

Sam White, Alaskan

By Sam O. White

Part IV—Learning to Fly

MY first year as agent for the old Alaska Game Commission wound up in fine style. That summer of 1928 I was transferred from Fort Yukon to Fairbanks, was married to Miss Mary Burgess, a nurse at the Fort Yukon hospital, and took the first step towards getting a divorce from my dog team. Not that there's anything wrong with the right dog team. But it seemed to me that the airplane, still fairly new in the North, would get me around the vast stretches of country I had to cover with far greater speed and efficiency. But as it tured out, I had to suffer awhile longer with the dogs.

One of my last patrols by dog team was into the back country about 130 miles from Fairbanks where a bunch of trappers were reportedly feeding moose meat to their dogs on a very large scale. At one empty trapper's cabin I found parts of twenty-one moose, most of them cows and calves, and I don't imagine I found all the heads, either, in the deep snow. The man was out at one of his trail cabins, so I took off after him. The snow was deep and the trail had side boards on it. I was on skiis at the gee pole between the dogs and the sled when I came in sight of the trapper's trail cabin across a creek. The trapper's dogs began to bark and he came out, grabbed a 30-06 that leaned against the cabin wall, pumped five cartridges out into the snow, put the rifle back against the wall, and went back into the cabin, shutting the door behind him. I was unarmed, but I left the dogs and sled where they were, made my way over to the cabin and knocked on the door. The reception I got was the one I least expected.

"Come in," he called. I went in. On the floor of the cabin lay a fresh killed calf moose.

"Where's the cow?" I asked, and he said, "Just out back of the cabin."

Well anyway, a couple of days later we were all headed for the nearest U. S. Commissioner, who happened to be an elderly lady but very competent and conscientious. There were five dog teams ahead of us, each with their owners, and each owner in the same brand of trouble. There seemed to be no ill will in the bunch. We stopped at the same roadhouses and brewed tea for lunches in one big kettle. Arriving at the seat of justice, the court action was taken care of in one long day.

The following summer I spent all the time I could spare figuring out ways and means of getting into the air. I had met

Noel Wien in the fall of 1924 at Nenana and had hopes of getting him to teach me to fly. But Noel was usually too busy to instruct me so he turned me over to his very capable brother, Ralph, and after something like fourteen or sixteen hours of dual, I soloed. Meanwhile I had ordered an aircraft from stateside that sounded promising, but as it turned out that was the only promising thing about it. When it became apparent that this plane was not made for Alaska, I sold it to Harold Gillam who wanted it for some chaps at Copper Center. Then I ordered a new Swallow bi-plane from Harold and when it arrived Noel and I went to Valdez to take possession. On the flight back to Fairbanks we were pleased to find that the plane evidently would do all the things required of it.

As is common with most new fliers during their first several hours in the air, I kept expecting the motor to quit at any moment. But after many hours went by and this did not happen, I built up quite a bit of confidence. It was then, of course, that the motor did quit—and cold.

It was in March and Art Hines, another pilot, and I were cruising at the head of the Salcha River, looking for Frank Pollock who was missing in that vicinity. There was a small glacier below us, and plainly visible from aloft were two small hummocks, wide enough apart to let the landing gear through, but close enough to sweep off both lower wings. And I had to land short of these two hummocks to keep from smacking into a black rock wall. We went in between the hummocks, but instead of a

stiff jolt and a rending crash, there was a soft thump and we kept on going. When we stopped, the crankshaft was just inches from the rock wall. We looked the engine over and could find nothing wrong. On the off chance it was water from condensation, we drained the carburetor and got a pint of water. So that was it, and we were ready to go again.

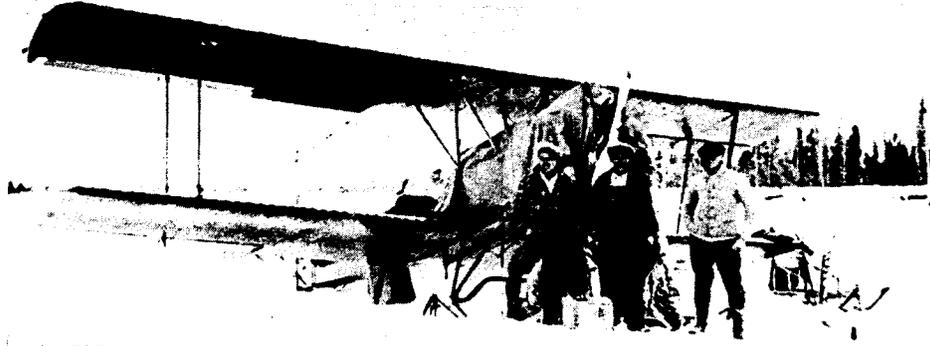
Then a difference of opinion developed over which way to take off. I solved it by saying, "I brought her in here. You take her out your way." The takeoff was more harrowing than the landing as there were high peaks and narrow valleys all around us. But Art was a veteran with steady nerves, and we made it. Ten minutes later we spotted Frank, but since he was okay and ready to take off, we didn't land. He got to town before we did as we went cruising around and visited with a couple of trappers on the Chena.

From this deadstick landing I gained confidence, and firmed up the following philosophy: "No matter where the motor quits, there is always one place smoother than the rest. Pick it out and head for it." That applied for wheels and skiis, so I had to find one for floats. I finally came up with this: "Pick out the wettest place you can find and head for it." Both seemed to work for me—with a good measure of luck thrown in.

At the start of my flying game patrol, I was somewhat disappointed because I could not spot as much as I had hoped from the air. However, this changed rapidly for the better as I got going, and within a year it was amazing what I



At Fort Yukon, 1928. Jack Donald of the N.C. Co., right; Miss Mary Burgess, R.N., the author and Fred Schroder. Miss Burgess was soon to become Mrs. Sam White



My Swallow biplane, NC422N, at Tanana Crossing, March, 1932.

could identify from aloft. At that time there were many aliens tucked away in remote valleys of Interior Alaska. Since an "alien special" license cost \$100, a lot of them were trapping without benefit of license or had falsely taken out resident trapper's licenses which were only two dollars. After about a year of the aircraft patrol, something of a rush on citizenship papers developed. The air patrol also helped to bring the pre-season and post-season trapping under control.

Another place where the air transportation really made a difference was in the sealing of beaver pelts. Sealing consisted of placing a tag on the pelt to show that it had been legally taken. It took me two-and-a-half months to seal the beaver pelts from Fairbanks to Kaltag by boat, while by air I could do it in a week and get in a second trip to pick up late arrivals. At the same time I could cover the Koyukuk and even lop over into another warden's district and give him some transportation.

By the second year things really began to open up as I gained experience in doing my old job a new way. Of course, even with the airplane I often found myself weathered in for days on end at out-of-the-way places. On a number of occasions I was stuck at Alatna in the Koyukuk River valley. Sam Dubin was the big butter and egg man on the Koyukuk in the early thirties, and when I bunked down at Sam's trading post it was as a guest on a free for nothing basis. Sam would never take any pay.

The plane was still a novelty, but its reputation spread fast. On one occasion Sam had his dog sled in the trading post with a native working on it to pay off his debt—and, incidentally, to get in debt again for more supplies. Suddenly the Indian stopped and said, "Sam, I wish you get airplane."

"Why?" Sam asked.

"Then you come dead quick and I owe you nothing," the Indian replied.

Sam was a character, but actually he had a very soft heart and did a lot of good. Another time an Indian came into the post and wanted supplies on credit.

He already was on Sam's books for a large amount, some of it several years in arrears.

"You already owe me a big bill and it keeps getting bigger instead of smaller," Sam told him. "I want my cash money."

That sort of squelched the Indian, but he made one more plea. "Sam, I got babies and squaw and no moose meat and no milk. Babies are hungry and it's too cold to hunt."

But Sam was adamant. "You bring some fur and pay your bill and then I'll give you groceries," he said.

The Indian left the post very dejectedly. Sam began pacing up and down, chewing on his cigar. It was easy to see he was quite agitated. Finally he whirled around to the native who worked for him and blurted out, "Frank, you put him up a box of grub quick. I'll tell you what to put in. He has babies to feed. They are starving. We can't let them go hungry."

So Sam had a box of grub valued at close to fifty dollars packed and delivered to the Indian's cabin. And he told me, "I won't put it on the books. He can never pay for it anyway." How many boxes of this kind were put up no one can even guess, but I know that it certainly happened on more than this one occasion.

A peek into Sam's warehouse at Alatna was an education. From the rafters hung lynx, fox, marten, mink, wolverine, ermine and other valuable furs aggregating a row of beans in hundred-pound bags,

many thousands of dollars. There was flour and sugar the same, sacks of coffee and tea, lard and butter, and slabs of bacon. From the rafters hung a row of "seal pokes." Even at sixty-five degrees below zero those seal pokes smelled to high heaven, and even at that low temperature the contents remained fluid and pliable.

A seal poke is made by first blowing up a seal skin and hanging it in the wind to dry. Then the fat of seal carcasses is cut in strips and stuffed in, and the mouth of the skin is sewed up with sinew. The poke full of chunks of fat is hung in the sun until the fat is tried out into seal oil. Then the poke is stored, and after one year of aging it is considered ripe for consumption and a great delicacy among the Eskimos.

At Alatna in those days there were a lot of Indians as well as Eskimos, and the Indians acquired an appetite for the seal oil too. They said they could stand the cold weather much better if they had it. As one native told me, "When we have seal oil, fifty below feel just like ten below." But since Alatna was far from the coast, seal oil sometimes was in short supply.

I was there one winter when a big potlatch was planned. Many Eskimos came over the portage from the Kobuk, and several Alatna natives met them half way with dog teams to break trail for the Eskimos so they could get the seal oil sooner.

The potlatch started early in the afternoon. Great quantities of food were laid out, which included washtubs full of "Eskimo ice cream" made of bear fat, moose fat, seal oil and blueberries kept over by freezing. The fats were put into a washtub with seal oil and beaten to a desired thinness and fluffiness by adding more seal oil. When this fluffiness had been attained, the blueberries were added. Elderly women would sit around the tub with wooden paddles and beat away, and usually a number of children with smaller paddles were beating away, too. The children were always welcome, and never told to go elsewhere or that they were in the way.

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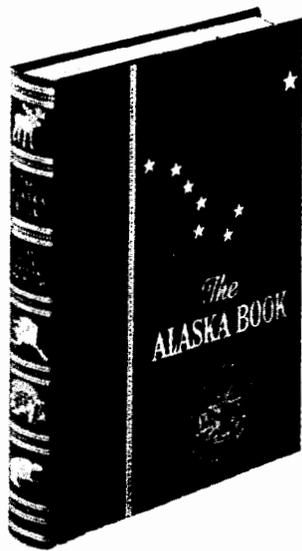
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Old Bettles, an historic settlement on the Koyukuk River. At the far end of the row of buildings along the river was Sam Dubin's trading post.

Also in the food line were big roasts and stews of caribou, moose and mountain sheep, along with bear and beaver and muskrat. Doughnuts were usually in evidence, and they were excellent. The native women used a mixture of bear fat and moose fat to cook them in. There also were large quantities of "bear bacon," cut in slabs just like our pig bacon, along with large receptacles of wild berries and smoked fish. I have attended many of these potlatches on the Yukon, the Koyukuk and the Kuskokwim. Most of the food was delicious, but I never got around to the seal oil or the Eskimo ice cream.

One time I was sure that Sam's trading post had Alaska's big ice pool won for me. He had a dozen alarm clocks lined up on a shelf, none of them running and each of them indicating a different time. I took down the times, and guessed at the a.m. or p.m. That spring I bought twelve tickets, one for each time on the clocks I didn't see how I could lose on that set-up, but I did. Anyway I got into the week the ice went out, and that's about as close as I ever came.

Two straight-laced missionary ladies were at Alatna. To them, the ice pool was gambling and gambling was the Devil's own work. I would always take out a

couple of tickets in their name, and after the tickets had been deposited beyond recovery, I would tell them their numbers. They would scold me mildly and then, I found out much later, would begin to worry about what they would do with the money if they won.

It was my habit when going to Alatna to take a couple of quarts of fresh milk and a pint of fresh cream to the missionary ladies. When they were relieved for a year's vacation, two younger and less experienced girls took their place, and I did the same thing for the newcomers.

An old native woman lived across the river from the mission. She was said to be in her nineties and really looked it. They called her Sitsu, which means "old woman." Sitsu never crossed the river when there was an aircraft in the vicinity. Whichever side she was caught on, there she stayed until it left. To her, they were "black devils." One day one of them came over and caught her in the middle of the river, and she burrowed in the snow until her relatives came out and got her.

One time when I came into the mission with milk and cream fresh from Bentley's Dairy, Sitsu was there. The girls thought it would be a wonderful



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treat to give her a taste of the cream. I tried to tell them it would be a waste of the cream, but the girls filled a water glass half full of the precious fluid and handed it to Sitsu. Not one to do things by halves when it came to free handouts, Sitsu took a great big mouthful. A look of absolute consternation spread over her wrinkled visage, and she exploded in one big blurb. Cream and saliva flew all over the place. Some of it went into the container and some into what was left in the glass. That pint of cream was shot in anyone's point of view, and that was the last time I brought any more milk or cream until the two old veterans returned from their vacation.

On one trip into Alatna by air I went up to the mission for lunch. The girls had the natives trained to leave as lunch or any meal approached, but one old Indian, who had never seen an airplane before, just sat and stared at me. Finally one of the girls told him nicely to go and come back after lunch. He got up, took one last long look at me, and said, "Must be just like God." He couldn't know how wrong he was!

Then there is always the trip where everything goes wrong. In November of 1932 I had spent several days at Wiseman where a few oldtimers were still taking a small amount of gold out of the ground. I took off with the Swallow biplane NC 422N in the evening for the return flight to Fairbanks, expecting an uneventful trip as the moon was full and the weather excellent. I had some hand mail to bring out, and also one old-timer had entrusted a fairly sizeable gold poke to me to take to the bank. This was a common thing in those days.

Well, I was enjoying the moonlight ride immensely when the motor quit. That brought me to life fast. I was on skis and it was about thirty below. Back a mile or two I had spotted a cabin on the bank of the Koyukuk, so I went for the river, squeezed over the trees, and landed on a very short bar in about two feet of snow. The bar was too small and I ran off it, across a channel, up a bank, onto another bar and stopped. For a parking place, I couldn't have one better with a tractor.

I got out, surveyed the situation, and decided to walk back to the cabin. I got there about eleven p.m., knocked on the door, and it was opened by an old friend of mine who was putting in the winter there. The man, whom I shall call Pete, was well along in years and had one bum leg. He was living pretty much on rabbits, and his only light was candle. But his cabin was a good one, freshly built, in a beautiful setting of spruce trees. It was small, about ten by twelve feet.

In one corner was a battered Yukon stove with several holes burned in the

top. These were covered by flattened-out tin cans that were not fastened down. Consequently when the stove was jarred a bit, the cans slid off the holes, and the draft made the wood burn too fast. So one was constantly adjusting the cans over the holes. Pete's bunk was across the back end of the cabin and he had only two blankets, but I had brought a couple with me from the plane. The next morning for breakfast we cleaned up all of Pete's grub—two hotcakes apiece and some bay beans. Since I had quite a bit of food in the plane, I went down and got it and gave it to Pete. Also got my sleeping bag and the poke of gold. Then I made arrangements with Pete to put a cord of dry wood at the airplane, paid him thirty dollars which he was glad to get, and started out for Wiseman which was ten miles away. I made it okay but I sure felt that lump of gold on my back. I tried all kinds of ways to pad it on the pack-board but it didn't help.

A day or so later a plane came into Wiseman and I caught it out to Fairbanks. I had missed the big Armistice Day party the American Legion threw on the eleventh, which was the reason for my moonlight attempt for Fairbanks. I got another motor and Herm Joslyn, one of Alaska's famed bush pilots and later a Pan American pilot, landed on

the bar for me right at the airplane. Ted Hoffman, a master mechanic, had volunteered to hang it in the ship, and Johnny Paul, a weather bureau man, came along to help. We pitched a tent over the engine, set up a new airtight heater, and moved into one end. By midnight Ted and John had the old engine removed. Then we all took to the sleeping bags on mattresses of spruce tips and slept well while the wolves howled all around us.

The boys got the motor hung the next day and by dark we moved the ship up to Pete's cabin. Pete had gone into Wiseman, so the boys set up the new stove which we had used in the tent while I walked back to the scene of the landing to pick up a few things we couldn't take in the ship. When I got back to the cabin I found a frenzy of cleaning activity underway. It seems that when the new stove was fired up, the cabin got heated like never before, bringing out some very unpleasant odors. The Coleman gas lantern threw a much better light on the situation than Pete's candle had, and disclosed the source of the odors. Rabbit entrails, heads and skins were found tromped into the spruce tip floor covering. Blood stains covered the table which the boys finally planed off with my sharpest ax after scrubbing wouldn't do the job. So with everything



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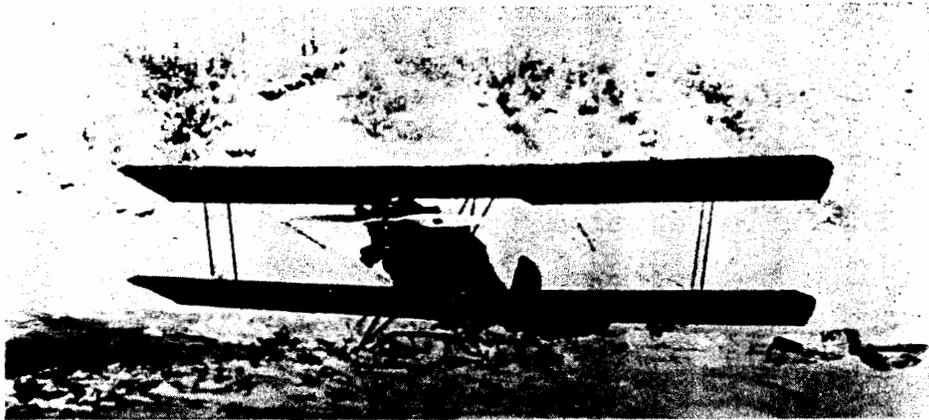
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Stuck for two weeks at Alatna where the thermometer hit 82 degrees below zero.

finally slicked up we had a good meal and slept very comfortably, as the airtight heater held a fire all night. It was the boys' first experience at roughing it in a trail cabin.

The next day we left the heater in the cabin for Pete and put our leftover grub in his cache. Then we flew up to Wiseman where we stayed at Martin Slisco's roadhouse. Martin decided to throw a dance for us. It was a simple matter which could be handled on very short notice in Wiseman in those days. It was only necessary to step out of doors and ring the roadhouse bell. Everyone would come running and the dance was underway in a matter of minutes. There were only two unmarried native girls, and they were very popular and never left the floor until the dance was over.

After the dance, Martin took the three of us back to his living quarters and served us a free lunch of delicacies. While we were eating we got to talking about mining and gold. Martin said, "I'll show you a gold nugget." He reached to the wall behind him and out from the moss chinking between the logs he plucked a nugget. It was very heavy and without impurities, worth more than \$700—and that value at the price of old gold. He handed it around so that each of us could inspect it, and then stuck it back in the same place between the logs. It came from Hammond River.

The next day a plane came in and Ted and John hitched a ride back to Fairbanks. I flew on down to Bettles and

Alatna, and then started off for Fairbanks again, expecting to go right through. But again it turned out otherwise.

At Jim River I went over a heavy layer of ground fog. The Yukon was socked in too, and there was a heavy overcast towards Fairbanks, so I decided to look for a hole. I found one at the mouth of the Dahl River where there was a cabin, and went down through. Then I decided to try for Stevens Village six miles up the river. I got over the village all right, but the fog was so thick I could not see to line up with anything so I went back to the Dahl and the cabin. The hole was closing in, but I got down okay, and ten minutes later there was nothing but solid fog.

Just as I got everything ship-shape in the cabin, a couple of native boys came in. One of them was Barney Grant who was murdered several years later. They had shot a lynx which they skinned out on the table, of all places, and then cooked lynx meat for their dinner. The next morning they cooked and ate their breakfast still with bloody hands from the night before. As for me, I wasn't hungry just then. In addition, I was covered with ten million lynx fleas. They chewed hell out of me for about six hours and were gone. The famous cooties of the A.E.F. never chewed me up any worse than those fleas. I would, however, prefer the fleas as they do not live long on a human host, while the cooties go on living and chewing forever.

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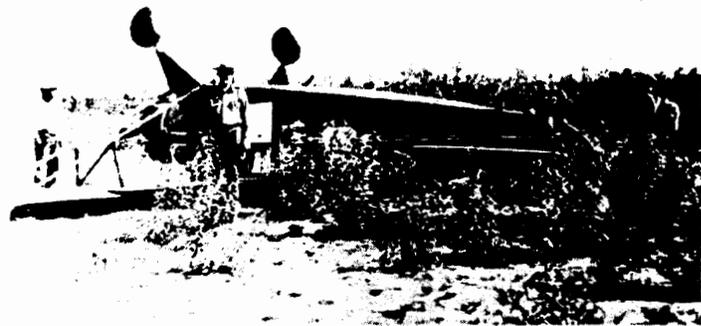
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I stubbed my toe on a sandbar at Kaltag.

The fog was as thick as ever the next day so I walked the six miles up to Stevens Village and stayed that night with the trader, Dave Drolette. Dave was glad to have company. He had a moose stew simmering on the stove that was a humdinger, and we feasted while I listened to Dave's stories of the early-day prospecting and trading. Dave was a very honest man and one of the real good fur traders on the Yukon. He told me that the large pike of the Yukon flats swallowed full-grown ducks and muskrats. At the time I may have doubted him a little on that one, but a few years later I verified it. I saw a full-grown muskrat taken out of the stomach of a pike that a native had caught in a net.

The wind blew the fog away the next day, and while Dave urged me to stay on, I was a bit restless and had things to attend to. So I walked back down to Dahl Creek, fired up the old Swallow, and finally made it back to Fairbanks. But when I told my wife about the fleas, I had to go through all the steps of a delousing campaign. Being a registered nurse, she would not accept my story that they had dropped dead as soon as they took a bite out of me.

Forced landings because of weather or mechanical failure were fairly common in those days, and I wish I could blame my first real crack-up on such problems. But alas, that was not the case. It was all traceable to cockpit trouble—lack of experience, and doing the right thing a split second too late, which made it the wrong thing to do then. It was on a beaver sealing trip down the Yukon in June of 1935. At that time I was flying a chartered Stinson Junior, 34 Model, four-place.

There was then on the Yukon an Episcopal bishop by the name of John Bentley. He traveled the rivers in a poling boat with an outboard motor, and was well known throughout Alaska and much beloved by all. As I made my way up and down the rivers, I would often see him chugging along, and would go down and buzz a "hello." This particular one morning, Bishop Bentley left Nulato for Kaltag with his boat. An hour

later I left Nulato, Kaltag-bound also, and soon spotted the good bishop on the river. I gave him a buzz and continued on my way.

Over Kaltag I took a hard look at the bar used for a landing field. It was not a good bar and there had been a few minor mishaps there in the past. But the weather was fine and the machinery up front clicking along, so with caution it looked okay.

Somehow, I stubbed my toe. The ship went over on its back in a rending crash and slid twice its length in a big cloud of dust. I crawled out unhurt physically, but my ego was shot. The villagers ganged around me, and when

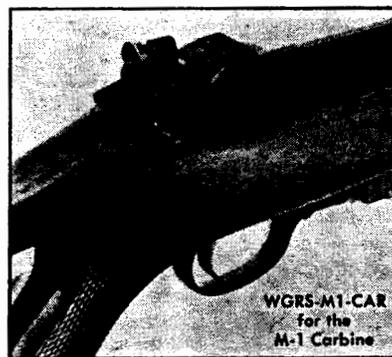
assured I was all right, happiness spread over their faces. One white trapper, who was by no means a sissy, said, "Sam, you scamp, you scared the daylights out of me. I'm sure glad you're not hurt!" Just then the bishop beached his boat on the bar and came running over to me.

"Well, well," he said after looking me over. "I have caught up with you at last!" Then we all had a good laugh. I got a scow and barge from Nulato, dismantled the aircraft and loaded it aboard, and then took it back to Nulato where it was placed on the upriver boat to Fairbanks and rebuilt. ▲

(More Next Month)



Bishop John Bentley and the author at Nenana.



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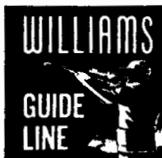
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