Alaska's Daughter

Pinson, Elizabeth

Published by Utah State University Press

Pinson, Elizabeth.
Alaska's Daughter: An Eskimo Memoir of the Early Twentieth Century.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9313.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9313

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=202002

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
With the coming of aviation to remote regions of Alaska, the demand for dried salmon for dog feed began to dwindle as dogs were no longer needed except for local travel. By the early thirties mail and supplies began to come to us by air, and long trips by dog team were getting to be uncommon. Before the airplane, summer travel was mostly by water because overland treks were virtually impossible. The way was blocked by the countless lakes and ponds and mosquito-breeding swamps that filled the valleys between impassable mountain ranges.

In the winter it was easier. There was a network of trails all through the North with roadhouses about every twenty to twenty-five miles, or a day’s travel apart. A fast trip from Teller to Fairbanks, over 500 miles, might take fifteen to twenty days, weather permitting. It took weeks longer if one became stormbound on the way. The roadhouses charged several dollars a night for lodging, and meals were a dollar apiece. The food was often poorly prepared by a slovenly cook. Sleeping quarters were usually unheated, and the bed only a hard mattress laid on board slats in a bunk, and you furnished your own sleeping bag. Travelers in the Alaskan bush, understandably, were quick to take to the air.
Alaska, with its vast distances, swamps and mountains and forests, great lakes and swift rivers, frozen muskegs and springtime runoffs, was a difficult country through which to build and maintain highways and railroads. Any wealth found in the North was dependent upon some form of transportation to bring it out. Dogs and snowshoes in winter and river steamers in the summer were not the answer. Aviation was. The airplane might well have been invented for the sole benefit of Alaska. It was love at first sight and a happy marriage for all concerned.

In the beginning the flimsy old crates of wood and fabric, with their short range and undependable engines, made flying over unmapped, unsettled country extremely hazardous. There were no aids to aerial navigation other than natural landmarks—river bends and towering mountains—by which the pilot found his way from point to point. Magnetic compasses were erratic and almost useless in a region so heavily mineralized as many parts of Alaska are. There were few instruments available for blind flying, and fewer men who knew how to use them. The prudent rule was that when the weather was bad, you stayed on the ground. If caught aloft by fog, blowing snow, or bad weather, you got back down as quickly as possible and made yourself comfortable until it was safe to fly again. Bush pilots always carried emergency rations of food and warm clothing in case they had to wait out a storm.

In no place else in the world has air transportation meant so much as it does in Alaska. Over the last fifty years every other person in the state of Alaska has traveled by air, especially so in the northern half where there are no roads or trains. Alaskan bush pilots are known for their ingenuity. In the wilds or primitive areas almost any place where a pilot has twice made a safe landing is regarded as a landing field. Alaskan flyers are among the world’s best, being in a land where fog, whiteouts, and blizzards can wipe out landmarks on which many bush pilots have had to depend. In the early days of flying in Alaska, the U.S. Weather Bureau and the U.S. Signal Corps cooperated closely in giving reports to their stations scattered widely over the territory. It was not until 1929 that the U.S. Weather Bureau inaugurated weather reports for planes. So there was no guessing, and a pioneering bush pilot had to have more than an ordinary amount of resourcefulness, courage, and instinctive good judgment.

A private pilot for a mining company operating on the slopes of the Endicott Mountains on the Koyukuk River northwest of Fairbanks and a handful of Native boys and men cleared the rocks from a space just wide
enough for a runway on a mountainside so that he might land uphill at about a forty-five degree angle. When the wind conditions in the canyon were right, he could land and takeoff. Once, when coming in for a landing, he saw what looked like a large boulder in the middle of his two-by-four field. Seeing that, the pilot thought, “Now where do I land?” Taking a once-over for a closer look, he discovered it was a big black bear, which he frightened away by buzzing low over the field.

My brother Tony flew commercially in Alaska for over eighteen years. Tony and his compatriots in the flying business in Alaska, were literally flying bird-men—they flew instinctively half the time. They landed and took off from seemingly impossible places in an emergency or as circumstances permitted—on mountainsides, river bars, mud flats, gravel beaches, or glaciers—and considered this all in a day’s work. They knew they had to do this if they were to fly. Good landing fields or aids to commercial aviation were (and still are in most of northern Alaska) few and far between. When Tony was flying supplies in from Kotzebue or Nome to the Kennicott Mining Company at Ambler, he used skis in winter, wheels in summer, and pontoons to land on rivers and sloughs. He had his air taxi service for many years, doing business as Bernhardt Air Service out of Kobuk, Alaska. He had much competition from other bush pilots and Wein Air Service. In the mid-seventies the small outfits crowded each other out, and Tony sold his Cessna 180 and his Heliocourier and, later on, his Piper Super Cub. In 1987 he retired, and he lived in Hilo, Hawai‘i, for many years.

Tony, besides operating his own air taxi service, was appointed by Governor Egan to the Fish and Wildlife Commission and held that post for several years. On top of that, he was a licensed big game guide for his part of Alaska, which took in all of the northern Seward Peninsula, the Brooks Range, the western part of the North Slope, Kotzebue, and Barrow. He took many famous people from the south forty-eight as far east as New York, Florida, and Chicago on the hunt of their lives. Whatever game they chose to hunt, whether it be wolf, bear, polar bear, Dahl sheep, mountain goat, or walrus, he knew where to go to get their prize trophy.

Steamboat travel on the Yukon, Tanana, Koyukuk, and Kuskokwim in the summer was much safer and more comfortable than winter travel, but still slow compared to flying. For instance, going from Teller the one hundred miles to Nome as the crow flies, we were three days on the trail when Papa took me there by dogsled that time to have my amputations.
Returning on the *Bessie B* took a day and a half. But in 1932 the first time I flew from home to Nome, we were in the air only an hour. So the convenience of flying was obvious.

All things considered, the benefits of air travel far outweighed the dangers and lack of comfort connected with those flimsy three-seater airplanes. What made the difference was the very special breed of pilot that developed air travel. They were the survivors of the early years of Alaskan flying, men who profited by their own mistakes and of others not so lucky. Even today, with the latest and best of equipment, the North will kill the reckless and incompetent. The bush pilots who continued to live were the cautious, methodical men who kept their aircraft in top condition, filtered their gasoline several times, respected the weather and the country over which they flew, and took to the sky only when the odds were in their favor. Eventually, though, most of the early day flyers died at their profession. It was just that some lasted a bit longer than others. Usually the “killer factor” was the unpredictable weather, something over which the pilot had no control—fog, whiteouts, wing and propeller icing, and blowing snow.

Carl Ben Eielson was such a pilot. We got to know him well at Teller. In fact, we watched him take off from there on his last flight. Born of Norwegian parents in North Dakota in 1897, Ben Eielson learned to fly as a cadet in the U.S. Army in the closing months of the First World War. After barnstorming around the country for a time with a flying circus, he returned to college to complete an education interrupted by the war. While at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., Ben met Alaska’s congressional delegate, Dan Sutherland. His interest in the North was kindled by stories told by the former sourdough, and when Sutherland offered him a job teaching science at the Fairbanks High School, he took it. Ben got there in September of 1922.

In the North people soon learned that he was a pilot. A group of Fairbanks businessmen, impressed by a flight of four army planes from Washington, D.C. to Nome in the summer of 1920, believed that the future of Alaska would be best served by air transportation. They put up the money to buy a war surplus JN-4 training plane, powered by an OX-5 engine. The crated *Jenny* arrived in Fairbanks on an Alaska Railroad flatcar in late June of 1923. Assembled by Eielson and his backers, it was soon taking passengers aloft for $15 a ride. The cost of the *Jenny* and its shipping charges were paid for in the first ten days. It was the first airplane to fly in the interior of Alaska.
When a mine owner asked Ben if he could fly some machinery parts to his mine, six days away by trail, Ben said, “I can give it a try.” He flew there in an hour, landed on a sand bar in a river, unloaded the machinery, and returned to Fairbanks. This was the birth of commercial aviation in Alaska.

That fall Ben returned to Washington. With the aid of Delegate Sutherland, he arranged for a mail contract with the Post Office Department to fly an experimental mail route from Fairbanks to McGrath, nearly 300 miles to the southwest. The contract called for ten round trip flights, twice each month, to start in January of 1924. An army airplane would be used, a DeHavilland. The pay would be two dollars a mile, half the cost to move the mail by dog team.

The DeHavilland, an open cockpit biplane, arrived by sea from the States and went by rail to Fairbanks during the winter. It was powered by a Liberty engine with four times the power of the OX-5 in the Jenny. Ben equipped the new airplane with skis made by a local carpenter. On the morning of February 21, 1924, with the temperature at twenty-five degrees below zero, he took off from the Fairbanks ballpark with 500 pounds of mail. Flying down the Tanana River to Nenana, then up the Kantishna to Lake Minchumina, he followed the north fork of the Kuskokwim to McGrath. He landed there on the frozen Takotna three hours after leaving Fairbanks. The same trip by dog team normally took twenty days.

Getting a late start for the return trip, Ben reached Fairbanks after dark. The ballpark landing field was outlined by bonfires that had been lighted when his engine was heard coming in the distance. He hit a tree while landing, and the first scheduled air mail flight in Alaska ended with the DeHavilland wrecked. The damage was not serious, and the airplane was flyable in time for the next scheduled flight to McGrath. The following six trips were made without incident, but when coming in for a landing after the eighth flight Ben struck a soft spot on the field and the DeHavilland was badly wrecked. He believed it could be repaired, but the post office department canceled the remaining two flights of the contract and the army plane was shipped back to the States.

Soon other airplanes were brought North to be flown by other pioneering pilots. In 1926 Ben Eielson was hired by the Australian explorer Sir George Hubert Wilkins to be one of the pilots in an Arctic expedition he was organizing. In a single-engine Fokker the two made several flights from Fairbanks to Point Barrow far out over the Arctic Ocean ice pack and
were the first to do so. They had no navigational instruments other than a magnetic compass, an air speed indicator, and a watch. They proved that airplanes could be flown in the Arctic and that landings and takeoffs could be made on the ice pack.

In April of 1928 Wilkins and Eielson took off from Point Barrow in a Lockheed Vega monoplane. Their destination was Spitsbergen by way of the Arctic Islands and northern Greenland. After a stormy flight of 1,100 miles, with Ben at the controls for a solid twenty hours and twenty minutes, they landed at Spitsbergen. For their accomplishment Wilkins was knighted Sir Hubert by King George V of England, and Eielson was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Harmon Trophy by President Herbert Hoover.

Two months later Eielson and Wilkins were on their way to Antarctica by ship. With them was the Vega they’d flown from Alaska to Spitsbergen and another airplane. They traveled on a Norwegian whaler to Deception Island, 700 miles south of Cape Horn, and when the two Vegas were put ashore, they were the first airplanes in the Antarctic. In late November 1928 Ben made history’s first Antarctic flight. A few days before Christmas he and Sir Hubert flew 1,200 miles over the Antarctic Ocean, discovering six previously unknown islands.

Back in Alaska in 1929 Eielson bought out the Fairbanks Airplane Corporation that his friend Noel Wien had organized several years earlier. His plans were to pick up freight and passengers and to service every town that offered a place to land. Business was good and the company did well.

In late October 1929 word was received that an American trading schooner, the Nanuk, commanded by Olaf Swenson of Seattle, Washington, had been caught in the ice off North Cape, Siberia. She was carrying a crew and several passengers, among them Swenson’s eighteen-year-old daughter, Marion, and a cargo of a million dollars worth of furs. The market was falling and each day the value of the skins declined. The owners offered Eielson’s company $50,000 to pick up the cargo and passengers and fly them back to Alaska. Ben’s intent had been to stick to the management end of the business, but the offer was a challenge that was too much for his adventurous nature, so he decided to participate personally. With a mechanic, Earl Borland, he left Fairbanks for Teller in a Hamilton cabin monoplane that had good carrying capacity. We met them as they came in and landed on the Grantley Harbor ice. They set up headquarters at one of the roadhouses. The frozen-in Nanuk was 400 miles away on the north coast of Siberia. The
day after arriving in Teller the weather was good and Eielson and Borland took off for Siberia. Landing on the ice beside the three-masted schooner, they loaded on six of the passengers, including Captain Swenson and his daughter, and $100,000 worth of furs and started back. Bad weather forced them down at a Chukchi village, but four days later they were able to make it back to Teller.

Then a wild northwesterly blew in. Day after day Ben and the other pilot, Frank Dorbandt, who was helping move the furs and the crew of the Nanuk back from Siberia, sat on the ice at Teller awaiting a break in the weather. It was the first week in November with only a few hours of daylight, and each day that passed, there was less. In another week there would be no daylight at all at North Cape—just a very few hours of dusk—and in an hour or so after takeoff it would be dark again. Impatience gnawed at Eielson. After six years of Arctic flying, in which he’d helped make most of the rules, he violated the most important, caution.

On the morning of November 9, we watched Eielson and Borland take off and vanish into the gray sky over Port Clarence Bay, not realizing that we would never see Carl Ben Eielson and Earl Borland alive again. About fifteen minutes later Frank Dorbandt took off on the same mission. He returned three hours later as he said visibility became nil, and weather conditions became worse as the day progressed. By evening there was a blizzard blowing, the wind gusting to sixty miles per hour. Frank Dorbandt and his mechanic, Clark Bassitt, put their plane in a makeshift hangar (we called it a garage) built on the harbor ice. It was a framework of two-by-fours with a tarpaulin stretched over the top and sides. It had burned down one afternoon, and they had to rebuild it. No one was hurt, and the plane was pulled out in time to save it. The rest of the month of November and all of December and January passed with no word of the missing flyers, other than wireless reports from the Nanuk that they had never arrived.

Teller was the headquarters for the searching aircraft. On some days there were as many as six aircraft on the ice of different types and models. There was one Canadian pilot, Pat Reid, aiding in the search. Also there were two Russian Junker planes with grizzly Russian pilots and mechanics who were real friendly and jovial. They liked to talk to us young people who would stand around and watch the activity and the planes coming and going. They would only speak a word or two of English but used sign language along with Russian words. Our American mechanics always had a pot
of coffee brewing on their Coleman stoves in the hangar, and the Russian pilots seemed to crave our American coffee. They would give us kids a taste of their dark bread and hardtack (a sort of large round soda cracker).

I kept a personal diary of the drama after the Nanuk froze in the ice in Arctic Siberia and as its crew and the million dollars in furs were rescued by daring Alaskan pilots. These entries attest to the terrible weather conditions over the winter months and also what dedicated individuals those American, Canadian, and Russian pilots were in their rescue efforts:

Diary of Eielson and Borland Rescue, Winter 1929–1930

October 29, 1929, Tuesday—Pilot Frank Dorbandt took off for North Cape, Siberia at 8:30 AM. He arrived at the ship at 4:30 PM.

October 30, Wednesday—Ben Eielson took off for North Cape with fair weather in the offing.

October 31—Both planes left North Cape with one ton furs and six passengers from ship. Stopped at Chukchi village four days. Too stormy to continue journey to Teller.

November 4—Both Eielson and Dorbandt took off from Chukchi village, Eielson going straight to Nome with crew off the Nanuk and furs. Dorbandt stopped here (Teller) for 15 minutes then went on to Nome with four of the crew from ship. Both pilots returned to Teller same day.

November 5—Airplane garage caught on fire about 9 PM. Mechanics Earl Borland and Clark Bassitt put it out. Nearly all the canvas was burned.

November 9—Pilot Dorbandt hopped off for North Cape for more furs and the rest of the crew of Nanuk at 8:30 AM. Ben Eielson and mechanic Earl Borland had left 15 minutes earlier. It started to storm after Dorbandt left. He returned at 11:30 AM on account of poor visibility.

November 16—Pilot Frank Dorbandt and Clark Bassitt were going to hop off for Siberia in search of Ben and Earl as nothing has been heard of their whereabouts yet. Just as they were taking off, one of the skis got loose and the plane fell on the ice. It didn’t get damaged any.

November 27—Pilot Dorbandt took off for Siberia to try to locate Ben and Earl but had to return on account of stormy weather.

November 28—Pilot Joe Crosson arrived here from Fairbanks and Nome to help search for Ben and Earl.
November 30—Pilot Crosson left for North Cape in search of Ben Eielson and Earl Borland. Returned 15 after 2 PM on account of stormy weather and fog.

December 3—Pilot Joe Crosson and Frank Dorbandt hopped off for North Cape to locate lost flyers. Were forced to return again.

December 6—Pilots Dorbandt and Crosson took off again for the rescue. They got as far as Little Diomede Island but were forced to return again at 1:30 PM.

December 8—Pilots Dorbandt and Crosson tried to go to Siberia but just as Dorbandt was lifting off, he dropped a ski and was forced to the ground.

December 10—Pilot Barnhill and Fred Moller in a Standard plane from Fairbanks arrived here at 25 to 11 AM.

December 11—Pilot Gillam and Pilot Ed Young, a Canadian, the former in a Stinson and latter in a Steerman, arrived here 15 after 2 PM. They came from Fairbanks and Nome.

December 13—All the planes went up for a spin, Dorbandt, Crosson, Barnhill, Gillam, and Young. Too cloudy to go anywhere. The ice field at Teller became a busy airfield.

December 18, Wednesday—All four planes took off for North Cape in search of Eielson at 10:15 AM. Pilot Joe Crosson was first, then Barnhill, Ed Young with Gus Masik, and Gillam was last. They all were forced to return on account of poor visibility. Pilot Mat Neminen and mechanic Alonzo Cope arrived here not long after those four planes took off. He left Cope here and Mat left 15 to 11 AM.

December 19—Pilots Crosson and Gillam in their Stinsons took off for North Cape at 9:30 AM. They both made it to a small Chukchi village along the Siberian coast where they last heard the hum of the ill-fated Hamilton. Stayed overnight, next morning Gillam made it to the ship 2:30 PM.

December 20—No news of the whereabouts of Crosson.

December 21—Crosson reached the ship, Nanuk, the next day.

December 22—Pilot Ed Young and Mr. Masik hopped off for North Cape at 25 after 10 AM. Forced to return, storms encountered.

January 25—Reported that the ill-fated Hamilton was sighted by Joe Crosson and Harold Gillam while flying around 50 miles east of Nanuk. The plane was badly wrecked. Motor was torn completely from cabin and lay 100 feet away. Parts of tail lay 300 feet from cabin.
Gasoline tins and other stuff scattered in all directions. Scene of crash seven miles from a Native village.

January 26—Pilot Joe Crosson flew over the wreck. Pilot Vic Ross arrived here in Standard plane with load of gas from Nome at 4 PM.

January 27—Both Fairchilds took off for North Cape at 15 to 10 AM. Pilot Young and mechanic Macauley, Pilot Reid with mechanic Hughes, two Canadian pilots.

January 27—Pilots Ed Young and Pat Reid in Fairchilds arrived ship at 2:30 PM.

January 28—Two Russian planes arrived Nanuk. Six planes there altogether.

January 28—Have nine Native men digging for bodies. Found Earl’s helmet and mitt.

January 29—No flying to ship as visibility is poor. Foggy up there, fine here.

February 7—Captain Pat Reid arrived here at 2 PM from Siberia with Captain Milovsov of the S.S. Stavapol (Russian ship).

February 10—Captain Pat Reid, alone, made attempt to fly to Cape Serdge with gas at 9 AM. Got as far as Lost River (on our mainland), too foggy across the straits, so was forced back.
February 10—After unloading gas from plane, pilot Pat Reid took off for Nome at 10:30 AM.

February 12—Captain Pat Reid and his mechanic Hughes arrived here from Nome at 9:30 AM. Didn’t even stop engine, just loaded on gas, and Reid alone took off for Cape Serdge at 10 AM.

February 12—Pilot Reid was forced back again at 11 AM accounting to poor visibility over straits.

February 16—Earl Borland’s body found, dug up by Russians. Body was four feet under snow and lying fifty feet from motor. Had instantaneous death.

February 18—Colonel Ben Eielson’s body found, or rather dug up. Body lying six feet under snow and 200 feet from Earl Borland. Also was killed instantaneously.

February 20—Pilot Reid with 16 cases of gas left for Cape Serdge at 15 after 10 AM. Returned at 3 PM.

February 21—Pilot Reid took off for North Cape at 9:30 AM. Planes out of gas up there so can’t do much. Have to wait till Pat brings some.

March 3—Pilots Ed Young and Joe Crosson and mechanic Macauley arrived here from North Cape with corpse of dead aviators at 25 to 4 PM. Soviet Junker arrived here 10 after 4 PM. All flags at half mast, everyone down at hangar on the ice. Too stunned to even speak. All was quiet.

March 6—Fairchild and Soviet Junker took off for Fairbanks at 5 to 8 AM. Got as far as Ruby (on the Yukon River).

March 8—Planes got to Fairbanks with bodies of dead aviators.

March 12—Funeral procession at Fairbanks for Ben and Earl.

March 22—Bodies arrived Seattle on S.S. Alaska, also Reid, Macauley, and Hughes.

The old timers had a down-to-earth reason for the crash of Ben Eielson’s plane in Siberia. Considering the time of year, knowing how harsh weather conditions can get, Carl Ben Eielson and Earl Borland probably decided to set the plane down and wait out the storm and in so doing plowed into a hummock of ice. They found one wing a couple of hundred feet from the fuselage and parts of the tail another hundred feet or more away. The thought was that they died instantly. When the bodies were brought to Teller, there was a guard stationed at the plane during the time that it sat on the wind-swept Grantley Harbor ice awaiting favorable weather to go on to
Fairbanks. We all felt so sad to see the drifting snow slowly covering up the skis of the plane with the much-loved pair inside, flier and mechanic, their lives silenced by the rigors of this harsh cold land. I was seventeen years old, and little did I realize that twenty-five years later, I would have a brother flying in the same weather conditions and terrain as these two brave men of the North. The only difference was that in that day so much improvement had been made in the airplane, the equipment in them, and the techniques of flying. But Mother Nature has not changed, in that she can be unpredictable.

With Sarah and David gone, there were still chores to be handed down to the next in line. Anne and Gussie, who were fifteen and thirteen when David went away, took over the care of the dogs and hauled ice for winter water, with the help of Albert, who was ten. At seventeen, I was quite an adept seamstress and was making most of the family’s clothing. While the rest did all the outdoor chores, I helped my mother tan the skins, saw that they dried properly, and then made them into mukluks, parkas, mittens, and pants. Whatever was on the priority list was made first. If Papa needed a pair of sealskin pants or a new parka to replace an old worn-out one, he got them before anyone else got anything new for he was the organizer and
main supplier of all our needs. Ten-year-old Albert had David’s outdoor bent. Already an expert hunter, he brought in lots of rabbits and squirrels, ducks and ptarmigan. Now the oldest boy at home, he became my father’s right-hand man, as Tommy and David had been before him.

When the runs of fish were heavy and there was too much work for Papa and Albert to handle by themselves, the rest of us pitched in. The freshly caught salmon were brought from the nets to a butchering table on the beach where they were cleaned and split, filleted and sliced, and either salted in the barrels or canned or smoked. The work was hard, and the hours were long, and we never stopped until the last fish caught in a day was taken care of. But we had incentive for everything we did. The harder we worked, the more prosperous was our season. If one of us began to slack off or get lazy, we were prodded back to action by the others. We could be considered capitalists, but we never had more than met our actual needs.

After we three older girls were mature enough to do most of the housework and care for the little ones, Mama would spend a lot of time outdoors, fishing with the other Eskimo women and snaring ptarmigan and rabbits. She also prepared the skins of the animals that Papa and Albert trapped or shot and with my help tanned the hides to make our cold-weather reindeer parkas and mukluks and sealskin pants. She was at her happiest when doing such tasks and fulfilling the life purpose of the Eskimo wife and mother—to help feed and clothe her family and make things easier for her husband. Childbearing and the extreme and constant struggle to make a living aged our mother prematurely and eventually resulted in her early death. But she would have wanted it no other way. To have not done her utmost in caring for her family would have been unthinkable in those days of either survive or starve. There were few lazy Eskimos. In her young days, the nonproducers starved and died, and the others worked themselves to death trying to survive. There was always the primeval battle for survival.

When you have to live off the land and sea, especially with six or seven months of winter conditions as in northern Alaska, just finding enough food to eat is a constant struggle. That is the way it was when my mother was growing up. If you want creature comforts, for instance, even to have warmth in your abode, it literally entails a 24-hour a day struggle. If the weather looks threatening and you must go to the beach to get driftwood, you must go! For if the storm sets in tomorrow, it may last four or five days, so you must gather the wood while and when you can and not wait until tomorrow.
The next stage in the plan for survival is having clothes to wear, and that means the acquisition of the animal from which you get your furs and hides to make the article of clothing. For this you need to have physical strength, good health, and the will to brave the elements, harsh as they may be. In comparison, the people who live in the temperate zones of this good earth have it so much easier, if you call living off the land easy.

It was in 1930 that my life changed abruptly. All the years that I had been corresponding with my Uncle Ed and Aunt Matilda in Pittsburgh, Uncle Ed had encouraged me to “observe” and “absorb,” and “know what’s going on around you.” He often commented in his letters about things I had written to them. “I think you could be a fine writer, Elizabeth. You have a knack for writing things in a way that is interesting to others.” In my letters I was always asking them about things I’d heard or suspected. Of this he wrote, “You have a thirst for knowledge. Take advantage of it while you are young.” I have always been interested in writing, and that I suppose is what prompted the diaries that I kept for many years. In my high school years I wrote short stories, and some were published in our school papers. Two of my high school efforts won prizes in our high school writing contests: one a short story and one a poem, both first prizes.

In 1930 I was eighteen years old and had finished the eighth grade several years before. Since we had no high school, anyone who wanted further education had to leave Teller. Few ever did. I was the first half Alaska Native to graduate from high school in my part of Alaska. Most parents believed that reading and writing and a little arithmetic was sufficient. The girls usually married early, and the boys became fishermen or left the country to become seamen on ships that would take them around the world. There was a public high school at Nome, and a government boarding school for Natives at White Mountain, southeast of Nome at the head of Golovin Bay. I was eligible to go to either. But way back there in Pennsylvania, Uncle Ed had heard all about the Alaskan educational system and wrote, “Even if you graduate from one of those schools you won’t be qualified to enter college.” A devout Methodist, he also knew about the Jesse Lee Home at Seward, Alaska, a boarding school for Alaska Native children operated by the Women’s Home Missionary Society of his church. The standards there were as high as in most Stateside schools, and the high school was accredited. I could have gone to Chemawa Indian School, near Salem, Oregon, as my sister Margaret had, but Uncle Ed wanted me to stay in my own native
Alaska, so the decision was for me to attend Jesse Lee with Uncle Ed paying all the expenses.

There were several ways I could have traveled to get to Seward. The quickest and most direct would have been to fly from Teller to Nome, thence to McGrath, and across the valley of the Kuskokwim and through the Alaska Range by way of Rainy Pass to Anchorage, then to my destination of Seward on the southeast side of the Kenai Peninsula by Alaska Railroad. The flying distance was about 800 miles, and weather permitting, would have taken two days. Flying was in its infancy and costly in those days in Alaska. The second choice was from McGrath I could have flown up the Kantishna Plains to Fairbanks by way of Ben Eielson’s first mail route, and then taken the railroad from there to Seward. This would have been a four-day trip of 1,200 miles. The third alternative was to go by sea to St. Michael on Norton Sound, then by riverboat up the Yukon and Tanana Rivers to Nenana where I could have caught the train to Seward. The 1,700 miles by this route would have taken about two weeks.

But all these ways would have been expensive. We couldn’t afford it, and Papa, frugal with other people’s money as well as his own, didn’t want to burden Uncle Ed with the cost of my transportation when I could travel free on a government ship. So that’s the way I went, by the longest and slowest and by far the most adventurous method available. But I’m glad now that I went by sea for it gave me the opportunity to see places I never would have otherwise, and besides, being the daughter of an old salt, I also happened to like the sea.

So on October 26, 1930, I departed family and friends for the second time not of my own volition, with my mother and father again sad of heart but happy for me that I would prepare for a useful future life. I boarded the USMS Boxer, not by way of a Jacob’s ladder as anyone else would have, but a bosun’s chair, which Captain Whitlam had the crew rig up for me. I could never have made it aboard any other way for the seas were rough, and it was already freezing outside.

It was a cold wintry afternoon. Mama and Papa and all six of the brothers and sisters were on the beach bidding me farewell. Mama and Papa hung on to me until the bosun said, “All right, Elizabeth, it’s your turn to get in the launch and don’t be afraid, we will help you.” Papa’s last words of advice to me were “Study hard, behave yourself, and always do the best you can.” He was always very protective of us, and I felt that he was a little reluctant to let me go for he always thought that I needed someone to protect
Elizabeth, age 18, Teller, 1930.
me. Papa and Captain Whitlam had quite a long talk just before we pulled away from the shore. The last thing I heard him say to Captain Whitlam was, “Take good care of her, Captain.” Captain Whitlam said, “That goes without saying, Albert, for you know how I feel about Elizabeth.” Captain Whitlam always had called me by my formal name, Elizabeth, and I was to be called by that name during my years at the boarding school. The wind was blowing cold, and it was beginning to snow.

Everyone from the ABs (able-bodied seamen) to the captain was considerate of me. I learned a lot on this trip about people in general, and I garnered every bit of knowledge and information I could by listening and keeping my eyes open.

The United States ship the *Boxer* was a historical old ship, operated by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, an agency of the department of the interior. The little ship was commanded by Captain S. T. L. Whitlam, a very good friend of my father’s whom we had known for many years. He had sailed these waters since the late 1890s. The duty of the *Boxer* was to look out for the welfare of the Native village inhabitants north of the Aleutian Islands. Only 125 feet in length, she was a little larger than the *St. Roch*, which successfully traversed the Northwest Passage in the 1940s.

The *Boxer* had been late returning south from Point Barrow and arrived in Port Clarence with the ice pack in sight a few miles north. As long as the wind blew from the southerly directions, we would get ahead of the ice after we left Diomede Island and King Island, thence into the Bering Strait. After loading water and reindeer meat at Teller Mission, we sailed for King Island, which had been bypassed on the way down from Barrow because the surf was too high to land supplies on that piece of rock in the middle of the Bering Strait. En route there we dropped off at Little Diomede Island the public health nurse, Mildred Keaton, who was contracted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to remain and look after the health of the Natives there. Mildred Keaton was well known throughout northern Alaska for her stamina in traveling by dog team with a driver to isolated villages, where she administered shots and medication to many Natives and thereby saved many lives.

When the *Boxer* returned in the spring, the nurse would tour the villages to administer shots or tend to the ill. The USS *Northland* (the U.S. Coast Guard cutter) carried on its tour of duty in the Arctic a public health doctor and dentist who administered to the ones who needed tonsils or
Alaska’s Daughter

adenoids taken out or a vaccination for some communicable disease that had begun in the Lower 48 and spread to the Native territorial population. The dentists onboard inspected teeth, filled the ones that needed it, and pulled the bad ones. The dentists many times remarked how the Eskimos’ teeth condition had changed through the early 1900s to the 1930s, saying there was a great increase of tooth decay in that span of thirty years according to the records they kept. This was because of the simple reason that gum and candy were more available in the latter part of that span of thirty years.

When I returned home from Nome after my hospital stay, Mama said that I had developed a white man’s appetite for meat and potatoes. As she said, “I turned up my nose at seal meat, seal oil, and fish,” but I did acquire a taste for beef, potatoes, and a variety of fresh vegetables in salad form and aspics, which I never had before. She said they made a “white man out of me,” but she seemed proud of it. So of course the food on the Boxer was even more strange to me, especially with the addition of fresh fruits and vegetables at every meal. Also I couldn’t get over the idea of a dessert after every dinner. For the first time in my life I ate cantaloupe, fresh frozen strawberries on ice cream, and fresh (cold storage) peaches with cream (cow’s cream, not canned cream). I was impressed with all the new foods being prepared by the cook, Sig Sundt, who loved to tease me because I blushed like a shy little violet.
I had seen the *Boxer* many times in my life as it anchored in the bay, but I never realized that I would one day be a passenger aboard her. The course to Little Diomede Island was north by northwest, and we had to quarter into the wind and seas and the old *Boxer* wallowed and rolled. Up to this time this was the largest ship I had traveled on. Of course we were in open water by this time, and I thought to myself, “If this is what we go through to get to Seward, I’d rather go by dogsled,” not realizing that this was just the beginning of the journey on rough seas. With the pitch and heel of this proud little vessel, I began to feel lightheaded and so went down to my cabin, which I shared with another girl who was going to the island of Kodiak. But I felt even worse as the ceiling and walls of the cabin began to whirl around me. Then I went up to the pilothouse and talked to the chief officer, and of course they teased me into not feeling sorry for myself. I learned a lot on this trip, not academically but psychologically and philosophically, for it was the first time I was around adults other than my parents or older sisters and brothers. New places and new faces. I might have to watch what I said, I thought, but Papa always said, “Be yourself, and don’t put on any airs, and always tell the truth, then you don’t have anything to remember.” My father often quoted Mark Twain. So after I remembered all the things that our father told me as we were growing up, I became at ease and wasn’t so shy anymore.

I learned to play backgammon, parcheesi, and cribbage, which was taught to me by the chief engineer, Herman Sanwick. One of the oilers taught me how to play the guitar in his off-duty hours, so by the end of the month-long trip I could play pretty well. He said I picked it up very fast, and I took to it like a duck takes to water for my first love was music. Then the wireless operator took me to the radio shack and showed me how they send and receive messages. It was all very interesting. Onboard ship I learned to balance myself to where I could get around almost as well as anyone. Most people take movement for granted, but I think out my moves beforehand. It comes to me in a flash and to my complete advantage so that I save myself energy and time. By this time, I was walking on my third pair of prosthetics.

Approaching the Diomedes, we encountered drifting ice cakes, the forerunners of the ice pack, but the nearness of the approaching floes made for calmer seas. As we sailed away from the Diomede Islands, we crossed the International Date Line, and we were in tomorrow for a short while.
Little Diomede and Big Diomede Island lie in the Bering Strait, with Big Diomede being the possession of Russia. The distance between the United States owned Little Diomede and the Russian Big Diomede is only three miles. The two Diomede Islands and tiny King Island are probably remnants of a land bridge from Siberia to North America.

We then sailed 150 miles southward for St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, and with the wind and seas coming from astern, the Boxer
misbehaved worse than ever. I thought that the wrenching and groaning meant that she was being pulled apart. I told Captain Whitlam of my fears, but he tried to reassure me. “Don’t you worry, Elizabeth, if she wasn’t flexible she wouldn’t have lasted as long as she has.” The northeast gale whipped the sea into a raging, foaming, wild mass of blackish gray water, reflecting the dark gray of the sky, dense with whirling snow. We were only fifty miles from the east coast of Siberia. I wondered which was worse, to be frightened to death or drowned in a sinking ship. And did anyone ever die of seasickness? There was a porthole beside my bunk, and as the ship rolled one way, through the two-inch thick glass, I could see the dark sky, then green water would rush by with some water squirting in around the porthole. There was the smell of diesel oil fumes coming up the companionway leading from the engine room. I prayed that Captain Whitlam would change course and take me back to Teller. If this was the price for an education, I could do without it.

It took our little ship a day and a half to reach Gambell, the northwest point of St. Lawrence Island. There was a regular blizzard blowing, the sky was a very dark gray and large flakes of snow were whirling down. We were only there a few hours, and I think even Captain Whitlam was more than happy to get out of there. I went up to the pilothouse and talked to the bosun while he steered a course directly east to Savoonga, the eastern point of St. Lawrence, which was only a half day’s journey. We anchored during the night, and early the next day the St. Lawrence Island Eskimos scrambled aboard the ship from their oomiaks and kayaks with their furs and ivory and ivory carvings. They were a tough-looking people who spoke only a few words of English and lived in the old ways in the manner of their ancestors. They dressed much like their Siberian counterparts, the Chukchis, who used to come to Nook each summer.

The St. Lawrence Island men were quite tall, straight, and the nicest looking of the Natives in the Bering Strait region. They were energetic, and even the older men were spry and quick of movement. They all gave me the eye, and began jabbering in their Native tongue, of which I did not understand a word. They said something like the word kabloona, which is sort of a pidgin Eskimo word for white man. They asked Captain Whitlam if I was the new school marm for Savoonga. Wife-purchase was still practiced in some regions, and the chief asked Captain Whitlam if he could buy me. “Sure, I’ll let you have her for twenty-five white fox skins.” The old chief
began to count out his white skins and would give me a glance to see what expression I had on my face. I was getting pretty worried that this was not a joke the captain and the chief were conjuring up. I knew that Captain Whitlam had quite a sense of humor and would carry a joke quite a ways. But I was really scared until I saw the twinkle in his eye and he said, “Don’t worry, Elizabeth, I wouldn’t sell you for all the white fox skins in the world, and besides, I will protect you with my life if they should want to kidnap you.” Having Captain Whitlam around I felt safe, like he was my own father. Still, I wasn’t completely convinced he wasn’t teasing until the last of the St. Lawrence traders was away in his oomiak, the anchor was weighed, and we were on our way again.

Captain Whitlam was famous around Alaska not only for his wry sense of humor, but for the preposterous yarns he told, especially to cheechakos, the first trippers to the North, about what they might expect to find when they got to where they were going. He had practical reasons for it. The young missionaries and school teacher couples, traveling to far-off villages where they were expected to do all things for the Natives in their charge—doctor the sick, sew up their wounds, deliver babies, and bury the dead—usually were quite apprehensive about the future that they faced. It all sounded so romantic when they applied for the job months before leaving the States. After seeing a few of the settlements and the people who lived in them, they would begin seriously to wonder why they had applied for the job to begin with. After a few rounds of Captain Whitlam’s exaggerations, though, the things they actually found were seldom what their imaginations, whetted by the stories of the captain of the Boxer, had them believing. Then, when it came time to face up to the really unpleasant aspects of life in an Arctic outpost, they were prepared for the worst. Many of them would be transferred from one outpost to another.

Captain Whitlam was one of the calmest men I have ever seen. He was well liked by everyone, crew members and passengers alike. He invited me to sit with him in the dining room at the officers table at every meal. Having not been away from home since the long-ago dog team trip to Nome, I had never eaten out, so I watched everything he did, which fork he used, how he held his knife, and his other table manners. He knew I was watching him, so when the waiter set a plate of ham and eggs before him, Captain Whitlam put pepper on his eggs, then salt. I peppered mine too then salted them. I took a glance at Herman Sanwick, the chief engineer, who sat across
the table, and he did his the usual way. The Captain said, “Elizabeth, nearly everybody puts salt on their eggs first, then pepper. Do you know why I put the pepper on first?”

“No,” I said, hesitantly.

“Well, the salt is heavier and it holds the pepper on the eggs so it won’t fall off when the ship is rolling.”

At breakfast we were served a half grapefruit first. I had never tasted grapefruit before and was waiting for Captain Whitlam to start on his as I was not sure how I was to eat it. I thought to myself, “Here I am eighteen years old and tasting my first grapefruit!”

Departing St. Lawrence Island we had to go to the mainland at Hooper Bay, almost 200 miles to the southeast, then on to Nunivak Island, where the inhabitants live as close to their original Native culture as do the St. Lawrence Islanders. They still lived in sod and driftwood huts such as my grandparents had, but the old culture has disappeared.

The ship loaded reindeer carcasses at Nunivak Island for the Seattle markets. The best reindeer meat is raised on this island—it is as close to the taste of veal as you could get, for the simple reason that they have a large range of lichen to graze on without having to range for long distances to find it. We left the mainland of Alaska for the Pribilof Islands, 300 miles off the coast near the middle of the Bering Sea. These islands, in the spring and summer, are the home of the Steller sea lions, the largest in the world. The males can weigh as much as a ton or more, and they comprise the largest congregation of sea animals in the world. We made a stop first at St. Mathews Island to pick up a government worker, then on to the largest of the island group, St. Paul. After leaving St. Paul Island, we headed for Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian chain, 300 miles to the southwest.

The temperature outside was freezing and with each wave that broke aboard, wind-blown spray froze to the rigging. The wind began to rage to gale force. Every so often seamen had to bundle up and go on deck and chop off the ice from the rigging otherwise too much could accumulate and make the ship too heavy, and she could roll over and sink. The sky was dark with swirling snow, large white wet flakes came down, then froze as they hit the deck and caused more concern for the captain. The men who worked to keep the deck clear of too much accumulation that would freeze quickly surely had a job on their hands. They tried hosing the thick soggy flakes, but the temperature was against the operation, causing more ice to form.
Everyone was getting seasick, even some of the crew. The ship rolled so that the cook was not able to do his chores in the galley. About halfway to Dutch Harbor the wind now reached ninety miles per hour, and the waves were forty to fifty feet high. The forward hatch cover was washed away, and water washed down the companionway and into the engine room. What more could happen? The crew hastily put down a large tarpaulin over the hatch and battened it down. If the wind didn’t blow it off, we could make it into Dutch Harbor without flooding the companionway and the engine room. Water began washing into my stateroom floor by this time. The old 
*Boxer* rode the waves like a water-logged duck, and as the stern of the ship came up the propeller broke out of the water and the engine had to be slowed so it would not cause too much vibration. Every time the little ship took a nosedive, she shook and shivered until we all thought she would come apart. At one time Captain Whitlam ordered fuel oil drums to be put over the side. He said that would pacify the wild combers. Inevitably no meals had been prepared for two days for it would have been an impossible task. No one had a real desire to eat anyway, but they drank a lot of coffee, and everyone hardly closed their eyes to sleep for you couldn’t stay in your bunk without bracing yourself with pillows or an extra mattress.

Captain Whitlam told me afterwards, and so did the chief engineer, Herman Sanwick, that it was the worst storm they had seen in the thirty-five years Captain Whitlam had plied those waters. At one point in the journey, reefed sails were set on the fore and main mast to help steady the ship and aid the laboring engine. We limped into Dutch Harbor on the third day after leaving St. Paul Island. We lay for several days at the dock while the ice was knocked off as it began to thaw from the ten-degree milder weather than what we had been through. The population of Dutch Harbor said we looked like a ghost ship coming in, with ice-crusted rigging and gear on deck coated white with an inch or so of ice. While at the dock we had the necessary repairs made, including the hatch cover. The ship was cleaned, and most of all we got our appetites back to normal.

Not long after leaving Unalaska and Dutch Harbor, on our way to Sand Point, we passed smoking Mount Shishaldin, a 9,500 foot active volcano in the Shumagin Islands. After departing the wild Bering Sea for the tamer waters of the north Pacific, along the rim of the Aleutian Chain, bad weather dogged us for the reminder of the voyage though it was nothing at all like crossing the Bering Sea had been. We made several stops along the
Aleutian rim, and we could always see the smoking volcanoes of the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, which comprise the lower southwest portion of the Alaska Peninsula.

Soon we reached Kodiak Island, which was the seat of government when Russia owned Alaska, until they moved their headquarters to Sitka in 1848. It is quite a picturesque harbor with inlets all around. We all took a trip uptown on the shank’s mare. We especially wanted to see the Russian Orthodox church, St. Michael Cathedral, which was dedicated in 1840. The exterior of the cathedral belied the interior of the edifice for there were priceless religious paintings of Christ and his apostles and also of the Mother Mary in solid gold frames, icons of gold set with precious stones, altar cloths and vestments embroidered in gold thread, and crucifixes, large and small, of pure gold. It was all quite unbelievable. I had never seen so much gold even when my father would bring home pokes of gold nuggets after a season of sluice mining. These furnishings of the cathedral were all brought from St. Petersburg, Russia, as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, and as I gazed at all the gold and precious stones, I said to myself, “Just think of it, these priceless furnishings have been in this country over 200 years now.” In a glass case near the altar was a crown of gold, studded with priceless gems, which our guide said had been worn by the archbishop of the church 200 years before. The original church and these priceless furnishings were nearly all destroyed in a fire in 1978.

As we pulled out of Kodiak Harbor, bound for the mainland, we encountered high seas so then we put into Woman’s Bay on Spruce Island awaiting favorable weather conditions in crossing the stormy unpredictable Shelikof Strait. The next day we left the foul weather on the open sea as we came into the shelter of the Kenai Mountains at the entrance to Resurrection Bay on which Seward is located. It seemed so relaxing to stand out on the deck in fairly smooth waters and look at such breathtaking scenery. The porpoises ran us a race, as they playfully dipped in and out of the surface of the blue-green waters which took on the reflections of the tree-lined mountainsides. Everybody was saying, “You’ll soon be home, Elizabeth,” reminding me that my journey would soon be over. I felt a little strange when I realized that these fellow shipmates would soon be on their merry way to their destinations, and I would be dropped off in Seward where I knew not a soul. I felt a reluctance as my journey was coming to an end.