

Happy 90th birthday, Maggie Sipary!

Here are a few stories of my Grandma. On behalf of my family and friends, we want to wish a very special happy birthday.

Maggie (nee Kamkoff) Sipary was born Nov. 23, 1902 in Kotlik. She was baptized in the Russian Orthodox faith. After her parents died in the 1917 flu epidemic, she took care of her little brother and sister for a month until her older sister took them to Marshall. At Marshall, working in the store there, she saw through the front window a man riding the only bicycle in the village. "You will marry that man," she heard a voice say. That man was Ivan Sipary, born of Eskimo parents in Kotzebue, off the Chukchi Sea. Ivan and his family moved to St. Michael Island on the Norton Sound, across from St. Lawrence Island in 1897. He joined the Catholic Church when he was 8 and went to school for two years at Holy Cross mission. Ivan and Maggie were married Jan. 2, 1921. They had 14 children and raised 9. They tried to learn all they could about the Catholic Church, saying their Rosary every night. They attended early morning daily Mass, and took instruction from Fr. John Sifton, S. J. Maggie and Ivan were married for 62 years. He died July 19, 1982.

In the summer of 1925, the Siparys were sent by Fr. Sifton, S. J. to Chiniliak. It took them 2 days in their row boat to go 67 miles. Ivan helped build the chapel. That year, Maggie was taught by an Ursuline sister to read music and play the organ, in just one week. Practicing everyday on a portable organ loaned by Fr. Sifton, she learned to play and sing hymns in English and Latin, including Gregorian chants. She painstakingly copied down the

music and translated many hymns into the Yupik language. Northern Commercial Co. sent Ivan to Nelson Island, off the Bering Sea and the family lived there for two years. Fr. Martin Lonneaux, S. J. a Belgian replaced Fr. Sifton, and asked Ivan and Maggie to return to St. Michael's. As a lay man, Maggie interpreted Mass at St. Michael's, Chiniliak and Stebbins.

Fr. Lonneaux, S. J. asked Maggie to help him write a Catechism for children. Many terms in English had to be changed to Eskimo expressions commonly understood, without distorting their true meaning. Before translating, she prayed, "Holy Mother Mary, let me use your tongue to speak right." She didn't want in any case to speak unwisely about such important matters.

In 1929, Fr. Bernard Hubbard, S. J., the famous "Glacier Priest", met Ivan in Unalakleet and asked him to guide him on a dog team to Akularak. Hubbard wrote, 'Ivan has the best team of dogs at St. Michael's and an uncanny instinct for direction. Both were important, as storms are fatal when they catch a dog musher in this lonely stretch. One has to follow the shoreline from Unalakleet to St. Michael's, watching the weather very closely before making a dash across the ice, the Bering Sea frozen for miles, and tide and wind breaking up the ice into blocks hard on sled travel. More than once, a heavy wind has detached miles of ice from the shore and teams have floated out to sea!'

"St. Michael's to Chiniliak is a distance of about 67 miles and usually made in 2 days. Ivan and I decided to risk the dash over the ice and make Chiniliak in a day's



Maggie Sipary, the 90 year old birthday girl.

(Theresa Ballinger Collection)

run: we pulled in at 10 that night. We bedded the dogs down comfortably, gave them extra good feed and crawled into our sleeping bags, sleeping soundly on the little mission chapel floor. I received a wonderful surprise the next morning. I intended to say Mass, quietly by myself, very early in the morning. Somehow, word passed around among the Eskimos the "Glacier Priest" was there. Where they all came from, I do not know, but the next morning, the chapel was packed to standing room by devout children of the North, who at Mass: both in Inuit and Latin, sang some of the finest Gregorian chants I ever heard, even a cathedral in Europe! One cannot help but love and appreciate the dear Eskimos of the Arctic,' Hubbard continued.

One can see the fruits of the first work done by Maggie and Ivan Sipary in Fr. Hubbard's first book, written long ago. Ivan sold their log home in St. Michael and moved with Fr. John Fox, S. J. to Hooper Bay in 1931. Many know of Fr. Fox's great faith and love of God, and would call him to bless them when they were sick. He never treated anyone rough or became impatient. Before he took his final vows, Fox stayed two years in the poorest village, where they always had the very worst weather, with high winds and bad drifts. He would always take Maggie to interpret, though he

understood what they said he couldn't speak the Eskimo language.

Maggie often acted as midwife and cut up her own flannel nightgowns for the newborns several times. Even though, in the old days, the Hooper Bay people were so very poor, they were generous to everyone.

Ivan and Maggie moved to Nelson Island with Fr. Fox, where Ivan's good mother and step-father, Simeon, were staying one winter. Fr. Fox used an old warehouse as a chapel and meeting place in Tununak. That spring, Fr. Fox had a wonderful surprise, Maggie not only taught the people Catechism, but how to assist at Mass and sing even in English! Father was welcomed, so touched by the wonder of all the people assisting at Mass, tears of joy overwhelmed him, he had to face the altar until he could compose himself to bless the people.

Ivan and Maggie spent 8 years on Nelson Island, staying at least 1 year in each of its villages. Besides teaching, Maggie worked hard, by then they had seven children, but she never noticed she was so busy. She slept only 4 or 5 hours a day. Eskimo mothers had their work cut out for them in those days: They make all the clothing, blankets, boots, besides trapping and fishing, drying fish, tanning hides for parkas, preparing meals for the ever growing family, teacher older children to cook and clean, and preparing food for the valuable dog teams. They had to melt ice or snow for drinking or washing clothes. Providing water was a daily chore, good weather or bad. Be it from chopping ice from frozen creek bottoms or catching rain water, or drawing it up with a bucket from holes.

Maggie taught in St. Michael's, Chiniliak, Hooper Bay, Nelson Island, Tununak, St. Mary's, Scammon Bay, Hamilton, Akularak, Chevak, Pilot Station, Sheldon Point, Marshall, Bethel, Takchak. Everywhere her work brought suc-

cess: In Takchak, the people understood her very well and didn't want her family to leave. One many told her, "You should get pay for this work", and promptly gave her a dollar. She kept it for years, until the man died, when she has a Mass said for his soul.

The Siparys moved to Anchorage in 1965 to be near to some of their family. These are just some of the many stories of the lives of Maggie and Ivan Sipary. Of the 9 children, Tony is the only son who died Dec. 13, 1989. (My dad, Tony had a favorite sister named Elzavita, and he named me, his first daughter after her, but everyone ended up calling me "Sister.")

Maggie has many grand and great grandchildren. She lives alone in Anchorage in a small apartment. She loves Native food, along with fresh bread with lots of real butter and hot tea. I can remember way back, when Grandma taught me how to skinsew Eskimo dolls and mukluks. She has the patience of an angel. Living a very simple life, of devoted Catholic faith, she continues to say the Rosary every night.

Grandma Maggie will be 90 years old. Your journey through life since 1902 has covered quite a distance, and along the way you've seen and touched so many. Together with Ivan, you've taught faith, love and family traditions. There are so beautiful memories that keep yesterday's joys ever so present in so many hearts. This is a time of Thanksgiving, saying how very, very special you are. We all love you. May God bless each and everyone to those who hold you dear.

Love your granddaughter,
Elizabeth
Auguk (Eskimo nickname)

(Editor's note: Elizabeth Kruzick, of Ninilchik, is the granddaughter of Maggie Sipary, and the daughter of Theresa Bellinger of Wasilla. Ms. Kruzick also used the assistance of Pat Thompson. Maggie Sipary's family and friends plan a birthday party and reunion this weekend in Anchorage.)