WE LIVE IN ALASKA

by CONSTANCE HELMERICKS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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Contents

To Bud, of course

I

Here Is the Trail

THE motor of the blue and white, six-passenger Lockheed turned over slowly as we taxied down the rough field. The pilot turned us around. At last the moment had come. Now we were rushing forward, nose down, tail up, gathering more speed at each moment. The passengers sat very straight in their seats. None would settle back and relax until we were in the air. But now the ground magically sank below us, and the snow-capped mountains of Resurrection Bay, the flaming Oriental poppies and the falling strawberry blossoms and the wee delicate forget-me-nots of full summer in Seward, Alaska, faded into a dream.

It all started for us when we were twenty-one. It might have happened while we were lingering over a coke in the college drugstore, or meeting between classes or walking side by side along the pleasant, palm-bordered walks of the campus. Bud was wearing the loose shirt and penciled "cords" that the Engineers wore and I was in some sort of peasant swing dress, you may be sure. And we both dreamed of going to a lot of far places.

Dreams are thin things spun of air. We told everybody that we were going to go to Alaska (since that was far away!) as soon as we were married. My sorority sister and her fiancé were going to South America at that time. Everybody was going to do something unusual.

There were a few slight deviations from the trail for us, but actually at twenty-three we were married, and we left an hour after the ceremony for Seattle, the Inside Passage, and points north. It was 1941.

We had no job waiting for us in Alaska, and just what we were going there for is hard to tell. Perhaps, because we had talked about it so much, we just had to get out of town.

The early May winds, as we stood on deck watching the gulls,

were cold. Even Seattle in summer had been the coldest place I had ever known, after the burning desert of the Southwest. The wheeling gulls looked cold, we thought, and we wondered why, fanning themselves through the air as they did and exposing their naked underwings and their poor bare feet, they did not turn into icicles then and there. At ten o'clock at night the cold sun sank far in the north; then we watched the endless darkened islands slide by on either hand, and jingled the sparse change in our pockets, wondering where we would go and what we would do when we reached Alaska. The lights of the warm interior of our steamboat twinkled on the water, and the sounds of music for dancing drifted out and were swallowed suddenly in darkened fjords. Some of the near-by mountain cliffs rose 15,000 feet straight up from the sea. I said to myself: "This is what you have been waiting for all your life. This is adventure. This is it." But we were on our own now, and couldn't turn back if we wanted to. We didn't have the passage back. We knew now, after two years of being bitten by the "Alaska Bug," that Alaska would exact her toll for what she gave. She would retain us for a little while on this detour — yes, longer than we had expected. To see the sights we wanted to see in the way we wanted to see them meant still further waiting and working and becoming Alaskans.

Our fellow passengers on the steamboat *Yukon* were men on contract for labor for the new government defense projects. We had sensed vaguely that there was something stirring in Alaska, but just what we did not then know. But Alaska is changing and will never be isolated again: the "Outside" will be close to modern-minded pioneers. All but the most blind are forced to see that something altogether new and momentous is at hand. For the first time in seventy-three years, once again Alaska is at the end of an old era and the beginning of a new, like it or not.

There were a few married women, probably no single woman, on the boat, and I realized suddenly one day that there were no tourists among them. We were soon to become used to the inequalities in the population, and would almost regard it as in the normal sphere of things that the proportion of white males over twenty-one to white females of the same age group should be

so different from the proportion in any other place we had seen.

Sailing the sheltered inland seas, we were wide-eyed as the vessel threaded the islands of the Alexander Archipelago. Somewhere, at the docks of some cannery long forgotten, I caught the biggest codfish of anybody on the trip.

The capital of Alaska, Juneau, was perched precariously at the foot of the mountains which threatened to push it into the sea. In this it was like several towns along this glacier-fronted coast, although it had a rainbow over it shining through a snowstorm on the peaks. But we knew at a glance that we would not want to live at the little governmental town. And it lay much, much too far south.

Cutting across the Gulf of Alaska we now left land behind us with one last glimpse of the great snowy Mt. Fairweather, over 15,000 feet tall, seventy miles away across the blue, rolling sea. Porpoises followed us.

We had a sort of great-uncle who was somewhere in Alaska. Uncle Fred was a legend. He was an Alaskan sourdough, who had run away from his home in the East to follow the sea. He had had his own fleet of fishing boats, and lost them, some said, when Ketchikan was the wickedest port on the Pacific, and he was a rough companion. It was even rumored that he had been a rum runner at one time. For the past twenty-five years, at least, he had resided in Alaska, and nobody had heard much of him.

When we docked at the end of our week's run at the longshoring town of Seward, on Resurrection Bay, we fished out a crumpled piece of paper and went to look for Fred. Inquiry revealed that our Uncle Fred was a much-liked person by the many who knew him; that he was nearing the retirement age in the Army Signal Corps, the Territory's telegraph system; that he was now located at Anchorage, 115 miles away. Consequently we now expended a few of our remaining dollars on tickets, and embarked on the Alaska Railroad.

The train climbed slowly through forests of dwarfed arctic spruce, up over a 2000-foot divide, and over receding Spencer Glacier. It tunneled through snowsheds over which spring freshets poured. It wound around and underneath itself in a loop which is perhaps the most scenic in the world, but we learned

that not only was it in a bad state of decay which would entail several million dollars for repairs, but that it would be an inviting target to enemy saboteurs as well. Therefore another line was being built to a new port of entry, Whittier on Portage Bay, which cut off fifty miles of needless tracks. Civilians thought that the town of Seward was dying; doomed for the future.

Everybody should have an Alaskan sourdough uncle. We recall that our Uncle Fred nearly fainted when he saw us – for if anything could surprise him at his stage of life it was the sight of his great-nephew Bud arrived in this outpost of Alaska with a new bride. It seemed Fred knew he possessed many nephews, relations, and the like, but true to the type of the old-time Alaskan, the passing years had found him with less and less to say to any of them. It was all so different here from what they were used to outside. He had sent a brown bear hide and gifts of moccasins, but on returning once had found them relegated to the barn, unwanted. He had sent somebody a case of Cordova salmon and fancy minced razor clams, but his only reply had been a rebuke about forgotten postage – an oversight on the part of a messenger. Fred sent the postage. He had sent a nephew a hundred-dollar bill on his graduation from high school, but had received no reply.

Always game, however, to blow a few dollars on a man just for the satisfaction of observing humanity, Fred had replied with encouragement to Bud's general letter of inquiry two years ago. Yes, by all means come to Alaska. It was the only place to be. "But advise you not to get married, for it is better to get a stake ahead."

As what's done can't be undone, however, and we were married, Fred gave us his bed gladly and slept on a mattress on the floor of the kitchen. After a week, because Fred knew the pioneers of Anchorage, we were able to rent a cabin of our own.

Anchorage, lying on Knick Arm off of Cook Inlet, and incidentally due north of the Hawaiian Islands, was at this time the largest city in Alaska. There is no port in Anchorage because of forty-foot tides and the fact that shallow Cook Inlet is choked with ice for many months of the year. Anchorage had been a railroad town, born around 1915. By 1941 it boasted the most

northern golf course in the world (very rough), a country-club swimming resort (very brief season), and the longest stretch of straight highway in Alaska, which led fifty miles inland to the town of Palmer, Matanuska Valley, and to the outlying mines in the Talkeetna Range. People had their automobiles brought up by rail from Seward just to drive them around town, gaily smashing them and beating them into wrecks within six months' time, as a rule. The road to Matanuska was like a washboard. But there were more cars at Seattle and plenty of money with which to buy them.

Because of the thousands pouring into the section around Fort Richardson and Elmendorf Field, people were living in tents and garages, and buying one-room, cardboard shacks without plumbing for $1500 in order to have a roof overhead. To a depression-bred generation, the newcomers, it looked at first as though one could not afford to eat. Anchorage was a real frontier boom-town, twentieth-century style, leading the procession of the many boom towns which were presently to pop up at quite remote points all over the earth.

Most of the newcomers, or cheechakos, came to Anchorage to make money and get out as soon as possible. Some were tough customers, the fly-by-night realtors not the least among them. Twice a month, when pay day rolled around at the Fort, certain well-dressed, prosperous-looking strangers suddenly appeared in the streets. These were the professional gamblers from Seattle, or Kodiak. Certain women who stepped from planes always had accommodations waiting for them although the wives of the town could find no suitable place to stay. This created quite a disturbance among the wives, who are sometimes forced to put up signs by their front doors: "Private Home." Vice was well organized from Seattle, two thousand miles away.

Grade school and high school were overcrowded and there was a rise in delinquency. The muddy streets thronged with strangers, few of whom ever got much acquainted with each other. Many were burdened with little children and were lonely and homesick. Some were Army wives in slacks and colored sandals, wishing, no doubt, that Anchorage was Atlantic City.

Soldier boys from home commenced to appear in great num-

bers. They resided at first in a tent city, which was soon to outnumber Anchorage itself in population. Everywhere one looked, Alaska was in uniform now. Congress had appropriated $200,000,000 for its defense against invasion.

Some very fine United Service Organization clubhouses, built by the boys themselves, sprang up in several Alaskan towns, and the USO Building became a much-needed focal point for community activities as a whole. Alaska wives, long dominated by an overpowering numerical masculinity and long suffering from the lack of amusement places for themselves (although there were twenty-eight rough board bars in every downtown block, so to speak), now surged forth in search of war work. The husbands as a whole were antagonistic to the policies of the USO, usually believing in the old-fashioned policy of "Let the soldiers keep to themselves." It was the women who put the USO on its feet in Alaska, as perhaps everywhere. Alaska women were great readers of the magazines and, while frequently married to slightly antisocial Alaskan men, they watched avidly the doings of their contemporaries in the States.

Among the population should also be mentioned an essential element which the newcomers saw little of in the boom towns, although they were there and had made their homes there for thirty years. These were the old-timers or pioneers. They consisted of the Scandinavian stock of Swedes, Norwegians, and Finns; the aristocracy of the railroad staff, who at one time set the social pace in these parts; and the old people. The Outsiders didn't even know of their existence, but people past forty made up a considerable part of the Territory's population. Fred said in the old days one could see little clusters of pioneers standing and talking on the street corners in Anchorage. They had names like Moose John, Two-Story John, Benzine Bill, Horizontal Bill, Montana Bess, Alaska Nellie, Stucco Johnson, Herring Pete — names that caressed the ear and gave even to the heart of the uninitiated a strange nostalgia. But southeastern Alaska and the coast towns had changed remarkably in the last twenty years. The pioneers either died or moved away. Some of them crawled into their shells and didn't think much of the changes that were coming. Such is always the case when a change comes. The old

gives way to the new only with great resistance, and sometimes personalities are broken in the process.

For that whole first year, a period of devoted and awful labors, we newlyweds lived in Anchorage in a log cabin. Water was pumped and carried from a complaining community pump (eighty-seven strokes for two buckets) over paths muddy in summer, icy in winter. It was carried out the same way and dumped from an unlovely slop bucket behind the house after it had been used. Although the city authorities harassed the landlords, neither materials nor labor was available to put in sanitary facilities – well, not until perhaps next year. Meanwhile people had to live some place. They crowded together, not in nice clean log cabins like Abe Lincoln lived in, but in sagging, hastily built log cabins with cardboard bedrooms attached, or in downtown apartments over the groceries which were veritable firetraps. There was no one available to build houses, as all were employed at the "base." The few men who cut and hauled wood to burn in the wood stoves charged eighteen dollars the cord, pile and split it yourself. It was a hard life – the crowding together as in tenements, and yet the loneliness and lack of friends; the complete lack of any place to go or anything to do for recreation; the utter sameness and drabness of life for all when the husband was working the fifty-six hour week or the seventy-two-hour week without a single day off in the year. Yes, that is the way defense bases were built in Alaska in the emergency. Man after man who couldn't "take it" quit and returned to the States, while the next boat brought a new crowd, willing to have their chance. Even today there is no room for weaklings in Alaska. Alaska has also long been known as a great enemy of marriage, which accounts in part for the large groups of drifting, unattached men.

A neighbor in the next cabin came over and offered to lend us a couple of hundred from his pocket to get started, which was our first initiation into the Alaskan tradition, but we declined his offer. Instead, we lived on oatmeal and turnips until the first pay check came.

Bud first hefted hundred-pound cement sacks as a day laborer on an airfield construction job; but soon he had become a

semiskilled sheet-metal worker and had a lot of fun handling iron, copper and the tin for which Outside people were saving their toothpaste tubes.

Every generation must meet its destiny — the destiny of war. We were just being born during the last war, along with millions of Greek and Russian and German and Japanese and Hindu babies. Now all the babies were grown up, carefully trained in the social systems of their forebears, most of whom were dead and forgotten by this time, but their vicious systems lived on, or perhaps were even invented over again by the new generation.

It was hard for me to understand many things at the time I was married. I only knew that, having got to Alaska, I didn't like it. This, incidentally, is usually the case with women. I enjoy pleasure and luxury and have never been a particularly brave person or a particularly realistic one. It didn't affect me to know that women before me had pioneered to an extent that was inconceivable in its endurance. I was a modern woman. I could dismiss all those others with the wave of a hand. The way I thought about Alaska, why — I thought it would be nice to take the roses without the thorns.

But Alaska wasn't like that, isn't like that yet. There were none of our crowd from school to applaud the adventuring heroes now. We doubted if any of the crowd would like Alaska very well actually, except through our enthusiastic letters.

Bud is a farmer's son. He was better constituted to slide easily into the Alaskan scene. He had battled his own way since he was fourteen. In addition to working his way through school he had managed to see all of the States and parts of Mexico and Cuba, and incidentally meet a great many different people under vastly different circumstances. He was used to being alone. As he pounded copper nails bare-handed up on the roofs of the barracks that winter, his mind was with the snowclouds being whirled two thousand feet into the air from the peaks of the untrodden Chugach Mountains. Or, almost unmindful of the cold, he would wonder how the mystic green of summer would look upon those same slopes. Like many boys and young men, Bud had always cherished a desire to wander freely and unhampered through at least some of the great wilderness of the Americas

as well as of other countries and continents. We agreed in this — so had I. Bud at least was well qualified to do it.

My contemplations of life in Alaska as the months passed disclosed to me presently that it wasn't only the last generation who had been uprooted and who had suffered and endured. We had thought our generation exempt. It wasn't. I began to see that I was not the only one who was undergoing or who would soon undergo a great change in methods of living.

The world was moving on, and at an accelerated pace. Following the Pearl Harbor incident the United States declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941. Germany declared war on the United States in alliance with Japan and Italy. England had been fighting for months now turning into years. The magnitude and speed of the process of adjustment to this Second World War on the part of all peoples and nations were inescapable. The activities all over the country were revolutionary in scope. They pointed two ways: to northern Europe and North Africa; and northwest through Alaska to the Orient and Japan. The legendary apathy of some of the Alaskan old-timers was being shaken. The infiltration of global war through and across Alaska, and the subjugation of Japan by the United Nations from eastern Russia, would possibly necessitate a fusion of Occident and Orient which would require all of their united power and strength.

And we, insignificant, young, and very interested, were now sitting on the direct route of the main west-to-east pathway to Asia whether via the Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutians direct from the little town of Seward, or by the natural passes of the mouths of the Yukon! Alaska was the spot of the day.

Citizens of Alaska had followed Governor Ernest Gruening's advice to a large extent. The outbreak of the war found every cabin with about a year's food staples on hand, stocked as only people like Alaskans know how to do. Radios which previously had tuned chiefly to Tokyo and Mexico City, easier of contact than most stations in the States, now enjoyed in Anchorage the improved sending and receiving facilities which hooked them onto the big networks with the favorite programs that the rest of the Americans habitually enjoy — this being one of

the growths, no doubt, of the war, and a real blessing. It serves to remind one of how isolated, psychologically and physically, Alaska was before the war.

Evacuation of Army wives and children and all dependents who were not residents began. There was wailing and gnashing of teeth at Anchorage by those who did not want to go. Yet for others it was a free ride, and some promptly came back after they were sent out. Many women suddenly got jobs so they would be classified as self-supporting persons vital to the lifeline of the Territory.

An interesting local phase of the war situation was the liquor traffic, which continued at increased tempo for some time. Ships docking at Seward carried hundreds of tons of beer and whisky, showing that the powerful liquor syndicates, too, were taking the governor's advice and stocking up for the future. Sometimes there was not a fresh vegetable or any other food in from Seattle because the liquor took so much room. The minority group of the housewives raged futilely to the grocers, who could do nothing about it as their orders had not been filled. Alaskans have always been good customers for liquor – a gallon of whisky per capita per month, somebody said, which is a guess. It's probably more. The Alaska Steamship Company's rates for passengers and supplies became necessarily very high as a result of the dangers of navigating the now unmarked passages of the islands wherein enemy submarines might lurk. The Company demanded a convoy, but was presently relieved of the situation when the Navy took over for the duration.

Bud and I, having survived the rigors of the long winter, were transferred, via slow freight, to Seward, there to work on Fort Raymond. That is, Bud was working on the Fort. I still had the dishes. Uncle Fred, now at Seward, finding that there were no houses to rent, bought a house and installed us in it with him temporarily. We had now resided in the Territory a year, and we were Alaskans. Digging our family bomb shelter, according to Army regulations, we kept this fact in mind and were thankful indeed.

We had been in Alaska a year when we felt we could make the break to see some of the sights which we felt we had truly

earned. For instance, we had slept in sleeping bags all of the first year, just waiting to go camping, and had camped in our own home, such as it was. Now it was time for the real thing.

It was full summer in Seward when Bud approached Mr. Cox, his boss: "I've been thinking of going up to the Yukon for a while."

"The Yukon?"

"Yes, you know my wife and I haven't seen it."

"Neither have I," said Mr. Cox.

"We have read that it may be an important place now."

"Is that so?"

"And so – well, we'd just like to take a vacation and see it."

"Hold up your hands for me to see."

Bud did so, palms up and even, before Mr. Cox's kindly eye. The hands quivered uncontrollably, ever so slightly.

"Not bad, for a year," said Mr. Cox, who was nearing seventy himself and who knew the sheet-metal business thoroughly. "Well, of course you've got a month coming anyway. A vacation will do you good. See how you like it up there, if they let you go. By the way, how are you going? Going to take one of them tourist river cruises?"

"Nope. There aren't any river cruises running these days. We wouldn't want to go on one anyway. It's to be a canoe trip."

"Canoe trip! I wish I was going myself. Well, good luck to you!"

"Good luck to you, sir!"

Bud appeared at home and went immediately to the back yard. There by the bomb shelter, he was joined by myself and Uncle Fred in front of a long wooden frame erected just over the carrots and beets. Upon the frame these two weeks past had arisen magically under our hands the form of a canoe, which was to be our only home for the months to come.

II

Initiation

CANOES and canoeing, white-man style, are unknown in Alaska. Everybody simply uses a clumsy, heavy, flat-bottomed river boat with oars, poles, a motor or all three. Most unromantic! Uncle Fred had never seen a canoe, and strangely enough neither had Bud, really. I tried to explain to the two of them what one was like, as I remembered it from my early childhood in the Eastern United States. From the store we borrowed a boat and canoe catalogue which was to be given back when we were finished with it. Then we found that we were unable to buy a canoe any place in the Territory, nor could we get one shipped to Alaska at this time except by waiting perhaps for most of the summer. We would have to build it ourselves!

Down at the lumberyard on a rainy day we selected our wood for the frame. Uncle Fred wanted ironwood at first, until Bud explained that ironwood is definitely out for canoes. The canoe, unlike the ocean-going boat, is not built to withstand the battering-ram of the waves, but to ride over them lightly, like a cork. About the only other wood which Seward's lumberyard boasted at this time was Sitka spruce, fortunately a light and excellent wood for our purpose.

This was war, and nobody was building anything. That is, nobody but us. The man at the lumberyard sleepily looked at us (it was not his lumberyard) and said flatly, "You can't do it." Our order was not an imposingly large one, and he told us that, the manager being absent, he couldn't risk using the power saw to cut our piece. Therefore our next few days were spent in sawing the gunwales and the sixty-four ribs out by hand, and painstakingly planing them to polished smoothness. Bud, who had by now drawn up the plans and measurements, assured me that care was vital, because the least roughness would tend to