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Dedication

**This memoir is dedicated to my friends in Little Russian Mission – now Chuathbaluk –
especially:**

Sinka Sikar & Charles Marlar

As well as my friends in Aniak, especially:

LaMont Albertson & Orie Haas

Acknowledgements

This work is the result of efforts spread over the years. Many individuals have contributed to its completion. Altha M. Wilson, Sharpsville, Pennsylvania, saved the original letters, without which there would be no manuscript. I thank her for adhering to my request, to save my letters, so innocently made some 33 years ago.

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Additional support and encouragement has come from the editors of *Alaska Magazine*, *Stories Magazine*, and the anthologies *A Good Crew* and *Wheelwatch Companion* as well as the editors of the *Anchorage Daily News* and the *Kodiak Daily Mirror*.

Finally, special praise goes to Denise J. Hockley, who has long labored on both the form and content of the following pages. She has faithfully corrected my notorious spelling, corralled errant commas, and gently redirected careening sentences.

And not to be forgotten, Jazz the Elderly Beagle, who has moiled long and hard, napping faithfully in his chair by my desk, keeping me company throughout the process.

Introduction

In February of 1969, fueled by my lifelong wish to go to Alaska, I filled out an application for Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA), wrote "ALASKA ONLY" across the top and mailed it. Two months later I received a call, was I still interested and available? Two affirmatives later I was informed that my wife Suzie and I had been accepted for the June training session to be held at the University of Oregon in Eugene.

The intervening two months passed slowly at our jobs as Teaching Naturalists at the Antioch College Outdoor Education Center in Yellow Springs, Ohio. The jobs were hard, the pay abysmal, the food nearly inedible, and only our fellow naturalists, and the military draft hanging over my head, made it bearable. But now, not only escape, but escape to Alaska seemed possible.

I had wanted to go to Alaska for as long as I can remember. As a four year old I panned for gold in the culverts of my grandfather's farm where we lived. At five I listened raptly to radio's Sgt. Preston and his mighty lead dog, Yukon King. Even today, fifty years later, I still have my deeds to one square inch of gold mining property outside of Dawson City – radio show promotions from Quaker cereals. In grade school I wrote to my congressmen in support of Alaska statehood. My junior high school social studies reports were surveys of Alaskan geography, economics and demographics.

And now, a voice on the phone was telling me that I was going!

A Brief Chronology and Background Information for

The Little Russian Mission Letters

I arrived in Alaska in July 1969, accompanied by my wife Suzie, as a VISTA Volunteer. A few days in Anchorage were followed by several weeks of Yupik Eskimo language training at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. This training was offered to those of us who had been assigned to Yupik villages. In my general ignorance of Alaska I had requested assignment to an “Eskimo village, in the Interior, with rivers, mountains and forests.” As it turned that such a place actually existed, Little Russian Mission, on the middle Kuskokwim River, 300 air miles west of Anchorage. Duly warned that I would have to build my own cabin as no housing existed, I blithely flew off to the most educational year of my life.

In June of 1970, as my VISTA year was coming to its conclusion, Governor William Egan became the only state official in the country to ever eject a VISTA program from “his” state. Not anxious to leave, and having evaded the state troopers’ sweep that loaded Volunteers, sometimes in shackles, onto planes with one-way tickets Outside, I landed a job as a teacher with Alaska’s then State-Operated School System (SOS). The state had recently taken over a dozen

schools in the Northwest Arctic from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and was desperate to staff them.

The aptly acronymed SOS was not fond of former VISTAs, whom they considered trouble makers, but they had a week to staff twelve schools and I had two previous years of teaching experience, and I had survived a year in the Bush. I was also willing to go back for more - not a small consideration with annual teacher turnover in the Bush exceeding 50%. So June 1970 again found me bound for Fairbanks, this time for six weeks training through the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Rural School Project. This Kellogg Foundation sponsored program was an attempt to prepare new teachers for life in rural schools and communities in hopes of improving teacher retention. To me it was an opportunity to be paid to enjoy another summer in Fairbanks. In retrospect, I think both aims were met and in August Suzie and I left for assignments in Pt. Hope, the northwestern most community in North America, 200 miles above the Arctic Circle, and the birthplace of my soon to be adopted son, Jacob.

Two years in the bleakness of the Arctic convinced me that my geographic future lay elsewhere. I had grown up roaming the hills, forests, fields, streams, and rivers of western Pennsylvania and knew I would never adapt to the wind, snow, ice and polar seas. Blizzards on the Fourth of July, and ten months of 20 degrees below 0 with 20 knot winds did not inspire me. Nor did a horizon which revealed only pack ice, and left me clueless as to my location. Navigating the ever-moving ice defeated all of my explorer's yearnings, and I missed the independent roaming that had sustained me since early childhood.

I applied for a transfer in March of 1972 and was, eventually, offered the position in Rampart on the upper Yukon, 120 air miles northwest of Fairbanks. I knew nothing about

Rampart save that it was small, had a gold rush history, and had been a “problem school” for a decade. It sounded like my kind of place.

Over the previous three years I had also come to know two people who would influence the rest of my life. Irene Reed of UAF had been my Yupik language instructor in 1969. She owned a plot of land near the U where a dozen cabins clustered about the original homestead. “Irene’s Village” on Dead End Alley would be my home whenever I was in Fairbanks for 25 years. Today road construction has swallowed the Village, and Irene died in 2001. I, along with Fairbanks and Alaska, are poorer for the losses.

In Pt. Hope another UAF faculty member would appear. Gaylen Searles would head yet another doomed attempt to train Bush residents, in their home villages, to be teachers. But his arrival in Pt. Hope gave me a friend and mentor. As a man who had operated Bush schools for 15 years he knew how to do more than survive. A former college fencing champion, we wiled away many evenings as he tried to teach me the finer points of epees and minimal movements, points that translated into an education in village politics. He was also instrumental in the adoption of Jacob. Gaylen has remained a friend ever since, though we have seen far too little of each other over the years.

Chapter One

VISTA TRAINING

Summer, 1969

Postmarked: June 27, 1969, Eugene, Oregon

We arrived in Portland yesterday at 1:00 PM (Pacific Standard Time) after a fairly uneventful trip. We were held up in Chicago for an hour by the weather. Unfortunately the sky was cloudy all the way out and that's all we saw. We had to sit around the Portland airport until 7:00 for the bus here, but we finally made it.

We spent the morning filling out forms and getting questions answered. First, our mailing address is:

VISTA Training Center

Straub Hall - Omega

University of Oregon

Eugene, OR 97403

Secondly we will be leaving for Alaska on July 16 and technically that's when our year begins. I'll let you know as soon as possible when we will be returning in 1970.

The mailing address here will do until we are permanently situated in Alaska. They will forward any mail to us from here so it's no problem.

We just got back from the evening session. The day has been pretty busy and I still don't have much information. We get our first pay tomorrow. Fortunately VISTA pays in advance so tomorrow we each get \$14.00 - 2 weeks pay at \$1.00 a day.

We received some information this afternoon. When we get to Alaska we will be supplied with sleeping bags, parkas, and mukluks for the year for free. That's a welcome relief. We will also get a larger than expected clothing and "moving in" allowance which will help. Our pay rate will also go up to \$2.50 a day. It also looks like we may go to a part of Alaska near the Arctic Circle and the Canadian Border.

It's almost 11:00 PM so I'd better get to bed. I'll write soon.

Postmarked: July 2, 1969

Well, we've survived the first week of training now and are really looking forward to getting to Alaska. We leave for Anchorage on the 16th and we'll spend about 4 days there. Then part of the group will go to their villages while the remainder goes to Fairbanks to take 3 weeks of language training at the University of Alaska. Suzie and I are hoping to be in that group, but we won't know for a week or so if we are.

Since I wrote last we've been involved in a training procedure called a "Family Live-In" in which each of us is taken to a poverty family in the area to spend 4 days. I guess the object is to see whether or not anyone can take living under bad conditions. For me it was easy, the meals

were better than I've had for the last year at Camp (*Antioch College Outdoor Education Center*) and the family reminded me of Uncle Johnny's. Suzie got along well with her family too. We got back yesterday and training resumes today.

We will be here until the tenth when we're going on a survival experience until the 13th up on one of the mountains. Consequently we're trying to get into shape with a little jogging, etc. We're not as bad off as most of the people here though as we've been hiking all year.

Postmarked: July 10, 1969

Training is progressing at a rapid rate. Tomorrow morning we leave for 4 days of camping up in the Mts. This trip is about the last major session before going to Anchorage. We were notified today that we have been accepted so we are really looking forward to leaving here on the 16th.

We spend 4 days in Anchorage and then either go to our village or to Fairbanks for language training. Although we don't know for sure it looks like we'll go to Fairbanks for the 3 week session in Eskimo.

From now until I notify you of an address change you can continue to write to us here and they will forward anything to the appropriate address. It also occurred to me that I'll probably never manage to keep a record of this year so I'll try to make my letters as detailed as possible and perhaps you can keep them for us.

This is when I came up with the idea of saving these letters for some sort of future record. That they were written, saved, returned, and still exist at all strikes me as one of the more amazing aspects of my life. The letters also survived some two dozen transcontinental moves. No less amazing, I have actually managed to transcribe, edit, and annotate most of them.

Last night and tonight we've been busy in rifle practice. Since many of us will be called on to do some hunting and some people had never fired a gun it seemed a little instruction was in order. Safety instruction was last night and tonight about 20 of us shot up about 800 rounds in everything from 22's to 45's to 12 gauge shotguns. It was a lot of fun as I hadn't done any extensive high powered rifle shooting since I was about 16.

We've also gotten a little information on things in Alaska from various anthropologists and such. Economically we won't starve as we're getting \$180.00 in food money and a lot of our meat (i.e. moose, big horn sheep, caribou and various small animals and birds) will be free. We're also getting \$180.00 a month in personal expense money in addition to our rent, medical and dental expenses, insurance, transportation and utilities. All in all, I don't think we'll suffer too much. They're also going to make our car payments out of the \$100 readjustment allowance we get. At least economically speaking it doesn't look too bad.

We're going to get 6 hrs. graduate credit in education for our training also. It's very nice because we don't have to pay any fees, take any exams, attend any classes or anything else. I think it will be the easiest 6 hours I ever got. We may also get some additional credit if we get language training.

Postmarked: July 14, 1969

We arrived back from our trip about 2 hrs. ago and are finally cleaned up and have about everything put away. We had a really good time. It was the first time we really felt like we were in Oregon as up to now it was just like being in another city.

We left Eugene Thurs. morning and drove to the "Three Sisters' Area" in the Willamette National Forest. There we each got back packs (about 35 lbs. each) and hiked 5 miles (all up hill) to our camp area at the base of 3 mountains known as the "Three Sisters." While we were there we did a lot of hiking, glacading (skiing down ice packs without skis) and climbed Little Brother Mountain. The forest there is all evergreen, mostly pine and spruce, and we stayed near the timber line where there is still plenty of snow. It was a little strange to do things like drink the water right out of the streams.

The trip was actually fairly dangerous. Rock climbing without any safety equipment or experience, near hypothermia in the cases of a couple of Volunteers, and other general administrative stupidity of a sort that would plague us throughout our VISTA year.

We get a "free" day tomorrow to recuperate and then meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday morning before departing for Anchorage on Wednesday afternoon. We still don't know where we'll be in Alaska but should find out by the end of the week. We hope to go to language school and probably will but we'll let you know for sure as soon as we can.

Postmarked: July 16, 1969, written on Northwest Orient 720 Turbojet

This may very well be the first airmail letter you ever received which was, at least partially, written on an airplane. At this moment we are flying at 35,000 ft. and traveling somewhere around 550 MPH on a Northwest Orient 720 Turbojet. We are somewhere over British Columbia about halfway from Seattle to Anchorage and it is 9:50 PM Bering Daylight Time.

I wish I could tell you how I feel to be finally approaching Alaska after 20 years of thinking about it. When we left Seattle it was dark but as we fly north it becomes lighter and lighter.

We will remain in Anchorage for 4 days and then fly to Fairbanks for language school. Tomorrow we find out what village we are going to so I will include that information before I mail this. Also, our address for the next year will be: VISTA Alaska; Box 1957; Anchorage, Alaska 99501. We will probably get our mail quicker at this address as this office will be informed of even the slightest quirks of the mail service of the remote villages.

This was pure fantasy - this office didn't have a clue about anything for the entire year. Mail service through VISTA was terrible, other aspects worse. It took nearly four months to get our first paychecks, for example. Boxes of my tools and other stuff would wander around rural Alaska before somehow catching up with in Rampart three years later.

Today we were officially accepted as VISTAs. I suspect Washington may plant a note in the Sharon Herald, but if you want to you can go ahead.

We have a couple of pictures from our mountain climbing experience which you will get eventually. We are sending them to you and Suzie's mother and maybe you can keep them for us until next July 1 when we will return.

Tonight we finally found out where we are going. For the next year we will be in a small village (pop. approx. 80) called Little Russian Mission. If you look at a map and trace the 158 degree longitude line to the Kuskokwim River you will be about there. We will be the village's first VISTAs and will arrive in about 2 ½ weeks and move into a tent while we build our house (we're the first Alaska VISTA's to do that). VISTA is supplying us with tools so you might as well keep our axes and saws for us. We're really happy about the assignment as we feel mountains and forests are preferable to tundra & moose and caribou meat preferable to seal and salmon. It is also a Russian Orthodox village which is better than the more conservative Moravian ones.

We will be here in Anchorage only until Sunday afternoon when we leave for Fairbanks. Please, though, use the Anchorage address for the rest of the year as that will assure that our mail doesn't go to Russian Mission on the Yukon River. The one exception to this will be the box we left to be shipped but the government will send you instructions concerning that in a couple of weeks.

One last thing I might mention is that although it is 11:00 PM it is still light enough out to read and never gets really dark. Also, due to legislative neglect, we are enjoying the questionable blessings of Daylight Savings Time.

Postmarked: July 23, 1969, Fairbanks

It is 6:00 p.m. here (Alaska Daylight Time) so it must be about midnight in Sharpville. The days recently have been very busy as we are working on learning Eskimo about 15 hours a day, 6 days a week. We spend another 3–4 hours in groups of 5 VISTA's with an Eskimo tutor and another 2–5 on our own memorizing grammar. As you can see, we are going to be very busy for the next two and a half weeks.

As I mentioned earlier, and can now confirm, our year is over next July 15 and we should get home about then.

One word of warning, once we are in our village and winter sets in our writing may become a little irregular. Normally the mail planes come twice a week but our village has no airfield so there times when the river is too frozen for float planes and not frozen enough for ski planes when we may not be able to send or receive mail for a month or so. Consequently, if you notice a lull in the writing, try not to worry about it and we'll get letters out as soon as we can.

I'm enclosing a picture from our mountain climbing in Oregon. I'm going down, not up, about an 80' cliff.

Postmarked July 27, 1969

Language training is going pretty well. In four days we've learned about 200 words, present tense verb conjugation, how to make nouns dual and plural (In Yupik Eskimo) and have made a pretty good start on pronunciation.

Yesterday the professor was ill so we got an unexpected day off. We spent some of the day in Fairbanks doing shopping for clothes. We're now pretty well equipped with shoes, wool socks, rain gear, and pants. We'll be stopping in Anchorage on our way to the village in a couple of weeks and will complete our shopping for things like wool shirts and insulated underwear and hip boots.

One thing I've been unable to locate here are butchering charts. We'll be doing a lot of it on moose and caribou but a chart for a cow should be perfectly all right. If the charts are expensive don't bother, but if they are reasonably cheap let me know and I'll send you the money.

Yesterday one of our friends had a car and we got a quick tour of some of the local points of interest such as the musk ox farm and the Malamute Saloon. The University runs the ox farm as an experiment to determine whether or not the oxen would make a good source of hides and meat for the villages. The Malamute is a fairly famous (infamous?) gold rush spot in which Robert Service (The Cremation of Sam Magee) set such well known verses as "Dangerous Dan

McGrew.” Alaska, apparently, has never gotten over Mr. Service and his poetry is found everywhere from bus terminals to the best hotels.

Like many a new arrival, I was taken in by the tourist hype. Mr. Service wrote his poetry before ever setting foot in Alaska or the Yukon, the saloon and characters were all figments of his imagination, and he departed for the south of France, never to return, as soon as royalties permitted.

Yesterday was the annual Gold Rush parade in Fairbanks. It is a difficult phenomenon to explain but includes everything from soldiers from the local bases to the Governor of Alaska to floats of supposedly typical gold rush era scenes.

Postmarked: August 2, 1969

I’ve got a little time this weekend so I thought I’d start a letter explaining some of what we’ll be doing up here. As to your question regarding the size of our group – we started out with 55 trainees in Oregon of whom 46 came to Alaska. Of that 46, 23 of us are at language training. The other 23 have already been in their villages for 2 weeks.

As to our jobs here, basically we’re going to be running an information source in the village. Information in the way of adult education, but more importantly, with regard to the

Natives relationship to the state and federal governments. In this latter regard, of particular importance is the current native land claims issue.

This land claim issue stems from the fact that congress has never made any settlement with the Eskimos and Indians here. Also, when Alaska was granted statehood they received permission to choose any 125 million acres (out of 300 million acres of the state) as state land. They began making their selections when ex-Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall instituted a “land freeze” which prevents anyone from acquiring title to any land until after December 31, 1970. The purpose of this “freeze” was to allow time for congress to settle the Native land claims before the state took all of their land.

The problem now is that the oil companies have paid off a sufficient number of congressmen to prevent the land claims from being settled. The object of this is to make sure that any of the profits from the oil and minerals end up in the hands of white Alaskans – not “dirty natives”.

Consequently, one of our major jobs is helping natives to effectively organize a pressure group – a group similar to local Black power groups in Negro ghettos. It makes our job a little ironic; we’re government employees working to prevent the government from cheating the Natives. Needless to say, this aspect of our job is not realized by any officials (including VISTA officials) outside of Alaska.

For once it may also appear that the government may have picked the wrong native group to mess with. The Natives here are exceedingly well armed and the U.S. Army has trained most

of them in genteel arts of high explosives. With this in mind, it's not difficult to predict that the years following 1970, should the native land issue not be settled, could prove very bloody.

A person begins to feel that he has been inadvertently dumped into Latin America with a bunch of revolutionaries. Besides a couple of geologists, (I guess we're supposed to know how to blow up oil wells) we have combat nurses, lawyers, a guerilla warfare expert, and others in our group. I really hope the land claims are fairly settled. Without a settlement the Native groups will starve or die fighting.

I'll try to keep you informed on the situation. With state, federal, and industrial officials suppressing the news of the situation, I doubt you'll hear anything about it in the newspapers.

The situation in this country really gets a little discouraging sometimes. We have enough money to land on the moon but we can't afford even the crudest water and sewage systems for natives in rural Alaska. Most of the villages up here have no wells, water is obtained from the same rivers the honey buckets are emptied into. There is no electricity and in order to attend school past the eighth grade the kids have to go to the B.I.A. (Bureau of Indian Affairs) boarding school in Oklahoma. Unfortunately there is no money to be made from providing these things. I guess we can't expect a government which doesn't mind killing 50,000 young Americans and 3 million Vietnamese so a few industries can make a little more money to be too concerned about 80,000 natives.

In retrospect it's surprising how much of the foregoing I got right. Forty five years later I can add a lot of detail, and I have a considerably greater awareness of the animosity between

various different groups of Alaska Natives, but much of my surmising was pretty close to the mark.

Postmarked: August 4, 1969

Our shopping is about complete and a week from Tuesday we'll be in our village. Yesterday was about our last chance to sleep as we have classes on Monday–Friday and next Saturday we'll be taking the train back to Anchorage. Sunday the stores are closed and on Monday we'll be flying to Bethel and Tuesday to the village. Our village has no landing field so we'll go in by floatplane – something which should be a nice experience.

Yesterday we bought wool shirts and socks, long underwear, hip boots, another duffel bag, and some miscellaneous kitchen stuff (pots, pans, etc.). Except for food we're pretty well set up. We will buy our first month's food supply in Bethel and have it flown to the village. We receive \$180 a month for food and most of our meat (elk, caribou, etc.) is free so it doesn't look like we'll starve. We're still trying to decide whether or not to buy a rifle. With a large number of brown bears around us it might not be a bad idea.

Hunting licenses are a little expensive (small game, \$10 + \$50 moose tag; +\$56 caribou tag; +\$25 bear tag; +25 mountain sheep or goat tag; +\$50 elk tag) but I'll probably get a small game license and a caribou tag. (*"Tags" are additional fees paid on top of the base fee. They are called tags as they actually include a tag for attaching to some part of the butchered animal,*

jaw, antler, etc., to be turned in to Fish and game for various studies.) License fees, should we stay a second year, drop to \$3.50 for a license allowing me to hunt any or all of the above animals with no seasons or bag limits. This license is called a subsistence license and is sold mostly to Natives and homesteaders but our income will be low enough for qualify.

Our housing construction is still a little up in the air. The Alaska VISTA head wants us to use logs because it's cheaper. I've agreed so now we're checking out tools. I'll write you details after our area supervisor and I corner him next Sunday in Anchorage.

Daddy's letter, sent first class mail, July 29 arrived August 1. That's pretty good. I suspect that all first class mail goes by air to Anchorage from Chicago. Since all mail delivery is by air, regardless of its class, I think sending stuff first class instead of air mail shouldn't make more than a one day's difference. When we run out of air mail stamps I'll send a letter first class and you can let me know how long it takes going that direction.

PS: I just talked to my supervisor in Bethel about our house. We'll be building with logs that will be pre-milled at a nearby sawmill. Tools, windows, nails, and other hardware we can get at Aniak, which isn't too far away. It looks like our heat will come from a wood stove made from a 55 gallon oil drum.

And so, intrepidly, we ventured off into rural Alaska. There would be a train ride to Anchorage, a flight on a Wien Consolidated F-27 to Bethel, and few days delay there. Eventually, Harry Faulkner would fly us first, and mistakenly, to Russian Mission, Yukon, then to Little Russian Mission on the Kuskokwim.

We had a couple of weeks worth of canned and dried food, a 6-gallon water bucket, a cord wood saw, a hammer, a rafter square, a shovel and a couple of duffel bags of clothing. Thus equipped, it was time to begin the year I had spent my life imagining. I would not be disappointed.