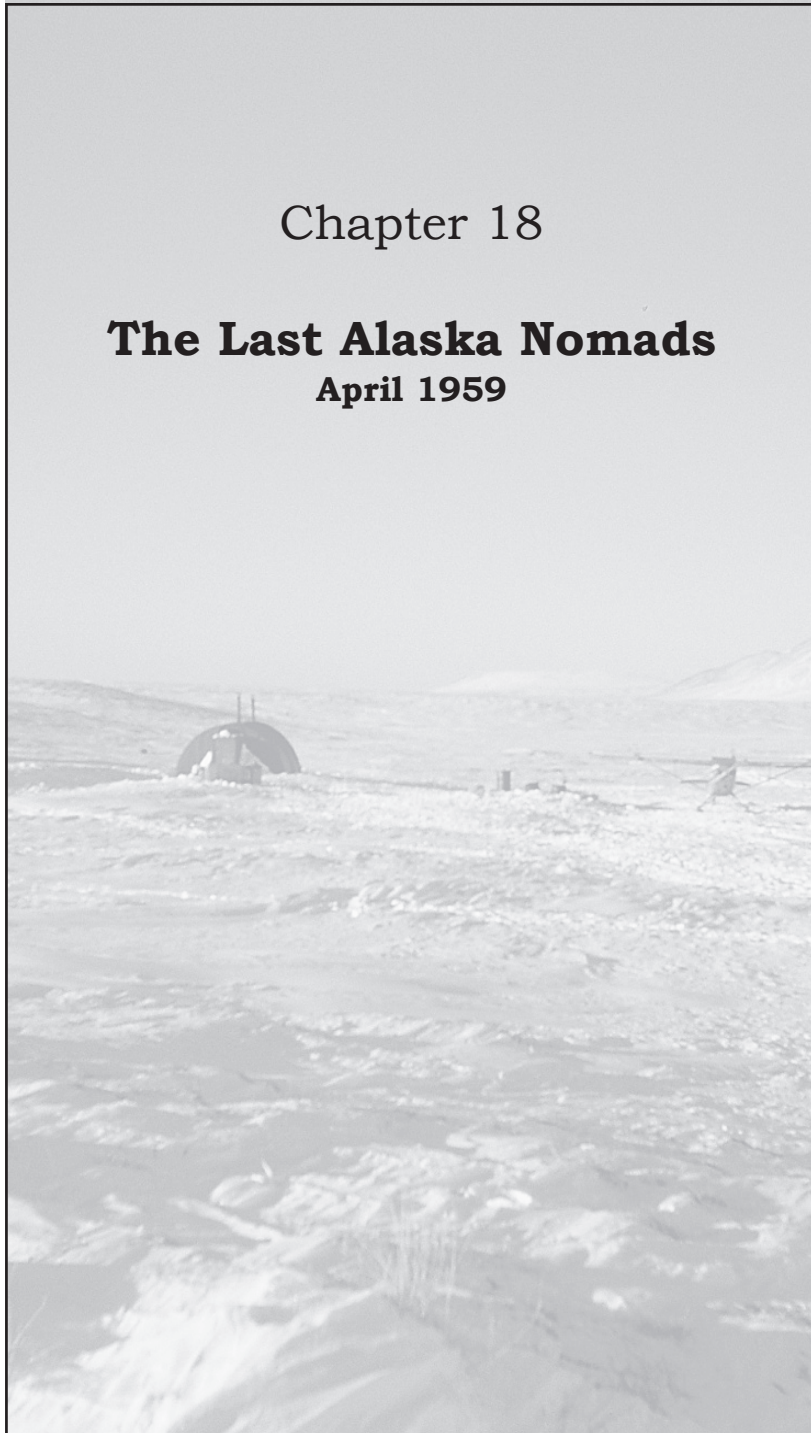


## Chapter 18

### **The Last Alaska Nomads**

**April 1959**



*I was flat in bed, in spite of strong medication, with searing pain shooting down my left leg. Nothing, however, would stop me from going on this trip.*

---

Crouching down, I moved through the darkness, feeling my way along in the low, tunnel-entry to the house. Gingerly, I withdrew my hand from a husky dog's furry body. Walking in this position was nearly impossible. Three days before, I'd developed a sciatic nerve irritation. Now, every step was excruciating, and I was more than ready to stand up straight. Finally, my host tugged at a door. A kerosene lantern illuminated a 20-by-18-foot room.

I'd finished a day of medical examinations in the Nunamiut (NOON a mute) Eskimo<sup>1</sup> village of Anaktuvuk (An ack TOO' vick)<sup>2</sup> Pass, which lay an equal distance of 300 miles from Fairbanks, to the south, and Barrow, to the north. Anna Bortel had accompanied me and we were now guests in one of the sod houses. Even with my previous travels to Alaska villages, this trip was unlike the others.



The Anaktuvuk Pass Nunamiuts were “people of the land,” whereas the majority of Alaska Eskimos lived along the west and northern coasts of Alaska, and were “people of the sea.” Until recently, this group had moved in tandem with the migrating caribou through the Brooks Range, eating caribou, wearing caribou, and, in summer, living in caribou tents. The Nunamiut hadn't always stuck together as one group, but smaller family units crisscrossed as they moved around on the open, rolling tundra; sometimes merging, other times going

---

<sup>1</sup> Inland northern Inupiat Eskimo.

<sup>2</sup> Literally means “place of caribou droppings.”



*Group of Eskimos in front of a sod house with caribou skins hanging behind.*

their own ways.

The inland Eskimos depended on dogsleds for transportation, of course, only possible during the winter. Given the distance to other villages, their travel was limited to intermittent treks to coastal Eskimo settlements for seal skins, seal oil, and simple food items such as tea, flour, and rice. Bush pilot Sig Wien had befriended them in the 1940s and occasionally tracked them down to trade rifles, ammunition, and a few staples for furs.<sup>3</sup> The coastal Inupiat valued the caribou skins they got from the Nunamiut for both inside and outside parkas, so each group got something they wanted and needed.

In 1949, the Nunamiut bands had joined at Tulugaq Lake, and subsequently settled at what was now the village of Anaktuvuk Pass. In 1951, a small post office was established in a tent set up by Homer Mekiana. Its presence provided regular, although weather-permitting, service, making it easier for people to order and receive supplies. At about the same time, a

---

<sup>3</sup> *Tannik School: The Impact of Education on the Eskimos of Anaktuvuk Pass*, Michael S. Cline.

small, seasonal, trading post was opened by Pat O'Connell, an Irish trapper and trader, offering such items as coffee, tea, sugar, salt, flour, and ammunition.

But until this time, Anaktuvuk Pass had been no more than a passageway and campsite. Given their location and their nomadic lifestyle, contact with other humans was unlikely. No one *just happened* to bump into this group. No trading post, FAA station, road-house, medical care, or school. No nearby fish camp, mining, or military installation to present a reason for an exchange or entice a population. No river highway or coastline to connect it with other villages by boat. No airstrip. Only small planes with floats could land on the lake in the summer and with skis in the winter, thus providing a tenuous connection to the outside world. Anaktuvuk Pass was one of Alaska's most secluded villages.

During my nearly two years at Tanana, I'd visited all the villages of my assigned area except Anaktuvuk Pass. This village, in the heart of the Brooks Range, and a two-hour flight north of Tanana, did not have a schoolteacher or a resident missionary to assist with radio transmission; consequently, communication filtered out sporadically via bush pilots. Besides the fact that it had been several years since a physician had visited the village, I was curious about these semi-nomadic, inland Eskimos. I decided that an April trip up north would benefit them and me.

I would not be flying there alone. Anna Bortel, Naomi's and Ruth's school teacher, had grown into Ruby's closest friend. Their bond and companionship got them through plenty a formidable Alaska winter night and lasted a lifetime. Anna's sense of adventure paralleled mine. She, too, was compelled to push just a bit further into the frontier, and to tackle an experience that would take her a layer deeper into the Alaska unknown.

That winter, one of the Public Health nurses who came through Tanana had stopped at the teacherage. Recognizing Anna's interest, she revealed that a medical team would be going to Anaktuvuk in spring.

"We nurses have to fly commercially, with a charter, because of insurance reasons, but you know Dr. Gaede

— he'll fly his own plane and there'd be room for you.”

That set Anna into motion. She wrote the Territorial Education Department in Juneau, requesting permission to hire a substitute teacher so she could go to Anaktuvuk Pass. They wired back and told her to take administrative leave and to assess the educational situation in Anaktuvuk, since there was no school there. Anna was elated.

The day before we were to leave, I was flat in bed, in spite of strong medication, with searing pain shooting down my left leg. Nothing, however, would stop me from going on this trip. The third evening, I hobbled down to the Family Cruiser in the mushy springtime snow that crusted over every night. Anna helped me pack the medical supplies for an early morning departure.

At 7 a.m. we were ready for takeoff. I told her bluntly, “Anna, I can’t straighten my leg for any length of time. I’ll take off, trim the plane,<sup>4</sup> and tell you how to get to Bettles.

Her blue eyes clouded for a moment and then with a nervous giggle, she hesitantly replied, “Okay Doc.”

The struggle to pack the plane left me exhausted, and I swallowed another pain tablet.

“If I fall asleep, or if you have any urgent questions, wake me up; otherwise, stay on this heading and altitude.”

I indicated which instruments to pay attention to and what should read what. She adjusted her glasses and watched intently. The weather looked perfect, and I didn’t expect turbulence or any difficulty getting over the low-lying Ray mountains.

All went well. I landed the plane at Bettles Field to refuel. Andy Anderson, a bush pilot who flew for Wien Air Alaska,<sup>5</sup> and who had built the Bettles Field Road-

---

<sup>4</sup> Trim – Adjust and set the controls that compensate for varying loads, flights conditions, or speed, so that the plane requires less hands-on manipulation to fly.

<sup>5</sup> To learn how one of Alaska’s earliest bush pilots, Noel Wien, and his brothers, brought commercial aviation to the Far North, read *Noel Wien: Alaska Pioneer Bush Pilot*, by Ira Harkey.

house,<sup>6</sup> warned us that the village of Anaktuvuk was easy to miss.

“You can fly right over it – even if you use the John River for a landmark and guide.”

I had a lot of respect for Andy. I’d met him when he’d flown patients in and out of Tanana, and I knew he was, literally, a lifeline for many people in Interior Alaska and would risk his life to save theirs. We were both the same age, but he’d logged more flying hours than I could ever imagine.

Now, the dark-haired man repositioned his cap and briefed me further, “The weather is good, but there is no airfield there. You can probably land on a nearby lake.”

I always liked to know what I was getting into. Not having an official landing strip wasn’t new to me, but I appreciated his instructions.

Our flight now took us north into the Brooks Range. After 70 miles, I saw the fork in the John River and continued northeast. The expansive valley varied from two to four miles wide and rose to tall, steep, gray granite cliffs. Everywhere, the surface was windswept clean. Trees that had clumped together were reduced to couples, then stood individually, until even those short, brave survivors diminished into sporadic dwarf willows. The stark white beauty against the blue sky contradicted the danger of the country. It seemed surreal, like a movie film, or a postcard, but, all in all, exactly as I’d always imagined Alaska. Stunning and majestic, yet raw and fraught with danger.

Like a needle in a Kansas haystack, an airplane or individual could vanish out here. In fact, last fall, a Fish and Wildlife Service team had disappeared, and, right now, a non-Native man was lost. Certainly no place to be forced down. I wondered how any living thing could survive on this arctic plain. But there *were* living things. A movement attracted my attention and I circled down to investigate. A large caribou herd.

“Anna! Where’s my movie camera?”

If they hadn’t been moving, they would have

---

<sup>6</sup> To read his captivating story, see *Arctic Bush Pilot*, by Andy Anderson/Jim Rearden.



blended into the tan and white tundra. But their hooves loosened the snow, and the wind tossed the whiteness into the air, catching my eye.

When we neared the area where I expected to find the village, I dropped altitude and scrutinized the unchanging terrain. Sure enough, there was a collection of about 20 mounds, partly drifted with snow, all with tunnel-like entries, making them appear like the stereotypical “Eskimo igloos.” On a knoll away from the other structures, one log building, with an aluminum roof and crooked stove pipe, stood out oddly. Since Anaktuvuk Pass was 40 miles above timberline, all wood was at a premium and had to be hauled in by dogsled. What rated such arduous effort? How many trips must it have taken to haul the logs for this building – and what was the impetus for doing so?

I circled. It took a bit to scout out the large frozen lake about a half-mile east of the village.

“The snow looks drifted and crusty,” I said over the engine’s roar. “Hang on.”

I gritted my teeth, anticipating the jarring on my leg. After the initial impact of touchdown, the plane slid up and down along the hard drifts until I cut the engine and it came to rest. Parka-clad adults and children with ruddy, windblown faces swarmed around us in the stiff air. The Eskimos wore their nearly knee-length caribou parkas with the fur toward their body, which made for



*Approaching Anaktuvuk Pass.*



*Eskimos and airplane.*

incredible warmth. The women covered the drab skin-side with a shell of colorful cotton print.<sup>7</sup> This contrasted vibrantly with the monochromatic surroundings.

Anna agilely swung out of the plane, unperturbed by the powerful arctic blast. Last week had been minus 40° F here. At the present, it was above zero; this was *warm*. It took me longer to maneuver, but, finally, I managed to extract myself from the plane. My plane on skis was now a toy for the strong gusts that rocked and scooted it around on the ice and hard-packed drifts. Rocks or stumps for tie-downs were non-existent, and crouching to attach the ropes to any object was impossible in my condition. I was relieved when several of the men went about fashioning tie-downs in the ice.

Anna and I were encircled by 20 or so Eskimos as we trundled toward an old military Quonset hut, between the lake and the village. How it got there I didn't know, but, apparently, it had been used by Public Health officials, before, to hold clinic. Just that morning, two Public Health nurses had arrived and had spent the morning giving tuberculosis skin tests. Polio shots were slated for the afternoon, and they asked Anna to help with recording the immunizations.

A generator provided heat only enough to break the

---

<sup>7</sup> Kuspuk – derived from the Yupik Eskimo word “qaspeg.” Other fabrics used are corduroy or velveteen, with rickrack for trim.





*Eskimos in front of Quonset "clinic".*

chill. Anna and I strung up blankets to ensure some privacy for the physical examinations, but it seemed *we* were more concerned about modesty than were our patients.

I began examining the 96 villagers. Anna sought out the elders in the village to learn about the educational needs of the children and the possibilities for a school. Meanwhile, an Arctic Health researcher returned to the village by dogsled. From what I gathered, he'd been coming and going in the area for the past 10 years, seeking information about wildlife and then returning to Anchorage. This speck in the middle of nowhere sure was a hub of activity at *this* time.

After several hours, Pat O'Connell, the trader, invited us all to his place for caribou stew. Simon Paneak,<sup>8</sup> the leader of the village, joined us, as did some

---

<sup>8</sup> Read about this remarkable man who understood his culture and environment, and was able to describe through words and pictures *this* knowledge, as well as provide a window into otherwise lost history and legends of the Nunamiut. *North Alaska Chronicle* by John Martin Campbell. *In a Hungry Country: Essays by Simon Paneak*, edited by John Martin Campbell.

others. Simon Paneak had married a coastal Eskimo, who had learned English from the missionaries, and now he, too, spoke fluent English — a surprise when most of the other villagers spoke primarily their own language.

Anna plied everyone with questions, questions which were welcomed. She learned there were between 20 and 30 school-age children. Simon had asked the Bureau of Indian Affairs to provide a teacher; however, the BIA surmised that the location was too remote to build a school and, regardless, no one would be willing to go there under the rigorous conditions.

“Before now they go to boarding school at Wrangell,” said Simon. “The kids get hold of liquor at school. We don’t want that. Anaktuvuk Pass is a dry village.”

I could see Anna’s mind ruminating.



“Sit there,” said Arthur,<sup>9</sup> motioning toward the caribou skins.

After the intense and absorbing conversation over supper, we’d been invited to another villager’s home. I’d made it through the entry filled with huskies and straightened up to look around. The dirt floor was covered with willow twigs and some caribou skins. As I moved past the stove toward the skins, I noticed a pan with dark water. Arthur dipped water from a five-gallon Blazo can and added it to the pan on the stove. He threw a handful of loose tea into the black liquid and turned on the flame. Without the abundance of spruce, such as the other Native villages I’d been to, there was no robust barrel stove for heating and cooking. Instead, a small oil stove provided tentative warmth.

But, in spite of all this, the room was toasty, and Anna and I pulled off our heavy wool gloves and unzipped our parkas. I tried to find a comfortable position for my leg on the pile of skins.

“Doc, isn’t this a wonderful experience?” whispered Anna.

---

<sup>9</sup>Not his real name.

My eyes roamed around the room, spotting a caribou skin mask fastened to the thick sod wall. A miniature kayak, tipped on its side on the table, lay beside an ulu knife and a rounded pile of sinew string.

Arthur hospitably held out blue Melmac™<sup>10</sup> mugs of steaming tea, and we cautiously sipped the strong brew as it fogged up our glasses. A few other Eskimos pushed through the door. Anna's genuine interest in the people and their children showed in her inquiries and comments, and young and old responded positively to her.

"Arthur, how often do people fly into Anaktuvuk Pass?" I asked, thinking of his kind hospitality.

"The mail plane comes once a week. And the Presbyterian missionary<sup>11</sup> flies in from Barrow every two weeks or so — he flew in this afternoon, did you know?"

He was quiet for a moment.

"I think it is time now to go to chapel." Arthur stood up and reached for his parka.

I started to drain my cup of tea. Looking into the bottom, I changed my mind. This thick mixture must have been steeping for days.

We left the coziness of the house. Springtime sure



*Beautiful and barren Anaktuvuk Pass.*

---

<sup>10</sup> Melmac, or Melamine, was produced in the mid-40s and touted as the modern answer for unbreakable dinnerware.

<sup>11</sup> Either William Wartes or John Chambers.

didn't want to show her face here. My fur ruff whipped across my face.

I'd learned the roughly-peeled log building on the hill was the church.<sup>12</sup> Constructed just the year before, the structure was the largest and most solid in the community. When the villagers had seen the design, drawn up by Rev. William Wartes, they'd been so excited they immediately started hauling in trimmed trees, an extraordinary effort, given the 40-mile journey. I didn't want to miss the opportunity to view this amazing wonder or to lose out on joining in a worship service; however, climbing the slightly rounded hill was a marathon of pain, buffeting wind, and unsteady footing. I didn't know how the simple cross attached to the arctic entry<sup>13</sup> managed to stay erect.

For some reason, I expected to find cold metal folding chairs inside the 24-foot long by 18-foot wide room, but, instead, there were willow boughs on the floor of the single room People poured inside and, mat-



*Villagers gathered around dogsled, in front of a sod house. Anna (back, center) with the church on the hill (left).*

<sup>12</sup> To read about this endeavor, see *Arctic Bush Mission: The Experiences of a Missionary Bush Pilot* by John R. Chambers.

<sup>13</sup> Arctic entry – an enclosed narrow porch with low-ceiling. The purpose is to reduce the amount of cold air that bursts into the living area when the door is opened during winter. It often collects winter boots, sled dogs, rifles, and other items needed when leaving the house.

ter-of-factly, sat on the floor. They enthusiastically sang church hymns with melodies familiar to me, even if the words were in a different language. Then, they proceeded into a full-scale church service, complete with baptism, communion, and church membership. Inspiring and heartwarming.

The service concluded at 10:30 p.m. As Anna and I walked out into the below-zero wind and down the hill to the shelter well, the bright moon was just peaking over the tall mountains in the distance. It cast a silver sheen over the village. Anaktuvuk lay so far north that, unlike Tanana, where winter offered brief glimpses of daylight, here the winter night slept for three months. At this moment, it was a silent night – except for the wind. I wondered what it would be like to live here long-term. Would the wild beauty compensate for the rigors of the environment?

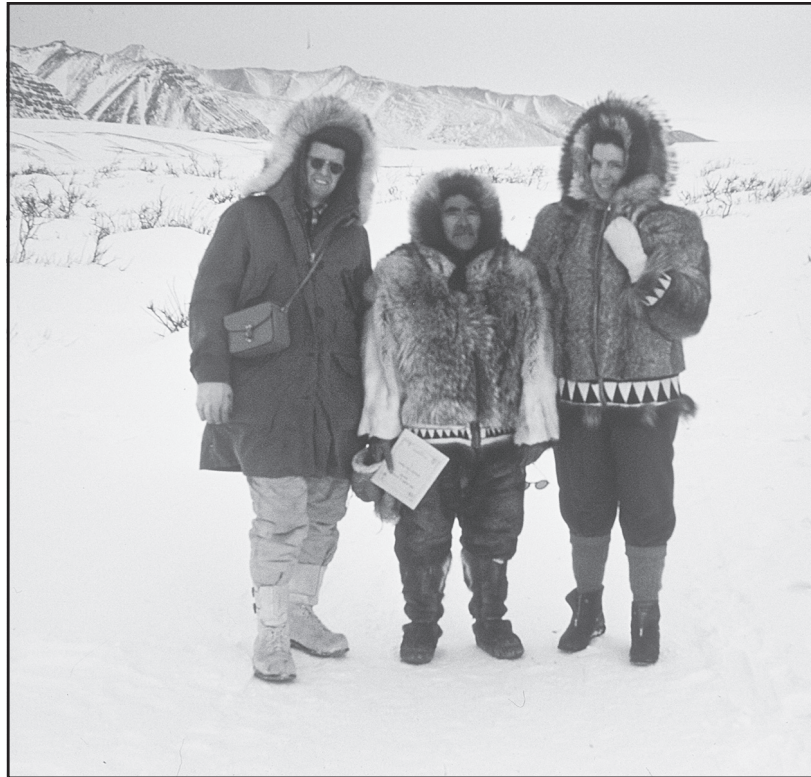
Our medical crew turned our examining rooms into sleeping quarters. I awkwardly squirmed into my narrow army surplus mummy bag with all my clothes on. Because of my pain, I was unable to bend down and remove my boots or heavy wool pants. I didn't like this helpless feeling. I much preferred being the doctor than the patient.

The next morning, Anna scrambled about, gathering information: names and ages of children, how much schooling they'd had, and projected enrollment for the near-future years. The Natives worked with her. They shared the same goals.

I completed medical examinations. The main health issues were chronic ear infections and recurrent respiratory infections. I was surprised at the small incidence of tuberculosis, which contrasted with the other villages I'd visited.

Since the nighttime temperatures had dropped below zero, before we departed, I had to warm the engine oil. Once that was accomplished, a large group of adults and children hovered around us and escorted us to the airplane. They seemed to think nothing of the continuous marrow-chilling wind. Sometimes, they walked backward to keep the wind off their faces, and, always, they smiled. A lasting impression was how





*Myself, Elijah Kakinya, and PHS nurse.*

good-natured they were.

Anna and I said farewells with handshakes, pats on the backs, and more smiles. Gingerly, I pulled myself into the plane and adjusted the weight on my leg. The blowing parkas of our send-off crew served as multicolored windsocks, and I turned the plane toward the air stream. The plane jounced about on the uneven surface as it fought to find the sky.

Anna pressed her face against the window and waved until the people were dark dots against the white background. Then, she sat in silence. I wasn't sure if she was thinking of future possibilities at Anaktuvuk Pass or just gathering in the polished wonderment of the Brooks Range valley and mountains.

After a brief fueling stop at Beetles, we wasted no time getting back into the air. Tanana was reported as clear, but gray clouds were settling into the Ray Mountains. I decided to avoid that bad-weather trap and,

instead, took a valley to the west. Like a magnet, the clouds followed us as we traced the river's path beneath the low ceiling and snuck into Tanana. The village was easy to find, with the evening sun reflected off the red, green, and rusted metal roofs. I buzzed the village and flared out for landing. Unlike Anaktuvuk, spring *was* coming to Tanana and my river strip was deteriorating. I'd need to switch to wheels and move up to the airstrip.

We climbed out of the plane. The air felt warm, with a tinge of life. I heard a bird chirp. I suspected the pungent smelling pussy willows were lined with gray softness.

"Tanana is so plush!" exclaimed Anna, when we climbed out of the plane. "A grocery store, school, hospital, running water and electricity, an airstrip, trucks..."

Such talk continued as we walked up the river bank to my medical duplex. I could see my four children at the living room window, kneeling on the couch, and looking out. Anna followed me inside. Ruby hugged us both. Knowing how I usually brought back souvenirs from many of my trips, the children clamored, "What did you bring us?"

I pulled out red fox and wolverine furs, and then a caribou mask. They giggled as they took turns trying on the mask.

"And wait until you see our pictures," I said. "You won't believe how the Eskimo women carry their babies. They carry them inside their parkas on their backs."

"Don't they just fall out?" asked Naomi.

"They put a belt around their parkas, which catches the babies under their bottoms. It makes a little seat to ride on," I explained.

"Yes, and guess how they get the babies out?" laughed Anna. "They don't just undo the belt and let the babies drop out. No, the mothers lean over with their heads nearly to their knees and the babies come out the top of the parkas where their mothers gently catch them."

Anna tried to demonstrate and everyone laughed.

"And that's not all," I said. "The babies don't have anything on their bottoms."

"No diapers?" said Ruby.



*Two women, one with baby on back (lt).*

“Yes. I didn’t know that and asked a mother to demonstrate for me so I could take a picture,” exclaimed Anna. “So she did. Right outside in the wind and cold.”

“No!” exclaimed our captive audience.

“Yes! I was shocked! The mothers’ parkas are caribou-skin lined and they wipe the caribou hairs off their babies’ faces, while the babies blink their little dark eyes in the cold brightness. Of course, I asked her to put the baby away. She pulled her parka up, pushed him around to her back, bent over until he slid up her back, and then belted him in.”

We agreed to get together as soon as our pictures were developed and invite over other friends to see our grand adventure

“It’s hard to believe that such a different world is only two hours away,” I said, to no one in particular. I looked around me. A green carpet, rather than twigs and branches, covered the floor. There were no caribou skins to sit on, but chairs accompanied the kitchen

table. I walked into the living room and eased onto the cushy sofa.

“Naomi and Ruth, could you help me out and untie my bunny boots? I’ve had them on for three days.”

At the time, I didn’t suspect that I would return to Anaktuvuk Pass and discover that a baby had been named for me — and not only using my first name of “Elmer,” but a middle name of “Gaede.”<sup>14</sup> Neither did I know that, within a year, Anna would return to Anaktuvuk Pass to establish a school and be the first schoolteacher, as well as create a market with an economy, for the Eskimos to sell their native crafts and make Anaktuvuk Pass known for their masks. She’d have even more stories to tell — enough to fill a book of her own.

I did know that, as much as I loved to make and gather Alaska stories of flying adventures, medical excitement, and hunting tales, it was nice, for a change, to just enjoy Alaska’s natural beauty and the uniqueness of her people.

The reception of the Anaktuvuk Pass people was a special and treasured gift they had given me. I hoped I’d given them the gifts of respect, encouragement, and a step toward health.

### **Simon Paneak Memorial Museum**

Named in honor of the early village leader and respected elder, the museum was established in 1986 by the community and is currently operated by the Planning Department of the North Slope Borough.

The museum's exhibits focus upon the origin, history, culture, and traditional lifestyle of the Nunamiut, with a strong emphasis on the importance of the caribou. The museum highlights the physical environment of the Brooks Range and hosts displays of tools, clothing, skin tents, caribou, and subsistence activities. Guided tours and formal education programs for students are available. In the Museum store are educational materials, local Native crafts, and gift items.

In the spring of 1962, when the Gaedes lived on the Kenai Peninsula and Anna Bortel was teaching in Anaktuvuk Pass, the Gaede family flew up in the PA-14 Family Cruiser to see her. Anna now lived in a sod house, just like the other villagers, and was offering to the Nunamiut what they had dreamed of: education for their children, as well as the opportunity for adults to learn spoken and written English themselves. Still a remote village, Naomi and Ruth were the first white children a number of the students had ever seen.

Read about this trip in *Prescription for Finding Home in Alaska*, "Homesteading Takes Root."