



1956

NEEDED: TEACHERS IN THE TERRITORY

Few teachers were applying for positions in Alaska. In fact, the previous year, the Territory was forced to resort to newspaper and magazine advertisements. Don Richards, put these facts in the *School News*:

At the first regular meeting of the newly formed Valdez chapter of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, commonly known as PTA... went on record as favoring a resolution drawn up on behalf of Alaska Education Assn for a salary raise in teachers pay, salary raises for Superintendents and other school personnel, allowing outside teachers equal consideration of time spent in teaching as Alaskan teachers, and a few other provisions all designed to help alleviate the serious teacher shortage problem.

... It is no secret that there is a shortage of trained teaching personnel in the nation's schools... The National Education Assn. states in an annual report that, "with 1,197,000 students last year, the U.S. now has a shortage of 130,000 teachers and 120,000 classrooms. There are 840,000 students getting only part-time schooling and 80,000 teachers without standard certificates, partly because of low salaries, 97,000 teachers will drop out of teaching this year.

As the Valdez newspaper pointed out in a January 5, 1956, article, *Of all the applicants that do apply, a very small percentage actually show up, and some of these quit before school starts.*

Teaching was not without its complications in Valdez. In the winter, snow piled up until only one-third of the windows allowed the pallid winter light into the classrooms. Unlike the school-yard rules in Pekin, Illinois, where I restricted the children to the school ground during recess, here I admonished them not to play *on* the school roof. The children were easily entertained building snow forts, tunnels, and towers; and what could be more fun than sledding down mountains of snow piled high around the school lot?

Even inside we had to contend with the elements. During my third year, Superintendent Don Richards, shared both the hurdle and the humor in the *School News* section of the local paper:

The faculty is seriously considering a radical change in its curriculum. For the balance of the year, instead of "Industrial Arts" or "Shop," we may offer "Aqua Sports" or "Swimming," or perhaps, "Applied Essentials of Marine Management." These changes would be the result of the approximately six inches of water in the Shop.

To attempt to teach at this time would undoubtedly lead to a short course in electrocution; or, should we say, a short circuit. We do not feel that our students should die with their boots on.

All fall, we have been anxiously awaiting the moment when the water would subside back into Sewer Creek, so that the floor would dry out. The long-awaited moment arrived last week. We took the plug out of the drain to allow the water to run out; instead, it ran in. Mr. Kulstad promptly replaced the plug.

Due to the excellent facilities of Sewer Creek in our shop, we might get a subsidy from the Territory to establish a fish hatchery. If anyone has a better use for this room, please contact the superintendent at once.

One day, when I left school at 4:00 p.m., I reflected on that quote and my compelling desire to come to Alaska. My boots crunched on the hard-packed snow in the below zero temperatures, and I looked up at the high moon and star-speckled afternoon sky. No matter the

short, dark winter days, and yard-deep snow. Leaving the Territory had never entered my mind.

ABC

In college, I thrived on singing in trios, quartets, octets, and musicals such as *The Messiah*. In addition, I played piano, organ, and accordion. I hoped I could instill this love of music into my students. The superintendent, Mr. Barney, recognized my musical interest, and my first year of teaching he asked me to assist him with the High School Chorus.

I wrote Millie my frustration:

Mr. Barney wants me to take kindergarten a half day and be free to help him with music, and what-have-you in the afternoon. I am tired of that teaching schedule... I had girl's chorus by myself today. We're trying to get ready for the music festival in Anchorage and we don't have but one sheet of music. Mr. Barney was directing the other day and right in the middle of things he stops and says, 'Miss Bortel, you come up and direct, I'm tired.' Yesterday he tried to get me to take the boys but... it's hard for a woman to sing male parts and after I impressed that upon his mind, he took it...

My annoyance was not at the students, but directed at his assumptions and unpredictability. The children were a pleasure to work with, even though they had not done much singing before and loved the songs, rhythms, and sheer fun of music. The time together was personally rewarding.

Before long, requests for my music teaching and directing extended outside the classroom and into the community. For Thanksgiving 1954, the churches had combined services and I'd been asked to facilitate the musical numbers.

The third year, my responsibilities included teaching both kindergarten and music classes. The music instruction spanned the entire grade school, including full-blown musical performances.