Alaska's Daughter

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It wasn’t all work and no play in the summer of 1931 for the kids at Jesse Lee. When the crops were planted and the cleanup and maintenance work was done, we had some free time. It was often spent going camping or picnicking, taking boat rides on the bay or motor trips out the Hope Road. We all loved those carefree times. We felt happy walking the clean, sandy beaches.

A bunch of us would pile onto the school’s old truck after breakfast and ride out to see the old mining camps at Sunrise and Hope, sixty miles away on Turnagain Arm, the north side of the peninsula. Hope, a few miles west of Sunrise, was famous for being the only place in Alaska where apple trees would grow and produce. The town consisted of a few buildings and cabins remaining from the gold rush days when, like in Teller and Nome, hundreds had come, hopeful of getting rich quick, and then gone away disappointed. Side roads led up several gulches to small mines that were still operating back in the hills.

The gravel road, a single lane on the straight stretches but wide enough to pass another car at the corners, was muddy and bumpy in many places.
But who cared! The scenery was spectacular, winding through dense spruce forests, up narrow valleys with snow-topped crags hanging over, past rushing streams and placid lakes, with blue glaciers in almost any direction we went. We’d see dozens of snowshoe rabbits, wearing summer brown, and spruce hens, or grouse, in coveys or flying up into the branches where they teetered, unafraid. We called them “fool hens” because they were so fearless. Ducks and geese fed in the sloughs and ponds and marshes. Bald eagles, hawks, and other predatory birds soared and dove to kill and carry off rabbits, grouse, and spruce hens.

We saw great beaver ponds backed up by dams as long as a mile from end to end. If we wanted to see the builders, someone would open a gap in a dam. As the water poured out, the beaver would come swimming from their lodges, dragging branches, and bringing mud up from the bottom of the pond to plug the opening. Sometimes, while stopped to watch the beavers working, we’d hear a tree come crashing down, usually a silver birch or aspen, and could see the spiked stump and tree trunk where one of the big, flat-tailed rodents had chewed it through. Occasionally a beaver would be found under a fallen tree, dead of a broken back. We saw muskrats, too, and mink that took up residence along the edges of the beaver ponds. My brother David would have liked it there with so many things to hunt and trap.

This was big game country, and we often saw cow moose with their calves browsing in the thickets along the road or belly deep in ponds, heads under water as they dredged up the roots of lily pads. The bulls were more wary, and we only saw them at a distance, black backs and racks of yellow antlers glistening in the sunlight. Around almost every bend in the crooked road, we’d come upon black bear that would go scooting off into the bushes. They say there were brownies in these areas also, but we never saw one. The noisy engine of the truck and our yelling, singing voices might have deterred them. Once while stopped beside the road to look down into a narrow gorge, we saw a bear moseying up a rocky streambed, pausing now and then to scoop a fish out onto the bank where he’d gobble it down in a bite or two, then wade out and catch another.

Besides the placer operations at the mining camps, where men with high-pressure water nozzles washed the gold-bearing sand and gravel down for sluicing, a big attraction was watching the bore come up Turnagain Arm. The difference between high and low tide was over thirty-three feet. At low
The three-mile-wide flats went virtually dry, across which the returning tide came in as a wall of muddy water as much as six feet high, traveling at twenty miles an hour up the shallow, ever-narrowing inlet. This wall of water was the bore, one of very few in the world. We heard of people stranded in dories on the flats by the receding waters who were drowned by the bore when the tide came in again. There was no escape by getting out and wading to the safety of the shore. The flats were covered by a slick sticky mud into which a person could sink out of sight or be trapped waist deep and overwhelmed by the incoming flood. Next to the Bay of Fundy on the eastern coast of Canada, Turnagain Arm of Cook Inlet has the second highest tide in the world.

One trip that we all liked was out to Alaska Nellie’s hunting lodge at Lawing on Kenai Lake, about twenty-five miles from Seward. Nellie Neal had sought adventure, found it in Alaska, and liked to talk about it. There were Alaskans who were a bit skeptical of some of the experiences she claimed to have had, but we never doubted a word this remarkable woman used to tell us.

Born Nellie Trosper at St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1885, she went to Cripple Creek, Colorado, when she was eighteen to work as a waitress in the gold camps. Shortly after her arrival a lot of miners were killed by a bomb explosion during labor strife. The morgue was next door to where she worked, and she saw the shattered bodies being carried there. She later married an assayer named Wesley Neal. Once, when home alone, she was robbed and badly beaten. The next time a robbery attempt was made, she shot it out with the holdup man, wounded him, and he was sent to prison. Her husband turned out to be a heavy drinker, and she left and divorced him.

She arrived in Seward in December of 1915 and was off the steamer only a few hours when she was offered a job as cook at a gold mine. The camp was at the end of a steep, five-mile road leading from the railroad at Mile 26 back into the Kenai Mountains. Part of the job was to shoot wild game to feed the hungry miners. Nellie’s accounts of face-to-face encounters with brownies and bull moose while out after spruce hens or rabbits for dinner were hair-raising, and with each telling seemed to become more so, a common trait of many avid storytellers.

Though the minor details might become a bit embellished over the years, the attacking bear get larger and fall dead from her rifle shots a bit closer to her, the basic facts of Alaska Nellie’s stories always remained
intact. No one doubted that she’d had her share of wilderness excitement, but some of her contemporaries, perhaps a bit envious of her fame, felt that she was not as woods-wise as she claimed, but, rather, “a fool who went where angels feared to tread,” being ignorant of danger and downright lucky. But to the Alaska born and to the foolish, the element of luck can be said to not exist. The law of averages does, though, and that is evidence enough that Nellie Neal was a superb woodswoman and an expert shot. She lived a long life and died quietly in bed long after some of her detractors had been killed or crippled by big game.

When she first came to Seward, the railroad was privately owned. Known as the Alaska Central it went only as far as Kern Creek, seventy miles away on the north side of Turnagain Arm, having been built to serve the gold mines of the region. Forty-five miles further on, where Anchorage now stands, there was nothing but a few log cabins at the mouth of Ship Creek, not worth extending the railroad to. A few years after Nellie’s arrival, the government bought out the Alaska Central, and the railroad was built the rest of the way to Fairbanks. My son’s great grandfather, Mike Callahan, helped build the railroad.

After several years of working at different mining and railroad construction camps, Nellie became engaged to marry a railroad man. He was
killed in an accident a few days before the wedding day. She wrote to the man’s cousin in Tennessee, a Billie Lawing. He answered, wanting to know more about the country and about her, and soon they were corresponding regularly. He proposed by mail, she accepted, and he came to Seward. He turned out to be an extremely handsome and charming man. The day he arrived, they were married on the stage of the Seward Theater after the show.

They bought a spacious log cabin close to the Alaska Railroad tracks at Roosevelt at Mile 25 on Kenai Lake. The name of the station was later changed to Lawing. After twelve years of happiness together, during which they operated a roadhouse for travelers and hunters and a commercial boat on the lake, Billie died one winter of a heart attack while shoveling snow. She buried him at Seward. She lived on alone at Lawing, operating her roadhouse. The crews of freight trains usually stopped there for meals, and conductors would stop their trains at Lawing for ten minutes so Nellie could show travelers her hunting trophies and tell the story of her life. A small box beside the door invited cash donations. For many years this was her only livelihood, and many times the pickings were slim indeed, except for the game she shot and the fish she caught. She wrote her autobiography, *Alaska Nellie*, and in 1940 it was published.

The big front room of Lawing Lodge had wide windows that faced out upon blue-green Kenai Lake and the green wooded mountains beyond. The walls were covered with the mounted heads of every kind of game that inhabited the Kenai Peninsula, and some that did not. Moose, brown and black bears, goats and sheep were local. The polar bears, caribou, and cougars were not. There were stuffed eagles, swans, owls, grouse, ptarmigan, marmots, lynx, rabbits, beaver, and muskrat. The rugs were made of the skins of bears and wolverine with heads intact, mouths agape to show the fangs, and glass eyes that stared at you.

Next to Nellie’s love affair with her husband, whom she called “my sweetheart” to the day she died, the highlight of her life was the day in 1923 when President Harding arrived in Alaska to officially open the recently completed railroad. He got off his special train at Lawing to visit the lodge, sign the guest book, and be photographed with her. She was one of the real Alaskan characters, and I’m glad that I had a chance to know her.

Another trip we used to take was to Cooper Landing at the west end of Kenai Lake, where the Kenai River begins its sprawling, crooked journey to Cook Inlet, seventy-five miles away. Not far from Cooper Landing was
the Russian River. Here, back in the days before 1867 when the Czars still owned Alaska, the Russians had a penal colony where criminals and political prisoners were exiled for a life of hard labor. There were no ruins left to see, but it was said that upstream at Lower and Upper Russian Lake were the remains of crude mines where the convicts had dug for gold. It was said, too, that in years past, skeletons had been found there with rusty chains still shackled to the leg bones.

Except for the minor human frictions that occur even in well-adjusted groups and happy families, if we had any problems at the Jesse Lee Home as that first summer of 1931 came to an end, it was finding time to do all that had to be done in preparation for the new school term and the coming winter. Late running silvers and humpies had to be caught and prepared and canned or smoked for human consumption, and the chums, or dog salmon, split and dried for dog feed. Railroad cars of coal from the Matanuska Valley and Healy Mines were spotted on the siding near the school for the boys to unload and haul to fill our coalbins. Other boys spent their days out in the woods with saws and axes, cutting down trees for kindling and fireplace fuel. It always seemed like such a waste of precious trees to me, being from a land that had no trees. The hay had to be mowed and piled on pointed stakes to cure, then hauled to the barn and stored in the loft. We didn’t grow enough to see our cows through the winter so tons more of baled hay came down from Fairbanks on the railroad or from farmers in the Matanuska Valley. Another donor, to whom we were all grateful, was the eastern Washington orchardists who each year sent a hundred or so boxes of C grade apples that could be used for pies, applesauce, and other cooking.

While the boys were doing their heavy outdoor work, there was plenty to do inside to keep us girls busy. We girls made jams from the wild berries and altered clothes to fit young bodies that had grown inches and gained many pounds during the summer months. A big shipment of garments came from the Women’s Home Missionary Society, and everything had to be sorted and distributed.

Harvesting the big garden was in full swing by mid-August. How we loved those fresh things, especially those of us who grew up in the Arctic and the Aleutians and who’d only had fruit and vegetables from cans. We could never seem to get our fill of spinach, cauliflower, and all the other wonderful tasting things that were grown. Cabbages, carrots, rutabagas, beets, turnips, and potatoes could be stored in the cool cellar for later use, but almost
everything else had to be used soon after it was gathered or canned for winter use.

One thing at Jesse Lee in particular that I was continually thankful for and that everyone seemed to take for granted was the bathroom facilities. It was there whenever you had to use it, a nice warm comfortable place to sit as you answered nature’s call. And to cleanse your whole body, all that you had to do was fill the tub from an unending supply of warm water from a faucet and not even have to go out to get the ice to melt it into water on the kitchen stove. What a luxury the bathroom was compared to the inconvenience of taking a once-a-week bath in the same water, in the same galvanized tub, for four of us in succession as we had to do at home. Then the next week the other four would go through the same ordeal, always the smallest ones first. If someone happened to open the front door while you were in the tub, the cloud of cold air would seek out the hot steam from the bath water, and when the two opposing temperatures met, it would cool the room down twenty degrees, it seemed, even though the room used as a “bathroom” was two rooms away from the front door.

Sometimes looking out an upstairs dormitory window, I could see a pod of killer whales (orcas), or blackfish as we called them, rolling and blowing as they fed on salmon and smaller fish in Resurrection Bay. That put me in mind of Teller in the summer during berry-picking time. From the high hillsides on each side of the Tuksuks River, we saw beluga whales under the surface of the clear waters, making a return trip from the Tuksuks going out into Grantley Harbor and eventually out to sea. Before the end of the berry-picking day Mama would look at her traps, which she had set earlier in the day, and bring home two or three squirrels. We would have squirrel stew for our supper, to which she would put onions, potatoes, and a handful of rice. It would be a change from the fresh fish we had as a usual meal in the summer. We also witnessed otters playing hide-and-seek among the rocks near the shore of the Tuksuks, oblivious of us in their carefree, playful mood. In the spring, at home, we would see the gray whales, the females with their young getting a free ride on their backs, coming up the channel following the runs of salmon coming in from open water.

The Eskimo now are in a state of cultural transition. They are combining the old way of life with the new. Schools and public health facilities have been established for them. With the advent of the oil money that came with the settlement of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act, the
older Eskimos are realizing better housing, oil for heating and cooking, and, in some areas, the latest bathroom facilities; all this in contrast to the harsh life of their parents and those previous to them. Education and training have made it possible for Eskimos to obtain jobs in the new industries, and wages enable them to replace fur clothes with cotton and wool garments, homemade equipment of bone and ivory and the harpoon with rifles and manufactured hand tools, and a diet from the land with canned, packaged, and fresh food.

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At the age of eighteen, I began to have quite a bit of discomfort with my left leg. The two bones below the knee, the tibia and fibula, were growing out of the stump and causing discomfort in the prosthetics of the left leg. I had mentioned this in a letter to Uncle Ed in Pittsburgh, and he suggested that I have a doctor look at it. Mr. Hatten took me to see Dr. Haverstock at the Seward General Hospital. The operation was scheduled for January in the Seward General, and in a few weeks, I was able to walk out of there and back to school.

While in the hospital in Seward, I had the honor of meeting Anthony J. Dimond, the prominent Alaska congressman, who through many years of political service became a popular figure in the fight for Alaska statehood. He also urged the building of the Alaska Highway during the Second World War. While the Japanese harried us in the Aleutian Islands, Mr. Dimond was telling us that we could end the isolation of our great land by building a link to the United States via Canada. So in 1942 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began to tackle the huge project. Winding through narrow river valleys, along the sides of solid rock mountains, and over seemingly endless muskeg flats, the route presented problems that engineers had not encountered since the Burma Road in Southeast Asia was finished in 1938. During the summer months of 1942, the army engineers found their way blocked time and time again by bogs which consumed rock and gravel as fast as it could be poured in. The bane of the North, mosquitoes, added much more to the discomfort and frustration of the workers. With the onset of winter the road builders were confronted with temperatures ranging down to sixty and seventy degrees below zero in the Yukon Territory of Canada. It took some 10,000 American troops from seven Army Corps of Engineers regiments and approximately 6,000 civilian workers through the summer and
early winter of 1942 to finish the road. This road had been cut through an untracked wilderness at the incredible rate of eight miles a day and was completed in eight months and eleven days. The total cost for the 1,422 miles of road was $138,312,166. Ownership of the road reverted to Canada after the war, with a provision that travel would be open to one and all. Now known as the Alaska Highway, the route was first known as the Alcan Highway. It is a scenic drive traveled by many, and the trucking business was a boon to Alaskans and Canadians.

I had no sooner returned to the classroom when I became aware that the left leg was ill-fitting after the surgery. And besides the brace and straps on both limbs needed replacing. Having informed Uncle Ed of this new development, I realized that the nearest place I could have these things done was in Seattle, which could be reached only by a six- or seven-day trip by steamer. After receiving a round trip steamer ticket, I left Seward for Seattle on February 10, arriving Seattle on the seventeenth. The trip south on the Alaska steamship line's McKinley was one I will never forget. Traveling the Inside Passage of southeastern Alaska, we stopped at Skagway, the city with the history of Alaska's gold rush days and Soapy Smith. We also stopped at the capitol city of Juneau, nestled on a plateau just large enough to set the city on, with towering mountains on three sides and the Gastuneau Channel on the west and the Mendenhall Glacier around the corner to the east. From there and keeping a southern course, we made Wrangel and Petersburg, two smaller towns with fishing and lumbering as their main stock in trade. Finally we reached the First City, Ketchikan; as the name implies, it is the first city you come to after leaving the lower United States. The weather all the way could not have been better considering the time of year. Low clouds hugged the mountainsides which were heavily forested to the waterline with the greenery of spruce, hemlock, and pine. The ship moved its way through narrow passages and around and between hundreds of thickly wooded islands, some I am sure a human being had never set foot on. Every now and then as we came around one small island to the next, we could see a waterfall spraying fine mist as it meandered down the shear cliffs.

The passengers seemed to have a merry time all the way. There were dances in the social hall every evening as the dancers swayed to the piano music by Johnny Chitwood, the famous Seattle nightclub music-maker. Every day the stewards set out the deck chairs and lounges for those, such as I, who found enjoyment and enchantment in the panoramic scenery
unfolding as one sat comfortably wrapped in a thick wool blanket. Many walked the promenade decks in pairs, walking briskly in the fresh, cool, unpolluted air, invigorating one to the very core. It is no wonder that the cruise ships on this run were always booked up in advance. The food they served on the S.S. *McKinley* was excellent and almost made one forget about watching the waistline. Contrasted with the old *Boxer*, the steamship *McKinley* was a floating palace, which ten years later would be destroyed near the Aleutian Islands by Japanese bombs during World War II. The one person on the ship whom I will remember perhaps the rest of my days was the stewardess, Mrs. Elizabeth Rogers. She kept an eye on me and saw to it that I was guarded from the overzealous male passengers, some of whom had not seen a young woman for months or years, and from old-time miners and fishermen making their first trip “outside” in many moons. She also noticed that the wireless operator, Sparks as he was called, was seeking my company on deck and spending hours talking to me. But she needn’t have worried for I knew my bounds. Mama had warned us of strangers even before we became teenagers, especially men who would try to come too close before we innocents could have a chance to analyze the what, where, when, and how’s of a situation. She used to say, “Watch out for the ones who want to work fast.”

Anyway I had a real guardian angel in Mrs. Rogers. About the third day out from Seward, she inquired of me as to whether I had anyone to meet me in Seattle. I told her I did not know a soul in the big city, but that I had a letter from my oldest brother Tommy just a few days before I left Seward in which he said that his ship was expected to be in Seattle for awhile. So she suggested, “Why not send him a telegram in care of the Sailor’s Union of the Pacific.” I did this, and Sparks, the radioman, was happy to send the message.

For the last two days before our arrival in the port of Seattle, it had been spread around the ship that this was my very first trip “outside” and first also to a metropolitan city. They all wanted to see what expressions I would have at the sight of the city skyline and all the wonders of big city life—neon lights, trolley cars loaded with people going up and down the steep hills, bustling crowds on city streets and in the stores, automobile traffic coming and going from all directions, and the Smith Tower, which was the tallest building in Seattle. As our ship approached Pier 48 and slid along the slip ready for the gangplank to be let down in place, everyone was scanning the welcoming crowd on the deck. I stood as close to the railing as I could, working
my way through the crowd on the ship, and who should take hold of my arm
and share the excitement with me but Mrs. Rogers. “If you can find your
brother in that crowd then we know that you will be all right.”

I had not seen Tommy in eleven years, since he left home way up at
Teller, Alaska, in 1921 on the MS Herman, Captain Pederson’s ship bound
for San Francisco. Finally, I spotted a resemblance of my brother, so I waved,
and Mrs. Rogers took both of my hands in hers and made me wave with
both hands. Soon people were rushing down the gangway and shaking hands
with others on the dock, and some were embracing, tears running down
their faces, reuniting with families after, perhaps, many years of separation.
Mrs. Rogers told the purser that it would be better if I waited until the mad
rush down the gangway to the dock dwindled so that I could take my time
going down, and just as she was saying that here comes my brother Tommy,
taking long strides up the gangway. He gathered me in his arms and gave
me a big bear hug, then put me away from him at arms length and said,
“Is this the little sister who could so easily have not been here when Papa
and I saved her life.” The last time he saw me, I was nine years old and was
just learning to walk on my first pair of artificial limbs. He complimented
me on how well I looked and that I was getting along so famously on the
prosthesis. He then asked me where I had hotel reservations, and I replied,
“The YWCA.” I think he thought to himself, “Well, that’s the safest place
for a young woman these days.”

From the first time that I entered the doors of my hotel, I hardly had
time to myself. First the two Seattle major newspapers sent newsmen and
photographers to the hotel to interview “the native Alaskan on her first trip
to the great outside.” This was on a Saturday so, of course, the news and
pictures were splashed on the front pages of the Sunday issues through the
AP wire services, from New York to San Francisco. They emphasized the
fact that I had come through such a shocking experience in Alaska at such a
tender age. The newspapers dubbed me “Queen of Arctic Alaska” and judging
from the many telephone calls and messages in my hotel mailbox, many
in the city and surrounding area wanted to take the “queen” out to dinner
or to show off the big city. I made some lasting friends, and even after I
returned to school at Seward, I got letters from people who did not get the
opportunity to meet me after reading accounts in the papers.

The people who benefitted the most from meeting and talking with
me because I was from Teller, Alaska, were Mr. and Mrs. Borland, parents of
Earl Borland, who crashed in the plane with Ben Eielson during the winter of 1929. They wanted most of all to talk to someone who had seen him for the last time, and I and some of my sisters and brothers were standing on the Grantley Harbor ice when the two flew into the gray sky westward towards Siberia on their last flight that cold November morning.

I was invited to many homes for dinner but could not begin to accept all the invitations. I saw my first movie, and being that I was a student member of a church organization, the Jesse Lee School, I was flooded with requests to attend “a special” at such and such church, and I was asked to speak “firsthand about Alaska” to assemblies at a large high school in the city. Of course, the work that had to be done on my prosthesis was of first priority.

The day after the newspapers came out with all the publicity, I had a phone call from Captain Whitlam of the USMS *Boxer*. After chatting for awhile he said, “Elizabeth, there is a new ship being built here for the service of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to replace the *Boxer*, and I’m to be her master. She’s being built at Berg shipyard in Ballard. She’s nearly ready to be launched and the Bureau of Indian Affairs has been looking for a Native Alaskan girl to christen her. I think you would be a perfect choice to do the honors.” Thrilled by the thought that I should be chosen for the opportunity that many girls would envy, I said I would accept and arrangements were made for me to christen the *North Star*, a 225-foot wooden hulled vessel, valued at $389,000. The launching date was still several days away, and Charles Hawkesworth, then an agent from Washington, D.C., in the Department of the Interior, was to be present at the christening. After his arrival Captain Whitlam brought him up to the hotel lobby to meet me, and over lunch in the “Y” dining room, our conversation never left the subject of Alaska. Upon leaving, both men said they would see me at the christening ceremony.

I spent many hours nearly every day at the prosthetic plant, where they were making the new limb. The right one, they thought, would not need anything but new straps, but the pulley in the knee might need overhauling. The prosthetics I had were already four years old, but they still fit me all right, except for the left leg that needed to be remade. Before I could go out on my own, so to speak, I had to practice with one of the fitters present to see that every aspect of them fit. Finally, when they were all done and ready for my debut, I walked down Third Avenue just like anybody else.
stopped in a department store to buy some city-type clothes. People in the store said, “Aren’t you the Miss Arctic Alaska whose picture was in the paper?” Or while standing in a crowd waiting for a light to change or for a taxi, I would hear someone say, “There’s Miss Alaska right there.”

The day was nearing when I would have to christen the North Star, but I thought, “I’m not ready to walk up that flight of stairs and then on a scaffolding to the bow of the ship, let alone walk on a straightaway.” And I knew I would be even more nervous with hundreds (perhaps thousands) of people watching. I conjured up all kinds of negative thoughts until I finally convinced myself that I couldn’t do it. I was afraid to call Captain Whitlam to tell him that I didn’t think I could do the honors, but I did. He was very disappointed that I had changed my mind and pleaded with me to go ahead and do it. I explained to him that I would be self-conscious going up those steps to the scaffolding and that I was afraid I would stumble and fall down. He said, “All right, Elizabeth, I think I see your point, but you don’t have to feel that way, for I know you can do it. Remember, I have known you since you were a little girl, and as far as I can see, you have more of what it takes than a lot of people I know.”

On the appointed day the North Star was christened, and the girl who did the honors was one of the Pullen girls from Juneau, Alaska, who was a student at the University of Washington. Although not an Alaska Native, as the Department of the Interior had preferred, she was from an Alaskan pioneer family.

I didn’t think that I could ever adjust to city living; it was so very alien to the life from whence I had come. There were crowds of people everywhere. I used to think, “Where do they all come from?” and “Where are they all going?” I almost got claustrophobia from being surrounded by so many people. The S.S. Victoria took me on the return trip to Seward, after about three weeks of fantastic new happenings on each day spent a couple of thousand miles away from school. I thought I had seen everything after traveling on a large steamship, experiencing all the sights and sounds of a busy seaport city, seeing my first moving picture, riding in an elevator in a skyscraper, and using the telephone. But this was only the beginning of my life in a big world, and I found life in it could be exciting and broadening.

After the first week in March, it was back to the old grind, and I must admit it was a little difficult to concentrate and dig in where I had left off
1932, Elizabeth on board USS North Star.
at school. But I worked hard and studied evenings and made up the three weeks in short order. By the time spring arrived and school had recessed, I was ready to go home to Teller for summer vacation. I received my uncle’s permission and when the S.S. *North Star*, the same ship I was first chosen to christen in Seattle just a few months previously, called into Seward on her way to Bering Sea duty, I was ready to go.

After leaving Seward and the comparative protection of the mainland waterways, we crossed the stormy Shelikof Strait to Kodiak Island, and from there the *North Star* made her usual ports of call to villages large and small. Taking a westward course, we skimmed along the southern shore of the Alaska Peninsula, past the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, and on to Dutch Harbor. Leaving the North Pacific and the Aleutians, we entered the Bering Sea through False Pass, the Panama Canal of the North. After that, the course was nearly due north, up through the Bering Sea. Having made this trip in the reverse, that is, north to south, just a few months short of
two years previously, I began to feel like an old salt. But what a contrast in weather and traveling conditions. Compared to the old Boxer, this ship was a regular cruise ship, with spacious cabins and a large dining salon, and I had the privilege of traveling with the same crew who made that miserable stormy voyage in the fall of 1930, crossing the Bering Sea when we all thought we would “go down to Davey Jones’s locker.”

After about three weeks of traveling, we arrived at Nome, which was practically next door to my home at Teller. To my great surprise, I found that airplanes were getting to be the regular form of travel. Another surprise—it only took sixty minutes to go from Nome to Teller, the same distance that it took my father and Tommy three days by dogsled to get me over to the hospital. I wasted no time in getting to Teller via airplane and a trusted bush pilot, Frank Dorbandt.

It goes without saying that I was happy to see my mother and father and five younger brothers and sisters. We had much to talk about. I was asked such questions as, “Are cities like Seattle really big? So big that you have to take a street car to get from one end to the other, instead of walking to wherever you have to go?” and “Are the buildings really so tall that you have to take an elevator?”

Also, something new was going on around my hometown. The MS Nanuk was anchored on the north side of Nook, where ships don’t usually
anchor. Papa said the MGM movie company was shooting a picture about the Eskimos. It wasn’t long before we met the whole company, from the director W. S. Van Dyke to the cameramen and the actors and actresses playing the parts in the movie. Never in our wildest dreams did we ever imagine that a moving picture would be made, for all the world to see, in our own front yard. The ship Nanuk was frozen in the ice and the entire crew of the MGM movie company were stuck at Teller during the making of Eskimo, from October 1932 to July 1933. The walrus hunting shots were made off the coast of Siberia, and the polar bear scenes were made at Herald Island due west of Point Barrow in the Arctic Ocean.

My father rented our house at Teller to the movie company, which they used for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police headquarters and interior scenes. The British flag flew over our house. A sign over the doorway of our house read, “Headquarters of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.” We made lasting friendships with the movie crew, some of whom we saw later in films made back in their home studios in Los Angeles. The leading lady was Lotus Long (her filmmaking name), and she and I corresponded for many years. She gave me an autographed photo of herself. She had parts in movies that Dorothy Lamour made. The leading man was “Mala” (Ray Wise), born in northern Alaska. The story was taken from the book, Eskimo, by Peter Freuchen, the six foot, four inch tall Danish author, explorer, and geologist. We became good friends, being that we had one thing in common: we both had the experience of freezing our feet in the cold northern climate. After studying geology at the University of Denmark, he mapped the southwest coastline of Greenland for the Danish government when he was quite young. He and his dog team were caught in a blizzard for days, and, with no protection from the elements, they waited out the storm only to find that he had frozen his right leg which had to be amputated above the knee. He used to set me on his lap and tell me about his ordeal and then he’d ask me about mine. I have a large autographed photo of him in my livingroom, which reads, “Thanks for winter 1933, yours truly, Peter Freuchen.”

My younger sister Augusta had a part in the making of the picture as they used the local population as extras, and a year or so later when the picture was released, it was great seeing my little sister on the screen, along with other familiar faces. Papa was hired as a technical advisor in the building of snow houses and the making of snow glasses that they used in some of the scenes.
I spent an interesting summer at home. When school opened its doors in the fall, I found myself attending the Nome High School, after making arrangements to board with the principal and his wife. At one of the social functions attended by the greater population of Nome that winter, I met one of the Coast Guard boys stationed there at the time. It was the closet thing in my young years to being in love. He was a German boy, and he said he had met my father the previous summer while on routine patrol in the Coast Guard launch to Teller. I was never allowed by Mr. and Mrs. Dunbar (the family I boarded with) to be in his company alone, only at large social functions, but we carried on our love affair by writing letters, even though we were in the same community. By the time the next fall rolled around, I had made plans, with my Uncle Ed’s permission, to attend school in Washington state as I found the winters in my home area were too severe, and it was difficult for me to get to classes in the snow and icy conditions.

In the fall, sailing on the S.S. *Victoria* from Nome, I and a few hundred people from the surrounding area—mining men, seasonal workers, captains, and pursers of the Yukon River boats—headed south, away from the oncoming winter that would last seven to eight more months. “It will be good to see Seattle again,” I thought. I applied myself in school with a lot of hard work. I found myself enjoying my classes. I was the first Eskimo to attend Roosevelt High School and the girls’ advisor, Miss Rose Glass, thought...
I should be honored. She was about to make arrangements with the portrait painting class for a sitting for me when I came down with appendicitis and had to spend weeks in a hospital with complications from that attack. Miss Glass thought it would be nice to have my portrait hang next to the Queen of Romania, who had gifted the school with her portrait a year or so before. But it was not to come out that way as the timetable for my classes overlapped the appointment with the art class.

Being a Native of Alaska and having firsthand knowledge of the life in that cold clime, I was asked to speak at a school assembly about Alaska. I thought they asked me some outlandish questions when they asked, “Did you live in a snow house?” or “Did you have a seal oil lamp to keep you warm or to cook your food?” I told them those were the conditions of a generation or two before mine. They couldn’t believe that a certain amount of civilization had come to remote Alaska by the time I was growing up. They had read too many outdated books! They said since I knew so much about Alaska, the old and the new, why didn’t I write a book about it. I told them someday I would do that. The fact of the matter was that the Last Will and Testament of my graduating class, stated that I, Betty Bernhardt, would be a writer of children’s stories for radio broadcast.

The previous year, I had met some friends who lived in Edmonds, Washington. I liked the little town, and the families I met were like people back home. I paid board and room at a home near the high school where I attended my senior year. I graduated as one of the ten highest students for scholarship that year. As the registrars of universities and colleges usually do after getting the list of honor students, such institutions as Washington State University, Whitman College, and Western Washington University at Bellingham sent me letters, encouraging me to register for classes in the coming fall term.

It was time again to get a new pair of prostheses, I having worn out the present pair to a point beyond repair. I had been going steady with the handsome young Irishman whom I met on the S.S. *Victoria* the last trip south from Nome. Being normal young people and thinking we knew each other well enough to spend the rest of our lives together, we decided to get married. So Elizabeth Bernhardt became Mrs. G. Michael Little. The first few years of our married life we lived in Wenatchee, Washington, where my son was born. When he was two years of age, I miscarried my second child when I slipped and fell on the icy front porch. I was not responding
to the hospital care I was receiving at this time, and tests showed that I had tuberculosis. For almost a year then, I received treatment at the famous West Coast Center for Tuberculosis at the Laurel Beach Sanitarium in West Seattle. During this period, I could only see my small son through glass doors or through my open window as he played and romped on the lawn while in the care of his paternal grandmother.

In the spring of 1940, my father wrote to each of us girls that our mother was very ill and getting weaker all the time. In the spring the year before this, my nineteen-year-old brother Albert, Jr., while hunting seal in the open leads with a friend that he had grown up with, drowned when his small boat capsized among the ice bergs. For days, weeks, and months my father and mother searched the beaches for his body, thinking it would finally surface somewhere. But upon reasoning this matter out, we surmised that since the boy who was with him said his body did not surface, it was carried under the ice by the swift current, never to be recovered. For the rest of the spring, summer, and into the fall, my mother and father spent every spare moment looking for some sign of him—clothing, boots, or even physical parts of him that may have drifted on the beaches that they walked. Most of us older girls who were away from home at the time made it home by the end of August. Mama passed away the ninth of September, 1940, at the fairly young age of about fifty-six. The nearest hospital was ninety miles away. My father said she had been slipping silently for the past five or six months, and when she lost her “Albut” (Albert), she didn’t seem to have enough reserve strength to overcome the great sorrow and grief both Papa and she had to bear. It was tuberculosis that killed her, but grief and sorrow hurried it along. I don’t care who you are or your station in life, it seems easier to bear the loss of a loved one, such as my brother Albert, when you have a resting place for the remains.

Papa bore the task of making Mama’s casket, which he made out of raw lumber that he had on hand; the only material he had. We had a family friend by the name of Jenny Thompson, about my mother’s age, whom my father enlisted to help him in preparing my mother’s body for burial. Papa brought out a woolen army blanket, lined her casket with it, tenderly laid her body on it, and combed her hair. He laid another blanket on top as we children looked on sobbing and hugging each other in our deep sorrow. Mrs. Brock, the minister’s wife from Teller Mission, was present, and she led us in singing “Rock of Ages.” With a heavy heart, my father was
the last to walk away from my mother’s graveside. Not only did my father make my mother’s casket, he, with the help of a youth from Teller and my sixteen-year-old brother Tony, dug the grave where my mother’s remains were laid.

* * *

My son’s father had gotten a job with the army engineers at Nome, so we wintered there. As for myself, not yet having had the opportunity to put my education to use, I received an office position with the Reindeer Service, an agency of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. After spending a year in Alaska, we again took the last steamer out of Nome heading for Seattle. On
November 7, 1941, we docked at Dutch Harbor where more passengers embarked for the trip south. Word got around as we were leaving the Aleutians that we were to travel “blacked out,” and all the passengers were in the dark as to the reason for the order. We arrived in Seattle on the twelfth of November. One month to the day after we were in the Aleutians, the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor.

We settled in Edmonds for a few years. My son began his first years in elementary school there, and for a change, I felt settled down. Every able-bodied man and boy was being drafted into the armed services. The little town of Edmonds was getting bare of young men. My husband, however, had asthma nearly all his life, therefore was not able to serve his country. His brother Bill was taken by the draft and served in the European theater in the Battle of the Bulge and was one of the lucky ones who came home in one piece.

Mike again hearkened to the call of Alaska, and he left my son and me in our comfortable little place in Edmonds to take a job with the Civil
Aeronautics Administration in Juneau. He was to find a house or apartment and then send for the two of us, and we left in the middle of Mickey’s third year of school. For the next two years, it was one move after another trying to keep with, and be near, his father. In one year, my son attended three schools. In the winter of 1944 my son’s father notified us by mail that we were to return to the state of Washington because he would be moving around in Alaska even more often as time went by, so he shipped us back to Edmonds where he expected us to stay with his folks until he got good and ready to come back and settle down with his little family. I wrote him in a letter that I was not about to live off his folks since he was irregular about sending money to help pay some of our living expenses. Although his kindly father and loving mother were thoughtful of us and said we could stay as long as we wished, I was not the mooching type.

In the next few months, having exhausted every avenue of prospective employment in the little town of Edmonds, I decided to go to the big city of Seattle to see what promises it held. I began at the YWCA as an elevator operator at about twenty-five cents an hour. That barely paid my room and board. I felt that I wanted to go into communications (telephone and telegraph), so I went to the representative of the International Brotherhood of the Electrical Workers Union. Finding out that I had no experience in that line, the business representatives referred me to a private school for training telephone switchboard operators. I worked at the YWCA on weekends and evenings to keep myself solvent, but barely. When I finished the course, I reported to Miss Vanderbeck at Local 77 IBEW, and she had a position ready and waiting for me at the Elks’ Lodge #92 in Seattle. I held that position for several years, where I met people from all walks of professional life, including George Meany of the AFL-CIO, the original Harlem Globetrotters team, and the leading lady who played Mother Barber of the famous radio series. Also, one time a young man came in and, as I was at the receptionist’s desk, asked me if he could see the night manager. I called upstairs to the seventh floor lounge and told the manager that a Mr. Charles was at my desk and wanted to see him. This was Ray Charles’s first Seattle engagement in the field of entertainment, and he later became famous singing in Seattle clubs, which led to making records.

About the time that my son was ready for high school, I began to think seriously of moving to Edmonds and raising him myself for his sake since it seemed out of the question that his father and I would ever get back
together in a home life. I thought, “If he could just have even a one-parent home atmosphere” as he surely deserved, I would be willing to try it. It was pretty difficult to find a job for a woman at that time because of all the men flooding the job market soon after the war ended. I, however, did get on at the West Coast Telephone Company as an operator in “traffic” (they used that word in those days). I did everything I could to be both parents for the boy. I did my best. I took him to league baseball games in Seattle and to the circus whenever it was in town. I also took him to the first hydroplane race held on Lake Washington. While he was in the Boy Scouts and Explorers, I attended as many doings as I could while still working. I went to his high school basketball games to cheer him on and also to the school football and baseball activities. Interestingly, my son had some of the same teachers at the Edmonds High School that I had had when I attended there.

My wages barely covered our expenses—at $69.50 a week, it took everything I made to pay rent, utilities, the milkman, food, union dues, and his Boy Scout dues and insurance, let alone buy much in the way of clothing. Mike paid no mind to our struggling, though his mother let him know. He paid me no child support at any time. My place of work was five long blocks from where we lived, and having no motorized transportation, I walked the ten blocks each work day. That is if I worked a straight shift, which was seldom. As most telephone operators work split shifts (that is, four hours now and four hours later), I had to walk twenty blocks on many days. There were days when my sore stumps could hardly carry my body five blocks let alone fifteen more to get to the end of my working day. Many times I walked to work when I really should have doctored my sore legs. When the weather was rainy, which is 85 percent of the time in winter, I walked for I could not afford a taxi ride. Once in a while the Edmonds police would pass me as I trudged in the rain, and they would give me a ride home. I worked night duty for almost two years, which meant that I had to do “information,” “rate and route” department, “T&C” (time and charges), and whatever else the public demanded of me, being the sole operator on duty.

Things began to happen in Korea, and the men were going to war again. In fact, my son’s cousin fought on Pork Chop Hill, Korea, and was wounded and sent home. He later was to receive the Purple Heart. Most of my son’s high school buddies who graduated the year before were joining up with the armed forces. I think that influenced him into doing the same.

Mick in Seoul, Korea, with his guard dog, 1955.
I was not reluctant to let him go for I figured he had to face the big, wide world sooner or later. He took basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas and Parks Air Force Base in California. He was trained as an Air Force policemen. Fighting in Korea had barely ended when he was assigned to the Demarcation Zone near Seoul. We wrote letters frequently. He wrote of TDY to Tokyo’s Tachikawa air base in Japan. Thirteen long months later he was back, like he said, “in the good old U.S.A.” In the meantime, having been a divorcee for ten years by this time, I had written him at his outpost in Seoul, that I thought I had found “a nice man whom I might decide to marry.” By this time Mick had arrived home on the USS O’Hara, a more grown up man than when he left.

My new husband, Sherman Pinson from Pikeville, Kentucky, was a WWII veteran and had not been back home in the U.S. long when we met. He had served in the South Pacific Islands, hopping from Tinian to Saipan to Guam with the U.S. Army Signal Corps, as the army retook island after island with the help of the U.S. Navy. Soon after our marriage he talked me into moving to San Francisco. I worked in a prominent hotel as PBX operator/receptionist and met many famous people in the sports, television, and movie world, including Joe DiMaggio, Don Drysdale, Ella Fitzgerald, Ted Williams, and Dizzy Dean. I once was hugged by Cheeta, the chimpanzee who had parts in many films and was the main character in the Tarzan movies.

In the latter fifties and early sixties, having moved again to Alaska, I went to work for the federal government in telecommunications. At the time, the Alaska Communication System was operated by the Department of Defense with headquarters at Anchorage. By the mid-1960s, the condition of my stumps was such that I was not able to get around without a lot of misery. The formation of cysts on both stumps was persistent. There was nothing else to do but apply for Social Security disability. We were now settled in the Seattle area where most of my family lives, including my son and his little family. Also last but not least, it was handy to be near my prostheses manufacturers, should I need repairs or get new ones. I knew them all in the Seattle area, having dealt with them nigh onto fifty years.

By 1949 my father saw the last of his offspring leave the nest at Teller. Robert, the youngest, enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving at Fort Richardson in Anchorage. My father, now alone at the old homestead, having reached the age of seventy-four and having spent fifty-two consecutive years in the
Alaska’s Daughter

1957, my father’s four oldest daughters, left to right, Mary, Sarah, me (Betty), and Anne.

Arctic, after much wheedling on the part of us girls, finally decided to leave there. He first lived with my oldest sister Mary in Fairbanks, and in the year of 1950, he was inducted into the Pioneers of Alaska. In about 1952 he moved to Anchorage and lived next to his daughter and family. After mulling over the idea of making one more trip to the U.S. to San Francisco and San Pedro, his ports of call during his sailing days, and perhaps visiting some old-time friends who were still living, my father, accompanied by our youngest sister Pauline, made the trip he had dreamed of. He visited old friends, including some of note like Rear Admiral F. A. Zuesler in Seattle, Dr. Bates in San Francisco (whom he hadn’t seen for over fifty years), and more old salts, including Captain Louis Lane and friends in San Francisco. Then finally he continued on down to San Pedro.

When they came back to the Seattle area, he stayed awhile with Pauline and also with me in Edmonds. But he was once again longing for the peace and quiet life in Alaska. In his seventy-ninth year, Papa was beginning to become unstable and forgetful. With the insistence of Admiral Zuesler, we decided that he needed special care, and he entered the Alaska Pioneer Home at Sitka, where he would get constant care in the hands of those experienced. Robert, the youngest brother, was then living and working in Haines and would pay visits to our father whenever and as often as he
could. I wrote often and would have liked very much to have visited him personally. The calendar reminded me that Father’s Day was on June 16. I picked out a nice Father’s Day card and called up the local florist shop in time so that they would deliver to my father an appropriate flower arrangement for his room. Early on the morning of June 16, 1954, the phone rang. It was Western Union from Seattle. As the Western Union operator read the telegram from Sitka, “Sorry to advise you that your father passed away very early this morning . . . ,” I realized that I was beginning to feel sort of numb. After I composed myself, I called my sister Pauline in Seattle. Neither one of us was able to go to his funeral, but the three other sisters (Sarah, Wilma, and Mary) living in Alaska at the time and my two brothers (Tony and Robert) paid final tribute to our dear father. He spent eighty years on this earth, nearly three-fourths of them fighting for survival for himself and his family in cold and barren northern Alaska. For him it was a life of freedom; freedom from religious and political strife, such as he had experienced in his early life in Germany until he left at the age of fourteen. He was not only our father; he gave us inspiration.