

Pleasant memories of growing up in Togiak

by Marie Andrews
for the Tundra Times

I was born in Snag Point, a remote village in Bristol Bay, in 1916. I was the youngest of 13 children. It was a small village with not many white men. There were just a few canneries in the bay. I think there were only three at that time.

My dad was of German descent, and he came to Snag Point when he was 17 years old. He made his living fishing and doing odd jobs here and there.

My mother was full-blood Aleut and was very beautiful, as my dad often described her. She died in the flu epidemic we called the Black Plague when I was a year old, so I do not remember her.

When I was about a year and a half old, Dad got a job running a trading store for Mrs. Lowe in the small village of Togiak.

I don't remember much about the trip we took in an old steamer around the cape of Togiak, but I do remember the landing. I looked to the shore, and on what I thought was a big cliff there were many strange looking people sitting all along the cliff edge.

I was scared and clung to Ann, our caretaker since my mother died.

Planks were put out for us to go ashore when the tide went out, and I hung on to Ann's skirt and would not let go.

I think we were all nervous and afraid of the strange people. They stared at us as one by one as we walked the planks to shore. As we neared them, one of the women reached out and touched my hair.

It was black and curly and they had never seen curls before. I remember screaming and screaming till Ann picked me up and calmed me down.

My next memories are rather vague. Being in a two-room house with one big bedroom is the next thing I recall.

Beds were all around the walls, made from rough planks and covered with homemade canvas mattresses filled with goose feathers.

Hanging blankets separated our sleeping quarters. The boys were at one end, girls in the middle and Dad at the other end. Our blankets were

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called in to eat.

After we had all washed, we had to stand in line for inspection. Dad would look at our hands and face to see if we did a good job of cleaning before sitting down to eat.

Most of the time I was sent back to the basin for a second wash, as I was always impatient to finish and would just wash my palms and the middle of my face.

Years later my sisters told me how dirty I always was. My neck would be grimy, as were the back of my hands. But I was a tomboy and didn't worry about my appearance.

In the evening Dad was always training us. The girls had to stand against the wall, then one by one a couple of books were placed on the top of our heads and we were told to walk to the other side without dropping a book or we would have to do it over again.

Many times I had to do the walk while my older sister was giggling at me, until Dad would send her into the bedroom. Finally, making the walk successfully, I would dash in the other room after my sister and start punching her for laughing at me till Dad would come in and put a stop to our bickering and taunting one another.

We also had to practice on our English and learn how to enunciate. Two lessons stick in my memory to this day, and every so often I would repeat them and so taught them to my children in their younger days.

hour and a half.

With everyone clean we would then sit around the table and listen to Dad read to us till bedtime.

Some nights we would have popcorn that had been made on top of the stove in a container looking like a french fry basket. The basket was shaken back and forth over the hot part of the stove till the kernels were almost all popped.

The next night it might be roasted peanuts or dried fruit and not too often a rare treat of hard mixed candy that came in wooden buckets.

Before going to bed we would all drink a glass of milk made out of powdered Klim. Usually it was quite lumpy.

My memories of growing up in Togiak were very pleasant and happy for us. Dad was the only white man in our little community. All of our friends were Aleut Indians, and we all learned to speak the language fluently, including Dad.

We were not allowed to go into their houses, however, as they all had lice, and Dad was very careful not to get any in our house.

He built us a Maypole with six ropes hanging from the top, and for hours we would sit and go round and round, then run to the teeter totter and go up and down. He also built some swings, six of them, but that was never enough as we were always fighting for a seat in the swing or the Maypole or the teeter.

walk down to the beach which was not far from the house and talk to the many kinds of birds wading in the shallows or walking the beach looking for food.

As time passed I made friends with many of the birds. I would stand for a long time holding out pieces of fish. They came closer and closer, finally eating from my hand.

From then on it was easy. More and more birds would come to me whenever I walked the beach, and many of the Natives thought I was possessed. As I walked, a bunch of seagulls would come behind me looking for scraps, and the smaller birds would sit on my shoulder chirping and singing.

One thing that stands out clearly in my mind was the way they buried their dead. No graves were dug. The dead were put in a box big enough to hold them with their valued possessions. Maybe some ivory talk sticks and woven baskets, or favorite dishes. Others, perhaps a fur parka or a favorite pot or whatever personal belongings were worth sending to heaven with them.

The coffins were then wrapped in canvas, brought to the graveyard and laid on top of the ground.

My sister Alma and I would go to the graveyard and look in the coffins that had broken apart with age. All we could see was skeletons with their belongings still intact, as no one bothered the graves.

I remember one night when our sister Elizebeth went to visit our neighbor, just across from our house. I sneaked to the graveyard, took a couple of skulls, brought them to our windbreak and crawled into the coal bin just outside the kitchen and waited for my sister to come home. I had a box of matches and candles from the kitchen so I was ready.

Back then every one in that village was afraid of ghosts, including Liz. After what seemed like a long wait I heard the neighbors door open and lit the candles.

As my sister opened the door I started moaning and waving the skulls. She let out a scream so loud, Dad was out in a flash.

The next thing I knew I was being yanked out of the bin by the scuff of my neck, candles and skull still in my hands. That was the closest I ever came to get a good spanking, but I did get a good shaking with a promise of the strap if I did a thing like that again.

The strap was always hanging by the basin on the wall as Dad had a straight razor and would use the strap every morning before shaving. No one had ever been spanked with the strap but we were all afraid of it.

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made of goose feathers also, but with a softer Calico cloth. Pillows were made the same way, using 50-pound flour sacks.

From then on my memories jump to different scenes: Watching from a distance at the other children playing games, seeing them stare back at us, some giving us shy smiles and jabbering in a strange language.

I think that's what frightened me the most, not being able to understand. Time passed, and the next thing I remember was all of us playing together having a wonderful time and not wanting to quit when we were

One was: "He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts." The other: "Timothy Thisleton the thistle gatherer thrusts 3,000 thistles through the thick of this thumb."

After learning them we had to speed up and repeat without making a mistake. That was very difficult for us.

Bath time came, and one by one we would get into the number three galvanized tub of water that had been heated in a big boiler on the woodstove. After getting scrubbed clean we then had to step into another tub and rinse off. This took about an

Dad smoothed out a ball field where we would play Miache. I wasn't allowed to play as I was too small. I'd kick and scream to no avail and would run to Ann for comfort.

School time came. We didn't have a teacher, but there was a one-room school. Dad set up classes in our kitchen and taught school to the family. Once again being too young I could not attend. As my brothers and sisters sat around the table to study, I was not allowed to talk to any of them.

I remember feeling so bad because I couldn't do what they were doing, and I would go outside and pout. I'd