

Alaskan Odyssey

Reflections on Life, Politics, and Finding God in the Far North



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Edited by R. J. Hartman

To the Men in My Life:

My Grandfather

My Uncle

My Father

My Brother

My Clifford, Richard and David

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Editorial Preface

In the spring of 1973 I was working furiously to complete and submit a Ph.D. thesis in physics at the University of California, Santa Barbara. One day in early May, my thesis advisor's secretary, Carol, who was typing my thesis, came rushing into my office to say that my father, calling from Alaska, was holding on her office phone.

My mother had been struggling with, and suffering horribly from, an aggressive form of breast cancer for over a year; although at the time I believed her condition to be relatively stable, I nonetheless feared the worst. Over the phone, my father explained that she had been hospitalized several days earlier and had passed away suddenly, without warning. Stunned and heartbroken, I made arrangements to catch an airplane home to Alaska as soon as possible. My 18-year old brother, David, less than a year out of high school, was at that moment on a visit to Mother's father, siblings and our many cousins in Nebraska; he too made emergency travel arrangements for the long flight home to Anchorage.

My family was not warm and cuddly. It could reasonably be characterized as "Midwestern-farm-style": interpersonally cool, reserved and distant; stoically self-reliant and uncommunicative in the face of adversity. But in the year before her death, my relationship with Mother had grown rich and warm in ways that surprised me. Over the course of that year I became her sounding board, health advisor, and unequivocal best friend. Her marriage had always been a source of emotional strain; my father was a difficult man to live with. He was the archetype of the strong, silently self-confident man of the frontier, but was seriously deficient when communicating feelings or working through emotional family issues, characteristics he passed along to me (his first-born) and, to a lesser extent, to my younger brother. Mother could confide in me in ways she could not, or would not, with other friends or family members.

I was aware that Mother had been working diligently on various writing projects during the three years preceding her passing, including a book-length, partially-autobiographical memoir spanning the period from our family's life-upending move to Alaska in 1948 until her death. I had, in fact, done some editing for her on a very early draft. She had been mentored and encouraged in this enterprise by a supportive East Coast-based DoubleDay editor named Mary, a long-distance soul mate with whom she formed a deep personal connection. Mom became acquainted with Mary through a correspondence-mediated introduction by Mary's husband, who had met socially with my parents during a series of international seminars sponsored by the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Following Mom's death, while going through her mostly unfinished papers and writings, I came across her unfinished manuscript: an imposing document of some 500+ typed, double-spaced pages, awkwardly bound with an office-style comb plastic binding common to that era. It was in a chaotic state, dog-eared, with editorial corrections hand-written in the margins and between lines of text. The thought crossed my mind that I should try to get it cleaned up and reprinted for the enjoyment of friends and family, as a tribute to Mom and as a legacy to her budding, cruelly truncated efforts as an author. It was an imposing project, but I felt obligated to try so I hauled the ragged volume back to California with me as I returned to attend to my own busy life, work and relationships.

As my life progressed over the intervening years (nearly 45 of them now), that manuscript lay atop one desktop after another, mostly gathering dust but occasionally getting a longing look and a brief manhandling as I would ponder ways to edit and resurrect it. When office computers, printers and scanners became widely available in the early 1990s, I made a couple of efforts, once in the late 1990s and again in the early 2000s, to try and scan a single faded, wrinkled chapter from the volume and run it through OCR software (optical character recognition, to convert the scanned image into a character-based digital format for editing). Both efforts were disastrous. The ratty pages jammed the office scanners available to me, and when I did successfully get a decent page image, the OCR transcription errors were simply overwhelming. It

was clear the project was doomed, short of having the entire manuscript re-typed from scratch, by a human being, into a word processor. Procrastination is my coping mechanism of choice; I do it because it mostly works for me, simplifying my life and insulating me from the chaos just outside my doors. In this instance, as in most others, procrastination proved to be an optimal strategy, at least from a mechanistic point of view.

One Sunday in December of 2016, during a weekly phone call with my brother (who still lives in Alaska), he mentioned that while cleaning out a storage area in his home he had come across a boxed copy of Mother's manuscript that looked "pristine." It seems that a small group of "Transcription Angels," helpfully identified by name in a somewhat mysterious undated, unsigned note accompanying the boxed ream of freshly-typed pages, had re-typed Mother's entire manuscript, probably using a heavily edited copy of the same ratty, early manuscript that had been sitting on my desk for nearly 45 years. Though undated, the typing of this "final" manuscript was most likely completed in 1973 (probably around the time of Mother's passing on May 7). The upside of my procrastination: We now had an unsullied copy, complete with all the contemporary editorial corrections made by my mother, instead of the ragged and incomplete manuscript I had been toying with on and off for decades.

I had my brother scan the first chapter of this new manuscript on his commercial office scanner and email me the scanned pages. A modern OCR software program digested the test chapter with only a handful of errors. Technology had reached the point where it was now practical to scan the entire manuscript, do the OCR conversion, and produce an editable digital manuscript for cleanup and possible friends and family publication.

Editorial Considerations and Historical Comments

The totality of Mother's creative writing experience spanned less than three years, between 1970-1973. The events and vignettes she chronicled occurred during the period from 1947 to 1973, approximately bracketing the birth years of the "baby boom" generation. Few will have much first-hand recollection from the

early years of this period, and even long-time Alaskans still alive today will likely have only second-hand knowledge, mostly from parents and parents of friends. Despite a possibly limited audience, Mother's recollections and notes are old enough to have some historical interest, so nothing from her manuscript has been omitted. Some chapters may only be of passing interest to younger readers, particularly chapters covering the Alaskan political scene in the mid-late 1960s and early 1970s, although many Alaskans will probably enjoy her insights into Wally Hickel, one of the state's favorite sons.

Mother had less than a year of college education, and until the last three years of her life no formal writing practice or experience whatever. Her style was "early-work-in-progress;" her unedited writing poured, mostly without stylistic concern, from the heart of a Nebraska farm girl, already pregnant with her first child at age 20, whose busy, complex and often tragic life experiences provided no opportunity to develop writing skills until her 45th year. As her warm-hearted mentor Mary confided to me in a letter following Mom's passing: "Your mother obviously had much writing talent -- she just needed the years to develop it."

The circumstance of Mother's under-developed literary art form presented me, as de facto editor-in-chief, with a uniquely personal dilemma: Should I simply tidy up typos, misspellings, punctuation, etc., from her manuscript, or should I, given my own questionable and untested editorial skills, attempt to modernize and massage the prose to make her story more readable? Readability, after all, is in the eye of the beholder. Put another way, do my notions of literary fluidity justify interfering with Mother's writing?

In the end, I resolved this all-or-nothing editorial conflict by straddling a middle ground: re-working the more egregious grammatical and syntactical elements, while strictly maintaining her story line and meaning. There was a temptation to overhaul the entire manuscript in order to present it in a single, coherent voice, but I resisted doing so. The result, unsurprisingly, is sometimes a choppy read, but I do hope at least to have done no harm, while hewing to the purity and accuracy of her storytelling.

A modest (but certainly not comprehensive) level of effort has been made to fact-check items of historic interest, mostly historic

dates and the like. Some of this was challenging: One of the more extended fact-checking exercises involved her claim to have seen, from the deck of an Alaskan Marine Highway ferry, a “meteor” in the night sky that was visible over at least two consecutive nights. Since meteors are transient, with durations of at most a second or two, I investigated the accuracy of the claim. Her report of the object’s appearance suggested it might have been a comet, so I researched comets visible from Alaska during the time of her ferry journey; that investigation turned up nothing. I ultimately realized that she had instead most likely witnessed the Perseid meteor showers of 1969, which were visible from her latitude and indeed were on display during her nights on the ferry; I therefore adjusted her description accordingly.

Regarding all historical material presented as “current”: It must be kept in mind that the manuscript was completed in 1972. In lieu of footnotes or endnotes, I have placed square-bracketed [] editorial comments and corrections in a few places to avoid confusion and to add context. The renaming of Mt. McKinley to Mt. Denali in 1980 is one example. But for the most part, it must simply be kept in mind that all facts, statistics, prices, etc. relate to the era of the early 1970s.

Mother had access to an impressive personal library of early Alaskan chronicles, biographies and other sources for her historical musings. Mostly, these are not of sufficient general interest to yet be represented in the Google Books scanning project, although Wikipedia is a surprisingly comprehensive source for many obscure historic items. In the end, my fact-checking efforts produced no changes of any consequence; Mother did her historical homework astonishingly well, no small accomplishment in the pre-Internet, pre-Wikipedia era.

The newly discovered boxed version of her manuscript is missing crucial accoutrements, including a Title Page, Preface, Acknowledgements, etc. I have therefore taken the liberty to create a Title Page I believe Mother would have endorsed were she able.

My early comb-bound, dog-eared copy of her manuscript included an Author’s Preface with some acknowledgements; it is included here unedited except for one correction: Her preface was written at a time when her “last chapter” was “Death Came to Call.” That chapter later became the penultimate chapter of the

final, boxed manuscript. My best guess regarding this change: As her own end drew near, she chose to finish her opus on a more cheerful note by anointing as her final chapter the upbeat “Hand in Hand on the Threshold of a Dream.”

Many of the people mentioned in Mother’s acknowledgement, and in the undated and unattributed note accompanying the recently discovered manuscript, have passed away. I was able to find and contact five individuals; they provided, along with considerable background information, insight into the typists identified in the note and into the note’s provenance: Darlene Appel, MaryJo Comins, Esther Cox, Nancy Hood, and Trudy (Thorsness) Lund.

A few personal acknowledgements: my brother, David, and his wife, Linda, for providing a complete digital scan of the manuscript and for conscientious fact-checking; Ann Sanders, my best friend for over 45 years, who offered much-needed artistic input and enthusiastically undertook the thankless task of proofreading an early draft; MaryJo Comins, who helped my mother during the original writing, for coming again to my aid with a thorough reading of a pre-production proof, correcting an embarrassing number of typos; Doug and Don Keil for helping with the difficult chapter describing Doug’s 1968 accident.

The author of the mysterious note was ultimately revealed through dogged online sleuthing by Trudy Lund, and by the kind and generous efforts of Sara Piasecki, Archivist at the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center (anchagemuseum.org). In her archives, Sara was able to find a 1940’s-era postcard written by Frances Ray, and forwarded a scan of the postcard to me for amateur forensic handwriting analysis. This led me to conclude that Frances Ray (now deceased), who is mentioned in the note as one of the typists, also penned the note. An unsolicited observation: The Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center is an incredible resource that deserves the generous support of all Alaskans.

About the Photos and Chapter Timeline

I have included a handful of personal and family photos. Mother would have vetoed the photos of her I have included, but I like

them and I am the editor. This book is primarily for the benefit of friends and family, who will also appreciate them. Besides, she was as lovely as she was loving, and I want anyone who happens upon this book to know that.

A “Chapter Timeline” can be found near the end of the book to help identify the (sometimes approximate) epoch of each Chapter’s events.

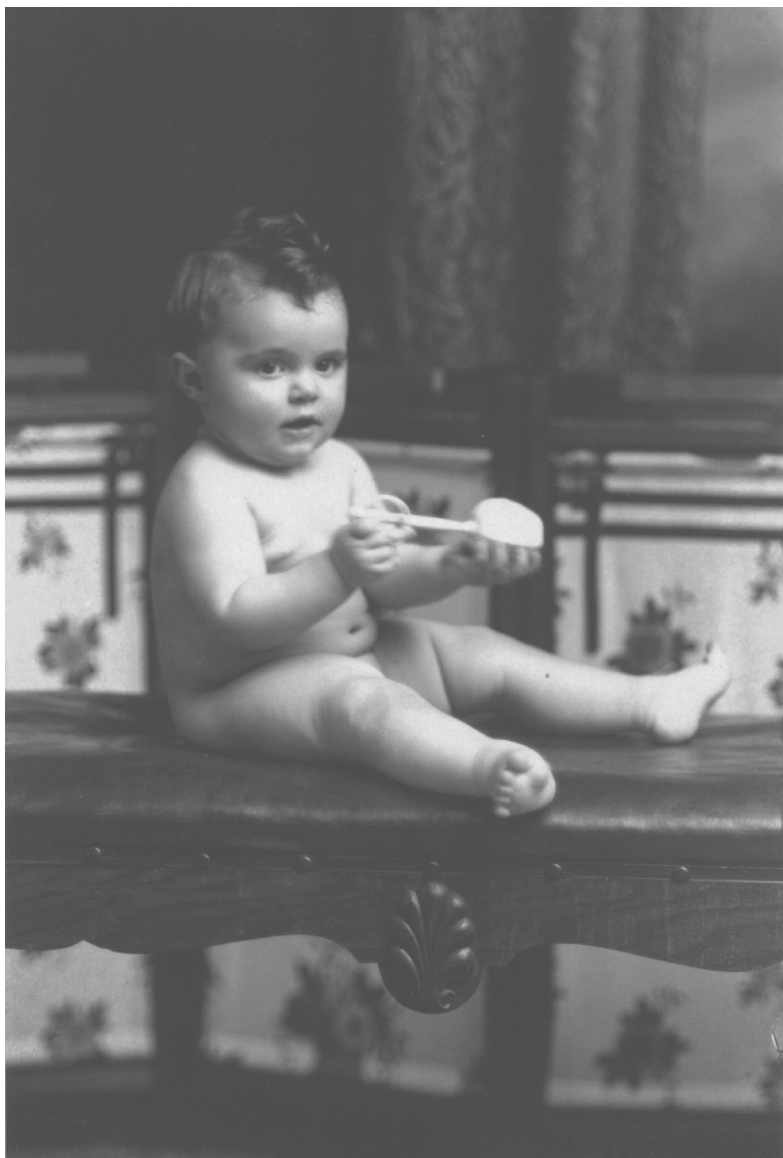
R.J. Hartman

April 2017

This is all of Lane's book, as revised,
except Chapter 3(2), which was
typed earlier, and the last four,
which I believe Lane typed.

Frances Ray, Trudie Thoroness,
Bea Mc Donald, Darlene Appel,
Nancy Hood, and Sparky Bumfelt
helped with typing.

Unattributed note accompanying the long-lost boxed manuscript,
believed to have been penned by Frances Ray, ca. 1973.



Author, ca. 1925



Author, ca. 1942



Author, ca. 1959



Author and Editor, Late 1972

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