

She lived a life of courage

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Pat Ivey worked with Emily Ivanoff Brown for several years in Alaska Heritage Writers Association which Mrs. Brown founded and Ivey is secretary. Ivey has worked at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks for the past seven years, and is working on Mrs. Brown's biography.

"Take me home, take me home," Emily Ivanoff Brown commanded from her hospital bed in Fairbanks. On May 3 at 3:30 a.m. she was peacefully taken to her eternal home, after a vibrant, giving life of 78 years, filled with many successes against odds, the sheer physical trauma of which would have destroyed anyone half her age with an ounce less determination.

Emily Brown was determined that the world would know about her people, the Eskimos, and their culture, and that



Emily Ivanoff Brown

her people would know about the world. She was determined that her people should take pride in their heritage and not forget it. She was determined to obtain all the education that she could in order to continue teaching us all that very special heritage. Finally, she was determined that her

sons would be together, and would be strengthened by one another.

She lived to see all her dreams fulfilled.

Emily's Eskimo name is Ticasuk, which means "Hollow in the Ground." She said, "I cried and cried when I found out that I was a hole in the ground." But when her mother explained that Ticasuk was a place where the four winds stored their treasures gathered from all parts of the world, she recalled, "I felt very good about my name after that."

Her father, Stephan Ivanoff — a lay minister, trader and teacher of Russian-Yupik descent — whom she adored, told her that the greatest of these treasures was knowledge. Stephan also told his only daughter that she must get an education and return to teach her

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PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Ticasuk lived a life of many joys, sorrows

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people, so they could get along in the white man's world.

"My father's word was law to me," Emily often said. She spent her life educating herself and others; a goal that would take her far away from her home in Unalakleet in 1919 to Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon. There, she spent the first week in terror because, "I thought the Indians would scalp me."

From the time Emily graduated from teacher's training at Chemawa in 1928, except for a brief return in 1930 to nurse's training at Seattle General Hospital which was interrupted by tonsillitis and marriage to Robert Vivian Brown, she spent her life teaching her people.

Her son Leonard was born within two years of her marriage, followed by Buddy two years later. Shortly after that, Emily was stricken with tuberculosis so severe that she hemorrhaged and was not expected to live.

Times were hard and the Browns had to send Leonard to live with Stephan and Amelia Ivanoff. Emily lapsed into a coma and the Dicksons—Lola, a public health nurse and Virgil, manager of the Lomen reindeer station at Egavik—offered to take Buddy. They were childless and asked if they might adopt him. After consultation with Emily's father, Bob agreed to let Buddy go.

After several bedridden months, Emily managed to recover, but Buddy, now named Stanley Dickson, was no longer legally hers. Although Emily was grief-stricken at losing



Martha Nanouk reaches out to embrace Stan Dickson. Martha was Emily Brown's life-long friend and co-worker with Emily and Dr. Larry Kaplan of the UAF Alaska Native Language Center on a dictionary in the Malemiut language. Copyright, Sabra McCracken, May 6, 1982

her baby, she realized that he was getting good care and resigned herself to visiting him when she could.

It often happened in the Eskimo culture that parents with many children would let others less fortunate "adopt" one. Children were shared, but they knew who their parents were and lived in the same community with them. Emily was not prepared for the Dicksons' return to the "lower-48" when Stanley was two years old. She did not hear from him again for nearly 20 years.

In the meantime, life had to go on. She had Leonard to think about. She was not officially allowed to teach because she had had tuberculosis, but substituted in Shaktoolik when the school officials could not find anyone else. She found summer work as assistant to the camp cook at the Unalakleet Mine in the summer.

With her weakened lungs, she was easy prey to pneumonia. One winter, after several months of teaching in a drafty school room heated only by a wood stove that she had to stoke and light every morning in the subzero temperatures, pneumonia did strike and she went into a coma again.

The school superintendent brought the school flag down and raised a dark army blanket as a distress signal for the mail plane to stop. The mail plane landed in the twilight on the ice-strewn beach, guided by bonfires and carried Emily to Nome where she was pronounced medically dead for five minutes.

But Emily fooled everyone again and was soon back home, teaching when she could. She was not supposed to allow anyone to speak Eskimo at school, but "I figured

that the best way to teach English was to explain what the word meant in Eskimo first.

The superintendent knew, Emily thought. As long as no one complained and the children learned English, he did not interfere. When the superintendent's son complained to his mother that Emily had scared him by telling Eskimo ghost stories, she was promptly fired. The townspeople complained mightily, and Emily was just as promptly rehired.

Emily's third son, Melvin, was born in 1941 and was a great comfort to her, although by this time, Robert Brown had left her due to ill health and was reported dead of cancer in Seattle.

Stephan Ivanoff was by then BIA Commissioner in Unalakleet and needed a secretary so he sent for Emily and her two boys to come home. Emily and the boys had to walk 20 miles down the beach to catch up with a neighbor who took them the rest of the way to Unalakleet by boat.

In 1946, Emily applied to BIA to return to teaching full-time, and after a lengthy physical examination, was rehired. On her return to teaching in Unalakleet, Emily started the Eskimo Mothers' Club, which exists to this day, "where young girls can go to learn about homemaking." The next years took her to White Mountain, Noatak, Meade River and back to Kotzebue, her first teaching station.

Her students remember that she wove their culture around her lessons. She would take them on field trips to identi-

fy edible plants, first in Eskimo and then in English. She would have them gather berries and greens and take them back to school and prepare them. Leonard and Melvin Brown most particularly remember their mother for that, and how she taught them to snare small animals.

"The best part was eating them afterward," recalls Morgan Solomon, one of her pupils at White Mountain. "Everything she taught us about our culture has stuck with me to this day."

Solomon recalls how Emily would tell the boys stories about trapping and hunting and about foodgathering and skin sewing to the girls — skin sewing to the girls — about customs and taboos and how they were the fabric of law and social order in the community.

"When we went to visit her, she always had some Eskimo food for us, so we would feel at home, and not be homesick. You see, a lot of us were far away from home at a boarding school. In our family-oriented way of life, that was very hard to get used to," Solomon said.

Emily began to gather stories and legends and write them down. She returned to college at the University of Alaska to upgrade her teaching credentials and obtain the skills necessary to document Eskimo legends and heritage. She talked about her culture to anyone who would listen, and was such a good story teller that everyone was spell-bound.

Emily managed a college career, teaching, writing and raising her remaining sons, al-

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though she had to struggle with cancer for almost 30 years, a stroke that forced her to retire from formal teaching, and in the end, failing eyesight forced her to stop writing, although she did manage to record her thoughts on tape.

Two years ago, she discovered she had cancer again, but forbid anyone to talk about her condition, for fear that her work at the university would be curtailed. From time to time, she would be hospitalized "for a rest."

By this time, she had received three university degrees and citations; and awards from the Alaska legislature, President Nixon and the National Federation of Press Women among many others. Although she always loved the attention

she received, it puzzled her that she was being honored.

"My father is the real unsung hero in all of this," Emily would say. "It is he who should be receiving these awards." And she would mentally accept them in his behalf.

In her final days, her greatest concern was for those of us who would be left behind. Before her eyesight failed, she wrote instructions for those closest to her.

The last week of her life, Emily's sons came to see her. Although Buddy, nee Stanley Dickson, now a microscopic technologist with a scientific instrument company in San Francisco had been reunited with her 15 years before and had visited his brothers one at a time, it was the first time they had all been together. Leonard is now a big game

guide, pilot and owner of the Unalakleet Lodge, and Melvin, a former collegiate basketball star and junior high teacher is now working for Sohio.

"Sit me up," she commanded and bade me get up in the bed with her and hold her up so she could see her sons. They stood by the window of her hospital room so she could see them in the light. Behind them through the window was her beloved University on the hill.

Emily smiled and lay back. She had met all her goals.

Her sons took her body home to Unalakleet. The Unalakleet elders remembered Buddy and regaled him with stories about his early days. His oldest brother, Leonard, the Renaissance man of the family, showed him the country in which they were born. Leonard and Melvin proudly introduced him to everyone.

"Now, at last, I know

where I am coming from," Buddy said. "I have much to think about." His talk was interspersed frequently with, "When I come back . . ."

At the Unalakleet cemetery, when Emily's pallbearers lowered her casket into the thawing earth, seven boys about 10 to 12 years of age, lead by her grand-nephew, Curtiss Ivanoff, ringed the head of the grave, soberly watching over her. They formed a headstone she would have loved.

Later, the setting sun broke through the clouds, sending cathedral-like rays to the surface of Norton Bay where seals poked their heads up through the icy waters and a pod of beluga sounded. Wedges of geese flew overhead, and far up the beach, a lone hunter strolled homeward with a backpack full of future duck soup.

It was the grandest homecoming of them all.