

## **Dedication**

**TO**

**My Children:**

**Jacob Wyatt Wilson and Josie Lee Wilson**

**&**

**My Granddaughters:**

**Eliza and Natalie Hagstrom**

**&**

**My Students at Rampart School:**

**David Evans**

**Robert and Stewart Joseph**

**Kenneth, Margaret and Sheila Newman**

**Rosemary, Florence, Rudy and Mary Jane Wiehl**

**Togie, Cliff and Mac Wiehl**

**Vincent, Bobbie Jo and Charlie Wright**

**Special Appreciation to Pioneering Bush Teachers:**

**Anne Hobbs Purdy (Google “Tisha”) of Chicken;**

**Gladys Dart of Manley Hot Springs;**

**Patricia Oaks of Ruby.**

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I value the comments of my son, Jacob W. Wilson, Chicago, Illinois, who read over rough drafts and inspired me with his reports of the many events and details he remembered through reading the notes and letters.

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. Thank you.

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

## **A Brief History of The Rampart Letters**

In 1969 I fulfilled a childhood dream and moved to Alaska. The Federal government was my travel agent, having accepted my application to become a VISTA Volunteer, an application which I had stamped “Alaska Only!” With foresight that continues to astonish me, I asked my parents, to keep the letters that I sent home. As a result I have approximately 350 letters covering the years 1969 - 1977.

Initially, I thought that I would edit and annotate them in the order in which they were written, and print them in 3 sets: *The VISTA Alaska Letters, Little Russian Mission, 1969 – 1970* (now available in e-book editions and at [www.edwilsonsalaska.com](http://www.edwilsonsalaska.com)); *A Teacher In the Arctic, The Point Hope, Alaska Letters, 1970-1972* (scheduled for publication in 2016); and *A Teacher on the Yukon, The Rampart, Alaska Letters, 1972 - 1977*. After many false starts and abandoned attempts, I concluded that I needed to begin with the Rampart years. This was partially because the Rampart letters were typed and could be scanned for editing and annotating, but also because it included the material most related to my adopted Inyupik children, Jacob W. Wilson, of Chicago, and Josie Wilson Hagstrom, of Minneapolis.

The only problem this bass-ackwards method poses is the need for information to clarify references in the Rampart letters to those earlier years, as well as identifying certain individuals whose friendships began earlier and continued for decades. Consequently, the following pages give a chronology, as well as introducing two people who would begin as my mentors and remain as life-long friends.

In compiling this collection, I began with transcription, either by scanning or typing. Once entered into my word processor, I re-formatted the letters and began to edit them. Editing primarily involved the deletion of “boiler-plate” introductory and concluding paragraphs, the correction of my notoriously creative spelling, and the insertion of punctuation, especially commas which I regularly eschewed. I have retained

the original flavor of the letters, and have resisted temptations to “fix” passages in ways that would reflect my current writing abilities rather than those I possessed at the time. Annotation has been added to expand on the topics, history and events. It is also used to illustrate what I wish I could have written at the time. In some cases I have also added references for my children’s edification - explanations of family events whose beginnings are not readily apparent. Chapters conclude with previously published sketches which illustrate activities and individuals in greater detail.

Finally, I have also added an “*Afterword*” which briefly mentions events which evolved out of the years in Alaskan Bush, and an “*Epilogue*” which contains a brief summary of the August, 2002 visit to Rampart I made with Jacob Wilson, Denise Hockley, and Jessica Evans. While these notes are neither exhaustive nor unbiased, they do provide a glimpse of personal history, which has gone unstated for far too long.

My years in Alaska changed me. The sometimes tragic experiences of the following years also had their effects, as did other occurrences, both humorous and instructive. I have been blessed to have lived a full, demanding, and complicated life. With Thoreau, I elected to “...go upon the deck of the world, the better to see the moonlight and the mountains.” Like him, I also have “...no wish to go below now.”

**Edward W. Wilson, Ph.D.**

**Palos Verdes, California**

**August, 2014**

## **A Brief Chronology and Background Information for The Rampart 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.” It turned out that such a place actually existed, Little Russian Mission, on the middle Kuskokum 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 I knew I would never adapt to the wind, snow, ice and polar seas. Blizzards on the Fourth of July, and six to eight 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" since the state had attempted to re-open it two years previously.

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 the University of Alaska - Fairbanks 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

1972

*Postmarked August 12, 1972*

At long last I have a chance to write. We finally arrived in Rampart yesterday after numerous changes of plans and are beginning to get organized, I hope. When we got back to Fairbanks after our first visit we did some shopping for things for here. Then, at the last minute, Gaylen was unable to go with me to bring the boat here. Hence, after much deciding, Sue, Jacob and I left Fairbanks last Thursday expecting to arrive on Saturday. The first day went well and we reached Manley Hot Springs (about 230 miles) that night with perhaps 2 quarts of gas left. We stayed and visited some friends on Friday and took an option on some ground.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The boat was a 16', flat bottomed, Ouachita jon boat, green with a 25hp Evinrude outboard motor. The trip was especially scary given that I had never piloted a river boat before, had never been on the Tanana River, had only a topographic map for deciding the course, and that there were no communities of any sort in the 180 mile stretch between Nenana and Manley.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Saturday morning we awoke to heavy rain on (and in) the tent - rain that continued until yesterday. We stayed in Manley until Monday when we finally decided that the weather wasn't changing. That afternoon we went the 80 miles to Tanana and talked awhile to the school system's Area Superintendent Bill Thompson. Tuesday we rested up somewhat and yesterday we came up the last 80 miles - once more in wind and rain. Needless to say, the sky cleared within an hour of our arrival and the weather has been beautiful ever since.

Now for the village and school, etc. The village is predominantly Indian with 4 or 5 whites (miners mostly). I'll probably have 14 or 15 students. The people, with a couple of exceptions, are quite nice (the exceptions are white, fortunately, so no race problems). The houses are mostly log and there are a lot of moose and bear around (we can watch the bears drinking across the



river at night and I've seen tracks behind our house). The school and quarters are in the same building (not log I'm sad to say) and room wise are quite nice. However the electrical and heating systems are both pretty well shot and immense amount of work is required. We couldn't be happier about the mess as it gives us a winter's worth of projects and the place will feel more like our own than Pt. Hope ever did. We have a large living room, 2 bedrooms, bath, pantry, workshop, kitchen, attic and "freezer" cellar for ourselves. The adjoining classroom also has a couple of smaller rooms attached. The water system is currently out but I expect to have at least cold running water by next month.

\*\*\*\*\*

*I was wrong about the ethnicity - Rampart had more Eskimos than Indians and the make up of my students was 4 Indian, 1 white, 9 Eskimo. The place was also a total disaster. The previous teacher, terrified to leave the building, had barricaded herself in with her dog. She filled rooms with her garbage and nailed the doors shut when they were full. Piles of dog scat covered most of the floors. When I arrived she was, I was told, completing her contract year in the locked ward at Alaska Psychiatric Institute.*

*The oil space heaters had exploded at some point covering every surface with oily soot. Jacob was converted into Tar Baby, soot covered wherever he touched or moved. The multipane windows hadn't been washed since the building had been relocated from Anchorage 25 years earlier. The water system, a 500 gallon cistern with a pump, hadn't functioned since 1948, and the generators had recently been taken off the beach in Galena where they had served as boat moorings.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Jacob is better and happy to be "home." There's been too much traveling this summer and the boat trip was about the last straw for him. We have a Dr. in Fairbanks for him now and are happy to have a hospital as close at hand as it is. It will also be nice to be able to get "to town" for Christmas.

I like my new Superintendent a lot and I suspect we're equally happy with each other. He turned down five other people for this position before approving me so my reputation isn't horrid all over the state. It's good to be pretty much on my own and I'm already working to get this place habitable. I have the authority to close the school if necessary and I am looking forward to polishing it into a nice place.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Terry Chase was the first superintendent, to be followed in rapid succession by Bill Thomson, Jack Dunham, Larry Helms, Jim Eachus, Ruth Stevens, Dave Dickerson, Will Rigger, and Judy May. The never ending parade of administrators was a curse with regard to getting things done, but a blessing in terms of being left alone. Most had taken the job to pad their resumes and soon departed upon realizing that they didn't have a bunch of meek teachers to kick around. Two - Jim Eachus and Judy May were very good, but unwilling to submit to the abuse and assaults heaped upon them by various Native "leaders". Of the 7, only Judy May and I would manage to stay in occasional contact over the year but, as with Orie Haas in Aniak, that too would come to an end as time and distance took their toll.*

\*\*\*\*\*

I have to get this to the PO so it will make the next plane. Sorry I couldn't write sooner. Thanks muchly for shipping the stuff. We'll send some pictures as soon as possible.

***Postmarked: August 26, 1972***

Just a note to enclose with the phone bill and fish. I am sending them airmail and I expect that they should arrive okay. The fish are eaten simply by cutting a piece and then peeling it out of the skin. The skin is occasionally eaten but usually it is too tough. I like to stick the skin in the fire until it crackles a little in which case it develops crispness like a potato chip. These are also the best fish we have ever managed to get anywhere. They are made locally by a man named Peter Evans and are far superior to anything we obtained on the Kuskokuim. They don't require refrigeration. We keep ours in the attic much like farmers used to keep hams and bacon. If you hang them up, put something under them as they will drip a little oil. If it's not all gone by your next trip you might take a little sample to Dr. Diehl.

\*\*\*\*\*

*These were king salmon strips, about 36" long by an inch square, dried and smoked over a rotten cottonwood smudge.*

*Dr. Diehl was my father's doctor, who had done my annual physical and first discovered that my cholesterol levels were above 700! He told me it was genetic and that there was no*

*known treatment at that time. He also told me I had already exceeded my life expectancy and shouldn't count on having much time left. Happily, he was wrong about the latter.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Write soon. Hope the greenhouse project is progressing okay and the new washer is nice. Our new one still hasn't arrived. I did get 2 new chimneys built this week though, so some progress is being made here.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The previous Christmas I had bought my father a greenhouse from Sturdy Bilt Greenhouses in Oregon. It was a prefabricated kit and the greenhouse served him for the rest of his life.*

\*\*\*\*\*

***Postmarked: September 2, 1972***

Late again, but I'm afraid that our letters are apt to be a little behind for awhile, I started school Wednesday and have a 3 day weekend now but we have so much work I doubt we'll ever get caught up. School is, however, a wonderful improvement from anyplace else I've ever taught. The classroom is just through the door and at recess time I'm home and for an hour at lunch and so on. The kids are really nice and very far behind but that's nothing new and will keep me from getting too bored. I really like teaching the little kids for a change. We also like the village better every day. The people are really nice and I enjoy talking to them.

The first day of school was something of a trial. Last year's teacher didn't leave any pencils here, a fact I didn't discover until the night before opening. I went to the store and "Trader Ike" had some he was glad to sell at \$ .10 each. During the first morning session I discovered that only 1 of my "second" and "third" graders (5 in all) even knew the letters in the alphabet. I sent them all home for the day at noon and settled down for lunch. Just then there was a knock and in walked my new Superintendent and Chief Maintenance Man, Bill Thomson and Alfred Miller. They toured the place and asked millions of questions and answered a few of my millions of questions and then flew out again. Then the mail plane arrived and brought about 150 lbs. of stuff for me to carry up the hill. Finally, I got some dinner and later collapsed into bed.

Days like that I can do without, although a lot was accomplished. Sue's quite happy not to be teaching this year and she is a lot of help to me by running the ditto machine and digging out books and stuff.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Thus continued my effort to pretend that Suzie was contributing to our family in some form or another, though, in reality, her efforts were minimal, as always.*

\*\*\*\*\*

It's really nice to be free of lunch duties and rough kids this year. I have a hard time getting over how nice most of the people here are. I loaned Turok Newman some gas to go hunting. Not only did I promptly get my gas back, I also got 20 pounds. of prime moose

\*\*\*\*\*

*This marked the beginning of my sometimes frustrating friendship with Turak J. "Boney" Newman, a friendship that would grow over the years, and only end with his death in 1990. Boney was very smart, very funny, and very lazy. The intelligence and humor would sustain our friendship, even when his lassitude would drive me to the brink of murder*

\*\*\*\*\*

I hope the dry fish arrived safely. Unless it got eaten between here and there there's not much that could hurt it. I hope you like it as well as we do although I have to be a little careful or I eat too much of it. It shouldn't dry out on you too much as your humidity level is a lot higher than ours. If it's too oily for your taste hang it up and it will drip and dry out some.

***Postmarked: September 9, 1972***

Another week has disappeared and we are awfully busy. The weather is rapidly turning colder with temperatures mostly in the low 40's and frequent frost. Most days there is a light breeze and it's pretty chilly most of the time. It's still nice enough for Jacob to play out and he and Sue have been out quite a bit.

Jacob seems to be staying quite healthy and I think, he likes it much better here than in Pt. Hope. About the time you get this you should also get a letter from him. Yesterday morning he got out some paper and his magic markers and "wrote" for a while and then told Sue it was a letter for you. He constantly asks and/or talks about you and frequently wonders where you are

and when he can "go airplane see Gramma and Grampa". He misses you a lot, I think, and will be quite happy to see you again.

We are hard at it as usual. Sue painted the kitchen this week while I put up a new ceiling. We've ordered some floor tile for the floor and a carpet for the living room. We have a lot of paint and expect to get the whole inside, including the classroom painted this year. I hope to get a new floor in the classroom next weekend, it has to be done before it gets much colder and preferably on the weekend so the whole job can be done at once and allowed to set for a day or so before it's used. Sue is also quite busy on a couple of quilts and curtains and jackets for Jacob and I. We've taken the last couple of evenings off and aren't doing much tonight as we expect a busy weekend. The plane tomorrow will probably bring a ton of stuff for the school and I'll have to spend half my time finding some place to store it.

\*\*\*\*\*

*I had suggested that the walls needed another cleaning before painting, but this was ignored with the result that the entire coat of high gloss enamel dried, then slid down the wall into a heap at the base boards - I cleaned and repainted the walls later. The ages old spousal ploy of screwing up so as to never be asked again was operating at full throttle. Similarly, the quilts never materialized - though Suzie did manage a couple of jackets from Frostline kits.*

\*\*\*\*\*

All-in-all we're quite happy to be here. It's an immense improvement over Pt. Hope. The people are nicer, the kids are much easier to teach and the location is vastly superior. Even the poor condition of the school and quarters are an advantage. There are now dozens of projects for otherwise boring winter nights and the \$0.00 rent helps relieve the transition from 2 to 1 of us working, as does no baby-sitter and much lower food bills (air freight to here is about 20% of the Pt. Hope rate).

The old rascal who runs the store is a totally rotten person who is despised by one and all. He creates lots of problems for everyone but is apt to break his teeth on us. It's really nice to have a skunk to contend with where you're not accused of being a bigot when you come out on top. I don't think I've ever come across such a totally bad sort before. To make things worse he's also smart so ignorance isn't his excuse. He's not at all happy with us (although he's as polite and nice as can be when I go for the mail etc.), since we order most of our food from Fairbanks. If he

can't squeeze money out of you then he really gets upset. Well, a little conflict makes things interesting and he's a little too old (pushing 80) to really get violent.

\*\*\*\*\*

*My mistake, Trader Ira Weisner was actually 69 at the time, and would become exceedingly violent over the next 3 years, including 2 attempts to shoot me, the pistol whipping of a young man, and the beating death of his "cook". Details of my first encounter with him appear at the end on this chapter.*

\*\*\*\*\*

I have to go out and check the generator now. One of our plants is down and the other is something less than 100% so I go over it a couple of times a day. It gets dark fairly early now, about 9:00 p.m., and I like to do my checking before then.

***Postmarked: September 23, 1972***

Jacob is sleeping and Sue and I are up in the attic where she is putting together her quilting frame. We still have an unbelievable amount to get done but we are making some progress. The kitchen and living room have been painted and new ceiling tile put up in the kitchen. Huge amounts of trash have been removed and we've put down a new rug in the living room and installed a new heater. Our washer came last week and Sue has been busy catching up and I've got about 3/4 of the house banked - so far I've moved about 8 tons of dirt with a shovel and wheelbarrow. A couple of new chairs arrived from the state and all of the windows have been cleaned and caulked. Old chimneys have been cleaned out and the overhaul of the water system is about half done. Sad to say, we still have floors to put down in the classroom and kitchen, painting in the bedrooms, bath, classroom and attic, more trash to haul and a new ceiling in Jake's room to do, not to mention the rewiring, housekeeping and teaching. It'll be a busy winter.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Having panicked at the school's condition during a brief July visit, I opened an account at Nerlands Department Store in Fairbanks and purchased a washer and new oil heater. These arrived late by special plane, ( the Twin Beachcraft that now graces the entrance to Alaskaland's aviation museum) along with my new 16 hp, twin cylinder Ski-Do snowmobile.*

*The buildings multi-pane windows hadn't been washed since the building had been moved from Anchorage in 1948 and had to be washed inside and out several times - I think I used up 2 cases of paper towels and 10 gallons of Windex.*

*When the water system was installed in 1948, pipes had run to the school portion of the building through uninsulated exterior walls. These promptly froze and ruptured the first fall after construction. Unlike my predecessors, I saw no reason to subsist with a 55 gallon drum for water. I capped off the broken sections and proceeded to renovate the rest of the neglected system. This involved rebuilding the piston pump which sat on top of the 500 gallon cistern, as well as cleaning the accumulated garbage out of the cistern itself, sanding it, and priming it. The cistern was about 3 feet wide, 6 feet long and 5 feet deep and the only way to work on it was to climb down inside, and sealing it with a toxic sealer that about did me in.*

*Of course it was still necessary to fill the cistern. I traded Dan Wield a drum of gas for 500 gallons of water. With the tank filled and the system tested, cold water only at this point, I contracted with Dan to keep it full. When winter settled it I extended a contract to his brother Henry who cut ice on the river and delivered it several times a week. Regular delivery was necessary so that sufficient melt time was available.*

*By the third year everyone was tired of supplying water, even at \$350/month. That summer I had acquired a truck to which I added four 55 gallon plastic garbage cans and a small gas driven water pump. While the creeks were still open I would haul water with the truck. After freezeup I would cut ice after school two or three days a week, and haul it myself with my sled and sno-go. It was an endless chore.*

*Perhaps the most challenging part of living in the Bush was the necessity of taking care of all of one's needs. There were no utilities, stores, plumbers, shops, newspapers, telephones, televisions or even laws. How well you lived, and in some cases how long, depended almost entirely on one's own willingness and ability.*