

COPPER TURNS GOLD



FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

2006

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BOB JOHNSON

A NOTE OF THANKS

The “thank you” that I express on this page to everyone who helped with my project should come not only from me, but also from those who read or see something in these pages that helps them better understand the CVS story.

One person’s current events have a way of turning into someone else’s history. If it turns out that you discover some of your own history here, I will feel very satisfied. I am no reporter, but I have tried to get the story right. If you spot any errors, please let me know.

I started researching this story in 2005 and completed it in 2006. Over the course of the roughly 12 months, I interviewed people in person and by telephone and e-mail. Several people gave or lent me material in the form of documents or images.

Much of what is recorded here is the direct product of the kindness of the following people:

In-person interviews or conversations: Don and Lu (Welk) Barrows; Madeleine (Longpre) Betz; Ralph Centoni; Fr. Bill Dibb, S.J.; Fr. Tom Gallagher, S.J.; Del and Cecile (“Teak” Daoust) Hoover; Jeanne (Leboeuf) Nagy; Judy (Casey) Ryle; and Marge (Mannix) Spils. Don and Lu Barrows hosted a mini-CVS reunion in Kent, Washington. Fr. Tom Gallagher’s brother, the Rev. Dick Gallagher, received Graceann and me at his home for the interview with Fr. Tom.

I especially appreciate the time Sister Ida Brasseur (Sister Mary Ida), SSA, shared with me last summer during a two-day visit to Victoria, BC, and the hospitality extended by Mickey (Grinzell) King and her husband Hal MacNaughten during that same visit.

Phone interviews: Al Gyllenhammer; Mary Anne Kent; Floyd Lee; Fr. Jack Morris, S.J.; Muriel (Allen) Poore; and Rosemary (Bobka) Schamber.

E-mail messages: Chuck Akers; Mary Ann Buck; Kevin and Connie (Langlois) Carey; Sam Demientieff; Tom Gemmell; Steve Henderson; Rep. Reggie Joule; Richard and Alice (Paul) Jung; Elizabeth (“Sister” Sipary) Kruzick; and the Hon. R.A. “Jim” Randall.

Print: Sister Kathleen Mary (Margaret Cantwell), SSA; Diane Hirshberg and Suzanne Sharp of the University of Alaska, Anchorage; and Fr. Louis Renner, S.J.

Photos: Andy Angaiak; the Fairbanks *Daily News-Miner*; Sister Ida Brasseur (Sister Mary Ida), SSA; Hermann Kurriger; and the Sisters of St. Ann.

I also acknowledge and heartily thank Michaeleen (Mickey) Grinzell King, archivist for the Sisters of St. Ann in Victoria, BC. Because of her, I was able to perform hours of research at the SSA archives that yielded many facts about CVS and led to a fuller understanding of the role of the SSA congregation there and throughout Alaska. In addition, she fact-checked some of the text in draft form and caught several errors.

To all, my most sincere gratitude.

INTRODUCTION

On a summer afternoon 45 years ago, a car turned off the Richardson Highway at Mile 111, drove down a one-mile gravel road, deposited me at Copper Valley School, and drove on to Fairbanks. As I shouldered my duffel and walked from the parking lot into the shelter of the Circle, I knew right then that this was no ordinary place.

Sometimes a fleeting moment can brand itself on the memory. As the black-robed figure of Fr. Francis Fallert—the principal—advanced toward me, hand extended in welcome, I knew that my life would never be the same. It wasn't. It isn't.

I had hitched a ride up the Alaska Highway from Spokane. I had heard a lot about this school from Gonzaga University students who had worked there as volunteers. They had returned full of praise for the place, the work, and the people. Little did I suspect on that July day that the Jesuit Volunteer experience would continue for life, nor that I would do just as much learning as teaching during the coming year—about the state of Alaska and its children, and about the generosity that the human spirit is capable of when good people band together to do God's work.

In subsequent years I would travel through many states and across many lands. Apart from my own home and family, I have never encountered a place that was as warm and welcoming, as magical, as nurturing, as transformative as Copper Valley School. For those of you who were there during any of the 15 brief years of its life, I have tried to recall in text and images some important details and people from that time. For those of you who never knew it first-hand, I hope to be able to convey the special qualities that set CVS apart.

Regrettably, the names of hundreds of people who helped build and staff this miracle school of the North—and those of a large number of benefactors who never got there except in spirit—have had to be left unmentioned in this short history. Whether you were a student at Copper Valley School, taught there, helped build it, run it, or donated money or goods to keep it running, you were important to the school's success.

Regardless of its length, no history could ever do justice to the dedicated, unselfish souls who gave of their time and talent so generously over so many years. Omission of their names should not be taken to mean that their contributions were small. The motto on the letterhead of Fr. Buchanan's Order of Truck Rollers newsletters used to read, "Everyone Builds."

Fifty years later, those words remain just as true.

Thanks.

Bob Johnson

Jesuit Volunteer, 1961-1962

“During the first winter at CVS, before Brother Hess found us a well with his willow stick, we had to take sleds down to the Tazlina to get blocks of ice for drinking water. Inside plumbing? Sure—inside a 3-by-3 shed 100 feet from our dorm.”

I was listening to Marge (Mannix) Spils over eggs and flapjacks at the Copper Center Roadhouse one morning in August 2004. On such a warm day it was hard to imagine having to use an outhouse—“visit Mrs. O’Leary” was the polite expression—at 40 below.



Marge’s reference to Brother John Hess, S.J. (below), who came to Alaska from Germany in 1911 and spent 50 years happily doing God’s work there, stirred memories of earlier years and the amazing school its students, religious staff, and volunteer workers knew simply as CVS, or just “Copper.”



With five other hardy women from New England—christened the “Flannelettes” from the warm pajamas the sisters gave them when they arrived—she had come to CVS in August of 1956.

Marge (right in photo below) and her companions, Mary Anne Kent, Rosemary Bobka, Jackie Langlois, Jeannette Rageotte, and the late Shirley Richard, blazed the trail for the dozens of volunteers who would ultimately work at the school where the Tazlina and Copper Rivers merge. One of them was me (below, in 1962).

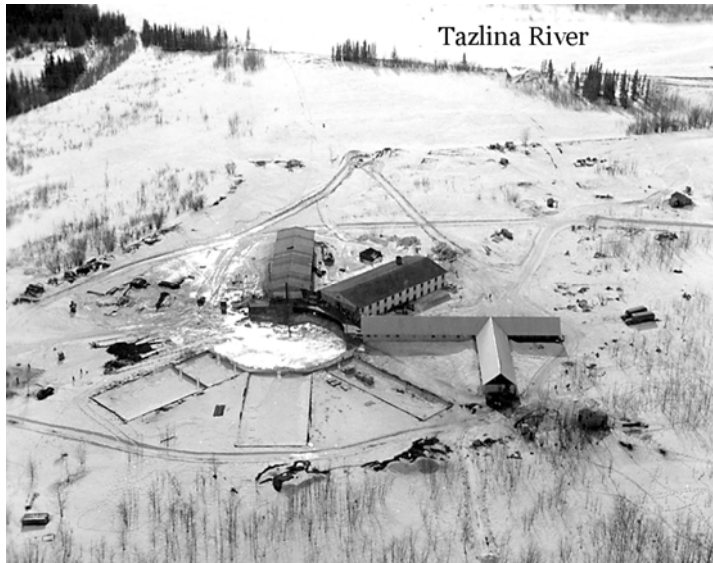


Starting from that nucleus of six in Alaska, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC), as it came to be known, was to grow over the next five decades until its members, known as JVs, would ultimately number in the thousands, scattered all over the map of the United States and overseas.

I had finally returned to the valley of the Copper, 200 miles east of Anchorage, after 42 years. Sharing the morning with me and Marge Spils were my wife, Graceann, Madeleine (Longpre) Betz, JV school nurse in the early Sixties, and Fr. Bill Dibb, S.J.



Father Dibb, a battle-hardened WWII ex-Marine, once fell through Yukon River ice at Holy Cross Mission and froze his feet so badly they took months to heal. He seemed apologetic even 50 years later. “When Holy Cross high school closed in 1956, I hoped to find warmer weather at CVS because my feet were still bothering me. No such luck. We couldn’t get the temperature in the men’s dorm over 45 degrees no matter how much wood we chucked in the potbelly stove.”



He was referring to the third building of seven that, when completed, would look like spokes radiating from the hub of a rimless wheel (winter of 1956–57, left).

Ned Abrams, a California architect, donated the distinctive plans for the school. Abrams was one of the first of scores of major benefactors of all faiths (he was Jewish) and backgrounds from across Alaska and the nation who would accept the challenge of a charismatic priest, Fr. John Buchanan, S.J. (below), to help realize the vision of a modern high school for Alaska’s natives that was located in the heart of the state.

In 1949, Fr. Buchanan had received directions from the Most Rev. Francis D. Gleeson, S.J., bishop of the missionary diocese of Fairbanks, to begin scouting sites for four chapels and a school to be located somewhere in the vast 74,000-square-mile triangle formed by the Glenn, Richardson, and Alaska Highways—an area larger than Missouri.

For the school, a local proposed a partly cleared, permafrost-free site at the confluence of the Tazlina and Copper Rivers. Fr. Buchanan secured 462 acres there from the US Department of the Interior and began soliciting materials and labor. He started with only his two hands, five dollars, and the bishop’s broken-down pickup.

There followed years of calls and hundreds of visits to suppliers, contractors, educators, charities, faith groups, and media representatives. He asked two simple but challenging questions:

“Do you believe in the future of Alaska?”

“Will you help its children find a place in it?”

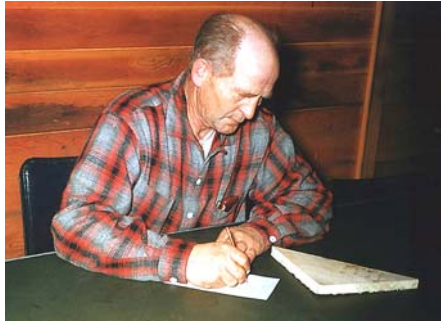


Fr. Buchanan’s dream was to help the native populations of Alaska acquire educations so that they could more easily cope with the new culture of 20th-century America. Subsistence living was becoming harder and harder with each passing year. Something had to be done.

He sensed that statehood was rapidly approaching—it came in 1959—and that the state’s native populations needed to prepare to compete for jobs in the larger population centers. In the early Fifties, no such

educational institution existed in Alaska except for the dilapidated Holy Cross Mission on the Yukon, which a Jesuit visitor of the time described as “one great junk pile.”

Inspired by Fr. Buchanan’s vision, contributors large and small began responding with all manner of donations. Among the donors were industrial titans like General Motors, Union Oil, Libby McNeill, Union Pacific, Firestone Tires. Contributions included a monster D-7 tractor from Caterpillar, a truck from Bing Crosby, cement from Permanente, steel from Bethlehem, salvaged Air Force runway landing mat, glass, piping, wiring, paint, flooring, roofing—all of which Alaska Freight Lines delivered free of charge to the school site. On fire with zeal for the project, Fr. Buchanan had made 48 round trips to the “Lower 48” by the winter of 1957. He often trucked loads of building materials up the 1,500-mile Alaska Highway himself, and he once logged 5,600 miles in 14 days between north Idaho and Seattle.



Who would supervise construction? Enter another remarkable scrounger–builder–priest from interior Alaska. To tackle the prodigious job, Bishop Gleeson tapped Fr. James “Jake” Spils, S.J. (left), who had managed construction of the St. Mary’s Mission and school in interior Alaska on the Andreafsky River. “Father Jake” proved as inspired at

materializing a school from the hodgepodge that was accumulating on the Tazlina Flat as Fr. Buchanan was in persuading people to donate it.

Father Jake got tremendous help from local volunteers and military men—many were not even Catholic—on weekend leave from their posts, 150-plus miles away. A sister then at CVS wrote, “Experts express amazement at the way Father keeps the project going with such an assorted force of workmen and with supplies coming in, not as they are needed, but only when they can be procured, and frequently, equipment must first be made fit before it can be used.”

Aided by these generous, stouthearted workers, Fr. Spils began pouring foundations in the summer of 1954, and the first building, a wood-frame structure in the form of a “T”, was occupied in 1955. Its chief carpenter was Mike Lyschinsky, a fiercely dedicated volunteer from Fairbanks. Mike put in many 16-hour days and even sold his rifles to raise money for food. Fr. Buchanan had met him hitchhiking along an Alaska highway.



Six more buildings, of concrete blocks made in a plant on the site, were to be erected. The last building, the chapel—seen here in July of 1964 (slanted roof on right)—was finished in the fall of 1961, and the first mass was consecrated there that Christmas. The 100-foot-wide conical roof was closed over in 1962.

The first contingent of students arrived at CVS on October 14, 1956. That was the date of the storied “Operation Snowbird” airlift from

Holy Cross to CVS, which coincided with the closure of that aged Yukon River mission’s boarding school. (The Jesuits and the Sisters of St. Ann co-founded Holy Cross in 1888.)

“Snowbird” was a two-hop, 15-hour transfer that involved shuttling the 26 students and staff in Stinson bush planes from Holy Cross to Aniak—an hour away—where they boarded a DC-4 that took them to Gulkana Airport, 12 miles from CVS.

Although CVS was not built specifically as a substitute for Holy Cross, a decision was reached jointly by Bishop Gleeson and the staffs at Holy Cross and Copper Valley School to close the boarding school at Holy Cross—a day school continued to operate—and transfer those students to CVS when it was ready to receive them. Originally planned for September 1, the shuttle had to be delayed six weeks. Its anniversary was honored each October 14 at CVS with a ceremony and the showing of a film (see frame below) shot during the all-day event.

Among the religious staff who accompanied the students on the plane during that 540-mile trans-Alaska flight—donated by Nelson David, then-president of Alaska Airlines—were Sister Alice Legault, SSA (Sister Mary Alice Th rese), and Fr. Tom Gallagher, S.J., later a CVS principal. Both Fr. Gallagher and Sister Alice hope to attend the school’s golden jubilee reunion this August, together with a few of the original Holy Cross “Snowbirders.”



But after you have a school and kids to fill it with, you need the third ingredient—a staff. A brilliant, dedicated, ebullient woman from Massachusetts was the key to recruiting those first six volunteers I mentioned earlier. Born Lucienne Babin, of French-Canadian parents, Sister Mary George Edmond (below) of the Sisters of St. Ann (SSA) could describe first-hand the conditions the recruits would face in Alaska because of her congregation’s decades of heroic service there. In 1886, the SSA congregation opened the first hospital in Juneau—possibly the first hospital worthy of the name in Alaska—beating the advent of electricity by nine years.



As mentioned, the Sisters began work at Holy Cross in 1888. They expanded in numbers, locations, and activities over the next decades until their communities dotted the map of Alaska—Douglas, Akulurak, St. Michael, Nulato, Sitka, Skagway, St. Mary’s, Koserefski, Anchorage, Fairbanks, CVS, and others.

Sister Mary George was behind a lot of the early promotion that helped educate donors and potential volunteers about the school and convince them of its viability. Her appearance on the TV quiz show *Strike It Rich* during her 1955 visit in the Northeast generated monetary winnings that she donated to CVS, but the publicity it garnered and her many speaking appearances during that time were probably far more consequential.

Ultimately sister superior at CVS, “Sister George” was everyone’s friend. A former student recalls arriving at the school feeling depressed and lonely. He reports that his mood changed in an instant when Sr. George laid her hand on his shoulder and, with a look of motherly compassion, asked, “Wouldn’t you feel better with something to eat?”

On the subject of eating, equally important to the school's success was the cook, Sister Mary Ida, SSA (Sister Ida Brasseur, below right), the irrepressible, indomitable, fun-loving "Smida," as everyone called her. Sister Ida served at Holy Cross from 1946 to 1957 before moving to CVS.

Now retired in Victoria, BC with other members of her congregation, Sister Ida was blessed with both an iron constitution and a fund of cooking experience from two years of training at a culinary academy in Montreal. Still, nothing had prepared her for having to devise meals for upwards of 200 people from scant ingredients—often foraged from the river and land—and cooking them on wood stoves in interior Alaska.

To supply fuel for breakfast, Sister Brasseur's days at Holy Cross sometimes started at 4:00 or 4:30 in the morning to allow her time to dry out the green wood on top of the kitchen's stoves. Her eyes twinkle when she tells of the time she barbecued 15



beavers and got numerous calls for seconds of "that delicious pork." And of the time she sneaked a leg of lynx into the tray of Thanksgiving turkey. She also reports that eels were sometimes to be found on the menu.



Sister Ida spent 15 years at CVS following her transfer from Holy Cross. Famous for her

artistic cakes, she performed amazing feats of cookery using ingredients whose nature and supply were mostly haphazard. The "watermelon" (above, red cake with streaked green frosting and chocolate-chip "seeds") was one of her finest creations.

A fall 1962 donation log enumerates a strange smorgasbord: "19 moose; 1 buffalo; 27 turkeys; 32 caribou; 10 cases of bread; 67 bags of carrots; 2 truckloads of cabbage; 6 cases of apples; 1 case of oranges; 1 case of tomatoes; 2 cases of chocolate bars." Still, Sister Brasseur says the CVS job was "Disneyland" when compared to the difficulties she had faced at Holy Cross.



CVS students were often pressed into duty when the school's food supply ran low: unloading trucks of smoke-damaged canned goods after a fire in an Anchorage market; pulling carrots for a percentage of the harvest; killing, gutting, and plucking 800 chickens when a Fairbanks farmer went bust and gave them to CVS. Every student was expected to work—peeling potatoes, washing pots, setting tables, hauling trash, hunting game, to name only a few of the numerous daily chores that attended boarding-school life.

A memorable hunt occurred in the fall of 1961, when some of the staff and eight older high school boys bagged 40 caribou in one day. Strung up around the 100-foot-diameter hub known as the “Circle” that connected the school’s seven buildings, the animals were there dressed out, skinned (Sister Ida often won the contests), quartered, and deep-frozen for the winter.

A student and I were once detailed to skin a buffalo—there are hundreds in Alaska—that had been killed on a snowy road by an 18-wheeler up at Tok. It froze solid in the winter cold while being transported to CVS in the back of a State Fish and Game truck. The massive 1,200-pound beast lay in the enclosed-but-unheated vestibule of the school chapel for three days before it finally thawed enough to get a knife under its inch-thick wooly hide.



Together, the team of Jesuits, Sisters, and Volunteers comprised a formidable team to guide the educational and moral directions of the mostly native student body. A September 2005 report sponsored by the Ford Foundation on the long-term effect of boarding schools on Alaska Natives and their communities gave Copper high marks.

Of the 23 schools reported on—all but two now closed—the report’s authors said that CVS received “consistently positive” reviews by former students on the quality of

their education and stated that “graduates felt they received a well-rounded education, and that they were prepared for college.”

The authors, Diane Hirshberg and Suzanne Sharp of the University of Alaska, Anchorage, wrote that over 75% of the polled CVS students rated their education as “very good.” The curriculum was described as “challenging” and the teachers were perceived as “trying to inspire them.”

Many of Copper’s students now populate the upper tiers of Alaska’s government, business, and educational institutions. Chuck Akers (right, above), a student leader, 1963 graduate, and former Executive Director of the Alaska Rural Development Council, describes the Copper community as having been “a family knit together by purpose.” Reggie Joule, another CVS graduate (1970) and a current State Representative from Kotzebue, says CVS was “a great experience for me personally and academically. I am grateful that they [CVS staff] cared enough to expect us to give our best as students. They had very high standards.”



In his excellent 2005 volume *Alaskana Catholica: A History of the Catholic Church in Alaska*, Fr. Louis Renner, S.J., echoes Joule’s assertion: “High standards of learning and teaching were set at the school’s inception. They were taken as the norm and maintained, for the most part, throughout the school’s existence.”

Besides classes in four languages—French, German, Latin, and English—CVS also offered physics and algebra, religion, general science, mathematics, and speech and debate. It was furnished with home economics and physics labs and possessed a decent library. “Sports, music, and drama were major components of life at Copper,” says Fr. Renner. “The school had many student clubs, a chapter of the National Honor Society, a Civil Air Patrol group for boys and girls, and even a hunting club.”

The students and staff remember fondly the cooperative spirit that prevailed at Copper. All seemed to honor one unwritten but pervasive ethic—tolerance. No one today seems to remember any significant ethnic strife or bigotry. Judging from the year I spent there as a high school teacher with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, student behavior was exemplary.

In fact, one of the former students reports that when his teenager recently inquired about the Sixties and the sexual revolution, the only answer he could give was, “What sexual revolution?—we were at CVS.”



During the year I taught there, never once did the students display anything but respect, even admiration, for the JVC staff (1958 volunteers, right). Chuck Akers says that “it was the example of the volunteers, in a challenging environment, one very different from Boston, Vancouver, or Spokane, who worked for \$10 a month and a place to sleep that years later brought home the sense of value we [CVS graduates] must have for that kind of sacrifice and service to others.”



The unusual closeness of the CVS family is reflected by the great number of pet names by which the Copperites knew—still know—each other: Bubbles, Monkey, Smudgie, Sugar, Buzzy, Tiny, Squeaky, Potsy, Tootie, Peaches, and Peasoup (from fog-shrouded Barrow). There was Buster, Lumpy, Motor Clod, Chedda, Bossman, Zippernose, Snoopy (Mike Kaniecki, a Jesuit scholastic), Ma Z (boys’ prefect), Lolly, Fink, and too many more to remember them all.

And then there was “Pack Rat”—the name that the press, principally influenced by a September 1953 *Newsweek* article, inevitably hung on Fr. Jack Buchanan, who taught everyone at CVS the deepest meaning of the words “faith” and “possibility.”

Most major construction ended by the summer of 1962 when the roof linking the seven buildings was finally closed over and the cross placed on the topmost cupola. The exterior received a coat of warm coral paint in 1963.

Six classes had graduated from Copper since construction began. Most of the students who arrived in 1956 on Operation Snowbird had by then found their place in the world. During those six years, support for the school had slowly grown more solid, thanks to the dedication of



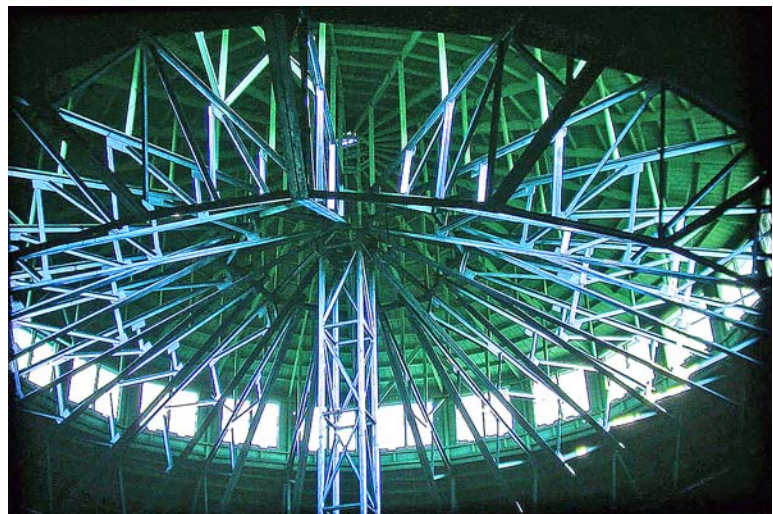
growing numbers of religious and lay staff and the generosity of Fr. Buchanan's "Order of Truck Rollers," his name for a loose group of benefactors, volunteers, supporters, parents, and friends of the school.

Enrollment grew, culminating with 187

in 1963–64 (Class of 1964, above). Starting from two students in 1957, Copper graduated seven in 1960, 13 in 1962, and 30 in 1965. For several years in the 1960s, Fr. "Pack Rat's" dream of a college-prep boarding school for native children in the heart of Alaska was fully realized.

The March 1964 earthquake gave CVS's architecture and building methods a supreme test. The shaking was so violent that eyewitnesses saw people jumping from second-floor windows in fear of their lives.

People who were present that March day saw "daylight through cracks in the walls" and the five-foot aluminum cross on the rooftop bending so wildly that "it literally became parallel with the ground, first on one side, then on the other."



Jeanne (Leboeuf) Nagy, a long-time volunteer at the school says, "We thought it was the end of the world." But the roof (pictured above, in July 1964) stood firm. Perhaps the school's survival was partly a result of Fr. Jake Spils's spontaneous prayer: "Oh God, better stop this quick before everything all goes to hell," an utterance that proves that the man of God was also very much a man of this earth.

Some people might have questioned Fr. Jake's building methods when it was being built, but CVS rode out the 9.2-magnitude killer surprisingly well. A post-earthquake news bulletin from Fr. Francis Fallert, then CVS's superior, reported that "no one was hurt" but "everything

movable was on the floor” (high school library, below). Despite some leaking pipes and cracks in the floors, kitchen chimney, and shop building, the school never closed. In fact, Copper served as a haven for 114 people from many families whose houses were flattened or flooded in Valdez, 100 miles to the south. And it took in 14 Valdez High students, some of whom received their diplomas at CVS that May. Other quake victims from the area around Glennallen also found refuge at the school.



Although death and destruction afflicted large areas of south-central Alaska, the earthquake ironically produced some welcome benefits for CVS. What Fr. Fallert later described as “a mountain of food”—salvaged or smoke-damaged consumables (including 10,000 cigars!)—from wrecked markets descended on the school. The dioceses of Anchorage and Fairbanks received donations of money from Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Food had been particularly scarce at CVS that year, to the point that school officials were seriously concerned about having to suspend operation and send the children home.

However, earthquakes of both an administrative and societal nature would soon occur that would have a profound effect on the future of the school. In 1965, the much-loved Fr. Francis Fallert



(left) departed for the Bering Sea Yup’ik missions after a nine-year period as school director. Four energetic, dedicated successors were to grapple with the knotty administrative, political, and financial problems that would afflict the school during what would turn out to be its final seven years.

In 1966, the Most Rev. Joseph T. Ryan of New York State, who had never been to Alaska, was seated as archbishop of the new Archdiocese of Anchorage. His territory was created from parts of the Juneau Diocese and the former Missionary Diocese of Fairbanks, and CVS was included.

Fr. Jake Spils relocated to Spokane in 1968 to assume duties as a preacher—occasionally returning to Alaska, but not to foreman any more construction projects. He retired formally in 1972. The man the natives called “God’s Builder” had pounded his last nail.

Rumors of the financial troubles that would ultimately force the closure of the school began to be heard in 1967. Although the school had always struggled, philanthropy of one kind or another had always pulled it through close scrapes—as it would for four more years. On the other hand, that same spirit of philanthropy on the part of the school’s directors had also held tuition to a minimum, or sometimes even let it go unpaid, a largesse that, though well-intended, contributed to the mounting debt.

But Alaska itself was changing in ways that no amount of money or donations of goods, food, volunteer labor, or lavish outpourings of prayer could alter. In the 15 years since Fr. Buchanan began implementing his dream, Alaska-sponsored home-boarding educational programs had

begun to open across Alaska, thus moving educational opportunities closer to the river- and coastal-dwelling populations that supplied most of Copper's students.

In addition, costs of coal to heat the 100,000-square-feet of buildings, and the fuel for the trucks to transport it from the nearest supplier, 120 miles distant, began to spiral. Despite the good intentions of the California architect who drew up Copper's plans, his seven-spoked design, although distinctive, exposed almost the maximum-possible number of exterior surfaces to the piercing winter cold. The old, ravenous coal-fired boilers chewed up mountains of it during the often minus-40 winter nights.



The mounting expenses of heating, staffing, and insuring not only Copper but all the diocese's other properties ultimately forced Archbishop Ryan to decide which of the many facilities under his supervision would have to close. Stating that "we can no longer meet the financial, economic or educational requirements," Archbishop Ryan sent official notice of the school's impending closure in March 1971.

Despite talks with the Jesuit Fathers and the diocese of Fairbanks about maintaining CVS on a reduced scale as a purely college-preparatory school or of converting it to some sort of special-needs school, no practical alternative presented itself. The final class of 22 graduated on May 23. Two months later, on July 31, the school closed its doors forever.



The school sat vacant for three years and then was auctioned in August 1974. Under successive ownership of two business groups—first from Glennallen, and later, Anchorage—the school had been undergoing slow remodeling for commercial pursuits in the summer of 1976 when disaster struck.



On August 2, a fire started somewhere in the bowels of the building and burned it to the ground (left). At the time, the structure housed three shops and some apartments. Although there were questions about the origins of the fire and whispers of arson, no conclusions were ever reached.

Fueled by all those thousands of feet of Packy-Board (wood composite) walls, the flames engulfed the entire structure in minutes. The heat was so great that the steel shafts and beams that supported the roof through the 1964 earthquake softened like pasta (above), and it crashed in on

the 100-foot central recreation area, the scene of so many arrival picnics (September of 1961, below), parade rehearsals, moose-skinning chores, and (pre-roof) moonlight ice-skating parties.

The local fire crew arrived as soon as it could, but could only stand and watch the school burn. In an hour, our much-loved but short-lived “Packy-Board Palace” had met its meteoric end.



News of the ruinous fire radiated quickly among the graduates, religious staff, and volunteer workers and was received with shock and sadness. On the other hand, Fr. Spils, the school’s chief builder, responded with religious resignation. When informed of the fire by Sister Mary George, he said only, “George, God alone decides the duration of a work. Copper Valley School is finished. We will not talk about it any more.”

More than once he had voiced the opinion that CVS was not an “original undertaking” anyway,

but only the culmination of the effort begun at Holy Cross Mission in 1888. His view seemed to be that the two schools essentially perished together, and in all likelihood, the Alaska Catholic boarding-school movement along with them. Only St. Mary’s—his other great mission-school achievement—remained, and it closed in 1986.

In a 2005 interview, Fr. Tom Gallagher, former CVS principal, said, “I don’t know of any other school—any physical plant of this size, educational or otherwise—built 95% by donations and staffed almost entirely by volunteers that approached in ambition, scale, and achievement what we had at Copper.”



He concluded, “Had I not been there, seen it with my own eyes, been part of it, I would not now believe that such a place could have ever been built, let alone operate for 15 years.”

In the 1980s, a few former CVS students (Class of 1965, below) began holding reunions, at first randomly and spontaneously, sometimes in Anchorage, sometimes in Fairbanks, and at various seasons. But starting in 1990, a consensus grew around holding the event yearly on the first weekend of August at the school site, which coincides with the anniversary of the fire.



In 1991, reunion attendees began building a Memorial Wall on the former school property using the coral-painted blocks of the school buildings. Each block bears the name of a deceased student, teacher, volunteer worker, benefactor, religious, or other person who had some significant connection to the school.

During a solemn Saturday-morning mass in the school's fir-fringed, peaceful cemetery glade, each person who died during the previous year is remembered and eulogized by the community as the block bearing his or her name is carried forward and set in place on the wall.



Block by block, name by name, the Memorial Wall (left half, above, in 2004) has grown until after 15 years, it is now 25 feet long and six courses high. In 1991, the wall held 81 blocks, in 1995, 101, and in 2005, 183.

So with the arrival of the 50th year since the beginning of classes at CVS, the attendees at this year's golden anniversary reunion will find almost as many names on the Memorial Wall as there are people at the ceremony.

Inexorably, the balance will shift with passing years until only the descendants of the original CVSers will attend. Maybe some year only the wall and the memories will remain. Perhaps at last even they will fade, leaving only the watchful Wrangells and the rolling blue Tazlina as witnesses to what *Coronet* magazine, in a February 1960 feature article, called "The Impossible School of Copper Valley."

The newly formed Copper Valley School Association is working with the Archdiocese of Anchorage, which recovered ownership of CVS following the fire of 1976, to set up a trust that would allow the CVSA to use the land in ways (yet to be defined) that would benefit everyone connected with the school. That group would include all former volunteers, religious, and students—graduated or not.



Below: The Memorial Wall (right half) in 2004.



Time to build another miracle school? I would not be at all surprised. Miracles seemed to have occurred with some regularity at Copper. Just when it looked like construction would have to halt or the school would have to shut down for lack of food, money, coal, or building materials—it happened with some frequency—a coal truck would arrive, a donor would call, a moose would wander onto the grounds during shooting season, and we would stay warm, build, eat, for another week. Sister Ida once said a prayer when she needed onions to spice up a bland menu and a truck bearing 50 bags of them arrived the next day.



One final miracle must be recalled here or I would not feel satisfied with this account: Like Brother John Hess, S.J., the ever-smiling, unfailingly charitable Sister Mary Eulalia (left)



devoted over 50 years of her life to Alaska. No sweeter, more pious person ever donned a habit. All who knew her were edified by her devotion to her duties and her vows.

Sometime during her years there, she decided to plant and nurture an Alaska spruce on the favorable soil ten feet from her convent window—or maybe it decided to plant itself. However it got there, she cherished it—pruned it, watered it, removed the weeds from around its base. It grew straight and true in the permafrost-free soil, and she spent time reflecting on the beauty of God’s nature when she tended to it. The students and staff came to know it as “Sister’s tree.”

When Sister Eulalia left the school in 1970, she must have imparted to her tree some sort of protective blessing. It *could not be* that any spruce would ever survive the fire that razed the



entire structure, steel beams and all, living as close as it did to the wood wall of her living quarters.

Yet there it was (left) in the summer of 2004—30 feet tall, full of cones, its seedlings thriving (right), in the ashes of the fire that should have consumed it.

I see the survival of Sister’s tree as a sign that the spirit of CVS



did not expire in the inferno that consumed the buildings that housed it. We who were nurtured at this school of miracles know that its life will stay forever “green” in us and in our children.

EPILOGUE

After 44 years, a sun doesn't set that I do not think of that blessed place at mile 111 on the Richardson Highway, a kind of crazy wheel off God's bicycle fallen to Earth on the Tazlina Flat. People often ask me what was the greatest lesson I gained or the fondest memory I retain of my year as a volunteer at Copper Valley School.

I can talk about the joy of service, the fulfillment of teaching, the beauty of the Far North—all those are uncontested verities. Instead—especially in these last few years—I choose to focus on what I learned about being content with what is, and what is not.

Last year, Sister Ida told me that her high school “kitchen girls” had once spent an hour baking eight large, delicious cherry pies for some dinner guests, knowing that when everyone else had been served, it would be their turn.

When the last pie—theirs—was being taken from the oven, someone dropped it squarely on the oven-door hinge, where it splattered in a red, hissing, steaming pile. Ever the resourceful, unsentimental Alaskan, she called out, “Girls, get your forks and come over here. You'll have to eat this pie where it is.”



TO LEARN MORE



The Copper Valley School story has been told in more detail by a masterful writer and researcher in a work called *North to Share*. Sister Kathleen Mary, SSA (Sister Margaret Cantwell, left), former English teacher at Copper, devoted an entire chapter to it in her book about the important role of the Sisters of Saint Ann in Alaska's history.

I am indebted to her for some of the facts in this article. Readers interested in more information about Copper Valley School, the Sisters of Saint Ann, the work of the Jesuit Fathers in Alaska, and the history of the other Alaska missions should consult her book.

To request a copy, write to the Archivist, Sisters of St. Ann, 1550 Begbie Street, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada V8R 1K8; e-mail address: archives@ssabc.ca.



If He who could make these mountains
wants this school, He will see that it gets built.

Father John Buchanan, S.J.