

Leisure Worlder

OF THE MONTH

DOROTHY NOVATNEY

When Dorothy Novatney finishes her term on the Golden Rain Foundation board a few months hence, she plans to take a ship to Alaska to visit the college library named in her honor.

It will be one of the more luxurious trips in the life of the former Alaska Deputy Commissioner of Education, who toured rural schools throughout the former territory in conveyances ranging from two-passenger float planes to mail boats and private fishing vessels.

"I've been asked if I ever traveled by dog team. The answer is no, but I've used just about everything else," she says. It is characteristic of this woman known for her ability to land "feet down and running" that she has indeed ridden on dog sleds, but purely as spare time recreation during her 30 years in Alaska.

The former Dorothy Holverson was born in the small Minnesota town of Alexandria, where her father owned a drugstore. At the age of 8 she taught herself to use the store's adding machine and typewriter, a harbinger of her later days in Alaska where she learned to read blueprints and inspect school furnaces.

She attended the University of Minnesota and was graduated from Pomona College. As the recipient of two graduate teaching assistantships, she earned a master's degree in English literature at Claremont Graduate School and a doctorate in adult education at Columbia University.

A specialist in adult education, she was appointed in 1938 as supervisor of a W.P.A. project in New York where she trained teachers of the illiterate.

The outbreak of World War II found her visiting an aunt in Ketchikan, where she remained to teach English and journalism at the local high school before joining the University of Alaska as associate professor of English. As a sideline, she taught English to the Russian officers stationed at Ladd Field as airplane inspectors for the Lend-Lease Program.

In 1945 she was hired as first supervisor of the Territorial Department of Education in Juneau, becoming Deputy Commissioner of Education two years later. It was during this period she married Robert A. Novatney, a salmon cannery man whom she later accompanied on prospecting and trapping ventures during the off-season.

"Roughing it" became a way of life for Mrs. Novatney, whose territorial job required her to inspect rural schools throughout Alaska at a time when the problems of inadequate transportation were compounded by a travel allowance (\$5 per day) which allowed no frills.

"I became expert at bumming rides," she recalls. She rode on refrigerated trucks, Road Commission vehicles, bush piloted airplanes and a variety of boats. On one occasion she traveled in a Piper Cub flown by a Powder Puff Derby contestant and another time on an uninsulated cargo plane in 20-below-zero weather.

Woman's Wear Daily would have frowned at her traveling costume, which usually featured slacks, a down-filled jacket and rubber hip boots. The boots came in handy for offshore landings by the float planes on which she frequently relied. (The airplane floats were replaced by skis for landings on frozen lake beds, she explains.)

The schools she visited were mostly remote and all small, with one to six teachers the norm. She recalls a school in the Aleutians where her 3 a.m. inspection visit was necessitated by the docking schedule of the mail boat that brought her there.

Warmer climes beckoned in 1953, when Mrs. Novatney accepted a four-month United Nations fellowship to study rural schools in Australia. Three years later she was named first director of the Juneau-Douglas Community College which she established at Auke Bay near Juneau. One of her pet projects was the school library, named in her honor during the mid-seventies.

In 1963 she resigned all duties to care for her husband, stricken with Lou Gehrig spinal disease. Following his death two years later, she returned as a consultant to the Department of Education and helped establish the first state boarding high school at Nome for Eskimos living north and west of the Yukon River.

She next became a consultant in language arts and social studies and conducted a curriculum construction seminar in those fields at the University of Alaska, which named her professor emeritus upon her retirement in 1963.

Mrs. Novatney's varied skills were put into action again when she moved to Leisure World, where she was a Second Mutual director and an organizing director of United Mutual before being appointed to fill a vacancy on the Golden Rain Foundation. Later elected to a full term on the GRF board, she served as chairman of its community relations and health and welfare committees.

She and her sister, Ruth Ferguson, with whom she shares a manor, both belong to Ebell and PEO. She also is active in Soroptimist, Opera 100, Academians and Pioneers of Alaska.