Alaska's Daughter

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In 1918, when I was six years old, I lost both of my legs to frostbite. In order to set this tragic event into some perspective, I must provide some background information relative to my grandparents.

Every spring after school was out and the ice on Grantley Harbor had broken up and been carried out to sea by offshore winds and tidal currents, we’d move to our fishing camp at Nook across the bay from Teller. The house that Papa had built had been added onto to accommodate our increasing family. That summer he built a house for the boys. There were eight children in 1918 when we left for Nook.

During the salmon fishing season, my grandparents, Ootenna and Kinaviak came from Teller Mission in their oomiak to camp nearby and fish so they could have dried fish for winter food. It gave them a chance to visit too, with friends and cousins who came to Nook every summer for fishing and trading—Eskimos from the Diomede Islands, King Island, and Saint Lawrence Island, and their Asian cousins, Siberian Chukchis. Of the Native tribes of the Bering Strait, those who had to make the most treacherous trip, a distance of about 150 miles in their open oomiaks, were the Eskimos from
Saint Lawrence Island. They would travel in a group of three *oomiaks*, full to the gunwales with tents, dogs, women, and children while the big, strong men paddled across the Bering Sea. One of the *oomiaks* had an Evinrude outboard motor, which if it wasn’t broken down, would tow one of the other *oomiaks* to relieve the paddlers, although we also saw them coming in under the sheer power of the paddlers. Loaded down as they were, they would make the treacherous Bering Strait crossing in high spirits. The tribes from King Island or the Little Diomede Island most of the time would paddle the twenty miles through the Bering Strait to the mainland. They were too poor to afford the luxury of an outboard motor. The trip from Saint Lawrence Island by pure, raw manpower would take from twenty to twenty-four hours, depending on the weather. Although they were expert on predicting weather ahead of time, nature sometimes turned the tables, and it would take perhaps a half day longer. And there were times when we would see some of the women taking a turn on the paddles, and that was to give the worn-out male a rest from the grueling task.

In mid-August, before the southwesters began, which would make crossing the Bering Strait in open boats too hazardous, the visitors would break camp and leave for their homes over a hundred miles away across
treacherous unprotected waters. Bad weather and oncoming wintry blasts from the north ended the fishing in late August or early September, and in 1918 we prepared to return to Teller for the winter and the opening of school. My grandparents asked if I could go with them to their village at Teller Mission as I had done before. They said they would bring me home in time for me to start school at Teller. I was allowed to go home with them which proved to be my downfall.

At the time I lived with them, my grandparents, Ootenna and Kina- viak, were still living an aboriginal lifestyle. My grandmother had three blue lines tattooed on her chin, the same as my mother had. The tatoos on the chin were to show that the woman was married and any prospective suitor who saw the tatoos would know what that meant. When my mother was growing into womanhood, the custom was fading. Their one-room igloo was atop a forty-foot bluff that sloped steeply toward the sea near the waterfall where Papa’s whaler and other ships loaded water in drums to take aboard ships. Theirs was a typical Eskimo dwelling. The main floor of the earth igloo was dug about three feet into the ground. The frame was a foundation of split driftwood covered with squared chunks of tundra that eventually sodded over. On the walls hung reindeer hides that kept out drafts. A skylight and a small window let in some light and the entrance was a low door about five feet high. As you opened the door to enter, you had to step down about two steps to the main floor, which was partly boards and partly earth.

I have often wondered since I grew up, how they could have lived in such conditions. The two windows, one a skylight, were both made of dried seal gut strips, stretched and sewn together before they were dry so one could pull the stitches really tight with the sinew that was used as thread and not tear the delicate intestines. Being transparent, the seal gut allowed in a certain amount of light. My grandmother also made waterproof parkas of the dried seal gut to be worn over a fur parka in rainy weather. Grandmother had made me one to wear when I went with my grandfather to hunt in the kayak. They used sealskin in one way or another on nearly every garment they wore. To prepare the hide they would of course scrape every vestige of blubber, then they would stretch it, and put either wooden pegs or nails at intervals to keep it taut while it dried. They also used sealskin with the hair taken off (which made it lightweight) for summer mukluks, for fancywork on parka trimmings, and for the dolls they made for their children. To get the fur off was a smelly procedure. They would soak the hide in human urine that they
saved in a large galvanized tub. We used to look forward to the end of the
sealskin tanning season so we wouldn't have all those smells to endure.

The sod igloo was a practical dwelling for the climate. The thick sod
walls kept out the wind and made it more practical to heat. Without a
fire though it became as frigid as a cold-storage room. In winter if you
set a bucket of water on the floor, ice would form before morning. About
four other Eskimo families lived in similar igloos in the village. There were
a number of other sod igloos scattered here and there in a partly ruined
state, probably vacated the generation before. Now there are scarcely any
sod igloos left such as we lived in when I lived with my grandparents. Those
that are left are decaying with time, just hollowed out places in the ground
overgrown with tall grass, and the whalebone and driftwood frames have
disappeared into splinters.

During the migration of my grandparents, they not only had to go
where there would be hunting and fishing but also where they could find
driftwood, for at this time in their lives the iron Lang stove was becoming
much in use as a cooking and heating unit. It was a modern innovation
compared with the soapstone oil lamps still in use by some of their neigh-
bours. There is always the struggle that comes from living in a cold country of
not having sufficient fuel to keep warm, but in my ancestors’ day they only
had the seal oil lamp made from soapstone. As they became more civilized,
they began to use the iron Lang stove, but that needed wood or coal or both.
The irony of it all would be that in less than seventy years the discovery of
oil and gas on the North Slope would occur less than 200 miles from Point
Hope where my grandparents began their migration south in their search
for food and lamp oil from the whales and seals they would hunt.

Few of the Alaska Natives who now inhabit the North remember
much about the early life of their parents let alone their grandparents. In
the past and during my early years there was little interest in the old tradi-
tions of the parents or grandparents, especially in the villages where there
was considerable western or Anglo influence. The older ones seemed to feel
that the younger ones couldn’t care less about their heritage, be it customs or
culture, and the younger generation had a lackadaisical attitude about what
life was like a generation or two ago. This happened to other aboriginal
people caught in the grip of fast-changing times.

When I lived with my grandmother and grandfather, I had the op-
portunity to experience firsthand how my Eskimo mother and her parents
lived, for they lived then just as they had for a hundred years. In their quiet, serene winter evenings the mothers would make their children toys to play with out of scraps of tanned hide and fur. One of the many things I learned to make and sew was a football such as they actually used to play in the game of Eskimo football. It was made by cutting one oblong piece of sealskin, eight inches wide by twenty inches long, then cutting two circles seven inches in diameter. You sewed the pieces together to make a ball and filled the cavity with reindeer hair. It made a very lightweight ball, and it did not make a player tired kicking it around. Another game they played during the winter months was called munna munna, and it went like this:

There were two teams, and each team made a circle in the snow about ten to twelve feet across. The circles were about one hundred feet apart. In the start of the game the ball was set halfway between the circles. After the referee held up his hand beginning the game, one player from each side had to kick the ball towards the circle of the opposing side. The idea was to kick the ball into the circle to score a point. At the end of the game, which sometimes lasted as long as daylight allowed, the team who scored most was the champ. This game was much like basketball in the U.S. The only difference was Eskimo football was played by kicking the ball and not using the hands at all.

My grandparents loved me dearly; they had pet names for me besides calling me by my Eskimo name, Wiana (pronounced Wee-ah-nah), they also called me Nah-long-me-u, which means “white man,” or King-a-lik, “the one with the high nose.” Eskimo names usually were descriptive of the person named, but not always. Some names don’t mean anything in particular. My grandfather would take me nearly everywhere he went. He would take me out in his kayak when he went to shoot ducks in the fall or to hunt a seal in spring. I went with him to hunt ptarmigan or Arctic hare on the tundra. Sometimes we would go to the beach below the waterfall, and I would help him gather driftwood that had been deposited on the beaches by a storm and that we needed badly for starting fires, cooking, and heating.

That year fall came early—the cold winter winds blowing down from the Arctic brought the first snowfall in September. By the end of that month the ground was frozen, and the snow was staying on the ground. October and November were usually windy and cold, and by mid-November the sea was frozen over with what they call in the North “young ice.” That year the young ice was getting thicker by the day.
The fall of 1918, of course, was also when the first great influenza epidemic swept the world, taking millions of human lives. Teller was not an exception, and many there took sick and died, just as they did the world over. There was no nurse or doctor within a hundred miles, and my father and a neighbor named Jimmy LaPierre went from house to house nursing the ill. Those two, along with Bill Maloney, an Irish man who also had a large family, helped bury the dead. All of my brothers and sisters were sick too, and when the new baby was born on the last day of November, he lived only a few hours. Papa baptized him, and he and Mama named him Albert Joseph Bernhardt, Junior. Papa made him a tiny casket, and they buried him on the hill back of Teller. For some unknown reason I never got the flu, but the loss of both my feet and legs was a direct result of the epidemic.

For the first month or so after the freezing over of the bay, my grandparents had not yet sent me home. There was little concern because travel would have been foolhardy in the beastly, bitter cold weather, with temperatures dipping down to thirty-five and forty below zero and colder and gales up to thirty and forty miles an hour. Then one day the wind calmed, and the snow ceased to blow, clearing the atmosphere. On this morning my family could look out from Teller and across the new glaring ice that sealed Port Clarence Bay, and for the first time in many days see Teller Mission hills on the other shore. Papa told my brother Tommy, who was eighteen years old, to hitch up the dogs and go see if everything was all right over at my grandparents’ igloo. It was not!

While Tommy was still a mile out on the ice heading for the mission, he saw no smoke rising from the igloos, and he could hear the howling of unfed malamutes. When he reached the village, the ravenous dogs lunged to the limit of their chains at him and his team as he drove by. As he passed igloo after igloo, he wondered if everyone was ill with the flu or perhaps even dead. Some of the dogs were frozen to death at their posts, some weak from hunger, and some partially covered over with drifted snow. The closer Tommy got to grandfather’s igloo, the more he began to worry. He tried not to think of the consequences. It was obvious that no one had stirred around the igloo for days for there was fresh snow all around but no tracks or footprints. He had to shovel away the drifted snow from around the door of the hut before he could open it. He looked around in the dimness, for there was very little light coming in from the side seal gut window and none from the skylight in the roof as the wind had blown a snowbank clear over the top
of the igloo. One of the first things Tommy thought as he entered was how very cold it was in the hut. No one was up or stirring, and it looked pretty much deserted inside.

I had been sleeping in the same bunk as my grandmother. One evening as she prepared to bank the fire with wood from the meager pile beside the stove, grandma had told me that grandpa had died in his bed. The next morning I awoke and grandma had not stirred yet when ordinarily she was up and had built a fire. I talked to her and shook her by the shoulder to try to waken her, but she was lifeless and her face was cold. So I gathered in my childish intuition that grandma, too, was dead. But I did not worry my little head for long, for I began to get drowsy, and a feeling of lethargy came over me. Whenever I would awaken, I would think about grandma again and wonder why she had died. After all she had not complained about being ill, but then grandmother did not complain about anything. She was “solid as a rock” to our clan.

I think by the next day I moved a reindeer skin and a blanket on the floor in front of the bunk where my grandmother lay and made a bed for myself. I wanted to be as near to grandma as possible. Even though I knew she was not able to give me physical comfort any longer, at least she was nearby.

I remember several times I tried to stand up, but I would fall in a heap on the floor. “What is going on?” I thought. “Why can’t I use my feet?” I didn’t get hysterical; I just lay back down and went to sleep for I was very drowsy this whole time. The hunger and cold I suffered would awaken me, and I would crawl on my hands and knees to the cupboard where my grandparents kept a meager supply of white man’s food, such as soda crackers and dried prunes. I would eat a few crackers and some dried prunes and then crawl back to my bed on the floor. After awhile, I didn’t make anymore trips to the cupboard for it was getting more cumbersome to drag my lower body to get there. Besides, I was losing strength everyday and perhaps by this time suffering from hypothermia, a condition where body and mind are too cold to function properly.

When Tommy arrived at the igloo to check on us, snow had drifted inside the door and my brother found me lying on the wood floor of the sod hut. The temperature was well below freezing, while the temperature outside was forty to forty-five below zero. There had been no fire built in the stove for several days. To Tommy it must have been like walking into a
deep freeze. Near the stove was a pail of water turned to solid ice, so Tommy, putting two and two together, figured I had been without heat in the hut for three or four days. When he went over to look at the grandparents, they were frozen as solid as stone. At one point I had evidently decided that I was going to go home, for Tommy said that I had all my outdoor weather clothing on, parka and mukluks.

After surveying this horrible scene and making a plan of action quickly in his mind, Tommy dashed over to the missionary’s quarters and made arrangements for them to bury the grandparents. He bundled me in reindeer skins, put me in the sled, and started his mercy mission back to Teller. After he got me home, he and Papa had to cut my mukluks down the side from top to sole to get them off my feet for my feet and lower extremities had swollen so badly, and they were beginning to turn blue-black in color as my body began to absorb heat from the room. I still have vivid memories of the horrible pain that began soon after Papa carried me into the house, put me to bed, and my limbs began to thaw. The warmth of our house and the broth that Papa was tenderly feeding me began to restore my circulation, hence my condition began to worsen almost by the hour. My feet and legs began to turn black and a new form of suffering took over my pain-racked body. I couldn’t tell which was worse, freezing or unfreezing! I screamed whenever anyone came towards the bed for it seemed that the least vibration would multiply the pain in my feet and legs. In a couple of days, realizing that gangrene was taking over rapidly, my father began to make preparations to take me to Nome in the hope of saving me from complete decay. The nearest doctor was at the Holy Cross Hospital one hundred miles away over the winter trail. There were no airplanes, of course, and with the sea frozen over, navigation was nonexistent. We had to go by dogsled.

The cold weather continued with the wind drifting snow, and Papa kept delaying our departure hoping the weather would moderate. Each evening just before darkness set in he would go out and look at the sky. “Maybe it will calm tonight and we can go tomorrow,” he would say to Mama. But it didn’t calm. After about three days of my almost-constant screaming with pain and the odor of rotting flesh permeating the room, he said to Mama, “The longer we stay here the more she will waste away. We will have to go in spite of the weather conditions.” It was a day of supreme crisis when my father and mother decided there was no other way but to make the trip to the hospital at Nome.
Papa’s friend Billy Marx, another German who was the U.S. Commissioner at Teller at the time, said, “You will never get her to Nome alive.”

Papa said, “God won’t let her die!” Since I had been brought home he had spent a lot of time on his knees, head bowed in prayer.

Besides Papa’s own team of dogs, a team was made up for a total of eleven of the best dogs in town—fast, obedient animals with the endurance to keep going long hours. A heavy freighting sled was loaded with camping equipment, supplies, warm clothes, and dog feed for a three-day trip. Mama made a reindeer-skin sleeping bag for me that was just my length. Papa dressed me in my fur parka, put me in the sleeping bag, wrapped me and my sleeping bag in heavy tarpaulin to help keep out the cold wind, and loaded me on the sled. I can still see my mother standing on the snowbank in the dreadful cold wind, eyes tearful, as we drove off in the grey overcast morning towards Cape Spencer and over the ice of Port Clarence Bay. I can still hear my father calling out to Mama, “Don’t worry, we will all be back.”

Tommy came with us, running ahead alongside our lead dog, Molly. After two or three miles of giving the team the usual encouraging “atta boy!” and “mush,” Tommy would join Papa on the back runners of the sled, one on each side. I don’t recall very much of the trip for I was in a state of delirium the major part of the time. I do recollect seeing the tops of willow branches showing above the snow now and then. I would count how many there were as we passed them, just to get my mind away from the pain in my legs, especially when the sled would bump over rough surfaces. The weather stayed around the thirty-five to forty degree below zero mark, with the windchill factor making it about fifty or sixty below zero. We were traveling in a world of complete whiteness, with a few branches of dry willows poking out here and there whenever we were traveling near the shoreline. Then traveling due south, all we could see around us were ice hummocks and snowbanks as we followed the coastline of the Bering Strait.

At first we traveled over the smooth sea ice that had been swept clear of snow by the constant wind just off the beach, and the going was fairly easy and close enough to the bluffs just south of Teller to give us shelter from the northwest wind. As we passed the bluffs at Point Riley and crossed over the land comprising Cape Spencer, we were traveling on the open expanse of the Bering Sea ice. We were struck by the full force of the northwest gale coming from the Chukchi Sea and East Cape, Siberia. The whirlwinds of blowing snow cut visibility to nothing at times. Papa had made the overland
trip to Nome several times and was pretty sure where he was in spite of
the blinding blizzard. At one point, believing we should be going more to
the west, he called, “Gee!”—the order for the dogs to go right. But Molly,
the leader, refused to go to the right and stopped and lay down on the ice.
“Tommy!” my father yelled to be heard above the wind, “go find out what’s
wrong with that leader!” She had never disobeyed before.

The wind was blowing so hard that my brother had to crawl on hands
and knees to get to the head of the team. He was trying to make Molly get
up and go when there was a sudden lull in the wind and the blowing snow
thinned for a moment. He saw, about twenty feet to the right, an open lead
of black choppy water. Had Molly gone that way, we would have been blown
into that wide crack in the ice for the surface of the ice was smooth as glass
in places. With the wind blowing as it was, our sled brakes would never have
held us from going right into the water, sled and all. No one would have ever
found us again or known what had happened to us. When Tommy got back
and reported the open water, Papa yelled, “Haw!” and Molly was ready. She
led the team to the left. Soon we were off the ice and crossing the snow-cov-
ered land between Port Clarence Bay and Norton Sound. We reached the fro-
zen sea again near Cape Douglas, where we spent the night in a shelter cabin
for winter travelers that was maintained by the Alaska Road Commission.

We were thirty miles from Teller as the crow flies, and Nome was still
seventy miles away. Papa gently carried me, reindeer sleeping bag and all,
into the one-room shack while Tommy hurried to build a fire in the Lang
stove. Tommy fed and unhitched the dogs and tied each one to a post with
his own chain where they could rest for the night. By the time Papa had
warmed up the stew that Mama had packed in coffee cans and cut the fresh
loaf of bread that Mama also had made the day before we left home, they
were almost too worn out by the strain and anxiety of the trip to eat. Papa
was more and more concerned as to whether there would be a spark of life
in me when we got to the hospital. The worry lines were getting deeper in
his forehead, and his eyes were getting to look sunken in their sockets. The
throbbing pain in my body never ceased. I had short spells of consciousness,
and I recall Papa saying to me, “Take this so you can have some fluids in
your body.” It was a teaspoon of whiskey in half a glass of water. This may
have helped my circulation and given me warmth too.

The storm was still blowing the next morning. We got an early start to
try to make another twenty or more miles and reach Cape Wooley by dark.
A Protestant missionary lived there, and Papa hoped he’d be hospitable so we would have a warm place to spend the night without having to camp in a cold shelter cabin. The lay of the coastline forced us to travel into the wind most of the day. The trail was rough with the rise and fall of snowbanks that slowed us down. As dusk was falling, we saw a light ahead, shining from a window in the missionary’s house. When we finally got there, he would not take us in. “There is an empty cabin a mile on down the trail,” he said. “Why don’t you go there.” The refusal of hospitality to a traveler in need of shelter was a violation of the code of the North. Papa was not a vindictive person, but he never forgot that missionary. For the second time in his life he was punished on account of his Germanic ancestry and accent. Being that the First World War was just very recently ended, some people still entertained thoughts that he was a German spy.

Worn out by the day’s hard travel, Papa didn’t argue that we were desperately in need of emergency shelter for the night but continued on. Tommy and my father found the cabin in the dark, got a fire going, and warmed up the stew my mother had prepared and put in lard cans. Tommy fed the dogs while Papa tended to me. He tried to make me eat a few spoons of soup, but he said I was in no mood to eat. I had not been given any medication; there was none to give. At this point as far as my mind can recall, I had only flashes of consciousness of what was going on.

There were only four hours of daylight so in order to make time, we had to begin our travel an hour before daybreak and end an hour or so after twilight. There were no stars or moonlight to go by, just the cold and the dark. After we ate the stew, my father stayed awake all night sitting next to my bed. He gave me a few sips of water. Tommy curled up in his sleeping bag on the bunk next to where Papa laid my pain-racked body in my reindeer sleeping bag. I was drifting in and out of a coma. Although I had no feelings of fear or apprehension of my condition, my father must have because I just happened to open my eyes and I saw him looking intently at the door. I glanced over and saw two older women dressed in their parkas and mukluks. I recognized them as friends of my mother who had passed on several years before. One was standing, and the other was on one bent knee. For some unknown reason it didn’t bother me even though I knew these two women were apparitions. Papa told me later that the apparitions were telling him that I was going to live through this ordeal.
We were on our way again an hour before daylight (at that time of year being about 10 AM). Unable to take nourishment I was weakening fast, and Papa was afraid I wouldn’t live through each day. Nome was still forty miles away. But for a change, Lady Luck was good to us. The weather had moderated overnight and there was little wind. The trail also was in better shape and the dogs loped along at a steady clip as if they knew that we were getting nearer our destination which was the hope and special prayers of a family and the whole population of the little town of Teller. As we were nearing Nome and dusk was beginning to fall, Papa saw a man with a small team up ahead. He was coming in our general direction. Wanting to waste no time in getting me to the hospital and having no idea in what part of town it was, Papa hailed down the first man he saw and both teams stopped. “I have a very sick little girl here and must get to the hospital without delay,” Papa said. “Can you direct me?” The man was friendly and willing to escort us in if we needed it, but Papa, hollered “Mush!” to Molly and with a fresh surge of hope thanked the man and drove on. As we arrived in the city of Nome, a streetlight here and there led us down Bessie Road. Papa could see the wooden cross on the spire of the Holy Cross Hospital, rising high above the surrounding snowbanks.

I have no memory at all of the last twelve hours on the trail. But when we reached the hospital and Papa took me from the sled and carried me into the hospital, I was partially revived by the disturbance of being picked up. I remember seeing a person all in white coming down the hall towards us. “I’m in heaven, Papa. I see an angel,” I whispered. It was a nun in white clothes. Immediately, of course, Doctors Welch and Neuman began to tend to me. They told my father that I would surely not have lasted another day. The doctors said, as they bared my little body of its clothing and saw the condition of my feet and legs, “They must come off.” And Papa said, “Then take them off!”

He stood by the operating table while they amputated my right leg at mid-thigh and the left leg just below the knee. Because of my deteriorated condition only a minimum of ether was used to put me under. It was not enough for during the operation I partially awakened and started to moan when I felt my body rocking to and fro as the surgeons sawed through the bones. They stopped until I was put out again.

I was in a critical condition for several days after the surgery, and Papa would hardly leave my bedside. The nuns would say, “You must have
something to eat Mr. Bernhardt,” or “You must get some rest.” The doctors
told my father later that one of two things pulled me through: either I had
a very strong constitution or the good Lord above thought I should have a
longer sojourn on this earth.

When it was certain that I would live, Papa sent Tommy home with
the news and to help care for those of the family who were sick with the
flu. While Papa and Tommy were with me at Nome, Jimmy LaPierre spent
quite a bit of time looking in on our family at home. Mary, my oldest sister,
had fallen down a snowbank and broken the upper bone in her right arm.
A good family friend, Sam Datos, a Greek who had been living at Teller for
several years and doing some gold mining in the creeks nearby, just hap-
pened to come into town and stopped at our house to see how things were.
Mama said Papa and Tommy had taken me to the Nome hospital on a mis-
sion to save my life, and here was poor Mary with a broken arm. Sam the
Greek (as we called him) said, “Let me take a look and see what we can do.”
Then he said, “Mama, get me some wooden slats off that potato crate and
some clean white cloth.” The break had happened that morning, and in a
few hours time the whole arm had begun to swell. Sam the Greek did such
a wonderful job on Mary’s arm that you couldn’t tell she ever had her arm
broken. In a few weeks she was able as ever to use the arm.

Once the poisons from the gangrene were out of my system, I began
to get well quickly and was alert to all the strange new things around me. I
never dreamed I would be in such a world as this: a real bed (we had wooden
bunks at home) and white sheets to sleep in, meals brought right to me in
bed, and if I needed anything at all I could ring a bell and a nurse would
come. Strangers were always coming to see me. They had heard about the
“little girl who was brought in by dog team from a long distance” and won-
dered if I had survived the ordeal. The nuns at the hospital made Christmas
a special celebration for me. At home my gifts might have been an orange
or an apple with some nuts and a small sack of hard candy in my Christmas
stocking, and stuck in the top a comb or a colorful hair ribbon. This par-
ticular Christmas was one I would never forget—even my room had signs
of a Merry Christmas. There was a bright red paper bell hanging in one
corner of the room, the window was draped with red and green crepe paper
streamers, and there were gifts of every description that a small girl would
ever ask for, from a great assortment of dolls, to teddy bears, to books and
puzzles and games. One man even gave me an RCA Victor phonograph that
you cranked by hand and an assortment of records to play on it, including some records sung by the famous Caruso. The phonograph was one of those popular in that day, with a large metal horn attached to amplify the sound. When I was well enough to have visitors, the pharmacist at the Nome drug store made frequent visits to see me and brought me picture books and toys. He was later to play an important part in my life, indirectly.

The Lomen brothers, Ralph and Carl, well-known businessmen at Nome, came to see how I was progressing. They would also bring toys and storybooks, which I could not read since I had not begun the first grade of school. The four Lomen brothers and their father, Judge Lomen, were synonymous with the early history of the city of Nome, and, in fact, the whole Seward Peninsula. They held large business interests in the area and some of them became members of the territorial legislature of that generation. Another important man of the era was a second district congressman who took time out from his busy political schedule to come to the hospital to see me. He encouraged me by saying, “Bessie, one of these days when you get some new legs, I will run you a race.”

But one day about a week after I was permitted to have a visitor or two, Papa said, “There’s a man who would like to see you. You don’t know him, but he knows all about you!” Then he told me about the man with the small team of dogs who passed us on the snowy trail on our way into Nome to the hospital. His name was Jake Kristy, a miner who lived about seven miles out in the hills in a cabin all by himself. Papa went on to explain that he was a former shipmate on a whaler in the Arctic who also stayed on in the great land of Alaska to try his luck at the mining game. The two renewed their friendship and became good friends.

When I was able to sit up in the bed, I noticed that I had no balance. I could not sit erect and kept falling backwards. This puzzled me. Then one day as I was thinking about losing my feet and legs, I asked my father if, in time, my feet and legs would grow back on. He gave me a quizzical look and then quickly said, “We will wait and see.”

My father went home to Teller in January, saying as he left, “I will be back in a few weeks, and by that time you will be ready to come home.” He then returned home before the spring thaw while the trail was still in shape to travel over. He had hoped to take me back home to Teller, but the doctors thought it best to give me another month or two, depending on how much improvement my right stump needed. They had to operate on it a second
time. The doctors feared they had not removed all the gangrene. The doctors and nurses were amazed at the agility I was showing in getting around over the bed and how I would climb from bed to chair and vice versa, using my arms and hands for every move in transporting my body. The doctors said that if anyone believed in the evolutionary form of human progress, I was a good example of proof of it for I was “performing like a little monkey.”

I was ready to leave the hospital by the end of April, four and a half months after I had been admitted in such critical condition.

Arrangements were made for me to stay at the Lutheran Children’s Home. I was in a wheelchair by this time and able to get around pretty well with it. Life in the orphanage was quite an experience in itself. Most of the children, like myself, were of mixed blood, part Eskimo or Indian. We all got along like one big family. I especially liked Sunday School, perhaps because we had music. There was an organ and a piano, and someone would play accompaniment while we all sang hymns. But the songs weren’t like the ones we sang at Mary’s Igloo Catholic church with the nuns or at the tiny Teller parsonage. One of the first things I did when I returned home from Nome was to teach my brothers and sisters the snappy church songs that I learned at the Lutheran Children’s Home. I loved to belt out the hymns I’d memorized. I sure put pep into such songs as “At the Cross,” “Bringing in the Sheaves,” and more. I had learned the songs by heart. It used to provoke the rest of the family that I should be so enthusiastic about the whole Protestant religion. Compared to our solemn, hushed, quiet, and calm services, my father and mother felt that I was well on the way to becoming an evangelist. I felt strongly about religion, for a young child, and still do to this day.

When the ice went out in June, I was ready to go home but had to wait for a ship that was going to Teller and points north. The first one was the Bessie B, a small two-masted schooner named for me. The captain of the little ship was John Hegness, an able seaman who had sailed those waters for several years and a friend of my father. Years later when John Hegness became captain of the mail boat he would bring my prostheses all crated in sturdy wooden boxes to Teller from Nome where they had been brought by steamer from Seattle without the usual high freight charges, for he would say to Papa, “I want to do this for the bravest little girl in all of Alaska.”

In 1919 there was no jetty at the beach at Nome as there is today. There was only a timber ramp on the beach down which boats were launched into the surf. There were a half dozen of us in the Coast Guard dory that was to
take us to the *Bessie B*, which was anchored about a half mile offshore. We all wore life jackets. A Coast Guard life-saving crew assisted with the launching, and they were rowing as hard as they could to get beyond the breakers when a high wave upset the dory. I was rescued by Chief Bosun Tom Ross, then commander of the U.S. Coast Guard Station. For the third time in eight months I came near to losing my life. Perhaps my Eskimo and German ancestors, both hardy peoples, endowed me with certain elements of survival. Papa always said though that God had a divine purpose for letting me live and that I should give my life special purpose and not grow up to be just an ordinary person. He set high standards for all of us.

Once aboard the *Bessie B*, we headed northwest past Sledge Island, a shelter island used by ships when the northwestern blew hard, and then into the unpredictable waters of the Bering Strait. The next morning found us headed around Cape Spencer into Port Clarence Bay and then Grantley Harbor.

Back in Teller everyone from grownups to my contemporaries were anxiously awaiting to see what the big city had done to their homegrown girl. I never wanted anyone to think that I was any different from any of them, or especially that I was handicapped. I wanted them to know that I was able to do things for myself. The word spread like wildfire that I came home from the big city with tons of toys, and there were comments such as, “Can you imagine anyone owning thirty-eight dolls and teddy bears?” There wasn't room in our house to put all the things I brought home, so Papa and Mama put some of them in the attic of the cold room, and the rest I divided up among my sisters and brothers. Besides, by that time, I was slowly phasing myself out of the “playing house stage.” I began more and more to want to play outdoors and be active with the rest of the children. Toys and dolls were for recuperating from a hospital stay.

When I left the hospital for home, they gave me a wheelchair which I learned to use with great dexterity, and after two and a half years of manipulating the wheelchair, I became quite expert in maneuvering it. I was eight years old when I entered the first grade of school, which was the year before I got my first prosthesis and learned to walk. Walter Marx, the U.S. Commissioner’s son, who was a big strong boy and in the eighth grade, would carry me to school. Papa or Mama would carry me when the weather wasn’t too vicious. My brother David was only ten years old so could hardly be expected to do so. I remember on stormy days when the blizzard would
blow so hard, you couldn't see the schoolhouse from our house which was only a hundred yards away. Papa would tie a hauser rope from our house to the schoolhouse as a guide for us to hang on to so we wouldn't lose each other in the storm.

Until being fitted with my first artificial limbs when I was nine years of age, I got around in a wheelchair or sometimes by crawling, using my hands. It was easier and quicker to get down on the floor and scoot than to maneuver the unwieldy wheelchair around the crowded house. I soon learned to figure out the easiest and quickest way to get from one place to another for something that I wanted. I don't remember ever being sad or feeling sorry for myself because I'd lost my legs. I think it was because of my parents' attitude. When I would be sitting at the window and watching the other kids playing, I'd laugh because they were laughing and having fun.

The druggist at the Nome Drug Store had a sister in Pennsylvania who was married to a man who worked at the Union Trust Company Bank in Pittsburgh. In a letter the druggist told his sister about me and the accident that I had had. He kept them informed of my progress and my eventual release from the hospital and return home. The pharmacist's sister and her husband were Edward C. Griggs and Matilda Griggs of Pittsburgh, and they had no children. About a year after I left the hospital, my father received a letter from Mr. and Mrs. Griggs with an offer to adopt me. They told him of all the opportunities they had to offer me to make my life a useful one through the educational facilities that would be available to me. Papa answered and thanked the man for his kindness and said, "But I can't let her go. She is one of us. I'm responsible for her being here, and I'll take care of her as long as I can."

In his next letter then Mr. Griggs asked if they could send me things that I needed and pay for my education when I got ready for high school. So Uncle Ed and Aunt Matilda, as they wished me to call them, sent things that I otherwise would not have had. After I entered the second grade, I began writing little letters to Uncle Ed and he would write me in return. He became like a second father to me, and all through my adolescent and adult years, I depended on him for moral support when I needed it. I still have some of the letters he wrote me on Union Trust Company Bank stationery.

Another great man in my life was Ralph Lomen, whose family had large business interests in northern Alaska. One day when I was eight years
old he came to visit my father. While they sat and talked, he saw me looking out the window at the other kids playing outside. He said, “Albert, isn’t it about time that Bessie had some legs so she can get out and enjoy herself with the rest of them?”

“We don’t have the money, Ralph. I have written letters of inquiry to two companies in the States and the price is beyond my means.”

“Go ahead and order them, and I will pay the bill,” Ralph said.

“I can’t accept charity, Ralph. It’s my responsibility.”

“It’s not charity at all. Consider it an exchange of favors. Someday maybe you can do something for me or someone else who needs it. After all the things you’ve done for others, it’s time someone did something for you.”

When it came time to measure me for the prosthetics, Papa laid me, undressed, on a large sheet of butcher paper on the kitchen table and drew an outline of my body on it. Every few inches he would measure the circumference of my stumps and write on the paper, “four inches around” or “seven inches here” and so on.

Thus, in the summer of 1920, the mail boat finally arrived at Teller. My father brought home to our summer camp (across the harbor from Teller), two large crates. I watched as he uncrated two large boxes made of rough lumber. As he took the crates apart, he said to me, “Here are the legs that you will walk on.” My feelings were mixed as I wondered what they would look like after all the butcher paper wrappings were finally taken away, revealing the contents. I thought to myself, “They look like heavy pieces of machinery.”

As he unwrapped one leg and then the other, they began to look better. I said to myself, “These are the parts of my legs that have been missing for over three years!” The manufacturer of the limbs was the J. F. Rawley Company of Chicago. They included a short letter saying they hoped I would be comfortable in these new limbs. But before I could try them on for a fitting, my father built in our girls’ room two parallel bars, or railings, made of two twenty-two foot long wooden poles fastened to the floor at each end. He set them high enough so that I could hold on to them as I walked between.

Being that there was no hospital or clinic within a hundred miles, my father had already figured out that he would be my therapist. And he was a good one. He explained to me that as a team working together, it could be possible for me to walk on this unsightly pair of manufactured prostheses.
They were quite heavy as they were made mostly of steel, wood, and heavy leather, and the feet were of thick felt. He first set a chair at each end of the parallel bars. He sat me, a tiny nine year old, at one end, then helped me in the process of attaching the prostheses to my body via straps, lacings, and braces. He had done such a good job measuring my limbs that the fit was almost perfect.

Papa was patient as he told me to walk to him at the other end of the bars. For weeks upon weeks, I practiced walking back and forth day after day. I took some tumbles, but he always encouraged me by saying, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Finally, one day there was only one bar to help me with balancing and walking. I guess we were both amazed and happy that I would finally one day actually walk. After several weeks of this Papa said, “Betty, you have no bars to help you today” for he had removed the last one.

I got up from my chair and bravely, with determination, walked to my father who sat in the other chair twenty-two feet away. And I did it without any assistance. At this point in time a thought came into my mind from the Bible when Jesus said to the old lame man, “Take up thy bed and walk.” From that day on I never have used a cane or crutches. I’ve always walked on my “own two legs.”

My new legs seemed a hindrance in some ways such as scrambling up a ladder, which I could do as quickly as a monkey without them. But soon I was just as rough and ready as the rest of the kids. We used to slide down snowbanks in the wintertime on a small piece of reindeer skin. My right leg had a bolt of steel to make a knee joint with a nut on the end to hold it together. Sometimes when I was playing, the nut would come unscrewed and the bolt would fall out. The lower half of my leg would go sliding down the snowy slope. I’d take off after it, find the nut and bolt, put it back together, and go on sliding or playing “King of the Mountain.” There were times too when a strap would break while I was out playing, and I would make a quick repair—enough to get me home in order to do a better job. In the spring it was worse for it was disastrous if and when I got my feet wet. The glue they used to put the toe-part of the foot to the main foot (which was of heavy, solid grey felt) would get wet, and it took a lot of drying out to put it back together. After a couple of years of hard usage, the artificial legs that Mr. Lomen had bought were ruined by my playing in the wet snow. I was also outgrowing them.
I had been writing to Uncle Ed and Aunt Matilda since I was nine years old, which was my second year of school. My Uncle Ed was smart when he insisted to my father that I write to him at the beginning of my education even though I could write only a few simple lines at first. In that way he kept up with the progress I was making in school. This also gave him an idea of what made me tick. And, I suppose, to see if I would be worth sponsoring in the furthering of my education. He often complimented me on my interesting letters and said I seemed very “observant.” Uncle Ed and Aunt Matilda never had children of their own, and I may as well have been their adopted child for they wanted to do so much for my welfare.

In one of my many letters to Uncle Ed, I mentioned the fact that in the wintertime we received wonderful radio reception at Teller, and some nights we could get just about any large city in the Northern Hemisphere; Russian, German, Japanese, English, and some large broadcasting stations in the United States came in clear as a bell. Every Saturday night, on our old battery-run Philco, we listened to the National Barn Dance from KNX Los Angeles. And we nearly always had a roomful of neighbors. I especially pointed out to my uncle that we could receive KDKA, a powerful Westinghouse station in Pittsburgh, on certain nights. He was pretty excited about this news, and right away he wrote back and said he knew the people who owned the station. Since we received it so clear, he suggested, “Why not make an appointment to say a few words to you over the air?”

The appointment was made over a month in advance. One night in February 1929, we, at Teller, Alaska, sat ourselves down near the old Philco with the dial set on the spot where KDKA Pittsburgh would come in. Squeaks, squawks, and interferences of all kinds nearly deafened our ears! But we didn’t give up. Papa was the engineer at the radio, and he tried everything to find the station. Nothing but interference! I guess, according to the powers that be, I was not supposed to hear my uncle’s voice, let alone know him in person, which never happened.