



NORTH TO ALASKA

At the age of 30, I knew I liked to travel and, a bit caught off-guard, that I liked teaching. And, I was single. Other women my age were married, with their lives and future decided as a wife and mother. Without that default, I was on my own to figure out what to I'd do and where I'd go. I don't know how exactly Alaska wedged its way into my heart and life, but I do remember starting to read books, such as *O Rugged Land of Gold* by Martha Martin, and articles about that distant and mysterious American territory. My heart and mind surged with excitement as I learned about frozen wilderness areas with access only by dogsled, remote Native villages, and the Northern Lights dancing across the Arctic sky. *My fascination is only a passing fancy—it will fade with time*, I told myself.

In May 1953, when the Free Methodist Mission Board offered me a teaching position at a Christian day school in Florida, I carefully considered the offer. Their letter outlined an opportunity to expand my career to teaching children of different ethnic groups. This appealed greatly to me; yet, to my surprise, the pull northward hadn't lessened, even with the knowledge and practicality that if I chose to head North, I would have to be on my own and without my denominational Mission Board support, since its affiliations did not extend into Alaska.

I'd learned about this small town through church officials who connected me with Wilson and Jay Stein, a young couple who was starting a Free Methodist church in Valdez. When I wrote them in February, 1954, Jay eagerly responded, "We have been earnestly praying that God would send workers this way."

My correspondence with Jay painted reality into my mental picture of Valdez and heightened the allurement of Alaska: *Do you know that snow piles up to 300 inches? Then you'll need rain gear, too, for the wet spring and fall. We really can't buy much here, in the way of clothes, but we order from Sears & Roebuck out of Seattle...*

I couldn't wait to experience this intriguing new life. If only I could close my eyes and be there. Jay suggested that the easiest method to bridge the gap between here and there was to drive to Seattle and put my car on the ferry, in order to avoid the Alcan Highway. This would cost \$150 to \$175 and only take about five days. If, however, I chose to drive, she advised that it would be prudent to have a traveling companion: *Be prepared for only 2,000 miles of pavement and then the gravel roads, deteriorating to dirt and mud... gas will be very expensive 57¢ to 85¢ per gallon; however, once here it is 34¢.*

Dorothy Fisher, a young woman who had stayed with me in Pekin, was compelled to join me, and she figured she could find some kind of summer work there. I knew she wouldn't whine no matter what we faced on this unknown journey, and I'd taught her to drive, which would be an enormous help with over 4,000 miles to cover.

Jay offered several job possibilities. She and Wilson had worked at the salmon cannery, which ran in July and August. Wilson earned over \$400. (Men usually made more than women, since men worked longer hours.) Room and board would be provided.

Another prospect was to work with the youth and children of their fledgling church group. I could volunteer for a while, but in the long run I needed money to exist. Jay also advised me to send my transcripts to the Department of Education in Juneau, with a description of my prior teaching experiences. In addition, she suggested that I send applications to the school boards in Valdez, Nini-

chik, Homer, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Seward, Chitina, and Glennallen. I felt confident I'd find a job soon after I arrived.

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I headed to Sterling, Illinois, for Dorothy, or Dot as she liked to be called. She was ready to go with her blue jeans cuffed around her ankles, showing off white bobby socks, and navy Ked sneakers. We were off!

Our first day was idyllic, driving along the Mississippi River in northeastern Iowa through German settlements. At noon, we picnicked in a park and in the evening cooked alongside the road. We were prepared for cooking with my aluminum camp set and a gasoline Coleman burner Daddy had sent along. Fried pork chops were our first gourmet dinner. Eventually, with 451 miles behind us, we made it to St. Cloud, Minnesota.



Dorothy cooking on a Coleman burner beside Anna's 1951 Styleline Chevrolet.

I carefully recorded daily details in my diary:

One winter night, in early 1954, I knelt beside my bed with my hands folded on the patchwork quilt. I felt God's presence and His very real summons to go to Alaska, despite the fact I didn't have a teaching position there. Some people would think this was a strange and illogical decision. Here I was, sought after by a Christian school. Furthermore, at Wilson School, I'd been offered a substantial increase, a \$200 per year raise for the following year. That latter incentive did not tempt me in the least, thanks to the influence of my Grandmother Crosby, who had written in my autograph book when I was a child, "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches."

I made the decision to go to Alaska. Colleagues at school raised their eyebrows.

"Will you live in an igloo?" one individual queried.

"The sun never shines in the winter," another declared.

"And, there's snow all the time," added another.

I packed up and returned to my parents' home in Bowling Green, Ohio.

That summer, Ernest Keasling, the Free Methodist General Conference Superintendent of the Young People's Missionary Society, wrote about my journey to Alaska in the *Young People's Missionary Society News*.

World Youth crusade theme of the YPMS for the past four years challenges young people in every walk of life. Just recently the call came to the central lay representative and Illinois conference YPMS president, Anna Bortel.

For years she has been promoting crusade but just this spring the Lord tapped Anna on the shoulder and said, "This time it is you." She leaves for Alaska this month.

When the Lord first called the youth leader, she wanted to be sure it was the right step so thought if a job opened up and everything worked out right, it was the leading of the Lord. But the Lord even knocked that prop out and her final commitment was she would go even if it meant scrubbing floors when she got there.

"The Lord has made things definite to me and I do praise Him," writes Anna. "I have always been interested in missions and had a great desire and a willingness to do mission work. Before I felt God wanted me right here, so I tarried as long as He led."

As of June 1, Anna resigns as lay representative and conference president. We are going to miss this sparkling girl on the council team but our loss is lessened when we consider the work she will be doing. Pray for Anna as she goes that the Lord bless her and reward her with souls.

—The Editor

On June 14, 1954, I awakened to sounds downstairs, letting me know that Mother was already in the kitchen. "It's important that you eat a good breakfast before taking a trip," she insisted.

I breathed deeply the aroma of Mother's pancakes, eggs, and coffee as I carried the last suitcase downstairs and out to the fully-loaded Chevy. I'd miss her loving care and delicious meals.

"Where is Daddy?" I asked, returning to the kitchen.

She was quiet a moment, "He got up early to go work on one of his rental houses . . . Anna, he just can't say good-bye."

He feared he'd never see me again if I drove over the desolate chuck-holed highway to Alaska; his view into my future was dim. On this day of departure, Daddy would lose one of his girls. On this day, I grasped the edge of my dream.

Alone in the driveway, I hugged Mother. "We love you, Anna." Her voice caught. "Watch for bears!"

I closed the Chevy door and backed out the drive-way. Mother stood weeping and waving. I checked my watch: 9:30 a.m. I was finally on my way to the great Territory of Alaska.

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Before I'd left Ohio, my finger had found Valdez (Val-DEEZ) on a map; a tiny dot of a seaport in southern Alaska that lay tucked into one of the bays within the large Prince William Sound. Between Ohio and Valdez stretched 4,408 miles.