

Simeon Oliver (Nutchuk)

by Ethel Ross Oliver

"Dutch Harbor bombed!" shouted the newsboy on the corner outside the New York restaurant where Simeon Oliver had ordered dinner that June evening in 1942.

"That's my home!" he thought. Leaving the table, he bought a paper which confirmed his fears. He immediately recognized that fate, once again, had taken charge of his life and given it a macabre twist.

All during his lifetime when circumstances appeared to be stable for the foreseeable future, fate had stepped in and effected an immediate change. During his adult years it usually presaged a career change.

On July 23, 1902, in the village of Chignik on the Alaska Peninsula, a son was born to the Eskimo wife of James Oliver, Norwegian fisherman-trapper. He was a child of rare gifts and two names, Nutchuk (Eskimo) and Simeon Oliver (Christian).

Simeon was two when fate first took over. This occurred when his mother died giving birth to his sister Christine. Unable to care for two babies, James Oliver was forced to place them in orphanages. Christine was taken to the Baptist Mission on Woody Island. Simeon went to the Methodist Mission on Unalaska Island in the Aleutians.

Here he came under the care and influence of a remarkably gifted medical missionary from New England and his wife. Sixty or seventy other boys and girls lived in the Jesse Lee Home at that time and grew up under the loving discipline and Christian training of Dr. and Mrs. Newhall. "He was doctor, teacher, priest and father to all the children and half the people within a radius of hundreds of miles," Simeon later wrote.

By the time he was five, Simeon became aware of the effect music had on him. When a reed organ arrived at the mission, he quickly learned to play familiar tunes by ear. Shortly thereafter he served as chapel organist during services.

Every week Dr. Newhall posted a work list on which every boy and girl was assigned a chore. There were no servants at the home and to keep it neat and clean required work by all.

The island was rich in foodstuff for the tables. Berries abounded in the hills. The lakes, streams, and the sea were filled with fish. So work parties were organized for winter. Much joy, fun and happiness accompanied the collecting parties.

When Simeon was 10, he was taught to read music. This new ability opened up vast reaches of enjoyment to him. As the years went by, his chores on the work list changed, bringing added responsibility. Often he was detailed to help the doctor with his medical duties. So it was that he decided to become a doctor. He told Dr. Newhall of his decision. The doctor in turn pointed out some of the difficulties he would need to overcome to achieve his aim, among them earning money. Simeon was 14 then, young and strong.

He found work on fishing boats. Many of his most memorable experiences in the ensuing years occurred on the high seas and dangerous passes in pursuit of fish and adventure.



Courtesy Ethel R. Oliver
Simeon Oliver

In 1922 he received a letter from his father, to whom Dr. Newhall had written of Simeon's ambition to become a doctor. His father wrote that he and Dr. Newhall would jointly finance Simeon's studies at Northwestern University in Napierville, Illinois, provided Simeon earned the money to get there.

With that spur, Simeon sought better paying jobs, first at the whaling station at Akutan. When the Alaska Sulphur Mining Co. offered better pay, he went to work in the crater of the live volcano on Akun Island.

Hard work and perseverance paid off and that fall Simeon joined Dr. Newhall's son Chester, for his first trip Outside and enrolled in college in Illinois.

Untold experiences lay ahead, some good, some not. Most he could meet by relying on Dr. Newhall's early training. When certain aspects of Outside civilization proved too abrasive for his sensitive spirit, he would go back to Alaska for a time to be healed before returning Outside.

Now as he sat in the New York cafe he knew he was headed for Alaska again. This time it wasn't to save himself but to help save his precious homeland.

Note: During his career, Simeon Oliver was a musician, author, lettering artist and lecturer.

Ethel Ross Oliver, beloved Alaskan educator, is the author of Aleutian Boy (1959) and Journal of an Aleutian Year (1988).