

Book Reviews

By **WALLY OLSON**

"Pioneer Missionary to the Bering Straits Eskimos: Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J." by Louis Renner, S.J. in collaboration with Dorothy Jean Ray, Binford and Mort, for the Alaska Historical Commission. 1979 207 pages. \$12.50

"Eskimo School on the Andreafsky:" A study of effective bicultural education by Judith Smilg Kleinfeld. Preager Publishers, 1979. \$22.95 (available through the Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska, Fairbanks for \$11.00)

The Catholic Church has a long history of service in the Territory and State of Alaska. These two books contrast the old and new approaches to missionary work. Father Lafortune was a Jesuit who served the Bering Strait area, especially the King Island people, for more than forty years. He arrived in Nome in 1903, and was already thirty-three years old and firmly rooted in his religious tradition. He was of the "old school" - convinced that his faith was the true faith, he would not compromise it in any way. Completely dedicated to serving the people and proclaiming the truth as he saw it, his life was filled with hard work, physical deprivation, prayer and love. It pained him to see the Eskimo people being demoralized by what he considered the scum of the modern world. This may sound harsh, but Lafortune was never one to mince words and when he felt it was necessary, he lashed out at perverse miners, Eskimos and even fellow priests who he thought should lead more exemplary lives. Though he was reluctant to compromise any of his ideals, he had great patience and understanding for the Native people. He learned to love Native dishes, and felt that the old diet was much more healthful than all the new foods which were being introduced to the Eskimos.

This portrait, by a fellow Jesuit, shows the life of the isolated missionary spending a life time to save his people both here and hereafter. It is filled with compassion and yet objectivity. Louis Renner gives an insight into a great life so that those of us who are far removed from those times can appreciate the challenges and accomplishments of these pioneers.

The second book is an in-depth study of the school at St. Mary's. Dr. Kleinfeld points to this as an educational-social success story in Alaska. For several years it was evident that St. Mary's and Covenant High School at Unalakleet have, for some undiscovered reason, produced exceptional graduates. This study was an attempt to find out the reason for success. As it turns out, the real key seems to have been both a missionary conviction and dedication on the part of the teachers and volunteers and an open acceptance of the Eskimo culture as an alternative lifestyle. The students were encouraged to explore their values, their attitudes, their goals in life. There was no special program in Native Studies, no trained professional in cross-cultural education and few of the extras which many educators think are necessary for such a success. Perhaps the real secret was the fact that the students were accepted as equals and that education was not confined to the classroom but continued throughout each hour of every day. Father Lafortune might have been happy with what was going on, but would probably have been dismayed to find out that some of the teachers were not even Catholics! This was the new approach to missionary work and was much more subtle than the old ways.

Both of these books are important contributions to an understanding of the role of Catholic missions in Alaska. Father Lafortune is gone, and the school at St. Mary's has suffered lower enrollments since other high schools have been built in the area. But the lessons are there to be learned. Today there seems to be a concentration on "problems and failures" and we fail to look at the successes. These two books illustrate what an individual, or a school, with complete love, understanding and compassion can do to bring a better life to Alaskans.