



# The Alaskan Shepherd



Volume 45 Number 10

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*Some give by going to the Missions*

*Some go by giving to the Missions*

*Without both there are no Missions*

## CATHOLIC MISSIONS OF NORTHERN ALASKA: THAT FIRST CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT MASS

**Editor's Note:** *For the contents of this issue of The Alaskan Shepherd we are indebted to Father Louis L. Renner, S.J. That indebtedness is herewith gratefully acknowledged.*

—Patty Walter

Wrote Sister Mary Joseph Calasactius De Ruyter—one of the three pioneer Sisters of St. Ann to staff Holy Cross Mission on the lower Yukon River—in her book, *The Voice of Alaska*, concerning the first Christmas Midnight Mass celebrated at Holy Cross Mission, that of 1888:

“All is in readiness. Over our valley the stillness of night reigns. Only the stars keeping watch in their course illumine the hills, where, for the first time, Christmas Mid-night Mass will be offered up, and Christ will come to dwell in our tabernacle on the banks of the Yukon.

“The little log chapel is large enough only for the celebrant and the three kneeling Sisters. Father Tosi [Paschal Tosi, S.J., founder of the Catholic Missions

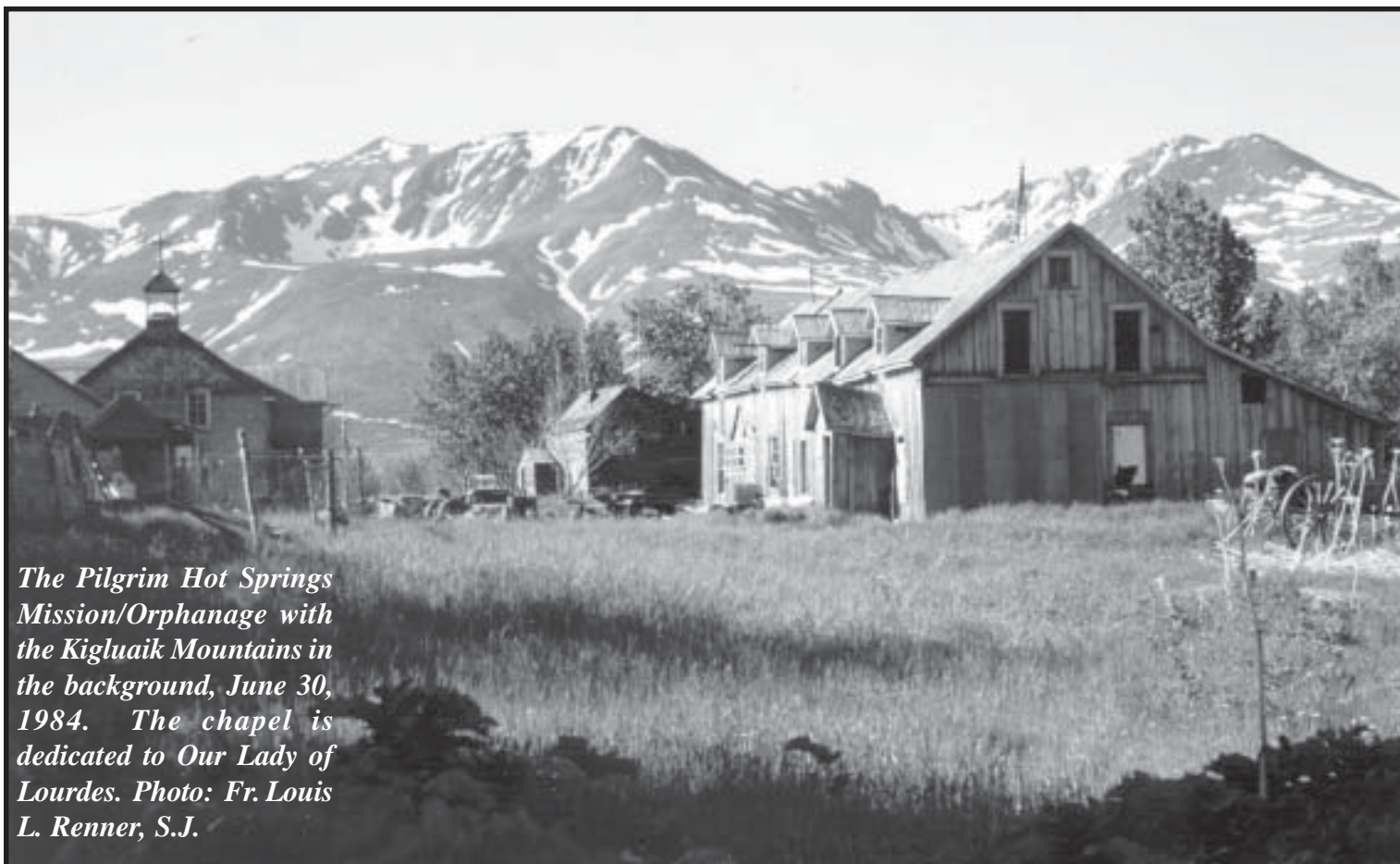


*A drawing of the first church at Holy Cross Mission. This log structure, built ca. 1890, was replaced by a frame building in 1906.*

*Illustration courtesy of Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J.*

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*The Pilgrim Hot Springs Mission/Orphanage with the Kigluaik Mountains in the background, June 30, 1984. The chapel is dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes. Photo: Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J.*

of Northern Alaska] richly vested, proceeds to the lovely altar. The whispered words of the Mass, the most beautiful prayer on earth, fill the expectant pine-scented air. ‘*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*’ Yes, we are very poor and insignificant to do so great a work as to help conquer Alaska for the Babe of Bethlehem. Yet, exquisite peace fills our souls.

“Our midnight possession of the Christ Child is not to be anything fleeting. After his thanksgiving, Father Tosi meets the Sisters to offer greetings and gifts. ‘I leave you a precious treasure,’ he says. ‘I leave you Christ in the Blessed Sacrament to dwell with you henceforth. See to it that He lacks nothing of your thought and service and love.’”

Wrote French-Canadian Father Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J., in the Pilgrim Hot Springs Mission/Orphanage diary under date of December 24-25, 1918, the year the Spanish influenza epidemic took a great number of lives in Nome and surrounding areas: “I go to the Igloo [Marys Igloo, a small Eskimo village near the Pilgrim Hot Springs Mission ca. 65 miles north of Nome] to give Extreme Unction to Sango. In the same time, I take some things necessary

for the Christmas crib and tree. In the afternoon, with the help of Mr. T. Gaffney and Mr. Carey, we build up a rack for our crib. That gives an air of festivity to our house. The Christmas hymns are rehearsed. The choir consists of a few orphans and survivors. May the Child Jesus bless them! At 11 p.m. the bell rings the réveil [wake-up call]. At 12 o’clock the confessions are heard. In our little corner of the world the Christmas hymns resound in the stillness of the night. The ‘Gloria’ of the Angels is repeated by the innocent lips of our children. The crib is lit with colored lights. Given the circumstances,



*Father Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J. -- “the Little Father of the Eskimos”--founder of the Pilgrim Hot Springs Mission/Orphanage and of Christ the King Mission on King Island. Photo: Father Bernard R. Hubbard, S.J./Courtesy of Jesuit Oregon Province Archives-948.05.*





*King Island, two and a half miles long, a mile and a half wide, rises abruptly out of the dark blue-green waters of the Bering Sea to a height of 1196 feet. It is located 92 miles northwest of Nome and 35 miles off the coast of the Seward Peninsula. The village of Ukivok hangs center front near the water. Photo: Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J.*

it is a beautiful Christmas. After the midnight service, Mr. Carey serves a delicious lunch to the little community. At about 2 a.m. all go to bed. At 8 a.m. all are on deck. At 9 a.m. the third Mass is celebrated, after which breakfast is served. In the afternoon we prepare the Christmas tree. Thanks to the generosity of Mr. Carey, I was enabled, whilst in Nome, to buy toys and candies for our little ones. What joy it is for them! God bless our benefactors! At 7 p.m. the Christmas hymns are sung again and the last prayers of the day said. And so passes the beautiful day of Christmas. What a pity that such days do not last forever."

Concerning the first Christmas on King Island, Father Bellarmine Lafortune, S.J., pioneer missionary to the Bering Strait Eskimos, wrote in his "History of the Mission of King Island" under date of



December 24-25, 1929: "At 7 p.m., after the ordinary instructions and rehearsals, we heard the confessions. All went home, but nobody slept a wink. With a baby Jesus left in Nome by the Sisters of Providence and an artificial Christmas tree and some tinsels and some colored candles we managed to put up a crib. Most of the King Islanders had never seen any such thing. It took them by storm. They seemed never to get tired to look at that child. They kneel devoutly before the crib and pray most earnestly causing a great consolation, and we have not the least doubt that Our Lord looks down on the simple faith of these people with the greatest complacency.

"At 12 o'clock, midnight Mass for the men followed by a second one for the women. A surprise was in store. After the gospel of the first Mass was heard the rattle of money in a collection box which the Native people had made on the sly. Men and women contributed \$34.85 and gave about 10 dollars worth in ivory and mittens etc.

"At 8 a.m. the third Mass with the little chapel packed to overflow.

"At 12 began the repast. The women very thoughtfully brought dishes enough for the little ones. With reindeer meat and the bread and rice and the candies and about 21/2 gallons of tea we filled them

*Christ the King Church on King Island as it appeared in 1938. Photo: By Father Bernard R. Hubbard, S.J., collection/Courtesy of Jesuit Oregon Province Archives-171.2.02.*

up to the neck. They had a good time and behaved irreproachably.

“I gave them a Christmas that they will never forget.”

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“On August 5, 1932, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Snows were founded by Father John P. Fox, S.J. One of those Sisters, still a Novice at the time, wrote an account—addressed to the benefactors of Little Flower of Jesus Mission, Hooper Bay, a Central Yup’ik Eskimo village on the Bering Sea coast in northwestern Alaska—of the Christmas 1932 festivities.

“The week before Christmas is a very busy time in most places, but I guess there was no place that had as much to do as in the Mission at Hooper Bay. Father Fox was pretty busy fixing up the walls in the people’s recreation room. When it was all finished, the whole room was painted. I wish you could come and see it now. The little Eskimos never saw walls painted so nice. After the recreation room was all finished, we painted the church. Father put roofing on the ceiling, because it leaked very badly during the soft weather we had some time ago.

“After all that was finished, we Sisters (or Novices) had a lot to do in the line of cleaning up. The whole church had to be scrubbed, besides the people’s recreation room. The floors were almost as black as coal. You see, these poor Eskimos have no floors in their igloos, only bare sand. They go out with all that sand on their feet, then it freezes, and when they come into the church, it melts and gets all over the floor. You bet, it was clean, when we were all through. Then, when that was finished, the crib had to be put up. Father Fox and two of the Novices did the job. That Little crib came all the way from Germany to this Mission of the Little Flower way up here in Alaska. It is a very pretty one. All the figures are there. The way Father fixed it all up it could not be any better. To speak about the decorations, too bad we can’t send you a picture of it all.



*Little Flower of Jesus parishioners pose in front of the building at Hooper Bay that at one time housed the Sisters and the church on the second floor and the priest and meeting rooms on the first floor. This photo was taken in the 1930’s. The church has since been replaced.*

*Alaskan Shepherd Archives.*

“The whole day of Christmas Eve was spent in putting up decorations, both inside and outside. I know the decoration in the inside, that is, the decorations these simple people must have prepared for the birth of the dear Infant Jesus in their hearts, were nothing compared to the natural ones we took so much care to make beautiful.

“I know you would like to know what kind of decorations we have here at Hooper Bay. Well, we used a lot of that crepe paper they use for making flowers. We made rings, twisted different colors together, made little lanterns, and other little things. Besides, that, we used some of those festoons some kind benefactor sent to us.

“Christmas Eve, four o’clock in the afternoon, there was a spiritual cleaning up for the people and children. All went to confession. Quite a few came for the Christmas celebrations, from Kashunak, Chevak, Ikfigmute, and Pimute.

“At the first sound of the bell for Midnight Mass, the church was soon packed full with people eager to bring their gifts to their newborn King. The first



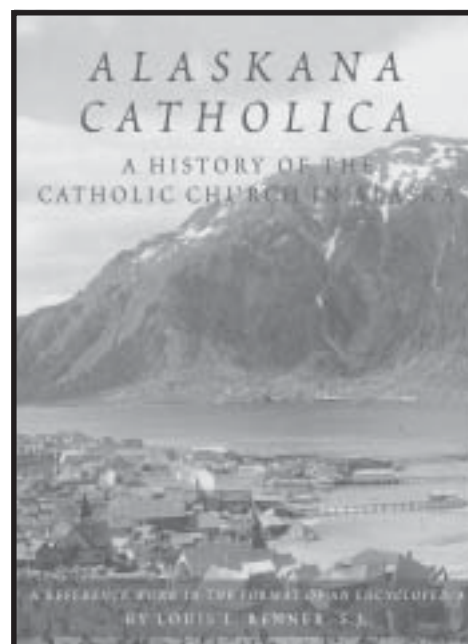
# ALASKANA CATHOLICA

*"Through years of dedicated research, writing, and documentation, Father Renner has created a succinct yet comprehensive guide detailing in total clarity and conciseness the history of the Catholic Church in Alaska. Within this historic documentation the reader can reference over 225 years of Catholicism in Alaska. Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., has accomplished in Alaskana Catholica a momentous feat—a magnum opus."*

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*"Father Renner is the foremost authority on Catholic history in Alaska, writing history at its purest, almost exclusively from archival sources."*

**Dr. Dorothy Jean Ray**  
**Historian and Anthropologist**



*"This fascinating volume offers an intimate picture of the activities of the Catholic Church's Alaska Mission, from its beginning in the nineteenth century to the present. It is a fact-filled account of people and places with a wonderful array of characters...Father Renner, with a historian's concern for the facts and a writer's eye for a good story, has produced a valuable work."*

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**Professor of History Emeritus, Marquette University**

*"One of the main intents of this volume," we read in the author's Preface, "is to keep alive for posterity the memory of many major Catholic Alaskan figures—clerical and lay, Native and non-Native, living and deceased—by the recording of their lives and deeds."*



*Alaskana Catholica* ("a unique Christmas gift, whether to give or to receive") is a reference work in the format of an encyclopedia. It offers its readers something more than mere bare-bones reference data and Who's Who-s. Moreover, some entries have a story about the given entry's subject attached to them. Some have a "tapestry" woven out of a series of quotations from the mission diary of the given place attached to them. These stories and tapestries give readers a kind of "you are there" experience, of being present at an event of the past or at a place remote to them.

Close to 400 images illustrate *Alaskana Catholica*.

Yes, please send \_\_\_\_\_ copy(ies) of *Alaskana Catholica*,  
written by **Father Louis L. Renner, S.J.**

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Dear Co-missionaries in Christ,

Once again, the year draws to a close, we look forward to that day on which we celebrate the birth of our Savior. My heart is filled with a deep gratitude to every one of you who have helped us fulfill the trust God has placed in us, that is , to be true shepherds to His flock of the Arctic.

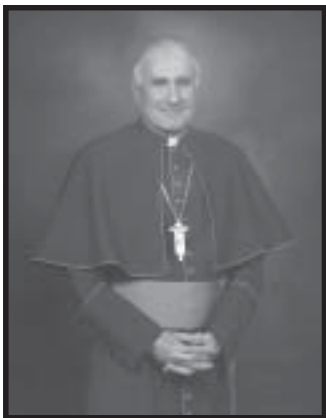
It has been, thank God, a good year and, thanks to Him and to you, our mission work has prospered.

I am pleased to announce to you that once again, now twelve years in a row, our Radio Mission, KNOM in Nome, the oldest USA Catholic radio station, received the prestigious Gabriel Award, its 15th!

We had cause to celebrate especially on June 1, 2007, the day I had the joy of ordaining to the priesthood Robert Fath. Father Robert currently serves as Associate Pastor for Sacred Heart Cathedral.

Good friends have retired and moved on—while we were blessed to welcome some new friends. Norbert Beans of St. Marys, Alaska, joined our staff to coordinate facility maintenance and upgrades for the Y-K region. Father Maciej Napieralski, one of our Polish priests, completed basic training for the United States Army early this spring and has now been assigned the position of Military Chaplain on Ft. Wainwright, Alaska. Gloria Slagle, Director of Religious Education at St. Raphael's Church in Fairbanks, retired after many years of faithful service to the Diocese and will be greatly missed. Father Roman Caly, a Polish priest, joined us on September 29. Father Caly has served the last 14 years in Russia. Deacon Al Wasuli and his wife Maggie moved to Anchorage for closer access to medical facilities. Deacon Wasuli served our diocese for 17 years out of Kotlik, Alaska.

In the year 2007, we bade goodbye to faithful servants of the Diocese of Fairbanks. Yup'ik Deacon Larry Charles passed away on April 18. Larry was 56 years old and married to his wife Albertina for 28 years. He served as a deacon for 23 years. Retired Yup'ik Deacon William Trader died on May 21. Deacon Trader was ordained April 23, 1976.



These are very short, cold, sometimes sub-zero days here in the North, but they are also days warmed and brightened by your prayers, love, and generosity. May God bless you. May He bless, too, all who are dear to you and look kindly on all your concerns. Be assured that we do daily remember you and them in our Masses and prayers—and are very grateful to be remembered in yours.

I pray that the New Year of Our Lord 2008 may bring you and all dear to you many special graces and blessings. And I extend to you, dear Co-missionaries, my personal best wishes—in Faith, Hope, and Love...

+ Donald J. Kettler

Donald J. Kettler  
Bishop of the Diocese of Fairbanks

Mass was a High Mass. Since the people don't know how to sing the Mass yet, the Novices sang the Mass of the Angels. The second Mass was a Mass of thanksgiving. Oh yes, the Little King of Bethlehem received a very nice gift, FIVE FIRST COMMUNICANTS. They were four old men and one old woman just lately received into the Church.

"I wish you could have heard the people sing the Christmas hymns in Inuit. The altar boys all know the Mass prayers very well for little boys that hardly know how to speak English. After Mass, good Father Fox gave everybody a stick of candy that some kind benefactor sent to brighten Christmas for these little Eskimos.

"The third Mass was celebrated on Christmas Day at nine o'clock. We had just a low Mass, but the church was crowded. Father gave a nice sermon on the birth of Christ and the many lessons we can draw from it. Too bad you were not here to hear it. After breakfast, Father and two Novices distributed flour and tea to people.

"It would not have been like Father Fox to let the day end without adding some more to the happiness of his people. So, the joyous Christmas of 1932 ended by Father giving the people, young and old, a scramble for peanuts in their recreation room. I am sure you would have enjoyed the fun of watching them scramble. Some held up their parkas to catch all the peanuts they could.

"Well, this is the way Christmas 1932 was celebrated here at Hooper Bay. May Our Blessed Mother Mary and her Divine Infant Jesus bless and shower all their best graces and blessings on all who helped in some way to make it possible to have this blessed and joyous Christmas, and to increase the joy and happiness of these little Eskimos so dear to the little King of Bethlehem!"

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During the years 1983-87, Father Louis L. Renner, S.J., had the pastoral care of Ruby, a onetime mining camp, now, for the most part, a Koyukon Athabaskan Indian village on the middle Yukon River. He left an account of his first Christmas at Ruby, which reads in part:

"As early as 11:08 p.m. on Christmas Eve, the first, of the many, announce their arrival in the church entry by stomping snow off their boots. At 11:30, I go out to ring the bell, a mere formality tonight, but it adds a festive note to village life. Inside, the people begin singing carols. Well before midnight, the little church is packed. I hear a few last-minute confessions in my quarters, then vest.

"It is midnight. I go unto the altar of God. I greet the people: 'May the grace and the peace of Christ, the Prince of Peace, Whose birthday we celebrate on this holy night, be with you all!' We pray, we sing, we hear readings about 'the kindness and love of God, Our Savior,' about angels and shepherds, about good news, peace and joy. Bread and wine are brought forward, offered up, made holy. Many go to Communion. I wish all a joyous Christmas, bless them, dismiss them. On foot and on snowmachines, they scurry off into the night.

"After Mass, I notice some gift-wrapped packages under the tree. I leave them there. I snack on fruitcake and tea, unwind, turn in. Sleep comes without an effort.

"On Christmas Day morning, we have Mass at 11:00. The crowd is small, yawns a lot. After Mass, we gather in my quarters for tea and cookies. When all have gone, I bring in the presents, open them, and am happy to get wool socks, a velour shirt, jarred salmon strips. As I lunch leisurely, my thoughts turn to parents, brothers, sisters in faraway places, to Christmases of other years.

"Katie Kangas has invited me to Christmas dinner. From experience I know that, when Katie invites, it pays to come prepared. No appetizer like a brisk, winter walk.

"It is now mid-afternoon, minus 7. The fog has lifted. Every spruce needle, every birch, willow twig is furred with frost. I move through a world of bluish crystal, as I climb the steep path leading to the cemetery on the bluff overlooking the village. After plowing my way among the graves and praying for the dead, I see down below a snowmachine trail leading out across the river. I go down and follow it.

"Gradually, I leave the village and its sounds behind. The trail parallels the far bank for a mile,



before heading up into the mouth of the Melozi River. The cold gets more intense. A lone raven in the crown of a spruce tree calls out into the frozen stillness. Isolated stars begin to pop through the pale-blue sky. Time I headed back.

“Later, in front Ivan and me and their three little girls, Katie spreads out a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. We bless and enjoy. Afterwards, I romp with the kids, help them play with their toys.

“I step out into the night air. It is laced with the smell of burning spruce and birch. No clouds, no moon, no northern lights. Myriads of stars spangling the black velvet sky above shine to their best advantage. It is now minus 21, but, all calorie-ed up as I am, the night feels almost balmy.

“This is a night made for cabin-hopping. Behind every door I knock on, I find an unusually warm welcome. Tea, fruitcake, cookies, candy are pressed upon me. Kids show me their gifts. I admire a doll here, a windup robot toy there. The night wears on. My visits become shorter. Finally, a last ‘Thank-you!’ and a last ‘Merry Christmas!’ I head home. Somewhat weary, but soul-satisfied, I enter the church, pray a brief spell, thank the good Lord for inventing Christmas. I turn off the furnace, slip into the sleeping bag, stretch, relax—soon wake up in dreamland.

“Next thing I know, it’s Monday, no longer early, 33 below. Frost ferns adorn the window panes. The outhouse door creaks, groans on its frosty hinges. I am scheduled to return to Fairbanks today. Will I make it? Small planes don’t fly, when it gets to be about 40 below. I get ready, just in case, snuggle down in my sleeping bag for some reading. Soon I hear the plane buzz the village. The pickup is already outside, honking.

“Two teachers and I board the Cessna 207. The pilot adjusts his headset, glances back to see that we are buckled in, turns the key. The engine coughs, catches. We begin to taxi. Full power, and in the dense, brittle-cold air, the 207 roars into the cloudless sky like a homesick angel.

“A vast, empty white world slips beneath us, as we drone across the 227 wilderness miles that separate Ruby from Fairbanks. At 1:09 in the afternoon, we taxi up to the hangar on the east ramp. Our pilot chops the power. The plane shudders momentarily, as the prop jerks to a stop. Silence, except for the clicks of rapidly cooling metal. Our pilot logs the flight on his clipboard. We unbuckle, stretch, climb out, and wait for our rides into town. My first Ruby Christmas is history.”



*St. Peter-in-Chains Church, Ruby, Alaska, as it appeared on Christmas Day, 1983. Christmas lights and frost adorn church and trees.*

*Photo: Fr. Louis L. Renner, S.J.*

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