



THE GOING GETS TOUGH

What a mess! I stood with hands on hips surveying the school grounds at Tanana, in late August. With my back to the river, the retired schoolhouse lay before me like a faithful, but tired, old dog. To its left, the new school, started in July, was framed, and outlined a future dream. The temporary quarters for the school sprawled to the right and resembled a campground more than a school yard.

Over the summer, Dr. Gaede and others in the village had persistently pursued the possibilities for a school facility and discovered that the Quonset huts, which functioned as barracks for the White Alice workers, would be available. The windowless 20 by 18 feet, khaki colored, semi-cylindrical shelters had doors at each end. Five of these road-wide structures had been transported down from the hill and positioned on the vacant lot between the school and the neighboring Kalloch's house. All this had torn-up the ground and dust kicked up around my feet. The vague afternoon light on the cloudy day didn't enhance the strengths of this potential school campus. When I entered one of the buildings for further inspection, I started a mental list. *We need some steps into these. There's no wiring. No plumbing. No heat. I'll need to see who's available for hire.*

Before I'd left Tanana in May, a telegram had arrived from Mr. Isaac, suggesting I stop in Juneau on my way Outside. At Juneau, he offered me the position of Head Teacher for the Tanana School with

the responsibility to hire two more teachers. He also showed me the architectural plans for the new school and asked for input. Before leaving, I met Miss Morey, my educational supervisor and together we ordered school equipment and supplies.

As Head Teacher the package included increased pay and increased responsibilities, including organizing this unusual fleet of buildings into a school.

A shadow darkened the door and Mr. Isaac joined me, bringing with him the faint smell of pipe smoke.

“Looks like you’ll need some help getting these Quonsets into shape,” he said, stating the obvious. “I’ll send out a carpenter. Could you motivate the community to join you in this cause?”

I hoped that the villagers’ elation would carry beyond their initial welcome-back fanfare. I’d expected my friends, and some of the parents, to shower me with enthusiasm, but it was the usually-restrained Natives who surprised me with their demonstrations of affection and handshakes.

Silence weighted down the air. *How could school start in ten days when as yet the tent portions of the Quonsets weren’t fastened to the floorboards?*

“Anna, start school when you are ready,” Mr. Isaac remarked gravely.

He was the perfect person for dealing with bush teachers, bush life, and the unforeseen that happened in village schools. I felt he understood the circumstances and would back me when necessary; not in a forceful manner, but steadfastly. I expected the going would be tough this coming year, and that bush teaching was about to take on a whole new meaning.

I put up notices in the post office and at the Northern Commercial store asking for volunteers. My pleas for assistance spurred the villagers to rally and support the men from the hospital, CAA, and White Alice site, who were already committed to the task. This project became the focus of the village and people buzzed about in participation; even children hung around offering their aid and grinning about “school starting soon.” Ruby baked cupcakes and oatmeal cookies, and I stirred up cocoa and made sandwiches.

Men and women helped in whatever way they could. We didn’t have electrical fixtures or light bulbs and neither did Northern Commercial. Since the hospital maintained close involvement with this project, Alice Peters, who was flying into Fairbanks, volunteered to go shopping for us. While she was gone, the CAA personnel connected electrical lines from the hospital, which was the source of electricity for the village. Men used their muscle and an available truck to haul up over 175 barrels of heating oil from a recent barge delivery.

Fortunately, the Quonset-hut setting didn’t daunt my new, very young, co-teachers, and with humor and vigor they pitched in to clean and organize. Harriet Amundson was a fresh-faced, robust farm girl from Minnesota. She brought along an impressive informal resume of mechanical and other fix-it skills. Herman, a slim, quiet Yupik (YOO-pik) Eskimo from Bethel, sported a short crew-cut and black framed glasses. He seemed a bit lost in the hubbub, but unreservedly carried out any instructions I sent his way. Children swarmed around him—good credentials for someone entering the teaching business.



Herman Romer in Tanana, Alaska