

One family's riverboat experience plying the rivers of Interior Alaska

by Tiny Dementieff Devlin
for the Tundra Times

Every morning around our house, Dad was up and out the door deep into his work by the time Mom would call us out of bed.

She always had sourdough pancakes on the griddle and bacon sizzling in the frying pan.

When I'd hear her calling, I would snuggle my head a little deeper into my pillow, thinking it would make me stay in bed a little longer. With my blanket pulled up tightly around my shoulders, I drifted in and out of nifty little naps.

This particular morning Mom didn't need anything to lure us out of bed. I had forgotten that this was the day to head "Down River!"

Life seemed to bubble with excite-

look out over this quiet domain. I'd look at the shoreline across the water.

If we were out toward the middle of the river, the trees along the riverbanks looked small. Then, as we moved closer to shore, it was tricky to try and keep my eyes on one particular tree.

I imagined that the trees looked as though they were trying to hang on. As we passed them by, others were evidence of the eroding currents of the river.

Nenana was our first stop. After we tied up at the dock, we walked with Mom back to Auntie Dina and Uncle Tony's house.

As we walked along behind Mom, I'd struggle to see the tops of the cottonwood trees. They towered over us, as we made our way down the narrow hardened dirt path.

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ment. Everyone was busy. Mom organized the older kids with tasks, leaving Sugar, Tootie and I to pack our treasures. We took all of the things we imagined we simply couldn't live without.

As I trudged back and forth I noticed that as the house slowly emptied, it felt hollow. While I packed things to the boat, I began to run to the boat, as though I was running from emptiness. I felt more secure and at home in the boat.

Finally, it was time to untie the boat. One or two of the deck hands pushed us out from the riverbank, then Dad slowly turned the whole outfit around and headed down river!

I climbed up the ladder to the pilot house and sat behind the sleeping cabins and watched the house slowly disappear. Then I would move in front of the pilot house and watch as Dad maneuvered the boats through the narrow banks of the Chena River.

As we approached the Tanana River I looked for the change in the color of river waters. The Chena was slow and the water somewhat clear, while the Tanana was swift and muddy and wide. I felt the shift of power from the slower waters to the swift currents and the color differences of the river waters side by side.

The clearer waters of the Chena mingled with the muddy water of the Tanana.

Then we made a slow wide turn facing us down river. It made me feel that we were finally on our way.

Dad was an expert riverboat navigator. He taught Manie, Bing and Birdie how to read the waters, noting the channels, keeping an eye out for shallow waters and always aware that the rivers change. Dad had great respect for the rivers.

From time to time I would sit and

One particular time, our visit was a rather sad one. Auntie and Mom spent their time in the kitchen talking quietly. Mom was unusually quiet. Later I learned that one of our cousins had lost her baby. I never found out what exactly happened, but I do remember Mom, Auntie Dina, Auntie Mary and some other of the village women went to pick wild flowers.

They took us with them. We walked in search of Lady Slippers and wild roses. It was hot, and the mosquitoes were about as pesty as they could possibly get. They weren't thick, just never ending.

After we gathered the flowers we returned to Auntie's house. The women worked quietly as they arranged a beautiful cross made of Lady Slippers and roses.

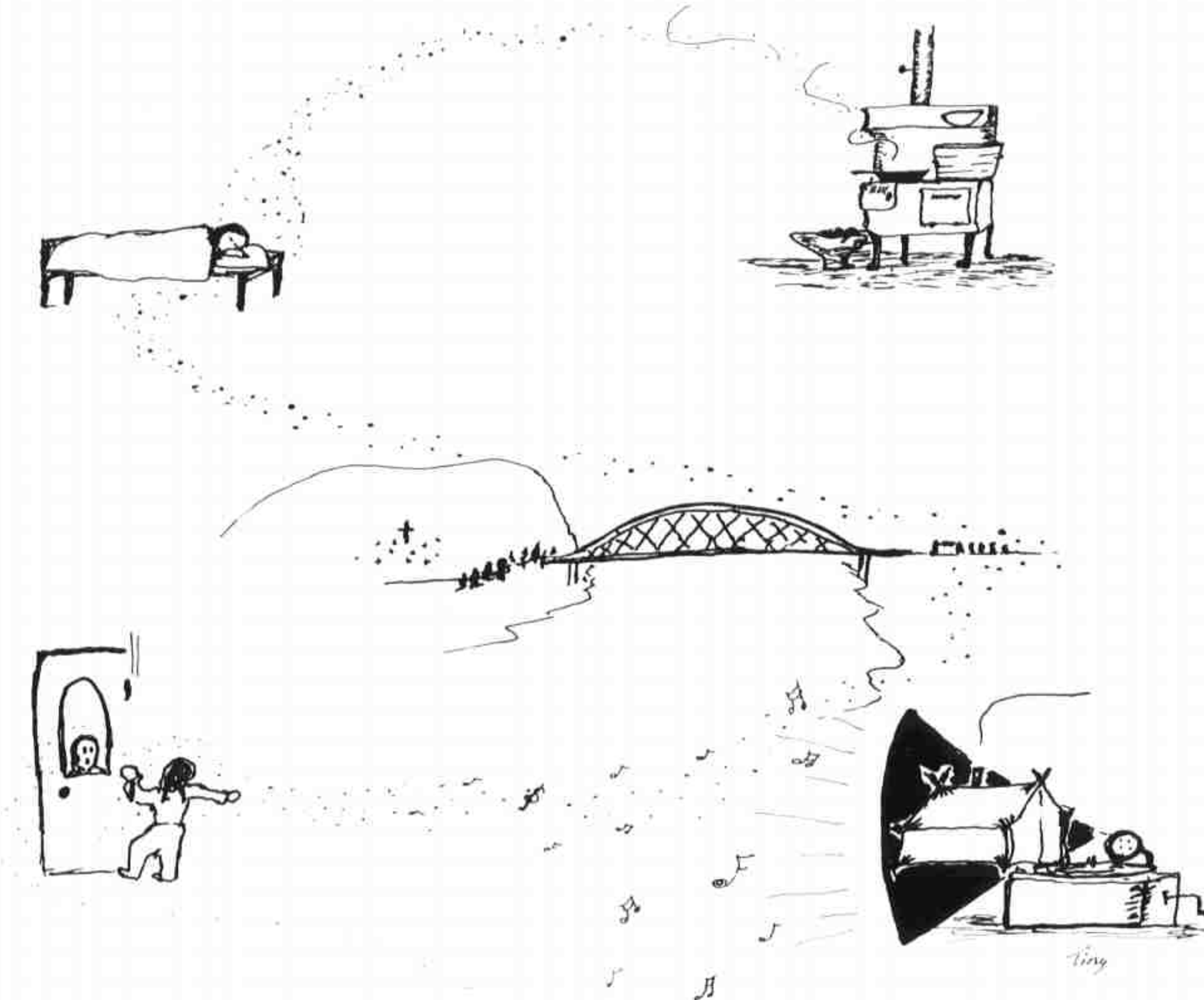
After the church services, the grownups went to the gravesite located across the river on the hillside facing Nenana. We had to stay behind. I looked on as the saddened faces gathered. They carried the little flower laden coffin across the railroad bridge.

I can still see the procession of people moving ever so slowly. It was as if the sadness created a heavy burden upon their shoulders.

When we were finished in Nenana — after the freight was loaded onto the barges — we'd turn the boats downstream and continue on.

Inside the *Sea Wolf* I'd climb into my bunk, read comic books and drift off to sleep.

Irene loved baking. She enjoyed making all kinds of wonderful desserts. One time she made a coffee cake. She didn't know that when the recipe called for coffee, it really meant brewed coffee. She carefully measured out coffee grounds and mixed them in to the batter. When the cake was baked to perfection, we could hardly wait for



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the exciting new taste.

It was awful! Irene threw the poor thing overboard.

After dinner during the evening hours, we'd climb over the freight and settle in front of the barge. It was quiet there. It could hear the river hitting the hull of the barge.

Now and then I could hear the echo of the motors in the boat. It was as though the sounds of the engines shot across the water, bounced off the riverbanks and rolled back, sounding like a memory.

During the evening light, I'd look out across the horizon. At some points of the river it would be so wide that I'd raise my hand to my eye to measure just how tall the trees could be. Sometimes they'd only measure out to be one inch tall. Trees one inch tall!

Dad sometimes stopped at Tolovana. I never quite figured that place out. There was only a store. It was a great store, but I never could figure out who shopped there!

The store was set back from the riverbank, and between the river and the store there was a stretch of land covered with green grass trimmed neatly. Wild strawberries grew there.

Sugar, Tootie and I would run in the

grass until we tired, then we'd lie down on the grass on our tummies, looking for berries. They were close to the ground and so-o-o sweet.

After the deckhands off-loaded the freight, we walked up the plank, pulled it back onboard and continued. Tootie was a quizzical little character. She had blue eyes, thick blonde hair and a winning smile.

She was the baby! No doubt about that, but she didn't mind sharing that special status with us now and then.

She did some strange things, though. She liked to wear dresses. On one occasion, Mom noticed that she looked a little "different." Mom asked her about her dress. Did she change? What could be so different?

We noticed she looked a little thicker or tighter or something. Then, Irene figured it out. Tootie had been putting on her clean dress on top of the one she wore the day before. She was up to about three dresses which explained why she looked a little thicker.

Sugar and I howled with laughter when we found her out!

Sugar was not exactly without a comical moment. One time we landed at one of the villages, and as we took our turns walking the plank, Sugar

That was one of my first memories of Jackie. He was a rugged handsome man. He loved life! He enjoyed lively music and laughing.

He must have owned that old record player! It was an old wind-up machine. We listened to the deep mellow tones of Tennessee Ernie Ford as he sang "Sixteen Tons."

decided to strike a pose.

She stopped half way down the plank, put one hand behind her head, the other on her hip and kind of leaned onto. . . nothing! Just that easy she landed in the mud!

We hurried to help her out. Mom was mad; Sugar was embarrassed. The rest of us were just not quite sure if we dare laugh or offer a little sympathy. We helped her out of the mud and kept quiet about it.

Of course, I was not without my moments. I accomplished a few amazing feats during my growing up years.

One day after we finished dinner, I was ordered to get busy with the dishes. Stack them up, and get ready to dry them!

Irene was giving the orders and was as stubborn and bull-headed as I was. "No, it's not my turn! I already done my turn last night!" I said.

"Tiny, you are going to have to grow up. Just do the dishes and don't worry about it."

I grabbed a dish towel and proceeded to dry the dishes. Each time I wiped a dish, I grew angrier. I was building up a slow stewing fit. Sugar came over to me and started to tease me.

"Ha, huh, hah, huh, ha! ha! You have to do the dishes!" she said in a sing-song, sassy little voice.

Irene could see me festering. She tried to calm me down, but Sugar kept at me.

Then something snapped. I slapped down the wet dish towel and started after Sugar. She knew she was in trouble. I guess she could see it in my eyes.

I thought where could she run? She headed to the back of the boat with me on her heels. She opened the door which separated the living quarters from the machinery of the paddle wheel and the bathroom. The door had a thick window in it.

Sugar pulled the door shut behind her, and to this day I believe she stuck her tongue out at me. That was it. . . I hauled my fist back, closed my eyes and through the window it went.

Irene, Sugar and I were all so startled that all of our attention was on the broken window.

It was real quiet and I was amazed with myself. Sugar treated me real different, and Irene worried about what Dad would say when he found out.

Later on, Dad came down from the pilot house and looked the window over. He never asked who broke it. He just took off his cap, scratched his head, smoothed back his hair, put his cap back onto his head and said, "It's going to be hard to get that same window. It's different, with the round top and the shape!"

I went back to my bunk and cried. Sugar and I felt different toward each other. I didn't want to lose my temper again.

After we finished with delivering all of the freight, we went to Grandpa's fish camp. There, Auntie Frances was busy with the work that's to be done at camp. Sugar, Tootie and I ran up and down the beach and all around the camp. It was great to be on solid ground.

That was one of my first memories of Jackie. He was a rugged handsome man. He loved life! He enjoyed lively music and laughing. He must have owned that old record player! It was an old wind-up machine. We listened to the deep mellow tones of Tennessee Ernie Ford as he sang "Sixteen Tons."

Another favorite was Dean Martin. Jackie had a whole bunch of records.

One of my favorites was Frauent. I listened to that song very carefully. I wanted to be able to sing it myself. Then one proud day, as I was singing, "Far across the blue water lived Old Lady Slaughter, on the banks of the old River Rhine," Irene happened to be within earshot.

She asked me to sing it again. I belted it out with all of the seriousness I could muster.

"Far across the blue water lived Old Lady Slaughter. . ."

She burst out laughing! I was devastated. After she settled down, she told me the worlds were "Far cross the blue water lived an old German's daughter, on the banks of the old River Rhine. . ."

Only when I was alone in the safety of my privacy did I think back to my song and chuckle at myself.