

An Angel on His Wing

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**The Story of Bill Gordon,
Alaska's Flying Bishop**

Tay Thomas

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An Angel on His Wing
The Story of Bill Gordon, Alaska's Flying Bishop
By Thomas, Tay
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Dedication and Acknowledgments

This book could never have been written without the help of the many friends and family of Bill Gordon. When I wrote my other books, I always struggled over the dedication, but with this one there has been no doubt since the beginning—it is dedicated to all of the following people:

To Billie Williams, the Gordons' and my long-time friend, who traveled all over Alaska and the Lower 48 to tape more than a hundred interviews; to Sheyna Rieger who devoted endless hours to typing and retyping the manuscript; to Bev Dodge who re-checked my Alaskan historical facts; to my husband, Lowell, Chuck Eddy, Tad Bartimus, Cynthia Merman, George Harris (fifth Bishop of Alaska), Andy Fairfield, and Don Hart, who all helped and inspired me in indispensable ways; and to all of the following persons who contributed through interviews:

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 Matthew Titus
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 Glen Wilcox
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 Stan and Charlotte Hadley

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 Kitty Harwood
 Sally Herron
 Teddy Hunter
 Peter and Elsie John
 Bob Jones*
 Solomon Killigavuk
 Mary Elizabeth Lee
 Alaska Linck

Sandy McClain
 Evelyn Melville
 Maryann Munroe
 The late Daniel Norton
 Louise Paul
 Helen Peters
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 Al and Joanne Reiners
 David Salmon
 Dale and Joyce Sarles
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 Luke Titus
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FAMILY MEMBERS:

Shirley Gordon
 Anna Gordon
 Becky Gordon Chisum
 Almeria Gordon
 Mary Irwin Gordon
 The late Nina Lewis
 Laura Gordon Williams

Bill and Bonnie Gordon
 Nancy and Sandy Dameron
 Jocelyn Gordon
 Sharon Mertsching
 Grace Gordon Pless
 Lynn Lewis Sathe
 The late Mina Ballard

*Note: Judy Edwards Jones died in a tragic fall at her home in Laramie, Wyoming, on 13 June 1989 just as this book went to press.

FOREWORD

In the mid 1980's, ten years after moving on from his post as the Episcopal Bishop of Alaska, Bill Gordon—he liked to be called Bill, or just “Bishop” if absolutely necessary—asked my mother Tay Thomas if she would write his biography. She already had published four books and earned a name for herself as an Alaskan author, and she and my father had been friends with Bill Gordon since the early 1960's. Without hesitation she said yes. Years later she commented that perhaps she should have thought twice before taking on the job.

The book took four years of her life. Folders piled higher and higher on her desk, filled with hundreds of pages of anecdotes, names, dates, place descriptions, all from interviews with over one hundred people—family members, friends, priests—who had lived or worked with Bill Gordon. A friend had helped her tape the interviews, but only Tay could do the writing. And then, after finally launching into the first chapters, she received in the mail 20 hour-long tape recordings from Bill which became more piles of pages of anecdotes and recollections of his early life and first years as a priest and then Bishop in Alaska. Tay wrote to a journalist friend, “I look at the two foot high piles of papers all about me, then force myself to begin a chapter outline. It comes to forty pages . . . what have I gotten myself into?”

The biggest challenge Tay faced in the writing of the book was Bill Gordon himself. He was a remarkable and charismatic man of great intelligence, energy and vision; he was used to going full speed ahead and making things happen. In the early 1960's, elected Bishop of Alaska at the age of only 29, he began pushing for the Episcopal church to raise up and train native clergy in place, which necessitated a change in the Church canons. By the early 1970's there were 27 native Alaskan men and women ordained to the priesthood (this also was very early days in the discussion of allowing women to be priests in the Episcopal Church). It was hard for this driving force of a man to sit back and let someone tell the story of his life. He wanted Tay to write the book, but he wanted control over it.

Bill Gordon was extremely stubborn, but so was Tay Thomas. When she finally shared the in-the-galleys manuscript with him in the fall of 1989, their long friendship teetered on the brink. He insisted on making many changes before the book was published, and she refused, maintaining that it was a biography and not an autobiography, this was what she had signed on for and what she was delivering, whether he was completely happy with the final product or not. Some heated letters went back and forth, but at the same time they each strove for honesty and hearing the other party out, and I am sure they each spent much time in prayer on this topic.

To their great credit—and much credit goes also to Bill Gordon’s wife Shirley, with her quiet sense of humor, and perspective—their friendship did survive the book and indeed outlasted it. Before Bill Gordon died of cancer in 1994 at the age of 75, he and Tay had parted as warm friends, and he had declared that the book was all right, though inaccurate in places. Shirley Gordon comments today, “His kids and I hoped that Tay would not write the typical saintly missionary story. We got our wish.”

It has now been exactly 30 years since the publishing of *An Angel On His Wing*. Thanks to Wipf and Stock Publishers, and to editor Al Ullman, we are able to reprint *An Angel On His Wing* with a couple of corrections that the Bishop so wished for.

First of all, many thanks to the Gordon family for providing the new cover photo of Bill with one of his beloved airplanes. This is so fitting for a biography of a man who learned to fly for the sole purpose of caring for his far-flung flock. Upon his retirement Bill Gordon estimated that he flew nearly 9,000 hours as chief pilot of what he liked to call “Episcopal Airlines of Alaska.”

And then there is the story behind the title of the book, or more accurately, two stories. We’ll never know how there came to be two stories of an angel flying with Bishop Gordon, but at least now, in this Foreword, you can hear the Bishop’s story: he strongly disputed my mother’s version of Bishop Bentley, Bishop of the Second Missionary District of Alaska (Bill’s predecessor who moved on to become director of Episcopal Overseas Missions), sending a letter of support for Bill Gordon to use an airplane for his regular visitations around the state, closing with the comment, “Keep an angel on your wing.” Bishop Gordon insisted there was no such letter of approval from Bishop Bentley, who did not approve of the ministerial use of small planes; instead he said the comment came from legendary Alaska bush pilot Don Sheldon, after the Bishop had had a crash landing in the fog at the Fairbanks airfield that unfortunately involved two other planes (unoccupied, with no injuries in the incident). Don Sheldon happened to stop off at the airport, and surveying the wreckage of the three airplanes, he shook his head and remarked in his laconic way, “Well, the Bishop sure had an angel on his wing this time.”

Finally the reprint of the book gives us the opportunity to include the Bishop’s suggested last six paragraphs for the book’s ending. Thirty years later it seems only fair to give him the final word, and I have a feeling my mother would approve.

Anne Thomas Donaghy
May 2019

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Chapter 1

Heading North

The young man stood at the rail near the bow of the ship; the cold March breeze ruffled his dark brown hair as he looked north across the gray water. Alaska, and a life of mission work, lay beyond the horizon. Bill Gordon had spent his life until now in the southeastern United States, sheltered by secure home and school walls. Yet, with supreme confidence, he knew he was now where he belonged. He was eager—impatient in fact—to find out what lay ahead.

Longshoremen were loading the holds of the *S.S. Yukon* with cargo, hauling heavily laden nets from the dock to the hatches above. Bill watched intently from the upper deck as a jumble of boxes and cases dangled in mid-air. Was his own well-worn trunk there? He hoped so; it contained all his worldly possessions. Bill thought back to the five-day trip from North Carolina; travel was difficult in 1943 wartime. The trip was one of many firsts: his first ride on a Pullman train; the first time he had been west of Birmingham, Alabama. When they stopped in Bluefield, West Virginia, he had twenty minutes in which to say goodbye to the oldest of his six sisters, and during his eleven-hour break in Chicago he had a visit with another one. For the rest of the journey he stared out the window for hours at a time at the grandeur of the western United States. At dinner in the dining car, which was preceded by hours of waiting because the train was jammed with troops, he had his first encounter with a finger bowl.

However, Bill would never forget his departure at the railway

station in the little town of Ridgeway, Virginia, twelve miles from his home in Spray. At midafternoon he stood on the crowded platform with his father, mother, an aunt, his youngest sister, and a girlfriend. He had been waiting for this big moment for a week and plans had been carefully laid for the trunk to be sent ahead by truck. But thirty minutes before departure it had still not arrived. Never very patient, Bill paced the platform, stormily complaining of the delay.

"We will pray about it," his father announced quietly, and "Preacher" Will Gordon gathered his family into a circle. "Good grief, Dad, we've got to do something! That trunk has everything I need for Alaska!" Nonetheless young Bill joined the family in the midst of the crowd as his gentle parent asked God to produce the wayward trunk. While their heads were still bowed, Bill heard the sound of the truck's engine just as the train's whistle shrieked in the distance. The driver had gone past the turn off, but remembered and turned back.

Now, pulling his coat collar higher, Bill felt a pang of homesickness. He would miss the strong support of his parents. With the exception of one summer at camp in New Jersey, the farthest north he had ever gone, he had always lived at, or close to, home. Tired, Bill leaned on the railing. The past two days had been a tedious battle of paperwork with the Alaska Travel Control Office. Since U.S. soldiers were fighting in the Aleutian Islands due to the Japanese invasion, wartime restrictions were tight: No one could go to Alaska without a job or a good reason for being there. But his fatigue was due to more than bureaucratic paper work. Bill had met a very pretty young lady behind the desk and had taken her out to dinner and a movie last night. His southern gallantry required that he, not realizing the great distance to some of Seattle's suburbs, accompany her home on the bus. He caught the last ride back at two A.M.

Suddenly, Bill spotted two most attractive young women among the crowd of men preparing to board the ship. His fatigue vanished. Bill could not take his eyes off the slim one on the right; she was beautiful, with long brown wavy hair, sparkling dark eyes, and even features. Her face was animated as she came up the gangplank while talking with an older man in Army uniform.

Too bad! She must be seeing that major off—her father, maybe. Bill watched enviously as the pretty girl hugged and kissed him good-bye on the deck below. Then the major disembarked while the two girls, waving excitedly moved to the rail. Bill headed quickly toward the stairs. In light of approximately 500 men sailing on this ship, as compared to twelve or fifteen women, most over forty years of age, he would have to act fast. Taking the steps two at a time the slim, five-foot, ten-inch athlete unhindered by his heavy overcoat “just happened” to find a place next to her at the rail and quickly struck up a conversation, enough for them to agree to sit together at dinner that night. This meeting would change Bill’s life, but the entry in his small black pocket diary notes only: “I met Shirley Lewis at 6:40 p.m. on March 3.”

Shirley came from a middle-class family in Longview, a Weyerhaeuser Pulp Mill Company town in southern Washington State. Life at Lower Columbia Junior College, a few blocks from home, had become boring, her tuition funds needed replenishing, and she was ready for something new. A secretarial job with the Army Corps of Engineers in faraway Seward, Alaska, was newer than anything Shirley could imagine. In spite of her striking good looks, she was an unaffected, genuine young woman of twenty, with a sharp mind and strong sense of values.

Shirley was a diary writer and she and her companion, Jean Evans, had purchased a brown and gold leather book to record every detail of their adventure. The first page, headed “Oddities (their signatures)” is followed by the names of four men and their addresses. William Jones Gordon, Jr., with no address, is at the top.

Shirley’s companion, Jean, begins the joint diary, describing the long, low, single-stack passenger ship built in the 1920s leaving the dock and heading across Puget Sound. “Then we strolled on the deck long enough for Shirley to meet Bill Gordon, twenty-four, a clergyman going to Alaska to take over the Episcopal Church in Seward.” She adds that he has a cute southern accent, dark curly hair, deepset eyes, and a catching smile.

After dinner that first night, Shirley and Bill strolled on deck. The next afternoon and two strolls later, Shirley confided in her friend, Jean, that she wanted to marry Bill. They had known each

other only twenty-four hours, but to Shirley it seemed like a year. "Shirley Gordon does sound pretty," she writes in the book.

With only six more days to go, the shipboard romance progressed rapidly. The sky was clear, the air mild, and snow-covered mountains lined the waterway. All perfect excuses for lengthy walks outdoors. The brisk evenings were even more pleasant because they had the decks to themselves—dark decks on a ship sailing under strict blackout rules.

One night Bill and Shirley ensconced themselves in a sheltered nook on the upper level, watching the phosphorous in the water. "It looked just like the stars in the sky—the only difference being that they were all falling stars, and I made a thousand wishes all the same," Shirley wrote. At that moment a young seaman decided to throw out a pot of water, squarely in the faces of the young couple. "We were speechless, then we laughed heartily about it forever after."

That night Shirley made a date to meet Bill to see the sunrise. "I stood on the port side and waited. The sun didn't rise—neither did the little minister. Finally he appeared from the leeward side and explained in words of one syllable or less that "the sun usually rises in the east—at least in this country."

"That's her story," Bill recalls. "I don't think she showed up."

"I was there," Shirley retorts, "on the wrong side of the ship. He was angry—I should have known then what I was getting in for!"

Shirley incurred further ire when she showed up for dinner one night wearing a pair of gray slacks. (The women on board always changed to skirts or dresses.) She announced to her friends at the table that pants were the only practical attire for the ship. The young people teased her and Bill stated that southern women never wore them. Shirley left in a huff, announcing that she was not hungry after all. She continued to wear slacks.

The ship docked at Juneau, Alaska's capitol, late on the third day but no one was allowed ashore because the Captain did not want to lose precious hours trying to round up straying passengers. A dangerous stretch of open water lay ahead, and a destroyer escort was joining him. The Aleutian battlefield was not far beyond their present horizon.

From the deck, Juneau is a quaint sight. The wooden buildings of the town, then home to 5,700 people, cling to the steep green and rocky mountainsides which drop straight to the shore of Gastineau Channel. The houses rise in tiers, perched on cliffs or stilt-like foundations. Rickety wooden stairways connect various levels, as do steep, narrow streets.

The girls had their first encounter with Alaskan prices after fresh supplies were taken on board and breakfast was served following a five A.M. departure. Shirley wrote that fresh milk was available again, if one wanted to pay one dollar a glass. They decided they would buy a cow when they reached Seward, and then board it in the church's back yard.

On Sunday 7 March about 100 passengers gathered in the ship's social hall to hear Bill give his first sermon since his graduation from Virginia Seminary in January. It was very successful, but Shirley was not entirely pleased with the consequences. Afterward, "everyone from the bos'n's third mate to the Ancient Mariner has wanted a conference with him—and he obliges," leaving little time for romance.

Bill recalls that having the service, which he did not volunteer to do, was an agonizing endeavor, but it brought a surprisingly pleasant result. The Chief Purser decided he was entitled to a cabin to himself on the main deck. Bill had enjoyed the company of his two tough construction worker roommates, but one had consumed much of two bottles of whiskey smuggled aboard at Juneau, and he caused considerable trouble in his drunken stupor. To show his remorse, he insisted on passing the hat for Bill after his sermon.

"Now that I had a nice place of my own," Bill remembers, "Shirley could visit me more easily."

Shirley retorts, "I came to visit you on shipboard?"

"Sure you did." The sparring resumes.

"I don't remember that. I remember visiting the assistant purser."

"I remember that, too." Bill can laugh over the rivalry today. "He had a new victrola and a big record collection."

The ship arrived in Valdez on 10 March and the passengers were allowed to go ashore. Alaska is a surprise to most people, but for

a southerner like Bill it was amazing. Valdez, surrounded by majestic glacier-laden mountains, received twenty-two feet of snow a year and there were huge drifts everywhere.

Bill and Shirley were glad for a chance to walk and headed directly for the Episcopal Church, built in Gold Rush days. They found the Reverend Mervin Wanner in the small wood structure, having just finished his Ash Wednesday service—to a congregation of six parishioners. Shirley was worried that Bill would be discouraged, but he was undaunted, eagerly looking forward to his work in nearby Seward.

Following the brief stop, the ship knifed its way between massive rock cliffs to enter the calmer waters of Resurrection Bay (so named by Russian sailors on Easter Day of 1791). At dawn the next morning the passengers lined the decks, awed by the sight of a circle of snow-covered mountains ringing one of the finest and busiest ice-free harbors in the northern hemisphere. Seward occupied a fringe of flat land along the western shore.

Docks, storage facilities, and a railroad yard dominated the site because the town served all of Alaska's interior with its vital railroad connection. (No paved roads connected any Alaskan settlements until 1960.) Seward's population was about 900, but Fort Raymond, on the north end of town (a stopover for the military en route to the Aleutian fighting) housed 2,300 soldiers. The war had brought other changes to the strategically important seaport: The Army built gun emplacements on the mountainsides, encircling the town and bay, and barbed wire had been laid along the shoreline and across the heads of mountain canyons.

Seward was founded in 1903 by a group of eastern businessmen who planned to build a railroad to Alaska's interior. Houses of all shapes and sizes sprang up almost overnight. Shops, restaurants, and bars lined the dirt main street. A two-story bank building stood on a slight hill, appropriately marking the section of homes dubbed "Millionaire's Row." The handsome Victorian-style buildings with front porches and scrolled eaves indicated the prosperity enjoyed by those residents who invested in small but wealthy gold mines beyond the fringe of mountains.

The private efforts failed in attempting to build the railroad and the U.S. government bought them out, establishing a con-

struction base on the site of present-day Anchorage in 1915, pushing the vital rail link through to Fairbanks in 1923. In 1943 the coal-burning train ran twice a week between Anchorage and Seward. The 150-mile trip took eight hours.

Bill disembarked on the night of the ship's arrival and was met by Episcopal Chaplain Justin Edwards, stationed at Fort Raymond. The church-owned house where Bill was supposed to live had been rented for many years. Since the occupants were still there, Mr. Edwards had arranged for Bill to stay temporarily with Mrs. Cal Brosius, "a plump sixty-year-old widow and member of the church."

Mrs. Brosius, who lived above a machine shop on the main street, mothered Bill during the three weeks of his stay with her. "She was given to wonderful hospitality," Bill relates, "but she was also given to conversation, and before I had a chance to meet most of my congregation, I'd had some analysis of them and their strengths and foibles."

Seward's St. Peter's Mission is a small wood building with brown painted siding and white trim around arched windows. A circular steeple perches at the rear of the steep roof and a small white cross is mounted on the front peak. At that time, the mission had been without a resident minister for ten years, but Chaplain Edwards helped with services. On Bill's first Sunday, the congregation numbered twenty-five. The small group puzzled him because he had been shown a petition signed by seventy-three people in Seward asking for a resident priest.

At the conclusion of the service, five stalwart ladies, pillars of the Mission, fluttered about Bill, apologizing for the rectory situation. They were startled by the boyish, handsome priest who had almost bounded down the aisle. "My, he's so young!" murmured one, while another added, "So good looking, and a bachelor . . ." with a sigh. She was the unmarried member of the group. "Well, he'll be better than no one," stated their cynical companion.

The following two months were busy ones for Bill. First he gave the small rectory a sparse house cleaning (the living room ceiling remained covered with a heavy layer of soot, where he wrote, "What are you looking up here for?"). He retained the

three boarders, which helped pay some of his expenses. Then he made some repairs to the church, adding new pews to replace rickety benches.

Most of Bill's time, however, was spent in other areas. "I'll admit I didn't do a whole lot in the church there." In late March the Seward High School English teacher was drafted. Since Bill had a degree, he was asked to take the man's place for half days the rest of the year. He also became assistant director of the U.S.O. The extra pay came in handy since his deacon's salary was only ninety-five dollars a month.

In the little time he had to himself, Bill continued to pursue Shirley Lewis. Shirley and Jean had found a ten by twelve room for rent over a plumbing shop on the main street. The area had been partially gutted by a fire the previous winter and the charred remains of buildings, combined with the mud and dirt revealed as the winter's snow melted, was a bleak setting, but the young people never noticed. They met at the ice cream parlor nearby (where shakes were made of canned milk) and Bill invited Shirley for meals at Mrs. Brosius's home, to the movies, and on long walks.

By early May, Bill came to the conclusion Shirley had reached two months earlier—he was in love. Their courtship, however, was by no means smooth and predictable. All month they squabbled and made up, over and over again. They didn't doubt their feelings for each other, but both were strong-willed and independent.

Shirley was caught up in a frenzy of dances and parties in a town with an Army base (where two battalions from the National Guard of Longview were stationed) and about twenty single young women. How long could Bill's quiet evening dates—dinners with Mrs. Brosius, the movies, and walks—compete with the glamorous whirl twenty-year-old Shirley was thoroughly enjoying?

The matter was brought to a head in late May when the bishop of the Missionary District of Alaska arrived for a visit.

Bill assumed that Bishop John Bentley was coming to check on his progress at St. Peter's, and in fact, that had been the bishop's initial plan. But before leaving his headquarters at

Nenana, an Interior town 470 miles north of Seward and a three-day train trip away, he received word that his elderly priest in charge of remote Point Hope was ill with a failing heart and would have to retire. This village post was the focal point of the work of the Episcopal Church along the entire length of the Northwestern Coast. It was also the most rugged and remote mission in the district. In desperation he thought of Bill Gordon, a young deacon just out of seminary and new to Alaska.

John Bentley was aware that Bill came from a remarkable family in North Carolina whose descendants had rendered notable service to both Church and State for generations, and that Bill had been reared with a keen sense of duty and obligation. Bill's clergyman father was considered a saint by the people of rural Spray, an impoverished mill town, home to the Gordon family since 1912. His mother was a woman of equally strong faith and dedication. In addition to bringing up seven children—six girls and Bill—she was active in many facets of Church life; a gifted speaker and teacher, she traveled all over the South to hold seminars and retreats, speak to women's auxiliaries and conduct Bible studies.

Bishop Bentley was honest with Bill. He explained that Point Hope was the most difficult isolated mission they had in Alaska. "Will you go?" he asked bluntly.

"I will go anywhere and do anything my Bishop asks me to do," was Bill's response. This was true; Bill was a dedicated young clergyman. But he "did have some private problems." It was hard to imagine any place more isolated and difficult than Seward. And what about Shirley? He asked Bentley for a day to think about it, and then he told him he would go, that the bishop knew the need far more than he.

They then proceeded to make plans. When Bishop Bentley attended a church service, he noticed a very attractive young woman assisting in arranging the altar, straightening up after people left. Later Bill introduced him to Miss Shirley Lewis, but it never occurred to the Bishop that there was any serious relationship between the two of them; after all, Bill had been in Seward such a short while!

In Bill's letter to his mother after the Bishop left, he reveals

more human feelings about his new assignment: "Well, your geography lesson starts again! I am going to Point Hope to replace Archdeacon Frederic Goodman, who is ill and has to come out, and there is no one else to replace him. It is quite isolated, with one boat going there a year—in August. The rest of the time it is icebound. Winters are long and there is total darkness for eight weeks. I know it is going to be lonesome, but I believe I can stand anything for a year. [The Bishop had suggested trying it for that length of time.] Frankly, I am a little afraid of the job, but I am going to do my best. There is no doctor there, or even a nurse. Anyone, when seriously ill, must radio out and have a plane sent in. Planes go there occasionally—that's how I'll get in."

He concludes wistfully, "I wish I could take Shirley Lewis along as my wife, but, of course that seems a little impractical, but not impossible in the future. She has a desire for service just as deep as mine—she is surely a wonderful girl and worth waiting a long time for. She will stay on with her job here with the Engineers until her year is up, but I wouldn't be surprised to see her go to work in one of our missions in Alaska after that. She likes Bishop Bentley very much, and he is crazy about her, but who wouldn't be? He has invited her up to spend her vacation in Nenana. I never thought I'd be so completely helpless around a woman.

"Do ask everyone to remember this new opportunity in prayer for I surely cannot handle that job alone. I must have much power from on high. I definitely seem to be guided to go there; every objection I have thought up has been selfish—Shirley, loneliness, isolation, living conditions, etc. If God wants me there He will provide for every need. I love you all."

At that time, Bill and Shirley had not yet talked of marriage. But, while Bill was making preparations to move, Chaplain Edwards and Mr. Knight, Seward's Methodist minister, began talking to him about marrying Shirley and going north together. Bill couldn't imagine asking a woman, even one as intrepid as Shirley, to endure the inevitable hardships of such a remote village.

The two men took Bill on a two-day fishing trip along the Russian River in the mountains behind Seward and spent much of the time encouraging him to marry. When they returned with

a good catch, they came to Bill's house for a fish dinner and invited Shirley. The entire conversation centered on why the two should go to Point Hope together. "It was a little embarrassing, since I had not asked Shirley to marry me. But out of that evening came the thought—why not!"

Shirley recalls her first comment following the proposal: "I can't marry you—I can't even play an organ!" She was ambivalent about marriage, and particularly about going to Point Hope at that stage in her life. She was having too much fun, and besides, she wanted to return to college. But she loved Bill, and he was the kind of man she was looking for. "Bill was, (and is) a southern gentleman. I had no family church background but was baptized on my own at age eleven in the Disciples of Christ Church. I dropped out when I was in high school and they told me that dancing was a sin. I liked Bill's brand of religion. Also, he read poetry to me—one of my loves—but that didn't last very long into the marriage. He didn't drink, and I don't think I ever knew a man who didn't."

Two weeks after he returned to Nenana, Bishop Bentley received a letter from Bill asking if Shirley might go to Point Hope with him. This possibility had not occurred to the Bishop, but he couldn't think of any reason to refuse.

"You tell her to get packed," he said simply.

And with that settled, they proceeded to set a date for the wedding. Bill wired his family the news that he and Shirley would be married on 16 July and then proceed to Point Hope together. Shirley sent a similar telegram to her family: "BILL AND I TO BE MARRIED JULY 16 MUST LEAVE HERE JULY 20 BISHOP BENTLEY APPROVES AND WILL PROBABLY PERFORM CEREMONY PLEASE SEND WEDDING DRESS AND VEIL IMMEDIATELY SEND ANYTHING ELSE TO ME AT POINTHOPE ALASKA BY JULY FIRST YEARLY BOAT LEAVES ABOUT THEN WIRE REPLY. SEND JEANS DRESS—SHIRLEY LEWIS."

To say that the Lewis family was stunned is an understatement; they had not been aware of the seriousness of their daughter's romance, much less her move to Point Hope, in their minds the place closest to the North Pole. Bill's parents felt that Point Hope was a great opportunity for him to provide the missionary service

of which his father had long dreamed. "Preacher" Gordon had wanted to go to China before he even entered seminary, but war intervened and he accepted a call from the small church in Spray for one year only. He was to work among impoverished and illiterate families who lived in mountain isolation, their children laboring with them in the local mills. Bill's mother, Anna Clark, was principal of a girl's school in East Carolina when his father invited her to come to Spray to teach school and church school classes. He really wanted to see how she would react to a missionary situation, still thinking of China. She rose to the challenge with equal fervor and they were married in 1913, but the China dream never became a reality; "Preacher Will" and his family remained in Spray for thirty-seven years. When Bill was born, his parents dedicated him to God for missionary work in foreign fields.

Shirley's mother, who was not a churchgoer, questioned whether her daughter knew Bill well enough, and Point Hope seemed truly at the end of the earth. But then Shirley had always been adventuresome and independent, and her mother trusted her judgment. In later years, Mrs. Lewis admitted that she had to battle a lot of "what ifs": What if she has a baby, gets sick, or homesick, or has a crash.

Shirley's father, an Army Major stationed at Excursion Inlet near Juneau, had strong feelings against the church as an institution. Nevertheless, he wrote his daughter assuring her of his support, promising to make every effort to be present at her wedding. He added, "When I was home last month, Mother and I were discussing you and Bill. I would be remiss if I did not quote her as nearly as I can remember her words: 'If Shirley contemplates marriage, there is one thing she must always remember: A minister's wife must subordinate at all times her own life, her home, her family, and her wishes on all things to the Church, the community, and to the demands which others will make on her husband, no matter how unreasonable they may be.'

"In this war-torn world, with all of its baser natures so exposed as they are today, it is indeed comforting to know those who have faith—as you and Bill must have faith—in God, in each other, and in your ability to carry that faith to others.

"Of one thing I am certain, and that is wherever you and Bill may go, you both have the intelligence, the faculty, and the ability to make your immediate environment much finer because of your presence. May God Bless you both."

Bill's mother wrote Shirley: "The girl William loves already has a warm place in my heart. I admire the courage that goes with your love in facing this challenge of the far north, and yet I think it is the most wonderful experience that two people who really care for each other could have—an opportunity to mean everything to each other and with it to serve in a quiet and blessed way.

"I have always loved William with a deep devotion and I rejoice in his happiness. I trust it to you, even as I pray that he may always worthily cherish you—and cherish is such a lovely word."

The six sisters were amused that Bill should marry someone before they even had a chance to say whether they liked her or not. Perhaps it should be no surprise that Bill picked a girl who looked so much like the Gordon daughters that when Shirley later stood in a family picture, friends could not pick her out! Nancy, the oldest, suggests that Shirley is the only person in the world who is sure enough of her own self that she could be Bill's wife and not be intimidated by him.

Even Bill and Shirley's "adopted" mother had to have her say. Mrs. Brosius took Shirley aside one evening after dinner and offered to write her mother, suggesting she feign illness so that she would have to return home, and thus escape the sudden marriage! "You know, my dear," she advised Shirley, "I'd be very wary of marrying any man who leaves his socks all over his room."

Marriage plans moved ahead at a fast pace. First, Shirley's belongings had to be sent to Seattle immediately, in hopes of making that one boat to Point Hope. Bill then took on the responsibility of preparations because Shirley had never been to a wedding! Shirley's mother sent the wedding and bridesmaid dresses, and Bill's mother sent her own ring. Anna Gordon had long ago told Bill that if she approved of the girl Bill married, she would provide the diamond ring that had belonged to her mother. And now she sent it to Shirley, sight unseen.

It was a traditional wedding. Bishop Bentley officiated at the

evening ceremony, assisted by Chaplain Edwards from Fort Raymond. Shirley's father gave the bride away and Mrs. Brosius served as mother, beaming from the front pew. The church was filled with wildflowers: tall vases of magenta Fireweed, blue Lupine, and graceful ferns. Two arrangements of white daisies framed the small cross on the altar. Shirley's princess styled dress was of white chiffon, and she carried a white prayer book with a shower marker of the same daisies.

Bill had neglected none of the details of a traditional "Lower 48" wedding, while Mrs. Brosius was in charge of the reception, given in the rectory by the Women's Guild of the Church, where Bill and Shirley cut a small, two-tiered wedding cake.

Following a short night's stay in the small Seward hotel, Bill and Shirley, along with Bishop Bentley, took the train north. The threesome stopped over in Anchorage for two days. At that time Anchorage was a town of 4,200 people, sitting high on the bluffs above Cook Inlet. In 1939, the military had arrived to select land for an airfield, and with the start of World War II an Army base was built as well. Now it was a bustling town.

Bill and Shirley made the two-hour drive toward the Matanuska Valley to visit the Eklutna Native School, and talk with two young Eskimo girls, Madeline and Alice, daughters of Peel Tooyak, interpreter for the Point Hope Mission. The youngsters told the Gordons much about life at Point Hope, and described the Mission house as "very nice."

They arrived in Nenana at three P.M. on 21 July, and the party transferred to the mission launch to reach the Bishop's lodge—home and headquarters a mile upriver. The rambling one-story building stood on the riverbank surrounded by a lawn, spruce and birch trees, and had a magnificent view of Mt. McKinley and the snow-covered Alaska Range beyond the swift, silt-laden Tanana river.

Nenana was one of the Tanana Valley missions begun among Athabaskan Indian villages in the early 1900s, but it has a unique history. A genteel missionary woman, Annie Craig Farthing, was given charge of the Mission and the work of starting a school for native youngsters. Miss Farthing did just that, at the cost of her life, and the resulting boarding school had a profound effect on

the native people of the whole valley.

The following day, Bill took his canonical exam, a verbal test given by priests Warren Fenn of Anchorage and Elsom Eldridge of Fairbanks, a requirement for deacons before ordination to the priesthood. Normally there is a year's wait before this final step, but the Bishop needed a priest at Point Hope now.

Bill was ordained by Bishop Bentley on Sunday 25 July in St. Mark's Church, Nenana, nine days after his wedding in Seward. Shirley was confirmed into the Episcopal Church just before the service, the only non-Eskimo person Bill ever presented for confirmation. She had momentarily cast off her usual sweater-skirt, bobby socks, and oxfords outfit for a handsome blue tweed coat, matching beret, and navy pumps with three-inch heels. The Reverend Arnold Krone, priest-in-charge of St. Mark's Mission was presenter for Bill, and Father Fenn gave the sermon. Bill acquired another substitute mother: Miss Bessie Blacknall, a long-time lay worker in the Nenana Mission school, originally from North Carolina.

Miss Blacknall later wrote to Bill's mother: "Isn't it proper for mothers to get tears in their eyes when their children are graduating from high school, and later getting married, and certainly when a son is being ordained? Well, I could not keep the tears back. Both so young, so good looking, so happy. Bill made a splendid choice in a wife we all think. She is pretty, most attractive, and sweet, and I think will be a great help to him all through life."

Bill wrote his parents that the congregation in the mission church that day consisted mainly of local Athabaskan Indians, a few soldiers stationed at a small communications center there, and the mission school staff; very different from his ordination as deacon six months earlier in the stone church in Spray. His father had participated in that ceremony, but only after much wrestling with his conscience. Father and son had parted ways on some theological issues during Bill's freshman year in college. "Preacher Will" held more fundamental beliefs, which to Bill meant retreating into a cocoon. Bill believed in a God "whose service is perfect freedom." Their divergent views became an issue just before Bill's ordination, when his father asked, "Can

you sign those vows?"

Bill replied, "Yes—you don't have to believe that every word in the Holy Scripture was written by the finger of God."

Bill's theology was closer to that of his mother's. "She had a wider horizon, saw the Big Picture," he says. "She taught it, and my father lived it." Three of Bill's sisters followed their father's views and three followed their mother, but each child was allowed to find God in his or her own way, in his or her own time. However, parental rules required Sunday church attendance and morning family worship services for anyone at home.

Following his ordination, Bill and Shirley went by train to Fairbanks, the terminus of the railroad, and while waiting for an available plane to take them to Point Hope, they shopped for winter clothing. "If only we knew what we would need!" was Bill's frustrated comment in a letter to his family. He also met the bishop's secretary while in Fairbanks and wrote, "She is very attractive, though I guess it is a little late for that observation now! I'm not complaining about my acquisition anyway. She is more wonderful every day. . . ."