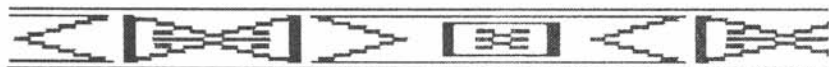
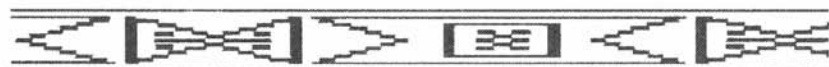


# 1



## How I Came to Be a Bush Teacher



O might I here\ In solitude live savage,  
in some glade\ Obscured

— Paradise Lost IX, 1084–86

**M**y career as an Alaskan bush teacher really began in San Francisco, California: at San Francisco State University to be precise. Five months before I signed my first teaching contract, seven months before I assumed the podium at the front of my first class, and four thousand miles of highway to the south of the Athabaskan village of Nyotek where I first came to ply my craft, I found myself sitting in a classroom on the campus of San Francisco State University with two dozen other unemployed teachers. We had come to hear the presentation of two recruiters from the Alaska Teachers' Placement office of the University of Alaska–Fairbanks.

Every spring I'd watched the migratory birds winging northward over the rooftops of Encino, envious that they were bound for a place I could only envision. Now it was time to see for myself, to

go where the mallards, coots, and Canadian geese had long since been going. I gazed on their winging wedges, dark and cacophonous, with envy, knowing they would be visiting a land I felt compelled to see for myself and had visited in my dreams quite often. Their long, honking throats seemed to proclaim their joy at being Alaska-bound. Every ring-necked note seemed to resound with its pristine reaches, with its glacier-mirroring fjords and columbine-colored tundra. A similar impulse to take flight was animating an unnameable quarter of my own soul.

That is how I came to be one of the twenty-odd aspiring bush teachers sitting in Room 111 of the Education Department at San Francisco State that Saturday morning in February.

### An Unconventional Recruiter

The course of my life was changed by what I heard in that room on that day. Bob Egan was a slender, six-foot, slightly rumped figure, whose thick reading glasses surmounted a friendly smile. He had an engaging air of informality about him that I immediately liked, as if the expansive, unfettered spirit of the great land itself still clung to him. The unbuttoned collar, the rolled up sleeves, the natural smile hinted of the unfettered spaces of the tundra. He exuded that free and easy confidence, that aura of shaggy informality that identifies the Alaskan wherever he or she goes. He also cut straight to the chase.

“Hi. I’m Bob Egan, the Director of the Teacher Placement Program for the University of Alaska–Fairbanks. The good news for you is that we have a chronic shortage of teachers in Alaska. But before I expand on the upside of the job market there, let me say a few things. If I can burst a few bubbles, I’ll be doing you a great service. Not everyone should go to Alaska. It’s not anything like teaching in Long Beach, zooming to and from work on freeways. I mention Long Beach ‘cuz that’s my hometown. I went from there straight to Nome, Alaska, where I taught for a year. I immediately fell in love with the whole state, especially the salaries for teachers. Now, I know you’ve all heard about the high salaries, and that may be the reason you’re interested in going, which is fine. There’s nothing wrong in that. But there’s more to consider than just the

high salaries. If you teach in the Pribiloffs, you will be lucky if you get your mail once a month! In Barrow, it's dark right now at 1:00 p.m. In fact, it's dark all day long! On the North Slope, living conditions range from urban Barrow to remote Eskimo villages. The environment may be significantly different from what you've grown accustomed to. You have to ask yourself, am I really willing to live in a remote Indian village? Are you mechanically inclined, able to do your own plumbing repairs, engine repairs, carpentry repairs? Handy with first aid? Willing to house visitors overnight, such as the Superintendent of Schools? Can you live with a rationed water supply? Are you content with facilities other than a flush toilet? Can you adjust to no television? Willing to live in an area where no medical attention may be available? Willing to live with only periodic communication with the outside world?"

He paused to take a sip of water.

"These are questions you need to think about. I've seen a lot of teachers bite the dust. And it's not a pretty sight. They arrive with high hopes and false notions and when the reality sinks in, they cave in. Quit their jobs in midyear and catch the first flight out of the bush. That's my worst nightmare too. 'Cuz I'm the one who has to deal with the fallout, who has to find their replacements. Do you know how hard it is to find a teacher willing to go into the Alaskan bush in the middle of February? So, I try to avoid that situation at all costs, which is why we're having this talk now, why I start out this way. The last two Californians I hired lasted exactly one week. Barely long enough to get unpacked."

He surveyed our faces, assessing the impact of his words.

"Let me give you a little background on the State. It's really five distinct states. The Southeast is a prettier version of Oregon. Rain forests. Tlinget Indian predominantly. Small fishing communities. Most likely you'd be the only white person in the village. Except for the other teachers of course. Compared to the rest of the state, the climate is easy. Piece of cake. So, these positions are very popular. There's little turnover, so they're hard to come by. To secure one, you need a strong teaching specialty. Better to set your sights on one of the less appealing regions. The second most popular region is the South Central, the Kenai Peninsula."

I suddenly recalled that I had mailed an application to this district, though at the time I had no idea where it was located. It

was merely an address on a bulletin board at the University placement office.

“Mountains. Which means snow. Winters not too severe though. That’s ‘cuz it’s on the ocean. Northern Pacific. Not the Bering Sea. Big difference. It’s a bit like Montana. If you land a position here, Anchorage will be within easy access by plane or even car in some cases. Anchorage has all the diversions of any metropolis anywhere. And after a stint in the Alaskan bush, you come to appreciate such amenities and diversions. It’s also a supply depot for the bush. Most districts pay their teachers a stipend to fly to Anchorage several times a year. ‘Mental health money,’ we call it. ‘Cabin fever funds,’ I’ve also heard it called. The mind that came up with that idea was truly enlightened. Makes my job a lot easier.”

This was sounding a little better. My spirits began to rise just a little from the abyss into which his first words had plunged them.

“Anyway, the Kenai Peninsula is truly one of the wonders of the state. A favorite recreation area in summer. And a very popular place to teach. So I wouldn’t set your sights on there either. They rarely have to recruit through our office to fill whatever openings they might have. Same with the Anchorage School District. They don’t recruit; teachers come to them. Most of them have a Master’s and five years experience.”

Where had I heard this before?

“You can forget about landing a position there as well. Especially if your field is Language Arts or Social Studies. They already have a backlog of those waiting to get in. The Matanuska Valley School District is the same. One of the most beautiful areas of the state. Just north of Anchorage. Rich, fertile soil. Ringed by mountains. A little Tibet on the roof of the North American continent. Quite lovely.”

He stopped, tilting his head down to peer over the rim of his glasses.

“Kodiak Island School District is another with little turnover. It’s a hub of commercial fishing. With a sprinkling of rural villages. Athabascan Indian mostly. They will not hire couples. It’s a strong, innovative, heads-up district. Good superintendent. Old friend of mine. Well, that’s it for the popular spots. So I would forget about a position in any of these places. If you’re coming to Alaska to live in one of them, I suggest you reconsider.”

A sip of water. Another assessing glance over the rim of his glasses.

“That leaves the “undesirables,” as I call them. First, there’s the Aleutians. They don’t celebrate Christmas, so you don’t get out for Christmas. Once you’re there, you’re there. Also a good superintendent. In the Pribiloffs there is a lot of turnover every other year. It’s like a lot of boroughs. Good openings this coming season. Dillingham in the Bristol Bay School District is a nice fishing village. Grim winters though. The Lake and Peninsula District is inland. Remote. Athabascan mostly. Bethel and Nome, I think, are the most rewarding. Eskimo. Maybe that’s why. They’re so different from the Athabascans. Less shy. More gregarious. Friendlier toward non-natives. Despite that, there’s also a high teacher turnover. Severe winters. Low tundra. Not scenic. Lots of poverty, alcoholism, racial tension. Plenty of time to do a lot of soul searching, and not much else. There’s a very high probability of finding a job on the West Coast. Places like Nome, the Bering Straits don’t get your low temps like the interior. The North Slope district is a very rich school district. Highest salaries in the state. But it’s also the most isolated and has the harshest winters. The complete lack of daylight can be emotionally difficult. The Fairbanks School District is mostly Athabascan Indian. It’s a more cross-cultural experience. Students speak pidgin English.”

My students in Hawaii had spoken pidgin, and the cross-cultural nature of that experience lessened my fears of this one to a degree.

“If you’re still interested in coming north, what you need to do is to write and register with Juneau. It’ll cost \$30 and take anywhere from 30 to 60 days to get the form for an Alaska Teaching Certificate. They have a reciprocal agreement with Hawaii, Oregon, and California. So if you already hold a certificate from those states, all you have to do is pay the thirty dollars and send in the form. Now the good part: salaries! Salaries are the highest in Barrow and Nome at 40K and rising at the rate of 2K per year. The Southeast pays 35 to 40K. They’re also rising at 2K per. In fact, statewide you can expect salaries to go up about 2K per year as part of what’s called your “step increase.” For every year of experience and for every graduate degree earned you receive a step increase. Doesn’t even have to be negotiated. Or more precisely, it’s already been negotiated. You’ll find that the State of Alaska has the best teaching

contract of any state in the union, including a twenty-year retirement plan that allows you to retire at fifty percent of your salary. Most teachers are still in their forties and fifties when they retire. But, I'll say it again: if money is your number one priority, don't come to Alaska 'cuz you're gonna get very bitchy. None of us are starving to death. I left Southern California 'cuz I couldn't cope with the lifestyle any longer. Maybe some of you feel the same way. Something has been lost in the rush toward progress if you ask me. Twenty, thirty years ago, it was different. You could still see the San Gabriel Mountains. But what good are mountains if you can't see them for the smog? Might as well not even be there. In Alaska I built my own home. I don't have to put up with any traffic. There isn't a parking meter in the entire state. And I live on five acres of land that I got for free through the homestead lottery."

He paused for another sip of water.

"Let's talk accommodations. Housing is no guarantee. But many districts will provide it. Those that don't will give teachers a housing stipend as well as a travel stipend. So that the money you make is yours. No overhead. Not even rent. We do this to heighten the appeal of the experience. All we're looking for from you is two years. That's the length of the contract. If you play your cards right, you can come out of that two years with a nest egg amounting to one year's salary. I've seen it done many times. In some districts you'll have a modern house to live in with central heating and running water. In others, a one-room cabin with no running water, a wood-burning stove, and a "honey-bucket" instead of an outhouse. It just depends where you wind up. But even if you have running water, you can count on the pipes freezing once or twice during the winter, on having to squirm under the house with an acetylene torch to unfreeze them."

"Now, for those of you who are still interested, we conduct a job fair on the Fairbanks campus the first week in June. Principals from all over the bush come to the campus to conduct interviews and do their hiring. It's not unusual for one of our candidates to have eight or nine interviews in a week, to have several offers to choose from. As I say, there's more openings than candidates. Many of our recruits pitch their tents in the woods adjacent to campus to cut down on expenses. They shower in the locker rooms, eat in the cafeteria, sleep in their tents. Weather's usually nice that time of

year. Eighty degrees. Clear skies. Little rainfall. Kinda like Arizona with pine trees! As an added attraction, the Second Annual Midnight Sun Writer's Conference will be going on at the same time. It was a big success last year. Some well-known names will be attending this year: William Stafford, Geary Hobson, John Haines, Jack Cady, just to name a few. Last year we placed all but four of our one hundred candidates who came up from the Lower Forty-eight, and four hundred out of a thousand applicants we had overall. Those are pretty good odds. So, if you do come, I can practically guarantee you a job."

The scales were already tipping in favor of making the trip when he mentioned the Midnight Sun Writer's Conference.

"The greatest placement occurs in June, July, and August. Best jobs will go in early June. So that's the ideal time to be there. A second wave gets hired in July. And then there's always a flurry of last-minute hirings in August for those who changed their minds and for positions that get funded at the last minute. So, your chances of getting hired improve dramatically if you can extend your stay for a month or so, to include that second hiring flurry. We feature a very personalized, individualized, and unconventional placement service. All it costs you is \$20 for the registration fee, and whatever it costs to have your placement file sent from the university where you did your teacher training. If you want to stay on campus in the dorm, you must make prior arrangements. Don't show up expecting to find dorm space 'cuz it goes quickly. But as I said, some of our jobseekers just pitch a tent in the forest for free. The local authorities might not like it, but the local mosquitoes sure do."

Of the two options he mentioned regarding accommodations, I found the second more appealing, as it better suited my shoestring budget. If I made the long journey north, it would be with a minimum of cash.

"What we need from you is your placement file, twenty bucks, a recent photograph, and a coherent letter of application. You'd be amazed at how many illiterate letters we get from teachers. In the letter, say some things about yourself we won't find in the placement file. Address it to me. My address is on the board. And leave out the outdoorsy stuff. We get a lot of that. Another thing to keep in mind: rural Alaska is extremely religious. What we really need this year are reading specialists and curriculum coordinators. The



teacher surplus is over, folks. I hear there's sixty positions in Montana they can't fill. Well, good luck and hope to see ya in Alaska."

I joined the crowd of people around Bob Egan's podium and when my turn to speak came, said I'd like to come north. My mind had been made up. He shook my hand and our eyes met in a brotherly embrace, as if we now shared something in common. "Problem is, I'll be making the trip on a shoestring." How frayed a shoestring I didn't know at that time.

"If you can make it up there, I'll guarantee you a job!"

Those were the only words I needed to hear. Now that I had a familiar face waiting for me at the other end of the long Northern road, and a strong assurance that a well-paying job in my chosen field would be waiting for me there, I vowed to surmount any obstacle that might get in my way.

Once more I felt I had a direction in life. The disquieting sensation of just drifting along vanished. I set my course for due north and embarked with the energy and excitement of a migratory bird on its fledgling flight into the arctic. I was about to enter my own Big Scrub country, even as my imagination once upon a time had followed Jody and Flag into the Florida backwoods. With this vital difference: that big scrub was figurative and this one was all too real. But somehow, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *The Yearling* prepared the way for this leap from the imaginary into the literal, from the page into the unfettered interior of the Far North. If in *The Yearling* I had made an inward journey into an outdoor realm, now I was making a journey outward into the interior of Alaska.

### The Great North Road

On a morning in the middle of May, I boarded a train in Oakland for the first thousand-mile leg of my journey. I had two hundred dollars in my pocket and everything I thought I would need for the trek stuffed into my blue ski-touring pack—a veteran piece of equipment that had accompanied me through the Sierras, the Tetons, the Rockies, and the Na Pali coast of Kauai. My most prized possessions, however, were the last words Bob Egan had spoken to me: "You make it to Fairbanks and I'll guarantee you a job!" I held onto



this promise as if clutching a ticket to an exotic destination, reciting it in moments of fear, skepticism, and restlessness.

I spent many hours in the dome car, admiring the familiar scenery of California, Oregon, and Washington, thinking of other trips I had taken through this part of America. This time, however, I was heading far beyond the northernmost limits of previous treks, which had extended to the Western shore of Vancouver Island. In Seattle, I bought a ticket as a foot passenger and boarded a ferry of the Alaska Maritime System, the Sitka Star, for the trip up the Inside Passage to Haines Junction, the second thousand-mile leg of the journey. I slept in my down bag in the solarium on the upper deck, by night gazing at stars in positions I had never seen, by day gazing at a primeval forest that slipped by our bow for days on end without so much as a sign of civilization.

This I liked.

We were escorted north by a pod of orcas that rode our bow wave—a trick they must have learned from the porpoises. Each four-foot, keel-like dorsal sliced the water like a knife through syrup, their hull-long shapes weaving through the subsurface at surprising speed, criss-crossing our bow in cosign waves under a waveless body of water as serene as the surrounding terrain was rugged. This syrup-sea was a palette for the reflections of unnamed subarctic Alps. The sheer immensity of the land was intimidating, and beyond the scope of words.

Until I traveled into the Far North, I assumed I occupied a significant place in the universe. Alaska put me back in my place. Such a monolithic landscape has a way of cutting the male ego down to size, of taking it down a peg or two. I was immediately humbled by the anonymity of these numberless ranges of mountains. The wilderness seemed to be saying: "Here is your place. Don't forget it. One misstep and you're done." It was a message I never forgot in the Far North. I was painfully conscious of my status as a greenhorn, a Cheekako, a newcomer to this inhospitable realm. And the horror stories of other travelers who had come north, who had forgotten their place, and who had suffered the unforgiving consequences never left my mind. They were too legion to dismiss. And seeing this giant landscape in person, having it stare me straight in my face, it was easy to understand how one false step, how a false sense of one's own abilities, could lead to disaster.

The Sitka Star was also escorted north by a flock of bald eagles that shadowed our wake scavenging the scraps and the detritus of the ship. Species that were endangered or extinct in the lower forty-eight states, abounded here—from the old growth, primeval forests that marched down to the sea from a precipitous, Norwegianesque coastline to the orcas, eagles, salmon, and bears. The sheltered fjords of the Inside Passage were as pristine as they were serene, as anonymous as they were numerous, shrouded in a sea-clinging mist that added a dreamy texture to the place. All linguistic paradigms for bigness were useless for depicting this landscape. The language had yet to be invented that could achieve its linguistic capture. It resisted any effort to name, much less to tame, it. It had more coastline than the rest of the United States combined, and was one-fifth the size of the forty-eight states combined. Yet, the place-names evoked something of the place itself: Wrangell, Ketchikan, Skagway, Sitka, Juneau, the Red Dog Saloon. Strange-sounding names, fresh, wild, indigenous-sounding—as native to the place as its fjords and orcas, its mists and coastal waterfalls, its microscopic blossoms and native peoples.

It felt thrilling to be following in the footsteps of other writers I admired, of London and Muir, whose works I read as I retraced their routes through this same Northern realm—works I would soon come to use in the borderland classroom. The fact I could be so far from my Yosemite cabin and yet still be reading Muir's descriptions of the land before me made me feel less alone. From his *Travels in Alaska* I read:

Wrangell was a tranquil place. I never heard a brawl in the streets or a clap of thunder. . . . The cloudless days are calm, pearl gray, and brooding in tone, inclining to rest and peace; the islands seem to drowse and float on the glassy water and in the woods scarcely a leaf stirs. (28)

I came across a sign while wandering the wooden sidewalks of Wrangell that led me to believe that the hospitality of the locals was yet the result of being drunk on nature: "What sunshine is to flowers, smiles are to humanity."

"Perhaps I'll end up teaching in this part of the state."

But something in me balked at the idea, for the weather was too inclement, the skies too overcast, the rains too frequent for my

tastes. "Toad-strangling weather," my dad called it. While camped in my tent on Sitka Island, I nearly caught pneumonia—an ill omen for a teaching career in The Panhandle.

At Haines Junction I reluctantly left the Sitka Star. It had been a comforting refuge from the reality of the landscape. Now there was nothing standing between it and me. Now I faced the most uncertain part of this journey, the third thousand-mile leg that would take me overland through one of the most uninhabited places on the planet: The Yukon Territory. My plan had been to hitchhike the rest of the way to Anchorage. But as I dropped my pack by the side of the deserted road leading out of Haines, I seriously questioned the practicality of this plan, and wished I had had the resources to fly from Seattle to Anchorage instead. The traffic was non-existent, the streets deserted. A sense of desolation touched my heart. However, if there is one thing my travels have taught me, it is that the further you get from civilization the friendlier people are.

The first car to come my way was driven by a young woman who stopped to pick me up. She was headed to Dawson, the old gold rush town situated in the heart of the Yukon Territory, three hundred miles into the interior. I was glad to be on the move again. Movement was the one staple my spirits could not do without. As long as I was making progress toward my destination, toward Fairbanks, Bob Egan, and the Teacher Placement Center, I could endure whatever hardships the road might place in my way. Now I understood the compulsion that drives the salmon upstream, and I derived inspiration from their steel-like shafts defeating torrents and falls until they reached the tranquil tributary of their journey's end.

The Haines Highway began in coastal forests, climbed Chilkoot Pass, then descended into purple tundra ringed by mountains unlike any I had ever seen. No alpine meadows here. Just these peaks: naked, windswept, icebound, lunar-looking, monochromatic, iron-hued. It was a glaciated space, traversed by glacial streams and opal lakes. To the north I received my first, heart-jolting sight of the St. Elias Range, with its unbroken chain of eight-thousand-foot summits.

As we left the sea, we also left the rains. This was a welcome change, and one that helped soften the shock of these mountains. There were other changes as well. Whereas I had been surrounded by these lush, heaven-reaching, old-growth forests, now there were no trees whatsoever. The landscape seemed emptier, larger, and

quieter—disquietingly so, in fact. It was as silent as it was limitless, inspiring awareness of my own limitations. In fact, its limitless expanses seemed to mock my own limitations, its infinite reaches my own finite being. The Sierras seemed like anthills compared to these ranges, seemed unworthy of the name mountain range. It was difficult to grasp the fact I was now in the same Yukon Territory I had just been reading about in the pages of Jack London's *Call of the Wild*.

And so I reached that vital crossroads of Haines Junction and the Alkan Highway. The very sight of the Alkan lifted my spirits, knowing I had reached the highway that led to Alaska, to Fairbanks, and to Bob Egan. I was close enough now to sense the end of the highway, though it was still 700 miles of wilderness away.

No less evocative of the Yukon than its mountains and place-names was the humor of its native-wits. In a little roadside café outside of White Horse, I eavesdropped on the badinage of a group of older locals. A tourist approached the old sourdough who ran the café while he was taking a coffee break with this group of old-timers.

"Do you have showers?"

"They're forecast," he replied.

There was a pregnant pause in the conversation of his friends before all exploded in laughter.

The tourist ignored his answer.

"How much are they?"

\$.150 a drop. It's just a pipe that leaks."

"How much you want for that king crab on the wall?"

"It's not a king crab. That's a Kodiak spider!"

His friends howled their delight. As I soon discovered, having fun with the tourists was a favorite summer sport in the Yukon, especially if they were American tourists bound for Alaska. There was a cutting edge to the old-timer's wit, a note of Canadian pride in his voice.

"Alright then, you have any stamps?"

"Sure. Here!" he said. He raised a booted foot and stomped it on the wooden floor.

I thought for sure that this sourdough's backwoods wit would have pleased Penny in *The Yearling*, for there are few things such folk enjoy as much as a good laugh at the expense of an outsider, a city slicker, a Cheechako.

“Very well, then. Can we have some milk.”

“I only serve milk to sourdoughs.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, to be a sourdough you have to do three things: pee in the Yukon, wrestle a bear, and sleep with an Eskimo. ‘Course, when you see an Eskimo you might prefer to wrestle with her and sleep with the bear!”

Another round of laughter, and my first glimpse of the stereotypic attitudes that still prevailed in many parts of the Far North toward the native Other.

In the dirt parking lot outside the café, I saw a bumper sticker on a car with Alaska plates that afforded yet another example of humor in the Far North: “Preserve sport fishing; can Hammond.” Jay Hammond was the Governor of Alaska, a big, burly, bearded throwback to the rough and tumble days that preceded statehood. Apparently, not even the highest political figure in the land was immune to the slings and arrows of these native wits.

As I paid my bill, the old sourdough couldn’t resist having a little fun with me.

“Watchout for those yahoots, now.”

“What are those?”

“Mean you never heard? They’re a little smaller than a kiyote. Real wily like. Tug your hair while you’re asleep. They have these green eyes that glow in the dark.”

“Are you sure they aren’t purple?”

He looked up at me as if to say, “Hey, I’m not kidding.”

As I sped through the Yukon in the back of a pickup, gazing at the ring of treeless, monochromatic mountains, I felt as if I’d passed a significant watershed on my journey. Gone for good were the low-spirits experienced in The Panhandle, induced by the rains that made the heart as heavy and low and soggy as the overcast skies. I was still on an incredible run of good luck, and prayed it would last a little longer. As my fellow travelers were heading to Anchorage, I was now assured of reaching my destination—a thousand miles through the Yukon and Alaska in two rides and forty-eight hours!

I sat in the bed of the pickup, using the touring pack for a backrest, my feet dangling out the tailgate, my eyes contemplating the extraterrestrial look of the Yukon. We toured on through the Mentasta and Wrangell Ranges. The scenery set me to thinking

about teaching in this part of the state, to fantasizing about a log cabin in this wilderness. As we crossed the border into Alaska the land became lusher, the forests returned. It took on the look of an alpine environment again, with jade lakes nestled in timbered, white-capped bowls. We stopped to let the occasional moose or black bear cross the gravel Alkan. Even the moose here were different, were evocative of the Far North, with their shorter, shallower racks, their longer dewlaps, their humped shoulders—changes I noted while watching one nibble red willow buds alongside the highway.

Here was country so beautiful I regretted being in transit through it. I had to resist a mad urge to leap out of the truck and explore it at leisure. Then there appeared a mountain so disproportionate to the ranges we had seen, I could only stare in disbelief. It was an entire range unto itself, a subcontinent of ice dominating the horizon and all other ranges to the south. The clouds that capped other peaks were in turn surmounted by its shoulders. As my gaze lifted above the cloud layer, I gasped in disbelief, for the whiteness I had mistaken for cloud-stuff was in reality a massive shoulder of this mountain still rising through the air! Into a second cloud bank it disappeared, only to reappear above it as well. I was again humbled to be in a place that could spawn such goliaths: whether mountains, bears, or redwoods. A reverent awe, surpassing any I have felt in the world's most famed cathedrals and temples, such as Notre Dame, Il Duomo, Chichen Itza, filled my heart. Finally, there in the sky, seemingly nearer to heaven than Earth, it culminated in a white pyramid worthy of a Pharaoh.

“Is that it way up there too?” someone asked.

Its watershed extended for hundreds of miles in all directions.

“What’s it called?”

“According to my map, Mount Sanford.”

I laughed. “What a ridiculous name! I wish I knew what the Indians called it. What elevation is it?”

“19,200 feet.”

I imagined the Grand Teton, whose roseate face I had seen from my cabin window many mornings, then imagined a mountain 6,000 feet taller!

I awoke from my bed in the back of the pickup to find myself surrounded by skyscrapers.

“Welcome to Anchorage!”

The reflecting glass was tinted pink in the predawn hour. Wrappers were blowing down the deserted street in a chilly wind that made me tighten the collar around my throat and wrap myself more snugly in the folds of my down sleeping bag. We found a café and nursed ourselves awake over sour coffee in styrofoam cups, then resumed the last leg of our trip, taking the highway that led south down the Kenai Peninsula to my friend, Ron’s home.

I was eager to reach the end of the road, to resume a more civilized existence. I’d had the same clothes on for three days, hadn’t showered, shaved, or brushed my teeth in that same period. I was tired of sleeping on the floor of ferries, in the back of trucks, and on the ground. I was tired of waging war with the mosquitoes, which seemed as loud and large as honeybees. Though it was late May, my breath was still visible on the air. However, tucked inside my down sleeping bag, in my wind pants, down booties, down jacket, and down hood, I was positively crispy. I was also down to my last one hundred dollars and must somehow find a way of replenishing my funds. I would check the docks in Homer, a fishing village at the end of the road where my friend Chuck lived, to see if I could find work in a cannery. It was the peak of herring season, and whenever a ship arrived there was always a hiring frenzy at the canneries.

The destination of my fellow travelers was Homer, mine was Soldotna, where my old high school fishing buddy, Ron had established a practice as a dentist. As luck would have it, Soldotna was also the headquarters of the Kenai Peninsula School District. Despite Bob Egan’s assessment that the popular Kenai District offered little hope for inexperienced teachers, I nevertheless resolved to fill out an application since I would be there anyway.

My travel companions dropped me off outside Ron’s office in a new, wooden medical center. Ron had found his own paradise: a two-story, four-bedroom home on the Kenai River, his own boat landing, his own eighteen-foot aluminum fishing boat, his walls mounted with trophy-sized king salmon, a sauna in the backyard, two freezers in the garage stuffed with fresh salmon, halibut, and moose meat, a partner who owned a bush plane and who flew him into the best fishing and moose-hunting habitat the state could offer, and a profitable practice. It was a long way from the medical



center at the University of California, San Francisco, where he had done his internship and had once worked on my teeth, or the shoals of Cave Rock at Lake Tahoe where we had “limited” on trout one summer after our sophomore year in college. Judging by the smile on Ron’s face and the vitality in his voice, the trip had been worth every mile of Alkan Highway he had had to travel.

He told me that he had arranged a “blind date” for me with his girlfriend’s friend, and that the four of us would be double-dating that same night. From his house I made an appointment with the personnel director of the Kenai Peninsula School District for the next morning. As luck would have it, my blind date turned out to be the daughter of the Assistant Superintendent of Schools. At the end of our date that night, she invited me into their house. We stayed up talking in her living room until 1:00 a.m., at which point a door opened down the hall, followed by slow footsteps. A moment later Dr. Walls rounded the corner in his bathrobe. We had awakened him from a sound sleep. We shook hands as his daughter performed the introductions, then he retired entreating us to keep our voices down. I took this as my cue to leave and did so, not knowing whether this had been a good or a bad omen. To this day I’m not sure which it was, for everything that followed happened as a consequence of this chance encounter with the Assistant Superintendent of Schools on the eve of my interview with the Kenai Peninsula School District.

Next morning at 9:00 a.m. sharp I entered the district offices, a copy of my resume in hand. Walt recognized me as he emerged from his office, and made a detour to shake my hand. He called one of the secretaries over and introduced me, then told me to see him in his office before I left. The secretary asked if I had any other documents. Suddenly a light went on.

“You should already have them! I applied for a position in this district last year when I was doing my student-teaching in Hawaii.”

Her face lit up.

“Wait just a minute,” she said, retreating into the records room while I prayed my file hadn’t been tossed. She emerged a few minutes later wearing a big smile and bearing my file in her right hand.

“You’re in luck! Here it is.”

Was I ever. She was as amazed as I was.

“I can’t believe it. We received your application from Hawaii last year. And now here you are in person! I am impressed. Just a minute.”

She gave me a wink as she said this. And I knew at that point I would be hired. I rolled my eyes heavenward in a silent prayer of thanksgiving for this string of lucky occurrences: Ron's living in the same town as the district office, a blind date who turns out to be the daughter of the Assistant Superintendent of Schools, with whom I just happened to have an appointment the next morning, and now the file! Whoever was pulling the strings up there must have wanted me to work in the Kenai Peninsula School District very badly. But whether he was pulling them for my benefit or for his own diabolical amusement I have not been able to determine to this day.

The secretary disappeared into Dr. Walls' office with my file. I could almost hear her telling him of the extraordinary coincidence. And so as a result of these lucky occurrences I vaulted over all those other aspiring and unemployed teachers who had applied for a position in this popular district. A few minutes later she emerged, and with a knowing smile motioned me into Dr. Walls' office.

His welcome was the big, hearty, informal welcome of the Far North—a verbal bear-hug.

"So, there's the man who had me up all hours of the night with my daughter!"

We talked of his daughter's plans to attend the University of Colorado. I spoke of my travels in that state. And then he got straight to the point.

"Well, I can't promise you anything right now. But we do anticipate having a few openings in your area. I will take my recommendation to the next board meeting. They meet in two weeks. Can you leave me a phone number where you can be reached?"

I gave him the number of the Alaska Teacher's Placement Office at the University of Alaska—Fairbanks.

"I'm attending the job placement fair up there in two weeks."

He raised a concerned eyebrow. My words had the desired effect. Nothing like a rival to make us fully appreciate the object of our desire. We shook hands and parted company. To this day I can't decide if Dr. Walls offered me the position in the village of Nyotek as a reward for my perseverance or as a punishment for my temerity in dating his daughter and waking him from a sound sleep.

Two weeks later I walked into Bob Egan's office to see what districts were interviewing that day, and was met with a happy scream from his secretary.

"Stephen! There's an important message for you from the Kenai Peninsula School District! A Dr. Walls wants you to call him right away."

I had had eight interviews in the six days I'd been in Fairbanks, for openings in remote villages like Angoon and Barrow. What was worse, I was fairly certain of receiving an offer from one of these forlorn outposts, an offer which, despite my misgivings, I feared I would accept. I was looking at two years of hard time in the remotest reaches of the interior. Then over the phone Dr. Walls broke the good news to me. He had gone to the board with his recommendation that I be hired to teach in the Athabascan village of Nyotek. The board had given its approval. Did I want the job?

It was a "no-brainer." Without a moment's hesitation, I accepted, never knowing what I had just committed myself to, what I was getting into, or all the difficulties that were in store for me.

"Good. Can you be here to sign the contract by the twenty-first?"

"Of June?"

"Yes!"

The same date as my birthday! My luck was still holding. I assured him I would be there. The office was abuzz with the word one of their recruits had landed a position with the Kenai Peninsula School District, an almost unheard of occurrence. Congratulations were offered all around, from Bob and his secretaries, from his partner, Steve, and from the other teachers with whom I had formed a unique bond during that week.

After the initial euphoria wore off, reality set in and thoughts of an entirely different nature disturbed my peace of mind. Could I handle the harsh conditions that came with my new home—the isolation, the loneliness, the racial tensions? Could I handle the regimentation of work after all these months of freedom? On the one hand, I felt I was embarking on a grand new adventure, that for me life (or at least my professional life) was just beginning. On the other hand, I feared I was making a big mistake, as if I'd just joined the army or the peace corps, had irreversibly committed myself to a course I might come to regret, and soon. Will these students accept me?

And so my fate, for better or worse, had been sealed. I was off to teach in the remote village of Nyotek, population 360 Athabascan Indians, located on the deserted western shore of the Cook Inlet, a

forty-five minute flight by bush plane from Anchorage. It wasn't Anchorage, and it wasn't Homer or Kenai or Soldotna or the Matanuska Valley; but neither was it the Pribiloffs or the Aleutians, Barrow, or Nome. Moreover, it was close enough to Anchorage to get away when the need rose, and it was in one of the most desirable regions of the state: one whose winters were "moderate" by Alaskan standards. Instead of fifty below zero, the average winter temperature was seven degrees above zero.

"Hell, I experienced worse than that in Jackson Hole!"

As luck would have it, I was also bound for the very village that my Hawaiian friend, Linda, had once taught in. If I recalled correctly, hadn't she given birth to little Holly in Nyotek? "Won't she be surprised to hear this." I hadn't been planning to contact her, but now I couldn't resist. Her old Alaskan home was just down the road from Soldotna, in Kasilof.

She and I had simply changed places. Funny, that I would travel all these thousands of miles only to end up teaching in the very same Indian village she had once taught in. I didn't realize at the time just how much my friendship with Linda would pave the way for me in Nyotek. My luck was still holding. And I prayed it would hold awhile longer.

Before leaving Fairbanks, I attended the Midnight Sun Writer's Conference where I was able to meet and speak with the poet William Stafford and with the Native American writers Geary Hobson and James Welch, all of whose works would come to play a part in my own borderland pedagogy, along with the works of Jack London and Farley Mowat, which I'd read for companionship on my travels to and across Alaska. In the arduous and challenging months ahead I would be grateful for this serendipitous encounter with these writers and teachers.

Now that I knew the name of the village, Nyotek, in which I would be teaching, I began asking anyone and everyone at the job fair and writer's conference about it. Bob introduced me to a group of Alaskan teachers conducting a workshop on books to teach in the bush. I found myself in a veritable nest of bush teachers: a free-spirited, iconoclastic group whose ideas were as bold as they were unconventional. I asked each of them if they could recommend books to use, especially pertaining to native cultures. I was encouraged by their responses about Nyotek.

“What’s the scenery like?”

“Oh, you know. Forests, hills, mountains.”

“It’s not flat. Be thankful for that.”

“And not too cold either. That’s the advantage of being on the coast instead of in the interior.”

“Do you know what you’re getting into?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Nyotek is probably the wealthiest native village in Alaska. Oil was discovered there a few years ago. The natives struck a deal with the oil companies. They have a brand new high school. They’re living in modern redwood homes. They’ve taken a lot of criticism from other villages for selling out, for betraying their own people. In the arena of native politics, Nyotek is somewhat of a loose cannon.”

“Have you had any cross-cultural experience?”

I nodded. “My teacher training in Hawaii was mostly cross-cultural.”

“Good. That should help ease the culture shock a little. Most native students in high school will have about a fifth grade reading ability. I’d get there a month early just to get used to living in a village.”

“And so you’ll have time to order the books you want, and any other supplies you might need.”

“I want to use books they can relate to, books about Alaska and other native peoples.”

“An interesting idea.”

“I think it’s a good idea. In my village we started this project where we sent the native kids into the village to talk to the old people and ask them for stories, which they wrote down in their journals. Then we made a play out of them that we performed at Christmas for the village. We made recordings of Eskimo ceremonies, filmed them.”

I too was anxious to gather and record the myths, legends, songs, and lore of Nyotek. In time, I would be brought face-to-face with the ethical implications of my own fetishization of the authentic native. At the moment I had more immediate concerns, however.

“You better request any films you want now, if you want them by spring.”

I was starting to get excited, was feeling a little more confident: a pedagogical plan was beginning to take shape in my mind. It