

# The Assistant Pastor

May 1939

## Lutheranism in Alaska\*

SECOND PERIOD

It is strange but true that, when for a cash consideration the Russian Bear released Alaska to our benign Uncle Sam, the first period of Lutheranism in Alaska closed.

Reindeer, a United States Senator, a young Presbyterian minister, and a Milwaukee apple-boy were links in the chain of circumstances that led to the beginning of the second period.

The apple-boy left the streets of Milwaukee about 1860 to accept a position in a general store at La Crescent, just across the river from La Crosse, Wisconsin. There he met and gained the friendship of a young pastor, Sheldon Jackson. On the 12th of August, 1884, the Rev. Sheldon Jackson was placed in charge of the Presbyterian mission and school at Sitka, Alaska. Not many years later he was made United States General Agent of Education in Alaska. On his first official visit to arctic Alaska, he became interested in the introduction of reindeer into Northern Alaska as an added means of sustenance for the Eskimo. Ably assisted in Congress by Senator Henry M. Teller, this enterprise was successfully launched on the morning of July 4, 1892, when fifty-three head of Siberian reindeer were landed on the shore of Port Clarence Bay, near the present village of Teller and on the present site of the Lutheran mission-station.

Siberian deer-men were brought with the deer

to serve as teachers in the care and handling of the semidomesticated animals. Dr. Jackson soon discovered, however, that the Siberians did not exert a desirable influence on the Eskimos whom he hoped to civilize. Therefore he started a quest for Christians who were trained in the handling of reindeer. The Laplanders of Norway were suggested to him, and from there his memory had but a short step to his Norwegian friend of the store at La Crescent, who had since held a chair as professor at the University of Wisconsin and was now Ambassador to Denmark. Correspondence with Ambassador Rasmus B. Anderson (that was the apple-boy's name) led to prompt action. A Mr. Kjelman was dispatched to Norway by the Washington authorities to secure Christian Laps to go to Alaska. Sixteen men and women were found who were willing to go on the conditions offered, provided a Norwegian Lutheran minister would be sent with them. Through the proper Government channels, a request came to President H. A. Preus of the Norwegian Synod to name a fit man for the spiritual care of the Laps in question.

The result of these negotiations was that the Rev. T. L. Brevig was properly called, and accepted the call, to serve the imported Laps as pastor. He served in this capacity from July 1, 1894, to June 30, 1898. Meanwhile he had a free hand to do whatever he could, when opportunity offered, to make known the Savior of the world to the Eskimos with whom he came in contact.

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## The Assistant Pastor

Published and edited by the pastor of the Jerico and Saude Lutheran churches, affiliated with the Norwegian Synod of the Synodical Conference.

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## Church Directory

H. A. Tjernagel, Pastor

### SAUDE CONGREGATION

Trustees: Chris Treider, Ned Borlaug, E. Firkingstad.  
Treasurer: Nels Ellingson.  
Secretary: G. G. Vaala.  
Cemetery Committee: Olis Borlaug, Juel Natvig, Miss Carrie Natvig, Mrs. J. Natvig, Mrs. Otto Hanson.  
Ladies' Aid: Mrs. Otto Hanson, president; Mrs. Carl Miller, secretary; Mrs. Oscar Natvig, treasurer.

### JERICO CONGREGATION

Trustees: C. Cutsforth, Ole C. Johnson, Olaf Roberson.  
Secretary: A. N. Anderson.  
Treasurer: J. A. Robinson.  
Cemetery Committee: Mrs. Fred Amman, Mrs. L. A. Robinson, Mrs. S. T. Roberson.  
Ladies' Aid: Mrs. M. A. Robinson, president; Mrs. Lloyd Roberson, secretary; Mrs. Harvey Roberson, treasurer.

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## Standing Services

### JERICO

First Sunday, Norwegian, October-May, 10:30 a. m.  
Third Sunday, English, October-May, 10:30 a. m.  
Saturday school every Saturday, 10:00 a. m.  
Confirmation class, Fridays, 2:00 p. m.

### SAUDE

Second Sunday, bilingual service, October-May, 10:45 a. m.  
Fourth Sunday, English, October-May, 10:45 a. m.  
Saturday school, 2:00 p. m.  
Confirmation class, Fridays, 9:30 a. m.  
Fifth Sunday by special announcement.

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During the winter of 1897-1898, the Government's reindeer headquarters were moved from Teller to Unalaklik as a more convenient location for the distribution of freight and mail. A few of the Laps moved to the new location; some returned to their native land; others joined in the search for gold. Ludvig Larson, the youngest of the Laps, married an Eskimo woman and settled down at Teller. He became very useful to the mission as an interpreter. Dr. Jackson now urged Rev. Brevig to start regular mission-work among the Eskimos and offered him free use of the deserted Government buildings at Teller.

Rev. T. L. Brevig and family "went out"—returned to the States in the summer of 1898 and at once threw themselves into an intensive campaign, urging the Norwegian Synod to establish an Eskimo mission with headquarters in the Government buildings. Rev. Brevig lectured in a great many of his synod's congregations. Even his little girls served in the campaign by appearing in their beautiful fur clothing and by singing. He hoped to arouse sufficient interest to get the work started the very next summer. In this he failed, but he did not give up. He continued pleading the cause of the Arctic natives in public lectures and in private conversation. He loved the Eskimos. He knew their plight at first hand and could not cease insisting that the Gospel of Jesus Christ be brought to them. His zeal finally broke down what, I fear, we must call apathy and found response. His synod in 1899 decided to begin the work he had so zealously promoted, and he was called to serve as the missionary in the territory about Port Clarence Bay. This location is about one hundred miles north of Nome and some fifty miles from Cape Prince of Wales.

On May 29, 1900 the *S. S. Goronne* weighed anchor in the port of Seattle and headed for the icy fringe about the top of the world. Aboard were Rev. T. L. Brevig, his young wife, Julia, nee Johnson, and their two daughters, Dagny and Leonora.

They had a tentative plan of work outlined. We quote: "The plan is to begin a Christian day-school and gather as many children as possible. . . . We will also, when opportu-

nity is afforded, accept children and keep them under the care of the mission until they are grown up. . . . We also plan to try to bring the Bread of Life to prospectors. . . . In so far as our means will permit, we hope to be so equipped that we can receive and care for prospectors who are in need, especially those of our own faith." In the article from which the above is culled, Rev. Brevig also wrote that a herd of reindeer was promised the mission according to the following plan: One hundred reindeer to be loaned to the mission for five years with the agreement that at the expiration of that period one hundred deer be returned to the Government, while the total increase was to be the property of the mission. The mission, furthermore, must keep at least three Eskimos at the station who should learn to care for, and handle, reindeer. These should receive two or three female deer a year as compensation for their work if after a probation period of three years they had proved themselves trustworthy and competent. When they had thus served a five-year apprenticeship, the Government would loan each of them fifty reindeer on the same condition as it made its loan to the mission. In this way the reindeer were to be distributed among the most promising native young men. "This is," he said in closing the article, "in broad lines the work we expect to undertake. The details cannot be decided upon before we arrive in the field; one must be guided by circumstances and conditions."

*Conditions!* Upon arrival at their destination they found that the Government buildings which were to be their home had been misused, if not despoiled, during the two preceding years by roving prospectors. And they had planned that those very buildings should be a haven for sick and needy prospectors! This is mentioned first because it was one of the least appalling conditions met with at the end of their journey. While our missionaries with buoyant spirits were on the way with the message of grace and life, a messenger of death, an epidemic of measles, carried by a whaling-vessel from the coast of Siberia, was raging among the natives of Port Clarence Bay. When the Brevigs landed, some had died, others were dying, and many, many were sick. There was no time to get things in order at the sadly mutilated buildings before going to work. There was no time nor need of deliberating as to what to do. Three children were found in a tent sitting about the body of their dead mother. The mother had been dead four days. An infant was found trying to nurse its dead mother. Was there a choice as to what they must do? A dying man shot the Shaman, witch doctor, in the hope that it might appease the angry gods. Another shot himself when his wife died, thus leaving two children orphaned. A boy, the survivor of a family of nine, was found, and another the only one left of a family of five. The natives were panic-stricken. Sometimes they left their dead and dying on the beach or in tents and fled. "In the immediate vicinity of the station," wrote Brevig, "I have buried twenty-two. For a while we prepared food for thirty-two out of our own personal provisions and brought it to them in their tents. Some were able to prepare their own food when brought to them."

If a messenger out of the North had met the Brevigs while *en route* with the news of what was in store for them at the end of their journey, would they have pleaded with their ship's captain to land them at the first possible port that they might return to the States? Their subsequent life and work among the Eskimos answers firmly: "No, no, no! Full steam ahead!" And Mrs. Brevig would, perhaps, have been the first to speak. The name Mrs. T. L. Brevig belongs among the great names of mission history. If in the household of God he is great who serves, then indeed was Mrs. Brevig great.

Thus was the tragic beginning of the second period of Lutheranism in Alaska. Yet was it perhaps, after all, propitious? The epidemic in its furious onslaught was soon spent, leaving an estimated fifty per cent. of the natives alive. Many had received much needed physical ministrations from the missionaries, and the missionaries, in turn, had gained the confidence of the natives. The ground was prepared for the sowing of the "good seed." As soon as things had returned somewhat to normalcy, the natives came, not only from the immediate vicinity but from Ageeopak,<sup>1</sup> Mary's Igloo, Cape Wooley, King's Island, distant Shismareff, and other places, to hear what the "Apaurook" at Port Clarence had to tell them. The orphanage was in operation from the very first day of their landing and on. The Christian day-school was opened without undue delay, and it was not many months till two prospectors, one who could walk a few steps between rests, while the other could move only on all fours, found the station a haven and were nursed back to vigor by the overworked but always cheerful Mrs. Brevig. Thus in a trice the entire tentative program of work was in full swing. This program, we



remember, also included the work connected with the reindeer herd.

Two years later, in the fall of 1902, we have this testimonial to the work of the Brevigs from the venerable Dr. Jackson: "Their readiness to sacrifice and their unwearied labors of love for the orphaned Eskimo children and the decrepit natives of their vicinity have wholly won my heart."

However, there is a limit to physical endurance. No one will wonder that Mrs. Brevig reached that limit after three years of zealous application to extremely trying tasks under all but impossible circumstances. She could no longer stand up under the severe demands of her numerous duties as a mother and as matron of the orphanage. On July 23, 1903, she returned to the States, while Rev. Brevig remained at his post through sheer force of necessity, though he, too, sorely needed rest.

The authorities having charge of the mission immediately set to work to find two women to replace Mrs. Brevig. Mrs. Karen Weeks of Portland, Washington, and Miss Helen Naes of Stanwood, Washington, were secured. They arrived at the mission-station in the early fall of 1903 and found Rev. Brevig on the very verge of a complete breakdown. They insisted that he must without delay make arrangements for passage to the States to join his family at Stanwood, Washington. He obeyed. Mr. A. Hovik, an available Lutheran layman, was placed in charge of the reindeer herd and other work that required the attention of a man.

The following spring, 1904, Rev. Brevig returned for a short stay during the summer. With him was Ludvig Larson of Parkland, Washington, who was to succeed Mr. Hovik in temporary charge of the reindeer. Rev. Brevig went out in September, hoping and fully expecting that a mission-minded pastor and wife in full physical vigor would be found and called to take over the work the following year.

The Lord of the Church wanted it otherwise, and the chronicles of 1905 must record the return of the Brevigs. They left Seattle aboard the *S. S. Ohio* on July 8 and arrived at their destination on the 23d. They were happy in the certain knowledge that Miss Jorgine Enestvedt would follow at a later sailing as teacher of the school and helper to Mrs. Brevig. Miss Enestvedt was well and favorably known throughout the synod for her efficient work at the orphanage near Stoughton, Wisconsin. The return of the Brevigs and the coming of Miss Enestvedt gave new life to the mission. During Christmas week of that year ninety natives were baptized and seventy-three communed. Rev. Brevig had not planned to administer Baptism until towards spring. However, upon their urgent requests, believing that their faith in the Triune God was a childlike faith and their desire for Baptism the expression of a sincere longing for a closer communion with their newly found Savior, he granted their desire.

In a letter dated June 6, 1906, Miss Enestvedt assured the readers of the *Pacific Herald*: "I am thriving here; it is true joy to be with the children in school and out of school. . . . These children are naturally at a disadvantage in not knowing the English language well; but they compensate for that lack by being kind, faithful, and ambitious to learn. They have such confidence in us that we cannot but love every one of them."

Miss Enestvedt remained to work the works of unselfish love among the Eskimos, with relatively short interruptions, for many years. Her name cannot be overlooked in any true history of mission-work in Northern Alaska. She is loved and blessed by many Eskimos who are still living. We believe with a firm assurance, based on years of close association with her and daily observation of her work, that many sainted Eskimos received her "into everlasting habitations" (Luke 16:9) when she died on July 18, 1937.

The rapid progress of the Lutheran mission was noted by the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church at Nome, and steps were taken to stop it, especially at Mary's Igloo, sixty miles from the home station at Teller. Though not many were enticed away by presents or other means from the green pastures of divine truth, to which their faithful shepherd had led them, it caused him added anxiety and work.

And now this must be told: Mrs. T. L. Brevig died on the 10th day of March, 1908. We quote from a letter written by Rev. Brevig, dated March 14: "On behalf of my deceased wife I herewith bring the friends of the Alaska Mission her last farewell. She rests, with her two departed children and her unborn child, among the people for whom she has done her life-work and near the mission of which she was the actual founder. From her twenty-first to her thirty-fifth year she

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worked here. Is it the will of God that her influence in the interests of this mission shall now be ended, or will her cold, still lips speak from the grave in the cause that was so dear to her? In life she spoke often. Her most glorious memorial is this mission and orphanage in which she was the life."

The Rev. and Mrs. D. W. Tornoe of Tacoma arrived at the station in July to relieve the bereaved Rev. Brevig. The first winter, Mr. T. C. Saetra, chairman of the Alaska Committee, informed the readers of *Kirketidende* that "Mrs. Tornoe is sick and must keep to her bed a great deal of the time. Rev. Tornoe is not well either. This makes it imperative that they return and that some one be found to take over the mission-work. 'Who will go?'" To his question he added the encouraging and informative statistics that Rev. Brevig had baptized thirty Eskimos before 1905; in 1905, ninety-one; in 1906, one hundred thirty-four; in 1907, fourteen; in 1908, twenty-six; a total of two hundred ninety-five Eskimos that must have spiritual care.

On August 9, 1910, the steamers *Ohio* and *Victoria* met on the Bering Sea within plain sight of each other. The *Ohio* was south-bound with Rev. and Mrs. Tornoe aboard. The *Victoria*, carrying Rev. and Mrs. H. M. Tjernagel, two small children, and an infant in arms, was headed north. The Tjernagels worked uninterruptedly for three years at the Teller mission. Under the combined efforts of Mrs. Tjernagel and Miss Enestvedt the orphanage functioned smoothly and was an oasis of peace, happiness, and cheerfulness under the dark, sunless dome of the arctic winter to all who called it home. It was also a cheerful place of refuge to white and native wayfarers. In school the four R's were expertly administered by Miss Enestvedt and gradually absorbed by the dusky pupils and also by one white hopeful. Meanwhile the missionary was busy teaching and preaching the Word of Life to the natives in the immediate vicinity and at more distant places, such as Ageepak, Mary's Igloo, Council and Shismareff. He traveled thousands of miles by dog team over the arctic desert of snow and ice.

The following entry copied from the records of the missionary will give evidence that the government plan regarding the distribution of reindeer was realized: "Reindeer sold September 6, 1911:

|            |    |                               |          |
|------------|----|-------------------------------|----------|
| "Elikshak: | 1, | 143 lbs., at 20 cts. a lb.,   | \$ 28.60 |
| Mission:   | 9, | 1,283 lbs., at 20 cts. a lb., | 256.60   |
| Willoie:   | 1, | 149 lbs., at 20 cts. a lb.,   | 29.80    |
| Eyiaht:    | 1, | 123 lbs., at 20 cts. a lb.,   | 24.60    |
| Anakartuk: | 3, | 325 lbs., at 20 cts. a lb.,   | 65.00    |
| Eκλοahron: | 1, | 154 lbs., at 20 cts. a lb.,   | 30.80"   |

It was the general understanding among those who had charge of mission-work in the Far North in those early days that it was not well that a worker remain on duty for more than three consecutive years. Plans had been made for a certain robust young couple to relieve Rev. and Mrs. Tjernagel at the end of their three-year period. The plan failed. Rev. Brevig again stepped into the breach, together with his daughter Dagny.

Rev. and Mrs. Tjernagel and children and Miss Enestvedt embarked on their return to the States on July 30, 1913, a few days after the arrival of Rev. Brevig and Dagny, who continued in charge until the summer of 1916. As Rev. and Mrs. Brevig were the first workers of the Norwegian Synod in Alaska, so now, twenty-two years later, he and his daughter were the last. The mission now passed into the hands of another church-body, the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America.

A listing of the physical hardships and privations of the various workers, men and women, during those twenty-two years, would show a total all but gruesome. The total expenditure of money was also relatively large. The one item of transportation alone was considerable, as can be judged from the fact that the return trip of the Tjernagel family entailed an expense of \$464.50.

Did it pay? Was it all worth while?

Erawlook's confession of faith in her Savior Jesus Christ and the reflection of heavenly peace and joy in her eyes a very few minutes before she died, answers, "Yes."

Iegiak's pleading for the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of his soul for Jesus' sake as he clung to a capsized omiak (boat) with a grip that finally slipped, answers, "Yes."

The Christian prayers of Anakartuk and his wife, Allali, and their singing of "Nearer, My God, to Thee," as they both lay sick unto death in the same bed answers, "Yes."

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