

# First Class grad still at Edgecumbe

By Bill Hess  
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The screams of several ravens can be heard as Gil Truitt walks across the neatly mowed grass of his beloved Mt. Edgecumbe High School, not far from where the old cannon stands pointed across the channel toward Sitka. Except for the crying of the ravens, it is unusually quiet. Yesterday, hundreds of students, parents, relatives and friends mingled here amidst laughter and tears, congratulating the graduating seniors

the fear mixed with excitement helped launch the school to a successful start. "We all shared the same feelings right at the beginning," he explains, "it made us a very tight and close-knit group."

Basketball helped weld the students from the start also, Truitt recalls. The players had hardly had time to stretch after their arrival when John Borbridge, Jr., then president of Sheldon Jackson Jr. College in Sitka greeted them and asked them to form a new, Mount Edgecumbe basketball team. Within an hour

ciation rather than resentment. "After I graduated, I went to Harding University in Arkansas, where I majored in Physical Education and minored in Social Studies," Truitt explains.

"My experience at Edgecumbe really helped me in two ways; one was with dorm living, I was used to it. The other way was because of the good teachers I had had. They had insisted on hard work and the work at Harding was very hard. I saw lots of students drop out their freshman year because they

starring Raquel Welch. "Ossorgin demanded discipline," Truitt explains the quality of the choir; "if you wanted to sing in his choir, you did what he said. They practiced longer than we did in basketball."

That choir was resurrected last summer after an emotional get-together at Edgecumbe's first all-class reunion, and will be performing once again this summer.

The discipline routine worked well for awhile, but attitudes about education

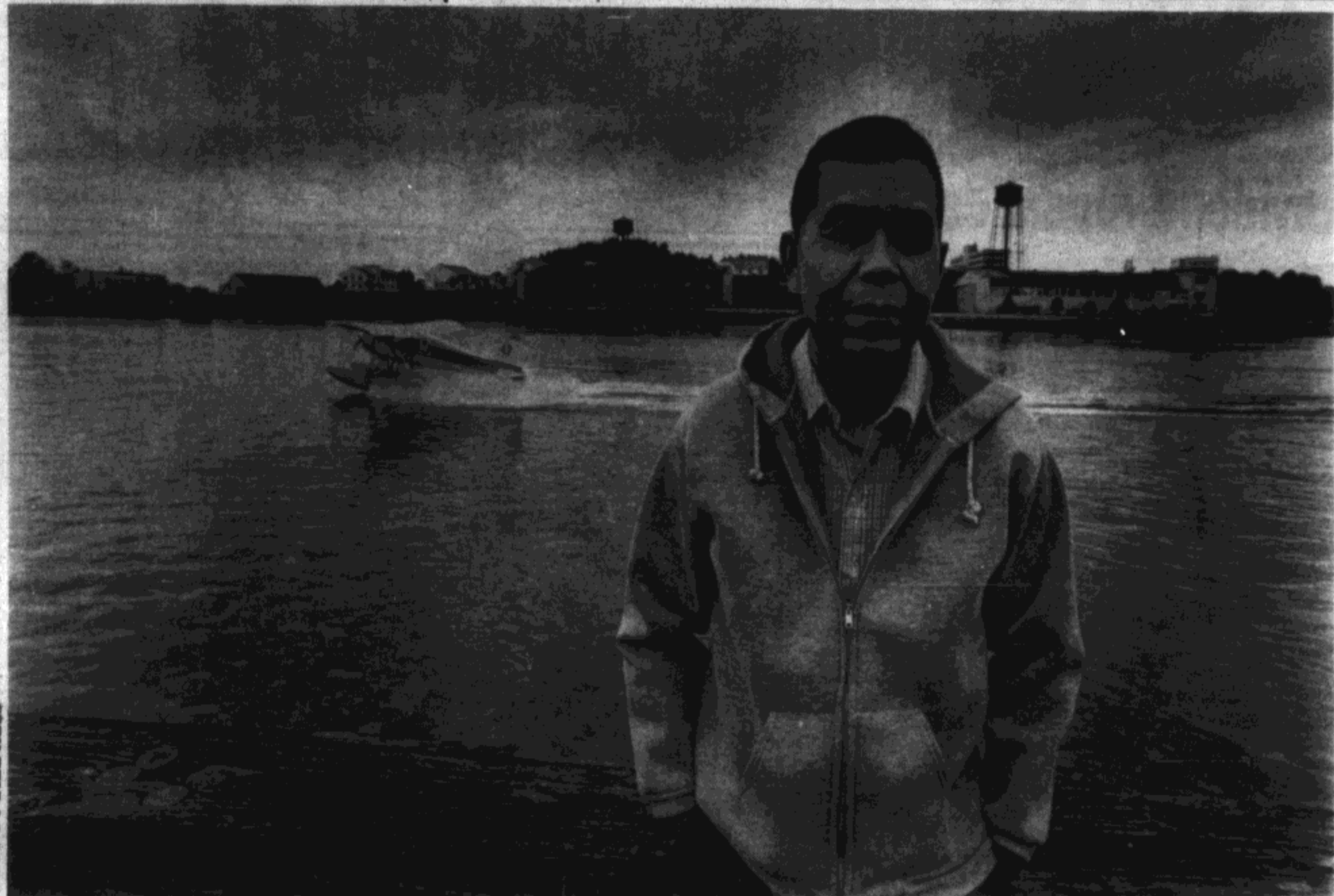


PHOTO BY BILL HESS

The campus of Mount Edgecumbe stretches across Japonski Island behind Gil Truitt. Truitt was among the first batch of students to arrive at Edgecumbe, and graduated in 1948 with the first class. He has stayed with the school, serving as a teacher and most recently as principal.

as underclassmen and women wondered where they would earn their own diplomas.

They are gone now, carried off by planes and boats to widely scattered cities and villages throughout Alaska. Their departure marks the end of Mount Edgecumbe's history as a United States Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school for Alaska Natives; its future as some type of state-run school for all Alaskans is clouded and uncertain.

Truitt, the acting principal, feels the silence deeply. Mount Edgecumbe is more than a school and a place of employment to him; it is his home since youth, the place where he met his wife and became part of a unique and large family.

"It was a real exciting date," Truitt recalls his introduction to Edgecumbe on February 22, 1974. "It happened so suddenly!" A junior in high school, the Sitka Native had been attending Wrangell Institute, where he played on the basketball team.

He and the other team members had boarded a seine boat for a trip to Ketchikan and Metlakatla when they suddenly received orders to disembark and instead were put on an airplane and flown to Sitka, where they would become the first students in the new boarding school established on Japonski Island in an abandoned naval base.

Frightening, yes, but Truitt believes

after their arrival, six teams from Sitka had challenged them to games.

The students were reinforced by others transferred to Mount Edgecumbe from the Eklutna Vocational School in Seward. They won all but one of the six games, falling to the Sheldon Jackson College team, perhaps the best in the state, in a 40-36 squeaker. The next year, the Edgecumbe team blasted its way through 33 wins, losing one game by one point to the Ketchikan Rockets.

Basketball alone could not produce a school which Truitt believes was second to none. The curriculum, he says, was equal to that of any top high school. There were courses in English, social studies, physics, chemistry, geometry, trigonometry; backed up with good instruction and the discipline which Truitt still sees as essential to a good education.

"We never questioned it," he says. "We expected discipline and we followed the rules!" By today's standards, the rules were hard. Boy-girl relationships were closely regulated. Holding hands was out of bounds, as was not being in bed by lights-out time, not being up for breakfast, and having a room which was less than spotless. There was no place for tardiness and unexcused absences, Truitt recalls.

Truitt had been homeless since childhood, and remembers the discipline of his government-given home with appre-

hension rather than resentment.

Truitt's own discipline helped in still another way. "In those days, there were no grants, no scholarships," he recalls. "If you went through college, you had to work for it." In the summertime, Truitt would return to Alaska to work as a purse seiner fisherman; during the school year, he worked about 18 hours each week in a sawmill and at a block cement plant.

After earning his diploma in 1957, Truitt returned to Mount Edgecumbe where he would work primarily as a social studies teacher and sometimes as a coach. Truitt has been at Edgecumbe every school year since his college graduation, although he spent a few summers taking classes in the extreme heat of Arizona State University, where he earned his masters degree in Education Administration in 1971.

As a teacher, Truitt sought to pass on the same demanding discipline which he had known. "Mount Edgecumbe had always been outstanding in everything it did," he explains, crediting that to education. He points to the famed choir formed under Father Michael Ossorgin in the early days of Edgecumbe. The choir received renown both in Alaska and Outside.

A recording of the choir held by the National Library of Congress was used in a recent Hollywood production, "The Legend of Walks Far Woman,"

and punishment began to change radically nationwide in the 1960's. The trend was towards more freedom for students, with discipline playing less and less a role.

Pressures created by the new movement descended upon Edgecumbe, and the discipline of the past frizzled rapidly. Yet Truitt was insistent that students in his classes would have to work hard to get a good grade.

"On the first day, I always told them what I expected of them. I gave them an outline for the year, and I told them if they did not do the work, they would fail."

Elizabeth Hope, who came to Edgecumbe from Kotzebue, remembers such a class. "He made us work," she says. "I hardly remember my other classes, but I sure remember Mr. Truitt's! I learned a lot there."

As an administrator, Truitt has also held fast to the doctrine of discipline, although he stresses that different students must be dealt with differently. A few encouraging words will help some get on the ball, while others must be forced to perform or leave.

A number of students at Edgecumbe have been social referrals, students who had caused trouble at home or who would not perform for other reasons. They had been sent to Edgecumbe in the hops that a stricter lifestyle would help them on to greater achievement.

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# Truitt remembers triumphs, failures

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Truitt readily admits that there have been some heart-breaking failures, but also notes students whom he thought would never make it, who broke all the rules there were, who finally realized they had to perform or be expelled and wound up doing an outstanding job.

At lunch in the Shee Atika Lodge, Truitt is greeted by two former students who had come to town to watch their daughter graduate. "We knew that with you here, it would be all right," they praise him. Before Edgecumbe, the daughter had shown little interest in her education. Truitt had seen to it that she was given the help she needed, and that her education came before other matters.

He recalls how angry she had become at him when he refused to let her go into Sitka for a shopping spree, but made her stay and work with a teacher instead.

"I don't care if your daughter gets upset and mad at me now," Truitt told her mother over the phone. "I'd rather

have her upset with now than on graduation day when she didn't make it."

She did make it; with a scholarship to attend college.

"We are family!" is a slogan which has been picked up by the students at Edgecumbe.

Truitt and Shirley Guilford were both young, single teachers at one time, and family-oriented students did not think that was right. "One class gave me a book," Truitt remembers. "There were pictures of me in there, and pictures of her, along with instructions that I should marry her." He did, and they were both still working at Edgecumbe as the school year ended. They had parented two boys, the oldest is now 21, and one girl.

Neither have made any plans to take other jobs. Last week, Alaska Governor Bill Sheffield agreed to accept \$22 million from the U.S. government to rehabilitate Mt. Edgecumbe and continue instruction of some kind under state control. Sheffield rejected an option to keep the school open next year under

BIA direction, while renovation was worked around instruction. He chose instead to shut the school down for one year while the work was being done.

Truitt worries about the effect of closure. "If they plan to close for one year, we will lose most of the staff; people who know how to run a boarding school, who know how to run dormitories. We will lose students who want to graduate here next year. We will lose continuity and direction."

Closing Edgecumbe, says Truitt, would be "a tragic mistake," one which would be realized later. Although students have lived under the threat of closure for the past year, Truitt says morale remained high throughout, weakening only slightly during the last few weeks of class as uncertainty over the future proved depressing for many students.

In fact, Truitt notes, this year's group of students came through with the highest grade point average and performed better than any class in many years.

What their future holds remains unclear, but Truitt has seen many of his

students, such as House Representative Al Adams, go on to become important political and business leaders. "There are many more whom you don't hear about all the time, but who have families and good jobs and are doing well," he stresses.

"All these years I've done what I wanted to do. I have enjoyed it. It's a rewarding experience, one that I wouldn't change. The success people talk about, that's one reward. The honor, being remembered, having friends in every part of Alaska, that's another. It makes it a real nice and rewarding experience.

"If you have never attended a boarding school, a place like Edgecumbe, then you have missed something in your life. Those kids who graduated yesterday, it's going to take them a long time to get over that experience!"

A special honor came to Truitt himself not long before this school year's end. He was inducted into the Mount Edgecumbe Basketball Hall of Fame by fellow alumni. Truitt had been the major force behind forming the Hall of Fame.