

make a seat, rested against one wall. An upright piano completed the furnishings in the linoleum-floored room.

The group was meager, about 15 adults and some children, but the kinship was enormous. We prayed together, and then sang "Amazing Grace" in simple harmony.



Arctic Missions Chapel attached on right, to the mission house. (1957)



## SCHOOL BELLS

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"In ten minutes I'll ring the school bell," Florence warned me.

I'd awakened early for this first day of school, although Florence was already up and dressed by the time I'd reached for a cup of coffee. I wore a narrow skirt with a loose long-sleeved sweater. Florence's dress with full skirt and large-buttoned bodice softened her stiff posture. We both wore nylon hose and pumps with a slight heel.

Impatiently I paced around my classroom, then opened the door and watched the children appear around the building. Some children were laughing and chasing each other. The younger children clung to their mothers. Suddenly the bell clanged. Children scrambled to the door from all directions.

Florence organized 25 students into a noisy group of grades three through eight, and they marched into her room. In my room, 24 first and second graders wriggled into their desks. Several of the youngest children, who were initially reluctant to leave their mothers, forgot their anxiety and became absorbed by the fall leaves pinned onto the bulletin board. I looked over my class. The boys and girls were predominantly Indian with dark skin and raven hair. One boy apparently had both a Native and non-Native parent. Along with his dark eyes, he had sprinkles of freckles and red curly hair. I learned that two girls, Naomi and Ruth Gaede (GAY-dee), were the new doctor's daughters. The younger girl, Ruth, kept to herself shyly, with

her shoulders pulled up slightly and her eyes downward. The second grader, Naomi, ran her fingers over her new Big Chief tablet and played with a freshly sharpened pencil. Her eyes darted around the room, taking in the September calendar with rural farm scenes, and watching a small group of children poking at one another. I suspected the girl with tight blond curls wearing a frilly blue dress came from a CAA family.

I introduced myself, then proceeded with first things first, as previously instructed by Florence; that is, I distributed vitamin pills to be washed down with cups of orange juice. Along with tablets, pencils, and crayons, the class materials list included a cup for this daily ritual. The procedure seemed strange to me, but it was a part of the health program required by the BIA school practice. Rather than leave out the non-Native children, I dispersed portions to all the students. Florence informed me that the government would also send tomato juice and hard cheddar cheese at other intervals.

The boys and girls, accustomed to summer outdoor activities, could barely restrain themselves in the classroom. I tried to maintain order with physical activities and a serious countenance.

"Miss Hotel..." a young Indian boy raised his hand and opened his mouth all at once.

The corners of my mouth turned up on my otherwise my controlled face. I wondered if he even knew what a *hotel* was. I thought of our assigned textbooks. How foreign they would seem to these children. For example, after lunch, I read a story and pointed to the picture of a red building with a silo. I asked, "Does anyone know what this is?"

The children sat for a moment, and then one Native girl volunteered, "A look-out tower?"

"Anyone else want to guess?" I asked.

"It's a barn and silo, just like my grandpa has in Kansas," responded Naomi.

I could see the limited general knowledge some students would have. Later, they opened their books to a story about children going by train to see their grandparents. My students were fascinated with

the train and asked questions, such as, "Could it go on the river?" To help them visualize a train, at recess we played *train*, coupling and uncoupling cars, being a caboose, and so on. Unlike me, the mournful whistle in the middle of the night was not a known element of their lives.

I noticed Alfred Grant, the village chief and school janitor, behind the door. He was watching me teach. This became a common practice for the eager-to-learn chief, and occasionally he'd even fit his bony frame into an empty desk for the lessons.

At day's end, I managed to herd the children into line, and then they shot out of the room. I dragged myself down the hall to our living quarters, and fell into the same overstuffed chair I'd snuggled into the first moment I'd walked into the teacherage. Whew! Had I learned a lot this first day. I closed my eyes and heard my father's words to me early in my teaching career, *Anna, you can help a child decide whether he is going to like school and go on to college by the atmosphere you create for him in his first year of schooling.*

*What atmosphere have I created today?*

Day two came and went, and in the evening I walked to the Wednesday night prayer meeting at the Arctic Missions Chapel. When I entered the room, I spotted a man in his thirties with a wiry build and crop of black wavy hair. He spoke energetically with Roy. Near him, trying to talk to Margie, sat a pretty dark-haired woman. A squirming two-year-old, with the cutest double-chinned face and a mischievous grin, grabbed most of her attention by snatching at her glasses. She tried to restrain his chubby arms, but he was quick and determined. Ruth did her best to distract the toddler and patiently waved a stuffed toy in his face. Naomi sat next to Ruth, and talked to her blond-haired classmate from CAA.

"Anna, I'd like you to meet Elmer and Ruby Gaede," introduced Roy. "These are their children, Naomi, Ruth, and Mark. Doc has been here a week, and Ruby and the children flew in on Monday."

The Gaedes had come from Anchorage, where Elmer Gaede had served at the Anchorage Alaska Native Service Hospital for two years. Before I could find out much more, Roy waved a long arm,

indicating it was time for the service to begin. Margie led us in choruses and songs, and accompanied with her autoharp. We were new to each other, but “What a Friend we have in Jesus” and “Tell me the Story of Jesus” were old favorites for us.

## ABC

I absolutely fell in love with my first and second graders, and although the children’s liveliness did not wane, I did manage to harness it by the end of the first week. In fact, several weeks after school had commenced, I had the nerve to ask, “How would you like to have a pet show on Friday afternoon?”

They weren’t sure what I meant. After I explained, their eyes got big, and I could see their imagination working.

“Oh that would be so fun,” shrieked Pee Wee, my hyperactive student who frequently gnawed on my desk. At this moment, she tucked her feet beneath her and balanced precariously on the edge of her desk seat.

“Let’s do it! I’ll bring my puppy,” pitched in freckle-faced Chris, the boy with soft brown eyes and red curly hair.

Friday arrived. The pet show would be in the afternoon. The students worked hard all morning and at noon lined up obediently to leave for lunch in their home and to get their pets. Like a dog team waiting for a race, they bolted when released. I didn’t see how they had time to swallow their food before they returned to school. Furthermore, I had no idea how or where they had acquired some of the pets.

Jimmy proudly paraded in with a beautiful blue parakeet in a cage. *Oh, oh*, I thought. *I’ll be up on the ladder trying to retrieve that bird from the ceiling.* Next came Rudy, trying to hurry and at the same time carefully balancing a fish bowl with eight gray guppies swimming in the sloshing water. Two roly-poly husky pups yipped at one another and the children. The bird put on a splendid show, obeying his young master, sitting on Jimmy’s finger and shoulder, and *not* soaring up among the dangling light bulbs. A black and white

puppy with a tiny curled-up tail whimpered when I picked him up. I cuddled him, stroked his soft fur, and whispered in his ear, “Would you like to sing us a song?” He opened his mouth wide, stretched his pink tongue, and let out a tiny yowl. I repeated the request and again he yowled. The children whooped in delight.

Before I knew it, the afternoon was over, and Florence’s students rushed through the double doors, wanting to see what they had overheard. The rest of the children exploited the bedlam, until I shooed them out as well. I surveyed the room. Desks were pushed against the wall and bits of animal fluff skittered from the draft of the just-closed door. A blue feather rose and resettled beneath a chair. I let out a small yawn and headed toward the hallway. I was tired, but it was a good tired. Next week, just maybe, the children would be motivated to write stories about The Pet Show. Now, it was Friday, and I had weekend plans for fun with new friends.

## ABC

I stretched lazily and unwillingly exited my snug hibernation. Slowly I plodded into the kitchen. Fortunately, Florence had put the coffee pot on. With a full mug in hand, I lined up ingredients to make waffles: powdered milk and powdered eggs. The eggs smelled like soy meal. Florence had warned me they made baked goods heavier. Marjorie Macomber, a nurse from the medical complex, and I had planned to hike downriver from the village. I’d been told not to go off alone outside the village, because of bears, so I welcomed her companionship.

When I’d approached her about a Saturday exploration, she’d responded without hesitation. In the same way my daily conversations revolved around unusual bush teaching incidences, hers were filled with situations unique to a remote hospital. “This beats any post-graduate review course!” would become a statement I’d hear often. We shared the same wide-eyed amazement of where we found ourselves in life.