Alaska's Daughter

Pinson, Elizabeth

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My mother, Ouiyaghsiak, attended the missionary school operated by William T. Lopp and his wife at Cape Prince of Wales, and during this time they gave her the Angelican name of Agnes. In her second year of school, at the age of ten or eleven, she learned rudimentary reading and writing. Mr. Lopp and his family soon moved to the Teller Reindeer Station, which later became Teller Mission. He took over management of the reindeer station there. It was during this period that my grandparents and their children also migrated to Teller Mission. For the remainder of their lives Ootenna and Kinaviak were never again out of sight of Port Clarence Bay. Nor was my mother. In all her life she was never more than eighty miles from her birthplace, Shishmaref.

Papa, however, was widely traveled, having begun his life in Germany, meandered through the seaport cities of five continents, and ended up in Alaska. He was born Albert Joseph Bernhardt in Danzig, Germany, in the year 1874, during the reign of Emperor Wilhelm I. He went off to sea as a cabin boy when he was fourteen years old in order to avoid military service in Bismarck's army. Generation after generation saw endless wars in Europe
for which young men were constantly being conscripted. There also was much religious oppression. These conditions made my father eager to leave his country of birth if he was to live the life of a free man. His first sea voyage took him to the port of Riga, the capitol of Latvia, and after his ship sailed out of this seaport city for England, he was never to see or set foot on European soil again.

By the time he reached Alaska, he had sailed several times around the world, rounding the treacherous waters of Cape Horn, South America, and the Cape of Good Hope on the southern most tip of Africa, where storms and waves could be so powerful that often ships were swallowed up by the sea. The end of his sailing days came when he chose to live on the Seward Peninsula. For the next fifty-six consecutive years, other than crossing to Siberia, he never left Alaska. In early 1900 he went on a trading trip to Siberia with his friend Max Gottschalk on his schooner *New York*. Max Gottschalk, who mastered the schooner, was a colorful character. He was one of the toughest men who ever set foot in Alaska. He did things the way he wanted, legal or otherwise. Papa used to say, “Max will give you the shirt off his back, but don’t trust him any further than you can throw a bull by the tail.” A remark by others who knew him was that “he would steal from his own grandmother.” He was known as a brigand in the Far North, and he didn’t care who knew it. One summer after a trading spree to Siberia, he returned to Teller with a young white Russian bride. My father asked him if he wasn’t “robbing the cradle.”

His little schooner was always the first boat of the season in operation on the ice-clogged Bering Strait, plying between St. Michaels at the mouth of the Yukon River and north to Kotzebue around the first of June. Whenever we spotted that one mast appearing over the southern horizon, we knew that the freighters were not far behind, and that meant fresh vegetables and fruits soon would be available and a welcome addition to our meager winter diets. If we had any potatoes left at all by the middle of May, a whole month before the first steamer arrived, they would have sprouted eyes three or four inches long and would be pretty soft and not very palatable, but we ate them just the same for there was no such convenience as a grocery store. Sometimes we would be out of potatoes three or four weeks before the first shipment of the spring came in. By that time we would be so hungry for potatoes, we would have given anything for just one meal of them.
Papa didn’t talk much about his early life in the old country, but there were many times when he would walk the beach at Nook in the evening, hands clasped behind his back, as if his thoughts were thousands of miles away in another era and another world. He spoke of his mother and two sisters now and then, and his two brothers. He said with pride though that his father was an officer in Napoleon’s army during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and that his grandfather also fought in the Napoleonic wars. As these recollections came into his mind, it is no wonder that he wanted no part of the Kaiser’s army when he sneaked on board a ship sailing out of Danzig Harbor.

After leaving Germany, my father shipped out of Liverpool, England, on British ships; he learned to speak English, but he never completely lost his heavy German accent. He went through the school of hard knocks. During his spare time, he taught himself to read and write English. He made his first voyage around Cape Horn before the age of fifteen in 1889 (incidentally, that was the year my mother was born). Sailing the oceans of the world in square riggers in the era of wooden ships and iron men, he soon became an able-bodied seaman and bosun. Following a particularly stormy and miserable trip around the Horn, he left his ship in San Pedro, California, and worked on tuna boats and, for a time, on the yacht of a wealthy Californian. He had a brief love affair with the rich man’s blonde daughter, and about that time he decided to go to a fortune-teller to get a hint about what his future held for a wife. She told him he would marry a small dark-haired woman, so he gave up waiting around for the rich man’s daughter and returned to deep-sea sailing.

In the spring of 1896, while ashore in San Francisco, he and eleven other sailors were shanghaied and put aboard a whaler bound for Point Barrow in the Arctic Ocean. They returned to San Francisco late that fall after a successful whaling season. My father came back from the Arctic with a love of Alaska and its ruggedness and shipped out voluntarily to return the next spring. In that fall of 1897 my father’s ship and the other whalers were caught in a sudden Arctic storm—a sudden shift of tide and winds brought huge ice floes in from the Arctic Ocean and locked the ships in. The men left their ships with whatever they could pack into duffel bags and headed for Point Barrow over the ice. A few of the men never made it.

In the early spring there was a rumor that several prospectors had found gold in the hills of the Colville River area, which was about 150 miles
southeast of Barrow. Some of the men died of scurvy and other diseases. My father was one who got “gold fever” and headed for the Colville. Having not the slightest knowledge where to look for the precious metal, and on top of it all, having contracted typhoid fever and nearly dying, he figured there must be another way to make a living or at least keep body and soul together. He headed back to Barrow where he caught a trading schooner going south. By this time there had been rumors again of gold strikes at Anvil Creek (what later became Nome). He joined up with a Finn by the name of Lindeberg and staked a claim in the hills back from the beach. The famous Alaska Gold Rush was just beginning to get into full swing. My father worked several claims, none of which turned out to be gold-bearing at the time, and since he was no miner, he staked on the hillsides rather than in the flats and creek beds which carried the gold, finally realizing that the heavy metal must have washed down to the beaches of Nome.

Word reached far and wide that gold had been discovered on the beaches and creeks, and by late summer thousands of people were arriving by the shiploads. Tents sprang up in every direction, and it was getting more difficult as the days passed to find even a place to sleep. About this same period, word of the major gold strike on the Klondike River, a tributary of the Yukon in northwestern Canada, brought a swarm of fortune seekers to Skagway in southeastern Alaska. They backpacked their supplies and gear over White Pass into Canada. Nearly everyone has heard or read of the hardships endured by the hordes of men who stampeded over White Pass into the Klondike. Reaching the headwaters of the Yukon, the men with money took passage on river steamers north to Dawson City, the center of the Klondike mining district. Others built small boats or rafts and floated downstream with the current. The alternate route, easier but longer, was to go by ship to Nome or St. Michael, thence up the Yukon by riverboat to Dawson, which is 1,500 miles inland to the east. Hundreds of prospectors, unable to afford tickets on the steamers, were camped along the beach at Nome. Thousands of the newcomers were former soldiers, recently discharged after service in the Spanish-American War, who came hurrying from Cuba and the Philippines, hoping to get rich panning for nuggets and gold dust in the streams of Alaska and Canada. Others, broke and discouraged by failure to find riches in the Klondike, came drifting down the muddy Yukon in anything that would float in search of new uncrowded diggings or a chance to work their way back to the United States on an ocean vessel. These prospectors, too,
ultimately fetched up on the beach at Nome, a beach that turned out to be virtually paved with gold.

All the available land for miles back from the shore had been staked with mining claims. Unless a man were able to carry his food and prospecting gear many miles inland on his back, he was out of luck. The only place open to everyone was below the high tide line where claims could not be staked. Out of curiosity someone had panned the tide flats at low water and discovered the ocean sand was rich with flakes of gold. Thereupon every time the tide went out people swarmed out onto the beaches with shovels, pans, and rockers. No matter how much gold was recovered, more was washed in from sea by every storm. It was hard work and no fortunes were made by the crude methods used, but one could earn a living.

My father gave it a try but decided that the gold he found wasn’t worth the effort. And there were so many people crowding the beach that there was hardly room to use a shovel. There was much thievery, quarreling, and fighting. Supplies were scarce and prices exorbitant. My father, coming to the realization that it would take special mining equipment to mine for the gold, left his holdings in the hands of a syndicate and struck off north over the Seward Peninsula to Port Clarence. The head of the syndicate soon died an untimely death, and the holdings passed into other hands without benefit to my father. Gold seekers were already at Port Clarence, but not too many. They were generally of a better character than most of those who thronged Nome. The hardships that it took to get to the new area eliminated the less attractive element, who seemed not inclined to physical effort, preferring to live by their wits off the more industrious.

Papa liked the country around Port Clarence and Seward Peninsula. Game was plentiful, the sea and streams were alive with fish, and at Teller Mission the reindeer herds were multiplying. There seemed to be more opportunities than at any other place he’d yet seen in Alaska. As a seafaring man he was especially attracted to the only natural harbor north of Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians on the route to the Arctic Ocean. Two fine, sheltered bays, Port Clarence and Grantley Harbor, offered a protected anchorage for deep-sea vessels, something that Nome did not have. Ships there had to lie several miles out on the open roadstead while passengers and freight were lightered to shore in small boats and barges. Lives and valuable goods were often lost when craft were upset in the surf or swamped by offshore combers. There was Sledge Island offshore from Nome about three miles
where steamers lay to seek shelter from the southwest gales. Papa felt that because of its good anchorage, facing on the open Bering Sea, Port Clarence was a better site for a permanent community than was Nome.

Prospectors and miners, including my father, said they'd found evidence that the surrounding mountains held a wealth of minerals such as the world had never seen. Later scientific geological studies would prove them right. The entire Seward Peninsula, which Port Clarence Bay and Grantley Harbor partly split in two, is one of the most heavily mineralized regions in Alaska. Gold was but a small part of it. Deposits of tin, graphite, copper, and other ores were found. There was jade, too—boulder-sized stones weighing hundreds of pounds that had to be broken up before they could be hauled away.

Besides the Eskimo villages of the area, the town of Teller had sprung up a few years earlier on a point of land on the south side of the channel leading from Port Clarence to Grantley Harbor. Founded in 1892 as a reindeer station, it was named after Henry Moore Teller, who was secretary of the interior at the time. Most of the newcomers who settled at Teller had their mining interests in the surrounding area, and some had married Eskimo women. According to laws then in effect, such marriages gave a white man all the rights and privileges of a Native. Although some had wives and children “Outside,” they married Eskimo or Indian girls anyway. Taking advantage of their “rights,” they made small fortunes hunting and trapping in areas reserved for Natives or acquiring reindeer herds in the names of their wives and half-breed children. Financially independent, they then abandoned their Native wives and children and returned to their stateside families.

Just across the mile-wide channel from Teller, at the end of the long sandspit jutting out from Teller Mission was a piece of land Papa acquired through the patent process and to which he gave the name “Nook.” Nearby was an ancient Eskimo village where earlier in the century the local Natives had fought and defeated a large war party of Chukchi invaders from Siberia. When Papa settled at Nook, the ancient village had been long abandoned, being only a clutter of grass-grown mounds and ruins of old igloos dug into the ground, roofed with the curving rib bones of whales or driftwood and covered with sod cut from the tundra. In the nearby cemetery the bodies were not buried but merely laid in a hollowed-out section of ground covered with driftwood logs and whalebone to keep out dogs, wolves, and
foxes. When I was a child, we used to play there. Peeking through the cracks between the weathered logs, we could see the hair and bones of our long-deceased ancestors.

During the years 1920 to 1928, Smithsonian Institution scientists dug extensively at Nook, finding many artifacts of an older culture. They took them back to the Smithsonian. Mama and her contemporaries felt a deep resentment toward the anthropologists who came to Nook. I remember these men with beards and overly warm clothes that they wore despite it being the middle of our summer. They were always armed with all sorts of instruments for measuring the depth of ground and digging, such as shovels, trowels, and some other strange-looking gear, including the ever present notebooks and expensive camera equipment which were always sheathed in black luggage-type cases. I remember when I was about twelve years old the world-renown anthropologist, Alex Hrdlička, and his group of anthropologists came to Nook, spent several hours at the old igloo ruins and the old gravesite where we used to play, and took some skeletal bones—skulls and arm and leg bones—that had lain on the scooped-out gravel bottom of the grave with the tinder-dry driftwood logs placed over them perhaps since the turn of the century, or who knows when?

Soon after settling at the Port Clarence area, my father homesteaded the land at Nook and built a large warehouse where he built his own boats, skiffs, sleds, and snowshoes. He built boats for fishing and to get around in and also to ferry travelers from Teller across to Nook. Often these were people on their way to the mining operations at Tin City, which proved to be one of the largest tin-mining operations in North America. Not long after settling in Nook, he fell in love with a dark-haired woman, just as the fortune-teller in San Francisco had predicted. Their first child, Tommy, was born in 1900. Two years later, Papa's first wife, Nellie, died while giving birth to a daughter, Margaret.

During the summers at Nook when the salmon runs were at their peak, the Natives from nearby settlements pitched their tents on the Nook Spit, where Papa allowed them to camp and catch fish to be dried on racks in preparation for the coming winter. My grandparents, Ootenna and Kinaviak, with their five children, also camped on my father's land. The second spring after Nellie had died, he noticed that Ootenna and Kinaviak had a lovely daughter. Unable to care for his young children and make a living at the same time, he was lonely and began to think about marriage again. He
noticed the young Ouiyaghasiak, eldest daughter of Ootenna and Kinaviak, and wondered if she was of age to marry. My mother was not sure of her correct age. Her mother said she was born in the fall, fifteen years after one of the worst winters they could remember. They had hardly any spring or summer that year, and there were few berries to gather for winter. My father figured that she was born in the year 1889.

In the year 1904, the hearts of the young, good-looking, blue-eyed, red-haired German, Albert Bernhardt, and the lithe, peppy Eskimo maiden, Ouiyaghasiak, entwined in mutual admiration. They were married in the fall, but not until the spunky Ouiyaghasiak convinced the young German to shave his handlebar moustache. Two years later their first child, Mary, was born. Every two years thereafter for many years, they had a new baby. After Mary, there came Sarah, who, by the way, was named after the great European actress Sarah Bernhardt. Then came David and then me. Eight children were born after me, totaling fourteen children altogether. Of the fourteen, thirteen lived to adulthood. They are, by oldest to youngest: Thomas Joseph, Margaret, Mary Teresa, Sarah Rita, David Paul, Elizabeth Wiana, Anne Sylvia, Augusta, Albert Joseph Junior, Wilhelmina, Anthony, Pauline Laretta, and Robert Aloysius.

My mother was a wonderful, unselfish woman with a great sense of humor. She was always in accord. I don't think she worried a day in her
life, except when we children got sick or hurt. Then she might as well have been sick herself. When we girls were growing up, she would talk to us “girl to girl,” and we could tell her every little thought that was in our heads. I never knew her to have an unhappy day. The Eskimos are superstitious and believe in shamanism. Around the turn of the century the power and influence of the shaman was diminishing rapidly as the Eskimo people turned to Christianity. There were many shamans in my grandparents’ time, and they
believed that they could heal or change minds towards proper living. My grandparents, however, did not talk about them very much to me, probably due to my young age. Mama used to warn us that there was an old Eskimo belief about putting our clothes on inside out. She said we would have bad luck that day.

There are several major Native groups in Alaska: the Iñupiaq Eskimo along northern coastal regions and islands; the Aleut along the Aleutian chain and Alaska Peninsula; the Yup’ik Eskimo of the interior Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers; the Athapaskan Indians also of the interior of Alaska; the Eskimo and Aleut of the Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound regions; the northern Canada Inuit and Indians; and the tribes of southeast Alaska, including the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimplshian. Ancestral Eskimos had only one name (for instance, my grandfather’s name was Ootenna and his family was known by his name).

Eskimos are a spiritual and religious people. Even to this day most Eskimos who live in the villages go to church every Sunday. In fact many of the babies born in my generation were given Biblical names such as Isaac, Jacob, Jeremiah, Luke, and Matthew for the boys and Sarah, Ruth, Magdelaine, Naomi, and Hannah for the girls.

What seems to be a mystery is why the Natives from Point Hope on down to Cape Prince of Wales and King Island had quite fair skin, not dark at all, and some of the Native children with whom I grew up even had freckles, their skin being almost creamy white. My grandfather for one had quite fair skin, and my mother had the same. This leads to more of the mystery about where the Eskimos originated. Perhaps some day someone will discover a clue to the missing link in the chain as to how exactly the Eskimo race evolved.

In the reports of the Canadian explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson about his sojourns in the Arctic regions of Alaska and Canada, he wrote about a “blonde Eskimo” race in the Coronation Gulf region of the Canadian Arctic as far back as 1904. For a whole year during this period he lived among “blonde Eskimos” who had never before seen a white man. In his report he wrote that their European characteristic (blonde hair) led him to connect these people with an early Viking colony that disappeared from Greenland between 1412 and 1585 (My Life with the Eskimo, 1913).

The Eskimos have no written language. Stories from one generation to another—teaching in the ways of hunting and fishing, the building of
ice or sod igloos, *oomiaks*, kayaks, sleds, dog harnesses, and the making of their only musical instrument, the drum—were all handed down by word of mouth. There was a time when it was popular for Eskimo carvers to make the smiling, potbellied figure, similar to a Buddha figure, called a Billikin. It is supposed to be a good-luck charm and is carved of ivory, in just about any size desired, from a half inch to three or four inches high. They also carve masks of animals out of driftwood, which Eskimos wear during their potlatch dances. These are observed for any given occasion, such as a nice warm summer day, an especially cold winter day when they feel they need carefree light-heartedness, or the arrival of a tribe that they have not seen for some time, the success of a whale hunt, and most any time they feel jubilant about a happy event. When Eskimos did have such a get-together, they would dance and beat the drum for days sometimes, not even stopping to eat or sleep. The rhythm would reach such a crescendo and the dancers reach such a fever pitch, they finally would almost collapse to the last beat of the drummer. The most prolific in the drum and dance routine came from King and Diomede Islands. They had the biggest and loudest drums and the most enthusiastic dancers. They have even performed in the Lower 48.

In the summer of 1900 the population of Teller increased far beyond what anyone could ever imagine. At the height of its heyday, the population swelled to 10,000. There were gold-mining operations in every direction you could see, besides the tin mine going full blast at Tin City, sixty miles to the northwest. Some of the gold miners and prospectors came directly to Port Clarence by ship. Most were the overflow from Nome—disappointed people who spent all they had getting to the North, lured by greedy steamship agencies’ outrageously false advertising such as: “’Nome, the New Eldorado’: Thousands of people are earning $300 a day and many more than that panning the golden beaches that stretch 250 miles long! In the creek beds the diggings are yielding $4,000 a ton and $500 nuggets are common! Sailors have gotten rich from gold dredged up by the anchors of their ships!”

Nome was also described as a peaceful modern town with U.S. marshals and U.S. soldiers to keep order. There was also Fort Davis down the coast about five miles east of the city of Nome. It was quite a large army settlement in the early 1900s and up to the end of World War I. It was said that there were a number of good hotels available. By June 1898, 10,000 fortune seekers had left Puget Sound alone, and 25,000 more were awaiting passage. A one-way ticket cost $125 and freight was $40 a ton. But before
long, mail began reaching the states that indicated the extent to which the truth in advertising had been stretched. The gold-bearing sands of Nome actually encompassed only a narrow strip of beach no more than three quarters of a mile long where 500 men were scrabbling to earn five to ten dollars a day, tides and weather permitting. Gold was in the hills, all right, but it was frozen solid, and coal to thaw the permafrost cost $150 a ton. Unless you were lucky enough to be where the gold was and had the equipment to work the claim, you could just make ends meet. The number of “good hotels” was a complete fallacy, as was the “peaceful, modern town.” According to my father and others who were there then, Nome consisted of two streets that were “dusty when dry, muddy when wet,” with crowds of idle, restless men wandering through them. Little steady work was available, and all but the worthless claims were staked. Unless you had a working claim, you would starve. Most miners who stayed over the winter had to charge the boarding house operators for meals and room till spring, when the ground thawed and they could resume their mining operations. The only year-round work available was for boardinghouse operators, storekeepers, and saloon operators, and there were plenty of the latter. Gambling and drunken carousing went on around the clock. Fights were common and men were knifed and shot by the light of the midnight sun. Few arrests were made for murder and other crimes. The law could hold criminals, if there were jails enough to hold them, until the revenue cutter arrived during its patrols of the North, for they were the enforcers of the law.

Nome, a city which has gone down in the history of Alaska as one of the wildest has also been rich in legend in the fact that the town could boast of the residency or visits of such notable and renown personalities as Billy Mitchell, the father of the U.S. Air Force; Jimmy Doolittle, a brigadier general in the U.S. Air Force and the man who led a squadron of B-25 bombers in WWII in the assault on the Japanese mainland; Jack London; Robert W. Service; Rex Beach; Roald Amundsen, the great explorer; Doc Maynard (some say the founder of Seattle); Wyatt Earp; Howard R. Hughes; Lowell Thomas; Will Rogers; and Wiley Post, just to name a few. So the city of Nome had its seamy side and its niche in history.

For three miles along the Nome beach the shacks and tents were twenty deep, and hundreds more people were arriving almost daily on every type of vessel seaworthy enough to reach Norton Sound. With no room left for one more tent, even women and children were sleeping on the damp ground out
in the open where they were bitten to distraction by swarms of vicious Arctic insects such as mosquitoes and gnats, or no-see-ums. Thousands of tons of freight was dumped on the shore just above the high tide line, where it lay unprotected from the weather and the thieves. There were no sanitary arrangements other than a few inadequate outhouses. Most of the shallow wells were contaminated, and typhoid, diphtheria, and smallpox were rampant.

Out along the creeks and back in the hills most of the wildlife was quickly exterminated by prospectors for food and skins. All around Norton Sound and far up the Yukon and the other rivers the Eskimos and Indians were without food and skins to make clothing. There was sickness and death in every village, and some were completely wiped out by disease and hunger. The meager possessions of the dead were usually carted off by travelers who left the unburied bodies to be devoured by hungry dogs and predators.

A few of the discouraged bankrupt miners were able to work their way back to the United States on ships that were shorthanded because crewmen had deserted for the diggings. Other destitutes were carried south free of charge on government vessels. Many more died, and their bones were laid in shoreside graves or washed away by storm waves and strewn along the “golden sands” that enticed them there.

The hardier ones, the people determined not to give up and go home as failures, got out of the overcrowded town with its undesirable elements
and went off up the coast or into the mountains. Everything they owned was carried on their backs: pick, shovel, and gold pan; beans, coffee, and flour; a little salt and sugar; a jar of sourdough starter to leaven their biscuits and pancakes; and a knife and rifle. It was this type that generally made it to Teller—tough and industrious.

Some fairly good strikes were found near Teller on creeks flowing into Grantley Harbor, but there was little free gold in the streambeds to be had for the panning. Everything had to be thawed and laboriously hacked out of the frozen ground before the dust and nuggets could be sluiced from the dirt and gravel. The work was strenuous for the lone miner or team of partners working with hand tools to make a decent living. Soon most individuals sold their claims to mining syndicates and went to work for daily wages. The larger operations of placer mining around Grantley Harbor were at Sunset Creek, run by Charley and Frank Rice at Gold Run. Dease and Coyote Creek were run by the Tweet family—the father and his four husky Norwegian sons. The Tweet family became the last of the great gold mining era. The two youngest Tweets were still running the operations each summer up through the early 1970s. My father worked at several of the placer operations around Grantley Harbor. Later, when tin deposits were discovered fifty miles to the west near Cape Prince of Wales, he hauled supplies from Teller to Tin City by a team of horses.

Principally because of its good harbor, Teller became the hub of the Seward Peninsula mining district. Most of the buildings were sturdy, rough-hewn lumber buildings—some still standing—and they housed banks, hotels, stores, and a jail. Saloons, honky-tonks, and bawdy houses catered to the miners and sailors from the ships that called. There was even a doctor and an undertaker parlor.

The boom peaked in about 1910, then tapered off, and people began to drift away. By 1917, when most of the younger, able-bodied single men left for service in the First World War, Teller was a community of only a hundred or so. Most of those who remained were white men who had married Native women. Large families were the rule. While Papa was still a miner, during the off-season he hunted and fished to provide food for his growing family. In the winter months he trapped for furs to sell to the traders for things the land did not provide.

People bought their supplies such as flour, sugar, cloth, tobacco, tools, hardware, guns, and ammunition from the local mercantile stores or from
the trading ships that anchored in Grantley Harbor every summer. Most familiar of the trading ships of the early ’20s were the MS *Herman*, under the command of Captain Pederson; the CS *Homes*, under Captain John Backland; the *Lady Kindersley*, under Captain Charles Klengenberg; and also the *Effie M. Marissey*, under Captain Bob Bartlett. Then in the ’30s came the MS *Patterson* which replaced the aging *Herman*; the *Nanuk*, a trading ship of the Swenson Fur Company of Seattle; and the *Maid of Orleans* (a former slave ship), commanded by Captain Klengenberg and his two sons, Andrew and Jorgen, who held large trading interests in Arctic Canada with home offices in Vancouver, B.C. Other ships that called into Port Clarence Bay with world renowned names included: Amundsen’s *Gjoa-Maude*; the *Ghost Ship Baychimo*; actor John Barrymore’s sleek yacht; Mr. Borden’s, of the Borden Milk Company, schooner, *The Flying Cloud*; and *The Pioneer* of the famous George Vanderbilts. Few ships went to or returned from the Arctic Ocean without stopping at Port Clarence to trade or take on fresh water.

The historic barkentine *Bear*, a revenue cutter, and the auxiliary schooner *Boxer*, operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, were twice-yearly visitors. In later years, after the *Bear* was retired from service, came the Coast Guard ships *Northland*, *Spencer*, *Haida*, and others.

Even when money and furs were scarce, Papa always bought a few special things for us: candy, gum, and a bag of oranges. He believed that a man’s first responsibility was to his family. Papa was raised in a strict Catholic home in Germany during the reign of Emperor Wilhelm I, and he remained a strict and straightforward man. In the winter, during which time he found life a little more leisurely, we held catechism class in our home on Sundays. He taught us, including my mother, all our prayers, and she learned to pray in English as well as in Eskimo. There were traveling Catholic priests in those days with headquarters at Mary’s Igloo Mission in the interior of the Seward Peninsula. They traveled the long hard way, by dog team. Father LaFortune (who translated parts of the Bible into the Iñupiaq language) would arrive by his personal dog team to stay a week at Teller, usually near Easter time. He held Mass every morning, and every day after school we children would scamper off down the street to the parish hall for Sunday School. All week we would have Sunday School after school hours. Everyone, Catholic or not, had great respect for the priest who, though aging, traveled 150 miles or so, by dog team, in the cold snow and icy winds to spread the word of God.
I was about two years old when we moved to Mary’s Igloo, a mission village some sixty miles inland from Teller, so the older children could go to the Catholic mission school there. Father Post, the head of the school and church was from France, the brothers (or monks) were German, and the teaching nuns were Belgian. They spoke French or German among themselves, and whenever my father was visiting, they all spoke German with him in an unusual camaraderie of Europeans in an unusual setting in the Far North of Alaska. About the only thing that I recall about Mary’s Igloo was a big flood and going to church in a boat. It rained so long and hard and the water rose so fast that a lot of the Christian Natives, and some of the nuns as well, thought for sure that God was punishing the earth with another deluge. They were concerned because there was no Noah with an Ark to save the righteous.

My father was an excellent cook and baker, and we always looked forward to the winter when he took a turn at kitchen duties. When we’d hear
him putting the big iron Dutch oven on the stove and sending someone to
the storeroom for lard to fill it with, we kids would all gather around, jump-
ing up and down and chattering with glee because we knew that we were go-
ing to have some doughnuts. People could smell them frying all over Teller,
and soon children would be hanging around outside, waiting for us to come
out and play. He also made corn fritters that would melt in your mouth.
He made delicious pies too. Whenever he thought that we had enough fresh
apples on hand—not making us short on eating apples—he would assign
one of the older girls to peeling and coring the apples. We would argue
over who was going to eat the peelings and cores, for we couldn’t see throw-
ing away any part that was edible. If it was getting to the last of the crated
apples, he used dried apples that he cooked first.

Papa had to teach our mother how to cook white man’s food, which
she learned to do quite well. But she never lost her fondness for the Native
diet. She always ate sitting cross-legged on the floor. She liked boiled seal
and walrus meat and dried or boiled fish dipped in seal oil. We children usu-
ally ate with Papa at the table, but if we wanted some of what our mother
was having, we sat with her on the floor to share it. She liked most of the
white man’s food, but she did not care for beans.

In the spring we gathered the tender willow leaves when they first
came out and stored them in pokes with seal oil for winter greens. They
gave us iron and vitamins, I suppose, because we never did have scurvy or
other vitamin-deficiency diseases. Mama called this soo-rut. Another plant
we gathered in summer looked and tasted like rhubarb, but Mama called
it “sauerkraut” because it was so sour. It was stored in a seal poke too. She
showed us how to follow mouse trails in the tundra to find caches of roots
the mice had gathered. They were shaped like peanuts, and she called them
pikniks, and they tasted sweet and were sort of juicy. They had the crunch
of water chestnuts. Mama said, “Don’t take all the pikniks, you have to leave
some for the mouse.” Mama also taught us to pick the leaves of a small plant
which looked like a stunted fir tree about ten to twelve inches tall. It was
called Hudson Bay tea. She and her ancestors used to make a tea or chi u as
it is called in the Eskimo language. It makes a spicy-tasting tea—you need
very little of the leaves steeped in hot water to make a cup of tea.

In 1915 we moved back to Teller from Mary’s Igloo. Our parents
had had enough of the yearly periods of high water caused by the runoff
from winter snows melting on the surrounding slopes of the Saw Tooth
Mountains, followed by the maddening insects that hatched out of the swamps and ponds with the first warm weather. There were plenty of bugs at Teller too, but the sea winds blew enough of them away to make life tolerable during the short, comfortably warm summers.

During the year of the big flood most of the rickety old houses of Teller, hastily built during the gold rush, washed away when the lagoon behind the town overflowed. Papa bought the best of the largest houses remaining, a former mortuary that had been empty since the boom days ended and people went back to the custom of burying their own dead. I was only four years old when we moved in, but I can still remember the red carpeting on
the floor and the musty smell of the place. A sign was still nailed on the front that read, “O’Neill’s Funeral Home.”

Like almost every other building in town, the house was covered with tar paper to help keep the cold winds out. But all the houses had double walls with insulation in-between; if you didn’t have some type of insulation, you could freeze to death. Besides a big front room and kitchen combined, there were two bedrooms, one for Papa and Mama and the youngest child, and one for the boys. We girls had one large room upstairs in the attic. In back was a big room where we stored our dry supplies such as flour, sugar, oatmeal, smoked salmon, seal oil, dried fish, and anything else that would not be harmed. We called it the “cold room.” Off to the far end of this cold room was a shed about 5 x 8 feet which was used as an outhouse. In midwinter there would be a half inch of hoar frost on the walls and floor. Before you could sit on the toilet seat, you had to put down a layer of paper torn from the Montgomery Ward catalog nailed to the wall along side the commode. If you failed to do so, you would find yourself stuck to the toilet seat. In the winter time when papa was trapping, he’d skin the animals he trapped and put them on stretchers to slowly dry in the cold room. When the furs are first put on the stretchers, they are turned wrong side out so that all the remaining fatty residue can be scraped off before it gets too dried on. Each fur is dried on a frame of wood to the size of the specific animal, such as a fox skin has it’s own frame and so on. When the fur finally dried, it was turned right side out and then groomed and brushed and, if need be, rubbed clean with corn meal and then brushed again.

There was an attic in this large cold room, and we younger ones had a hard time resisting the temptation to climb the ladder that led to the hatch opening in the ceiling. The hatch door was always thrown back to the open position. One day David, Anne, and I decided we would go up there and find out what deep, dark secrets the attic held. To our surprise and with hearts pounding, we discovered two new empty caskets. At this point Anne and I decided to scamper back down the ladder, but David teasingly called us scaredy-cats and in the same breath said, “Oh, look at these beautiful flowers!” With that exclamation we moved to another corner, and sure enough there were the most beautiful artificial flowers we had ever set eyes on.

There were also wide-brimmed ladies summer hats banded with velvet ribbon, lovely long gowns of silk and lace, blouses of sheer voile, and patent leather shoes that buttoned to the calf. Years later when we laughed and
reminisced about the attic full of caskets, beautiful clothes, and flowers, we would say, “How come those dead people didn’t haunt us for playing with their cast-off clothing?” The items we treasured mostly though were the artificial flowers. We thought they were the loveliest things we had ever seen. There were sprays, banks of white Easter lilies, roses of all colors, gladiolas, lilies of the valley, and more. They were made of fine gauze-like material with the feel of pure silk, glued to a wire frame in the shape and color of each particular flower. The stems were of a heavier wire wrapped with green tissue paper.

The next house from ours was about a half block away on the other side of the street and of the same vintage. It was much larger, more like a warehouse with a large room walled off in the back end and used for the living quarters. At the end of this large room was a shed. It had loose floorboards, and they squeaked when we walked on them. It seemed that no one owned the building for it was always vacant. When Gussie (Augusta), and Anne, and I were small, we often played in the shed of the building for the door was always ajar. One day our curiosity got the best of us and we lifted one of the floorboards, and there we saw four cigar boxes on the ground just under the boards. We picked one of them up, and it was very heavy! It was about half-full of copper pennies—a lot of them were Indian head pennies. At this particular time we were not sure what kind of money it was as we had not handled much money before, and we had never seen pennies for the least change we got from the stores was a ten-cent piece because nothing could be bought for less. We never did look in the other cigar boxes for we were content to play store with the copper pennies.

Something that was really baffling to us was grapefruit. Usually after a big windstorm coming from the southwest in the summertime, the shore at Nook would be strewn with debris of all sorts. After these big summer gales we would look forward to a long walk along the gravelly beach “ooh-ing” and “aahing” at all the strange specimens that would be washed up on the shore. There were large jellyfish, twelve to fourteen inches across, that the storm had washed up on the beach and good fresh clean mussels that Mama steamed for supper. One of the most strange things that washed ashore were grapefruit skins cut in half. I called out to Anne, “Look at the huge orange skin I found.” We had never seen any citrus fruits but oranges before then. Anne said, “They must come from another country than California or Florida” (referring to the labels stamped California or Florida on
Elizabeth Bernhardt Pinson

the crates the oranges came in) “for the oranges we’ve ever had aren’t that large!”

It was a few years later when our older sister Mary married Captain Albert Walters (he was captain of the mail boat Silver Wave), and he would bring us new things from Nome that would clear up some of our mysterious finds. Captain Albert Walters was an import of Captain Klengenberg, who sailed his ship the Lady Kindersley into Grantley Harbor from San Francisco. My brother-in-law was a handsome Viking type of a man with a very masculine physique, and to top it all, he was the proud owner of the black belt from Sweden in the martial arts sport of karate. He was proud to show it, and he told accounts of his athletic career in his youth in Stockholm, Sweden. I adored him; he was sort of an idol to me. It might have been because I subconsciously admired his strong, whole body.

Like many other early Alaskans who’d come from foreign countries, Papa had not yet applied for American citizenship. Then at the outbreak of WW1, caught up in the German hatred of those days, some of his longtime friends turned against him. One day some officials came from Nome, and my father was told, “Mr. Bernhardt, we have orders for your arrest as an enemy alien and spy.” I remember clearly the men, who were from the immigration office in Nome; they were robust and looked stern as they talked to Papa. We children and Mama began to cry. The smaller ones clung to Mama’s long full calico skirt.

Papa said, “Why should I be an enemy and spy? My wife and children are American, and this is my country too, not Germany.” It turned out that not long before this, we had had a visitor. He was served lunch with my father, and they talked about the winter’s prospects for trapping furs. Papa took him to the cold room and showed him the furs he had caught so far that winter. Of the many furs hanging there the man saw three fox skins hanging side by side, one red, then a white and a black. Those were the colors of the German flag, and my father had accidently hung those fox skins in that order. When the visitor got back to Nome, he reported that my father was pro-German. Of course there was no way my father could have contacted anyone in Germany, even if he wanted to. Nor was there anything going on in our part of Alaska that would have been of interest to the Kaiser, who was having enough trouble in Europe at the time. Papa was able to convince the authorities of his loyalty and of the outlandishness of the accusation, and the charges were withdrawn.
“But you’ll have to become an American citizen, Mr. Bernhardt,” the immigration men told Papa. I also remember that just before they left our house, they said he would be under surveillance until he became a full-fledged American citizen.

“It will be an honor to become one,” my father said. Thereupon, he got busy and studied U.S. history and the constitution. He began to take instruction under the tutelage of Mrs. Christensen, a citizen of Teller who we had known for several years by then. As the years went by, she became one of our closest friends. We grew up with her two elder children, Tommy and Karen. Finally in 1918 Papa became a U.S. citizen. He always said it was one of the most important events of his life.