

L. Arden Almquist

Describes

Axel Karlson's Life

Missionary Pioneer Leads Hard Life in Alaska

IN OBSERVANCE of the 75th anniversary of the Alaska Covenant church this year a new book, *Covenant Missions in Alaska*, is being published for distribution at the annual meeting next week in Seattle. Author is Dr. L. Arden Almquist, Congo missionary, who spent last January and February in the 49th state doing research for the book. Parts of the second chapter, which tell the story of pioneer Axel Karlson, follow.

The Covenant of Sweden began its work [in Alaska] in 1887, and on July 29, 1889, offered to turn it over to the American Covenant, an offer that was jubilantly accepted.

The Swedish missionaries were quite willing to continue their work under American sponsorship. Two of them, Axel E. Karlson and Adolph Lydell, had previously worked among the Russians in Caucasia. Karlson had been banished to Siberia, where for three years he was a prisoner. Only by the intervention of the Swedish government was he released, suffering from malnutrition and ill health.

In August, 1886, Karlson and Lydell arrived in the United States and spent a year in San Francisco, learning English. Karlson had met representatives of the American Covenant at its annual meeting, so the Alaska work from its inception was followed with interest by the younger church. In the summer of 1887 the two men left San Francisco for Alaska, going first to Yakutat on the shores of Yakutat Bay

in southeastern Alaska, a lovely village in the midst of evergreen hills, with the majestic mountains of the St. Elias Range in the background. Lydell elected to stay at Yakutat, and Karlson continued north, arriving at St. Michael on June 25, 1887.

On the same ship was the pioneer Episcopalian missionary, the Rev. Henry Chapman. Karlson and Chapman agreed that if one of them should be led of God to go north, the other would work in the Yukon region. At St. Michael they met Nashalook, outstanding leader of the Eskimos of Unalakleet, who spoke a smattering of English and Russian and could thus communicate with Karlson. He invited Karlson to come to Unalakleet. So, it seemed to the two missionary pioneers that God was showing his hand. Karlson went to Unalakleet and Chapman to Anvik, there to found the Episcopalian work.

Arriving at Unalakleet on July 12, 1887, Karlson quickly learned that not all the inhabitants were as friendly as Nashalook. Three men were determined to kill him, and it was necessary for Nashalook to keep him hidden in his house for three months. When his stay became reasonably safe, he built his own quarters and began his ministry. Nashalook died a Christian in 1942 at the age of 80. He was the youngest of five outstanding brothers of the family of Dalelek, all of whom received Karlson with kindness. Truly God had prepared the way! "He goes before" (John 10:4).

The very first winter Axel Karlson visited villages along the Unalakleet River and made a trip to Golovin Bay. In the summer of 1888 he returned to the States for supplies and help, and was joined by August Anderson of Värmland, Sweden, also called and sent out by the Covenant of Sweden.

[Karlson's] . . . message was eagerly received at first, and worked for several years before the first convert was won to Christ. When you ask the oldtimers among the Eskimos who heard Karlson talk about?" the invariable reply is, "He told an unending story."

story of salvation is in its deepest sense an unending one indeed! for these people of the north, accustomed to spending the winter evenings in the telling and hearing of stories, Mr. Karlson came a welcome guest, whose message eventually won their hearts.

Mellander, professor at North College, would say of Karlson in viewing his work at Unalakleet following his passing: "When he came there were no Christians; when he left, there were no pagans."

was, of course, an exaggeration, but all such generalizations must be qualified. But that there was truth in the statement is evident from the testimonies of Eskimos who came to Christ because Karlson had come to Unalakleet.

At the start Karlson preached in Russian, and interpreters were needed to interpret for him into the Eskimo language. The message would be

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ed into two or three dialects. Karlson employed English, and used converts with some knowledge of that tongue as interpreters. Some of these men eventually became able preachers in their own right. Karlson gradually learned the Eskimo, and as he did, he could preach in a mixture of English and Eskimo, the interpreter being in.

He was the first man the villagers of Unalakleet had seen with glasses, he received the name: "Isregalik" the man with the glass eyes.

Although he spent most of his life at Unalakleet, it is clear that he regarded this post chiefly as a base for widespread extension of the gospel, for he made long tours of the Norton Bay area, going as far as Cape Prince Wales on one of his first trips.

There was comprehensiveness in Karlson's ministry. He tried hard to be "all things to all men" (1 Cor. 9:22). Efforts to nurture the new converts in Christ in matters of the spirit as well as to improve their standard of living mark his work. Converts had to study from several months to a year before receiving baptism. The content of these studies included the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Psalms, and the stories of the Bible.

It was a logical thing to get a school going, and this was done early. From the October 22, 1899, entry of his Unalakleet log we read, "Today in the Lord's name we began school for the children. Twenty-five children were present, twenty boys and nine girls. . . . The children got new names and some clean clothes and promised to wash their faces every morning."

Axel Karlson is also credited with having taught the Eskimo at Unalakleet how to build log cabins, an introduction to Alaska by the Russians. And later he interested himself in raising reindeer, expressing as his purpose: "Our main objective in view is to improve the . . . Eskimo's earthly as well as spiritual life of living."

By the same token he was generous to a fault in providing clothes and food for the population at Unalakleet, operating a commissary as far as possible by funds obtained from his gold mines.



Axel E. Karlson
'He Told an Unending Story'

The subject of Karlson's wealth requires, in fact, some comment. . . . Karlson came by his wealth innocently enough. He was a kind-hearted, hospitable man, helpful to friends and strangers alike. So it was that when gold was found in northern Alaska and Unalakleet became a stopover for some of the adventuresome who flocked north, there were among them those who remembered this generous man, the warmth of whose home and soup and heart was especially appreciated by hungry, weary, footsore, frozen travelers far from home. Karlson . . . received stakes put out for him by grateful and appreciative miners, and became a wealthy man through Alaska gold.

Karlson himself is quoted by an Eskimo who knew him well as saying: "I didn't come for the prosperity of gold, but to preach the gospel to the natives." He did allow the use of the four-ton, two-masted mission schooner, however, and grubstaked some prospectors who passed through Unalakleet. Nonetheless, he did not leave his preaching to prospect for himself, as did so many of his comrades in the cross. And to his further credit it must be added that, when the entire northern Alaska missionary staff resigned in 1900 because of gold, Karlson and his wife Hanna returned to the work immediately, almost alone, when requested by the Covenant to do so.

Life was hard for Mr. Karlson. His log entry for December 9, 1887,

reads: "Still another day is done. I feel lonesome quite often and like a hermit in the wilderness." Doubtless the arrival of August Anderson to share the work in 1889 made the work easier.

Hanna Swenson arrived in 1891 to take up duties as a housekeeper at Unalakleet. Before long she was to limit her housekeeping to one home, becoming Axel Karlson's lifelong and able partner. She shared with him in poverty and in wealth, in sickness and in health, and buried him at last in the frigid Alaska soil.

She was a generous and earnest woman, concerned for the Eskimo, and she entered heartily into the work, assisting in the teaching and helping, particularly, in the work with the women. She was the first white woman seen at Unalakleet. Her knowledge of English was somewhat limited, as the following entry in the Unalakleet mission log, made on a revisit to the field some time after her husband's death, shows. But we include it, since it also shows a good deal more:

"My farval to the Dear old Home and all people at Unalakleet. At this home I have injoy both sorrow and joy. And without those two life would not bi even. I would not have my life difference except for that to bi able to do more service for *Christ*. And with this I leave you all to God and His Grace." July 20, 1910. Hanna C. Karlson.

Hanna Swenson and Axel Karlson were married in 1894. They shared life until his death on January 15, 1910, at the age of 52, due probably to a ruptured appendix. Mrs. Karlson remained at Unalakleet briefly and then returned to the States, settling in Seattle. She retained her interest in Alaskan missions to the end of her life, acting as hostess to missionaries traveling to and from the field, and leaving most of her property and wealth to the work.

Karlson was "kind, patient, and firm," resourceful as a leader and teacher, a man with a strong faith in God and love for his fellowmen. Not only in point of time, but in point of fact, he is rightly called the founder of our Alaska work. All told, he gave 27 years of his life to missions, three in Russia, 24 in Alaska, 22 of the latter with the American Covenant.