazaar that Father Monroe sponsored for the benefit of the hospital. Scheduled for October 18-20, it gave promise of offering games of chance, booths of beautiful handmade articles and delicate foodstuffs for those who were always hungry. Raffle tickets offered a chance to win a beautiful fur parka and an elegant ivory Rosary, lovingly carved by one of Father’s former parishioners.

The October days came and went with the usual swirl of caring for patients, comforting those in trouble, and praying for the conversion of those seriously ill whose faith had been long neglected. At the end of the month, the Fairbanks citizens and Father Monroe presented a check for \$3,000 to Sister Monaldi. In 1910 such a fund was a windfall, especially to a group of sisters who worked under the constant stare of a \$30,000 debt.

Chapel renovations begun in the summer of 1910, after interruptions, finally saw completion the following April 15, 1911. This added a 16- by 11-foot annex to the room in which an altar was installed and the walls repainted. The *Chronicler* adds, “Although very inadequate it is, however, a more appropriate habitation for our Divine Guest.” The chapel, located just down the hallway from the main door, was a spot precious to the hearts of the sisters and to the nearby parishioners who often came to kneel in silent prayer.

On May 4, 1911, the sisters experienced an event that annually was to become a source of great worry. Situated just one hundred fifty feet from the north bank of the Chena, the hospital stood in constant danger of floods.

Each year the city erected a temporary bridge over the Chena at the spot where the channel was narrowest. Each year at “break-up,” tons of ice coming from the head of the river, combined with brush and logs that swept into the water, jammed at the pilings of the bridge to clog the channel. The water rose, overflowed the banks and sought a new course around the bridge, flooding streets and houses in its course. As the pressure of the ice and debris grew, the bridge was finally swept away and the surrounding areas inundated with chunks of ice and gallons of cold, muddy water. On May 7, the *Chronicler* tells us that in less than an hour after the ice broke, the water in the hospital’s laundry and storerooms reached a depth of seven feet. It takes little imagination to picture the consternation this must have caused the sisters. All the heavy laundry equipment stood in muddy water; storerooms, containing hospital supplies, were lakes of quickly rising water. In the general clean-up that followed the flood, boxes and barrels of valuable medical supplies could not be salvaged. The House history makes no mention of the weeks of work that followed the flood, but anyone who has lived through the raging of wandering river-water knows what it must have been.



*St. Joseph Hospital, Fairbanks, and The Immaculate Conception Church, showing the waters of the Chena near flood stage c. 1920.*

On Wednesday, June 21, 1911, Father Francis Monroe, S.J., presided at a ceremony held during the daily Mass at Immaculate Conception Church, as Sister Agipit pronounced her Final Vows, and received the significant silver ring. The joy and happiness of the sisters upon receiving a young woman into the precious Silver Circle gave vent to a holiday atmosphere that permeated the hospital. Sister Agipit lived in a happy glow each time she looked at the silver ring on her right hand, given at the time of Perpetual Profession. This was the first time Fairbanks had witnessed such a Providence ceremony.

It was on this note that, on July 1, 1911, the Sister Chronicler closed her account of the first year in Fairbanks, one blessed with the baptisms of eight infants and three adults, and to the reconciliations of many patients who had found the grace to return to the practice of their faith through the gentle ministrations of the sister nurses and the kind pastor.

If Sister Monaldi noticed a general malaise and an annoying fatigue as she moved about her duties, she told herself it was nothing that a good rest would not cure.

## II

The House history for September 1911 opened with two events that highlighted the month: the arrival of Sisters Joseph Napoleon and Dominic, and the completion of a new chicken house built “on a solid foundation” and boasting of being well lighted and heated. If this last seems hardly noteworthy, remember that the hospital chickens worked hard to supplement the diets of the household, and adequate housing was the least they could expect. In order to impale this occasion of the spindle of history, Sister



Monaldi donned a fresh white apron and stood scattering grain to the flock while someone took a picture. It must be admitted that the chickens strolled in and out of the chicken-runs of their new white house unconcerned by the camera.



*New chicken house, with Sister Monaldi, 1912.*

By the time November 8 rolled around, the days were bright and sharply cold, much to everyone's delight. This was the day the Catholic Church was to be moved from its location on First and Dunkle (the edge of town) to a new site next to St. Joseph Hospital. The area chosen had once housed a sawmill, whose noisy activity drove patients and hospital personnel to distraction. The machinery was removed, loads of sawdust sold or hauled away, and an excavation prepared for the basement of the church.

Everyone who could endure the biting cold gathered on the bridge or the Chena banks to watch this historic move. Standing at the hospital windows, the sisters were happiest of all. Having the parish church one-half mile away was inconvenient for the priests and difficult for the sisters to attend the religious services. Now Father Monroe, clad in a heavy coat, fur cap and huge moose-hide mittens, moved among the men, encouraging, making suggestions, and generally keeping a close eye on all proceedings.

James Doogan, in his sketch, *The Catholic Church in Fairbanks*, tells how this was accomplished:

"... in two days the river had frozen solid (enough) so that it could be crossed with horses. The river had to be crossed diagonally. It was a distance of four hundred feet, but the water under the ice was not more than six or seven feet deep. Two lines were drawn on the ice thirty feet apart, and holes were cut in the ice every eight feet along these lines. Strong pieces of logs were wedged in these holes and let freeze. The following day all the tops were sawed two feet above the ice to make a strong and cheap support for the heavy timbers on which the church was to be rolled. A number of people who had foretold that the church could not be moved across the river, were surprised at the ease with which it had been accomplished.

“The last step was to raise the church twenty-five feet from the river level to the top of the new foundation. The grade was rather steep, and Father Monroe added another cable. The men thought the expense useless, but the church was just touching the foundation when the old cable broke, and had not the new one held it back, the church would have rolled down to the river and several men might have been injured.”

Of course, there was considerable work yet to be done before the church was completely renovated, but in Alaska one learns to wait and to live with inconveniences.

Which point is proved by the fact that this year three sisters had to make a private retreat, as Father Monroe, the only available priest, was too busy to preach the exercises. The sisters lived the eight days of silence and prayer, their souls and minds attuned to the silent words of the Divine Retreat Master.

But inconveniences must be corrected when possible, and Sister Monaldi saw areas of the hospital that called for renovation to provide greater room in busy areas, or more efficiency in rendering services. Early in 1912, she found the resources of the house adequate to renovate the operating room which was woefully small. She ordered the wall between the dressing room and linen room removed, which extended the space of an adequate operating room. Then, Doctor Ernest Hill furnished the paint, which a friend of the hospital applied after his day's work was done. The bright, new operating room was the object of pride to the hospital staff.

Next, Sister saw to the addition of a diet kitchen on the second floor. This eliminated a good deal of extra work. The new room measured 12 by 17 feet, and was a great help to the sister nurses who prepared the trays there.

It was at this time that the sisters noticed that Sister Monaldi was not well, and everyone tried to make her work easier. Sister Monaldi, a woman of great determination and of an indomitable will, continued to go about her duties even on days when all knew she should be resting.

In September of 1913, the hospital purchased a small lot which contained two small houses and was located near the hospital. Two hundred dollars was paid for this lot. Onto this, the little log cabin that had served as the “first Fairbanks hospital” was moved. This was used as a guest house for the family members of long-term hospital patients, a courtesy that many worried and lonely families appreciated.

This year the annual bazaar had to be discontinued and the sisters took up again the begging tours throughout the city and the mines on the outlying creeks. They asked for funds in exchange for a “ticket” of hospital insurance. The first trip in September brought in \$1,743. One may well imagine there were ninety-nine different places that demanded a part of these funds.

The Chronicles of 1914-1915 open with an account of the visitation by Sister Aristide, First Assistant General, and blood sister to Sister Monaldi. She arrived with Sisters Mary Veronica, Rose Elizabeth and Noemi.

If life at St. Joseph Hospital had its dull moments, these were certainly relieved by seasons of surprises and changes that called for hurried departures and little time to spend in tears. Sister Joseph Napoleon, soon after her arrival three years previous, began to show a steady decline in

health which mystified her and concerned the sisters. After consultation, Doctor Hill found that she had contracted tuberculosis and advised that she return to Montreal at the first opportunity. It came now, with the arrival of the Visitor General and her three companions, and it necessitated that she leave the same evening. Sister Fredolin accompanied her, while Sisters Mary Veronica and Rose Elizabeth replaced them.

The fall flood, resulting from continued heavy rains, brought four feet of water into the hospital basement. This time the sisters were ready for it, and the Chronicler states, "The damage was not considerable." However, it gave Mother Aristide an insight into the added work and worry the river caused twice a year.

Besides this, she saw at once that the physical condition of her dear sister was greatly altered, and she wired this in a lengthy message to the Motherhouse. Mother Mary Julian, the Superior General, immediately telegraphed Sister Monaldi an offer to come to Montreal for treatment and rest. While the sister personnel at St. Joseph Hospital rejoiced at this opportunity and urged her to accept the permission, Sister Monaldi thanked Mother Julian and chose to stay at her post in Alaska. She felt there was too much to do to leave.

### III

"... according to the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Poor."

The date was March 18, 1915. The place, the hospital chapel, beautifully decorated with roses and delicate greenery. The occasion was the Final Profession of Sister Domitille with Father Monroe presiding. He gave a short but touching homily showing the beauty of Religious Life. It was an occasion that brought a time of recreation and relaxation for the sisters, who dearly loved the youngest of the hospital staff. It lifted the feeling of emptiness resulting from the departure of Mother Aristide and her companion.

Bishop Raphael Crimont, S.J., made his official visitation at St. Joseph Hospital on August 25, 1915, and a few days later three of the sisters entered into an eight-day retreat with Father Julius Jetté, S.J., of Tanana, as their Retreat Master.

### IV

Though the threat of a flood had passed, the last of the fall rains kept the Chena River running high and angry, a situation that greeted Sister Mary Gregory as she arrived from Nome on September 21. As usual, the bridge had washed away and she crossed the river in a small boat that tossed like a chip. This frightened her so that she could hardly remember a prayer. At 11:00 p.m. she walked up the riverbank and across the grass to the hospital door, where the Night Sister admitted her with suppressed cries of surprise and welcome.

Sister Mary Gregory had come to help and comfort Sister Monaldi, whose condition had worsened but who continued to go about her rounds. With her dear friend near, her days would be brighter and her duties eased, and Sister Monaldi welcomed her with a grateful heart.

The two sisters on the collection tour returned with the surprising amount of \$3,000. This insured fuel and light for the hospital during the winter.

As the months wore on, everyone was concerned for the Superior's health, so steadily eaten away by diabetes. On November 11, at 9:00 a.m., she admitted being too ill to work, and retired. Sister Gregory wired the Motherhouse of this turn of events.

It would be best to insert here the account sent to the Superior General of the last hours of Sister Monaldi's life. Sister Mary Veronica wrote:

"The nature of the illness of dear Sister Monaldi led us to the conviction that her days were numbered, but we were far from believing that the end was so near. Naturally of an active and energetic character, she continued her daily round of duties to the last. Thursday, November 11, she became seriously ill. Our chaplain, Father Monroe, S.J., visited her in the evening, but not considering her condition critical, did not administer the Sacraments.

"We retired that night anxious and sad at heart, yet still hopeful that the worst had not come. But alas, at about 2:00 a.m., we were aroused from our slumbers by the gentle voice of the Sister on night duty. Sister Monaldi felt that the end was coming fast and had asked for the last rites of Holy Church . . . We Sisters were all kneeling by her bedside. She was perfectly conscious and answered the prayers for Holy Communion and Extreme Unction. After the anointing she reminded us of the custom of renewing our vows and making our profession of faith . . .

"Perceiving that Sister was declining rapidly, Sister Mary Gregory said to her, "What shall I tell Mother Assistant (Sister Aristide) for you?" She (Sister Monaldi) answered, "Tell her that I was going to write her, but this came so quickly." When Sister Gregory asked her to pray for us when she would be in heaven, she replied, "Poor children, certainly." That was her last moment of consciousness. She turned over and no more knew us. At 5:00 a.m. a coma set in from which she never recovered. She was very peaceful all day Friday. About ten o'clock Friday night, she had a little restless spell that lasted but a short time. Saturday morning Sister Gregory remarked to the doctor that she was dying so quietly. He replied, "Sister, she is dying as she lived." Her departure from this world was apparently without the least agony." (November 13, 1915)

Word of Sister Monaldi's final illness flew about town like a fireball. Many telephoned or came to inquire about her condition; others spent time in the little chapel offering prayers for her Journey to Eternity; and Father Monroe, at the altar, lifted his hands and heart in prayers for her soul.

Sister Veronica's account of her funeral reveals nothing of the grief and emptiness the sisters knew at their Superior's death. She simply says:

"Her funeral took place from the parish church, Tuesday, November 16, at 10:00 a.m. Regardless of denomination, hundreds of people, including the (Alaskan) Pioneers who came in a body, attended the services and paid their respects to our beloved Sister who had gained so many friends during her ten years of ceaseless work for the people of the North.

“Her body was interred in a plot, set apart for the Sisters, at the left of the Cross in the Catholic Cemetery.”

Sister Monaldi was the first of three Sisters of Providence to lie buried in the hallowed spot of Alaska earth, and her bronze marker states briefly: “Sister Mary Monaldi died November 13, 1915. Age 68.”

In the Church of the Immaculate Conception, still standing at the spot Father Monroe chose and now entered in the National Registry of Historic Places, there is a memorial to her. At the right front of the church, a window in vibrant reds and blues catches the morning sun to tell the story of the Resurrection. The inscription reads: “To the memory of Sister Monaldi. Gift of B. H. Schuff.”

The windows, added to the church in 1926, memorialize Father Monroe, Father Jetté, and Bishop Crimont. No one remembers who B. H. Schuff was, but we can be sure it was someone who had known Sister and perhaps was grateful for graces received while in the hospital she so beautifully administered.

On Clay Street, in Holy Cross Cemetery, the summer winds blow soft across her grave where wild strawberries and delicate purple flowers grow together; in winter the golden birch leaves and a myriad of snowflakes cover it, as the ancient Alaska skies watch time slip by.

## *Chanson De Bon Coeur*

Weatherwise, April in Quebec is as unpredictable and mysterious as a young girl. And Thursday, April 12, 1894, was no exception.

The last remnants of winter were half-way out and an early spring was half-way in. A pale green brushed the trees and lawns with a promise of hope, and farmers rejoiced in the calm weather that gave time for planning and planting.

Alphonse Veilleux was not in his fields this day, however; instead he stood by the kitchen table, his large capable hands turning a fork over and over as he stared at nothing. His children, ordinarily so active and noisy seemed quietly limp, as if they hardly understood the seriousness of the moment. The door of the big bedroom was closed, and a florrid-faced midwife bustled about with towels and bowls of steaming water.

As the sound of an angry wail lifted in the bedroom, Farmer Veilleux turned and clumsily tiptoed to the bedroom door. His wife, Delphine, smiled up at him and his rough face creased with smiles. The new little girl was strong and healthy looking. With lusty cries she announced her arrival into a world where she was destined to become one of Alaska's pioneer nurses. Her parents named her Marie Leonie and had her baptized the following day at the parish church of Mount Carmel, Quebec.

The Veilleux home was a happy one where prayer and religious exercises were a vital part of living, and Marie Leonie's young soul blossomed in the goodness and love of God. She grew up on a farm, where with other brothers and sisters, she had her share of daily duties and responsibilities at home and school.

She was not a beautiful child; her complexion was too dark; her nose too large; and her mouth too generous, but her big brown eyes shone with the joy of life. Her voice was soft; her laughter infectious; and she was keenly sensitive to the feelings of others.

Marie Leonie studied with the Sisters of Providence at the Infant Jesus School in Montreal, and upon completing her education, she taught school for one year.

On January 12, 1914, at the age of twenty, when life offers so much that is glittering and promising, she entered the Providence Novitiate in Montreal, Canada. She set about her duties of working to her perfection with all the energy and eagerness that marked all she did. World War I raged and ramped throughout Europe, and the American Doughboys tramped in to finish the War to End All Wars; but life in the Novitiate moved on with a placidity hard to imagine. Wars, and rumors of wars, seemed hardly to touch it.

On July 19, 1915, Marie Leonie pronounced her first vows and was assigned the name: Sister Romuald. She knew very little of her patron saint, but in her own right she hoped to bring the name an aura of happy dedication to the Will of God in the service of His poor. Surprisingly, she was granted a three-day visit to her family; a privilege indeed, for one newly professed. The reason for the visit was soon discovered. Her new mission lay far away, and her time with her family prepared them for her leaving

Canada. One month from her profession day, she and Sister Marius set their faces to the West bound for Seattle, where on August 26 they boarded the *S.S. Victoria* for Nome, Alaska.

The steamer took eight days to cover the 2,630 miles of open water between Seattle and Nome. There is little account of the trip, but one can be sure that aside from the agonizing periods of seasickness, Sister Romuald enjoyed the beauties of the scenery, the flight patterns of the gulls, and the increasingly long daylight hours as the ship neared Nome. It was 1:30 a.m. when the *S.S. Victoria* dropped anchor two miles offshore. The two nuns looked across the water in the brilliant sunlight to see the cross on the Catholic Church welcoming them to this field of work.

The Chronicles of the Nome hospital record the event of their arrival as: "in the middle of the night." While the Nome sisters welcomed these recruits, they sadly bid farewell to their Superior, Sister Mary Gregory. She had replaced Sister Monaldi five years previously, and now was on her way to the bedside of her dear friend who was dying in Fairbanks.

The two new little sisters settled to the work of Holy Cross Hospital with all the energy and goodwill of young Religious. Sister Romuald was assigned to help in the kitchen, where she learned the art of making sourdough bread and pancakes, and how to prepare the wild meat and fowl with spices and love till they were tender and taste-tempting.

There was much to adjust to: the long hours of sunlight; the treeless, grassless terrain; the unbelievable prices for everything; the Eskimos; and the countless areas in which they did without the conveniences they had taken for granted.

Toward the end of the first month in Nome, the Apostolate Prefect of Alaska paid the sisters a visit. Sister Romuald's brown eyes widened when she met him. She expected someone in black, edged with purple, who was somewhat inclined to stuffiness. Instead, Father Raphael Crimont, S.J., appeared at the kitchen door dressed in a flannel shirt and whipcord pants with mud on his heavy boots. He dropped into a chair and gratefully accepted a cup of coffee from Sister Bujold, who beamed as she laid out hot biscuits and cranberry jelly.

After a few minutes, the seven bells of the General Call sounded through the house and everyone who could, came to the Community Room, where the kindly priest met the two new sisters who spoke only French. Everyone sat about the long table and Father Crimont, the Prefect Apostolate, began to speak of his work and his travels. In time the talk developed into a conference on the unique way Religious in Nome proved their love for the Divine Master. He spoke simply and humbly from the great abundance of his heart, and his words brought comfort and encouragement to all who listened. He was a pleasant man, who delighted in quiet jokes, and his great depth of spirituality was built on years of hardship, struggle and endless prayers offered in the near-constant presence of God. Sister Romuald, sitting at the end of the table, as was right for the youngest member of the House, listened with her heart and mind open, and felt a happiness in the awareness that this good man kept all of them in his prayers.

Father Crimont was in Nome to confirm a group of twenty-five children and eight adults. It was a day of great rejoicing, and the Chronicler entered

the event in the House history with a remark that shows she was remembering Montreal: "Confirmation, when conferred by a Prefect Apostolic, is not as solemn as when it is administered by a Bishop, however, this ceremony awoke in us many fond memories."

Sister Marius, who had come from Montreal with Sister Romuald, was of frail health. When what had seemed to be fatigue from the long voyage did not clear up, the Nome doctors quickly found her dangerously ill with tuberculosis. They strongly advised that she return to the Motherhouse immediately, where climate and living conditions would hasten her return to health. When she heard of it, Sister Romuald's eyes brimmed with tears and she murmured, "Poor little one, she has had only three months to fulfill her missionary dream."

So, on November 3, 1915, the Nome community gathered on the shore to bid farewell to Sister Marius. She traveled with two women friends who personally took her to Providence Hospital in Seattle. If Sister Romuald missed her traveling companion, she never mentioned it, but she set about her duties with all the energy of her young soul.

She had difficulties of her own to face. She spoke no English at all, and she found herself in a village where one could hear the languages of the world. Like all the rest who came before her, the grinding isolation and loneliness was a constant challenge. With all the determination she could muster, she set about mastering the language as she worked in the kitchen or with the sick, listening to inflections and idioms and trying to learn one new word a day. She was on hand to help wash the hospital linens, and to hang them to dry in the basement near the stove. Often, she took her turn to remain there to see that the clothes did not catch fire. Of all the dangers feared in Alaska, FIRE was dominant.

The Christmas Carnival, held annually to benefit the hospital, added a touch of excitement to days now short and brushed with a milky twilight. While Christmas preparations went forward at the hospital under the blessing of a dear and lovely Advent, the sisters remembered Christmas at Home, or at the Motherhouse. The spectre of loneliness hovered close during these days, but each did her best to make the days happy and prayerful for the others.

Sister Bujold was busily making a pork pie for Christmas dinner, when Sister Louis de Valance and Sister Romuald entered the back door, their arms full of packages. Their cheeks and noses were red, and they brought a whiff of cold air into the kitchen. "Umm-m-m, c'est magnifique!" Sister Romuald remarked as she sniffed hungrily. Then she told how they had met the Postmaster in the General Store, and had learned that the latest dogsled mail brought fifty letters addressed to Santa Claus, and he wondered what to do about them. To answer would be too late, and the price of postage would be prohibitive. "Pauvre petites," she added as she unwound a long woolen scarf from her throat and shrugged out of her long mantle. Then she remarked to her Superior, "Combien je desire avoir un parka!" (I wish I had a parka!) Sister Louis de Valance smiled and shook her head. Furs and such were not for Sisters of Providence, the heavy mantle would have to do.

Christmas came and went, and on December 31, the mayor and a couple of businessmen came to present a check for \$800.50 to the sisters, proceeds from the annual Christmas Bazaar. A tidy sum indeed, and already it was earmarked to pay for the repairs made on the hospital during the past summer.



Winter months saw a slowing of the patients that came to the hospital, but there was work still to do for the caring of twenty boarders housed during the cold weather. Meal preparation, cleaning, washing and mending, all demanded time of the sisters, who added the visiting of the sick in their homes to the usual rounds.

With the approach of spring and the opening of navigation, the boarders moved out to the mines and everyone waited for the First Boat. Letters, magazines, packages and the blessed feeling that they were no longer forgotten or so far from loved ones, all came with the first ship to Nome. The sun stayed longer and longer with each day; the tundra flowers bloomed; the robins and Canadian geese returned; and soon it was time to hang the laundry on the outside lines and forget the dangers of a basement fire.

Spring melted into summer, and summer into autumn, and in October of 1916 came a telegram from the Motherhouse that recalled the Superior, Sister Louis de Valance, and her blood sister, Sister Noemi. They had one day to pack and set their affairs in order before leaving. This came as no surprise, most of the departures from Nome had been precipitous. Sister Romuald took Sister Noemi's place as nurse.

All the sisters gathered at the shore to wave off the travelers. This left them without a Superior, and Sister Mary Edith, one of the school teachers, who was the Assistant Superior, squared her shoulders, gritted her teeth, and took up the administration of the hospital with her regular classroom duties.

Another Thanksgiving; another Christmas; another Carnival to benefit the hospital (which brought them \$725.90); another New Year with its attendant visiting and wishing the year's best, and before they knew it, it was time for the First Boat to dock and spew forth the mail treasures for which they had waited seven months.

It was June 10, 1917, and the boat brought only mail, when the Sisters had hoped that the new Superior would be among those who would arrive on it. But no, there were sacks of mail and the news that Father Crimont, S.J., had been elevated to the dignity of Bishop of Alaska. By this time Sister Romuald had mastered an amazing amount of English, which rolled from her lips with a soft French-Canadian tinge. She learned much of the mystery of hospital work in the two years she had been in Nome, and made many friends among the Nome citizenry. Everyone loved the young sister who laughed heartily at her own mistakes in English usage.

It wasn't till August 9, 1917, that the new Superior arrived. Sister Robert came with Sister Laurentin, a quiet little sister who felt she came near perishing on the wild lashings of the boat crossing the waters from Seattle.

They couldn't have come to Nome at a worse time. It was no longer the Paris of the North. All the information in letters and journals from the earlier sisters' writings did little to prepare them for the changes in Nome, which seemed almost a deserted village.

The tempo of life had definitely slowed; many of the stores had closed; there was no great bustling of people on the streets, only Eskimos moving along the board walks and an occasional dog slept in a doorway. The very air of the city seemed to hold a sense of neglect and stagnation. When they

arrived at the hospital, Sister Mary Edith and the others explained the four factors that militated against Nome prosperity, any one of which would have staggered the City Fathers of a good-sized town.

1) By early 1914 the Nome Rush had “played out” and the steamers that docked at the roadstead no longer carried men eager to scabble for gold. Long ago the beaches had been deserted and the tents and rockers vanished. All the surface gold had been harvested.

Gold had been found in other regions of Alaska: Livengood, Tolovana, McCarthy, Ruby . . . and just as men left the wasted claims of the Klondike to rush to Nome, so now they left Nome and hurried to the newer and more promising strikes.

2) Gold mining companies, with big-money backing, moved into Nome. With heavy equipment that dug and gouged the earth to hunt the deeper veins, they scooped up the gravel, mud, sand, and “colors” to separate them by mechanical means. The huge metal monsters chewed up the terrain and strained out the gold in less time and covered larger areas than pick-and-shovel prospectors.

Those who could not afford sophisticated equipment to find gold in the deeper reaches of the earth, had long since given up and returned to the Outside, where work and high wages could be found in the shipyards and the munitions plants.

3) The United States had entered World War I and called for general mobilization. A high spirit of patriotism and the lure of crossing the ocean to the Old World caught the fancy of men who would otherwise be drifting or working like moles in mines to precious little advantage, so they answered the call of their country.

4) Civic interest in the survival of Holy Cross Hospital had fallen alarmingly, and with prices soaring out of sight, the sisters were hard put to keep themselves solvent.

Faced with such gargantuan obstacles to prosperity, the population of the once-proud city shriveled and shrank. Businessmen with vision found little reason to remain, so they pulled up stakes and left.

But the Sisters of Providence had been sent North to do the work of God, and in the face of difficulties, they would continue. The Nome Community now consisted of six sisters: Sisters Robert, Laurentin, Mary Edith, Romuald, Florine, and Bujold. Each saw the handwriting on the wall, and realized that time for Holy Cross Hospital was running out. Each month offered another difficulty of higher prices, fewer patients, and higher wages for workmen. The big house was impossibly cold as the ever-hungry furnace consumed the expensive coal. The sisters were ingenious in finding ways to restrict their outlay of funds and unusual ways of economizing, but it did little good. The poverty they practiced this last year was stark and rigid.

Work and prayer continued as if there were no crisis facing the whole city. Sister Romuald, knowing that after three years she had become a Sourdough, welcomed the two new sisters with all the eagerness and love of her great heart. It was good to have another sister nearer her own age, and one to initiate into the way of living in the farthest north hospital in Alaska. So, she made herself the Guardian Angel to Sister Laurentin and taught her the many little things that would help her adjust to mission life.

The last of August offered such beautiful days that sometimes one forgot there were hard times afoot. There were berry picking outings which always included a frugal picnic; the tundra bloomed with tiny, brilliant flowers, and the sun stayed long hours with them. The children played all day and all night, and a noticeable number of families launched the boats to go to the fishing grounds for added protein for their diets. Fish sold readily, which meant a substantial income for families. And Nature herself seemed determined to fling all her beauty into the teeth of hard times. The skies were eternally blue as willow-china, the breezes sweetly warm, the distant mountains shimmered in the sunlight as if inviting one to come and climb. The vegetable gardens produced well, and there was plenty of meat to be had, if one could hunt it. What was hard was the awful uncertainty of how long this situation would exist, and what each day held in further sacrifices.

Then, in April of 1918, came the summons to close the hospital and return to the Outside where further work awaited them. Sisters Robert, Laurentin and Romuald were to go to Fairbanks; Sisters Mary Edith, Florine, and Bujold to Seattle to receive their new assignments.

Sister Romuald was twenty-four years old and had not yet pronounced her Final Vows. Thus, as the youngest member of the House, much of the running up and down stairs fell to her lot. Such a rash of planning, packing, and organizing! The sisters were busy taking inventories; packing and shipping materials usable to Fairbanks, or other houses; closing business with the city's merchants; disposing of current patients; and long planning sessions with the Pastor to settle the future of the school, the hospital, and the farm animals.

It was a hard time for everyone, for it was one more gigantic sign that Nome was dying. A small private hospital had recently opened in Nome, and the sisters transported their few patients there. The big, two-storied Holy Cross Hospital seemed to shrink as more and more rooms closed to conserve fuel, and packing cases appeared in the yard, tightly nailed and marked for southern destinations.

On September 3, 1918, three years to the day that she had arrived, Sister Romuald held the front door open for Sisters Robert and Laurentin, then followed them down the steps along the sidewalk to Front Street. Sisters Mary Edith, Florine and Bujold accompanied the travelers, helping to carry baggage and struggling to be cheerful in the face of separating from three who had become very close in their common work and loneliness.

The *S.S. Victoria*, the same vessel that had brought Sister Romuald to Nome, was now destined to take her to St. Michael, where she and her companions would board another smaller steamer for the trip to Fairbanks.

### III

As the *Victoria* ploughed through the Bering Sea, all on board looked forward to a quick trip to Fairbanks.

But the River Gods would have it otherwise.

In an account of her life, in her own handwriting, Sister Romuald gives no reason for the sudden transfer, but simply states that sixty miles from St.

Michael, the *S.S. Victoria* dropped anchor and the Fairbanks passengers boarded a smaller sternwheeler and churned on into the Yukon River. An inauspicious beginning, true, and things got no better as the trip advanced.

The Yukon is a river of many moods, and the last of the summer rains had sent the usual amount of debris into it. So, the little steamer moved cautiously, feeling its way to avoid floating logs and sandbars. They passed Andreafsky, Russian Mission, Holy Cross, Kaltag, and Nulato, which was the oldest of the Alaskan mission villages.

On the Koyukuk and around the great bend in the mighty river to Ruby and eastward to Kokrines, where, stories have it, Satan had possession of the natives. At Tanana, a good-sized village having more whites than natives, everyone got off to look about, while the deckhands replenished the wood and water supplies.

When the steamer moved out into the river again, they traveled the Tanana River, a massive tributary to the Yukon, that drained 44,000 square miles and added tons of silt into the daily offering the Yukon took to the Bering Sea. The Indians named it Muddy Water, and it was apt. Cocoa-colored water purred about the boat and the sternwheel tossed it into the air. The boat nosed ever eastward past Hot Springs, Tolovana, Minto, and then southward to Nenana, where a new little town was springing into existence.

Nenana was a terminus of the newest and greatest project of the Federal Government. It was here that a railroad bridge was to be constructed as soon as enough rail was laid to bring in the needed materials. The place was growing as sporadically as had Nome, and the streets were full of men looking and waiting for work to fill their days in building a roadbed for the Iron Horse.

Then, from Nenana, they traveled north again to the mouth of the Chena River to finish the last ten miles to Fairbanks. It had taken twenty-six days to make the trip, the vagaries of shifting sandbars and the dangers of floating debris had made it a cautious trip.

Fairbanks! Founded by mistake, spawned by a gold rush, and named for a Senator from Indiana, it was the largest town in the Territory of Alaska, and it seemed a teeming, bustling metropolis to the sisters from Nome. The docks at Front Street deposited the passengers right on the riverbank where wooden sidewalks led them to wide streets and sleek stores where all manner of business houses offered the conveniences and wonders to be found in New York City.

Scanning the crowd standing at the dock, the sisters spied the white headdresses of the hospital sisters. It was October 1, 1918. The War to End all Wars was winding down in Europe; and the Spanish Influenza was rapidly sweeping across the globe to strike Alaska and its natives a month after the sisters arrived. To the three weary travelers from Nome, this seemed a paradise—a haven of clear skies, sharp winds, and a warm home at St. Joseph Hospital.

There were many questions and answers in French as the sisters walked across the Cushman Street Bridge to the parish church and the three-storied hospital. Here, Sister Robert was to be the Superior, replacing Sister Mary Gregory, who, on the death of Sister Monaldi five years previous, had assumed the administration of the hospital.

Oh, it was good to be on terra firma!

After the visit to the chapel to thank God for a safe trip, everyone returned to the Community Room as Sisters John Eudes, Valentina and Mary Domitille had much to tell of the comings and goings of St. Joseph Hospital. With shy smiles and happy laughter they reported that the hospital had sent a young woman to the Novitiate. Last August, Miss Annette Gahan, a nurse who had worked with them, left to go to Vancouver, Washington, where she had entered the Novitiate of the Sisters of Providence. They were justly proud of this first recruit from Fairbanks.

They told, too, how on this July 20, Sisters Mary Gregory, Flavienne and Dominic had left on the *S.S. Yukon* to begin the long journey from Fairbanks to Montreal, leaving the three feeling lonely but too busy to feel sorry for themselves. Cooking, cleaning, laundry and the care of the sick made a constant demand on their energies. They had heard that three sisters would come from Nome after the close of the hospital had been completed.

And Bishop Crimont had visited the hospital last month to begin his visitation of all the Alaska missions. He gave them a conference in which he spoke of the life and virtues of a new saint, Theresa of the Child Jesus. They knew at once that he had a deep devotion to her, as he had named her patroness of his diocese and spoke of her cult at each opportunity.

And today! Today the hospital staff was complete! They lifted mugs of coffee in a salute to the new sisters and nibbled thin sugar cookies that Sister John Eudes was famous for baking.

#### IV

Everything pleased Sister Romuald. The hospital's big wards, the pretty private rooms, the clean smell of the wide halls, the hint of incense that always hung in the chapel; and the vegetable and flower gardens that yielded so abundantly. True, the hospital had no elevator, but a strong orderly carried non-ambulatory patients up or down the long flights of stairs.

But best of all to see trees! Trees and lawns! She found things very much to her liking. Even the mosquitos didn't seem too large.

One month after their arrival, the Spanish Influenza struck Fairbanks with a stunning force. The hospital was deluged with patients, and it seemed that men who were strong and healthy were the first ones to succumb. The Indians and Eskimos caught it and whole villages were wiped out, in many cases leaving little children, cold, sick and terrified.

At St. Joseph Hospital, all but one of the sisters fell victim to the flu and it was then that the charity and generosity of the valiant ladies of Fairbanks came to the rescue. They cheerfully and efficiently operated the office, the laundry and the kitchen. They helped care for the patients; in fact, they practically ran the hospital.

The sisters were quick to thank and praise these good women, and when the flu wore itself out and the sisters recovered, they assumed their duties with grateful hearts. They offered many prayers for their good benefactors.

It was customary for the annalists to close the year's coverage of the House history with a summation entitled "PERSONNEL AND WORKS."

The Chronicles of 1918-1919 closed with the following:

Vocal Sisters	6
Lay Nurses	1
Male Nurses	1
Salaried Employees	2
Aged guests present on July 1	2
Aged guests admitted during the year	2
Patients admitted during the year	141
Patients in hospital on July 1	5
Charity patients during the year	12
Number of beds for patients	30
Priest patients as of July 1	—
Deaths	15
Vigils in establishment	221
Meals given to the poor	—
Prescriptions given to the poor	\$20.00

V

The months rolled on, and on February 19, 1919, Sisters Valentina, Laurentin, and Romuald entered into their annual retreat. Father Monroe, though still suffering from the last traces of the flu, preached it. At the close of the eight days, the little chapel was beautifully decorated for another special occasion. Out came the artificial lilies, roses and long streamers of greenery. While flowers grew abundantly in summer, in February the Sister Sacristan had to depend on her store of everlasting blossoms.

The young Sister Romuald, now quite adept in English, knelt at the altar rail and pronounced her Final Vows. This was a day that struck a deep mark in her memory. It was heightened by the fact that she and all her companion sisters were very far from the Motherhouse, where her Profession Companions were likewise vowing themselves to the love and service of le Bon Dieu for the remainder of their lives. Fairbanks, on February 28, with the snow falling steadily, wasn't too different from Montreal, but the miles that stretched between them seemed endless.

The ceremony ended with a day spent in joyfulness as the sisters went about their rounds. It closed with a special dinner to honor the heroine of the day, and the pleasantries that Sister Valentina was able to concoct from her imaginative and loving store of entertainment for the sisters.

The following June 27, 1919, a most unusual and highly amusing incident occurred that was to give occasion of happy teasing among the sisters. Mother Mary Alexander, the Fourth Assistant General, arrived for the three-year official visit, having with her Sister Jules Armand, who was destined to work at St. Joseph Hospital.

What rocked the composure of the sisters gathered on the riverbank to welcome the travelers was the sight of Sister Jules Armand, who debarked carrying under her arm a black Pomeranian puppy, which she called Benny. Their minds leaped to a passage in their Holy Rule which read in part: "They shall nowhere keep birds, or little dogs . . . as such might become for them a waste of time . . ."

Upon arriving at the hospital, Mother Mary Alexander explained that during the stop at Tolovana, the sisters spoke with Mr. and Mrs. John Vachon and their three little daughters, who were playing with two such puppies. Sister Jules Armand enjoyed the children and their pets and found herself attracted to Benny. When Mr. Vachon and his wife offered her the little dog to take to Fairbanks, Sister pleaded for Mother Alexander's permission to take him. In her own gruff way Mother Alexander was a marshmallow at heart, and after asking, "What on earth would you do with a little dog?", she let the young sister have the pet.

Well! As can be imagined, there was no place in the hospital for a puppy, no matter how cute and playful he might be, so in time Benny was given to a family of the parish who had children. Sister Robert breathed a sigh of relief when Benny trotted off to his new home.

But!

Recognizing an opportunity for family fun, Sister Valentina, during one of her trips to town, stopped in at a local catch-all store, where she found a little black toy dog, who stood fat and sassy on a wheeled platform. She bought him and whisked him home. In making her rounds the following morning, Sister Jules Armand found him innocently standing under a table in the dressing room. She picked him up and laughing to herself, deposited him in the ample pocket of her apron and there he stayed until supper, when she placed him on a table and gave an account of his presence in the confines of the hospital.

The next day she found him peeking at her from behind a screen in a patient's room. This time she hid him in the linen closet on her way to prayer, hoping he'd not appear again. But no, a few days later he was waiting for her at the top of the stairs when she came to work, his beady black eyes shining with mischief. She scooped him up, a bit miffed with all these goings on, and wondered where she could hide him.

The evening recreation held an account of who had rescued Benny and how he had fared locked away from his hospital haunts. This time Sister Jules Armand was sure she had safely hidden him. He was in a corner of her "square" where she kept her sewing basket.

For three days she was rid of him, and hospital work kept her too busy to miss him. Then, one day when things were particularly busy and Sister was fighting the Dragon of Gloom, she was hurrying down the hall with a patient's dinner tray, when she saw, peeking around a doorway black, glassy-eyed Benny waiting her coming. In a spurt of anger and annoyance, and no doubt missing the original Benny, she kicked the toy out of her way and down the hall as she entered the room.

Poor Benny! He landed hard against the leg of a chair and broke his jaw, and it was there that Sister Romuald found him. With a chuckle she picked him up and carried him to the surgery, where she applied glue and bandages, and laid him on a shelf among a stack of paper forms and office supplies.

The next day Benny was waiting by the statue of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus at the top of the stairs. His jaw carefully bandaged, he looked like the true accident victim he was.

That was it! Sister Jules Armand gathered him up and, making sure he had "healed," she gave him to a little native boy who was sick in pediatrics.

So ended the life and times of Benny II at St. Joseph Hospital.

A charming vignette indeed, and it proves that joy and good fellowship went the rounds with the sister personnel at the hospital.



# *The Iron Horse Comes*

July of 1919 saw the departure of Mother Mary Alexander accompanied by Sister Mary Domitille, who was the last of the Fairbanks foundresses. She had spent nine years at St. Joseph Hospital.

Alaska tends to create a bond between people who work there. It's a closeness born of necessity, for if people didn't help one another, if they are not in tune with the cares and hardships of others, the cold and isolation would drive them to madness. It's a fact attested to by the numerous miners, who on quarreling with partners have gone to live alone; or by wives who spend days in small cabins caring for numerous children without an opportunity to have outside relaxation. Both were among many who fell victims to mental problems, many of whom could not be cured.

In winter the gray-darkness, long nights and intense cold are the causes of "cabin fever;" in summer the millions of mosquitos incessantly buzz and sting, and cannot be driven off without a smudge. These add another dimension to the suffering. One doesn't know which he prefers—the cold and darkness or the mosquitos.

So, the people of Fairbanks had come to know this beautiful and happy little French-Canadian sister. They had been at the docks to welcome her from The Lower 48, and many had been at the ceremony of her Final Profession. Others knew the skill of her nursing care, and many could say she had brought them back to health or to the practice of their religion. Her leaving meant a loss to many, indeed.

In September a great many repairs had to be made on the basic structure of the hospital, and Sister Robert was faced with a staggering bill of \$2,495. In 1919 this was a fortune, and must have been the object of many prayers for a benefactor, or a miracle.

Making certain to celebrate the Feast of St. Patrick with ancient and honorable festivities, Mr. and Mrs. George Preston held a raffle to benefit the hospital. They canvassed the people of Fairbanks and all the mines in the creeks for the money-raising project, and held an evening of great success, socially and financially. The following day the Prestons were happy to bring Sister Robert a check for \$3,500. Remembering the debt incurred by the renovation of the previous summer, the sisters knew a deep sense of gratitude to their kind-hearted benefactors who had produced a minor miracle.

## II

April 23, 1920 is the date registered in the Chronicles that speaks of the ravages of a second appearance of the Spanish Influenza in the City of Fairbanks. Within six days 600 cases of the flu were recorded. The sick filled the hospital to capacity and necessitated the opening of wards in a hotel and in the church basement.

All the sisters but Sisters Valentina and Jules Armand fell victim to it, and these two unstintingly worked around the clock. The Red Cross personnel came to help at all three stations, and while many of the sick succumbed, the

sisters regained their health, only to have Sister Jules Armand fall ill later. Sister Robert, upon resuming her work, had to return to bed with a severe attack of rheumatism on her left side, a condition which resulted from the influenza. For a period of ten days she was unable to make the slightest motion. The influenza and its aftereffects continued into the summer, and all Fairbanks felt enervated and listless.

### III

Winter transportation in the Territory of Alaska consisted of dog teams, horse-drawn sleds, and early automobiles, all of which traveled along the winter trails that served very well at that season but became useless in summer. For the most part, the Valdez Trail was the main highway from the Interior to Valdez, the fresh-water port, open the year around. What with the mining activities and the steady growth of Alaska demanding more than one summer-winter trail, the United States Government finally took note of the pressures by Alaska delegates for a more adequate means of travel for passengers and freight.

An Alaska Railroad brochure gives a brief history of the Government-owned railroad:

“On August 24, 1912, Congress passed an act that authorized the President to appoint a commission to conduct an examination of problems relating to Alaskan transportation. Two years later, in March, 1914, a second act authorized the President to designate and cause to be located, routes for railroad lines to connect one or more of the open harbors on the southern coast of Alaska with the navigable waters, for coal fields and agricultural lands of the Interior.

“The information obtained was reported to President Woodrow Wilson, who issued an order in April, 1915, to announce his selection of a route commencing at Seward, on Resurrection Bay, and extending northward a distance of 412 miles to a point on the Tanana River, where Nenana is now located . . . Subsequently, it was decided to extend the construction of the main line to Fairbanks, a distance of 470.3 miles. Under government auspices, construction started in 1915, and for eight years insured work for many Americans.”

Just when difficulties in maintaining the hospital seemed heaviest, Divine Providence set a most welcome relief. After preliminary correspondence, a representative of the United States Government met with the sisters and offered them a contract to admit patients of the Alaskan Engineering Commission.

It was found necessary to do renovating to prepare for an influx of patients from accidents on the construction lines and other personnel of the Engineering Commission who fell victim to the usual ills of mankind. The sisters purchased the heavy equipment needed for the surgery from the small government hospital, which had to close. New sterilizers and other pieces found their way into St. Joseph Hospital for the sum of \$450, and the winter of 1921 found the sisters busier in this expansion of their field of apostolate.

By this time, the railroad bridge at Nenana was fast reaching completion and the roadbed on to Fairbanks went forward in construction, giving hope

and joy to the population of the Interior. This was a means of sending freight in and out of this region at a much-reduced rate. The economy knew a resurgence.

#### IV

On August 22, 1921, the sisters welcomed Reverend Aloysius Elaine, S.J., a visitor from Nulato, who had been temporarily named to attend to the spiritual needs of the Fairbanks parish, and serve as the hospital chaplain during Father Monroe's illness. Good Father Monroe was threatened with paralysis of the tongue and could speak only with great difficulty. Later that year, he left Fairbanks to seek medical aid in Seattle. The "temporary" appointment became a permanent one, and with the exception of two years as Prefect of Discipline at Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington, Father Elaine spent the rest of his life as Pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Fairbanks. He died there on April 13, 1943. In that time he had preached twenty-one retreats to the sisters. That's one each year.

Meanwhile, Sister Romuald was busy covering a number of departments. She was Surgery Supervisor, Supervisor of the Maternity and of the Medical and Surgical Floors. If this seems a heavy work load, remember that everyone worked equally hard in this forty-bed hospital.

The following year, on October 25, 1922, a telegram arrived from Doctor Romig, Chief Surgeon of the Government Hospital in Tanana, asking that two sisters from Fairbanks go directly to Nenana to care for a very special patient.

Father Julius Jetté, S.J., a missionary in the Yukon for twenty-five years, was the victim of a serious accident, and realizing that the Nenana Hospital lacked the nurses to undertake the special procedure required, Doctor Romig asked that the sisters come as special nurses to care for this venerable patient. Traveling by dog team, Sisters Robert and Arcadius left Fairbanks on October 28 for Nenana.

Father Jetté, after three days of intense suffering, and unable to find medical help in Tanana, bravely decided to leave. With the help of a devoted friend, Andrew Vachon, and a good Indian guide, they undertook the perilous trip from Tanana to Nenana, a distance of one hundred fifty miles. Because the weather was bad, they had to travel by dog team. Leaving on October 28, they traveled through mounting drifts and hazardous roads. There were times when the patient felt he would die before reaching his destination.

Father Monroe, who had recovered under expert medical care in the States, had been reassigned to the parish in Nenana. Upon hearing that his good friend was enroute to Nenana in such a perilous condition, he left on October 27 to meet the dog team. Dressed warmly and wearing sturdy fur boots, Father Monroe walked twenty to thirty miles a day and met the small caravan midway between the cities. Father Jetté immediately asked to be anointed. There in the wilderness with the dogs lying in the snow, Mr. Vachon and the guide unslashed the robes from him, and Father Monroe administered the Sacrament of Extreme Unction while a pale Alaskan sun

and the thin evergreens stood as witnesses. Upon completing the ceremony, they continued the trip and arrived in Nenana on October 30 at 7:30 p.m.

The following morning Father Jetté went to surgery for a strangulated hernia complicated by a pelvic abscess. Exhausted by his suffering and the fatigue of the long trip, the patient barely lived through the operation and remained between life and death for many days. The sisters remained at his bedside day and night, replacing one another for each shift.

By November 14, the patient regained enough strength to be transferred to St. Joseph Hospital in Fairbanks. The two sisters returned with him, this time traveling more comfortably in a horse-drawn sled with foot warmers and fur robes. The hospital personnel turned out to welcome them and to carry the patient to a private room. How glad the sisters were that the good Father was in their care, and he in his turn was grateful that God had permitted them to reach this destination safely. The best possible care was lavished on him and in time Father Jetté returned to his mission church in Tanana.

## V

The winter of 1922 progressed with heavy snowfalls, occasional fierce winds, and temperatures that hovered beneath -35 degrees for long stretches of time. All the Old Timers shook their heads at the thought of a quick break-up and the melting of snow, which would bring a flood.

And sure enough, St. Joseph Hospital didn't stand a chance! When the ice began to move and debris from up river flooded down with the big chunks of ice, it blocked at the pilings of the bridge and the flood was on.

In a very short time the river sought a new course and rose above the banks to flow over the hospital gardens and between the church and hospital, moving around the bridge to re-enter the riverbed and continue its course to the Tanana River. The hospital basement, which contained the laundry equipment, filled with water and had it not been for the fact that everyone worked to move all the hospital supplies to safe places, the loss would have been extremely great.

The river sent great chunks of ice over the grounds with pieces of stumps, logs, trees and brush. When the waters subsided, the sisters, with the use of an electrical pump, cleared most of the water from the basement and storerooms, and began the tremendous task of cleaning up. They gave thanks to their patron, St. Joseph, for his protection from a worse disaster.

The flooding Tanana River washed out railroad tracks between Healy and Curry on the Alaska Railroad, and property loss was general throughout the Tanana Valley. But, in time the sun came out to dry up the mud and slush; the Chena Bridge was rebuilt; and the tracks re-laid between Healy and Curry on the Alaska Railroad. The gardens were better for the deposit of silt left by the receding waters, and slowly life returned to normal.

The Old Timers had been right; it had been a flood to remember.



*Sister Emily of the Cross (Malo) with Blind Joe. Kitchen, St. Joseph Hospital, Fairbanks, Alaska c. 1923.*

## VI

All Alaska buzzed with the news!

The papers were full of it! On July 15, 1923, the banner headline of a Fairbanks paper proclaimed in letters one and a half inches high: **PRESIDENT DRIVES GOLDEN SPIKE.**

For the first time in the history of the Territory, a President of the United States traveled to Alaska. President Warren G. Harding and his wife arrived to drive the golden spike that signaled the completion of the Alaska Railroad. Crowds gathered from all points of Alaska to attend the ceremony. There were speeches and singing and someone lit a string of firecrackers. Then the President stepped to a point on the north end of the railroad bridge, lifted a heavy iron mallet, and sank the golden spike into place. Cheers and a good deal of handshaking and back-slapping followed, and the crowd began to disperse. Then a few professionals and railroad officials moved in to pry up the golden spike and carry it to safety. It now resides in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

On July 16, the Presidential Party spent a day in Fairbanks. The weather was clear and warm, and all Fairbanks groomed for a holiday. The storefronts wore red, white and blue bunting; flags flew from private homes as well as offices and business houses, and St. Joseph Hospital was festooned with yards and yards of bunting. Two large pots of garden flowers stood at the main entrance, and others, placed throughout the corridors, gave a festive air for the occasion. The sisters gathered on the front steps to welcome the President and his wife.

Warren Gamaliel Harding, twenty-ninth President of the United States, was blessed with an abundance of social graces. He was personable, tall,

handsome, and most of the ladies twittered at the thought of seeing him. Those of Fairbanks were no less affected by his dashing presence.

The change from the glories and beauties of the White House must have been stark indeed, as the presidential car moved down the dusty streets of Fairbanks, with its wooden sidewalks, false-front stores, and generous scattering of log houses. The people were friendly and the President and his lady were wined and dined during their one-day stay. It was upon the request of the President himself, that Mayor Tomas A. Marquam arranged a visit with the sisters of St. Joseph Hospital.

Now they stood, wearing their best habits with the long sleeves pulled to finger-tip length, and knowing no small amount of breathless anticipation as the open touring car drove across the Chena Bridge and into the hospital's front yard. From an open window on the ground floor floated the strains of Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever." Joe had cranked up his phonograph to send a welcome to the President of the United States.

The President stood for a moment smiling at those gathered, then descended and with Mayor Marquam mounted the front steps of Alaska's largest hospital. After introductions and pleasantries, the tour began in the company of the hospital's chaplain, Father A. Elaine, S.J., Mayor Marquam, Doctors Romig and de la Vergne, and Sister Robert. A few patients were somewhat awestruck at the presence of this handsome gentleman in whose hands rested the administration of the United States. His visit to their bedsides must have been brief, and after he moved away, they wondered if they had imagined it.

At the nursery he stopped to survey the new citizens, paying particular attention to a five-day-old baby, asking to meet the mother to congratulate her. The new x-ray department was the next stop, where the young man in charge asked if he might "x-ray the hand that ruled the land." President Harding graciously accepted, and laid his right hand on the plate. One wonders whatever happened to that film!

The tour led through the laboratory, the surgery department and up to the hospital roof, where they had a sweeping view of the Tanana Valley. To the south, across the rooftops of Fairbanks, lay a panorama of the meandering Tanana River; and to the north, where a mountain range dominated the scene, lay extensive gardens of wheat and potatoes. Harding declared the vista was beautiful, and he was right. The clear day basked in a light wind which kept the mosquitos at bay.

From this point they looked down on Mrs. Harding, who, because of protracted illness, remained in the car, visiting with the sisters and friends and hospital employees. The President asked all the right questions about the city, its history, and the major buildings, and finally the group returned to the ground floor and down the front steps where they stopped to view the hospital's flower and vegetable gardens.

At the moment of departure, Sister Robert, speaking in the name of the sisters, presented a souvenir-gift to Mrs. Harding. It was a replica of a Yukon sled and driver, pulled by five dogs; the sled filled with various articles. A perfect miniature carved by an Alaskan Eskimo from a single walrus tusk. Mrs. Harding was genuinely pleased and promised to write as soon as they returned to the White House.

The President, standing in the car, spoke his appreciation and again congratulated the sisters for services they rendered to Alaskans. He closed with a beautiful wish, "God bless you that you may continue your work of charity."

Then, someone cranked the car, the gears meshed, and those gathered watched and waved as the car moved out of the hospital grounds and onto the graveled road to the Chena Bridge. Their schedule included a ceremony at which the name of Lake Salchet, forty miles from Fairbanks, became Lake Harding in memory of the President's visit.

Who could have known that sixteen days later President Harding would be dead in San Francisco, and the reins of government would fall to the hands of a stern-faced New Englander named Calvin Coolidge?

## *Going Home*

It was April of 1924 and Fairbanks was in the "mud stage" of the spring break-up. Outside an open window a flock of chickadees scolded and chattered in a big cottonwood that graced the hospital's side yard.

Inside, a small whirlwind of activity blew through the halls of St. Joseph Hospital in preparation for the advent of a new Superior. Sister Robert had served six years as Superior and Administrator and was named to another post. Her cloak had fallen on Sister Paschal, who would arrive shortly before Sister Robert would leave.

Three rooms on the first floor stood in need of repair. The annalist gave a careful account of what was done:

"Under the special protection of our Patron, St. Joseph, we began the long delayed repairs in rooms 1, 2 and 4 of the hospital which had become urgent. In number one, which we used as a parlor, we replaced the wall paper with a material called "Sanitas." For the renovation of the other rooms mentioned above, we used unbleached muslin. The use of this material once painted, had to date given excellent results in facilitating the cleansing of the rooms and contributed to the sanitation of the establishment. The floors were renewed with fir wood imported from Seattle, Washington."

Now, on her way to the chapel, Sister Romuald stopped for a minute to see how the repairs were progressing. The place smelled of paint and new wood, and one stepped over nails, sawdust and paint tins of brushes and turpentine.

She nodded with satisfaction and moved on to the chapel door. Her step was light and her eyes shone with joy as she genuflected and entered a pew, and with folded hands, placed herself in the presence of God.

A large blue-bottle fly buzzed angrily against the window trying to escape to the bright outdoors, and a single mosquito flew from one black clad sister to another begging for a donation of blood saying, "Pleeceezee!" Blind Joe sat in the back pew, left side, his rosary slipping through his stubby fingers, and his sightless eyes seeing what others could not.

Sister Romuald was having distractions. The morning mail had brought a letter from the Superior General naming her as Sister Robert's traveling companion to Montreal, where she would have an opportunity for a visit to her home. Her mind whirled through the past nine years since she had left Nome, and her duties as Surgery Supervisor seemed far away, and her six years in Fairbanks held a wealth of memories. There had been mine accidents, epidemics, births, deaths, and many a soul had found his way back to God before going on to stand in His presence in Eternity.

And what stories she'd have to tell about this great sprawling Territory!

Alaska's largest city had done very well for itself. Two years ago, in 1922, the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines had opened when President Charles Burnell and six teachers welcomed the first group of students. Last year Carl Ben Eielson, of the Army Air Corps Reserve, had arrived in Fairbanks to teach science in the local high school. Before long he had left his classroom to organize a flying company, and the United States



Government granted him a franchise to carry the first air mail between Fairbanks and McGrath. It was said he received \$800 for each flight.

The United States Smelting and Mining Company opened offices in Fairbanks and moved in heavy equipment to dig for the rich gold deposits in the Goldstream area. The Fairbanks branch of the U.S. Smelting and Mining Company, known as the Fairbanks Exploration Company, was simply called the "F. E. Company." Many found employment on the big dredges.

There were visionaries like the engineer Donald MacDonald III, who worked with the Road Commission on the old Valdez Trail to build the Richardson Highway, and who, on every occasion, spoke of the necessity of building a highway between the States and Alaska.

## II

Sister Romuald shook her head, feeling ashamed that her thoughts had wandered so far from her prayers, but what wonderful stories she'd tell her dear ones, and how proud she'd be of this beautiful country. Momentarily, she wondered if she'd return; she hoped so.

The days hurried by till the calendar proclaimed it August, the most beautiful time of the year for Alaska, when summer was on the verge of running out and the birch trees donned golden leaves over the russet and red of cranberry bushes. This was the time that the Alaska Fair became the object of intense interest to every family who owned a vegetable garden. Last year there had been cabbages too large for a man to span with both arms, and carrots as large as gigantic icicles that hung from the roof at winter. Long hours of sunlight and ever-present moisture in the rich earth made for giant produce. And flowers! Why the pansies measured five to six inches in diameter!

On Tuesday morning, August 19, 1924, the day broke dull and cloudy, which only added to the feeling of heaviness as the sisters gathered at the railroad station to bid godspeed to Sisters Romuald and Robert. The usual gathering of friends and those who stood about in curiosity made up a goodly crowd to wish the travelers well. A group of little boys stood ogling the engineer and boasting to one another of how they'd someday run one of the big blue and gold engines.

With a warning blast and the final boarding order, the engine eased into motion and the faces of the passengers slid out of sight to those left behind. Angling northwest, the train huffed along to College, Esther Creek, and Happy, with passengers boarding and leaving at each stop. Then, with the twenty-five-mile run to Minto, the engine picked up speed and seemed to race with the sun. It rumbled along rivers, through mountains and past Mount McKinley, while the wheels made a song of motion, that sounded like, "Going Home" "Going Home" "Going Home."

Sisters Robert and Romuald sat in silence that bespoke the quiet saying of the Rosary. Each knew the sting of leaving the Golden Heart of Alaska, and each hoped that time and circumstances would bring her back.

At Curry the passengers spent the night at a government-owned hotel, a new and impressive structure which stood in isolated glory in a beautiful spot near the railroad. Here the accommodations offered passengers lodging and excellent food, before they continued their trip to Seward the following morning.

At Seward, a ship of the Alaska Steamship Line took them on a seven-day trip to Seattle, where upon docking, the Seattle sisters met them and whisked them to Providence Hospital for a brief rest before continuing their journey. A few days later, our travelers boarded the Canadian Pacific train for the Motherhouse and the happiness of a family reunion.

What a joyful meeting it must have been for Sister Romuald, with her parents and brothers and sisters all talking and weeping at once at the depot. They hurried her home where they talked and laughed and tried to cover the fourteen years she had been gone. Her parents were proud of their daughter, now a confident, bilingual Religious. According to custom, she spent the day with her family, but returned to a Providence House for the night.

But time, which has not stood still since Joshua's command, marched smartly along, and in November of 1924, Sister Romuald returned to Seattle as Supervisor of the Fourth Floor of Providence Hospital. It was at this time that she enrolled in the Hospital's School of Nursing, graduating in May of 1926. She passed her State Board Examinations in July, after which she remained on the nursing staff of the hospital.



*Sister Romuald (Veilleux)*

In March of 1929, Sister Romuald became one of the Founders of Ozanam Home in Tacoma, Washington, a home for the aged. Sister's smile and gracious manner brought cheer and peace to the men and women "guests." Remembering some of the Old Timers that she had cared for in Fairbanks made her smile warmer and her heart the more understanding of the follies and foibles of the elderly.

Then followed a quick series of changes that she accepted as challenges in her life. In 1930 she returned to Providence Hospital as Supervisor of the

Fifth Floor, and three months later, she found herself on an Alaskan Steamship bound for Fairbanks, where she would be the Superior of St. Joseph Hospital. Only an Alaskan could know her joy in returning.

The morning of June 15, 1930, broke with the torrential rain that had steadily fallen through the night. It inundated all parts of town, and at 6 p.m. Doctor de le Vergne drove two of the sisters across the street to the train depot to meet Sisters Romuald and Melece. It was a wet homecoming, indeed! As the returning sisters stepped from the car at the hospital entrance, the lovely strains of an "Ave Maria" echoed from Joe Terrigluck's open window. Sister Romuald smiled and nodded at this selection he had chosen as a means of welcoming back an old friend who would now be his Superior.

Then, in August, the Chena overflowed and Fairbanks stood in six feet of water. In this respect, things had not changed, and many people, weary of the yearly danger of a flood, left Fairbanks, but the sisters, having no place to go, remained. The flood lasted three days and during that time the house was unheated and no laundry could be done, but life went on as usual. Sister Romuald took care of patients, bathed new-born babies, and scrubbed floors in between times.

### III

But Fairbanks HAD changed in her absence.

Cushman Street had been macadamized as far south as Tenth Avenue; new wooden sidewalks had replaced the old ones of Second Avenue; fewer and fewer riverboats plied the waters of the Chena-Tanana run; and a new and magnificent Federal Building stood on the corner of Second and Cushman, covering a full block in the business district. Everyone was extremely proud of it, for this meant that the Government recognized the solidarity and promise of the Tanana Valley, and had set a seal of approval and encouragement on it with the tall building. The Fairbanks First National Bank had been completely renovated, and seemed proud and glittering with a lighted sign that automatically displayed the time and temperature by turns. Ladd Airfield was busy with an amazing number of small planes owned and operated by "bush pilots" like Joe Crossen, Ralph Wein, and Archie Furgusan, who, with Carl Ben Eielson, had done much to open the Territory to the miracle of flight.

Indeed, the airplane itself seemed a miracle of speed for the outlying villagers and homesteaders. As early as 1926, it was a means of "instant transportation" that brought a patient to St. Joseph Hospital. The Sister Chronicler made special mention of this:

"On this day (June 19, 1926), an airplane was used as a means of bringing to us the precious treasure of a poor soul who had been deprived of the help of our Religion for many years. The patient was stricken with a serious illness, and as she was unable to receive medical help in her part of Alaska, she arrived here after an airplane trip that took four to five hours to travel the five hundred miles from her home to Fairbanks. Had she been obliged to take the normal means of transportation, it would have required three weeks, under great hardship."

And St. Joseph Hospital knew changes, too. In February of 1926 a circular letter from the Superior General, Mother Amarine, brought the news that St. Joseph Hospital, Fairbanks, had been annexed to Sacred Heart Province. While many of the sister personnel had come from Sacred Heart Province, until now the Alaska hospital had been under the direction of the Motherhouse. The change somehow brought the sisters closer to those of the West, for from now on the sister staff members would be supplied from Seattle.

Besides, the hospital was far too small for the demands made on it. Fairbanks was expanding toward the direction of College; rail and air services brought an increase in population, and new businesses meant new people. The sisters could see that the time for renovation and enlargement was not too distant. While they waited and worked in cramped quarters, they supplicated Heaven for funds to build.

It was the fall of 1930 that Carl Ben Eielson and his mechanic, Earl Boreland, took a short flight to Heaven when they crashed and were killed in a flight to Siberia. All of Alaska was shocked and grieved at this, and many pilots attempted to find the bodies and return them to Fairbanks, but flying conditions continued unfavorable until Joe Crossen finally located the plane and the bodies and brought them to Fairbanks. Today, Eielson stands first among the legion of pioneer pilots of Alaska.

Visitors were always welcome at the hospital, and with the railroad making transportation to the Interior easier, the hospital sisters welcomed new friends and old who stopped to see them. Mother Mary Alexander, Third Assistant General, arrived in August of 1931, with her traveling companion, Sister Mary Loretta (Gately). This was the latter's first trip into the largest Territory of the United States, and she found much to surprise and delight her.

The sisters arranged that the visitors see the mines and one of the large dredges of the Fairbanks Exploration Company at Goldstream. Sister Mary Loretta saw how large buckets that moved on conveyor belts scooped up the earth and dumped, crushed, and washed it to remove the precious metal from mud and rocks. At the Assay Office, she watched while the gold was purified in crucibles, molded into bullion and prepared for shipment. But it was the size of the garden vegetables, the long hours of sunlight, and the monstrous mosquitos that amazed her the most.

On August 27, 1931, the visitors returned to Seattle, each with memories and interesting experiences to relate.

#### IV

Events moved tranquilly enough through the winter of 1931-32 and then Mother Nature sprang a surprise on the city of Fairbanks. On the night of May 1, 1932, the Chena River began to rise, and in ten minutes overflowed the banks. By 10:30 p.m. one of the night nurses at the hospital noticed that the vegetable garden was submerged and called the sisters at once. Everyone, sisters, personnel, convalescents and friends from town helped to remove everything possible from the basement. The water continued to rise

and reached a number of inches above the windows of the basement; but marvelous to say, no water entered any part of the building, and the basement floors remained perfectly dry. After some hours, the water began to subside and averted further damage. A minor miracle, everyone said, as the basements of adjoining buildings had as much as four feet of water. The sisters attributed their safety to the intercession of Saint Joseph and "The Little Flower" (Saint Theresa of Jesus).

With the flood safely behind, Sister Romuald one day donned a blue apron and a pair of work gloves and strode to the yard where a row of thirty-two trees stood ready for planting. Following a plan as to where each should be placed to beautify the grounds, she worked side by side with the gardener and his helpers till the work was finished. Then, she stepped back, slapped the dirt from her gloves and remarked, "Very good! They will provide beauty in summer and winter!"

And they did. To this day those trees stand tall and majestic keeping guard over the now-empty building.

## V

Suddenly, the sisters realized that the slow and sleepy tempo of life in Fairbanks had taken on an unusual alacrity that could almost be termed "breathless."

The sisters saw that the chapel needed repairs. They wrote to the Provincial Council asking permission to begin the work. The Council allowed the \$250 to complete repairs. The chapel was small, but adequate enough for eight sisters, Joe Terrigluck, and any other parishioners who might drop in for Mass or Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

After the work began, Sister Romuald realized that a greater outlay of money would be necessary and the sisters began to pray for a benefactor or another miracle. It was Peter Malone, a staunch member of the parish, who offered a check for the necessary funds, and who asked to be informed if the sisters needed any further money.

The refurbishing included beautiful hardwood floors to replace the softwood planking and two new statues from Deprato Statuary Company in Chicago. St. Vincent de Paul and Saint Theresa (The Little Flower), patroness of the Alaska churches, graced each side of the altar.

On the morning of April 5, 1933, most of the staff gathered at the loading dock to view Doctor de le Vergne's latest gift to the hospital. The maintenance men pried open the crate to reveal a large gleaming table publicized as a "Saint Louis Hydraulic Operating Table." Such a chorus of oh's and ah's echoed on the chill air! As she hunted about in the excelsior for the instruction booklet, Sister Romuald declared that this beautiful piece of hardware was a direct gift from heaven, via the beloved Chief of Staff. With little or no ceremony, the men carried it upstairs and wheeled it into the surgery room, where it gleamed in the pale morning sunshine.

Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's came and went with the usual joyful "atmosphere" that ice and snow help produce at this time of year. The sisters, living close and lovingly with the Triune God, knew a peace and joy

that is difficult to describe, but all who brushed their lives found themselves in an aura of quiet contentment.

But holidays don't last forever, and by early January the winter doldrums set in. It was at this time that two housewives, Mrs. Kay Huffman and Mrs. Clara Murry, decided that Fairbanks needed a major celebration to mark the end of winter. With the cooperation of local businessmen, they successfully launched the first Winter Carnival and Dog Derby, and set March 10 and 11, 1934, as the Carnival Days.

All Fairbanks tingled with anticipation as the days passed. A great burst of activity ran through the town as teams of high-school boys cleared the snow from the Chena River ice, and another group set about preparing the Carnival Queen's Ice Throne on the river at the Chena bridge.

Everyone bought tickets (at \$1.00 each) which allowed them to attend the Carnival and offered a chance to win a 1934 deLux Ford Sedan priced at \$1200. Excitement was high among the queen contestants for there were worthwhile benefits attending the honor of reigning on the Ice Throne either as Queen or as one of the runners-up.

When the days finally arrived, the sisters took to the hospital roof where they observed most of the racing events. Father Elaine, S.J., bought a ticket and attended most of the Festival events.

All activities took place, or originated, before the Ice Throne. There were dog team races, snowshoe races, skating events and a parka contest, to name just a few, all before the gracious presence of the Winter Carnival Queen and her princesses.

On the evening of March 11, the Carnival closed with a dance, and during the intermission, the Mayor of Fairbanks drew the winning number for the new Ford. Father Elaine, S.J., won it, much to the delight of the city. When they gave him the car the next morning, his face radiated with happiness. He didn't keep the car, but gave it to the sisters who could hardly believe their good fortune. It was thus that they came to own a car, and their next problem was to find a driver. This was easily solved, for almost everyone they asked to squire them about was happy to handle the shiny new vehicle.

March 1934 marked a "first" for Sister Romuald as she was the first Alaskan Superior to attend the Provincial Chapter in Seattle to elect delegates to the General Chapter, which took place in Montreal. She made the trip to Seattle and back on the Alaska Steamship Line.

The following January (1935), Brown's Jewelry Store of Fairbanks, with an eye to stepping up business, advertised that for each \$1.00 spent in the establishment, a customer would receive a free ticket for a drawing for five one-hundred dollar bills! A sizable sum, and one that drew many customers.

The last ticket (#9105) of the closing day went to Father Elaine, S.J., who stopped in for watch repair, and he put the hospital's name on the stub. That evening at the Empress Theatre, the winning ticket, drawn from someone's hat, was #9105, and the sisters received five crisp one-hundred dollar bills.

Providence provides in strange and sundry ways!

The following year, Sister Joseph Anselm arrived in Fairbanks bringing an aura of excitement. As Provincial Treasurer from Seattle, Washington, she came to direct the construction of a new wing to St. Joseph Hospital. Sister explained the prospected addition and the renovations necessary in

the original structure as the new wing rose. Someone spoke of it as the "1935 wing," and the name stuck.

On April 23, 1935, Father Elaine, S.J., the hospital chaplain, offered Mass in honor of St. Joseph for the success of this venture. The construction began under the auspices of the Warrack Company and the Smith Courtney Company.

The construction progressed quickly through the long summer days and by the following October 27, 1935, the new wing opened for patients.

Many visitors came to inspect the glories and innovations of the hospital's new section. All found the renovations of the original building made for smoother operation of the whole facility.

But the Old Timers found many changes in their beloved hospital that unsettled them. The front door, for instance, had been walled in so as to make for an additional room, and what had been the *back* door now became the main entrance. And the kitchen, which once welcomed all who entered the back door with a blast of warm air and host of savory odors, was relegated to a section in the new wing, where it sat shiny, spacious, antiseptic and coldly impersonal. The business and admitting offices occupied what had been the kitchen space. There were places for a cafeteria, and what had been a parlor and the Superior's office now housed the sisters' dining room. The long flight of stairs on the first floor had been removed so that the former hall space might become a Community Room, with the private rooms off it now reserved for the sisters' use. And there was an elevator in the 1904 building! Sakes alive! Such goings-on would make the help lazy! But, thank goodness the chapel was still in the same location.

Well, no one could stop the wheels of progress, and with the railroad and airplane bringing people into Fairbanks, the hospital *had* been too small. As long as the good sisters were there, the grumpy Old Timers felt they could accept the inevitable.

## VI

Now began for Sister Romuald a series of changes which she had come to expect in her life. She was a woman of rich and varied talents, of good health and stamina, and her superiors were quick to utilize them, as may be seen in the list of offices she filled in the next few years. When her term of office was completed in Fairbanks, in 1936, *The Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* paid her a beautiful tribute in an editorial:

"Alaska, and Fairbanks in particular, lost one of her most esteemed and capable, and it may be said, distinguished long-time residents in the departure Sunday of Sister Romuald, for many years a member of the Sisters of Providence serving in Alaska. As a young sister she entered hospital work in Nome, and for the last six years served in Fairbanks as the executive head of the affairs of St. Joseph Hospital.

"Taking hold of the hospital when it was a small and poorly equipped institution, she brought it by sheer and wise administration up to the standard of the best hospital in Alaska, and with the loyal support of her carefully selected staff of Sisters and other workers, and the ready

cooperation of the community, made the place the outstanding hospital base and haven for the sick and injured of this vast region.

“Not only Fairbanks, but the far-flung realms of Interior Alaska and contiguous areas now find here an institution of service that is indispensable, and which is growing in importance with rapid development of the Country. St. Joseph Hospital stands today a testimonial and monument to the labors and the name of Sister Romuald. That she is still in the prime of life and with years of activity and prospective service awaiting her, is a comforting thought to all who have learned to know and appreciate her. Wherever she may be assigned in her great service of self-sacrifice and love, Sister Romuald may rest assured her friends in Alaska are legion and the love and well wishes they bear toward her, ever will abide in this land, which has been the beneficiary of her rare talent and devotion.”

Her many friends dropped by to wish her well, and, God willing, a speedy return.

After all, it had happened once before; why not again?

She left Fairbanks on July 5, 1936, for Seattle—a trip that held a new adventure. She boarded the Lockheed Electra plane for the first leg of her journey, and knew apprehension as the craft roared down the runway and took to the skies for a flight to Juneau. There she joined those destined for Seattle via the Alaska Steamship Line.

In August she took up her duties as Supervisor of 2 North at Providence Hospital, Seattle, and it was while she worked here that she completed a course in Hospital Administration and Personnel Management conducted by Sister John Gabriel.

In 1937, as the Superior of Providence Hospital, Everett, Washington, she put into practice the principles recently learned. It was while she served two terms here, that the American College of Hospital Administrators honored her in 1938 by conferring membership on her in recognition of her capable discharge of administrative duties. Two paragraphs of the letter sent to Sister Mary Mildred, Provincial Superior, read as follows:

“The objective of this organization is the advancement of hospital administration through educational measures. The College confers membership upon those administrators whose hospitals show evidence of sound administrative practices and whose cooperation with other hospitals and allied associations gives proof of their sincere interest and integrity in the field.

“We congratulate you and the members of your Board on having an administrator so capable of assuming the duties and responsibilities of the office in your hospital.”

Sister Romuald’s next assignment was that of Administrator of St. Mary Hospital in Walla Walla, Washington. After a month she left for Montreal, at which time she took advantage of the proximity of her family to enjoy a home visit. How blessed it was, after nineteen years, to see family members and the dear Motherhouse! However, before long she was back in the Pacific Northwest and busy at St. Mary’s, Walla Walla, Washington, for two terms as Administrator.

In February of 1946, Obedience called her to St. Joseph Hospital in Vancouver, Washington, for a three-year term as Administrator, and then



in 1949 she became Supervisor of the Medical Floors of St. Elizabeth Hospital, Yakima, Washington.

Within seven months, she was renamed to Providence Hospital, Everett, where she worked in the Business Office.

## VII

The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they come full circle in time. In March of 1950, Sister Romuald found herself in Anchorage, Alaska, acting as Treasurer of Providence Hospital, the newest of the Alaska hospitals. She welcomed this opportunity to serve in Alaska's fastest growing city, and for four years she added to the efficiency of the office and to the joy of her companions.

It was in January of 1954 that she was called to take charge of the Geriatrics Department at Mount St. Vincent, Seattle, and she gave richly of her happy disposition and her devoted service.

Then, behold, on May 1, 1962, she found herself back in Fairbanks as Assistant Superior, but in six weeks she took over the reins of administration. Fairbanks welcomed back their Sourdough Sister, this valiant woman who had first come to them in 1910 after three years in Nome. This time she served until 1965.

And this was a memorable year! It marked her 50th year as a Religious. Eighteen of her twenty-one Alaska years had been spent in Fairbanks. Everyone planned to make this a special occasion.

On July 4, 1965, the hospital sisters declared a holiday in honor of her Golden Jubilee as a Sister of Providence, and everyone spent the day in joyous rest and simple festivities which greatly pleased her.

The Women's Hospital Auxiliary and the hospital's Advisory Board gathered for a special luncheon at the Fairbanks Inn to honor her and to wish her well in whatever her next assignment might be. Many of those present could state that they had been brought into the world with the care of Sister Romuald, and all shared the memories they had of this dear friend. Because they knew Sister did not care for fuss and long speeches, her friends kept the ceremony simple and presented her a beautiful ivory Rosary, a true memento of love, and a sly way of asking to be mentioned in her prayers.

Once more Fairbanks' friends and sisters bid her good-bye. At the close of her term of office, and after the festivities at St. Joseph Residence, Seattle, she was directed to return to Montreal one more time before assuming her next assignment.

It was a long stretch between 1894 and 1965, and she was feeling it, so she welcomed the rest and a time to visit her family again. This time there seemed to be numerous grandnieces and nephews with whom she had to become acquainted. Everyone was so proud of the Auntie Sister who came from Alaska and who could tell wonderful stories about the "early days" of Nome and Fairbanks.

In October of 1965, she became Assistant Superior of St. John Hospital in Port Townsend, Washington, and a month later, the supervision of the Surgery, Laboratory, X-ray, and Housekeeping Departments fell to her duty.

By 1966 the Sisters' Retirement Home in Seattle opened and on September 5, Sister Romuald left the busy world of health care and took up residence there, where she was the Assistant Superior and assumed the duties of Sacristan.

By 1968, it became evident that her health was deteriorating, but she continued to fulfill her daily duties until a stroke rendered her helpless. After a period of hospitalization, she was transferred to the Skilled Nursing Unit of Mount St. Vincent, where after weeks of suffering, she died on June 25, 1968.

Right Reverend Monsignor John Doogan offered her funeral Mass, and the holy earth of Calvary Cemetery, Seattle, received her remains that for seventy-four years had lived and worked for God's greater glory.

Newspaper accounts of her death recalled her years of service in Alaska, where she was remembered as the Pioneer Alaskan Nurse. The generous and loving heart was stilled; the broad and capable hands were folded over the small black cross that bore her name and the inscription, "My Only Hope;" and under them lay the paper having, in now-faded ink, the formula for her vows which she wrote so carefully at the time of her Profession, fifty-three years earlier.

This time, she had gone home for good.

## *From Mary Louise to Laurentin*

Winter in Nova Scotia is never easy. The winds are fierce, the snows are deep, but often clear days with bright sunshine make ice crystals hang in the air like tiny splinters. The gift of beauty in scenery and setting make amends for the grip of winter. By February, the days steadily get longer, and people can see the end of it.

Lazare Leblanc, Postmaster, Justice of the Peace and School Master of Cheticamp, Cape Breton, was absent-minded this day; clearly his thoughts were somewhere else. It was February 10, 1879, the day his sixth child was born. His mind and heart prayed to the Good God that this little one would be well and strong enough to live. His wife, Resine, was healthy enough, but this was a gift the parents seemed unable to give to their children. They were to have twelve, of whom nine died in infancy.

This little one, a girl whom they named Mary Louise, showed a strong inclination to remain with her parents, and grew into a talented and happy-hearted child. She was quick in thought and had an eager mind; and by the time she was four years old, her parents thought she should begin her lessons. So, under the gentle but firm hand of her father, she began her education. Through the years she never attended any school but his.

The Leblanc home was a happy and deeply religious one. Mary Louise was a child of gentle disposition and a keen mind. Aside from her studies she quickly mastered the fine point of sewing, knitting and crocheting, and when her parents recognized that she possessed an aptitude for music, her father arranged that she take piano lessons. As always, she was a quick and eager student.

When she was eleven years old, her mother died and her grandmother came to help the family. It was at this time that Mary Louise decided to discontinue her education in order to help her grandmother with the household tasks.

A year later, Lazare married a young woman who loved and cherished his three children. Of this marriage, nine children were born and Mary Louise's loving heart endeared her to all her half-brothers and sisters. As they grew, they gathered around the piano in the evenings, to join her as she played and sang hymns and jolly nursery rhymes. Until she was eighteen, Mary Louise helped at home.

Then she left to live with a married sister, and the family at this time moved to Fall River, Massachusetts. This was a city of textile mills, industries that produced metal goods, rubber products and laundry machinery, where employment was promising.

It must have been while she was with her sister that Mary Louise met a Sister of Providence who made a deep impression on her. When she went to Fall River to be with her family, the thought of entering a convent was with her. Her confessor, when questioned as to which Community she should choose, suggested that of Providence since he had two sisters who were in that order.

In August of 1903 she began to make arrangements for her trip to the Novitiate in Montreal. Leaving home was wrenching for her and her family.

She had endeared herself to her younger half-brothers and sisters, but she set her face to the House of Bread and entered the Providence Novitiate in Montreal on August 31, 1903.

## II

The young Postulant set herself to work toward becoming a very fervent little Sister, and made every effort to respond to Grace. At her Profession on April 14, 1905, she took the name Laurentin, with Saint Lawrence as her patron, and set her heart to do whatever she could, to labor in the apostolate to which the Lord called her.

Her first assignment took her to St. Joseph Hospital in Kenora, Ontario, where she remained for five years caring for the sick. Then she went to St. Johnsbury, Vermont, where, at another St. Joseph Hospital, she took charge of the surgery and the pharmacy, and when time permitted, she tended to the sick.

Sister Laurentin had received her nursing diploma from the Chatanqua School of Nursing Correspondence Course of Jamestown, New York, and for two years she served in St. Johnsbury, where her soft voice and capable hands were the hallmark of her care of the sick.

Then came a stunning surprise in the form of a night-letter telegram which instructed her to report to the Motherhouse within twenty-four hours. One can imagine the surprise and concern that must have followed on the heels of these summons. With her usual calm, good sense and dispatch, she readied her trip, and upon reaching her destination learned that her next mission called her to Nome, Alaska.

She often recalled this trip, comparing it to the Holy Family in their Flight into Egypt. An apt comparison, verily, for the young Religious. Traveling from Seattle, on the *S.S. Victoria*, the journey took nine days. This seemed to be a long voyage, and the ship stopped often. Captain James O'Brien did not tell the sisters that the crew were in mutiny, for if this was explained, the delay would have been catastrophic for the passengers.

It was not till the sisters were speaking with him after they reached Nome, that they learned of this state of affairs. When the sisters asked if he had been apprehensive about this, he replied, "No, not a bit! I had two sisters on board and knew that nothing could happen."

Nome, in 1917, was a far cry from what she had pictured it. There was a staleness about it; the streets seemed empty to one who had heard about the "Paris of the North," that had hummed with activity and the languages of the world. As the sisters walked to the hospital, along streets that had once teemed with miners, businessmen, Eskimos and children, they found only emptiness and quiet which breathed loneliness and defeat. Sister understood what the letters from Nome had been trying to convey to the Motherhouse.

For the prospectors, the surface gold had "played out" and gold strikes in other Alaskan areas called such men away. Without the miners there was nothing for Nome. Most men had moved their families away or had returned to the States, where work was readily available; others joined the Armed Forces to fight in World War I.

The poverty of the sisters was extreme, and Sister Laurentin was to say later that it was during her stay in Nome that she learned the true meaning of missionary life. The hospital, because it was built on permafrost, could not be adequately heated, and the price of coal was prohibitive, so Sister Laurentin's hands were always cold.

But her life of prayer and sacrifice sustained her, and she always brought a spirit of joy to the community recreations. Her deep devotion to the Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph warmed her soul, and with that, who cared about cold hands?

### III

In the spring of 1918, the General Council in Montreal finalized the plans for the closing of Holy Cross Hospital. Since it no longer sustained itself, the sisters were to be sent to other places of mission life.

The residents of Nome grieved at the thought of the sisters leaving, for Nome had come to love them dearly, and Blind Joe's face was set in stern lines that gave him the expression of a stone image. He stopped at Sister Robert's office one morning, simply slipping into a chair and waiting quietly till she spoke to him.

"Yes, Joe?" Her voice held a question.

Joe swung his short legs. "Sister, by'm bye all Sisters go fa-a-a-ar away from Nome?" The longer he held the vowel, the greater the distance.

"Yes, Joe." He thought her voice sounded like the feel of tanned beaver skin.

He tried to think of the right way to put his question. "Where you go?"

"Some to Fairbanks, and others to Seattle."

A pause. Then, "You take Blind Joe, too, please?" His sightless eyes seemed almost worried. "Him hab no fambly; no home." He stopped, and Sister Robert knew he was remembering that a blind man cannot hunt or fish, nor could he join such a party, for he could not keep up with them.

"Of course, Joe, we will take you and Mr. Peter Brennan with us. You will live with us at the hospital in Fairbanks and you will help us there."

A slow smile broke over his face, and he moved to the door, where he turned to ask, "When we go?"

"By'm bye." Sister Robert smiled and turned back to her work.

Joe was forty years old and this uprooting made him feel unsettled and restless. He'd have to talk to Charlie Aluckanak about this.

He left the office and walked down the hall. His bearing was straight, his bow-legs, wrapped in tanned moose hide, carried him unerringly to the door. He walked out and turned down Steadman Street toward Front Street. Charlie should be at the waterfront.

Sure enough, he was sitting on a rock not far from the water, letting the sun warm his back and shoulders. He hailed his approaching friend.

Joe selected another rock and sat. For a long time neither spoke. Charlie knew that Joe had something on his mind and waited for him to speak, while he filled his pipe with Virginia leaf tobacco.

When the pipe was drawing well, and the air was slightly scented with the pleasant scent of tobacco, Joe shifted to face Charlie then spoke. "Some sisters go to Fairbanks, some to Seattle, come boat, sometime."

"And you?" Charlie ached for his blind friend, knowing that without the sisters there'd be no place for him.

Joe smiled. "They take me and Pete Brennan to Fairbanks."

"Yeah? What you do there?"

"Same as what I do here." Joe spoke with a shade of pride. "Wash floors, fix dripping faucets, wash dishes, split wood, take care of stoves. Lotsa things."

"You come back by'm bye?"

Joe shrugged. He felt like an uprooted evergreen. Nome was his home; Charlie his best and closest friend. "Fairbanks fa-a-a-ar away. You come and see me?"

It was Charlie's turn to shrug. "I dunno." He tamped his pipe and then asked, "I go to village; you come too?"

So the two old friends rose and headed toward the part of town that held the shacks that housed their neighbors.

#### IV

One evening Sister Robert came to recreation with a twinkle in her eyes, and everyone knew it meant a special surprise.

As the sisters gathered their sewing boxes and began hand mending, Sister Robert spoke. "Sisters, Doctor Kennedy has made an unusual request, however, he is very serious about it," she paused and looked at each of them wondering how they'd take the news.

"Will we have time before we leave?" Sister Mary Edith wanted to know.

"Yes, Sister," the Superior smiled. "He wants to take a picture of us."

"Mon dieu!" murmured Sister Laurentin, and Sister Romuald laughed with delight.

"When?" Sister Mary Edith asked again. Hers was the task of coordinating the packing of the hardware of both the school and the hospital before they left.

"Tomorrow, at about one o'clock." Sister Robert carefully threaded a needle. "He will have his dog team here and beautiful fur parkas for each of us to wear."

Sister Bujold was knitting a pair of wool stockings from gray yarn. Now she laid down her work and looked at the Superior. "Do we *have* to wear them?"

Sister Robert nodded. "He asked particularly that we do, and I think we should humor him."

"Imagine, a picture of us in a dog team *and* wearing fur parkas!" Sister Romuald's eyes shone and she smiled at the thought.

The Superior added, "Doctor Kennedy promised each of us a picture for our families or our picture album. By the time next winter comes we will be scattered, and it will be nice to have a group picture of the Nome Sisters—in parkas!"

The talk went on and when the clock struck eight, they arranged their chairs for night prayers before a statue of Our Sorrowful Mother.

The following afternoon they gathered at the front door to find Sister Robert and Doctor Kennedy waiting by a pile of handsome parkas. These were no novelty; many people had fur parkas but the sisters, upon going out in the sub-zero weather, wore heavy serge parkas, but with no fur on the hoods. It was thought to be contrary to poverty to wear fur-trimmed clothing. So, now they stood, feeling the pile of beautiful robes and eyeing them for size.

Doctor Kennedy explained, "I borrowed these from the Parka Shop, sisters, so you will be the first to wear them." Then he added to the Superior, "I think Jake realized he'd get a good deal of free advertising from this."

There was a great deal of grunting and giggling as they helped one another into the costume, trying to avoid crushing their starched linen headdresses.

Feeling like stuffed pigeons, they trooped out the door to the team of dogs, which immediately began to jump and bark to be off and running. Doctor Kennedy quieted them while the sisters set about arranging how six nuns would fit into one Yukon sled. It just couldn't be done and still display the beautiful parkas.

Sister Robert settled it by having Sisters Romuald, Laurentin, Mary Florine and Bujold kneel in the sled, facing the right side of it, with Sister Mary Edith and herself standing in the snow by the driver's place.

Doctor Kennedy took three or four shots and it was over. They trooped back into the hospital and struggled out of the parkas, again being careful of the starched headdresses.



*The sisters wear fur parkas. Standing, (l-r) Sisters Mary Edith and Robert. Seated, (r-l) Sisters Romuald, Laurentin, Florine, and Bujold.*

## V

Days grew into weeks, and the weeks into months while time seemed a natural enemy. The break-up came, the warmer winds melted the snowbanks and dried the streets and roads. The first boat arrived with a sturdy bag of first-class mail and a treasure trove of newspapers, magazines and packages that had waited months for the third-class passage on a boat. Such excitement!

Everyone took a new lease on life. The winter was behind them; soon there would be a steady run of steamers from the Outside and now it was time to begin the long-delayed plans for leaving Nome.

The busy days ticked off one by one. Sister Bujold wrapped dishes in newspapers and packed them in barrels. Sister Mary Edith packed books, reams of paper, pencils, crayons and chalk. With an eye to salvaging some hardware, she advertised in the *Nome Nugget* that the school had pupil and teacher desks, books and school supplies for sale.

Huge crates began to appear in the hallways and Blind Joe walked more carefully so as to avoid bumps and scratches. The sisters of each department, little by little, sorted, discarded, and packed what they were not taking with them and had them stored; others they placed with the freight destined for hospitals, stateside.

## VI

Tuesday, September 5, 1918, dawned wondrously bright which promised a happy omen for the travelers. This was the day that the first three sisters were to leave Nome. From the beginning, Sister Laurentin was very much aware that this was the last she'd see of her first Alaskan mission, the Gold Rush Town. Now it was a sad and weary-looking village with empty storefronts and dusty roads.

This was the last time she'd be at Mass in the little hospital chapel; the last time she'd have breakfast in the refectory; the last time she'd walk the streets of Nome. The sisters seemed as solemn as she, and she understood why. After all, they had been here far longer than she.

They hurried to finish the last-minute duties, for the *S.S. Victoria* waited for no one, and, sure enough, all heard the blast of the boat's whistle that heralded her departure in thirty minutes. The ship that had brought her to Nome was the one to take her from it.

Blind Joe and Pete Brennan were seated on cane-bottomed chairs looking uncomfortable in new suits and shoes as the sisters gathered at the front door. Sister Laurentin stopped by Joe to say, "Sister Superior has asked me to be your guardian angel during this trip."

"I already got one," he answered without moving.

"I know, Joe, but I'm the one you come to when your other angel tells you to ask for help. Anything you need, you come to me. Savy?"

He nodded, and the little smile he wore proved he had known all along what she had meant.



Right now, his whole mind and soul was saying good-bye to Nome. He was remembering his last visit with Charlie and all his friends of the village. Absently he wondered about his wife and children, then his mind turned to Charlie's parting gift, a bottle of seal oil, a great delicacy to the Eskimos, but one the white man failed to appreciate because of its odor. His mouth watered, knowing it was safely packed and he'd have it for treats on the way to Fairbanks.

Everyone gathered and Sister Robert began the Traveler's Prayer, asking for a safe journey and a happy landing. Joe and Pete answered the responses and with the "Amen," they gathered bags and bundles and started down the hospital's front steps. The three remaining sisters accompanied them to the docks.

Joe walked without aid; he knew his way about Nome as well as anyone, and as he walked he prayed silently. "My Father above, today I leave to go to a new home. I leave my footprints on this land. Living here has been good. You have been kind to me and I can count many blessings coming from your hand. If the raven of sorrow has perched on my house, he has not remained too long, and the sun dogs of joy have been plentiful. May the sun be warm on my face in my new home. Smile on those I journey with, and smooth the sea waters ahead of us. When it is my turn to climb the ladder to the mighty boat, do not let me slip into the sea. Amen."

Joe didn't slip. Neither did anyone else. The big ship steamed out of the roadstead, and pointed southeast for St. Michael, where this little group would board another boat destined for Fairbanks.

## VII

Sisters Mary Edith, Florine and Bujold returned to Holy Cross Hospital to continue the work of closing the House, then it would be their turn to ship out of Nome. All the patients had either been returned to their families, or sent to the little new hospital for continued treatment. None of these sisters had been with the first group to come to Nome with Sister Mary Conrad, but each felt mixed emotions about leaving.

It was a blessing to return to the Motherhouse and be with novitiate companions, to work in places that didn't make such stringent demands on a person. Yet, it was simply because of the continual sacrifices they made that their greatest joys came, and they knew a special closeness to God here in the loneliness and isolation of Nome. It was strange how God managed things.

Fourteen days later, on September 20, 1918, they locked the doors of the hospital, gave the keys to the Pastor, and turned their steps to the waterfront and the waiting steamer.

The Sisters of Providence had worked for sixteen years here, becoming part of the warp-and-woof of Nome's life, and with their departure it became a little more empty and a little more lonely.



*Holy Cross Hospital. After the sisters left in 1918, this became an office building c. 1920.*

## *Expansion*

In Fairbanks the Immaculate Conception Church never looked so beautiful. This was the dedication day of the new wing of St. Joseph Hospital and Sister Laurentin's thoughts kept turning back to the fact that this was the 17th anniversary of her coming to Fairbanks. Merciful God, where had the time gone? How quickly it slipped into Eternity! It seemed only a month or so that she and Sisters Robert and Romuald had stepped off the sternwheeler at the Northern Commercial dock and had made St. Joseph Hospital their home. She remembered how pleased she had been with this hospital, and with Fairbanks, which seemed so large and busy.

Yes, she had seen seventeen years of watching the ice come and go while Fairbanks and the hospital grew, and now they were celebrating the 25th jubilee of the first sisters' coming in 1910 and the opening of a new wing as well.

The little bell in the sacristy chimed and the altar boys, the deacon and sub-deacon preceded Father Elaine, the celebrant, from the sacristy doors and into the sanctuary.

The priest and deacons were garbed in beautiful gold vestments, a gift of one of the benefactors for this occasion, and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass began.

Father Elaine, the hospital chaplain and pastor of the church, glanced at the crowd, noting there was only standing room left, and he was grateful. Then the organ and choir took up the lovely strains of the Gregorian music and the beautiful Cum Jubilo Mass swept on.

After Mass Father Elaine, S.J., blessed the new wing with the sister personnel in attendance. It offered fifty beds, with twenty private rooms, all equipped with every modern service and provided with every comfort.

After lunch, Fairbanks' Mayor E. B. Collins and a group of dignitaries proceeded with the civic dedication of the new wing, with a goodly number of people in attendance. Mayor Collins congratulated the sisters for their twenty-five years of service and noted that in that time the sisters had cared for 15,198 patients.

A tour of the new wing followed and then the visitors attended a Silver Tea for the hospital, sponsored by a committee of ladies from town. At the close of the day sisters and helpers were happy to see that the donations amounted to \$555. October 27, 1935, had been a beautiful and very busy day.

## II

In the summer of the following year, two incidents occurred that touched the life-pattern of Fairbanks and St. Joseph Hospital. As a sign that Fairbanks in particular and Alaska in general were becoming important to the United States, the Government, on August 21, 1936, established an Army Base in Fairbanks. A group of Army officials lead by Major Lawrence Parsons, of the Medical Corps, visited St. Joseph Hospital. Upon leaving, Major Parsons stated, "With such a splendid institution here, so well

equipped, it will be necessary for us to build a dispensary only for emergency cases, therefore, we will send our men right here." So, the United States Army came into contact with the Sisters of Providence.

There had been changes in the parish rectory, too. Father Joseph Tompkins, from Nulato, arrived seeking medical attention. He offered to say the six o'clock Mass in the hospital chapel so as to give Father Elaine an opportunity to rest in the morning. And with this ripple in the routine of hospital life, events moved as smoothly as ever.

The summer of 1936 held a blessing of sun and rain, then on October 3 came "Termination Dust," as Alaskans speak of the first snowfall. On this day, the Feast of the "Little Flower," Sister Laurentin prepared the altar for the six o'clock Mass and then sat in a front pew to await Father Tompkins.

He did not appear. After she had checked with the switchboard to make certain he had been summoned, she asked Blind Joe to go to Father's quarters and remind him of Mass.

Joe left, and everyone waited, while Sister Laurentin stood by the sacristy door. Finally Joe appeared, his face troubled. "Him smell dead," was his report.

Father had died eight hours earlier of a massive heart attack. They found him seated at his desk, where he had been working on some correspondence. He had seemed well enough the day before, telling only Father Elaine that he felt drowsy. He died on this 65th birthday.

This shocked everyone and for a couple days a pall fell over the hospital. It seemed so sad that this good man should die alone after the years of service he had given to the natives of Nulato. Sister Laurentin reminded herself that St. Francis Xavier, that great missionary to the Orient, had died alone on the Island of Sanchow, and that Father Tompkins had been given the opportunity to follow in his footsteps.

### III

In 1937 Fairbanks was harried by a series of natural upheavals that would be remembered for a long time.

On May 12, St. Joseph Hospital suffered a spring flood that was a record-breaking disaster. The spring runoff was extremely heavy and the Chena rose to flood stage steadily. All perishable supplies were moved to the first floor, and the hospital's basement filled with water shortly after, flooding the boilers and cutting off the principal source of heat.

All of Fairbanks suffered. The city's fire truck came and pumped the muddy water out of the basement so as to save the laundry equipment. The waters poured into the city for three days. During that time forty patients, eight nurses, three orderlies, seven sisters and ten flood refugees had to be quartered in the hospital. Flood damages were estimated at \$106,500 and from one-half to two-thirds of the population were forced to leave their homes.

After three days the water receded, and people began to take stock of what remained. An editorial in the *Daily News Miner* lauded the Fairbanks spirit: "Fairbanksans are optimistic and confident that the country and the city

have a great future. With such a spirit, all will quickly recover and push forward to a record-making era of prosperity.”

Throughout this account of St. Joseph Hospital, the annual spring or fall floods have been mentioned so often that the reader may wonder why something was not done to neutralize this hazard.

To understand the facts, one must know that the Chena River drains 2,000 square miles of wilderness. To this add the fact that the Tanana River drains 44,000 square miles, and when the Tanana floods, the waters back into the Chena adding tons of water, ice, silt and debris that first choked at the Fairbanks bridge and then tore through it as if it were made of matchsticks. It was not until a steel structure was erected that could withstand the punishment such floods brought, that the city knew their bridge would hold.

Alaska became the 49th state in 1959, enjoying territorial status until then, and government funds were not available to territories. It was only after the flood of 1967 that, with government funds, the Army Corps of Engineers went to the source of the flooding and built a seven-mile long, twenty-five-foot high diversion dam, and as part of the project, constructed a twenty-three-mile-long levee along the Tanana River to prevent it from spilling into the area between North Pole and Fairbanks.

It stands to reason that such a flood guardian project, at the cost of \$159 million, could be neither financed nor executed without government funds and the assistance of the Army Engineers.

At the same time the Fairbanks division of the National Weather Bureau received an adequate flood-warning system costing \$400,000. A network of six reporting stations in the Tanana and Chena River basins now provide accurate information on flood conditions. The Fairbanks Weather Bureau can now predict a flood as far as seventy-two hours in advance.

But the city had another trial to face yet. On July 22, 1928, an earthquake struck that lasted three minutes, the most severe in the city's thirty-seven-year history. Except for broken windows, no damage was done to the buildings, though stocks of bottled goods suffered damages in the area of \$5,000, with drug stores and liquor stores among the heavy losers. Travelers reported slides along the highways and numerous cracks in the roadways for thirty-four miles from town. According to custom, many clocks stopped, but William Groden owned a venerable clock that had not run for two years, and it got such a shaking that it started to run again! Aside from fright and a good shaking, St. Joseph Hospital personnel suffered no damage.

On May 3, 1938, a great crowd gathered to welcome the first flight of Air Mail service. The flying time between Juneau and Fairbanks and back was four hours and thirty-five minutes. The United States Postal Department granted a four-year contract to Pacific Alaska Airways to carry only first-class mail. This flight carried 15,850 letters, or 317 pounds of mail, at twice the ordinary postal rate.

It was quite a step from Carl Ben Eielson's flight to this latest development in air postal service. Progress moved surely into Alaska's Interior.

On September 7, 1938, Mr. A. Blain, editor of the *Alaska Catholic*, arranged for a private showing of Alaska Films' account of Fairbanks and Ketchikan. Of special interest to the sisters was a reel showing the

development of Juneau's Retreat House and Shrine of the Little Flower, in honor of Bishop J. R. Crimont, S.J., and Father Francis Monroe, S.J., pioneer spiritual and civic leaders of Alaska's Interior. Sister Laurentin made a mental note to ask to make her next annual retreat there.

As with most Religious, word came one day that Sister Laurentin was called to a new field of endeavor. She had lived and worked in Fairbanks for twenty-two years, and had grown to love the people, the dry climate, and the beauties of the Interior. The one bright spot in this move was that it did not take her from Alaska, only moved her to a new location.

The new Providence Hospital in Anchorage called for a sister staff now that it was about to open its doors to patients, and Sister Laurentin was needed in the business office.

The *Daily News-Miner*, Fairbanks' oldest newspaper, carried an editorial that said it all for everyone who knew and loved this beautiful soul.

"Fairbanks is about to lose one of her best friends, Sister Laurentin, who always meets us with a smiling face in the office of St. Joseph Hospital.

"After twenty-two years of unselfish service, she will have her first vacation with the consent of the Mother Provincial. Sister Laurentin served in Nome before coming to Fairbanks. She is an Acadian by birth. Whatever Sister Laurentin's plans are, or where she will go after leaving Fairbanks, we, her old friends who knew her as "The Dear Old Sourdough," wish her good health, happiness, and we hope that she will come back to see us someday, and that she will never forget those who appreciate her loving and kind service through all the years she has been with us."

# Anchorage

Flying from Fairbanks to Anchorage in an amazing two hours, Sisters Laurentin and Marcien arrived on November 17, 1938. Sister Laurentin was to return to the Provincial House in Seattle for a well-deserved rest, and Sister Marcien, who had come to Fairbanks with Mother Mary Mildred, the Provincial Superior, had taken ill and was forced to remain there. She was now returning to take up her duties as Provincial Secretary.

At Seward, they boarded the *S.S. Yukon* for Seattle. Traveling from Seward held no hazards as did the ocean trip to Nome. The Gulf of Alaska was the only area that held any unpleasantness, when the winds and waves were contrary enough to cause passengers to remain below. If the Gulf was calm, the trip was a delightful seven-day cruise. We have no idea what weather conditions prevailed when the sisters made the trip, but suffice it to say they arrived in Seattle safely and were welcomed into the Community at Mount St. Vincent.

Sister Laurentin's vacation lasted till June of 1939, when she received her next assignment. Her blue eyes shone and her heart rejoiced upon learning she was to return to Alaska and become one of the "Foundress Mothers" of the Anchorage Providence Hospital. Her duties included those of the Business Office and that of the Sacristan for the hospital's chapel.

This time, traveling north on the *S.S. Aleutian* with Sister Jorene, she arrived on June 1, 1939. She was back in her beloved Alaska, serving in a beautiful new hospital. Summer had come to the city, and she felt well and strong after her seven-month rest and medical attention.

## II

June 8 has always been a day of special meaning to the Sisters of Providence, since that is the day honoring the Founder of the Institute. Ignace Bourget, Bishop of Montreal, worked with Mother Emilie Gamelin among the lonely, aged, poor and neglected of Montreal and extended to them the loving and compassionate service for God's dearest children.

This day, the anniversary of Bishop Bourget's death, was held special, and usually was given to putting aside all work that was not urgent or necessary, and living the joy of the day. Often this meant an outing, time to work on a hobby, to read and pray privately, or to rest. The day was to be one of joyous relaxation.

On this particular June 8, there proved to be little time to relax from the preparations necessary to the opening of a new house of healing, but was a day that the sisters received an unexpected and beautiful donation.

During the past year donations had come from many Anchorage citizens in the form of room furnishings, draperies, hospital equipment, and incidentals of patient-care, as the workmen hurried to complete the work on the hospital's interior. The sisters gratefully acknowledged these donations and placed the donors' names on the long list of benefactors.

Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Laurence arrived this afternoon with an unusual

gift. Sydney Laurence was Alaska's Artist-in-Residence, a man who loved the Territory and Mount McKinley in particular. His canvases had captured countless moods and beauties of the mountain, as well as other aspects of the landscape and the Alaskan natives.

The Laurences presented the sisters a beautiful painting depicting a towering mountain at whose feet was a rich and lovely mountain meadow. The painting measured seventy-two by fifty-one inches, and was encased in a gilt frame. The donors wished to have it hang in the lobby of the hospital. Valued at \$1500, the sisters greatly appreciated this gift, which today hangs in the entrance of the new Providence Hospital, where it is protected in a controlled-air glass case.

Up to this time the sisters had been busy setting things right, completing the various departments, furnishing the rooms, and just generally preparing for the reception of the first patient.

And on June 10, 1939, he arrived.

A gentleman who, as a result of an earlier accident, was unable to walk without the aid of crutches. He was a "character" of sorts and was locally known as "Lucky" Baldwin. When William A. C. Baldwin, age 75, appeared at the hospital for medical attention, he was put in room 255 and given the attention that the first patient deserved. Elderly, and not too well, he later asked the sisters if he could remain with them for the rest of his life. He was well able to pay for his keep and the sisters happily accepted.

### III

Sister Laurentin found Anchorage very different from Fairbanks. Situated on the northern shore of Cook Inlet, Anchorage lies in the heart of Alaska's south central Gulf Coast. The city was built on a low-lying alluvial plain, surrounded by the Chugach Mountains, dense forests, and open water. The city was carefully planned and was laid out with straight wide streets. It had been born as a tent-city for the construction workers of Alaska Railroad, the only government-owned railroad in the world, and in 1940 had a population of 3,488 people.

Providence Hospital was built on a square block at Eighth and L Streets. At this time Anchorage could boast of four or five doctors, and the consensus of most was that the hospital had been erected too far from town and was much too large for the needs of the city.

The hospital, a long, low, three-storied building, lay two blocks from Cook Inlet, across which one could see Mount Susitna, "The Sleeping Lady" of native lore. Sister Laurentin early learned that one could tell fairly well the climate of the following day by looking at the "Lady." If the sky was red behind her, the day would be sunny and pleasant; if not, one could expect precipitation and cloudiness.

Providence was the largest and best equipped hospital in Alaska, rivaling anything that could be found Outside. As in Fairbanks, Sister Laurentin was the Chronicler for the House, and the pages of the book bear items of interest and historical happenings all inscribed in her careful handwriting. She had a true historical sense, and those who have used her chronicles send



grateful prayers to her in Heaven for the beautiful accounts she kept of all that concerned the life and times of the hospital, in particular, and the Anchorage citizens, in general.



*Sister Laurentin (Leblanc)*

#### IV

Her term here was short, compared with that of her years in Fairbanks. After all, she was slowing down, as well she might, after having lived with a history of heart trouble. Now in her 60th year, she was not too surprised when, in 1944, a summons came directing her to Seattle.

Leaving Alaska wrenched her heart. She was of the same persuasion as the people in a little story she used to tell about Alaskans who upon entering Heaven had to be chained there, or they'd slip back to God's Country. But, she made the sacrifice and traveled south for the infirmary at the Provincial House at Mount St. Vincent.

For a year she served as bookkeeper at this establishment, and then Obedience called her to again act as "Mother Foundress" of the new geriatric home in Tacoma, Washington. Here she was the Treasurer for Ozanam Home, but spells of illness kept drawing her back to the Provincial Infirmary. Just as soon as she was well enough, she hurried back to her duties at Ozanam Home.

But even the most heroic of workers must stop and give in to the body which functions as the soul's interpreter, and that day came on October 3, 1955, when she came to the infirmary for the last time. The great comfort to her about this move was that it occurred on the Feast of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, that great patroness of the Alaska Missions, and one to whom she had a deep devotion.

This was also the year of her Golden Jubilee, a day she held dear to her heart, saying afterward that it was a glimpse of Heaven.

She was a happy soul, enjoying the Community's feast days and bringing happiness to the evening recreation. She deeply loved her work as Sacristan, for it was a means of bringing her to the Tabernacle, where she poured out her prayers for the souls she hoped to bring back to God, and for her many "intentions."

Among her sisters, she was known for her remarkable love of the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, "The Little Flower" and the Mexican Jesuit martyr, Father Pro. These were "her saints" and those about her bedside remembered how she looked intently at each picture shortly before her death. These, her friends, her loved ones, waited to greet her in Eternity.

During her stay in the infirmary, she suffered many heart attacks, and was anointed several times. Always, it seemed, she rallied and grew better, but there came a time on March 12, 1963, when the attack appeared to be her last. However, she lingered on till March 16, when God called her to Heaven. She was conscious to the last, and knew the love and comfort of the support of several sisters about her bedside when she breathed her last, at 8:25 a.m. on March 16, 1963.

Father Garrett Galvin celebrated her Requiem High Mass in the Mount St. Vincent chapel at nine o'clock on March 20, 1963. Then the funeral cortege started the trip to Calvary Cemetery where she awaits the glorious summons to the General Resurrection.

Indeed, we know she's not "chained" in Heaven, but remembering her intense love of souls, we know she is begging graces and favors for those who live and work in her beloved Alaska.

## *The Duration*

Father Time shuffled along smiling behind his hand. At the departure of Sister Laurentin from St. Joseph Hospital, he knew a secret.

Only he.

Oh, it wasn't much as time-secrets go; he had known many since the primal bang, but it always amused him that the children of God planned so diligently in such impermanence. They always did, though the earthlings were mostly of the present moment, and they thought themselves so infallible.

And what was his secret?

It was this: That St. Joseph Hospital had thirty years more before its doors would be permanently closed and the building, with three score years of service, would stand empty and deserted, to be the lodging of rats, pigeons, and vandals.

What filled these last thirty years?

The Chroniclers of the House diligently penned three copies of the House history, recounting the ups and downs of the hospital's existence, and it is from these that we found the grist for the mills of its history.

On June 26, 1939, the sisters decided to have a picnic supper to honor the feast day of the Superior, Sister Bernard (Desveaux). After lunch, they drove out of town to a beautiful open meadow where grass and wild flowers promised an excellent site for the planned festivities. Before three o'clock the skies darkened and a wind sprang up which brought moisture for a driving rainstorm. Scurrying so as not to melt their linen headdresses, the sisters packed food hampers, books, games and folding chairs into the cars and returned home, where Sister Bernard and her seven sisters enjoyed their picnic supper in the refectory. A classic example of sisters proposing and the weather disposing.

Well, they promised themselves that they'd try again, and this time they'd go to their "mining claim."

The sisters held this property deeded to them either in lieu of payment for hospital care, or as a gift from a grateful benefactor. Called the Mable Placer Mining Claim, its title reflects the hopes and dreams of those who had located it. Such property could not be developed by the sisters, of course, but it proved to be a source of funds needed for equipment before they could go on the picnic.

On October 26, 1939, the United States Smelting, Refining and Mining Company paid the sisters a sizeable sum for the claim, and these funds bought some much-needed appliances: a large Lang range and a steamtable for the kitchen, and for the pantry, a stainless steel sink and a large metal rack to accommodate fifty-four trays. Dietary personnel can fully appreciate the blessings of these items.

The year of Our Lord, nineteen hundred and forty, opened with the death of a dear and venerable friend. The Chronicler tells its simply and with warmth:

“On this day (January 9, 1940) we were notified of the death of Rev. Francis Monroe, S.J., at Mount St. Michael, Spokane, Washington. Father Monroe spent about forty-five years in Alaska. His long and untiring efforts for the progress of the Northland are beyond estimation. The (Alaska) Pioneers agree that they owe much to Father Monroe, who was a sincere friend to the struggling miners. In 1905, he began to plan our present hospital. He met with severe difficulties, but his perseverance and unquenchable enthusiasm won the help of the early settlers, and St. Joseph Hospital became a reality.”

The life of the kindly priest had touched many, and people from all points of Alaska knew a loss at his passing.

Father Monroe no doubt blessed the generosity of the Fairbanksans through the years, and the House history is replete with gifts of money and equipment to the hospital.

The Catholic Ladies of the Pioneers and the Women of the Fairbanks Moose Lodge raised funds to present a Hess Infant Incubator to the hospital on April 26, 1940. Its first occupant was a tiny native boy, Little Chief Healy, who at his birth weighed two and one-half pounds. Such a tiny mite quickly became the concern of the hospital staff, and everyone rejoiced when he began to gradually gain weight.

Whatever happened to him? That's the sad part of the hospital history as found in the chronicles, we lose track of patients. Perhaps, someplace in Alaska, there is a forty-year-old man who owes his life to that timely gift.

By July 16 of this same year, the first Medical Meeting of the Interior of Alaska convened at St. Joseph Hospital. The Dietary Department prepared and served an adequate dinner after which the doctors held a business meeting. Doctor Ross Sutherland, the chairman, introduced the topic of keeping medical records, which the group discussed. Attending were: Doctors F. B. Gillespie, P. B. Haggland, N. Dick, D. Hoehn, and his wife Doctor Bernice Andrews. Absent: Doctor Swartz. And the battle to keep medical records completed on time was launched.

By September of 1940, the nursing sisters for the first time donned a white habit while on duty, and all Fairbanks liked the idea.

On the following March, the sisters closed the Nurses' Home, and the graduate nurses found residence in private homes or hotels. Their wages were raised to meet the expense. At this time, too, the hospital began the eight-hour-duty day. To those who served in the "early days" this must have seemed an inestimable boon.

A great deal of activity sprang up about the hospital yard one day, and sidewalk superintendents standing on the Chena Bridge watched, wondered and speculated. The mystery was solved when an enterprising cub reporter went right to the source and learned that Carl Rudberg and Frank Swanda had offered to build an outdoor shrine for the hospital. William Hufeisen, a contractor, gave much thought to the planning of the shrine, and the men

worked during their free time, while the sisters supplied the materials. This was a gift of love; no one would accept payment. Occasionally others dropped by to help, and the little Grotto of Lourdes became a reality under their skilled hands. It was a lovely spot during the summer, and in the winter, Bernadette and Our Lady both wore mantles and caps of snow.

When the hospital closed in 1968, Doctor and Mrs. Joseph Ribar had the shrine moved onto the church property, where it stands today for May crownings and other outdoor services, or is just a spot to go to pray quietly under the blue Alaska skies.

In late November of 1941, a near-disaster visited the hospital. It was found that the third floor needed resurfacing before it was covered with linoleum. This called for a sanding job, and during the process, one of the workmen emptied a bag of sanding dust into the inside incinerator, causing an explosion. His hands and face were severely burned. One of the hospital employees had presence of mind enough to turn the chemical fire extinguisher on the flames, thus saving the hospital from further damages. In gratitude to God for this preservation, the sisters had a Mass of Thanksgiving offered in the hospital chapel. Fire is the greatest of Alaska's enemies.

### III

When the United States found itself plunged into war with Japan, everyone learned the first measure of defense. Colonel Gaffney of Ladd Airfield gave orders for an Air-Raid practice, and the first blackout was held at 8:00 p.m. on December 10. The city was in total darkness for one hour.

Blackout shades, air-raid warning systems, Civil Defense members, airplane spotters, and shortages of all kinds brought Fairbanks and its population face to face with the grim realities of an all-out war effort.

Times such as this demanded sacrifices in all areas of work and living. The sisters found that their personnel was called to the Armed Services, which created shortages in the efficient operation of the hospital. In March of 1942, the sisters petitioned for the deferment of two of the Filipino boys who had been called by the Selective Service Board. It was impossible to find sufficient help, and these boys were indispensable in the kitchen and pantry. The petition was granted for six months.

At this time the sisters found their large garden a special blessing. Since all supplies had to be shipped by boat from the States, the vegetables and eggs were far from fresh when they arrived. As gardeners were hard to find, too, the sisters supplicated Heaven to supply a man who rated 4F in the military records to fill this need and a kindly Providence acquiesced.

Those who lived through this time will remember the meatless days. The sister in the Dietary Department called upon her French-Canadian ingenuity to prepare tasty and attractive meat-substitute meals. So, when the Bently Dairy gave the hospital two hundred pounds of beef, it seemed a blessing from Heaven. Cows were not only contented these days; they were conceited as well.

Now berry-picking became truly serious business, not merely a chance for

a picnic. It was a means of gathering fruit for meal supplementation. The sisters and three or four women of the Hospital Auxiliary went to the woods and berry patches for the berries, and in three hours returned with seventy pounds of either blueberries or low-bush cranberries. Patients long remember the hospital's pies.

When Sister Francis of the Cross and Sister Henry Paul came to St. Joseph Hospital on September 8, 1943, they were the first sisters to fly directly from Seattle to Fairbanks. The war effort had tamed the skies, and the big planes made the trip in four or five hours, saving seven days of travel by boat and train, but sacrificing the leisurely viewing of the beauties of Alaska.

These were the days that saw Fairbanks boom.

Ladd Airfield overnight became the busiest spot in the Interior, and because it was too small to accommodate the larger planes, an airport was built several miles from town. The Army and Air Force established a base south of Fairbanks and named it for a World War II hero-general. Thus, Fort Wainwright became a very busy reality.

Housing for military wives and families, and war-related personnel caused a building fever comparable to that of the Gold Rush days. Additional people meant endless services for their welfare and comfort, which in turn called for additional people to man such services. The city grew to the north, so that the little community of College, the home of Alaska University, joined with Fairbanks.

Late in 1944, the hospital was called to the aid of seventy-eight construction workers suffering from wholesale poisoning. One of the men died, but it was found later that his death was due to a weakened heart condition. The rest of the men were soon well and back on their jobs. The *Chronicles* failed to mention the details of the poisoning, but the incident gave proof of the value of disaster drills, and the need of more hospital beds in the near future.

Everyone found that the sleepy atmosphere of Frontier Fairbanks vanished with the war effort, and life took on a smart efficiency that kept people on their toes. The church held five services on Sunday to standing-room-only congregations. The sisters responded to the many extra demands for service and prayers, and with the shortage of competent help each took on an extra portion of the calls made for their help.

#### IV

At 2:10 p.m. on August 14, 1945, the sirens blew and the church bells rang announcing "V.E. Day." At last the War in Europe had come to an end. In thanksgiving, the pastor held Rosary and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the parish church. It was filled. "We have much to be thankful for," the Sister Chronicler remarks at the end of her entry.

But anxiety was not far away. A few days later, the sisters and hospital personnel stood with their hearts in their throats watching the angry flames of an uncontained fire. Remembering that the all-wood hospital was insulated with sawdust between the walls (the usual way to insulate in the

“early days”), one can rightly understand their fear when the International Hotel, situated directly across the street, became engulfed with flames. They blessed God that the wind did not carry sparks to the hospital roof. Such a wind would have destroyed the original wing and have endangered the “35 wing” as well.

In January of 1947, the Chronicles note that the population of Fairbanks had increased by 213 babies born at St. Joseph Hospital during the year, an increase of 45 over the year before.

The following month, February 5, marked the twenty-fifth day of -50 degree weather. The coldest on record. It's days like this that fool a person. The air is clear and the sun bright, and the outdoors beckons, but the temperature is wickedly low, and one had best be dressed for it, or remain indoors. Having to live through almost a month of keeping the houses warm in sub-zero weather must have worked additional hardship on everyone, but Alaskans are always ready for extremes, and they survived to be grateful when the cold spell snapped.

Eventually, the earth's North Pole tipped toward the sun, and the warm weather became a part of Alaska living. Then, in July of 1947, God asked the sisters to bear a very heavy cross.

Sister Rita of Charity, a fine sister-nurse, had a history of back trouble. After suffering for many years, she finally agreed to surgery. On Saturday morning, July 24, she was wheeled into the surgery, and the doctors began the operation. Sister died on the operating table, taking flight to her Heavenly home.

This was a terrible blow to the sisters and the hospital personnel, for Alaska friendships are deep. Her funeral was held in the parish church, where many gathered to pay their respects. She was laid to rest next to the grave of Sister Monaldi, in the Clay Street Cemetery.

## V

Naturally, the war brought a population influx to Fairbanks, but at its close, many stayed to make Alaska their permanent home, and the population grew steadily.

In June of 1949, Sister Marcien, the Provincial Superior of Sacred Heart Province, arrived to meet with businessmen and discuss the feasibility of adding another wing to St. Joseph Hospital. Those with whom she spoke recognized the need for it in light of the growing population. A few days later, Sister received a telegram from the Motherhouse giving instructions to proceed with the building plans.

Then came meetings with architects, contractors, and labor union representatives which seemed unending. The sisters poured over the blueprints trying to visualize the rooms and service areas of the “51 edition.”

On September 23, 1949, the first sign of the building appeared in a rather strange way. Because of the high cost of operating the greenhouse, and because it stood on an area needed for the new wing, the sisters decided to sell it. A buyer offered to purchase and disassemble it for \$3,000, a welcome assist toward the ever-present need for funds.

The very next day a letter came filled with surprises. It was signed W. K. Kellogg of Battle Creek, Michigan. He had been a patient at St. Joseph Hospital over thirty years earlier, and the memory of the gracious treatment he had received from the sisters had never been forgotten. He wrote: "I was greatly impressed by the work you were carrying on." He was especially aware of the fact that kindly attention had been given to those patients who could not afford to pay for their accommodations. He enclosed a check for \$200.

From then on, the sisters ate their cornflakes with added relish.

On October 25, 1949, the workmen began the excavation for what was already being called "the 51 wing," and many stood at the edge of things watching, criticizing, and offering free advice. Soon the concrete forms were laid and poured, and those interested watched the new addition grow.

And then labor troubles hove into sight. The Carpenters' Local 1243 called a strike for more equitable wages. Shortly after, the Plumbers' Union, Local 375, called a strike for higher wages. For a while the work came to a complete standstill, while unions and representatives dialogued, and everyone else worried and prayed. In time the labor unions solved their problems and on August 10, 1950, *The Jensen's Weekly* carried this headline and article:

"ST. JOSEPH HOSPITAL MUSHROOMING. Morrison and Knudson construction crews last week peeled the forms from off the first floor of the new half million dollar St. Joseph Hospital wing, and were pouring on the second story. One workman remarked that this was one of the fastest and best jobs he had seen in Alaska, and from the looks of the terrific progress over the past few weeks, we concur. Don't help your town out, help it up and onward!"

The *Chronicle* states on September 30, 1950:

"The last cement pouring was finished on the building and premises, at noon today, and as a result of Morrison and Knudson Company's good will, a portion of our front yard has been black-topped for parking space . . . According to specifications of our contract, the Grotto of Our Blessed Mother was moved, and now rests on the south side of the hospital facing the parish church."

## VI

Sister Regina Marie Kistner, Superior, took on a great task when she decided to serve a Christmas dinner to the sixty-five men on the construction project. Using the newly built kitchen (which, though incomplete, was cleared out for the occasion) as a dining room, sawhorses with long planks became tables, decorated with Christmas favors. The men appreciated the full turkey dinner, as many of them were away from families and would miss Christmas with their loved ones.

The donations for the furnishings for the wards and private rooms began to pour in. By March, 1951, a total of \$12,758.11 promised a good start on the room and ward furnishings. The sisters blessed their benefactors and watched the new wing ready itself for patients.



March 19, 1951, the Feast of St. Joseph, broke clear and sunny. This was the day set for the grand opening of the new wing. More than eight hundred people toured the new area, and ended with a last stop in the kitchen where a Silver Tea was in progress. Here, Mr. Ruben Bloomquist (who represented Mr. John Maloney, architect, during the construction) presented the key to the new wing to Sister Regina Marie, who spoke the sisters' thanks to all who participated in the construction.

The following June, three other renovations beautified the hospital and increased patient services. First, the completion of the landscaping of the hospital grounds. A stretch of lawn stood where the vegetable garden once produced large root vegetables. The new wing covered the area of the potato field. Secondly, with the removal of the kitchen to the new wing, the sisters remodeled the empty space into an up-to-date cafeteria for the hospital personnel. Thirdly, the patients' diet kitchen on the second floor became a children's ward with soundproof glass windows.

Then, there followed in quick succession, the installation of a public address system, which allowed the patients to hear morning and evening prayers and the rosary; a time clock which became a time saver in computing wages; and then a new switchboard of which the House Historians wrote:

"We are progressing in making Saint Joseph Hospital more efficient each day with the acquisition of a new switchboard, which, besides giving us more outside lines, also enables us to call the various departments without going through the switchboard. Several of the departments which heretofore had no phones, have had them installed. It is also possible to plug in telephones into private rooms at the patient's request. This equipment was ordered a year ago, but due to the shortage of equipment and the distance, the delay was unavoidable."

St. Joseph Hospital was doing its best to keep abreast of the times, but most patients either could not pay, or remembering the days when the sisters asked pitiful reimbursement for services rendered, remonstrated at the increase of prices asked for hospital care. It became increasingly difficult to collect outstanding bills, and the brave little hospital knew the beginning of desperate times.

## *Blind Joe*

At the top of the world, the wind swept across the ice ridges of the Arctic Ocean and drove streamers of dry snow into wispy veils, piling them into drifts as smooth and sharp as the stark elevations of a moonscape. The pale mid-winter twilight announced the time of day as a little bush plane taxied down the runway and took off into an uncertain sky. The village of Point Barrow lay like scattered toys as the pilot nosed his craft into a half circle, faced into the wind, and checked his instruments. This promised to be a routine flight. The Eskimos below waved the travelers to a happy landing, then trudged back to the scattered houses as the plane faded into the wind.

The Medicine Man at Point Barrow had arranged to have his young wife flown south where she was scheduled to see a physician, and the pilot figured to make the trip in a little over three hours.

### II

In the Fairbanks control tower, a young man sat before the radar screen watching the sweep-arm make its 360-degree race in a ghostly green light. There wasn't much air traffic today.

This was sleepy work, and he rose to get a cup of coffee that steamed in the urn. The bush plane moved steadily south-eastward, a pale blimp on the screen. The day wore on; the tiny blimp moved steadily toward its destination, as the pale winter sun drifted to the horizon and silence enclosed the world.

### III

In the light plane, the pilot glanced over his shoulder at the woman seated behind him. She looked like a soapstone carving, her parka a dull gray and her head dropped forward as sleep conquered her.

They had passed the Brooks Range and the Village of Wiseman, and were nearing Cold Foot when the force of the wind buffeted the frail craft, causing the pilot to check his passenger and to swear softly. This tramp storm was straight from the North Pole.

The Eskimo woman straightened and adjusted the hood of her parka, then again closed her eyes. The pilot scowled, the lights of Chandler should be down there someplace.

Suddenly there was a bone-shattering crash that threw pilot and passenger from their seats and against the controls and pieces of heavy freight, as it tore a wing from the plane and drove it through the snows of the Endicott Mountain Range. The impact left a trail of broken parts, pieces of fuselage, and boxes of freight along a hundred-yard trail. Then the eternal silence settled over the spot where the winds and the snows had been the only witnesses of the crash.

## IV

In the Fairbanks air control tower, a young man watched the screen over his coffee cup. In mid-swallow he blinked, lowered the cup slowly and looked intently at the glow before him. He watched the white sweep pass through its west-northwest quadrant, then hurriedly called his supervisor, "There's trouble here, Sir, I just lost a bush pilot on the radar."

The Supervisor watched the screen, his eyes squinted as he chewed the ragged end of a matchstick. "Poor devil," he muttered, then turned to pick up a phone to alert the F. A. A.

## V

The storm lasted all night, and the next day a rescue squad set out to bring the bodies to Fairbanks. The pale daylight urged haste and the men in the plane spoke little as they flew northwest.

They found the wreckage, and landing at a space near it, they climbed the rest of the way. While working to clear a space of snow to open the cockpit door, they heard a sound as of a kitten mewling. As they removed the bodies, they found that the Eskimo woman had been carrying a baby in the hood of her parka; a little boy of about nine months, whose hair stood straight up like porcupine quills. He was very cold and hungry.

Suffering from hunger, intense cold, and fright, it was a miracle the little one had survived the night. Gently they removed him from his mother's parka, and wrapped him in blankets. Then, moving the bodies to the back of the plane, the crew turned back to Fairbanks.

## VI

Meanwhile, life at St. Joseph Hospital moved on in the routine schedule, with the work of bringing people back to health or easing their departure from it. Blind Joe was busy washing the pots and pans in the kitchen, and the day held no promise of the bizarre or unusual.

The Admissions Clerk looked up to see a tall man standing at the window with a bundle of blankets in his arms, from which a few faint wails emerged. Immediately, everyone galvanized into action, and the little one was taken to the nursery, where it was discovered he had suffered a broken leg. His condition demanded intense and delicate care. The pediatrician set the leg with a little plaster cast, and began the care that would ensure his life and safety.

That afternoon Blind Joe, who was on his way to the chapel for his daily Rosary, stopped to speak with one of the sisters. She told him of the Eskimo baby who had survived the plane crash, and Joe asked if he might see the baby. Sister explained that the little one was in a special area of the nursery where it would be hard to see him. Joe nodded and shuffled on to the chapel.

Each day he asked if he might see the baby, and the day finally came when he could. Named from a current song about a little witch doctor, Uggi was

the center of much attention and a great deal of love. Sister had clipped away some of his long black hair, and everyone in the hospital brought clothes, toys and other incidentals for the little patient. He was dressed and pampered as he had never been in his young life.

Soon he had adjusted to his formula and was taking notice of all that passed. He had been assigned to a crib in the Pediatrics Department, and each day was wheeled into the hall for a few hours, where the doctors and nurses clucked to him as they went their rounds. It was at this time that Blind Joe stopped by the crib to see him.

Joe's face was wreathed with smiles, as he stood by the baby who clutched one of his stubby fingers. He spoke to it in his Eskimo dialect, and was sure the baby understood him, for it gurgled and cooed in such a way that caused Joe to state: "Him smart baby. Him Eskimo; him *really* smart baby!"

After that, Joe came every day to see little Uggi and speak with him. One day he spoke to Sister Germaine d'Auxerre, telling her that he was the only *real* Eskimo (full-blooded) in Fairbanks. Then he smiled and added, "No, two real Eskimos; me and baby!"

Militantly proud of his heritage, Joe had little time for Indians or Negroes; the Eskimo was truly superior! But at this time he *was* the only full-blooded Eskimo in Fairbanks, except for Uggi.

The baby stayed in the hospital till his leg was healed and he had regained his normal weight, then it was time to think of returning him to his father. Uggi had grown into a handsome baby with plump cheeks and bright brown eyes. He was a happy child, and his horrendous accident seemed to be forgotten.

The day finally came when a Public Health Nurse carried him to a bush plane and she and little Uggi traveled the skies to Point Barrow and his father. Life at St. Joseph Hospital suddenly seemed dull, and Blind Joe knew a heavy heart. He understood that Uggi belonged with his own people, but the baby's absence left a great hole in his life and those of all who had loved and cared for him.

## VII

Spring and summer finally arrived in Fairbanks. The sun was staying longer in the skies, the breeze was warm, and the mosquitos came in droves to harass anyone who stood still long enough for a good bite.

Blind Joe was in the yard splitting kindling for the kitchen stove. As he brought an armload up the steps and to the woodbox, Sister Zozima, who was speaking with a salesman, turned to thank him and asked him to replace the washer in the hot water faucet. Joe nodded and went to the storeroom for his tools. At once he set to work and was about to remove the old washer, when he became aware that the salesman was watching him. He laid aside his tools and turned to sit on a stool in the corner till the salesman left, then he quickly made the change and was finishing when Sister Zozima asked him why he had waited to complete his task.

"Man here. Him watch me," Joe answered.

"Yes, Joe," Sister agreed, "but why didn't you finish the job?"

Joe straightened to his full 5 feet 3 inches with great dignity and said, "Man watch Blind Joe. Him learn how to do. Him catchum tool and make much money. Joe never teach man to take job from him."

Sister wisely agreed that the salesman was a potential laborer in the faucet-fixing business, and turned her attention to the preparation of rhubarb pies.

## VIII

Saturday dawned, a day to rejoice with those whose goodness of heart brought them into the ken of the small things of nature.

After Mass, Joe went to his room on the ground floor and switched on the electric light. Then turning on his electric razor, squatted before a small mirror and shaved himself by feel. Why he used the light and the mirror, he never explained. It was a habit he had come by, no doubt, in the early stages of his blindness.

That finished, he checked the time from a Big Ben alarm clock that had no glass over the face, and his sensitive fingers told him it was close to breakfast time. He always took his meals in his room, and he switched on his small radio to wait his tray. He had selected a country western station that brought the news and weather while he enjoyed his breakfast. Answering a tap on the door, he accepted the tray by smiling and greeting the young kitchen helper.

This was the day the new Superior would arrive, and Joe wore a new flannel shirt in her honor. Finishing his breakfast, he left his room and walked to the front door, where he walked down the steps and stood close to the right railing where he sniffed the air as he turned his head from side to side. He sniffed and turned for a minute, then walked to the flower garden where he reached down to feel the flowers gauging how much they had grown.

Joe was in the vegetable garden checking on the rhubarb when one the priests walked by, calling, "Good morning, Joe. Lovely day, isn't it?"

Straightening, Joe nodded and returned the greeting, adding "Maybe him come rain. Bi-i-i-g cloud far away."

Father stopped. "Do you really think so, Joe?" he asked with incredulity in his voice.

Joe nodded, smiling. "By'm bye him come rain. Gardens need rain."

Father hurried on to the Rectory, shaking his head. Joe had an uncanny instinct about weather, a native trick, no doubt, but the day was so bright and warm, he felt Joe was mistaken, native trait or not.

Sister Melece, the new Superior, arrived that evening and the sisters crossed the street in a heavy downpour to the train depot to welcome her. As they returned, accompanying her to the hospital, music wafted from Joe's open window—the strains of a Strauss waltz rendered with violins and a symphonic orchestra. If Sister Melece noticed it she made no mention of it, and it was only after the sisters had gathered for a cup of coffee with her, that one of them mentioned that Joe had given her a first-class welcome. Sister smiled and declared she wanted to meet him.

This was Joe's way of extending welcome to the new sister. He had few worldly possessions, and his gratitude to the sisters was deep. So, he welcomed each new sister as best he could, in this case with a beautiful rendition of the "Blue Danube." When Sister met him the next morning, she thanked him for the musical welcome and he beamed his appreciation.

Several days later she stood with him on the steps as he sniffed the morning air, turning his head from side to side like a wise old polar bear tasting the wind. He declared it would be a good day, lots of hot sunshine; no rain, so the vegetable garden should be watered. Sister looked at him in amazement. Indeed, this blind Eskimo was a most unusual man!

At lunch that day she remarked to the sisters that Joe had given a most accurate forecast of the day's weather. Everyone smiled, and someone said softly, "Yes, Sister, he listens to the early morning weather report on his radio, but we let him fool us as it gives him so much joy and a sense of feeling important." Sister Melece nodded. He was still a most unusual Eskimo!

## IX

Because his eyes were sightless, Joe no doubt perceived more than those with full vision. His whole life revolved about the chapel, the Rosary, and his prayers, and he longed to be able to follow the exercises of a retreat. The day came when the Pastor, who was preaching the Spiritual Exercises for the sisters' retreat, allowed Blind Joe to attend the instructions. It must have been a unique retreat group: four Sisters of Providence and Blind Joe Terrigluck.

Joe reveled in the days of silence and prayer and the morning after the retreat closed, he seemed to be walking on air. He beamed with the special joy and graces that come from eight days given to the love and grace of God, and spoke to everyone about how he had enjoyed the days. To Sister Bernard he confided, "Now I'm *really* in!" She smiled, wondering if he meant that he was a male member of the Sisters of Providence or that he had at last gained the vestibule of Heaven. His life was peaceful and happy, and Joe rarely knew a black day.

Only once he had been driven to a desperate act, by a state of deep depression brought on, no doubt, by the long winter days and the memory of the times when he could see and follow his companions on hunting and fishing expeditions, or the thought of his wife and sons. This day the cabin fever overcame Joe's happy disposition, and he stumbled to his room and fingered his straight-edge razor. Life and his eternal darkness had become too much for him.

Sister Melece heard him calling for help. She found his wrists slashed and bleeding profusely, and Joe panic-stricken at the thought of dying by his own hand. She called a young intern and in no time Joe was stitched and ready to go on living. This happened only once; from then on he was able to weather whatever life offered him.

The days passed quickly and Joe's life was a round of duties that measured the minutes to fill his days, the high point of which were his prayers before the Blessed Sacrament. He loved to be asked to pray for special needs, or for the conversion of a patient. His faith was deep and vibrant, a result of his affliction and of his open and generous nature. God was very personal to him, and very close. He was at the early morning Mass with the sisters, and was present for all the church services held in the chapel or in the parish church. He loved to join the sisters' choir for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

One evening when there was no organist, the acappella choir turned to a hymn with which he was not familiar. His voice wandered through the maze of the unfamiliar music, which made it difficult for the rest of the choir to follow the melodic line. After Benediction Sister Bernard, who had stood beside him, remarked, "Joe, you went off the note; you threw me off, too."

Joe nodded, and said, "Well, you know I can't let out all my wind, it would be too loud."

Sister Bernard blinked, finding it difficult to follow his line of reasoning. Joe nodded and smiled, one excuse was as good as another.

On one occasion he demonstrated an Eskimo dance for the Sunday School children. Accompanying himself on a native drum, he sang a number of Eskimo songs as he danced the story he was telling in music. The children gathered that the language must not have had m's, b's or p's, as Joe's lips never met as he chanted the song. Music and singing were great joys in his life.

Joe explained that "he had a head" as he tapped his forehead. This meant that he had wisdom, and among the Eskimos was considered one to be asked to settle difficulties and differences. When he was a young man, his father used to ask his advice—"because he had a head"—and when his sister was about to be married, the father discussed with Joe the character and stability of her young man. Clearly, Joe was a man the village respected and revered.

His early instruction in the Catechism and tenets of the Catholic Faith was solid and deep. He often said that Father LaFortune had taught him after his blindness, and had housed him with the Nome priests, where Joe became well founded in Church doctrine. On the eve of the Ascension, Sister Bernard asked him, "Joe, what feast do we celebrate tomorrow?"

Joe moved his arms upward, suiting the action to the word, "Tomorrow, Jesus Christ, whosh-sh-sh-sh!" It couldn't have been better explained, sister thought.

One evening, about eight o'clock, Sister Helen Yvonne (Lariviere) stopped by the chapel to say a few prayers, entering the chapel through the sacristy door and not bothering to turn on the light. The sanctuary light was cozy and plentiful.

Suddenly, she became aware of the sound of heavy breathing in the back of the chapel. Thinking flight the better part of valor, she hurriedly left and called another sister to investigate. They opened the door and switched on the light, and there was Joe, thumbing his way through the Rosary, as he

whispered the words. Smiling, they closed the door and went their ways. The house was safe; Joe was praying.

In 1941, Blind Joe suffered a slight stroke and from then on he was a patient at the hospital. He moved about the halls and grounds in pajamas and bathrobe and his praying time increased.

Friends and priests from the villages visited him often, bringing him news and bits of local gossip. These and the mild distractions such as the sisters could arrange for him made up the fabric of his life.

The day came when he was confined to his bed, and he had to adjust to inactivity, which he found hard. The sisters came to see him each day, and the chaplain never failed to drop by for a little chat or to give him the spiritual help Joe needed. After a while, there were times in the day when he spent hours remembering his past life and finding it rich and relatively happy. He closed his blind eyes and again saw his parents, his sister, his old friend Charlie Aluckanak. He could almost feel the cold wind blowing in from Norton Sound, and Nome was once more the busy place of his childhood. He relived the times when he worked for the sisters at Holy Cross Hospital, and when the priests of St. Joseph Church took him into their home at a time when he thought there was no place on earth for him.

Then on February 23, 1956, Joe was mildly surprised that his bed had been moved outdoors, where the sun was warm and small flowers carpeted the area around his bed. He could see, though faces moved through a milky mist.

Sister Monaldi was among the sisters about his bed, with Charlie Aluckanak and Father LaFortune, S.J. Blinking his eyes, he spoke to Charlie in Eskimo, and Charlie nodded and held out his hand. Joe turned to Sister Monaldi and found hers extended, too. Reaching to clasp their hands, he moved easily across the tundra toward the bright Northern Lights just over a hill. Smiling, he shrugged out of this life and walked confidently into the next. At last, he was "really in" with those who had waited his coming for so long.

Blind Joe's funeral proved that his friends and Eskimo companions were legion. On February 27, Father Elaine, S.J., offered the Requiem Mass and the parish church was crowded to the doors. Joe was laid to rest on a small knoll shaded by a stand of birch trees in the new cemetery on Birch Hill.

He had been with the sisters for 34 years.



## *Sunshine and Shadow*

Monday, June 30, 1958, dawned as if nothing portentous was about to happen. The day promised to be exceedingly warm, which warned of an afternoon thunder shower; but aside from that, things seemed pretty prosaic. At two o'clock the sisters gathered for the afternoon meditation and the atmosphere of the house settled to the quiet and prayerful hush of one that knew holiness and peace.

Suddenly, the city whistles and sirens began to blow as if to announce the General Resurrection. As the noise kept up, Sister Stanislaus, the Superior, went to the telephone, called the newspaper and learned that the Senate Bill had passed which admitted the Territory of Alaska to the United States of America as the 49th state.

The sisters left the chapel and went outdoors to find that many people had gathered on both shores of the Chena River to rejoice and congratulate one another. Statehood had passed the Senate by a 64 to 20 vote, and jubilation was the order of the day. Radio and television broadcasted the news and there was a considerable tumult and din in the city. From now on there would be forty-nine stars in the American flag.

From the Polaris Building, Fairbanks launched a huge gold star with forty-nine printed on it where, by means of a gas balloon, it floated over the city for many hours. Later in the day, an enterprising group attempted to make the waters of the Chena River run gold, but it turned green instead. No matter, everyone was in a holiday mood and continued to rejoice far, far into the night.

So, Alaska became the 49th state in the Union and the Territory prepared to adjust to the status of statehood. This was a gigantic ray of sunshine.

Time, as always, hurried along. The hospital had a change of Superiors; a few more babies were born; a few more citizens of Heaven found eternal happiness; and the Army Corps of Engineers constructed a new steel structure to replace the outdated Chena Bridge. It is interesting to note that the City of Nome bought the old bridge and reassembled it in town where it is still supporting those who cross the Snake River.

More sunshine!

## II

Good Friday of 1964 fell on March 27, and the State of Alaska was still pretty much in the clutches of winter when it found itself shaken by the worst earthquake in history.

At 5:37 p.m. the sisters had gathered with the parishioners for the Good Friday services at Immaculate Conception Church, when the tremors began. The candles surrounding the Altar of Repose danced and the ceiling lights swung in a frenzy, while the building seemed possessed. It shook and creaked in a terrifying manner. Those who attempted to leave found it difficult to walk. The whole city rocked and writhed in a paroxysm of internal unrest.

Father George Boileau, S.J., asked the congregation to leave the church, and after an orderly evacuation, the tremors stopped. A few minutes later, Father Edmond Anabel, S.J., the Pastor, held a Communion Service, and after the Adoration of the Cross, all returned to their homes.

The sisters went to see and reassure their patients and employees. Of this, the Historian notes:

“Everyone realized that an earthquake with its sudden threat to life, can be a special means of grace, helping us to realize that we must be prepared at all times to make the sacrifice of our lives in union with Christ.”

By means of a radio, the Fairbanks sisters heard the news of the damage sustained by the people of Anchorage, and prayed for the welfare of the sisters working to care for the sick and the injured who found refuge and treatment at Providence Hospital. In comparison with Anchorage, Fairbanks suffered little damage from the earthquake.

Shadows, indeed.

A long dark shadow fell across St. Joseph Hospital as the years followed one another. Financially, things worsened for the hospital. Every means possible were taken to help keep it afloat, but the general interest in the work of the sisters seemed to fall off. Though many came for medical care and attention, few paid their bills. The memory of free care and the early price ranges lodged in the memories of those who had medical charges to meet, and the hospital found itself in ever deeper straits.

Salaries and hospital expenses kept pace with the changing times, but revenues and capital improvement monies did not. Thus, the sisters were forced to turn to the floating of a \$5 million hospital bond issue. This was the first time in the history of the sisters that they sought a public capital-bond to sustain the ministry. All of the other institutions of the sisters borrowed funds from a private lender, but the financial condition of the hospital in Fairbanks would not sustain such a loan. Public support was imperative. It failed to pass on October 4, 1966, by a vote of 1,731 for, and 2,098 against, in the fall voting. The Borough was faced with preparing an alternative plan, since the sisters found it unlikely that the Hill-Burton matching funds would be awarded to Fairbanks without the passage of a bond issue. The apathy of the citizens pointed to an ultimate closing of the hospital.

### III

The largest lottery game in Alaska has a unique background. The history of the Nenana Ice Classic goes back to the beginnings of the opening of the Territory when the Alaska Railroad was under construction. The rails had been laid north as far as Hurricane Gulch and the city of Nenana, both places where a bridge was needed. The crews in Nenana had need of heavy materials to start the spring building. Because of the winter ice, the equipment was stalled in Seward.

In boredom, the Nenana crew began to place bets as to when the ice would go out on the Tanana River, to allow the freighters to bring the machinery needed. All who wished to place a bet paid one dollar, and stated the month,

day, hour, and minute at which they thought the ice would move. All this was duly recorded in a register.

A huge tripod, placed on the ice at the center of the river, held a wire that connected with a clock placed in the observation room on the bank of the river. The rules demanded that the ice had to move seventy-five feet, pull the trip-wire and stop the clock. Those who had guessed the date and time of moving won or shared the lottery.

At first it was a local gamble, but through the years it became an Alaska Event. The price was raised to two dollars a guess, and only those residing in Alaska could join the lottery.

On May 4, 1967, at 11:55 a.m. (Alaska Daylight Time) the lottery paid off with a glorious ray of sunshine. Several of the office girls at St. Joseph Hospital who placed their guess under the name of "The Ten Hopefuls" set their date at exactly the right date and time, and became part of the winners. Because someone in the hospital's business office bought Sister Gertrude Nestor a ticket, and her guess was the same, she was the winner of about seven hundred dollars. Only an Alaskan can fully realize the excitement that hovers over the whole state in waiting for the ice to move. The sisters had good cause to congratulate their sister-bookkeeper.

Nineteen hundred sixty-seven was the Centennial Year of the American Sovereignty of Alaska, and the State made an all-out effort to make it memorable. The Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce launched a mammoth public relations program to increase tourist attendance and to promote the new Alaskaland Park, situated on a forty-four acre tract on Airport Way and Peger Road on the City's ever-expanding environs.

Alaskaland boasted of a Mining Village, Pioneer Museum, a Wildlife Park, a Gold Rush Town, the Riverboat *Nenana* and a Native Village. There was a glittering Midway and a new Civic Center that housed a theatre, an art gallery, a convention hall and business offices. To preserve Alaska's history, the City spent three years moving ancient log cabins and antique business houses onto the site. The City repaired the buildings and rented them to various people who opened shops, boutiques, an ice cream parlor and restaurants. The *Nenana*, "Queen of the Yukon," was the last of the sternwheel steamers to make the Chena-Tanana-Yukon run, then it gave way to air travel and diesel-powered riverboats. Now it stands in a simulated river in the center of Alaskaland.

*Milepost: All-the-North Travel Guide* (1976) comments on this vacation spot in speaking of Fairbanks and its offering to tourist attractions:

"Alaskaland is open every summer to provide visitors with a "mini-tour" of Alaska. The facility, near the downtown area on Airport Way and Peger Road, has a picturesque and authentic gold rush town created from buildings that once graced the downtown area of Fairbanks. Included is the Kitty Hensly House, which is stocked with items from the turn of the century. (Volunteers are eager to explain not only the house, but all of Alaskaland.) The first church built in Fairbanks has been moved to the site and a Pioneers Museum has been constructed and dedicated to those who fought to create the town. Many of the old cabins house gift shops and other exhibits."

The Park opened at the end of May. Fairbanks and all of Alaska prepared to enjoy a beautiful and memorable Centennial. Prince Rainier and Her Serene Highness Grace Kelly were to spend a few days there while taking their children on a vacation through the Western Hemisphere.

#### IV

Those whose hindsight is stronger than their foresight realized that the telegram was an Omen, to which they should have given their full attention.

In the following July, when tourist travel was at its peak, a telegram to Governor Hickle from Prince Rainier told that the ill health of Princess Grace made their immediate return to Monaco imperative. Alaskans were grieved and disappointed. A visit from royalty was not a common occurrence.

The month of August was dull and wet, with rain falling in steady dreariness from the 10th to the 15th. The heavy run-off flowed into the Tanana, backing it into its largest tributary. The flood was in progress.

A crew of men worked with cranes to remove the logs and debris that clogged at the Chena Bridge, so that the waters would run over it and continue on in its channel. But by August 13 they could no longer cope with the flooding.

Many came to volunteer their help at the hospital, with nurses staying on during their time off. When it was decided to sandbag the hospital, the City dumped bags of sand around the hospital, and volunteers helped to put them in place.

The Administrator, Sister Conrad Mary (Bomer), was away at the time, and the burden of all this fell to Sister Bibiana (Shirley Smith) who was second in command. The waters continued to rise and crews of men began to use boats of all descriptions for rescue work.

Doctor Raymond Evans, in charge of the medical area in time of disaster, contacted Jack Murphy, Civil Defense Director, about the critical situation of the hospital and the possible need for evacuation to Bassett Army Hospital at Fort Wainwright.

Sister Bibiana carried a transistor radio in an effort to keep abreast of the announcements made for residents of the city. All except the pay phones were disconnected. The sisters were issued dimes in the event they had to make outside calls. The electricity was still working in the hospital. Workers had great difficulty reaching the hospital from their homes as most of the city was inundated. People who were not flooded worked around the clock to help those whose homes or businesses were standing in icy water.

And the waters continued to rise.

By 6:00 p.m. on August 13, everyone realized that this was no ordinary flood. The city was going to have to cope with the ravages of a major flood. While pumps worked continuously in the basement of the hospital to keep the waters out, the fires in the boiler had to be turned off. When the phones no longer worked, Doctor Joseph Worrell set up his citizen-band radio to maintain communications in the hospital. Hal Barnette, a former engineer,

came to work with the hospital engineers and stayed night and day for a week.

At 9:00 p.m. Mayor H. A. Boucher and Civil Defense Director, Jack Murphy, came to recommend the immediate removal of patients. Those at the hospital began to implement the plans for patient evacuation. Doctor William James visited each patient and explained the need for the move and where they were going. Nurses prepared duplicate lists to check out patients as they left.

Mayor Boucher and Mr. Murphy notified Colonel Philip H. Hardin, M.C., U.S.A., of the decision to evacuate to Bassett Army Hospital. Each patient received a bag containing his/her medication, a blanket and his/her own chart. Each bore a name tag on his/her forehead. Ten stretchers were moved first, followed by wheelchair patients, mothers carrying their babies, and lastly the ambulatory patients. Since it was unwise to use the elevators, nurses and sandbag volunteers carried stretchers and wheelchair patients down the stairs. Doctors came to help and accompanied those who were in critical condition or in need of special care.

Ambulances, taxis, private cars and the Army helicopter made up the evacuation caravan. Nurses accompanied the patients to Bassett Army Hospital and remained to provide care.

A total of sixty-three patients were removed—fifty-two adults, three children, and eight babies (two of whom were twins); premature babies were sent in their isolettes. The whole procedure was completed in one hour and twenty minutes. A short time after the last car had crossed the bridge, it was completely closed to all traffic.

And still the cold, muddy water continued to rise.

After the patients left, work continued in the hospital. Sister Mary of the Cross worked with the volunteers to remove supplies and equipment to upper floors; Sisters Bibiana and Donna Fisk tried to save as many medicines from the drug room as they could.

Regularly, the Weather Bureau issued bulletins that the flood would crest at thirteen feet, then at fourteen feet, and again at fifteen feet, but the waters continued to rise. It seemed incredible that so much water could pour into Fairbanks. The Tanana River drains 44,000 square miles and much of its waters poured into the Chena River, which drains 2,000 square miles. Truly, the raging waters knew nothing of the Weather Bureau's predictions.

At 2:00 a.m. on August 15, the water was coming in faster than it could be pumped out. It rushed in through broken windows in the basement and up through the drains. The electrical panel was in the basement, so the engineer turned off all electricity. All the clocks stopped at 2:10 a.m.

During the night the logs and debris of the Chena River banged against the house with such force that all feared the walls would not hold. The personnel kept busy answering the door and supplying medications, baby formula and other supplies requested. Having been warned of the possibility of contaminated water and the improper sewage disposal, the sisters placed iodine in the drinking water, and pherol solution (5%) to take care of the sewage disposal.

The Bureau of Land Management supplied the hospital with a communication device that had to be manned at all times. This brought

communication to the main control building, and when called, the operator was expected to answer *at once*. This provided contact with all refuge stations around the city, so the hospital personnel no longer felt isolated. All who left the hospital had to do so by boat or helicopter. There was no cessation of the rising waters.

Father Secundo Llorenti, S.J., offered to say Mass on August 15, if he could get from the rectory to the hospital. He climbed out a second-story window onto the roof of the first-floor entrance, and from there he dropped into a boat which took him next door to the hospital. So, those who could, joined the Liturgy at 4:00 p.m. Water stood all around the hospital and since there was no heat in the hospital, it was very, very cold. The sisters wore parkas and winter clothing, and when they sat down, they wrapped blankets about their knees.

Late in the day on August 15, the flood water crested at 18.8 feet. Since flood level is 12.1 feet, the water had risen 6.7 feet above flood level. The Government declared Fairbanks and Nenana disaster areas. Ninety percent of the Fairbanks people were evacuated from their homes, many of which were a total loss.

After three days the waters receded and there was only mud, holes, and piles of debris left. Then the work of rehabilitating began. Everyone had herculean tasks of cleaning up, so few could give time to help at the hospital. However, all the Providence hospitals on the West Coast sent maintenance men and engineers from their plants to help clean and restore St. Joseph Hospital in Fairbanks. Many sisters volunteered to leave the Lower 48 and come with boxes of rags, blue aprons and strong arms to help in Operation Clean-up. These heroic people worked almost around the clock, cleaning machinery, shoveling out mud and silt, collecting damaged supplies and mounds of debris to be sent to the city dump. The Alaskan sisters blessed those who so generously gave of their time and energy. It was cold, dirty work, but everyone in Fairbanks was similarly employed so no one complained.

Needless to state, the beautiful Alaskaland Park situated close to the Chena River was quickly inundated. *Life Magazine* covered the '67 Flood with colored pictures, one of which showed the carousel standing in water up to the prancing feet of the gaily painted horses. The Riverboat *Nenana* stood in a lake that flooded every cabin and tourist attraction in the park. The prospects of an adequate financial return from the new attraction quickly faded, as tourist attendance suddenly dropped. A somewhat dazed city began to clean up after the rivers' wild spree.

A kindly Providence sent a sudden change in the weather and a long Indian summer set in. Operation Clean-up was the general state of affairs. Everywhere there were blankets, mattresses and sofa cushions on the roofs of houses, and blankets and rugs hung on clotheslines, bushes or fences to dry. All who could, set the temperature higher in the houses and opened doors and windows to allow for quicker drying of the interiors.

The City of Anchorage printed the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* so that Fairbanks would not be without a newspaper, while personnel of the Fairbanks paper scurried to clean machinery and receive supplies for the regular publishing of the paper. Fairbanks had helped Anchorage during

the earthquake; and Anchorage returned the compliment during the flood.

The Fairbanksans spent little time lamenting and feeling sorry for themselves. They literally rolled up their sleeves, spit on their hands and tackled the horrendous task of bringing order from the chaos left by the raging waters. As might be expected, there were many who documented the flood with countless rolls of film. Upon looking back, what seemed a gargantuan task was completed with great energy and a surprising dispatch. Everyone knew there was many a story that could be told of this catastrophe, and in time everyone became an Old Timer with many a yarn to spin about the flood and the earthquake.

There was a whole month of sunshine after the dark shadows of the flood.

So the tapestry of life at St. Joseph Hospital spun on to its close, fashioned from the light and shadows that went into its making. Without the darker shades, the beauty of the bright, light colors would be lost, or meaningless, and vice versa.

That's the way with life, isn't it? The radiance and gloom complement one another, and as we work from the wrong side of the tapestry, we see little of the beauty and meaning in the pattern. The splendor of the whole cannot be fully appreciated until we see the completed work from the right side—in Heaven.

Let us carry the metaphor one step farther:

Sisters Monaldi, Rita of Charity, and Gustav Marie, who rest beneath Alaskan skies, stand now with all who served in Fairbanks. Each can recognize the stitches she so faithfully added to the whole, and each knows an honest and eternal pride and joy.

Well done, faithful servants.

## *Ad Finem*

The winter of 1967-68 was mercifully mild. Oh, the snow fell; the Chena bumbled along under a shallow coat of ice; and only occasionally did the temperature drop below -50 degrees. Sheltered in a cup of hills, the Greater Fairbanks area knew protection from the rude winds that raged across the open tundra to the north and the raw moisture-heavy air from the south.

While prosperity was very far away, still the economy, thrown off balance from the flood, slowly adjusted itself through loans from the Small Business Administration.

In December the sun rose about 10:00 a.m. to make a low-arch journey across the southern sky and set by 3:00 p.m. Many school children rode to school and home again in darkness. Winter in Alaska is a quiet time when the heartbeat of society drops to a slower tempo, as if to rest and renew its energies while waiting out winter's icy grasp.

At the hospital it was the fact of their having to leave it to other hands that kept everyone so busy. There seemed to be no end of repairs and renovations necessary after the flood. The sisters blessed God for the kind generosity of friends and benefactors who offered contributions to the fund established for this purpose.

July 1, 1968, was the date set for the sisters' departure from the hospital. Sister Cecilia Abhold, Provincial Superior of Sacred Heart Province, had notified Fairbanks' newspapers and television stations of this fact in a letter dated October 12, 1967. We quote:

By: Sister Cecilia Abhold, F.C.S.P.  
Provincial Superior  
Sisters of Charity of Providence  
Sacred Heart Province  
Issaquah, Washington

October 12, 1967

“After almost 12 years of deliberation and consultation with architects, financial consultants, City and Borough officials, the Sisters of Charity of Providence are announcing the closing of St. Joseph Hospital, Fairbanks, Alaska. The hospital will be officially closed on July 1, 1968.

“The first announcement that the Sisters of Providence would not be able to rebuild St. Joseph Hospital was made on May 24, 1966. This was re-iterated in a statement dated June 29 of this year when estimates of constructing a 100-bed hospital in Fairbanks had soared to \$8,000,000 to \$9,000,000.

“There is only one reason the Sisters must make this announcement—they cannot in any way finance such a monumental sum of money. Even being granted maximum allocations of Federal and State funds there would still be a shortage of approximately \$4,000,000.

“Announcement of the closing of the hospital does not mean that the Sisters of Providence no longer wish to serve the people of Fairbanks, a work which our Sisters have been dedicated to since October 1, 1910, when



they answered a plea to take over the administration of St. Joseph Hospital. Our Sisters have been asked by many in Fairbanks if they would still be willing to continue serving the medical needs of the area. We have told them that we are most anxious to remain in Fairbanks when other arrangements for hospital service are made.

“Setting a definite date for the closing of St. Joseph Hospital was an extremely difficult decision for us to make, but we feel there is no other alternative. It has been almost a year and a half since the Sisters first announced the decision not to rebuild. It was our sincere hope that the City, Borough, other organizations or individuals would have solved the hospital problem by this time. We realize that the Borough has made two intensive efforts for bonds to build a new hospital, but both have been defeated at the polls. The announcement of a closing date should demonstrate the seriousness of the situation as well as help those in Fairbanks who have taken the leadership in solving the hospital problems.

“It has been the intention of the Sisters of Providence to announce an earlier closing date for St. Joseph Hospital. However, because of the flood and the defeat of the bond issue, our hospital sisters asked that the closing be delayed until next summer. They also asked for permission to repair the flood damage to the hospital, which is more than \$200,000. The hospital could never have been reopened if the damage was not repaired and supplies replaced. We are deeply concerned about our ability to finance this extra sum at this time. Contributions have helped somewhat and at present they amount to \$22,250.

“Until St. Joseph Hospital is closed, the Sisters of Providence will do everything they can to continue providing the very best in patient care to the people of Fairbanks. We will continue to co-operate in every way with those who are spearheading efforts to provide a new hospital for the city.”

Because they were faced with a situation of being without a hospital, the people of Fairbanks immediately began to make plans for a community hospital. On January 30, 1968, they launched a fundraising campaign for this purpose.

On June 4, 1968, the Sisters signed the papers that legalized the lease of the hospital property to the City of Fairbanks, and the Lutheran Hospitals and Homes Society accepted the administration of it.

And so began the task of preparing the house for the transfer of administration, since this venerable structure must serve till the new community hospital was ready. Those who have taken part in such an activity certainly remember what it entailed, and can empathize with the Fairbanks sisters. One can appreciate the heartache of closing an era, after fifty-eight years of loving care and attention to the sick and accident patients of this town.

On June 22 the Chronicler wrote:

“This morning a last Holy Mass was offered in our Chapel. About three hours later, nothing was left that would remind us of the sacredness of that room, except our memories. For sixty-eight years, this room had been the

center of activity for all the religious who spent any time here. The hospital had grown and changed in many ways, but, the Chapel remained in the same place.”

Bishop (Robert) Whelan, S.J., (of Fairbanks) was to take any furnishings that he could use in the new bishopric; vestments were sent to Mount St. Vincent, Seattle, Washington, statues and candelabra to the (Fairbanks) sisters’ convent and to missions all over Alaska.

Mr. Ron Peters, auditor from Arthur Andersen Co., Seattle, came to help with the disposition of the office records and the inventory to be made at the time of the change-over. The buildings behind the hospital had been severely damaged by the flood, and were too expensive to rebuild, so we appealed to the Fairbanks Fire Department to destroy them. The new hospital administrator could find no use for the Thrift Shop building that had been on the back corner of the main hospital property, and had not been used since the flood. Its only worth would have been to provide a cover to protect something from the weather, and so on July 26, 1968, the little log cabin was burned as had been the other buildings.

How much history went up in smoke that day! This sad little log cabin had been the first hospital erected in Fairbanks (c. 1903-04). The ghosts of the early doctors and nurses must have gathered to watch its demise at the hands of the firemen. How sad that it had not been salvaged for Alaskaland!

The Administrator of the Fairbanks Community Hospital was Mr. Robert Goff, a member of the Lutheran Hospitals and Homes Society. By June 27, 1968, he was the only permanent member of the Society to remain in Fairbanks.

On June 30 the House Chronicler wrote:

“It is a strange, lonesome feeling to walk through such familiar places, see the same employees and realize that you are no longer a part of this scene. Even before we walked out of the hospital that Sunday night, the switchboard operator was saying, ‘Fairbanks Community Hospital.’ This was right, we expected it, and knew it was coming. Still, just like death, it is not real until that moment.

“Our car had one last load of many things. Shortly after midnight, Sister Conrad Mary, Superior, Sister Maria of Providence, and Sister Mary of the Cross walked out of the door leading from what used to be our Community Room, got into the car and drove to the Sisters’ Convent on Illinois Street. Sister Virginia Goodell was waiting at the door with a smile and a refreshing drink before retiring.”

After June 30 the hospital nuns stayed at the school convent while they finished work at the hospital. They found a less friendly atmosphere there. In charity this is explained as being a necessary means of establishing their own image.

Sister Maria of Providence left Fairbanks on July 3; Sister Conrad Mary on August 5; and Sister Mary of the Cross finally completed her work as the Business Office Manager of St. Joseph Hospital on August 15, and took a plane to Seattle. Now we can truly say that St. Joseph Hospital, Fairbanks, is no more.

Then, as always, the Chronicles closed with a résumé of the Personnel and Works of the Year from July 1, 1967, to June 30, 1968. It is a sad little commentary of the love and attention given to this area of God's Vineyard. We quote:

LIST OF RELIGIOUS PERSONNEL  
June 30, 1968

4355 Sister Conrad Mary, Superior-Administrator  
4523 Sister Mary of the Cross, Treasurer  
3919 Sister Maria of Providence

PERSONNEL AND WORKS  
From January 1 to December 31, 1967

*RELIGIOUS PERSONNEL*

Sisters of temporary vows		1
Sisters of perpetual vows		2
	Total	3

*HOSPITAL SERVICES*

How many beds?	Private rooms	5
	Semi private	26
	Wards	39
	Total	70

Patients admitted	3,289
Hospitalization days	16,620
Percentage of occupancy	65.05
Bassinets	15

How many newborn?	486
How many hospitalization days?	1,919
Percentage occupancy	35.05

*OUT-PATIENT—EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT*

How many patients?	2,735
How many visits?	3,259

*EMPLOYEES—PRIESTS AND LAY*

Chaplain	1	
Professionals	12	
Registered nurses	37	
Licensed practical nurses	13	
Nurses-aides and orderlies	31	
Office employees	15	
Tradesmen	4	
General employees	25	
	Total	138

*EXTERNAL WORKS*

How many visits to patients at home?	7
How many visits to poor at home?	10
How many visits to institutions?	5
How many free meals given to poor?	525
How many free prescriptions?	15
Amount of alms in cash and clothing given to outside poor?	\$525

Sister Conrad Mary signed the paper, closed the book, and prepared to leave to attend her brother-in-law's funeral. With this, the Nome-Fairbanks saga came full circle. *Sister Mary Conrad*, one of the first Sisters of Providence to bring health care to the Alaska winterland, had opened Holy Cross Hospital in Nome, 1902.

Sixty-six years later her grandniece, *Sister Conrad Mary*, one of the last sister-nurses to leave the Interior, helped close St. Joseph Hospital in Fairbanks.

It seemed strange to see the parish church's front pew empty at Sunday's eight o'clock Mass. The sisters always sat there. And it was lonely not to find the sister-nurses in the hospital. There were families who knew the kind charity of the sisters' visits and who missed the blessing of the sisters' presence in their home.

But no one has yet stopped the sands of Time. The days were filled with bustling activity with work on the trans-Alaska pipeline, and Time passed unnoticed. So, the sisters quickly slipped into other fields of endeavor, and Fairbanks remembered them only occasionally.

Oh, the snows fall softly, steadily on the once-proud Gold Rush Town, and the winds swirl about the three headstones at the Clay Street Cemetery, where three Sister-Sourdoughs lie waiting the call to the General Resurrection.

May they rest in peace and pray for us.

# Epilogue

This is not the end of Alaskan Providence History. The work still goes on in the 49th State, where there are stories to record of health care and education. However, these must be left to the endeavors of other Providence Historians.

With the ecumenical opening of windows, the winds of change brought a new aspect to life and endeavors of Community living and the work of extending the Kingdom of God.

Providence Hospital, in Anchorage, established in 1938, is alive and thriving, and has become Alaska's medical center; Catholic Junior High (1961-1967) knew a brief and shining history before it closed, and the Providence teachers sadly turned their efforts elsewhere.

In Fairbanks, the Jesuit-owned Immaculate Conception Grade School (1947- ) and Monroe High School (1956- ) are still functioning. Because of the scarcity of religious staff, the Sisters of Providence withdrew from these faculties in 1974 and 1976, respectively. The researching of these institutions would yield fascinating histories well worth documenting in book form.

In 1969, with the finding of huge oil deposits, Alaska went through a change that plunged its residents into a frenzy of growth and expansion comparable to the Gold Rush days. Everyone found him/herself disturbed and shaken from the comfortable existence that made life a quiet, if frosty, Shangri-la.

The Alyeska Cartel,\* composed of oil and pipeline companies, drilled to bring the oil to the surface and built a trans-Alaskan pipeline to transport the oil to Valdez, where huge tankers took it to refineries in the Lower 48. Such a gargantuan effort meant the influx of highly trained people and opened a market for Alaskan employment. One may easily imagine the impact of large salaries and steady employment on those who formerly knew a simpler livelihood.

This bonanza lasted from 1970 to 1977, and it was time for hundreds to return stateside and to a more prosaic life. In spite of the horrendous winter cold with fierce winds that sweep across the bleak vastness of open tundra, and in summer holds sprawling areas of pristine silence, many chose to remain and take up residence in the nation's 49th state.

So, the 20th Century stampede who rushed "North to Alaska" for the black gold, returned home leaving a contingent of new Sourdoughs who, caught by the lure of Alaska, remained to become its avid and loyal citizens.

Alaska stands gigantic, remote and aloof while the earth keeps turning, bringing the procession of the seasons with the stark beauty of our largest state. Tourists standing in awe before towering mountains, gigantic glaciers, and the summer's midnight sun declare that Alaska holds a magnificent beauty found nowhere else in the world.

Time and History march in time with this turning, leaving the new gold of recognized History, awaiting the efforts of scribes to catch and hold forever the accounts of the future glory of Alaska.

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\*Alyeska Cartel; Amerada, Hess Corporation; Arco Pipe Line Co.; British Petroleum Pipe Line Corporation; Humble Pipe Line Co.; Mobil Pipe Line Co.; Phillips Petroleum Co.; Union Oil Co. of California.



*Merilu Vachon, S.P.*

## *Biography*

Born in St. Joseph Hospital in Fairbanks, Alaska, Sister Mary Louise (Merilu) Vachon, grew up in what was then the Territory of Alaska.

Her parents, John and Louise Vachon, owned a homestead on the winter trail between Fairbanks and Tanana, and operated a hostel for those who traveled between the two villages. In winter this was managed by dog- or horse-drawn sleds; in summer by steamers that plied up and down the Tanana River.

Merilu attended Alaska public schools, but entered high school at Providence Academy, in Vancouver, Washington. After graduation, she studied for one year at Holy Names Normal in Spokane, Washington, then entered the Providence Novitiate in Seattle, Washington.

As Sister Hubert of Jesus, she pronounced her first vows and began to teach at Holy Family School in West Seattle, Washington. For 37 years she taught in Providence Schools up and down the Pacific coast, which included a year at Catholic Junior High School in Anchorage, Alaska, where she knew the terrors of the Good Friday Earthquake. Her life in the classroom finished with six years at Monroe High School in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Wishing to enter a second career, Merilu served for three years in various departments of St. Elizabeth Hospital in Yakima, Washington, then returned to Fairbanks where she began the research for the present volume.

With two books of poetry published, she claims that this book is a labor of love, as she knew all but one of those mentioned in the Fairbanks section of this book. Sister Monaldi, a close friend of the Vachon family, died before Merilu was old enough to remember her.

Presently, Merilu resides in West Seattle, Washington, where she writes for Providence publications.