

# Memoirs of Childhood In Alaska

By MISHA IVANOFF

**M**ISSION HOUSE!" How familiar that sounds to the ears of those that have lived and were raised in it!

There is, to some people, a certain charm about old houses. Perhaps it is the mind that wanders back to those days when once we felt so free from all anxiety; perhaps it is the hours of happiness and sorrow; the births, marriages, the deaths, that have taken place inside its doors.

This old mansion—what a pity!—has been torn down long ago. In place of it now stands a more modern structure, a two-story building made of "outside" lumber and furnished with the best. The lovely garden within the gates; the whole front decked with beautiful flowers of different varieties. In fact, this new building has all the features of a city house, but it lacks that story of the old "Mission House."

Yes, this never-to-be-forgotten place has its sweet memories of childhood. It was here a great number of children lived and were taught the love of God through the tireless efforts of the first missionaries, the Rev. and Mrs. Axel E. Karlson. Rev. Mr. Karlson, as we all know, has long been at rest and peace, waiting for "that day" when he shall put on the crown and be with the Lord forever.

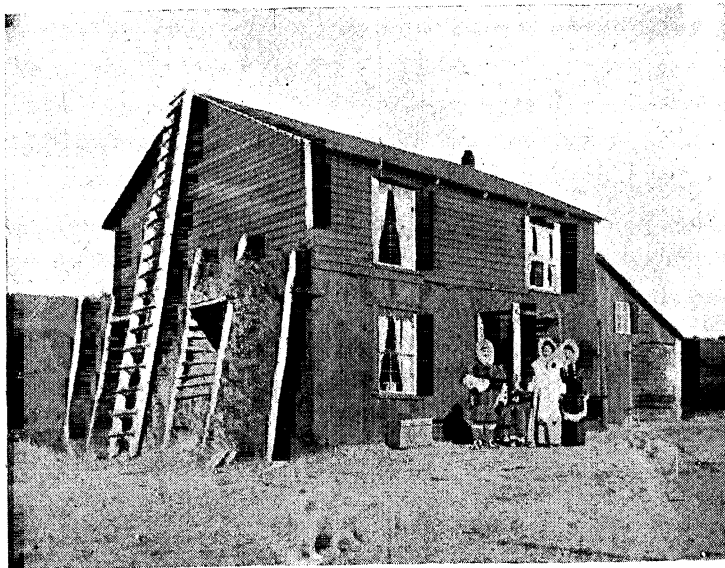
This never-to-be-forgotten place which I am about to describe stood where the new one now stands. It was built from heavy logs of spruce, cut and rafted down the Unalakleet river. Some of the logs were picked up on the beach, as they came down the river and were washed ashore by the current and the winds. The walls of this building were whitewashed every year, both inside and out, to withstand the challenging winds and blizzards of this far north. Truly these huge logs used for the walls of this building stood many a blow until they finally gave way to the nature of all things and crumbled to dust. What little could still be used, I am sorry to say, was added to the fuel. How interesting it would have been to have had it standing yet! However, that is the way of this world, and before we reach the buildings "not made with hands," we may never expect to see any that will stand forever.

The size of the entire building was about 80 or 90 feet in length and about 30 in width. It was a two-story house with thirteen large rooms, five upstairs and eight downstairs. The upper rooms were known as the North Room, South Room, Girls' Room, Boys' Room and the Dark Room. The North Room and the South Room were reserved for the assistant missionaries, or others connected with the Mission.

In the Dark Room were placed a great many different things, such as parkees—if you know what that is—skins, skinboots, trunks, "civilized shoes," and many other things. It was, indeed,

a dark room as I remember it. It was here, too, that some sweet chocolates used to be put away for safe keeping, and I must confess that had it not been for the squeaky door that led to this place, the box with the goodies would have been found emptied. Thanks be to the squeaky door! It saved me from stealing.

The Girls' Room and the Boys' Room were partitioned by a single boarded wall. Both rooms were of the same size, about



The Old Mission House.

15x30 and running parallel with the length of the building. Each room had a small gable slightly projecting out from the main roof. The large windows, two to each room, were at these gables.

From the girls' window could be seen the Bering Sea with its shore line stretching north and south. The sandy beach on either side of the Unalakleet River could also be seen from these windows. From the boys' room one had a still better view. A low mountainous country extended from the north to the south as far as one's vision could go. Between these beautiful hills and the onlooker lies a low plain marked here and there with lakes and sloughs. Birds of all kinds fly over them. Such was the view from our windows. What fun we often had in those lakes. And doesn't it sound somewhat like that "Old Country" of yours, Sweden. I imagine it does.

A brick chimney went through the boys' room, and into this big chimney came the smoke from several stoves below. Imagine what many cords of wood these stoves could consume! How

noticeable the smoke from this big chimney on a day when it was 40 below zero!

The boys, as well as the girls, were under strict orders as how to keep their rooms. We had to do our own scrubbing. Many times we were made to do the work over—and no wonder—for when it was a nice calm day we were always anxious to get out and play. Only a few strokes, a few lazy strokes, would end the work. But do you think we escaped when we were up to such tricks? Indeed, not! However, to relieve our young minds we would promise ourselves to do it better next time. Then we would run down to the matron and tell her that we were through, and ask her to let us go out. "Is your work well done, my boys?" would be her first words to us. "Y-yes," was our answer, of course. But that hesitating "Y-yes" gave us away. The matron would go up the stairs. The next words that we would hear were, "Do the work over."

The rooms downstairs were the kitchen, the dining room and a corridor, which corridor also served as the children's eating place. In this room the prayer meeting was held for half an hour every night. This meeting was led either by Missionary Karlson or by some one else that came in turn for it. Five doors opened to this passageway. Then there was Miss Johnson's Room, as it was called during the latter years. The parlor, or the sitting room, came next. This was furnished with mostly home-made furniture. I well remember the two clumsy chairs, one rocker and one arm chair. They were so big that they took up a large space of the floor. A large round table, on which often lay some books and other reading matter, stood in the center of the room. An old style round burner, Rochester lamp, which probably burned half a gallon of kerosene a night, always stood in the center of this table. In one corner of the room was a huge stove or furnace. This was made from a hundred gallon oil tank, and the inside of it was lined with home made bricks. Four rooms were heated by this furnace. Hundreds and hundreds of cords of wood were consumed here. The two bedrooms opened to this sitting room. In these lived the missionaries in charge. There was still another small room next to these rooms in which was kept medicine. In later years this place became the post office. It was at the time when Nome was in full development and Unalakleet had become a central place from which mail was distributed to various points along the coast and also into the interior.

This description of the "Mission Home" is not from its earliest days. However, it is from

the 90s and the years immediately following. Ah, those years are gone! But their memories still linger. I can close my eyes and see that Home right now with its warping floors, the battered seats, the initials cut by the jack knives, the charcoal frescoes on the walls, and the worn thresholds which showed the marks of heavy boots.

Close to a corner near the kitchen door hung an old home made triangle of steel which served as a bell. If I remember right, it was Mr. Hultberg that made this bell. He was, I believe, a blacksmith as well as a missionary sent up to Alaska by the Swedish Mission Covenant. Mr. Hultberg was stationed at Golovin Bay, a place north of Unalakleet some fifty or sixty miles. It was during his visit at Unalakleet that he

made and repaired many things for the Mission there. I remember, too, that he soldered together some old tomato cans to repair some of our broken lamps. The cans soldered together served as lamps in place of the broken ones. But that bell! Who can tell the number of times it has rung? Twice it rang for each meal—and we had many of them. The seventh bell for the day was for the evening worship. This, too, was as regular as a clock. Figure out how much pounding that old triangle must have stood during all those years! Also think of the many that struck it! Neither was it an easy matter to make it sound. The piece of iron with which to strike it was about eight or ten pounds in weight. Not a

few were bruised by it, more or less. Some hit their fingers, others dropped it on their toes. For my part, small as I was, I could boast of enough strength to handle that piece quite well. Long years afterwards, when I was married and had my own children, the oldest one, as she was playing one cold day, got her little tongue stuck fast to this bell when she licked it. How it must have burned! Luckily there was some one near that heard her cry and brought both her and the bell into the kitchen. Here the tongue was again set free. What has become of that old faithful bell I do not know. It has served its purpose. It called us when we were hungry. I can still hear it say, "Come and eat, come and eat." It also echoed through the village when it was time to come to hear the word of God, and many there were that came when the old bell called them.

Outside the Mission was a big garden in which grew a great variety of vegetables. Every fall we had a joyful time digging up potatoes, rutabagas, turnips, carrots and other things that grew there. Oh, what fun we children had! We would eat raw turnips to our hearts' content.



Misha Ivanoff and Family.

How good they tasted! I suppose that this was one of the main reasons why we children at that time were so willing to work.

Besides this old dwelling there were several other old buildings belonging to the Mission, the Flour House, Shop House, Seal Oil House, Dog House, Stable and Store House. Each of the above has a story of its own, but we shall only take up the last one mentioned. And also the school. We must not forget that.

The little store that stood right across from the main building was the place in which most of the year's supply was kept. In fact, there was the supply for the whole village. I do not remember how large a business this little place gave to the Mission, but I do know that most every Saturday the widows, and others that were poor and disabled, came here and received free of charge flour, tea, and sugar, and also many other things. Sometimes, to show their gratitude, these poor people would bring a few tomatoes, smelts, trouts, or whatever else they happened to have. Mr. Karlson never took the pains of measuring out the things that he gave away. He gave out of sympathy with the suffering ones. Very often he was seen going out from the store with an armful of packages to give to some poor native family. At other times he would be seen dragging a small coaster in which were placed things to be given out. One cold Saturday afternoon in December, only a few weeks before he died, he was seen doing charity work. Cold as it was in the supply house, he did not seem to mind it. As far as I can remember, this was his last service for the natives. One cannot realize how much good was given out by his hands.

The school house, like all the rest of the buildings, was made of logs. These were plastered with clay and sand mixed together. It served as a place of worship as well as school. The size of it was about 25x60, and it was partitioned in the middle. However, the doors were wide, so that when they were opened it looked like one big room. One room was for the Primary, while the other one was for the more advanced. The latter had regular "outside" double desks. It was considered a great honor to have such a seat. The Primary desks were long benches made of heavy planks. They were braced here and there to be kept from falling apart. I still can see the initials carved on them by the jack knives. How odd they would seem to us now!

This school was managed in those early days. I presume, very much like schools are described in the song, "School Days." Our teacher, though very young, was very strict. She never hesitated a moment to use the switch on us whenever we needed it, and this was quite often. One afternoon, I remember, she kept me locked up the whole time for not knowing a short rhyme. I had to learn it before I was permitted to go out. The rhyme read something like this:

"This is east and this is west;

This is narrow, this is wide;

This is high and this is low,

Don't you think I'm getting wise?"

I must have studied it quite hard, for I still know it. Of all the punishments that I received, this one was one of the most effective. Through the windows I could see the rest of the children having a glorious time, coasting down the snow-drifts and pitching snowballs at each other. It was this that made the treatment so hard. To choose between this and some corporal punishment, I should have wanted the latter.

To induce the village children to come to school, a large kettle full of beans was ever kept there from which it was served out every afternoon. How long this was kept up I do not know.

There were many different teachers in our school. There was one by the name of David Johnson, or David Elliot, as he was called later on. He, too, was very strict. During the following years several other teachers came and went, until the time came that I, too, became a teacher there. It was the same building in which I had gone to school myself. In the year 1905 the government put up another school house. That is the one now standing. The old school house, just like the old Mission, was torn down. Unseen now, but never to be forgotten! Can anyone ever forget his childhood? Worry meant so little then. Can anyone ever forget his parents that so tenderly nourished and cherished us, or the guardians, or the teachers?

Before I leave off writing, let me say something about the stable and what was kept there. Of course, you know what one keeps in such a place—horses, cows, goats, pigs. Just think of it—we had some of these right here in Alaska! We even had chickens for a short while. But we didn't get much good from them. The dogs came and took them all. At times we had as many as three and four cows. At first there were but two brought to this station. Probably they were shipped to St. Michael and driven from there to Unalakleet. Ivan, the "cowboy," drove the cattle home each night from the pasture. Many times he would not show up until late at night, long after it was dark. "How brave," I would say to myself. So as to be equal with him I would sometimes venture out with him in search of the animals, but the pace he and the cattle kept was always too much for me. Every time that I was left behind I felt a big lump down my throat which proved that I really was far from being his equal. When it was time for milking, it was up to Ivan every time. I could not understand why I could not do as well as he. One day I found myself seated on a low stool with a milk pail between my legs. For a while it went excellent, but soon I became nervous and could not squeeze out any more milk. Thinking that I did not squeeze hard enough, I put on more strength, but this annoyed the cow, and she gave a kick which caused me to jump up and spill the milk. I had had enough of milking. Churning butter, I thought, was far better than milking. At least, there was less danger. Danger enough, though, if one was caught sipping the thick cream as it came up with the churning stick. Being left alone while working, the hand was quite free to take up a little sip now and then. How good it tasted!

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rated with trees, evergreen ropes, paper lanterns and flowers for this, the greatest festival of the year.

Christmas eve is the festival of the home, and as we were three households at our station, we took turns in gathering at the different homes for the festivities of the year. This year it was at our home.

As evening drew near, our helpers in the home came in to see the Christmas tree, receive their gifts, and last but not least, join with us in praising our Savior for His infinite love and mercy, praying that He make us more faithful to Him because of that love.

Then our comrades came in and we sat down to the evening meal, for which the fatted goose had been killed and mince pies and other good things had been prepared, after which we gathered around the tree, where we sang Christmas hymns, read the wonderful Christmas gospel and asked God to hallow all the festivities and all that we did or said to the glory of Christ our Master. Then came the distribution of the gifts, useful and amusing, enjoyed especially by the children. Their joy increased ours as we shared it with them.

We went to rest early, knowing that the next day would be a busy one. At 2 o'clock in the morning we were awakened by singing directly under our windows, and found that it was the school girls singing Christmas carols. We

Christmas Day in the forenoon we gathered for worship. The church was packed, and many had come long distances. We had many callers at the house, and were indeed busy the whole day through. But it was a joyous work, and God only knows how many poor benighted souls learned that day of the love that gave Jesus to us. One dear country woman was so happy that she had come and "had had a glimpse of heaven."



The late Rev. Mr. H. Conradson and Mrs. Conradson.

The Sunday school festival was in the evening, when the children gave their program. The trees were lighted and candles burned in every lantern. These paper lanterns were some in the shape of fish, others as baskets, vases and lotus blossoms. Away back near the door was the best one of all. It was a round lantern of white tissue paper. As the candle was lighted, it set in motion some small mechanism, and we saw revolving the whole story of the birth of Jesus. There was the Child in the manger, the mother and Joseph near by. Then came the shepherds. After them the wise men on their camels, then presenting their gifts. Last of all came the flight into Egypt, Mary and the Child on the donkey, and Joseph walking alongside.

When all the program was ended and everyone had gone, each to his place, we, too, went home, tired but happy, realizing that it had indeed been a most blessed Christmas.

## MEMOIRS OF CHILDHOOD IN ALASKA

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"Make hay while the sun shines!" This is what we did to feed the cattle. There was no need of hunger for the animals, for there was plenty of hay. What fun we boys had in climbing and rolling down these hay stacks!

It is a general tendency nowadays to get rid of old things. Everything must be new and shining. No old sagging sofas where dear ones rested, no scarred old tables and chairs, marked by some mischievous child—mischievous and yet innocent. None of these things are wanted. Today we must have chairs and sofas with sharp edges and oak tables with a coat of some expensive varnish, all polished and shining. But,

"Childhood can never die, never die, never die.

Childhood will never die, no, never die."

