



Members of the Demientieff family shown in this photograph from about 40 years ago include, back row, from left, Irene, Birdie, Lolly, Bing and Lumpy; seated, Eva, Nellie Mae Demientieff, Nick E. Demientieff and Mannie; and front row, Tiny, Tootie and Sugar.

River life in Alaska was an adventure

by Theresa Demientieff Devlin
for the Tundra Times

My name is Theresa Nellie Demientieff Devlin, Tiny, to my friends. I was born to Nick E. Demientieff and Nellie Mae Bressler.

Dad is Russian and Athabaskan; Mom was German and Athabaskan. I was born into and raised practicing the Catholic faith.

There were 10 of us, Eva, Mannie, Lolly, Bing, Birdie, Lumpy, Irene, Sugar, Tiny and Tootie. I know it sounds like a bunch of characters, but we grew up in a time when nicknames were terms of endearment.

Dad and Mom raised 10 of us by operating their small business of river freighting. Each spring we packed the two boats, the *Sea Wolf* and *Beaver*, and set off into a new adventure. When I read about Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, I thought that perhaps life like this was very ordinary. Not until later in life could I realize how extraordinary it really is.

Dad kept us all together as much as he could so we would grow up as a family. I never thought too much of the extra worry and work it put on both Mom and Dad.

We all took our turns at almost drowning, but there was always someone around to pluck us out of the river. We grew up running on the barges, running along the sides of the boat and hanging our heads over the front of the barge.

We knew no danger. Mom tried her best to keep us from all of the above,

but we just made sure she wasn't looking when we were up to mischief.

Dad and Mom had their ways and means of keeping track of us. It was up to Mom to count heads each time we were leaving. One time my brother Birdie sent me to the local store to buy him some candy. When I got to the store, I realized he didn't tell me what kind of candy he wanted, so I bought what I liked. That way if he didn't like the candy then I could have it.

Well, I was so pleased with my bright idea, I took my time in selection. When I ran back to the boat, it was gone. I couldn't believe it; they actually left me behind.

I stood there in disbelief. Some village kids noticed and started to laugh and tell me that I was left behind on purpose.

I mustered up all of my courage and told them that no, I was just staying with an aunt. I stood around for a little while, and sure enough my brother came for me with the skiff, the little run-about boat.

I was so angry I kept the candy and wouldn't speak to him. When we got to the *Sea Wolf* I just stepped onto the boat like nothing big happened. Sugar and Tootie were laughing. I recall Dad asking Mom if she counted heads. I didn't stick around for any answer. I just marched to my bunk and ate my candy.

Mom had a routine to be carried out before we would land anywhere. Lolly, Lumpy and Irene were supposed to take care of the three of us smaller

ones. They made sure we had clean clothes, clean faces, and they had to brush and braid our long hair. I often thought if I grow up to have squinty eyes it's their fault!

It was quite a deal when we landed anywhere. There were always a bunch of people there to meet the boat. The boat meant a lot of things to different people. We hauled in groceries, supplies and fuel. So we were always a welcome sight.

The village kids sometimes gave us a bad time. They told us we weren't Native. This meant calling on the older brothers and sisters. They always won the right to be recognized as Natives.

The village of Holy Cross was our summer base. Grandpa and his brothers helped build the mission and the church. The main building had four stories and was huge. The main floor included the dispensary, the receiving room, the kitchen, the dining hall and the recreation room. There were areas that we weren't allowed to go into for whatever reason.

The woodwork was very solid, ornate and had a dark stain. It was beautiful. The second floor was the little girls dorm. I remember it well. There were rows and rows of little beds. There was a small toilet closet for use only during the night.

The third floor was for the big girls. It somehow seemed much nicer and more important.

Then there was the fourth floor. To

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me it was heaven. For Holy Cross, it was the highest point to be able to see all of these things. The view was overlooking the Yukon River, the whole village, the meadow, the hospital and all of the gardens.

The sewing room was also on the fourth floor. I learned how to darn socks there. We sat and mended many socks and spent a lot of time talking about nothing.

We only spent time living in the mission when Dad had to travel closer to the ocean. He didn't like to take us where the waters were rougher. So we got to know all of the mission kids.

We were fortunate. We could go home when Mom and Dad came back. They were usually gone only for a week or so. It seemed so long. I often wondered how long each of those mission kids would stay there.

Well, life with the village kids was great. There was certainly a difference between the two. The mission kids were bound by such a strict order of life. The village kids were a rather freer bunch. We enjoyed running free on the sandbars and swimming in the Yukon. We played games like flag, tag, aunty I over, marbles and hide and seek.

Sunday was very significant. No one worked. We rose to dress for Mass. The church was one of the most beautiful churches I could imagine. The ceiling had angels in the center of a dome. The rail was all fancy, and the altar was magnificent. It was understood that the front was set aside for the mission kids, the girls on the right and the boys on the left.

Then the village people were behind the mission kids. Since we were in and out of the mission on a regular basis, we just sat up front when we wanted.

As far back as I can recall I remember spending time in church. I remember reciting the rosary or pretending, kind of filling in similar words and maintaining a serious look to emphasize the importance of it.

Then when I learned how to read, I really got into the beauty of prayer. Especially the Mass. It was very much an honor and privilege to listen to the Latin, and I felt significant when I translated it into English with the daily missalette.

All of those saints, martyrs, apostles were such a different people with their own traditions. It was truly amazing. One concept I had a really tough time with was the Holy Ghost. The only ghost I saw from my reference was Casper! How could Casper the Friendly Ghost be fearful? Anyway, I felt a whole lot better when they changed the name to the Holy Spirit.

Breakfast after Mass was great. Dad cleaned the top of our wood stove real good and cooked pancakes right on the stove. Mom would enjoy coffee with her friends, and we all felt warm and full.

As daylight dwindled and the nights grew longer, we knew that our last trip of the summer was coming up. We would say goodbye to our friends, and

We all had our chores to do, such as fetching water from the well and running to the store. Mr. Turner was the owner of the store. He was an older man. He was always kind to us.

The first time I recall having to buy from him, I told him what Mom wanted, and the total was something like two dollars and two bits. I just went home and told Mom I didn't get it because he needed two bits. She laughed and explained that two bits for him meant 25 cents.

Night time was special. It was time to lie in bed and wait for Mom to go to sleep. Our house had two stories to it. Our beds were on the second floor. Each end of the house had windows that could be removed. So when Mom was sleeping, we would take the window out, jump on to a sawdust pile below and join all of our buddies. We would play hide and seek in the tall wild grass and play to our hearts' content. Then we would place a ladder back to our window and climb to bed.

One time I was sitting in the pilot house with Dad. It was in the month of August, and we were on our way home to Fairbanks. It was evening, and the darkness of fall gave signals of winter. We were moving slowly against the strong current of the Tanana River, and I saw the red blinking light of a radio transformer. I could hear the announcer as we moved within range of the signal. It was like coming into a modern world. I was thinking about the television set at home.

We had a set when they first came out, and I recalled trying to describe it to my buddies. I finally resorted to, "You'll have to see it for yourself."

It was then that I had a really emotional moment. I felt as if I weren't really a Native. I didn't know how to talk the language. I didn't know how to dance the dances. And I certainly didn't have the coloring. So how could I be truly a Native if I didn't do all of these things?

Somehow I felt cheated. I didn't let on that it bothered me because whenever we went into a village we went through the ritual of proving ourselves. Irene, Birdie, Lumpy and the bigger kids were always there to defend our heritage.

After the fight, Sugar, Tootie and I were proud to announce, "I'm just as much Native as you," hoping they would believe the words. I wondered about it every time I looked in the mirror. Somehow being Russian and German seemed to be just too far fetched!

Our home in Fairbanks was a great big log cabin. It had a living room with a TV, a woodstove made from an oil drum, a wash stand, a slop bucket, a wash basin, a mirror with a shelf inside, a wood stove for cooking, cupboards that Dad made, a water pump, a long dining table that Dad made and an electric stove that Eva won in some raffle or other. We just used it to put things on.

The bedrooms were a little different. Mom and Dad had a huge bed that Dad built. A curtain divided the first

I would cry to myself as if we were not coming back. The trip back to Fairbanks was colder and slower. We were traveling against the current, and it just was more difficult. Dad usually fixed a makeshift tent on the barge so we could lie on a full-sized mattress and watch the scenery go by.

I loved the river life. It stirred my imagination. Birdie must have noticed. He enjoyed telling stories. One time, as we were passing a mountain, he pointed out the three crosses on top. He told us that was where they crucified Jesus and the two thieves. We were very quiet. I felt very embarrassed by the presence of it. Somehow it made real and graphic the life and death of Christ.

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set of bunks, Tootie's bed, then the next set of bunks, a divider, and the boys' room.

Manie, the oldest boy, had a dog team. His lead dog was Corky, and he trained his team every night during the winter months. After his workout, he always gave us the opportunity to run the dogs one more time. After the little run we had to put the dogs away. We never caught on.

Manie — Floyd — won a good number of dog races during the early days of the Winter Carnival. We had a shelf in the house for the trophies.

The first day of public school for my younger sister was real exciting. We walked up to the bus stop, and before the bus got there, Irene decided to ask Sugar what her real name was. She was so used to hearing Dad introduce himself to people that when she responded it was, "NICK E. DEMIENTIEFF!"

We couldn't stop laughing. Irene tried to explain it so she wouldn't get embarrassed in school. It was like changing into a different person having to go from the friendly terms of endearment that are linked to a nickname to the formal structured environment of school and a different name.

I remember the time I was singled out as being different in front of everyone. Irene, Birdie and Lumpy weren't there to prove me human. So, I was different! I wasn't picked on. It was more like aren't we lucky, we have a little Indian in our class.

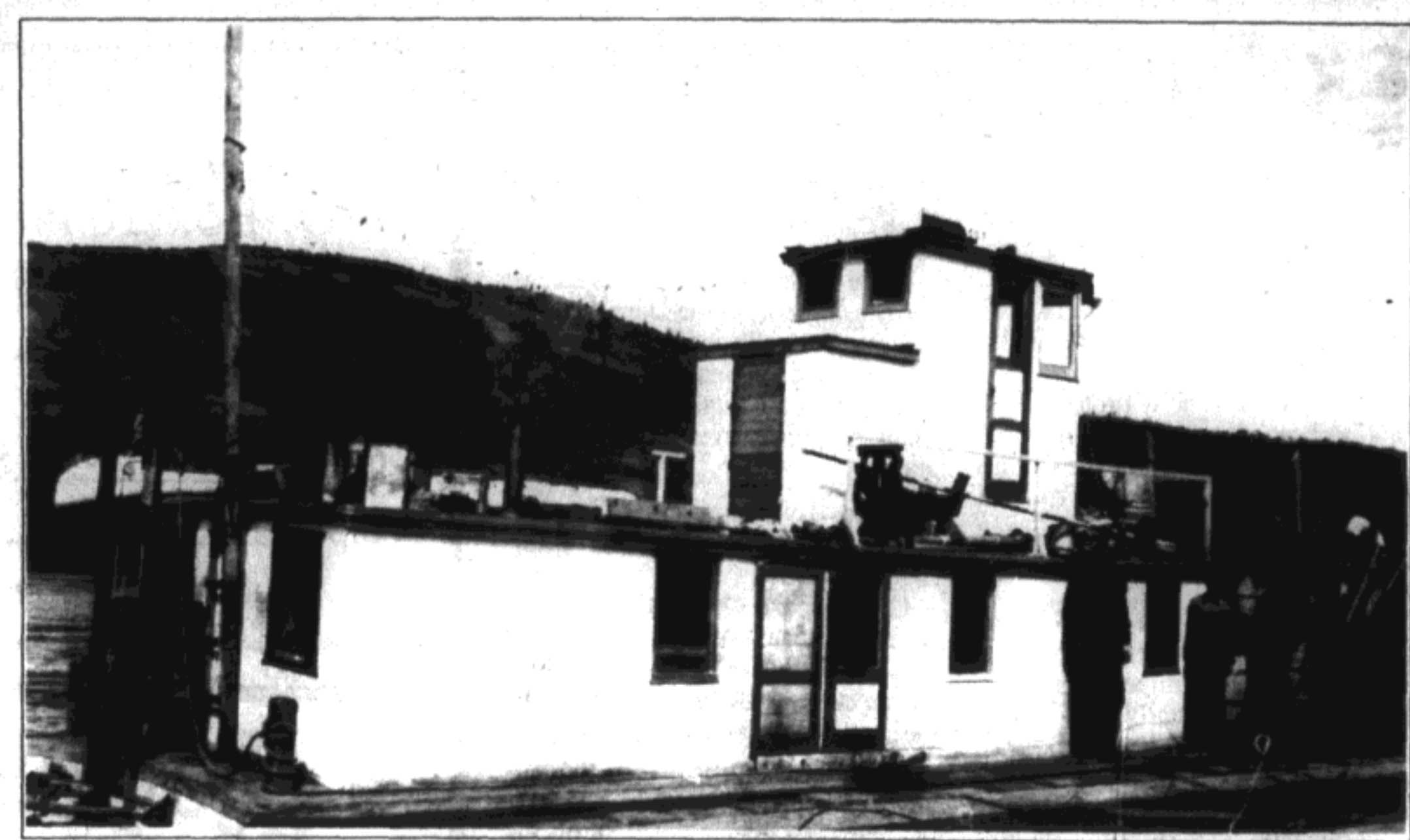
So I adjusted to that. It was like I was the mascot, the prize. Anyway, as soon as I had the chance, I chose the Catholic Boarding School. I sure felt a lot more at home with the presence of the church being a part of everyday life.

I was very comfortable in my life. Everything seemed to work out like routine. Spring, summer, traveling, seeing new things, new people, moose, wildlife, fishwheels, all of the villages, the different stores, fall, returning home and the coziness of our Fairbanks home.

Looking back now, as an adult, I realize that as a child my life seemed so ordinary. Now after experiencing a lot of different friends and learning of different lifestyles and life ways, I realize how extraordinary my family and childhood is.

It gives me strength to know each and every one of us really is unique. Not ever having that appreciation is a loss not only of ourselves, but for family and the community.

Editor's Note: This article was written for a class at Alaska Pacific University. Theresa Demientieff Devlin, 44, is a student at APU in Anchorage.



Each spring the two boats were packed for a new adventure. Shown above is the Beaver at Nenana.



Two of the older girls cared for the three youngest, from left, Tootie, Tiny and Sugar.

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