THE STORY OF E. LYMAN GRAVES:
A DISPASSIONATE EXPLORATION OF A HARD LUCK HARRY
WHO ALSO HAPPENED TO BE MY GRANDPA

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THE STORY OF E. LYMAN GRAVES:
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By

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Abstract

This story follows the life of E. Lyman Graves for a quarter of a century and connects his personal story to social change during that time. At the very beginning of the 1930’s Lyman Graves had a pioneering vision and he yearned to seek his personal fate in the frontier of the Territory of Alaska. This time period reflects the pressures on Lyman related to The Great Depression, World War II, and federal influence in the economics of individuals in the Territory of Alaska.

Lyman wrote a two page timeline as a retrospective of his life around 1955, titled “Twenty-five Years of Progress”, and defined his efforts as “success” or “failure.” Through the use of family story, personal, historical and public document research, this work is an exploration of Lyman’s challenges. Authorial reflection as Lyman’s granddaughter reveals understanding that is acquired through this process. Through the use of Lyman’s personal story the reader will have a new understanding of how an individual is influenced not just by their own decisions, but also by events outside of their ability to control.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to Donald M. Graves, my grandfather’s son, my mother’s brother, and my beloved Uncle Don. It is with his guidance that I was able to delve so deeply into the adventurous and somewhat mysterious history of my grandfather. In this process we discovered facts about Lyman that astonished, confused, disappointed, and reassured us.

Donald’s ability to recall certain aspects of the story from his perspective led me to a new understanding of my grandfather’s story, and how that story influenced the generations that followed. Donald was the little tow-headed boy who loved his daddy very much, and understood that not everything was what it appeared to be.

This work is also dedicated to the members of my committee: Dr. Daryl Farmer, Dr. Gerri Brightwell, and Dr. Terrance Cole. Each of them provided me with knowledge that allowed me to tell this story and contributed unique information that enriched and enhanced the process. Dr. Daryl Farmer gets extra credit for providing me with a lifeline as I pulled myself up hand over hand to get myself out of the deep water.
Disclaimer

The Writing of “E. Lyman Graves: A Dispassionate Examination of a Hard Luck Harry, Who Also Happened to be My Grandpa” is a work of creative non-fiction.

As the author of this story I have told the truth as best I can. This means that this story is based on facts acquired through interviews with family members, personal papers, research in public papers, and the emotional impact as someone who experienced these events both personally and through family memories.

In order for the reader to feel the emotional truths I included details in the narrative that answer the questions about how these real people might have interacted and felt about their situations. The narrative also seeks to provide background to the readers to establish a sense of place for them in an unfamiliar environment. This process was dependent on the author’s familiarity with the subjects, fact checking and correspondence with the remaining participant in this story, my Uncle Don.

The reader will also experience some compression of time, leaving out events that are not as significant or do not fit within the main time frame of Lyman’s story in Alaska.

The Epilogue, “Waiting For Me To Follow,” was first published in Cirque, A Literary Journal for the North Pacific Rim, Summer Solstice 2012, v 3, no. 2, under slightly different form.
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Prologue

The modern architecture of 1964 gave a dreary look to the streets of Seattle. Gray slabs of marble faced the older facades of the buildings, and seemed a reflection of the perpetual rainclouds. The downtown sidewalks were filled with pedestrians and traffic that cold autumn day and our breath trailed behind us in small clouds. My mother and I kept going down the steep sidewalks until we arrived at the old shops and cafés located on the gloomy streets under the Alaska Way Viaduct. Finally she stopped and from the look on her face I knew she was somewhere else, not quite here with me. I was just a child when my mother took me downtown that day, and wouldn’t say where we were going.

I shifted from one foot to the other, impatiently waiting for her to tell me what we were doing here. The electric trolleys clanged, sparked, and rattled their way down the dingy street and it felt old and scary. The ocean air was cold and damp, the cobblestone surfaces uneven and slippery. The passage of cars and trucks above on the viaduct boomed and echoed loudly as the wind cut sharply through concrete buttresses. The windows on the building were smaller here, surrounded by the dark red brick of old fashioned construction and most of the doorways were boarded over. She seemed a little disoriented as we first walked up the street, and then back down. At last we arrived at steamy windows that were brightly lit but strangely below the street level with steps leading down to the glass doors. Older people were coming and going and each time the door opened a brass bell jangled loudly. Gold letters proclaimed the name, “The Alaska Café.” She turned and said, “This is the place that important men conducted important business. Your Grandpa Lyman, my Daddy, brought me here for lunch one time. I was a very young child when that happened.”
We walked down the steps, opened the door and the smells and sounds of the place enveloped us. Meat frying, vegetables steaming, cutlery clattering and a waitress bustling back and forth with a coffee pot caused us to stand still and just absorb the sensations. At the small tables sat elderly gentlemen wearing dark suits and smoking cigars, the remains of their luncheon plates pushed aside. At the back of the dining room was a long bar with liquor bottles stacked on narrow shelves, and the glassware gleamed. The women were frail and white-haired, their flowing dresses and woolen overcoats skirted their ankles. A hostess arrived and seated us at a small table with two chairs in the middle of the room.

I looked up at my mother’s face and her eyes lit up as she smiled and pointed. “The chairs and tables are the same! All oak, and look – even the booths are still there and covered with leather.”

I twisted around in my seat to see them. The booths were filled with more elderly people and I remember thinking it was just like a scene from an old black and white movie. The clothing and white haired couples were a sharp contrast to the vivid colors and youthful styles being sold just a few blocks up the hill. I was amazed to be in this place. The waitress came over to us and said, “Would you like a menu?”

I looked at Mom, and she hesitated a moment. Then she sat up straight in her chair and said, “Yes, we want the lunch menu.”

In that moment of remembrance I sensed in my mother the need to have me know some things about her father. Perhaps she was seeking an understanding of some of the reasons why her life had been what it was, and how it had happened. She never arrived at a place where she could accept the circumstances of her childhood. I won’t say that I understood all that my mother was trying to share with me that day, but the memory of that place and those people have stayed...
with me for more than half a century. It feels like this story needs to be told. She started by
telling me of a meeting that was held in the Alaska Cafe, and in my mind I can see the men just
over there, at that table in the far corner.
Chapter 1 – It Begins

It was a brittle January day when the young couple who became my grandparents, E. Lyman Grave and Florence Annette Miller, eloped to Seattle. They were married in King County, Washington on January 13, 1927 by a Minister of the Gospel in the home of a friend. The witnesses were their hostess and the groom’s brother. 1

Lyman was not quite twenty-four years of age, and Florence almost twenty-one years of age when they married. Lyman was employed by the Carnation Company as a stockman and after the ceremony they travelled to Georgia where Florence gave birth to my mother on October 16, 1927. After a year in Georgia they became the proud owners of a milk bottling plant in Hood River, Oregon. Their second child, Donald, was born on March 22, 1929. Married life seemed to be proceeding quite nicely for them, until it wasn’t.

In the building heat of the September day in 1929 the birds flitted from branch to branch and the clouds spun lazily over the Columbia River near to Hood River. Lyman stood in the doorway of the milk parlor clutching his belly and wondered if he had eaten something spoiled, or had the influenza. Lyman and Florence had purchased and operated this small milk bottling plant and he took great pride in being the owner. His own small dairy herd stood in the pasture, knee deep and grazing in rich grasses or ambling over to drink from the creek. As he looked across the small yard where other dairymen delivered their milk for bottling he felt satisfaction. In his mind’s eye he saw the improvements to the buildings and he saw a larger herd of cattle. He saw his future.

Lyman went in the back door of the house and kicked off his muck boots.

Florence was surprised to see him. “Are you all right?” she asked. Walking over to him

she placed her hand on his forehead, “You’ve got a fever.”

Lyman groaned as he had another spasm of pain.

“Go on to bed,” she said, “I’ll get you something.”

Before he finished getting undressed he started vomiting. Florence spent the night nursing the baby and caring for her husband. Nothing gave him relief from the pain, vomiting and fever.

Florence stood in the yard the next morning waiting for the first delivery of milk. She planned to have them go to fetch the doctor for Lyman. Then she would have to ask for help to get the bottling done. More farmers than Lyman stood to lose product and livelihoods if the milk wasn’t bottled quickly and delivered. The cows moaned their discomfort as they nudged at the barn doors demanding to be milked and fed. Soon she would hear the rattle of a farm truck with cans of milk clanking as it jounced over the rough road. She anxiously waited for the help to arrive, for someone to feed and milk the cows, clean the barn, and run the equipment to bottle the milk and cream.

Later, in the fading twilight of that long day, Florence struggled to put on Lyman’s chore boots and barn jacket. It would take her some time to feed the cows and beef calves, but Lyman was finally asleep. He needed the sleep, but he wouldn’t be able to watch the children and she fretted about how to get the chores done. She was a farm girl and could measure the grain and fill the mangers with hay to feed the stock, but the milking and bottling for others was beyond her. Baby Donald began to cry. Shirley began to run through the kitchen banging a spoon and singing. She wrapped up the baby in her heavy shawl binding him to her back and told three year old Shirley to be quiet and be good. She closed the door, torn between her anxiety for her husband and for her children.
The doctor came as soon as he could. He used his stethoscope to listen and pressed and prodded Lyman’s belly. After one particularly sharp pain Lyman gasped as he curled forward, and his eyes rolled back. He was taken to the closest hospital soon after. Florence and the children were given a ride home after the surgery for his ruptured appendix was over.

A few weeks later Florence sat rocking the suckling baby at her breast and realized that she had to take action soon. The neighbors were kind, but had only been able to do the basic chores. The raw milk no longer came from others, and their milk bottling business was finished. The stock would have to be sold to help pay the hospital bill. For the moment she smoothed the tousled blond hair on Donald’s head and closed her eyes in exhaustion. They both slept.

Eventually the hospital could no longer offer assistance to Lyman as he slowly recovered and lost the strength to stand and walk. It turned out that without the land payments being made their business and their home had been taken back by the bank. Unable to pay the hospital, or any other bills, the injury of poor health was escalated by the insult of bankruptcy. With nowhere else to go, Lyman was half dragged, half carried into the spare room of Florence’s childhood home with the reluctant support of his father-in-law Ralph Miller. The roughness of moving from the hospital to the car, and the drive on dirt roads to the farm in Shedd, Oregon tugged at the swollen tissues in his gut and Lyman’s face was tight with pain. He was still healing from the surgery and it was taking a long time for the infection to subside. Penicillin had been discovered that same year but it isn’t clear if the small hospital had access to such a new drug. Likely, it was only Lyman’s strong constitution that allowed him to survive the massive infection in his abdomen. The long bed rest, intense pain and illness had left him unable to walk.

Florence came from the back of the house after hanging up their coats and ran to help Lyman finish lying down on the bed. Holding his hand she said, “It’s good you’re home. We’ve
missed you.”

Lyman lay on the bed and looked around the plain, threadbare room that still had no electric lights, winter damp on the wall and heat from the cook stove trickling in through the open door. He said, “You know we can’t stay here. I won’t be beholden to your folks.”

“I know, but it will only be for a while. Until you get your feet back under you. You almost died,” she said.

“We’ll leave as soon as I get the train fare together to go to Seattle. My folks will help us.” Lyman closed his eyes and slept.

In June of 1930, when Lyman could walk unaided, the small family left Oregon and traveled to Seattle. In his later life, Lyman wrote the details of his life in chronological order, giving brief details of events. He called it “Twenty-five Years of Progress.” In it he had written this entry for 1929, “July. Bought a milk bottling plant. September. Went to the hospital with a ruptured appendix and peritonitis. Convalescent 9 months. Went bankrupt. Failure.”

There must have been some type of epiphany for Lyman in the career change that came next. In a letter to his father he wrote, “I don’t think cattle weaned me away from town, but rather the town drove me away from itself.” In this letter he sets the base line for the decisions he made over the next twenty-five years when he says, “I sincerely hope and trust that some time you can let go all halts and slip out of the howling mob and let the wind touch your face and hand and the earth heal the bruises and corns and bunions too, that, too much town gives a guy.”

Lyman’s father was a major stockholder in the Kanaga Ranching Company, a fox

2. E. Lyman Graves. “Twenty-five years of Progress” This document was a compilation of personal facts created in 1955 by E. Lyman Graves as a timeline of his life. Entries were by year with a brief description of events considered important. The document was only two pages long and is typewritten.

3. E. Lyman Graves, Jr. to Edwin L. Graves, Sr., December 2, 1930.
farming corporation in the Territory of Alaska. He made a good living off of the income from his investment, and he wanted his son to get involved at the ground level and make good money himself some day. He arranged a meeting between the President of the Corporation and Lyman in the bustling Alaska Café in downtown Seattle. The café was located across from the piers that hosted the shipping traffic that brought the rich raw resources from Alaska to Seattle.

Amid the smoke of cigars and the clanking of dishware, father and son approached the lone man sitting at the table in the corner. Looking at the short wiry man with a large nose and an even larger smile Lyman knew that this could be the deal that made him a rich man.

Lyman reached across the table and shook his hand before he sat down at the table and said, “Good to meet you, Mr. Bowman.” Lyman’s father sat in the third chair and silently listened.

Harold Bowman replied, “My pleasure, I’m sure young man. Your father tells me that you are a hard worker but have had a little hard luck. I’ve heard of your animal husbandry training and boating experience – you should be a good match for what I need. Your father also says you are willing to invest funds and move up to my ranch.

Lyman leaned forward and said, “Yes, I am a hard worker. I can trap fox, see to their health and help keep an eye on things when you are away if I’m an investor as well. Could you tell me more about your business interest there?”

Mr. Bowman said, “I have full rights to Kanaga Island, half interest in Tanaga Island, and all of Ilak Island. I pay the twenty-five dollar a year lease for each island to the United States Department of Agriculture.4

Lyman asked, “What kind of buildings do you have?”

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Mr. Bowman replied, “I have eight cabins and huge working barn on Kanaga and this is where you and your family will stay. There’s a large private pier which can handle large boats. With my half interest I have the rights to six cabins on Tanaga Island. 5 If you are working on Tanaga and need to stay, those are available.”

The waitress came and offered them coffee. Mr. Bowman waved her away with the smoke of his cigar floating up into her face. Lyman leaned forward intently waiting to hear what was next.

In 1930 Kanaga Island was stocked with blue arctic fox 6 which needed to be trapped and removed, because they were too inbred and quality was getting poor. The markets were changing and orders had been placed for silver arctic fox breeding pairs.

Lyman asked, “It would be my job to clear out the old stock?”

“Yes, you will clear the islands of fox and then introduce the silver fox breeding pairs. We should be able to pull this removal off in time for a successful breeding season, if time isn’t wasted.”

“My father and I have some funds to invest – to buy shares, but I also need wages each month.” Lyman then asked, “You’ll deposit my wages and profits when we ship out the furs and sell them?”

Mr. Bowman smiled and sat back in his chair. He said, “Well, of course – minus your food supplies. As soon as the furs are sold for a good profit you’ll get your share through your stock. Your job is to make sure there are plenty of furs to sell.”

Lyman asked, “How often do boats bring in fresh goods?”

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6. Record of livestock, e-mail communication with Steve Ebbert, USF&W. March 27, 2014.
“There’s fairly regular service for fresh foods. You’ll have no worries about eating.”

“The weather shouldn’t be too much for Florence and the children,” Lyman said. “They are used to the rain. I’d like to bring my brother Robert along as a worker. Is there room for him on the crew?”

Mr. Bowman thought for a moment and puffed on his cigar. With a smile he said, “Sure, I can use another man, bring him along.” He added, “You keep an eye on the work and I’ll arrange the supplies and the profits. As soon as you make the funds available you’ll be a stockholder, and a worker. I’ll arrange to get you and your family up there on my ship.”

Sitting back in his chair Harold Bowman looked each man in the eye, then leaned forward to offer a confident hand. They had shaken on the deal.

Spring winds were deceptively gentle the day in 1930 that Lyman Graves and his family were landed by private boat, probably The Gas Screw “Aleutian Native” at the bay of Kanaga Island, Territory of Alaska. Tall logs rooted in the bottom of the bay supported the boardwalk of sawn lumber and led to a large frame built barn. Scattered across the island were eight cabins meant to house workers along with dormitories in the barn loft.

It is true that Harold Bowman invested huge amounts of money in his fox farming operation. In 1938 an archeologist who visited the area with the Smithsonian Institution wrote on the back of a photograph, “It is stated that this company has invested $80,000 in the buildings and small dock. I noticed that even the warehouse ceilings were sealed…” In today’s terms,


8. Ibid.

that $80,000 would be equivalent to more than a million dollars.\textsuperscript{10} All of this large operation was owned by Harold Bowman, a man who operated freely in the almost lawless territory.

The culture of the East Coast fashion never considered the men and women who produced the furs and the hardships they suffered to satisfy the markets. The socialites only enjoyed the sensuousness of the fox fur coats and stoles as they slid over bare shoulders. Fashion changed and society women grew bored with the deep reds and tawny gold of the red fox. They turned their eyes to colors more rare. Demand for blue and silver fox pelts skyrocketed and furriers scrambled to find the pelts. The fur farmers seemed unaware of the financial failures of the stock markets and the potential impact. The prices offered for these furs made poor men dream of being rich and thieves sit up and pay attention.

To be taken on as a partner, Lyman had borrowed money from his father, already a shareholder, to buy into Mr. Bowman’s corporation.\textsuperscript{11} Lyman was there to work and increase the profit of his investment and make money for his family.

It is easy to see in hindsight the warning signs that could have alerted father and son to the impending difficulties. When Lyman agreed to go out to the islands, he had made an arrangement with Harold Bowman. He updated his father in December of 1930:

In reference to our agreement regarding my debt to you, I gave Mr. Bowman an assignment of my wages to you for a period of five years. I discussed the matter with him and acted on his suggestion. . . . it makes it possible for me to apply all my means to settling with you without interference. Doubtless he has just overlooked speaking of this to you because a multitude of other things have occupied his mind. I would be glad if you would speak to him about it when you can.\textsuperscript{12}


\textsuperscript{11} Articles of Incorporation, Kanaga Ranching Company, June 18, 1930.

\textsuperscript{12} E. Lyman Graves to Edwin L. Graves, December 2, 1930.
What isn’t known is if Lyman’s father did speak to Mr. Bowman. The lack of wages paid to Lyman’s father combined with the empty bunks in the barn loft, and the empty cabins scattered around the island should have set off alarms. But, Lyman’s piercing blue eyes did not have the power to foresee the outcome of this situation, and his father didn’t remark on the irregularity of it.

Kanaga Island is in the Andreanof Group of the western Aleutians. It starts low and runs flat for some distance, with a gradual sloping towards the sharp pointed peak of Kanaga Volcano to the north. It is the character of this island to have many streams running on the surface, which then fall away to run under the tundra.¹³ Fox, eagles and seals patrol the cliffs and beaches, while abundant birds and fish provide food for them. It is closer to Hawaii than Seattle, but the weather on Kanaga is nothing like either place. The Aleutians are an arc of volcanic islands that separate the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea. Ancient calderas of varying height create rookeries for seabirds and pullouts for seal, while other are gently sloped and inviting for adventurers. Some volcanoes slumber for decades while others are constantly shaking and smoking. The Aleutians are commonly called the Birthplace of the Wind and have monsoon rains that fall so hard the volume of it forms lakes on flat ground.

There were few young families in the Aleutians, or many families at all. Living conditions on the islands in 1930 could be spartanly comfortable, but the extreme isolation was an issue. Communication and access to the mainland was limited by weather conditions. Lyman was willing to take a chance that all would go well for his family. Perhaps he couldn’t comprehend the severity of the weather when he factored the risk. By the end he probably understood that risk. Lyman would often say, “I was known for my physical strength and tried to

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¹³ Royce Rainey Gibson, Kanaga Diary Excerpt. 1937. Family papers Estelle Gibson Lauer. E-mail, Steve Ebbert to author, USFW. March 27, 2014.
use it to counteract ignorance and the need to survive.”  

Alaska was the last frontier left for people who spent their lives moving ever westward. Lyman was one who never thought to settle where life would be easy, and like his father, always had an eye out for opportunity.

Buttoning his woolen coat to the neck Lyman turned and looked at the sky and the sullen swell of the Pacific Ocean. The low clouds were spitting rain and no matter which way he turned the wind pushed hard at him. The williwaws of the Aleutians made for miserable working conditions and he was determined to push back.

His task was to check and set traps for the blue arctic fox living on the southwest side of Kanaga and get back home before the early dusk of winter. He walked away from the small trapper’s cabin that his wife Florence, and children Shirley and Donald, sheltered in. Striding along the narrow foot trail leading across a headland and through the treeless sedge to the ranch compound his thoughts were on the work ahead. He stopped at the big barn and took a minute to grease his leather boots to waterproof them, and cut fish into bait for re-setting the traps. He also grabbed a length of rope and took a minute to sharpen his skinning knife before he set out.

Lyman headed south along the ancient trail already pressed into the low growth of grasses. The paths meander around rocky outcrops spoke of long ago volcanic eruptions. He followed the trail across a large bluff, then down a steep section until he reached the beach. He walked until he found the myriad trails leading up the next bluff, indicating the routes of the fox that came to feed at low tide. He sighed at the thought of more climbing, and began to follow the trails, searching out the traps he had set just days earlier. At times he had to traverse loose rock, and often stepped over streamlets cascading down to deep waters. Many traps were empty, but

enough were full to make the effort worth his while.

After several hours climbing the rocky trails, collecting, skinning the trapped foxes, and adding the pelts to his load Lyman was ready to be done, go home to a warm stove and a hot meal. Shivering in the cool wet air he swung the pelts over his shoulder and started back. It was with mixed feelings he acknowledged that the cold winter storms of the Aleutians encouraged the growth of such luxurious furs, but at the same time made the harvesting of those furs so miserable.

Lyman’s quick pace carried him across the rocky beach and then up the trail back to the headland. With every step the rain became heavier and the wind began to moan. He scrambled and slipped in the mud. The footing became more difficult and he winced when a chilblain on his hand cracked open. At last he pulled his body up to the edge and toeholds in the volcanic boulders gave him purchase to scramble over the top. The sound of the wind changed to a scream as he struggled to his feet. Bracing his legs he stood square with every muscle pushing back to keep a staggering balance. Roaring across the treeless expanse of the island, the gale force wind hit him in the chest like a giant’s slap with a plank of wood. It dropped him to his knees at the bluff’s edge, the fox skins falling aside. With bent arms he covered his head and tried to protect his eyes from the driven rain pellets, along with gaining a few gasps of air. The rain became a fiercely battering deluge that soaked him to the skin.

The weather had been brewing for several days, but Lyman had chosen to tempt fate. It was a pattern in his life. Work needed doing and he needed to get it done. In his teens he had shipped out as third mate on relief missions bound for Asia, and he understood the messages of clouds and winds. He knew that low pressure systems coming up from Japan were unpredictable – sometimes storming and sometimes just threatening. He had counted on being able to beat it.
The winds were coming from the east now. He was exposed to the force of the storm and would have to fight it every step of the way.

Hunching and twisting his shoulders he turned his body and tried once more to stand. The wind pushed him down again and he fell flat. He curled into a protective huddle and realized he needed to get shelter quickly.

He had choices. A mile across the exposed headland and another climb down a narrow muddy trail he would reach the security of home. Or, he could back track a half mile across the tundra and down to the earthen shelter of a barabara. It was a place of safety built by native Aleut long ago. It was long unused, but still served its function for others. He had noticed the mound on earlier forays and decided now was a good time to find it again.

Lyman shivered as the wind seeped into the cold wet wool and began to rob his body of heat. Rolling to his hands and knees he began to crawl in what he hoped was the right direction. He grunted at the effort it took to move and he began to think of how he had gotten here. The abandoned fox skins made a sodden lump in the dark, left behind to suffer the violence of the storm.

Lyman kept his head ducked against the slashing rain and crawled his way over the rough ground seeking the barabara. His elbows and knees took the brunt of the punishment as he crawled over volcanic rock and rubble and tried to brace himself against the wind. The tiny particles were driving like close-range buckshot and he was unable to see more than a few inches. His exposed skin stung and again he tried to protect his eyes by lifting an arm to shadow them. Fearing that he would pass the mound he finally shut his eyes and groped blindly ahead with both hands.
After what seemed like an eternity he felt the decided rise of the mound. Scrambling to
the side he pulled the turf door out of the entry and crawled in pulling the plug back into place
behind him.

It all went black – as black as tar – and he lay still to rest.

Silence pressed against his ears and eyes when he stirred. His gasping breaths were the
only noises. In the darkness he put out a hand to find the wall and steadied himself.

He savored the respite for a few minutes and enjoyed just existing without the struggle
against the wind. Raising his roughened hands he felt his face to check for damage. Other pains
were only scrapes and bruises and he counted himself lucky. He lit the candle stub he always
carried in his pocket. He held it up and looked around the shelter at the whale rib supports
holding the earthen walls. He sat on the earthen bench that kept him above the dripping water
and in the warmer air. After a time Lyman was warm enough and he blew out the candle to
conserve it. He was exhausted and pulled the now damp wool coat closed and curled his back
against the wall to wait the storm out. The deep vibration of the pounding surf on the beach
below thrummed through his body and lulled him. Drowsily he thought, surely a storm this fierce
can’t last very long.

Sometime later Lyman startled awake and after blinking several times determined it was
dark, and he hadn’t gone blind. He listened hard but could not hear the storm muffled by the
earthen shelter. He dug in his pants pocket and found the candle stub and a few more matches
dipped in wax. Scraping one to fire he lit the candle and looked around.

Dirt benches lined the sides of the main chamber and the walls were propped up with a
mixture of large driftwood and the whale bones he had already seen. The floor was level and
there was an old fire ring close to the entry hole. Lyman wished there had been some loose
driftwood to be found so he could have a fire, but he wasn’t willing to compromise the supports to have heat, nor willing to go back out in the storm. Holding up his candle and looking towards the back of the room he was startled to see a small green light winking out. Blinking and shaking his head he wondered if he had somehow banged his head too hard.

Casting the faint light higher Lyman peered closely toward the shadows. There was a small rustling sound and several pairs of green lights danced. He moved towards the back of the shelter until the candle light illuminated a family of foxes. There were four in all, two kits and two adults. The kits would look at him with caution and run back to their parents to hide. Never still for long they would come closer if he made kissy noises with his lips. He thought if he had some food, he could have enticed them to come to him.  

The fox family reminded Lyman of his own two children back with their mother in the trappers shack over the bluff. They too would be getting the full brunt of this storm rolling in from the Bering Sea on their little home and feeling scared for him.

Lyman smiled as he thought of the children’s bickering this morning. Sibling rivalry seemed inevitable and little was done to correct it.

“Mama, Donald is not eating his breakfast right,” Shirley complained, shoving her blond curls behind her ear. She used her arm movement to hide that she stuck out her tongue at Donald.

“Donald, sit up and eat like a good boy,” Florence said as she shoveled more coal into the stove.

Tow-headed Donald scowled at Shirley and tried to blow bits of soggy oatmeal at his sister. The result was a mess down his chin and food in his lap.

Shirley wailed, “He’s trying to spit food at me!” while reaching over to pinch him.

15. Donald Graves, Personal communication, 2011.
Florence grabbed a towel to wipe her hands and started towards the children, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Donald’s eyes got big and hopping down from his chair he scurried over to Lyman and climbed on his lap. “Papa. Papa,” he squealed.

Shifting his weight on the uneven dirt bench, Lyman remembered the feel and warmth of the small boy body worming its way into the chair with him. His arm lifted and made a place for Donald to snuggle into before he recalled where he really was. He’d make up a story about the fox kits to tell the children later he decided. He dropped his arm as he felt the emptiness.

The lit candle heated up the shelter but the stub grew shorter, so Lyman leaned over and blew it out. He again felt the vibration of the surf pounding up through the volcanic rock and earth, and he yawned. Lyman slept for some time before waking. His stomach was empty as he had eaten his lunch a long time ago while climbing the trap line. The hollow ache in his stomach was best ignored.

The fox were still rustling in the back of the barabara. Growing accustomed to their presence it didn’t occur to him to ponder this sharing of space with the creatures he was there to kill. He thought of them as a family, sheltering from the storm, to be left in peace.

He shifted his shoulders to a new position on the earthen bench. Lyman’s mind wandered back several weeks earlier to when he had dropped his brother Robert off at another small island.

Just a few days before the storm Lyman had sat waiting in the motor boat in the early morning chill with Robert’s crates and canvas duffels tightly packed between the gunwales. Robert would spend his time on the smaller island trapping the inbred fox to extinction. The brothers figured six weeks would give Robert plenty of time to do the job and be ready for the
new breeding stock that Mr. Bowman had bought.

In the early dawn the clouds had cleared and the opportunity to make the trip between islands was upon them. The engine ran rough and blue smoke trailed across the stern as Lyman adjusted the choke. Sea birds called and dived in their morning feeding dance as the calm water helped them find schools of tiny salmon darting just below the surface.

“Pack plenty of food Robert,” Lyman had instructed his greenhorn brother.

Robert complained, “I’ve got double what I need already.”

“Take more; you never know what the weather in this place is going to be like.”

Tossing in his last bag Robert waved farewell without turning to look and see if Florence and the children were waving back. The second oldest, Robert was used to being around family, but he was a bachelor and confident, and couldn’t imagine how alone he would feel away from them all.

“Let’s go brother, there’s work out there to get done,” Robert shouted to Lyman as he pushed the bow away from the shore.

Lyman smiled into the dark of the barabara as he remembered Robert’s enthusiasm and hoped that he wasn’t too lonely now. The earthen bench began to feel harder and Lyman turned and stretched his legs, wondering how Robert was faring in the storm. He tried not to think of Florence and the children but a wave of anxiety washed over him, so he stood and pushed at the matted turf plug, making a small opening in the doorway. He drank from the rivulets of rain and snow melt that poured off the leaves. He also saw that the storm had not abated.

He pulled the turf plug back down and returned to his hollowed out spot on the earthen bench to the side of the barabara. It was comfortable enough and Lyman figured it was well
designed to keep the occupants dry as the force of the storm pushed water down through the cracks and crevices to puddle on the floor. He rubbed his face with his hands and expelled a deep breath as he schooled himself to inaction.

Hours later Lyman twisted and turned from side to side to fit himself better into the hollows. How long could one of these storms last, he wondered? Was his family safe? He knew his trouble might not be over yet.

Lying in the dark, captured by the storm, Lyman focused on the future. He knew he could work hard, he would harvest these skins, and he would make good. There was plenty of money to be made in furs and he would take his share of it. If ever optimism and positive thinking could guarantee success, he would have been well rewarded.

The storm continued through most of the night, mixing wave spume with torrential rain so that there seemed no difference between the air and the sea. The next morning Lyman awoke and waited to feel the vibrations of the rough surf on the beaches below. Feeling no vibrations, sensing only stillness, he lit the last little bit of candle stub that he had been saving. Looking for his fellow captives he peered to the back of the barabara and saw that the fox family was gone. They had left through their private burrow hole to resume their hunting on the littered beaches, rich with storm detritus.

With lifting spirits Lyman pulled his coat back on and walked over to lift away the plug of turf, moss and lichen. The sky was blue, the clouds were wispy and the wind was gentle. The storm was over and it was time to leave. Scrambling out onto the turf he firmly restored the entry to the barabara. He might need it again someday.

The softer winds of this day were almost playful as they tugged at Lyman. Striding out across the headland he went towards the trail back to the family. Covering the distance with his
rapid walk he soon came to the top of the bluff where the fox skins lay in a matted heap. He picked them up, shook off some of the icy water, and then threw them over his shoulder. The dark volcanic rocks gleamed with moisture in the sunlight and the sea wrack was piled deep on the beach.

Lyman would return to this bay again in a few days to check the traps and reset them. There was another trapper on the island and Lyman needed to check with him about setting lines and harvesting the old stock. He was eager to do the work, get this island ready to turn loose the new breeders. He was anxious for them to eat the sea bird eggs come spring, scavenge the beaches, breed and have large, well fed litters. Come next winter they and their kits would grow those heavy pelts and be ready for him to trap and get even more profit.

He chose to forget that fox farming in the Aleutians had high stakes risks. If the weather or the sea didn’t get you, then a careful man might need to watch out for the greedy bastards.
Chapter 2 – Living the Life

All relationships have a certain element of conflict. Often, this leads to clashes and disagreements when parents have something to say about how their children mature into independent adults. It is hard to say what the full motives of Lyman’s father were, but when he began to act on his desire to guide his sons, the results were catastrophic for the Graves boys. At the age of fifteen, Lyman’s father deemed it necessary to finally have something “particular to say about the way the boys spent their time out of school.”¹ It is clear that there was physical violence, argument and a total severance of filial respect between Lyman and his father for much of his teen years. Family story has it that Lyman chose to run off to Shedd, Oregon to attend high school, graduating in 1922² at the age of nineteen rather than endure any more of his father’s form of guidance.

It is telling that every one of Lyman’s brothers left home in their teen years as their father insisted on taking a hand, literally, in their transition to manhood. Some three years after leaving home Lyman wrote to his mother that, “I just received a letter from dad advising me to come home regardless of cash. Somehow mother, I don’t see it in that light, but I may some time.”³

Somehow, the two men healed their past and by 1930 Lyman wrote from Kanaga Island to his father. He wrote of the beauty of the islands, and the desolation, and added that “without his [Bowman’s] comfortable buildings and houses and supplies and equipment we could not take advantage of nor enjoy this wonderful country.” Lyman goes on to say, “Thank you for putting me where I am” and also shares that he is “deriving more honest satisfaction from this job than

¹. Edwin L. Graves to Helen Graves, November 1932.
². Commencement Announcement for Shedd High School, May 26, 1922.
³. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, May 8, 1921.
any I have ever had.” He closed the lengthy letter by saying, “I love you Dad, with all my heart…”  

It took Lyman’s father close to a decade to come to realize that his wife and his sons would always object to his harsh treatment. It was 1932 before he finally admitted to his wife by writing that “you and I would arrive at the same place by different routes and there is no need of compelling ourselves to spoil our own lives and the boys too…” He details how he cannot think clearly after arguing with her about the boys. He concluded by informing her that, “By coming out Saturday nights until the boys get into some work for the summer, I come to work in a good frame of mind. Can work evenings and all in all things will be better for everybody than the old way.” It may seem a noble sacrifice that this erring father had made to preserve a healthier home life. However, in family story there was a long tradition of the elder Graves habitually leaving his family to their own devices, and murmurs about his arrangements with other women.

The winter of 1930 found Lyman, Florence and the children enjoying their life on Kanaga Island. Lyman’s younger brother Robert was there too. They ate fresh water ducks, swans, ocean fish, and seals but found they had to wait patiently for the infrequent delivery of fresh butter, vegetables and letters from home arriving on the Aleutian Queen. Canned and dried goods were supplied by Mr. Bowman and their life was manageable even if the food was sometimes not varied. In the weeks and sometimes months between deliveries Lyman and Bob kept busy with their work while Florence kept busy tending to children, cooking, cleaning and


6. Ibid.
enjoying the adventure. Lyman also extolled the virtues of John Taylor, the only other worker on Kanaga, who was training him on the finer points of fox farming.  

Whenever the supply ship was sighted it was an event that everyone paid attention to. Lyman described the arrival of the supply boat like this:

I happened to be the one to sight it and get in with the news first on this occasion. Bob sighted it too, about the same time, but was farther away so I beat him in. I had killed a seal out on the point to the north of the harbor and had gone back to try and find it at low tide when I saw the “Aleutian Native” just coming into sight on the horizon. It took her just an hour to get in after I saw her so you know she was just a speck on the ocean. So I drove the team hard to the house, yea brother, they are still suffering a little from the exertion. In a rise just back of the house I emptied my automatic shot-gun and emitted a couple of wheezy whoops to apprise (sic) the city of the news. And pandemonium reigned. About fifteen minutes later Bob reeled in but was unable to tell why he came. However, he was finally heard to gasp, “The bhoat (sic).”

Lyman gave his news with enthusiasm and a certain rosiness that seems facile. Florence was enjoying her life in the Aleutians, the fresh-water ducks were the tastiest, and the terrain was gentle and fruitful. He encouraged his father and mother to come for an extended visit. He makes a small mention of Florence needing a quick trip home to attend to some “pressing dental work.” His never ending enjoyment of the Aleutians and the frontier lifestyle were a real indicator of his attachment to Alaska, but perhaps also an indicator of his inability to recognize potential disasters.

Later that year, June of 1931, Lyman’s letter to his mother starts in a practical way. He speaks of his promotion to the management of Tanaga Island and bemoans, “I’ve been gone from the Harbor for over two weeks now, and am darned lonesome tonight. If Florence was out in the

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
states it would seem different, but from my window I can see the hills west of the Harbor, and can’t get there."  

The isolation of the Aleutians could be felt even more when a man could see, but not reach, his wife and children.

He adds that Florence has been ill over the last six months, and while she was “one game sweet kid all winter” he hopes that she will be able to “put on a little weight” soon. Aside from his absence from Kanaga and an exhaustive survey of the wildflowers on Tanaga, Lyman doesn’t say much about the winter just past and some of the challenges Florence was dealing with. By the end of their time in the Aleutians evidence supports that Florence may have lived a different experience than he.

Late winter in the Aleutians was damp and the smoke from the stove pipe trailed a thin wisp into the wind. Inside the cabin it was later in the morning than usual for signs of activity and Florence slowly turned over on the scratchy, grass stuffed mattress. She shifted her neck experimentally to check for soreness. She lifted her left arm over her head and arched her back to relieve the knots in her shoulders. The lack of goose bumps on her forearms told her that Lyman had put coal in the stove before he went out. When he was gone for days, travelling to the other islands, both she and the children woke up earlier and chillier.

Throwing back the covers she swung her feet to the floor and curled her toes against the chill as she was reminded that the floor cracks were not covered by carpet, and never would be. Standing up quickly she felt a rush of dizziness and grasped the bed frame. Her cotton night shift clung to her legs and she pulled at it impatiently so that she could walk to the wash bowl.

Opening her mouth wide in front of the small mirror she prodded at a swollen spot in the back of

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10. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, June 28, 1931.

11. Ibid.
her gum. Sometimes she thought her jaw felt swollen too, and she had lost so much weight her cheek bones were too sharp. Sighing, she turned away, trying not to look at her face. Lyman worried about her, wanted her to see a dentist in Seattle. But, he told her, the furs stacked in large heaps in the barn hadn’t been sold yet, and it would have to wait.

With a sigh she turned and called, “Wake up sleepy chicks!” Up popped two tousled heads, one blond and curly, the other smaller head, white blond and poker straight.

“Mama, I gotta go pee,” declared Shirley. She jumped up and ran to the chamber pot in the corner.

“Mama, mama.” chanted Donald as he clutched himself and danced frantically from one foot to another.

Florence hastily scooped him up and helped him to unbutton. She set him down on the small stoop outside the door and sternly reminded him to pee on the rocks and not on the steps.

She stood behind her son and looked over the barren yard area of their home. No trees grew on this ground; the area close by was filled with sharp rocks and layers of volcanic ash mingled with gravel and clay soil. It seemed like every day their little place rattled as the large dark volcano at the other end of the island grumbled its disgust at the weather. Dirt paths wandered through the grassy tussocks and led to the slopes of the volcano covered with sedges and shrubbery. There was no one else to go see, no one to talk to past the age of five some days.

The small windows rattled in their frames, the wind gave sibilant shrieks as it whipped around the corner of the small house. The smell of burning coal filled the house as the open door allowed a pressure shift in the smoke stack. She grabbed Donald, pulled him inside, and shut their only door.
Florence pulled on her woolen dress and winter drawers. She jammed her feet into the thick stockings and leather boots that kept her feet warm and dry. She tossed a shawl around her shoulders and began to cook breakfast and tend to the endless chores. She didn’t look in the mirror again that day. She must get a meal ready for when Lyman came home, and then things would look so much better to her.

Later that day the wind briefly lulled and the rain stopped. Grasses and leaves gleamed wetly in the soft light as Lyman carefully set one foot in front of the other to avoid the lava boulders as he travelled over the rise and down the last slope towards the house. He saw smoke rising from the stack and looked forward to joining his family. Today he had walked up north and done a last survey of foxes on Kanaga Island. He’d spotted a few, so he had some work left to get rid of the scrub stock. He sighed when he remembered that John Taylor was gone now. There was no one else working for Bowman, and Lyman and his brother were the only ones left.

Next week he was planning to cross to Tanaga Island if the weather held. There was always a need for him to cross over the treacherous strait to the other islands, and sometimes he could do it, and sometimes he would have to wait a long time for the winds and rain to subside. Never mind, he thought, he was good with boats. Florence was usually very happy and content, but she worried when he crossed the strait.

Lyman opened the door of the small trapper’s shack and Florence turned and smiled for him.

Something happened in late winter of 1931, or the fall of 1932, that wasn’t talked about by others in the family. But still, it had an impact and affected Shirley all of her life. It was more than thirty years later when she first told it to me, and the memory of it lingers.
It was early one morning at our house in Portland and I was eating my bowl of cereal with the concentration that only a five year old can accomplish. My mother sat across from me and fumbled for another cigarette. She cupped her hands around it as she hungrily inhaled. Her movements were jerky and she quickly tapped the ash into the tray. Pulling her robe tighter around her shoulders she took a breath. “I am afraid of guns,” she said. “I’m going to tell you why.

“We were in the cabin on the island. It was night and probably raining, it always rained there. The lantern light glowed orange and the coal fired stove was putting out heat. I was sitting on my mother’s lap and it felt good. She was singing the patty-cake song to me.”

My mother paused to inhale, and then exhale the cigarette smoke. I scooped up my cereal and she continued. “Donald had already been put to bed; he was just a baby you know. Daddy was sitting on a chair at our small table cleaning his rifle. I remember seeing our shadows as Momma and I moved. She had wispy curls and I had wispy curls, so we had silly looking heads with poky bits of hair, and our shoulders moved back and forth as we gently slapped our hands in rhythm.”

_Patty cake, patty cake._

“When we rolled our hands we leaned into each other and touched noses. Our shadows did the same and they melted together into one.”

_First you roll them,_

_Then you pat them,_

_Then you mark them with an S._

“This is when we threw our hands up in the air. She was wiggling her knees and I was rocking back and forth and it felt like I was flying.”
Then, my mother clenched her hands as she leaned across the table towards me. Her face was very serious and she said, “And then, I remember this awful flash and a loud noise. I screamed. The wall behind us exploded and splinters hit our faces. I screamed again and Momma screamed too, and she grabbed me hard. She jumped up and ran with me in her arms to the door, but she was sobbing so hard that she crouched down and couldn’t go any further.

“Daddy sat at the table, perfectly still. The rifle, his favorite 30-06, still laid on the table, pointed towards the wall behind where Momma and I had been sitting. His expression was horrible as he realized what he had almost done.”

With a sigh she relaxed back into her chair and the tip of her cigarette glowed red before she stopped and exhaled. I continued to eat my bowl of cereal and looked quietly at her as she sat lost in the memory. My ability to grasp the meaning of the story came many years later.

Lyman never referenced this event in his writings. Perhaps he hoped that his young daughter would forget that it ever happened. She never did. Florence was the only other person who could have told about it. But, she never did.

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Chapter 3 – To Stay or Go

Doing business in the Territory of Alaska was often a little more casual, a simple handshake among business associates. According to family story, Lyman worked for wages, room and board for his young family, plus a share in the profits from the sale of the fox furs at auction. There was risk in the financial arrangements that Lyman, his father and Harold Bowman agreed to, but there was no permanent record of the terms. Did Lyman ever consider the risk involved in taking his wife and young children so far from civilization? Sometimes it seemed that Lyman grabbed for the best deal he could get, and thought about the consequences later.

Florence often got sick and the family believed that she had bad teeth and simply needed to see a dentist. In our modern world, bad teeth don’t sound too serious. But, in 1931 something as simple as impacted wisdom teeth could lead to serious infection. On Kanaga Island there were no dentists or doctors.

It was mid-summer of 1932 in the Aleutians, a time when the sunlight lingers, but temperatures were never hot and the wind always blew in squalls and storms and then blew them out again. Lyman was glad to be home after working for several days on the far side of Kanaga, camping at night in a small tent. Daylight waned to the twilight that lasts all night as he guided his skiff into his home bay and the building clouds promised more rain. He drifted around the boulders and nosed the skiff onto the beach with a short twist of the throttle and then cut power. He looked up the shoreline to see home.

Lyman narrowed his gaze as he searched for movement and he listened for the shout of a greeting to float on the wind towards him. The windows of their small cabin were unlit. The lap of the waves and the quiet chuckling of nesting sea birds was all he could hear. No shouts from
the children, no door slamming open as they heard his motor coming across the bay. No smell of
the coal fire’s malodorous scent.

He reached back, tipped the engine up, and stepped over the side into the shallows.
Without conscious thought he yanked the bow up on the beach, dragging it over the rocky beach
to safely secure it. Throwing the rope down on the wet sand and rocks he started up the trail until
he was almost running. Bursting through the door he couldn’t see or hear anything in the gloom.

He whispered, “Florence?” A soft sleepy whimper drifted from the back of the cabin near
to the children’s bed. The stale odor of chamber pot hung heavily in the air. He fumbled to find
the lantern and matches. The flaring wick smoked and burned until he turned it down. The dim
light revealed the jumble of several days of neglect.

“Shirley, Donald?” he whispered.

A rustling of the covers from the children’s pallet told Lyman they were stirring awake.
Turning away he saw Florence in their bed. She was bundled and shivering, huddled under every
blanket they owned, her face fever red, and her breathing deep and wet.

He opened the stove door and faint coals gleamed in the fresh flow of air. Lyman pushed
in more coal to warm the cabin. The clamor of the stove door closing finally woke the children
and he pulled them close and calmed their crying. Florence’s shoulders jerked and pulled as her
cough deepened and he put them aside to tend her.

Lyman slept little that night. He hauled and boiled water on the coal stove to provide
steam to relieve Florence’s coughing and hot rags for her chest. He boiled water to clean the
thickly crusted dishes and pans so that he could cook food from their dwindling supplies. He
boiled more water to wash the children’s soiled clothes. He hung the damp clothing from the
chairs and shelves where they would stay for several days before they dried. He fed the stove to
keep the damp air warm. The windows were misted both inside and out as the weather worsened and the rain began its remorseless assault on the roof. By the third night he slept upright in the chair. He startled awake as he tipped forward onto the table. Her coughing and fever never seemed to end, until finally he lay down on the bed next to Florence and slept until morning.

Lyman opened his eyes and was confused in the half light of the early morning. He wondered why he felt so rested. Turning his head he watched Florence breathing, and her face was not flushed with fever.

Lyman got up and stoked the fire in the coal stove. He pushed his feet into unlaced boots and grabbed the water bucket before leaving the cabin. He looked up at the barely revealed outline of the volcano as the sun touched the horizon. The wind that always blew from every direction was still for a change and he sucked in a deep lungful of the earth scented air. He walked towards the fresh water stream, and looking towards the beach he saw the fog had settled onto the bay.

Lyman pulled the door latch closed with a muffled click. He kicked off his boots and padded over to the stove and poured water from the bucket into a pan. Scraping his hand through the many days growth of whiskers he stood in the small room and looked at his sleeping wife and two young children. The rasping noise of Florence’s breath was still loud over the crackle of the fire. He sat next to her on the bed.

She stirred and made an inquiring noise. Careful coughing caused her shoulders to round and she twisted to her side to relieve the pressure.

He said, “Let’s get this pillow behind your back.” He pulled her thin shoulders upright and she settled back without awakening.
More days passed and Florence began to feel somewhat better, her fever was intermittent and she sat up sometimes. It scared him, her constant sickness and fevers. Her jaw and neck were often one large aching mass which was bad enough, but this time it had settled in her lungs too.

The day was one of domestic and nursing chores and at noon time Lyman took the children out of doors to get rid of their energy and to give some peace to Florence. He would need to find out if Mr. Bowman was still on the island, to let him know about Florence’s health. He had made his decision. He couldn’t work and there was no one else to help with the children. He told himself if he could get her back to Seattle to see the dentist, then everything would be all right.

Lyman walked down the rocky shoreline with the children roaming by the surf’s edge and he planned for the trip out. He would have to come back soon, before the bad weather started in earnest. Perhaps Florence and the children could stay with his mother and father until she was well.

The next morning Lyman walked to the main compound to talk with Mr. Bowman. They had their own boat, and it allowed them to come and go at will. As he approached their house he admired the large barn that stood tall and proud. He noted that the large dock was empty.

Looking across the compound he saw where the work of keeping this operation going should have been happening. In the large white barn there had once been almost a dozen men repairing traps, re-caulking the skiffs, painting and repairing buildings, and doing all the other interminable chores of keeping a place like this going. Most importantly, the fox furs should have been stacked like cord wood, safe from the weather and ready for the auction in London. But, in the past few months Mr. Bowman had let go of everyone else who had worked at the ranch, and the milk goats had been let loose to take care of themselves. It seemed eerie to Lyman
to be looking around the compound without the noise and work that should have been going on. Mr. Bowman had said it was just a temporary measure, a way for them to save some money that they could put back into the operation.

Arriving at Mr. Bowman’s small house he knocked on the door just in case someone was there. Perhaps their Japanese cook would be there, and knew when the Bowman’s would return. As he stood at the unanswered door he realized they were gone. It seemed to him they should have at least made the effort to say good-bye.

While he was there he walked to the barn and lifted the stout latch. He took pride in the smooth swing of the large door that he had repaired just a few months ago. It was gloomy inside and it took a moment to adjust his sight. There were several dinghies, a few piles of traps, and the variety of tools needed in any large working ranch. Over in the corner was the locked storage room, filled with the fox furs. He had worked hard to make that pile of furs larger, and wanted to check on them. He used his key to open the cabinet and found it empty. Since the lock was intact he decided Mr. Bowman had taken them.

Lyman returned to find Florence running a low fever. The children were playing quietly but it brought home to him how vulnerable they all were. They needed to leave soon, and once he made up his mind, Lyman acted.

The supply boat might arrive any moment and he must have the family packed and ready to go south. When it arrived he would ask the skipper to take them to where they could get passage on a steamship, probably up to Dutch Harbor. He would be sure to meet the boat to make the arrangements. The skipper would probably have to finish his deliveries before he could take them aboard but time would be short. They must be ready.
Just a few days later, as he hoped, the supply boat came to the dock and Lyman and his family stood there to greet them.

Many years later, when he was eighty-five years old, Donald told me a story his father had remembered about him. “It had been a long time since we had fresh food. It was pretty tough to get any variety and we had run out of anything tasty and started to run out of everything else. He said I reached into the crate of onions, grabbed one and bit into it.”

“I told daddy it couldn’t possibly have been me that ate that onion. I hate them!” Donald told me.

“Lyman had said, ‘You had tears running down your face and ate it like an apple.’”

How close to malnourishment were they on Kanaga? Did Lyman and Florence recognize the signs and comfort themselves that they were making changes for the better? Did they realize they had made a poor choice by locating in such a remote place and being so dependent on others and the weather for nourishment and assistance? It is hard to imagine placing the health and welfare of your wife and children below that of making money. How could a man know when the risk is greater than the benefit?

Within a week the supply boat came back to pick them up. Lyman and Florence left their home of two years, each experiencing different feelings. Lyman expected to return before September became October. Florence had no interest in returning, and the children were too young to care.

1. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, July 22, 2014.
2. Ibid.
After the supply boat delivered them to Dutch Harbor, Lyman purchased tickets on the next passenger ship that was steaming to Seattle. The had enough cash to pay their passage and nothing more. The four of them crowded into a single room and ate from the supplies they had brought with them.

Several days out from Seattle, Lyman helped Florence to a chair on the deck of the steamer. She sighed as she settled back and turned her face to the sun and said, “I look forward to getting better.”

Lyman kept a close eye on the two children who ran back and forth on the steel deck and screamed with joy at being free of the tiny cabin. The Inside Passage route was more protected than the Aleutians and the breeze felt soft and warm.

“I’ve sent a telegram to Mother and Father. They should be expecting us,” Lyman said.

“It will be nice to see them, and go to see the dentist finally,” Florence said.

“I hope they’ll be able to meet us at the dock, and take us straight home.” Hearing no response he looked at Florence, but she had fallen asleep in the chair. He covered her with his jacket and went to the children. It was September of 1932.

Soon after arriving in Seattle Lyman got Florence and the children settled at his parent’s home. The very next morning he went to the bank to get money.

Lyman walked up to the bank teller and said, “I’d like to withdraw funds.”

The teller asked, “May I have the account name?”

“Lyman Graves.”

“Just a moment sir. Is there another account you might be affiliated with?”

Lyman nodded and said, “Kanaga Ranching.”

“I see,” said the teller, “can you wait a moment?”
Lyman stood with his hands in his pockets trying not to show his impatience. Now that they were back in Seattle he needed to get Florence in to see the dentist and he needed cash to pay for the treatment.

A banker wearing a suit and smoking a cigar approached Lyman and said, “Would you come with me sir?”

Lyman nodded and went along, wondering at this special treatment.

After closing the office door, the banker sat in his chair and invited Lyman to have a seat also. He asked, “How are you connected to Harold Bowman?”

Lyman said, “I work for him and I’m a small stockholder in his business.”

The man narrowed his eyes, and grimaced. He shifted the cigar in his mouth from one side to another and stifled a small cough. The banker rearranged some paperwork on his desk and aligned his fountain pen with the inkwell before he said, “I regret to inform you that there are no funds available in the Kanaga Ranching Company account, nor in your account. Mr. Bowman took out a mortgage in August, just last month, to pay off various notes and keep his businesses going.”

Lyman shifted in his seat.

The banker said, “Do you have any property that is his?”

Lyman shook his head no and sat in stunned silence. This couldn’t be happening, he was a stockholder in the business, and Mr. Bowman had never indicated things were going this wrong.

Lyman left the banker’s office. He stood on the street corner and blindly watched Seattle traffic passing by. He didn’t know what to do. How would they afford to pay a dentist to look at Florence? Later, when he asked him, his father knew nothing about a mortgage.
On August 4, 1932, the mortgage taken out by Harold Bowman with the First National Bank of Seattle was executed, just one short month before Lyman went to collect his wages and profits from the sale of furs. Within the document were listed eighteen promissory notes that were paid in full, acknowledgement of the corporate partners, but not by name, and every island lease that Harold Bowman owned. It attached every building, every stick of furniture, every ship, every can of food, and the breeding stock of fox on every island and any future income from the harvesting of the progeny of the fox. It even attached the life insurance policy taken out by Mr. Bowman. The mortgage allowed Harold Bowman six hundred dollars a month for his salary, his assistant and wages. In the margin is penciled in the dollar amount of $142,373.99 which might be assumed to be the amount of the mortgage. In today’s terms, this would have been a mortgage of $2,476,923.09.\(^3\)

The mortgage did not list any particular stockholder or E. Lyman Graves as an employee, nor any other men who worked on the islands for wages. It cannot be proven that Lyman was cheated by looking at the legal paperwork. But Lyman’s entry to his “Twenty-five Years of Progress” bears witness to his disappointment.

This is what he wrote: “1932 September. Returned to Seattle for dental treatment. The day I got in town the Company went bankrupt with liabilities so far in excess of its assets that I got nothing. Failure.”\(^4\)

It seems certain that Lyman never knew that Harold Bowman might have been able to pay his back wages of the past two years. Or, that Harold Bowman probably could have spared Lyman enough to pay a dentist’s bill from the bank’s allotted monthly income of $600.00 – an


\(^4\) E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
amount today that equals $10,438.38 per month.\textsuperscript{5} It is certain that Lyman did not have the resources to pursue the matter in court.

It is true that the fur markets plummeted and many fox farmers failed to keep their businesses in the Territory of Alaska during those years. How would Lyman have felt to find out that Harold Bowman continued to farm fox and other animals, as well as hold the leases on Kanaga, Tanaga, Ilak Islands, and partner with Adak Ranching for nine more years, until 1941 when World War II finally shut down the fur trade in the Aleutians?\textsuperscript{6} Would he have demanded retribution for all of the pain and suffering from the loss of that money?

Outside the bank Lyman stood on the busy corner in downtown Seattle. Harold Bowman’s bankruptcy would impact all of the family. His father had placed most of his life’s savings into the Kanaga Corporation and was now close to broke. Lyman had worked for no wages for two years, and Bowman had not paid down the debt owed to his father either. He would not get his high stakes share in the sale of fox furs. He did not have funds to support his family. They could not afford to visit a dentist and the children needed a home. Even though it was still September of 1932 everything for Lyman and his family had changed in that brief moment. FDR was running for president after the failed policies of Hoover and it was very difficult for anyone to find work. The extent of The Great Depression was poorly grasped by those who tried to make a living in what they hoped was only a short run of difficulty. None of it mattered in that moment as Lyman considered his failure.

For the next nine months Lyman went every day to look for work in Seattle. At first he would get a carpentry job that lasted a day or two, then he would end up looking for another job.


Sometimes he earned just enough to feed the family and no more. Florence stayed reasonably healthy even though she wasn’t able to get the medical attention they had planned. Eventually he did a little better and they rented a small house by Lake Washington. Lyman began to look for new opportunities to make money in Alaska.

In the spring of 1933 Lyman learned of a gold dredge in Nome with good soil reports. Investment opportunities for Alaska often appeared in Seattle newspapers advertising for investors and laborers. Or, perhaps his father knew of someone who was involved in the dredge and brought it to Lyman’s attention. The current owners needed an investor and someone to labor on the dredge.

Lyman purchased a working partnership in a dredge by borrowing more money from his father, but the exact name of the dredge is lost. Family story tells that the dredge was located close to Nome, on the Seward Peninsula, and the soils test showed promise. Ever optimistic and ambitious, he went to Nome alone.

The gold in Nome wasn’t lying loose on the surface, or even in the gravel of a running stream, but was deep in the frozen Alaskan gravel and soils. The process of getting this gold required massive machinery and a steady flow of unfrozen water. Gold dredges used powerful water jets to wash away overburden and expose the gold bearing rock, while a mechanical system of buckets scraped it up for processing. Mining companies had recently made technological advances that allowed them to thaw the deep soils providing access to more gold.  

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The short mining season in Nome commonly started in July and ended in late October so working the claims was intense with little time to correct for errors.\textsuperscript{8}

The Gold Reserve Act of 1934 outlawed most private possession of gold but provided a ready purchaser in the United States Government. The price went up from around $20.00 per ounce to $35.00 per ounce.\textsuperscript{9} However, the gold in Nome was so difficult to access that only larger operations could afford to mine it. There is little doubt that Lyman was aware of the impending change to the price of gold and he was again betting on the future of a natural resource to secure stability for his family. He was still willing to take risks, and perhaps felt sure that this time he had it right.

He may have taken some time to think about it and approached his father for a loan based on the increased price of gold in the next year. It is conceivable that he used the financial ruin of the two years of fox farming to make his father willing to let go of his remaining cash. In spite of the enthusiastic letter of thanks that Lyman wrote from Kanaga Island there was still tension between the two men. Donald once commented there “was no love lost between them.”\textsuperscript{10}

Lyman prepared to go north again, to try and recoup his lost funds, and perhaps his father’s fortune. Lyman wrote just four lines in his “Twenty-five Years of Progress” about the Nome adventure in 1933 – each cryptic entry a mere suggestion of the tensions among the family who were financially involved and the personal relationship between husband and wife.


\textsuperscript{9} Claus M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick, \textit{Alaska A History}, (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 166.

\textsuperscript{10} Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2014.
Lyman wrote his first entry this way: “1933 June. With the help of my father scraped up enough to buy a working partnership in a dredge. Drill sheets indicated each share would net fifteen thousand dollars.”\(^{11}\) In today’s economics this share would be $260,959.49.\(^ {12}\) Always optimistic, Lyman must have felt the financial return was worth the strain on his relationship with his father, and the unwanted absence from his wife and children.

It is hard to say if Florence and the children stayed behind in Seattle because of the roughness of Nome or because of her health. Florence had married to live a life filled with parties and fun.\(^ {13}\) She wanted to leave the poor life of her childhood on a hardscrabble farm, but after five years of marriage and constant relocation, perhaps she was tiring of the rustic adventure and more hard work. Maybe she simply didn’t want to go even further north to live a difficult life in poor conditions. Sister-in-law Celia wrote her memories of Florence during Lyman’s time in Nome and said, “she was always fun and instead of doing chores we would drop everything and go to the beach for a picnic.”\(^ {14}\) Celia also mentioned that Florence yearned for a stable home and friends.\(^ {15}\)

People travelled through the Aleutians on regular steamship schedules to the major ports such as Nome. Lyman would have boarded the S.S. Victoria on one of her six annual round trips to Nome.\(^ {16}\) He would eat his meals in comfort and have had a stateroom in the large vessel.

\(^ {11}\) E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”


\(^ {13}\) Celia Graves to Donald M. Graves, May 23, 1999.

\(^ {14}\) Ibid.

\(^ {15}\) Ibid.

One day, half-way to Nome, Lyman stood at the rail overlooking the water and the distant hills of the coast of the territory. He always wore a woolen cap on his head to cover his thinning hair, and likely had his red checked shirt buttoned up to his neck. Summer this far north was often cold when the clouds moved in and the wind blew. A steward on the ship walked down the deck calling his name, searching for the passenger who had received a telegram. Lyman turned and acknowledged the man, and then took the telegram. He was wary as usually nothing good came in a telegram. This was no exception. The exact words of the telegram did not survive as the small paper was let go into the wind, to drown in the Bering Sea.

It cannot be said with exact certainty that his part ownership was in this particular dredge – it could have been another dredge that didn’t warrant mention of its fiery end in the Nome Nugget. But, how many dredges in Nome would burn on the same weekend, or have discovered such a rich source of gold and advertise this in the Seattle papers? This leaves us with a high probability that the Casa Dredge is the same dredge that Lyman sailed towards, and he would certainly be identifiable as “others interested” in the article. The Nome Nugget Newspaper reported on July 20, 1933, a Thursday, that the “Casa Dredge Burns Down.” The article is as follows:

The dredge operated by Connors in the Casadepaga section burned to the ground last Saturday night or early Sunday morning. The dredge which was moved a couple of years ago to its present position had not done any too well up to last year, but had just encountered some fairly good dredging ground and was in a position to make a cleanup this year. Which, it was said, would clean up its indebtedness and make a little to the good. (sic)

It is unfortunate that fire leveled the ambitions of its operator and others interested as well as the employees. From the meager details received it is learned that the fire started from a torch exploding on the engine and quickly spreading to considerable accumulated oil about the engine base thence to the frame work and then to some 20 or 30 drums of oil which were aboard the dredge, thus making a clean sweep of everything.17

Lyman’s second entry for 1933 reads, “July, The dredge burned on the 17th. Failure.” Lyman never named the dredge in which he had invested his father’s last bit of savings. He never wrote of how he felt about finding out his hopes and dreams had once again been thwarted.

Lyman worked a variety of odd jobs in Nome in what remained of the summer. Nome was a small town, but there were dance halls and churches, grocery stores and schools. Men far outnumbered the women and there was a lively social life available to both.

Interestingly, a young woman named Ramona McCausland was teaching primary school in Nome, Alaska in 1933. In a diary kept by Aileen Spaeth, Mona is mentioned several times throughout the winter and spring of 1933, first as a good cook, and then as someone who didn’t try very hard to be friendly. Mona sailed out on the Victoria on June 18, 1933 for the summer. Lyman arrived sometime after July 20, 1933, and stayed working at odd jobs until November of 1933. The directory of teachers for the Nome School primary children includes Mona McCausland, who returned for the 1933-1934 school year. There is no doubt that during his time in Nome, Lyman had met her at some social event. They may have met only through a casual introduction, or they may have even shared a dance or two. Even if Lyman scarcely remembered meeting her then, he remembered it later.

Lyman’s third entry for 1933 is this, “November. Returned to Seattle on the last boat out of Nome after earning a little at a variety of jobs during the summer.”

When Lyman arrived home in the late fall, just in time for Christmas with his family, he found that Florence was not doing well and needed medical attention. And then he made a very serious mistake.

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19. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
In 1963, when I was about nine, the Christmas tree that Grandpa Lyman left on our porch was particularly sparse and weak and my mother and I tried to find branches strong enough to hold the glass ornaments and tinsel. I noticed that she seemed sad and asked, “Why are you so sad?”

“I have some very sad memories of Christmas, she said.

“I remember being on the front porch of a house on Christmas Day when I was only five years old. There was this awful rattling noise coming from inside and this mean lady came out and told me to go away, be quiet, or it would be my fault if my Momma didn’t get well.”

“What was that noise you heard?” I asked.

She hesitated, her face showed an expression as if maybe she shouldn’t say what it was, shouldn’t tell me this. But, after a moment she sighed and began. “My Momma was really sick. She had pneumonia. Her teeth were bad, and the infection settled in her lungs.”

“Didn’t she go to the doctor?” I asked.

“Back in those days if you didn’t have money, you didn’t get to see a doctor. They didn’t have good antibiotics like they do now, either.

“Momma was really sick. Daddy hadn’t been able to get a doctor sooner because it cost money. The doctor was in there with her then. I think I was getting sick because I remember being very cross and crying out there on the porch. I picked up a stick and started to hit the rail with it.”

I looked up at her, waiting to hear what would happen next.

She said, “I was only five you know.”

I hung a heavy layer of tinsel in a particularly bald spot on the tree. “What was that noise?” I asked again.
She paused, and then continued, “That rattling is what happens when someone is dying. It’s called a death rattle. I was too little to understand exactly what was happening.

“So, they sent me across the street to stay with the neighbors while my momma died. Daddy finally called the doctor then, but it didn’t matter. I thought for a long time that she had died because I was bad, like that neighbor lady said. It turned out that I had pneumonia too, and the doctor told Daddy that he might lose me too. I was sick for a month.”

Lyman’s fourth and final entry for 1933 in “Twenty-five Years of Progress” was:

“December. Because of financial limitations failed to call a doctor when my wife became ill. This failure resulted in her death from pneumonia on Christmas Day. Failure.”
Chapter 4 – Consequences

It is an understatement to say my grandfather made a mistake when he neglected to call the doctor for Florence after he returned from Nome in November of 1933. He did try to correct his error by calling the doctor to come on Christmas Day, but it was too late; my grandmother died from pneumonia on December 25, 1933. It may have been Lyman who went to the telegraph office to send that notification to his in-laws, Ralph and Sadie Miller, in Shedd, Oregon. Perhaps it was his mother or father who took on that burden. Florence Annette Miller Graves was buried at Evergreen Cemetery in Seattle, Washington. She died at the age of twenty-seven. She was wife, helpmeet, and the mother of a five year old girl and a three year old son. Her death had an impact on her husband, daughter and son that stretched into future generations as each struggled to overcome their loss.

It is not known if Ralph and Sadie were able to attend the funeral. What is known is that they were devastated. They had not approved of her marriage to Lyman, and resented him for taking her away. Receiving this telegram was affirmation that they had been right that no good would come of their daughter’s marriage to Lyman. Ralph Miller was unable to forgive, and he knew where the fault lay. He intended to take Lyman to task for it. Sadie though, had enough kindness in her to understand Lyman’s grief alongside of her own, and she loved her grandchildren.

Late in January, or early February of 1934, after Shirley had finally recovered from her own bout of pneumonia Ralph and Sadie were summoned to Seattle. They drove their Willys-Knight, following the highway north, through the chilly winter day.
Ralph and Sadie found the Graves’ family home in Seattle and parked at the curb. They went up the pathway and onto the porch of the house. Ralph probably cleared his throat and stiffened his spine as he raised his hand to knock on the door. He was prepared to express his displeasure.

Lyman would have met his in-laws at the door, and invited them to enter. He would have been nervous about them being there, and nervous about what he was going to ask of them.

Ralph curtly nodded his head and allowed Sadie to walk in first. They finally settled on the sofa in the front room, uncomfortable in the city house with soft furniture and electric lights. In the crowded kitchen Lyman’s five brothers sat at the table and his mother and father appeared in the doorway to listen.

Sadie looked around the room and peered towards the kitchen, and Lyman understood what she wanted. He told her, “They are with my little sister Celia, over at the neighbors. We need to talk about arrangements.”

Sadie nodded her head, as if she knew what was coming. Ralph placed his hands on his knees and shifted his feet.

Lyman said, “I want you to take the children and care for them. You can easily feed them.”

Ralph said, “You expect us to take them so you can go haring off back to Alaska? You have responsibility here!”

“I need to go back north to earn money. There’s no work for a man here,” Lyman said.

“Why do you want us to take them? Things are tight on the farm too,” Ralph said, “Besides, those young ones are too active!”
Lyman cleared his throat and wiped his hands on his trousers. He said, “Please, Florence would want you to.”

Ralph didn’t respond to Lyman’s last statement, but his jaw tightened and his hands clenched. After a moment he said, “Why can’t your folks take them?”

Lyman looked down at the floor and swallowed. He didn’t look at his mother. “My mother is still raising my brothers and sister and her house is full. It is too much to ask her to add more.”

“Why do you always want Alaska? That place is nothing but bad news.” Abruptly Ralph stood and turned away from Lyman, then stared out the window at the darkening clouds.

Lyman said, “Alaska is full of opportunities to make good money and I’ll be able to provide for the children once I get back there.”

Lyman’s voice raised in desperation. “I cannot take the children with me, and my mother says it’s too much for her to take them on. Don’t you want to have Florence’s children well taken care of, safe with you?”

Sadie sat quietly, hands folded and eyes lowered to the floor but her back was stiffened. She waited to hear what Ralph would say.

Ralph rubbed his face and looked at his wife. He didn’t want any children underfoot, and he didn’t want to do anything that would help Lyman. He was angry to be forced, and he hated the choice he had to make. There was a time Sadie had stood up to him, and he remembered it well. She had left him for a while, before Florence had been born, and he had promised to curb his temper and keep her happy. And they had done well enough, until Florence had moved away.¹

¹. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, July 21, 2014.
Ralph said, “All right. We’ll take care of them but you’ll have to give us money to pay for things. We won’t take care of them forever, you hear!”

Lyman may have felt the floor drop away from him in his relief. He said, “Thank you.”

Sadie closed her eyes and tears streamed down her face as she lifted her lawn handkerchief to stem the flow.

Ralph said, “We’ll take care of them for Florence and see to it they are god-fearing.”

The cold wet rain of Seattle began to fall and fill the gutters of the streets. In the mountains the snow began to accumulate as a winter storm gathered its strength. Ralph and Sadie stayed two days, waiting for better weather but it was not a comfortable time between the families. The house was too crowded, the weather was miserable and Ralph finally said to Lyman, “You had best get the car ready. I’ll not be driving in this mess; you’ll have to do it.”

Lyman was taken aback for a moment at the demand that he drive them back. But, two cardboard boxes were found for the children’s clothes and tied with string. There were hugs and tears, and confusion about how to get three adults and two children with boxes all packed into the vehicle. Finally the boxes were tied with more string to the footboards and they drove off into the storm.

Donald sat on one side of his Grandmother Sadie, and Shirley on the other side in the back seat. Sadie wrapped a blanket around them all and pulled them close to share her warmth. Lyman drove the Willy’s Knight, and Ralph sat next to him. As they travelled south the roads became more difficult and detours took them east through The Dalles, Oregon. There they crossed the frozen Columbia River further inland and avoided the worst of the snow storm. They passed the small town of Hood River without even seeing it through the heavy snowfall. The
mixed snow and rain stayed with them for many miles, changing back and forth with each change of elevation. Ralph Miller took advantage of his and Lyman’s enforced proximity.

As the miles rolled by Lyman shifted gears and adjusted his posture on the hard seat. Glancing sideways he watched Ralph’s face growing harsher and more drawn. He resigned himself to wait for the inevitable explosion of Ralph’s anger. It was almost a relief when it finally happened.

Ralph started, “You’ve ruined everything and now you are dumping the children on us.”

Lyman stayed silent and allowed himself to remember one evening at their house in Seattle, the one by Lake Washington, the summer before he had gone to Nome for the Casa Dredge. It had been a hot afternoon when Florence took the children to the water to learn how to swim, until Donald refused to go in because the water hurt his eyes. They had picnicked and played the day away before returning home. After supper she and Lyman were doing the dishes and he had snapped at her with the dishtowel, and she had thrown a wet dishrag at him. All of them had dissolved into helpless giggles when it wrapped around his neck and dripped water on the floor. Later they may have talked about Lyman going back to Nome, to work on the dredge and plan their dreams for the future.

Reluctantly, Lyman came back to the present as Ralph continued.

“We never wanted her to marry you. Running off the way you two did showed you have no respect for marrying a girl in her own church! You have careless ways, taking Florence and the small ones out to that god-forsaken island in Alaska. You made her work too hard and gave her nothing. No doctors to care for her and no one to help her.”

Cold seeped through the metal doors of the Willy’s and Sadie tucked the blanket more tightly around the children and said, “Ralph, the children shouldn’t hear this.”

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2. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, July 22, 2014.
Ralph turned and silenced her with a look.

She tucked her head and pulled the little ones closer and eventually the children fell asleep as the tires droned on the wet and rutted roads.

Ralph went on. “She should have married a local boy. You weren’t ever good enough for her. She would have been safe on the farm and she would be alive.”

Lyman did not respond and he wrestled the steering wheel to keep the vehicle on the road. He wanted to reply that Florence would have gone anywhere to get away from the farm and the brutal work for the women who had no running water or electricity to help them preserve food, wash clothes or mend clothing.

Ralph said, “You couldn’t even keep her safe after you brought her back! Your family didn’t take care of her either, just left her alone with those young ones.”

Lyman thought of Celia, his young sister, who had visited Florence often while he was in Nome from July through November of 1933. Celia had gone to help with sewing or shopping and playing with the children. But, Florence had always wanted to leave the chores and go to the beach for a picnic or go people watching instead.³

Ralph pounded on his thighs with both fists, for emphasis, “It was your duty to call the doctor!”

It was a dreary trip through the storm with Ralph never stopping his invective of anger. Lyman drove through deepening snow ruts and hoped the windshield wipers wouldn’t quit. Pulling into the dark farm drive Lyman steered the Willys-Knight to the fallen oak branch blocking the drive and stopped.

Ralph pushed open the car door and stepped out. Turning back he said, “You killed her you bastard.”

³ Celia Graves to Donald M. Graves, May 23, 1999
Lyman said nothing. He had nothing to say.

Sadie woke the children and shepherded them into the house. Ralph shouted another curse when he noticed where the clothes boxes had been tied to the sideboards. Donald’s box had fallen away somewhere in the storm and was lost. Shirley’s clothing was sodden and filthy from road splash.

Sadie hurried the children into the small house that had only a wood stove for heat and no electricity for lights. She would need to build a fire to cook them food and it would take some time to heat the room. First she lit the kerosene lantern to lighten the gloom and told them to hush and sit quietly. She would take care of them. They were all she had left of Florence. Ralph came in the door and slammed it shut as he passed by to change into chore clothes and check the livestock.

There is no record or family story of Lyman ever defending himself against accusations that he caused Florence’s death, or the resentment that Florence’s father felt towards him. What is known is that Ralph seemed to make life as difficult as he could for Lyman and the children, and Lyman simply described Sadie as a “Saint.”

Lyman left the farm that stormy winter day in 1934, and Shirley and Donald did not see him again until late October of 1935 after Ralph and Sadie drove again to Seattle, this time to send their grandchildren north to meet their new mother.

In “Twenty Five Years of Progress” Lyman wrote that he left Seattle in July of 1934, as soon as he finalized his arrangements to return to Alaska. He had a new business partner and together they outfitted a ship filled with quality tools. The two men knew that good tools were prized and hard to get in remote settlements in the territory of Alaska. Their likely path was to

travel to Wrangell, Juneau, Sitka, then Seward and Kodiak before moving west along the
Aleutian chain to sell their tools. This was a path that Russian traders had followed in reverse for
decades, and Lyman and his partner would have stopped anywhere there was a settlement or
individuals who might need their wares. Both men knew the territory of Alaska and the sea, and
were confident they could establish a solid business. Tools were not a luxury item by anyone’s
measure and were a necessity for the fox farmers, gold miners, and for industry. Even before the
business had been proven, Lyman described this venture as “Success.”

Even in the territory of Alaska the Great Depression was pinching economic growth.
People couldn’t afford to buy the tools, and business was dismal for them. Lyman and his partner
made the decision to part ways. Lyman was the one who wanted out, so the partner kept the boat
and the business and Lyman probably got a little cash. Of course, soon after Lyman left the
former partner began to make a big success of the tool trade. For years there were lingering
doubts in Lyman’s mind that he might have been manipulated by his partner into leaving the
business. Don commented, “It seemed too coincidental to Lyman that his partner landed such a
large tool supply contract so soon after Lyman gave up.” For 1935 in “Twenty-five Years of
Progress” Lyman wrote, “Business was so poor that we parted company. He started making
money as soon as I left. Failure.”

There were two events in Lyman’s life in 1935 that were worthy of inclusion in his
“Twenty-five Years of Progress,” but neither one even merited a passing mention on his list.
This omission probably indicates an effort on his part to conceal from family the effect of the
events upon him. Perhaps he excluded them in an attempt to forget them, or at the very least push
them into the deepest reaches of consciousness where they could lie fallow.

5. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”

6 Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, July 22, 2014.
The first event brings a certain resolution to Lyman’s relationship with his father. As Lyman matured, and perhaps his father mellowed, there was an improvement in their relationship. The financial ruin of the fox farming venture in September of 1932 impacted both Lyman and his father as both went broke at the same time, but with different consequences. His father was fast becoming an elderly man and losing his energy and interest in making another fortune. The elder Graves’ marriage was further strained because of their new financial insecurity. The loss of their investment in Kanaga Ranching left them with few resources for their retirement.

Lyman too went bankrupt in the autumn of 1932, but he still had his wife and young family to keep him motivated to go out and earn money. In spite of the return to Seattle, and Florence’s illness, he was convinced that he would be able to amass his own fortune in Alaska. It isn’t clear how or why Lyman was able to use his father for a loan to buy the interest in the Casa dredge in Nome. Perhaps his father felt that he owed Lyman something for having involved him in the Kanaga Ranch business.

It will never be known how these two men resolved the loss of so much money between them, or even if they did resolve it. What we do know is this: on February 24, 1935 Lyman was in Alaska trying to sell tools from a floating hardware store with his business partner. Family story tells that one day, his father, mother and several of his younger brothers were gathered in the family car. They were going bird hunting on a pleasant day in the early spring, and had packed a picnic lunch. Lyman’s father realized that he had forgotten the .22 rifle hanging on the wall in the study and it was needed for the purpose of the outing. He climbed out of the car, and stepped back into the house to fetch the rifle, while the rest of the family waited impatiently.
Lyman’s mother sat on the front seat and told the younger boys to settle down in the back seat. A small popping sound caused them all to look around a bit. They didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

Finally, Lyman’s mother said, “Let me go see what is keeping your father.” Climbing down from the car she walked into their home, and into the study. She opened the door and saw a footstool lying on its side, and then she saw her husband’s dead body on the floor.

My mother always said, “Of course, no one would say if he committed suicide, or it was an accident. Back in those days it was scandalous to say someone committed suicide and they just listed it as an accident. They didn’t want to speak ill of the dead.

“I think he killed himself because he was so upset by all of the bad things that had happened. How else could he be lifting down a rifle from over a doorway and end up with the muzzle pointed at his head? A .22 caliber bullet is supposedly not powerful enough unless you put it right up to yourself. How could that be an accident?”

Donald confirmed to me his impression of the event when he spoke of his grandfather’s death. “You know he shot himself – committed suicide. It was a tough year for your Grandpa Lyman. It was a tough year for the whole family.”

Lyman wrote a letter to his mother soon after from the Hotel Zynda, in Juneau, Alaska. In it he consoles her for the loss telling her that, “It is only for a little while that Dad will be gone, at best. And then we will have all eternity with him and the others we lose. Realizing this has been a tremendous comfort to me.”

His written words seem more designed to comfort himself about the loss of Florence, with an added gallant attempt to assuage his mother’s grief. Lyman knew from his own

7. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2014.
8. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, April 21, 1935.
experience that there is nothing to be done about a loss of this magnitude, and that acknowledgment and faith was a part of his healing process.

Lyman also comforted his mother by reminding her that she had the support of five sons and a daughter, and the anticipated arrival of another son through marriage to his sister. He prolonged his letter by chatting about meeting old friends, and dinner plans and his hope that he would come home for a visit in the summer. There was comfort in sharing information about the living, for both mother and son.

How odd that he would not remark on his own plans for his near future in that letter to his mother. Perhaps he was trying to spare her from thinking of anything that would seem joyful, or perhaps he wasn’t sure if he should bring this type of news up to the family. Perhaps he didn’t yet know about the second event that would happen in just a few months.

This second event involved a woman. It isn’t known exactly how they met. Likely he had met her in Nome in the fall of 1933 after the Casa dredge had burned. He may have remembered her and looked her up after the death of Florence, when he returned to Alaska in the spring of 1934. Or, it may have been simple happenstance that he ran into this particular schoolteacher when selling tools from the floating hardware store that he and his partner owned when they docked at Anchorage. By then she was teaching first grade in Anchorage and made a good living of $1,472.50 per year, likely more than Lyman made that year.

“The family never seemed to know for sure if Lyman and this woman were really married.” Donald once said. It was speculated that they may have had to marry because there was a child, though no child ever appeared. Perhaps the child died, but there are no death records


10. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2013.
from the Juneau hospital for an infant named Graves, with Lyman and the woman as the parents, in that time period. However, not all deaths were recorded by the good nuns, especially stillborn or very young infants.

The fact that Lyman had met her before his wife Florence died probably means nothing. Widowed men often strike up a personal acquaintance with women that they had already met before the passing of their spouses. Regardless of how it happened, Lyman never entered into his “Twenty Five Years of Progress” the information about his second marriage on June 19, 1935 in Juneau, Alaska.¹¹ The happy event occurred just eighteen months after Florence died, and the woman’s name was Ramona McCausland.

The personal journal of a fellow teacher, Aileen Spaeth, recorded her impressions of Mona’s first school year in Nome, 1932 through 1933.¹² Aileen wrote in a letter home that Mona “seems to be a regular recluse although nice in some ways.”¹³ She added that the other teachers had discussed Mona and decided that “she isn’t willing to go half way in making friends.”¹⁴

Apparently Mona wouldn’t play cards in Nome, but not because she had “moral scruples”¹⁵ against it. Playing cards in Nome, Alaska in the winter was a popular pastime. To her credit, Mona was a considered a good cook and she would entertain when the mood struck her.¹⁶


¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.
The two women often took walks together, and visited with each other over the winter, but Aileen didn’t seem to care much for Mona by the end of that school year. Aileen writes in one letter home that she wasn’t mentioning Mona because, “I finally have given up trying to be sociable with her. She isn’t unfriendly, just indifferent.”

This unflattering external analysis of Mona’s character contrasts quite a bit with Florence’s reputation within the family. Sister-in-law Celia recalled her times with Florence as, “such good fun” and that Florence was always, “willing to have a jolly day.” Lyman’s comments regarding Florence’s time on Kanaga was that she always “enjoys herself to the limit out here.”

Unfortunately, Lyman wasn’t able to recognize how different Mona was from Florence. The obvious and simple attraction was that she was a single woman, and he a single man. It was likely that he also saw her as a new mother to his two children. She seemed eminently suited to motherhood with her career as a primary schoolteacher. Was it possible that he was unable to imagine any woman not reaching out to his motherless children? Perhaps he mistakenly thought that someone who taught children would naturally be able to love them as well. Whatever he thought, he didn’t think about it long enough or hard enough.

Eventually the children were put on a large steamship travelling from Seattle to Juneau in October of 1935 by Ralph and Sadie Miller. Given over to the care of a stewardess the two

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19. Ibid.
children were excited as they travelled north to reunite with their beloved daddy, and to meet their new mother.

On the steamship the food was good and everything they saw was so different than the farm in Shedd, Oregon that it has left a vivid memory in Donald’s mind. There were men in white gloves who rang bells to announce the meals served in a large dining room with uniformed waiters. Seven year-old Shirley embarrassed the deck full of passengers by turning cartwheels and revealing her bloomers for one and all to see. The stewardess quickly hustled her into the stateroom and gave her a lecture on proper behavior for young ladies. Donald, as usual, sat on the sidelines to see what else his sister would do. Shirley was known for her impulsive behavior and the longsuffering stewardess was likely very happy to deliver the two of them to Lyman and Mona in Juneau.

Over the years my mother told me several times about that journey, but her memories were limited when it came to Mona. She remembered going up the Lynn Canal on the big passenger steamship and was very excited to see the mountains and islands of the Alexander Archipelago came right up out of the water and she told me they were so beautiful. When talking about her father, even when she was in her fifties, my mother called him Daddy. She said, “Daddy met us at the dock and helped to catch the lines of the steamship, and it was wonderful because I hadn’t seen him in almost two years.” She never mentioned Mona in this story of joyful reunion, even though Mona also met them at the dock and they all lived together in the small two bedroom apartment provided by Lyman’s employer.

22. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2011.

23. Shirley A. Graves Moddemeyer, Personal communication, 1960’s.
Lyman worked in the Alaska Juneau (AJ) Gold Mine when they lived in Juneau. The AJ was a lode mine, which means that the gold is in the rock and not panned in creeks or picked up from the surface. The only way to get this gold is through dynamite, large equipment and men to operate the machinery, and set the fuses. It was a tough job and conditions were often dangerous.

Lyman applied for the position of laborer on September 19, 1935 at the AJ Mine. He listed his previous experience in mining at the Cripple River Mining Co., for four months of 1933 in Nome when he was earning wages to travel home to Florence and the children, and the Ruby Creek Syndicate for four months during 1934, without mention of the failed tool business.

Eventually, Lyman was promoted, or applied for the job of bulldozer, most likely because it paid the best money a man could hope to make. Sometimes large rocks got caught in the grills going to the crusher mill and the bulldozer needed to clear that area by blowing up the jam. The men who handled dynamite took a greater risk and were expected to be mature and level headed in the handling of the dangerous materials. Lyman was a mature age and motivated to provide for his new wife and two children, but there was some doubt as to his level-headedness.

The story goes on to tell how the bulldozer’s job was to set the fuses in the dynamite to clear this area. One time the fuse lit off too early and Lyman and his partner began to run as soon as they saw it burning. There were seven sticks of dynamite in that grill hole and the fuse was acting hinky; it hadn’t blown as fast as they thought it should. They got to a corner of the passage and Lyman went back to take a look. Just as he stepped around the corner, just as the last ember in the fuse reached the end, the dynamite went off and the blown rock rubble hit him in the face.

and chest knocking him flat. Donald commented years later that there were some who would have something to say about the wisdom of Lyman’s having gone back to look.  

I clearly remember my mother telling me about the dynamite accident, but never identifying Mona as the woman who picked gravel from his face and chest. She said, “His face was bright red and he had his shirt off. There was a woman there who used tweezers to pick the gravel from of his skin. Each rock left a small spot of blood that she would wash with a warm cloth, and it made a small ringing sound as the gravel landed in the bowl. He wasn’t a happy man and went to bed as soon as she was done.”

It was many decades later when I asked Donald what he remembered about Mona. He said, “She was a mean spirited vixen. I remember that she was always moving, fixing things, and tidying up. But, she would lose her temper real quick and then it wasn’t very nice. She was always screaming at Shirley. You know, we were just seven and five, and I can’t for the life of me know how a seven year old girl could make a grown-up so nasty.” Donald also told me a similar story about the dynamite, of a woman and his daddy in the small kitchen. She had bent over his daddy’s face plucking rocks and that is all that he remembered.

My mother told spare stories of the woman through the filter of a young child’s dislike, and when she did they were tales of anger and hurt. When history is viewed through a child’s lens of dislike it is natural to question the veracity of the observations. To ask a few questions and see if the now adult person might recognize their prejudice or verify their memory seems prudent. I never had the chance to pursue this with my mother. But, the negative impressions are still holding water. I believe my mother blocked the sad memory of that woman who screamed at

25. Personal communication, Donald M. Graves, 2014.

26. Shirley A. Graves Moddemeyer, Personal communication, 1960’s.

27. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, July 22, 2014.
her seven year-old self. Even Donald, eighty years later, didn’t recall that Mona was the one who cared for his father. In his telling of the story he identified her as “some woman.” When I asked him if that woman was Mona he paused a moment and said, “I guess it must have been.”

There are some facts about Lyman’s occupation that may explain some of Mona’s erratic behaviors. The invention of dynamite in 1865 led to numerous scientific investigations of the ailments of miners and their families. One report describes the most common problem as a severe headache. The headache comes on soon after exposure to the air of the closed mines where dynamite is used, but the miner can acclimatize to it with steady exposure. Savvy miners would wear rags rubbed on dynamite under their hats on days off, as a way to avoid the headaches when they went back to work. It also says that the clothing worn by miners had an effect on their wives, with severe headaches occurring for them while laundering the miner’s clothing. Also highlighted is that the miner’s wives would have particularly bad headaches as they used steam to press their husbands clothing, vaporizing the harmful chemicals in dynamite and inhaling them. Laundry was not done daily and the gaps in exposure resulted in the wives not being able to acclimatize and avoid the headaches.

We will never know if dynamite headaches contributed to Mona’s sour personality or to her inability to form any positive relationship with the children. However, we know there was no excuse for her eventual solution to the lack of a cordial family life in Juneau.

Donald told me more about their time Juneau when he told stories about Mona and Lyman’s cream-puff parties. I had to ask if he meant fancy parties, or that she literally made


30. Ibid.
cream puffs as the edibles of the party. He told me Mona was a good cook and would make
cream-puffs and she and Lyman would have punch and play cards with friends. “Of course,” he
added, “we two kids were sent off to bed, and the punch was spiked with liquor, but they sure
liked having those card parties every weekend.”

I remembered the comments from fellow teacher Aileen Spaeth, about Mona’s time in
Nome as a teacher, that she was a good cook but couldn’t be bothered to play cards. But now,
Mona was hostess to card parties and made effort every week to be social in her effort to build a
life as a married couple. Lyman protested her treatment of the children, but seemed unable to
change her behavior, especially towards his daughter. Lyman expected Mona to almost instantly
become a mother to his children and change her life from independent working woman to
housewife. With the heavy expectations that the two had for one another, they seemed a strange
mismatch in their effort to have a life together. Was it any surprise that things didn’t go well?

And then there was the last story Donald told me about their time living in Juneau. In this
story he did use Mona’s name and shared that in the springtime she and the two children were
planning to go home to visit the folks in Shedd, Oregon, for three months on an extended
vacation. Lyman and Mona weren’t getting along very well and one day, she packed up a
suitcase for herself and for the children. At the last minute they got on a small steamship in
Juneau that was sailing for Seattle.

Donald remembered that there were only about six staterooms, and the crew built paper
airplanes for the children to play with. Mona took good care of him when his neck swelled up,
and he doesn’t recall any angry outbursts on Mona’s part. After their arrival in Seattle, they all
took the train to Portland, and ended up back at the farm in Oregon. Instead of Mona staying to
visit, she left them with Ralph and Sadie Miller and disappeared.

31. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, June 18, 2014.
No one knows exactly where she went right after leaving the children on the farm. She was from Colorado and perhaps she went home to see her family there. The children only knew that their new mother hadn’t liked them very much and returned them to the farm.

Think of those two young children being dumped unceremoniously on their elderly grandparents without any care for how this act would impact them. What a disappointment for Lyman to find and marry a woman who did not want his children. By anyone’s measure, Mona’s refusal to aid Lyman’s dream of living together as a family seems a basis to terminate their relationship.

Strangely, however, Mona was able to reconcile with Lyman. Within just a few months she was back in Alaska and ready to build a life with him. It is a mystery how she managed this feat, to convince this man that what she had done wasn’t the end of them. It casts a somewhat yellowed tint on Lyman’s judgment that he could be convinced.

The reasons and the emotions of both adults are only vaguely understood or completely lost. My mother would always say that she and Donald never knew what had happened to Mona. It isn’t known if this was a refusal on her part to acknowledge the details of that time, or simple ignorance. She would always end her story about that time by saying that she didn’t see her daddy again for seven years. Every time she said this, she would purse her lips at the end of that telling and swallow, hard. Eighty years later Donald still has clear memories of how mean Mona was to them. Donald has expressed surprise as the facts and connections of that time become clearer as the papers reflecting many of Lyman’s decisions have been located and read.32

It is safe to say these facts have led to some disappointment in Lyman’s choices. It appears from what is known that he freely accepted Mona back into his life. There was no child of their union binding them. She refused to make a home for his children. He chose to stay with

her and left his children on the farm in Oregon to anxiously await the day that he would return, and their life would be complete.
Chapter 5 – The Gate to Heaven

From 1935 through 1941 in his, “Twenty-five Years of Progress” Lyman recorded the first four years as “failure,” before even one effort finally is accorded the nod of “success.” He mentioned a few details of his financial losses, but only briefly touches on one life-threatening incident and neglects entirely to mention another. It was as if he was trying to deflect knowledge about his real life, to leave out details of the choices he was hoping that no one would ever know about. Or, perhaps it was the pain of reflecting on those years that was too much for him to commit to paper.

For April of 1936, Lyman failed to make any entry that reflects that his new wife, Mona, had left him. Or, that she had taken his children away to Oregon where she left them and disappeared. He simply recorded that he left Juneau for Nome, and had a job on a dredge. He did not record why he left the job at the AJ Mine. One scenario was that Lyman was heartbroken at Mona’s desertion and he quit his job and left Juneau for a change of scenery. The other was that the dynamite accident may have resulted in his firing from the mine.

The decision by President Roosevelt to devalue the dollar by raising the price of gold was a boom of another kind for the gold mining industry. The location of hard to access gold in Alaska was known, but the price was too low for the effort involved in digging it out from solid rock. The raise in price from $20.67 to $35 per troy ounce \(^1\) stimulated gold mining jobs in Alaska for men who were willing to work hard for them. With Mona’s desertion, Lyman was now free to seek fortune where he found it. He would have purchased passage on a steamer,

perhaps the same one he had travelled to Nome on in July of 1933 when he was an investor in the Casa dredge.

However, it soon became apparent that Nome was not a lucky place for Lyman in his efforts to become a gold miner and a success. This time he did not receive a telegram informing him of his loss of investment and opportunity. Instead, upon his arrival in Nome he reported for work only to learn that the other dredge had “changed hands”\(^2\) and the job he had travelled nearly a thousand miles for was gone. He counted this event as a failure, too.

Between April and August of 1936 there is a lack of information about what Lyman was actually doing. He may have left Nome immediately, or been required to find odd jobs for enough cash to pay his passage.

Another man might have gone to Oregon to comfort his children and reassure them. But that wasn’t what Lyman did. What is known is that he eventually ended on the Kenai Peninsula, disappearing into the wilderness to traverse dense underbrush, climb craggy peaks and float along placid lakes and rivers. What he saw in that ramble touched a part of him that had lain dormant for years.

During Lyman’s retreat in the mountains, glaciers, lakes, and forests of the Kenai Peninsula he looked to his future and saw that he must change the work he did. He needed to give new purpose to his life. There were looming changes in how the federal government looked at the conservation of resources in the early 1930’s, and Lyman may have realized that this might be his last chance to acquire “free” land in his beloved Alaska. He went inland to the Kenai Peninsula where he joined other settlers in Alaska who were determined to establish themselves permanently. Finding land in Alaska that was close to established settlements was difficult

\(^2\) E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
because there were so few roads or railways. Access to land was commonly accomplished through river travel which required a certain level of risk.

At the very least, his entry in “Twenty-five Years of Progress” reflected a change in Lyman’s chosen way of living in Alaska. He forswore the sea and gold mining with the intention of claiming land in Alaska. In September of 1936 he wrote that he went to Skilak Lake on the Kenai Peninsula, south of Tustemena Lake in the Chugach Mountains, to do some writing and trapping. Skilak Lake is a part of the Kenai River system, four miles long with the surrounding lands teeming with wildlife that a man could hunt or trap. Some of the run-off into Skilak is glacial, but not enough silt is present to confuse the clarity of the waters, or cloud the mind of a man.

It seemed that Lyman was going away to the wilderness to lick his wounds and try to heal. It was an attractive solution, a small cabin far from any civilization and opportunity to reflect on the outcome of his second marriage and the failed effort at a united family life. He may have thought he would do all of this in splendid isolation while gazing at the beautiful mountains of the Kenai Peninsula. He would fell tall spruce with his ax and be twice warmed, once in the chill autumn and again in the dark and frigid winter. When the snow fell and covered the world he would have written about the inequities and tragedies that befell him. This beautiful place would succor him. The moose and sheep populations were not yet protected wildlife, so it is likely he sought to hunt both for the winter’s meat.

What is known is that Lyman reconciled with Mona. She may have gone to Colorado to visit her family as was speculated, but she also returned to Alaska that summer and convinced Lyman to give their marriage more effort. His acceptance of the woman who had been mean to his children, and refused to provide them with a home, defies the imagination. The vows of

3. E. Lyman Graves,” Twenty-Five Years of Progress.”
marriage, for better or for worse, must have been sorely tried in Lyman’s conscience. Lyman still intended to spend the winter at Skilak, still intended to run a trap line and write, but Mona was going to accompany him and share in the isolation.

On September 26, 1936 Mona wrote a chatty ten page letter from the small town of Coopers Landing, on the Kenai Peninsula, to Lyman’s mother outlining their plans for the coming winter of 1936 through spring of 1937. She started by explaining:

This letter will probably have to be from Lyman too, because he is so busy getting ready for a winter at Skilak Lake. This morning he left in a little home-made boat with two other boys for the first trip with freight down the river. It will take only a few hours for them to go down but it will take about three days for them to line the boat back up the river.4

Mona added, “If you do not hear from us for months, don’t worry, it will simply be that we haven’t had a chance to get a letter out. We will be all right and will have everything we need.”5 But, in the next paragraph she says, “If you haven’t sent the box yet, don’t send it until later, as I don’t believe we will have enough cash right now to pay for it. . . . However, we have no dishes at all, and would like to get those if possible.”6 From highly confident to a confession of being nearly penniless, there was a strange discrepancy in the information Mona wanted to communicate.

In the matter of housing Mona was, “anxious for Lyman to get back so I can have a description of the house. He was there last spring, but at that time paid no attention to the house further than to notice that was a little tiny log cabin.”7 One of Lyman’s friends, who had travelled with him the previous summer, had gone inside and told her there was only “a stove

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
and no floor.” It seemed that Lyman had not been worried too much about the condition of the cabin he had planned to hide away in. Priorities changed when Mona was going to come along.

Mona next listed all of the things she expected Lyman to do once they arrived at the tiny cabin on Skilak Lake:

The next few weeks will keep us all very busy. Lyman must make a good freeze-proof cellar, put a floor in our cabin, get wood for the winter. Chuck and Bob will make several trips with freight and then hurry to either repair an old cabin or make a new one. I will be busy cooking, washing, preparing lunches and all the rest. And I will be handicapped by having very few cooking utensils and working in a primitive way.

Mona also added her assessment of Lyman’s mental state. “Lyman is feeling much better than he did in the spring. He is getting very restless to get moved down to Skilack . . .” It isn’t clear what Lyman’s mother knew of their problems, but it was clear that Mona had put the best face possible on their difficulties. Mona presented a picture of a devoted and adoring wife who was looking forward for the chance to be with her husband in this remote location. It is known that the children did not see their daddy for the rest of the time he was married to her.

On the day that Mona wrote that letter, Lyman and the two men launched their boat loaded with freight. They expected the first trip down would only take them a few hours as they leisurely navigated the slow placid waters of the Kenai River. They knew they would have to fight the rough rapids that came next, but felt prepared. There was a tangible level of excitement among the men, based on the sheer adventure of it all. But then, reality intruded, and Lyman’s next grand adventure began to fall apart.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
Lyman’s entry in “Twenty-five Years of Progress” was succinct: “Lost the outfit in the River. Failure.” That simple statement belied the complexity of the impact of this event on Lyman’s future life. Mona also wrote several postscripts on the letter to her mother-in-law detailing the mishaps of the men, and the changes to their plans for the coming winter. The first postscript, dated September 28, 1936, breaks the news:

The boys returned yesterday, after having wrecked the boat, and lost our food and clothing in the canyon below here.

It is a miracle they escaped with their lives, but as long as they did, we just call ourselves lucky and go on.

I don’t know just how things will be, but we will be alright, and don’t worry about us.”

It took Lyman almost five more years before he wrote at length the story of the three men losing their outfit as they travelled to Skilak Lake on the Kenai River. He titled the piece “The Gate of Heaven” and this is how he began it:

If it weren’t for the rapids, I would almost hesitate to tell you about it, or where it is. Of course a few neighbors would be all right, though too many would spoil it.

But the rapids protect us.

The Gate of Heaven stands at the foot of the four miles of rapids on the upper Kenai River. It is always open. The Kenai flows through it, becoming in the transition a broad peaceful river after having been for four miles a brawling, roaring giant defying you to ride its swift slant with your little boat and puny human muscles. We rode through the Gate on that late September afternoon, but on the bottom of our badly wrecked boat and with only the few things left of our winter’s outfit which the river had scorned to take from us. We were thankful to have even our lives.

Lyman recounts the laziness of the river before they met the rapids, the quiet curling of their cigarette smoke on the still air and the distant roar ahead. Rounding a bluff they

11. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
encountered the blinding sun that concealed the true channel that they sought. They struck a submerged shelf and the river filled their boat:

I dug desperately into the water in the hope of swinging out of the current far enough to land as the river made another turn. The left oar struck a submerged boulder and snapped like a pipestem. A spare was shipped, but it was too late. In the deep water of the channel, our load was sinking us. . . . We hung for a turning moment on a rock; then the boat turned slowly and then quickly over and-lightened-bounced,-bottom-up, to the surface, with her crew making a wild clamber to get on.\textsuperscript{14}

The men rode the rapids as chunks of the boat were ripped loose, their feeble efforts thwarted as they tried to influence its direction towards any kind of salvation. They saw a patch of still water behind a log jam and flailed with arms and broken paddles trying to reach it. They failed, and as they drifted past, clinging to the keel of the boat they spied a young black bear on the river’s bank. In unison they shouted curses at the bear to relieve their stress, then howled with laughter as the bear startled away from the sight of them, and their impending demise. More chunks of the boat broke away as they shot through a steep sided canyon to a wider section. They seemed to find a shallow shelf extending to the bank and Lyman made his biggest effort yet:

The water appeared to be less than knee deep. On a desperate chance, I took the painter and plunged into the water, bracing myself against the drag of the current, slipping over boulders covered with a frictionless slime, straining toward shore. I was going to make it! As a loop of the painter entangled my feet, I sought to free myself by plunging down and rolling out of it. Every move brought me nearer to shore, but the water, like some tireless insistent choking beast, kept seeking to thwart me. I saw that there was less than thirty feet left to go. It must get shallower! I was as good as out!

Then, suddenly, there was no bottom! I went into a deep channel cut between the bar and the shore. My course was downstream as well as lateral. . . the current carried me quickly to the end of the painter, and I began to go up, hand over hand. The water poured over me and forced me under . . .

I knew by the feel of the water and the bruising impact of boulders that we were in the chute of the rapids. I thought, dully, ‘Is this the way it’s going to be?’

\textsuperscript{14} E. Lyman Graves, short story, “The Gate of Heaven,” 1939.
My outthrust hand, reaching for another hold up the painter, bumped the blunt bow of the boat, and my face came out into air.15

Lyman reflected on his feelings about the country around Skilak Lake at the end of his essay. He said it is made for people to live in: “It has the same lovely enchantment that beconed (sic) the covered wagons across the long barrier of plains into the Oregon country.”16 In his tale of survival Lyman fully reveals his love of Alaska, so much so that he suffers tragedy and heartbreak in abundance, but without sufficient regret to leave Alaska behind and go to his children.

What Lyman doesn’t reveal in the telling of his glorious tale were the practical consequences of the sinking of the boat and the loss of their winter supplies. Mona said it succinctly in her final post script in her letter to her mother-in-law: “And now what? We don’t know. But neither of us are worried – only slightly impatient to get out after a job of some kind… Again, don’t worry about us. It is interesting, and trying, and inconvenient – but not tragic – Love, Mona.”17

There is no evidence of other letters from Mona, and it may have been the only letter that she wrote to her mother-in-law. Within it was a brief glimpse of a woman who seemed accepting, acceptable and genuine. But, she also left a legacy of sadness.

Finding a job was of paramount importance for the winter of 1936-1937 but there was another blank in Lyman’s list of “Twenty-five Years of Progress.” This omission seems curious as he was generally forthcoming about what jobs he had, and how long they lasted. But, it also seemed another indicator that Lyman was unwilling to share everything that happened. There

15. Mona McCausland Graves to Helen Graves, September 26, 1936.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
was no evidence of exactly what Mona did, but it was possible that she accepted a teaching position somewhere else that fall and left Lyman behind to figure things out.

Without reference to any external employment for the winter past, in April of 1937 Lyman inexplicably shifted his home site location to Grant Creek and wrote that he was harvesting logs at Grant Lake to build a cabin at the home site. 18 This new property was within thirty miles of Skilak Lake and the original cabin and land he desired, but the story behind this change is lost. It is known that Lyman fiercely fought for this five acre parcel of land lying along Grant Creek, very near Moose Pass. It became his beloved home and his last refuge in Alaska.

For April of 1937 Lyman wrote, “Got enough lumber from Grant Lake to build the cabin in Moose Pass. Success.” 19 Lyman next cryptically referenced in June of the same year, “Spent two months logging on Grant Lake before the inevitable outcome was clear. Failure.” 20 Lyman never told the family what had happened to define this failure. He never logged lumber at Grant Lake again, but it certainly wasn’t the last time he was involved with that location. But, for that portion of his past, Lyman continued to be vague about what he did to survive, and continued to fail to mention Mona in any capacity.

For September of 1938 he wrote “Survived until July on a few small Forest Service jobs. etc (sic).” He also noted an injury. “Went to the hospital with back and hip dislocation. Net for the season $100.00. Failure.” 21

Years later my mother expanded his meager details of the story when she wrote a biographical article in a local Anchorage shopping paper The Great Lander, about the time after

18. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.
he lost the winter supplies. “He signed on to help build a piece of road known as the ‘Missing Link.’ It was only a matter of days until a huge culvert pipe rolled on my father and crushed his back. I can remember letters from the Seward hospital where he languished for six months in casts.”

There is some discrepancy between her dates and Lyman’s, but dates from distant memory can be hard to pin down and Lyman’s dates and record of events seem the authority in this case. What seems incontrovertibly accurate is that Lyman had an interminably long string of bad luck.

Lyman related his injury in 1938 as a dry recitation of fact, as if it was inevitable that this type of thing would happen. He did not reference any events from the time he spent in the hospital in Seward, nor the size of the doctor’s bill that he must have paid. He certainly wasn’t able to work and it was 1939 before Lyman was able to walk. This was the second time in his thirty-six years of life that he had been required to learn how to walk after an illness. As seen in his extended hospital stay from the ruptured appendix and peritonitis, sheer grit and determination were the only things that allowed him to struggle up from the enforced bed rest and plant his feet on the ground. He also realized that he must leave his beloved home site at Moose Pass to find work, but he did not abandon it.

Lyman waited until 1939 to write “The Gate to Heaven” while he was working as a carpenter at Kanatak for Standard Oil. Kanatak is an Alutiiq village on the Alaska Peninsula where Standard Oil was developing oil resources in the 1920’s and 1930’s.23 With his ability to walk and be gainfully employed restored after his hospitalization in Seward, Lyman began to see

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life in a more positive way. This return to functionality, and perhaps an acceptance of the inevitable ending of his marriage, allowed him to write the almost tragic story at Skilak Lake and express his emotional perspective of the incident. Whatever he was doing – be it walking, working or writing – he was ready to make adjustments in his life. He counted this a success.\(^{24}\)

In August of 1939 Mona became completely absent from Lyman’s life after she accepted a teaching position in Bethel, according to the 1940 census. She was listed as Ramona Graves, married, the head of the household, but living alone. Her income is $560.00 per year.\(^{25}\) She had abandoned any pretense of a marriage to Lyman and by 1941 she had established through her actions the grounds by which he would divorce her.

Lyman was still in love with Alaska and his children were still at the farm in Oregon. Shirley was almost a teenager and Donald was not far behind. Both were becoming more than a handful for his now elderly in-laws, Ralph and Sadie. Sadie had spent years protecting Shirley from her grandfather’s strict discipline because she held that women should not be struck. But, she was unable to protect Donald, often subject to his grandfather’s harsh punishments. Shirley could count on her grandmother for protection, while Donald would run to the woods for his solace. Both children were in sore need of their father and Sadie was worried about both of them.

Perhaps Lyman made the decision on how to put his life back on track in 1939, or even as late as 1940. The details of that process were closely guarded by Lyman, and he never shared them with his family. It may have been that he was thinking of his children. He may have had letters from Sadie, or from the children, begging him to come for them. However it was done, the needs of the children were communicated to him. One of the most important things he did during

\(^{24}\) E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”

that time was to visit the law office of R.E. Baumgartner in Juneau, Alaska on October 1, 1940. He filed in the District Court, Territory of Alaska, Third Division, a Complaint No. 2513 (S) against Ramona Graves for dissolution of the bonds of matrimony now and heretofore existing between plaintiff and defendant.\(^{26}\)

In addition to consulting with an attorney, filing the complaint, and waiting for the court date in 1940, Lyman was the low bidder on a schoolhouse job at Unga, Alaska.\(^ {27}\) Unga was little more than 700 hundred miles to the east-northeast of Kanaga Island, the place where Lyman had worked at fox farming in the early 1930’s and where he had fallen in love with Alaska. Both places were surrounded by the oceans and seas, with the same birds and marine life. The winds always blew in circles over both islands. He must have felt that these things were a good omen.

Lyman was always optimistic that he would make a lot of money and that money would improve his life. It is likely that at first he considered this opportunity a success. His entry to “Twenty-five Years of Progress” states that he was building a school there.\(^ {28}\)

Lyman needed a camp cook and the population of Unga was quite small. A missionary named Hazel May Paramore who was stationed on Unga Island applied for the position. Her salary for spreading the good word and doing the good work only paid $250.00 per year\(^ {29}\), and employment for the summer would be a welcome supplement to her meager living. Hazel did a

\(^{26}\) United States of America, Territory of Alaska, District Court, Territory of Alaska, Third Division, Complaint No. 2513 (S). E. Lyman Graves vs Ramona Graves.

\(^{27}\) E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”

\(^{28}\) Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2013.

good job staying within Lyman’s budget to feed his construction crew even though she was not a great cook. If she needed to feed six people, she would lay out twelve slices of bread, six slices of cheese, six pieces of bologna, and a spoonful of mayonnaise for each sandwich. To her credit she ate sparingly herself, but pride in her frugality superseded the caloric needs of working men. She also did well in catching Lyman’s eye.

Hazel Paramore was a woman of God, an ordained minister of the Methodist faith from Kansas and at serious risk of becoming an old maid as she approached her mid-thirties. She came to Alaska as a missionary to save souls, and perhaps to seek out a husband among the adventurers in Alaska. She was a lodger with the Peterson family in their home on Unga, and as she observed their family life she may have yearned for a family of her own. Perhaps the Petersons’ one boy and one girl seemed perfect to her inexperienced eye.  

She was stern of face, strict in her moral character, a plain cook, and an avid gardener. It was clear that Hazel Paramore would have had nothing to do with a married man and Lyman probably realized he would have to come to her unsullied by an estranged wife before he could count on her for any solutions. There may have been some kind of a prenuptial agreement between them, but it would have been completely proper and the details of such would have been confidential. Lyman had again sculpted his personal history to reflect only the jobs, but not the tangles and trials of ending one marriage, and working towards another.

Lyman continued his entry for 1940 by revealing that his financial backer for building the school at Unga had fleeced everybody he had ever dealt with. As an independent contractor


31. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
Lyman was dependent on recruiting investors to put up money for the purchase of lumber, nails, roofing and all other expenses. When the bills were finally paid by the federal agency in charge, both parties would be successful. Lyman could look forward to a profit without having the cash up front, and the investor would make money just for lending their money for a short time. Lyman never shared exactly what happened that resulted in him being fleeced as well. However, this venture ended in failure by the time he left Unga and is accordingly written as such in “Twenty-five Years of Progress.” If the school was ever completed it isn’t mentioned, and more importantly, Hazel is never mentioned.

In the meanwhile, the legal processes in the Territory of Alaska were grinding forward. The Complaint filed in April 1941 in the District Court for the Territory of Alaska Third Division stated the obvious type of information building the grounds for divorce; the plaintiff (Lyman) had been a resident for more than two years, the plaintiff and defendant (Mona) were married at Juneau the 19th day of June 1935, and there were “no children the issue of said marriage” and “no property rights requiring adjudication.”

The finding of this document put to rest a rumor in family story that there may have been a child from the marriage of Lyman and Mona. There was once speculation that a child was born and died very soon after birth. Death certificates keep their secrets for a hundred years by state law. If there was a still birth or very early crib death we will never know until that time has passed. However, the divorce documents clearly state that there was no child of this marriage.

In many conversations Donald had dreamily speculated that he had a half-sibling somewhere that had never been aware of their family in Alaska. When told about the lack of

32. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”

33. United States District Court, Territory of Alaska, Third Division, a Complaint No. 2513 (S). E. Lyman Graves vs Ramona Graves.
evidence, and the statement of no other children of this union in the divorce decree, Donald was silent for a few moments and he looked away. It was as if he was more than simply disappointed.

Every divorce document has a section describing the basic problem in a marriage. Here is Section IV, in its entirety.

That there is an incompatibility of temperament existing between the plaintiff and defendant to such an extent, that the marriage of the parties has, for more than three years last past, been a complete failure, and the parties have been unable to live together as husband and wife because of the differences in their temperaments, and for numerous other reasons, among which are the following: (a) that plaintiff has a minor son and daughter by a former marriage, and that defendant objected to plaintiff having said children in the home of plaintiff and defendant; that defendant’s intense dislike of plaintiff’s seven-year-old daughter caused great bitterness and friction in the homelife of the parties; and (b) that defendant voluntarily separated herself from plaintiff so often that the homelife of the parties was a total failure; and (c) that defendant insisted upon teaching school at great distances from plaintiff, and against plaintiff’s wishes, and since August 1939 remained away from plaintiff continuously, teaching school at Bethel and at Kodiak, Alaska.

Imagine the reaction from Mona when she was served with these papers on April 5, 1941. She made her living caring for and educating young children. In those days a divorced woman was still at a disadvantage and a woman who was charged with disliking a child would not receive much sympathy from a school superintendent considering whether or not to employ her. Her future as a teacher would possibly be looking quite grim.

Strangely, Mona did not file an answer or other pleading from an attorney within the thirty days allowed for such action. It seemed like she had no defense to the charges made. The courts issued an Order of Default on May 14, 1941 in open court at Anchorage, Alaska. However, on that same day Mona filed a Motion to Set Aside Default, and the courts allowed Mona the opportunity to respond when they reviewed the documents on May 20, 1941. They granted her until June 2, 1941, possibly after the school term was over, to present her case in the

34. United States of America, Territory of Alaska, Third Judicial Division, District Court, Territory of Alaska, Third Division, a Complaint No. 2513 (S), E. Lyman Graves vs Ramona Graves. 2.
courts. In the end, Mona did not contest the divorce, and in her Answer to the Complaint she simply stated, “Defendant denies the allegations of paragraph IV. Thereof.” It isn’t clear how she came to that conclusion, or why the courts gave credence to her view. The testimony of a witness and the act of abandoning the children seemed to support the veracity of the complaint made in the original document filed by Lyman.

Instead, the courts allowed Mona to demand two hundred dollars from Lyman, as repayment of “money advanced by said defendant to the marriage venture.” Perhaps this was a repayment for the winter supplies lost at Skilak Lake, or a way to recoup the price of Lyman’s hospital stay in Seward. It is puzzling that he did so, but Lyman signed the paperwork on July 16, 1941, paid the money and was quit of Mona McCausland Graves. Perhaps he was weary of the fight and only wished to move forward.

35. Answer. Plaintiff’s Complaint – In the District Court, Territory of Alaska Third Division. July 8, 1941.
36. Amended Complaint – In the District Court, Territory of Alaska Third Division, July 16, 1941.
37. Ibid.
Chapter 6 – Coming Together

July of 1941 was a busy month for Lyman. He divorced Mona McCausland and married Hazel Paramore just days later. Lyman and Hazel were married in Seward, Alaska.\(^1\) Despite the fact that they had obviously known each other while Lyman had still been married to Mona, no one in the family would have ever suggested anything improper about their courtship.

What is evident is that Lyman had planned ahead this time. Before the wedding he arranged for Hazel to visit Donald and Shirley in their exile at the Miller’s farm. Both Shirley and Donald remembered Mona and her treatment of them. They weren’t very interested in this new mother.

“We figured she knew what challenges she was signing up for,” Donald said years later. It would also be fair to say that Hazel did not understand the enormity of the effort she would have to expend to try and become a mother to an attractive teen-aged girl and pre-teen boy whose past had included abandonment, extreme poverty, and a lack of connection to their father.

Lyman learned from his mistakes, and when he married Hazel he did what he could to make sure she understood the situation. From his action it was evident that their relationship took precedence. He left the children with their grandparents for the next two years.

But, it may have been the looming hostilities with Japan that kept Lyman from sending for the children. This was a valid concern as the news reported on the threat from Japan to the coastal settlements of the territory of Alaska. On June 3, 1942, only eleven months after Lyman and Hazel’s wedding, Japan invaded Attu and Kiska. It was often difficult to function in the wartime territory of Alaska for adults who struggled to find jobs, decent housing, and groceries, but for two children waiting to be reunited with their father, the difficulty became even more pronounced.

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For the year 1941 Lyman wrote in “Twenty-five Years of Progress” that he had taken small jobs and was unable to obtain materials, so he was forced to shut down as an independent carpenter. He didn’t divulge where he was working at this time, just that closing down meant failure. But, the challenges faced by Lyman cannot be laid only at his doorstep. The entire Territory of Alaska was suffering from a lack of materials as the lower 48 states were gearing their production towards the war effort in Europe. Despite this, Lyman estimated the challenges he faced during this time as his own, and thus a failure.  

Lyman went to work for the Army Transport Service (ATS) in February of 1942. According to a history of the Army Corps of Engineers:

By early 1940 the War Department had agreed on a long-range program having five major objectives: to augment the Alaska garrison; to establish a major base for Army operations near Anchorage; to develop a network of air bases and operating fields within Alaska; to garrison the airfields with combat forces; and to provide troops to protect the naval installations at Sitka, Kodiak, and Dutch Harbor.

Lyman’s work for the ATS put him in charge of wartime operation at the Port of Seward, Territory of Alaska. He was tasked with supervising the unloading of freight at both the military and civilian docks and in this way facilitated the mission of the ATS. The Seward docks had a severe shortage of space in which to unload the materials needed by the military and civilian projects. The big push to develop military bases, roadways and other corridors of transport in the territory along with building materials to create housing and bases had created a bottleneck at the

2. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
3. Ibid.
6. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2014
docks. Freight came in at a rate faster than the existing transport system could disperse it to their intended locations. The pressure to serve the military need was high at that time of war and Lyman often worked sixteen or more hours per day to get the freight onto the Alaska Railroad to Anchorage or Fairbanks, or onto steamships sailing out to the Aleutian bases.

Finally, in 1943 Lyman decided that it was time to unite the children with their new mother. At last, Lyman’s income was steady, and they had decent housing in Seward. Lyman and Hazel felt secure in their relationship and ready to present a united front to the children. Ralph and Sadie Miller, after ten years, were done raising their grand-children. Shirley had grown into a young woman of fifteen years, and Donald was thirteen.

Perhaps it was also the fact that Donald had recently quit school, at the urging of his grandfather that also forced the decision. Ralph Miller had convinced his grandson that his future was in the farm and not in a schoolroom. It could be that Ralph genuinely believed that school was not important for Donald’s future, or it could be that Ralph was seeking a twisted revenge against Lyman by trying to diminish the son’s future.

Years later Donald said, “On arrival in Seward, I proudly showed my callused hands as proof of my ability to work like a man. Lyman had commented, ‘Calluses are a sign of ignorance.’

“It wasn’t one of Lyman’s most tender moments.”


9. Ibid.

10. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, July 22, 2014.

Shirley kept a scrapbook when she moved to Seward. The first page was filled with the papers in her wallet upon arrival, arranged with notes about who she had met and who was her good friend. The second page had three party invitations with the notation, “Three Parties to Which I was Invited and Was Unable to Attend.” The first invitation was dated September and was from “The Boys of Battery E.” Nicely printed up on card stock, they extended the invitation for her to participate in their “Autumnal Antics” at their dining hall with escort provided. Then, in October, a Sunday school invitation that was hand drawn with an admission of one apple to attend a supper party. Finally, in December she had received one from the United States Coast Guard to their Christmas Dance. 12 Apparently Hazel, the humorless Methodist minister, had decided that propriety must be observed when it came to military parties that fall and had refused to allow Shirley to attend. Perhaps an argument, or some other infraction, had caused Shirley to miss the Sunday school dinner.

In January of 1944 Shirley’s social life began to blossom. Her scrapbook pages show invitations to many parties, photos with friends, and the program from her performance at the U.S.O. Club. There were also programs from the Methodist Church services, and newspaper articles describing her attendance at small group outings, all carefully chaperoned by some older couple. In her senior year of high school, the now sixteen year old Shirley had been allowed to perform at the USO Club by playing the piano and singing the 1900’s tune “A Bird in the Gilded Cage.” 13 Hazel and Lyman took the duty of properly chaperoning Shirley seriously. This was not because Shirley was poorly behaved, but because she was attractive and naïve. She was always escorted to and from home to the club by her father or Donald, and always returned home before it was improper for her to be out. She was popular with the young officers who never imagined

12. Shirley A. Graves Moddemeyer, Personal papers.
13. Ibid.
finding such a charming young woman in such a backwater location. It is clear that Hazel had relaxed her vigilance a bit, or perhaps Lyman finally intervened in the strict guidelines she had established.

All of this does not say that the two women became close. Shirley sang romantic ballads to soldiers, while Hazel sang hymns at church services. Shirley had an avid following of young officers and Hazel had been single until she was in her late thirties. Shirley loved her daddy with a fierce possessiveness. Hazel loved her new husband and had enjoyed their two years of bonding as a married couple. Shirley was jealous of Hazel and Hazel was jealous of Shirley. Hazel relied heavily on her religious beliefs to guide her in dealings with Shirley. There were no spontaneous outbursts of affection or praise from Hazel, who preferred order and reserve instead of emotional displays. Shirley had little to guide her but emotions and rebellion. Normal expectation would fault Shirley as young and immature and credit Hazel with wisdom and understanding, but Donald once commented laconically that, “Hazel wasn’t an easy woman to love. Don’t judge Shirley too harshly.”

In March of 1944 things came to a head when Shirley was preparing for her crowning as the “Queen of the Drakes” for the Seward military basketball team. Clippings from the Daily Polaris, showed the headline that “Col. Crawford Will Crown Cage Queen.” Also clipped and glued down was the article printed right before the game:

Anchorage Champs Meet Drakes & Drake’s Queen

. . . Miss Shirley Graves, pretty editor of the High School paper, “Town’s Folly”, and poetess laureate of the paper, was unanimously picked by the basketeers as “Queen of the Drakes”, thus becoming the official mascotess of the quintet.

With Shirley as mascotess, it is easy to see where the Drakes will draw their inspiration from when they meet the Anchorage champions. The ceremonies

14 Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2014.

15. Seward USO Newsletter, Daily Polaris, March 1944.
begin at 8 Friday night, immediately followed by the fireworks. Admission is free ---- and well worthwhile.\textsuperscript{16}

What young woman wouldn’t be giddy with such praise and attention? That evening, before the event, Shirley had tried on every item of clothing she owned to see if she could make something new of the old. She had hoped for a new dress from the store, but prices were high and cash was always in short supply. Hazel had offered to make a dress for her, but Shirley hadn’t wanted Hazel to be a part of her moment. Finally, she pulled one dress from her closet that she hadn’t worn before and as she looked at herself in the small mirror hoped it didn’t look too old fashioned. Turning her head she lifted her hair and tied it with ribbons that she quickly yanked out. Next she pinned it up with dozens of bobby pins, then tore them out and pushed it back with combs that allowed her curls to frame her face. Make-up was scarce and frowned upon by Hazel, but Shirley rouged her lips and cheeks before she clasped a simple necklace around her throat. Her escort knocked on the front door, and she was out of time to change her mind again. She rushed down the stairs, grabbed her coat from the front hall and ran out the door to the high school gym.

In the echo of the slamming door Hazel finished her chores in the kitchen and checked that things were in order in the parlor. With a sigh she climbed the steps to see what Shirley’s room looked like. The bed was unmade and clothing was tossed both across the bed and into the corners. The towel from Shirley’s bath was lying on the floor, leaving a wet mark on the wood. There was a dirty glass leaving a ring on the dresser. Hazel felt her heart swell with anger.

In that moment of uncharitable disgruntlement Hazel marched into her bedroom and took out a piece of stationary. She wrote, “The Queen of the Drakes, lives in a Pigpen”\textsuperscript{17} and tacked it onto Shirley’s door as she firmly shut it.

\textsuperscript{16} Seward USO Newsletter, Daily Polaris, March 1944.

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Shirley had a magical evening. She wore her crown and a real flower corsage, and danced in the gym with many of the young men. There was punch and cookies and streamers crossed the ceiling. At the end of the evening she floated home on a cloud of euphoria and drifted up the stairs to her bedroom. Hazel and Lyman were quietly reading in the living room as they waited up for her, but she didn’t stop to talk with them. From the top of the stairs she noticed the note on her door and walked to it. After reading it, her face darkened and with a resounding bang, she slammed her door. Her muffled sobs could be heard.

It was possible Shirley marched back down the stairs, holding the note in her fist. She may have shouted at Hazel for being mean and ruining her wonderful evening. She might have pleaded with her daddy to make Hazel apologize. Or, perhaps, Shirley had learned at a young age that creating too much trouble with a woman married to her daddy could have consequences. For the first time in seven years, Shirley was finally living in Alaska with him, having some fun at school and in the community, and most importantly had gotten away from the dismal drudgery of farm life with her grandparents. In her experience, it may have been worth the price of the muffled sobs to ensure that she was allowed to stay with her daddy.

The conflict between Shirley and Hazel was ongoing and Lyman was usually not there to intervene. He left most of the decisions to Hazel, who had ample opportunity through her discipline and responses to emotional situations, to evoke resentment and bitterness in Shirley. Lyman never seemed to understand that he was the focus of their rivalry. Or, if he did understand, he never knew how to deal with it.

17. Shirley A. Graves Moddemeyer, Personal communication, 1960’s.
In June of 1944 things in Seward began to change. Lyman was known to speak bluntly at times, and not necessarily wisely about things he saw as obvious problems. It could be that he didn’t have the sophistication to jolly people into doing what he wanted, nor had the time to spend asking them nicely to comply. He could be short tempered in situations where someone dithered about a solution, when to him it was an easy choice. He may have simply told people what to do, and expected they would see the rightness of it. He wrote in “Twenty-five Years of Progress” that a false “reorganization” forced him to resign after two and a half years with the ATS.

Lyman next went to work at the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) in the Property Management office in Anchorage, where he stayed for three years. He relocated his family to Anchorage for this position. He did not designate this as either a success or a failure. One wonders if it may have been a relief to remove his newly graduated daughter from the small town of Seward, teeming with young military men.

Soon after the move it was decided that since Shirley had graduated from school a year early, she should work for at least a year before attending college. Her junior high school teacher from Shedd, Oregon said, “Shirley needed to be kept busy you know, or else she found other things to occupy her. So, I just kept giving her more work to do and she did eighth and ninth grades all in one year.” Lyman found her a position at Merrill Field, close to the CAA headquarters in the file room where she would learn more responsibility and had time to mature.

18. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2014
19. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
20. Ibid.
Hazel continued to try and correct Shirley’s deficiencies as a housekeeper and a cook, and reduce her melodramatic reactions to obstacles in life.

It would be almost twenty-five years before Hazel and Shirley partially resolved their conflict. In 1973, Hazel wrote the following letter:

Dear Shirley:

Since the night you became so angry that you couldn’t finish the meal, I’ve been hard put to understand such reaction. The statement you have made several times, and again on that evening, “I want to be accepted as I am” has brought about some soul-searching. I can see where my religion as exemplified in my daily life has not been exemplary in your eyes, because from the first when you became a part of our household, I did not accept you as you are. Careless about yourself and housekeeping, you seemed to be living on a pretty pink cloud, expecting people to show you special attention and acting as tho’ (sic) every boy you met was about to “fall” for you. I wondered if you would some day come down to earth and mature normally.

You did. Marriage and family certainly provided the school, and your Daddy and I remarked many times how the potential abilities, understanding and good judgment showed up in many ways in which you met the problems and general situations in your home. It has been gratifying to see what maturity has revealed in you. One of your outstanding attributes is compassion for others. You seem to have a natural knack for knowing just what someone needs most when he is hurting in any way – a most admirable characteristic. Along with that is unselfishness in giving of yourself or of anything you have to relieve the conditions or problems of another.

When in anger you declare you want nothing of my religion and don’t even want me to talk about it, or anything of a religious nature (so it seems), then I know I have failed as a Christian so far as you are concerned. Consequently, I have also failed in the role of a mother when you have needed someone to take you in her arms and listen with love and understanding.

I am truly sorry that this state of affairs has existed. In my way I have tried to understand and listen. My eyes and ears have been clouded by my selfishness rather than giving God full opportunity to use me as an instrument of love. You may find it difficult, even impossible to forgive. I can tell you that my admiration, acceptance and love have grown with the years as you have blossomed into a very talented and capable person.

. . . My heart has been burdened to put these thoughts on paper that they may help you to believe that I do care, I do love you and am anxious about your welfare and what happens to you. May God bless you in every way.

Most sincerely and humbly,
Your step-Mother

Hazel was at a point in life where reflection was more easily come by and self-evaluation more clear-cut and revealing. Shirley had finished raising her own children, but still held on to the anger and resentments of her life. This apology was sincerely meant, but perhaps in the end simply too late to make a real difference. They never became close to one another, but perhaps they at least came to an understanding.

Anchorage in 1945 was a military town, but the military bases were further away from the civilian operations. Lyman and Hazel’s small home wasn’t too far from Shirley’s job to walk, but it was too far for her to decently walk alone, and potentially dangerous if she happened to run into the local wildlife. At the end of her workday, Shirley and Donald would brush the willow aside as they kept a sharp eye out for moose along the gravel trail.\(^{23}\) It was a good choice for Shirley to go to work, but there was no more singing at the U.S.O. Club, or chances to be the Queen of a basketball team. Shirley’s life became more constricted, and she became restless as she and Hazel continued to clash. Lyman was often sent to remote villages for work and could be gone for weeks at a time. Eventually it was decided that Shirley would return to Oregon to work, and then attend college in the fall, with her grandparents as a nearby steadying influence.\(^{24}\) Lyman probably heaved a sigh of relief at the cessation of the discord at home in that summer of 1945.

That fall, Lyman’s mother wrote to remind him that she still had Florence’s watch. Lyman replied,

I had forgotten (and) I love you very much for thinking of the watch at this time with all the other things you have occupying your attention. I’ll enclose a note to

\(^{23}\) Shirley A. Graves Moddemeyer, Personal communication, 1960’s.

\(^{24}\) Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, July 21, 2014.
Shirley to go with the watch wishing her a Merry Christmas and telling her how she happens to be getting the watch . . . I’m sure it will be as welcome to Shirley now as it would have been at her graduation and have all its sentimental value to her. In fact it may have much more as she has matured a great deal in the past year and a half.25

With a few days to consider it, Lyman composed a letter that demonstrated he wasn’t indifferent to the emotional turmoil that his daughter exhibited in the years that she lived with him and Hazel. It turned out that Lyman’s ability to express his sentiments in writing, and therefore in private, revealed that he felt great empathy for his fragile daughter and her troubles.

Merry Christmas Shirley Girl!
  This is a little early to be writing Merry Christmas but this note has to go a long way.
  This watch is yours, this Christmas, because you have a Grandmother like Grandmother Graves. She has kept it all these years. – it is your own Mother’s watch.
  Now it is yours. It is a very good watch, if a little old fashioned. I hope you can keep it and use it a long, long time.
  I gave it to your Mother when she was eighteen for her birthday. You are very much, now, like she was then. I loved her very much – and love you very much now. . . .
  So, once in a while, when you glance at this watch to see what time it is think of these nice ladies – Your Grandmother Miller – who is near an angel as you will ever see on this earth. Your grandmother Graves – who is just as fine and wonderful a person as you will ever know, as long as you live. Your own Mother – who would be proud of her lovely daughter if she were here to know you now.
  Now again – A VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS and all my love,
  Daddy26

The watch was sent to Shirley in time for Christmas of 1945, and along with the letter, remained in her jewelry box for the rest of her life.27

Shirley continued to attend college in Oregon that spring where she met a man newly out of the Army, finishing his college education interrupted by the war. They became engaged and

27. Letter and watch found in jewelry box, May of 1978. Author.
wished to marry right away. She came home to Alaska for the summer where she broke the news that she was ready to be a married woman. In August of 1946, not quite a year after Shirley left home to attend college, Lyman wrote a cheerful and chatty letter to his mother while he was at the Naknek Airbase, still working for the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA). He also addresses the news of Shirley’s impending marriage after her visit to Alaska for the summer.

Shirley is leaving Anchorage next Tuesday (August 20) via CAA plane on her return to school and matrimony. There was no dissuading them from getting married before school starts this fall so I reluctantly gave my consent and hope that it will be alright. But I still wish she could have grown up a little, for her own sake.

Hazel and I figured out every possible way of making it possible for one or both of us to go out with her to be at the wedding but there just is no possible way. . . I might just get away from the office, in an emergency, but it would have be a bona fide emergency as we are so short handed . . . It is a very great disappointment to me not to be there, and I’m afraid it will also be a sort of disappointment to Shirley as well because I rather feel that she has come to depend on me for that sort of thing in the past three years. There was just a little choke in her throat the other morning when she left for work because we were saying goodb’ye (sic) for quite a long time. But she is a fairly tough little brick which is all the more reason I hate to disappoint her. 28

The struggle for Lyman’s attention continued even as Shirley prepared to become a married woman. It appears that Lyman hadn’t a clue that his daughter still fostered hope he would someday begin to pay more attention to her life than to his own. She had enjoyed having some of his attention for two and a half years, and it would never be easy for her to let go of her hope. In all likelihood, no matter what Lyman did in the future, he would be unable to make up for the past.

It turned out that Lyman was able to make it to the wedding after all, where he gave away the bride who was both happy to see him and furious with Hazel. Hazel had declared that a blue

28. E. Lyman Graves to Helen M. Graves, August 16, 1946.
suit was practical for a marriage, and therefore a white wedding dress wasn’t necessary. Hazel had her way, and Shirley’s wedding picture showed a young woman with a resolute look on her face and wearing the practical blue suit. How Lyman and Hazel were finally able to attend the wedding isn’t known, but the drama endured. The story of the blue suit survived in family memory and in Shirley’s scrapbook. Next to the wedding picture is a small faded swatch from the blue suit.

Early in 1947 Lyman experienced a reorganization of his CAA position. He expressed no particular disappointment in the loss of this office job, but he wrote, “Although the actions at neither the ATS nor the (CAA) were any particular disappointment they let me out, which is not a success, so it is failure.” He and Hazel made plans to return to Grant Creek in August, expecting to have enough money to build their house.

In June of 1947 Lyman wrote from Anchorage to his mother about the delay in moving to the home site. You are surprised that we haven’t gone to Moose Pass but it is the result of a number of things. First – I am still being plagued by shortages of material . . . . It has been my contention for years that I have a completely unjustified number of tough breaks like these I have enumerated. The unannounced bank holiday on real property loans has precluded sale of the house which is just another tough break but not necessarily a deterrent(sic) to my going to Trail Lake . . . .

Lyman also updated his mother about his new grandchild, and that Shirley, “would probably be able to go home about the 27th or 28th. I hope that nothing has developed to interfere

30. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress”
31. Ibid.
32. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, June 29, 1947.
with that schedule. If not she is probably home with her daughter today. I hope so.”

As time passed there were no details about the home-site that were too small for Lyman to share with his mother. In his letter to her, Lyman drew a map showing the location of the home site and described that, “Our place consists of five acres of beautiful cottonwood, birch and spruce trees just south of the mouth of Grant Creek.” He added progress reports on each stage of construction over the summer.

At the time that Lyman and Hazel began to construct their home on the five acre site there was only one neighbor, a close friend of Lyman’s. The road from Anchorage to Seward wasn’t often travelled and there was no settlement or busy hum of traffic. Lyman had built a one lane bridge over Grant Creek and began to dig their basement. He soon found that the boulders deposited by the ebb and flow of glacial moraines caused him to adjust his planning.

He wrote, “I started out to build a place with a full basement but have reached the place where I’ll settle for a full roof! The excavating and concrete work are (sic) just too much for me to get done before cold weather. So I’ve had to change my plans considerably. But all the lumber is on the site and I’m just about ready to start nailing it up. That won’t take too long now.”

He settled for half a cellar the first year and shared that, “I want to get hydro-electric power installed which will be a hard and expensive job but I think it can be done. Anyway I’m going to try.” This is the first time that Lyman mentioned his interest in hydroelectric power.

33. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, June 29, 1947.
34. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, September 18, 1947
35. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, September 18, 1947
The building of a power generation plant on Grant Creek by building a dam on Grant Lake was a long term project that Lyman carefully cultivated.

Lyman also revealed that “Hazel’s reservations about our coming down here have disappeared and she is as much in love with the place as I am which is going some!” Lyman showed his love of the place when he wrote that “other parts of the good old U.S.A. have beautiful scenery and color in the fall but the Kenai Peninsula doesn’t have to take a back seat for any of them!” 36 It was clear from his enthusiasm that he and Hazel were very happy in their home.

In October of 1947 Lyman wrote that “I hope you will believe me when I tell you that I am abiding by Hazel’s instructions and your admonition in the last letter ‘Don’t work too hard’… When we went to Anchorage I was (I hate to admit) very near both physical and nervous exhaustion . . .” He revealed, “I’m down to 168 lbs. and would like to put on at least 30 lbs between now and spring. If I can, I think I may be able to continue to do a half a day’s work a day, six days a week, nearly all summer.” 37 Because of Lyman’s physical break-down they also had to rent a nearby house for the winter. Work on their own home was left to wait for his recovery and for spring.

Convalescence was not easy for Lyman during the winter of 1947-1948. He wrote his mother, “We have had snow and snow and snow – more than we usually get. About six feet have fallen since we got home which finally settled to about three feet. I have been digging our way out to the road – three hundred feet away – a little every day.” 38 Always putting a positive tone to

36. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, September 18, 1947
37. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, October 17, 1947.
38. Ibid.
his letters, he added, “Having so much visible winter around gives me a kind of comfortable feeling.”

In his 1948 New Year’s letter, Lyman for the first time acknowledged his awareness of the limits to what he can accomplish in his life:

I have been going over our situation objectively since we got home. It is the first opportunity I’ve had. And I find that it (surprisingly enough) is going to require all my genius and skill and strength and patience (and all of Hazel’s!) to realize what we want here. But it can never be done by remote control. It requires that I be on the ground and have the time to do what needs to be done. Otherwise I would have to make our fortune somewhere else and then come here to spend my declining years. So, since this is an unlikely way for me to achieve what I want, I’ll just have to do it the only way I know how – with my bull strength and awkwardness! And if I should die before I make it I’ll thank the Lord for the privilege and the pleasure of having been able to spend my time and strength, here, engaged in satisfying – if not very fruitful – effort. Here I feel at ease and at home but I am conscious of being an alien everywhere else.

So, bless your heart, if my only accomplishment to which you point is that I am a pioneer (born fifty years too late) you will have to forgive me. Fortunately for you I’m just your oldest son. I hope the other boys will make up for my shortcomings and am sure that they do.

For the 1948 entry, Lyman wrote in “Twenty-five Years of Progress” in his usual cryptic style, “Built at Grant Creek. Success.” He and Hazel had begun to settle into their life at Grant Creek across the bridge from Moose Creek. His children were finally grown-up, his daughter married and his son at college, and he now had one grandchild. At the beginning of this New Year Lyman was in his mid-forties and had begun to reflect on his life beyond the need to scrabble for a living. His life at Grant Creek allowed him to be comfortable in his own skin, happy in his marriage, and preparing to do the work he thought he was best suited to do.


40. Ibid.

41. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
Lyman also spent his time fine tuning his knowledge about the construction of the hydroelectric dam on Grant Lake and the long flume that the water would pass through on Grant Creek to provide enough electricity for Seward.

He may have wished he had looked closer, and seen the future.
Chapter 7 – Falling Apart

In 1948 Lyman decided to do something about his mother’s precarious financial situation after she had to ask for money to replace her broken glasses.¹ Both he and his father had lost their fortunes in 1932 to Harold Bowman, but his father’s suicide had left his mother without substantial investments to provide her with income. Lyman wrote to his mother, “I am still trying to develop an arrangement, in which all of us can participate, to insure you enough to live on without your having to worry and scrimp. You may not like it but I am going to have to risk that because I am not content to have you existing on the thin edge of poverty when it isn’t necessary.”²

Several months passed in delicate arguments between Lyman and his mother before she accepted support from all of her sons in March of 1948. In a letter he wrote, “You say you’ve tears of humility in your eyes because God has given you ‘so great a family.’ Well, how do you suppose we feel about having so great a Mother? And – an important point – nobody but you made us feel that way! You’re the nicest lady in the world!”³

Years later, Donald would say, “Making that arrangement wasn’t the easiest thing that Lyman ever did, those boys were known for going their own directions.”⁴ But in the end, Lyman succeeded in creating an agreement that provided his mother with financial security until her death.

In letters to his mother, it seemed as though Lyman was coping successfully with all challenges. But this was not truly the case. His lighthearted accounting belied the reality of the

¹. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, January 15, 1948.
². Ibid.
³. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, March 29, 1948.
⁴. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2014.
financial and physical struggles that he and Hazel experienced in their effort to live at Grant Creek. There was a tremendous storm that caused damages and this is how Lyman related it to her:

When one big cottonwood blew down the other night I was sure that part of my temporary roof had blown off and tore out in my robe and slippers with a flashlight to see what could be done. It was while I was looking for the damage that the spruce tree blew over with a splintering crash and Hazel wondered for a few desperate (sic) minutes if the rest of the house had gone with the roof – and me too! It was some storm. I’m glad they don’t happen often. Fifty years will be plenty soon enough to have another one like it.

I have to chuckle about the bridge because several of the old-timers around here have declared that it was no good and not safe and wouldn’t hold up and so on. Now they have proof that they were right. It will make them all feel better! . . . It is perfectly safe and sound. It took a seventy five mile-an-hour wind to damage it didn’t it?\(^5\)

In a January 1949 letter to his mother Lyman described winter living in the woefully inadequate summer cabin: “[It] was never designed for winter and it has been a case of keep a fire going day and night for the past two months to keep from freezing our selves, the house plants and our groceries stiff.”\(^6\) Lyman and Hazel’s return to Grant Lake was not as easy as they had hoped. He just couldn’t seem to get things lined up in a business sense and for 1949 he wrote: “Financially exhausted and unable to get FHA loans in Seward for several prospective builders. Went to work as a carpenter. Success.”\(^7\) His enthusiasm for living at Grant Creek never waned in spite of the challenges.

By March he wrote to his mother about their move into the house: “Mark today as a very great day for your northern children, It is the VERY FIRST day we have relaxed and rested from

\(^5\) E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, October 18, 1948.

\(^6\) E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, January 4, 1949.

\(^7\) E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
our labors (and) we are out from under the heavy pressure imposed upon us all winter by the severe weather and the urgent necessity of getting our house into habitable condition.**8

In 1950 Lyman was still trying hard and looked for the positive aspects of his efforts. “Went back into contracting in Seward and got a few small jobs including the power house. Still not successful in getting FHA loans. Success”**9

Lyman calling the failure to get FHA loans a success seems is an odd interpretation, but perhaps he referenced the small jobs and power house. However, the impact on individuals of the vagaries of federal agencies during the territorial times should not be underestimated. Financing projects in the territory in any other way was difficult, and federal involvement was intended to ease progress for small businessmen. But, federal inefficiencies and local politics combined with territorial status could often render someone like Lyman helpless.

Lyman presented a brave face in what was rapidly becoming a whirlpool of unfortunate occurrences. In 1951 he wrote, “July. Upon assurances of $40,000 in financing from Bank of Seward bid on Homer School. Was successful bidder but the bank reneged on its promise. Mortgaged the house, car, construction equipment etc. to get enough to go ahead with the job. The terms were ruinous. Success.”**10

To read Lyman’s statement and see anything that indicated success seemed improbable as he had mortgaged every worldly possession he had to build this school. It seemed irrational for him to feel such confidence.

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9. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
10. Ibid.
There was a perception in family story that Lyman had managed his position in Seward on the docks during WWII in a way that created great animosity with the city businessmen. Donald once commented about Lyman’s trouble with the bank’s failure to keep its promise on financing, “He made a lot of enemies during his time there. He was pushy and didn’t care what others wanted him to do. He did his job but not with a lot of finesse.” The men in Seward who felt injured may have had long memories, and as the years passed they didn’t forget. Perhaps Lyman felt strength in his ability to outmaneuver them this time.

After the Homer School was completed in 1952, Lyman began to feel the shakiness of his position as he wrote, “Completed the Homer job with $20,000 loss. Still unable to get FHA loans with single exception of Rose job. Failure.” The resulting financial pressures required that Lyman leave self-employment and work for wages.

In July of 1952, Lyman landed a job with the Alaska Public Works (APW). He wrote, “Went to Work for APW in Seward and tried to salvage my mortgaged property, in part, by building an Alaska Housing Authority project on land obtained from the city tax-roll. Unable to get clear title. Failure.” This proved to be the last time that Lyman would try to profit by building housing for others.

The APW was a Federal Program authorized in 1949 to build public structures in the underdeveloped territory of Alaska and the Virgin Islands. This infusion of federal monies into the territory was a good opportunity for Lyman to make money to rescue his home-site. A

11. Personal communication with Donald M. Graves, September 22, 2014.

12. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”

13. Ibid.
regular paying job created a respite from financial pressures, and he prepared to launch his next grand plan.

By January of 1953, Lyman and Hazel lived in Juneau in a small apartment, where Lyman was still employed by the APW. Work had taken him to Seward and he had made time to stop and visit the home-site. In a plaintive letter to his mother he wrote, “…I managed to stay overnight with Chuck and Mary Clements before coming back. They are all ready to sell out and go up north of Mt. McKinley and settle on the Kantishna River.”

It is likely that Lyman was feeling tired from his job or unhappy living in a town, even a small one like Juneau. The steep mountains of Juneau are skirted by the sea and people there live closely together. Or, perhaps the memories of his time there with Mona caused him to wish he was elsewhere.

It could be that following his friend Chuck Clements north seemed more attractive than following through with the hydroelectric project, and barely keeping up with payments.

He might have talked to Hazel about it as they sat in the tiny apartment in Juneau one evening. “You know, Chuck Clements and Mary are talking about going up North to settle again.”

Hazel continued to stitch the seam in the dress she was making for a neighbor. In the corner were stacks of hand stitched leather purses, pig skins for gloves, and yard goods for dresses. She worked every day on these items, which supplemented their income.

He said, “It might be nice to start over where there aren’t so many people. You know, another family has moved into Grant Creek – we will be able to see them from our place.”

Hazel stopped sewing and settled her hands in her lap. Her mouth opened and then closed. She briefly shut her eyes and said, “Lyman, I have put my heart and soul into that place. I have planted every wildflower there is into the beds, and placed every rock in the wall that holds the dirt back. I have watched you work your hands until they bled, and seen you so ill from the effort that you couldn’t get up. We will not start over.”

With a sigh Lyman rubbed his hands over his face. “You feel that strongly about it?” He stood and started to pace the small living room before he turned and said, “I need to know you are backing me. Everything we have is on the line here. We may not have the choice about starting over if I don’t pull this off.”

Hazel looked at Lyman out of the corner of her eye. There was a hesitation as she thought about her answer and she tightened her lips and set her jaw. She said, “It is our home. We’ll go back when things are in order, and I know you’ll do your best. God will guide us. I am not leaving Grant Creek.”

Lyman finished his letter to his mother by continuing to tell her about the Clements: “Civilization is driving them away from Moose Pass. But, as reluctant as I am to come right out and admit it I ain’t got another move north left in me. Trail Lake is as fur’s (sic) I’ll git. Just ain’t got the strength to go on. So I’ll just set a spell and build me a hydro-electric plant or something easy to while away the time. . . .”

For 1953, Lyman wrote in “Twenty-five Years of Progress” that he had “filed [the] application for preliminary permit on Grant Creek in March.” He claimed neither success nor

15. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, January 26, 1953.
failure at this point in the project. He also filed his paperwork for the Articles of Incorporation for the Grant Lake Electric Power Company, Inc. with the Territory of Alaska.\(^{16}\)

On January 28, 1954, the headline of an article clipped from the Ketchikan Chronicle read:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Permit Given By FPC For Kenai Power}

The federal power commission has issued a preliminary permit to the Grant Lake Electric Power company, Inc., of Anchorage according to information given Delegate Bartlett this week.

The proposed project would consist of a concrete dam at the outlet of Grant Lake on the Kenai Peninsula to provide electric energy for market in the areas of Moose Pass, Seward, the railbelt south of Anchorage and Kenai. . .

In addition to the dam at the outlet of Grant lake, the proposed project includes a conduit about 5000 feet to a power house on Grant creek near its confluence with Trail river; a power house with initial installation of 2000 horsepower and an ultimate installed capacity of 4000 horsepower.

The company was incorporated under the laws of Alaska March 23, 1953. Named in the articles of incorporation were E. Lyman Graves of Moose Pass, president; E.L. Arnell, Anchorage, secretary, and Raymond E. Plummer, Anchorage.\(^{17}\)

The clock was started with the issuance of that permit. Lyman and his partners would have two years to get all the plans drawn up and the testing done. In the letter stapled to the article, Lyman hastens to reassure his mother,

\begin{quote}
I’m sending a clipping which you will enjoy but I must caution you that the issuance of the preliminary permit by the Federal Power Commission is only an initial formality. In itself it doesn’t guarantee that we’ll be able to go ahead with the power plant. That depends upon whether or not REA builds the transmission from Seward to Cooper Landing. If they do they will buy power from us. Then we’ll build the plant. So, while I may be a power tycoon someday I’m not one just yet.\(^{18}\)
\end{quote}

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\footnote{17. Ketchikan Chronicle, January 28, 1954.}
\footnote{18. E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, January 30, 1954.}
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For 1954, Lyman wrote that he had, “Received [the] permit on February 1. May. With every prospect for a success that would enable recovery of the house and full repayment of those who had had to act as sureties on my building-bond left APW to get the power project started. Success.”¹⁹

Lyman was right to be excited that his dream of providing power from Grant Creek and Grant Lake was beginning to come true. It looked like what he had envisioned on the day he selected his home-site would finally pay off.

The midnight sun of June 7, 1954 slanted across the forests surrounding Grant Creek and gave an ethereal illumination to the air. Lyman stood on the porch of his house, hands stuffed in his pockets and his hat pushed back on his head. The mosquitoes buzzed nearby but didn’t notice his heat. He had read and re-read the plans and papers he was going to carry with him the next day when he would address the Seward Utility Board. He had been waiting a long time for this chance, and he ached to get started on his long held dream. On the desk was the carefully typed up contract, signed by his partners, ready for the board to sign.²⁰

Donald had just graduated with a degree in engineering from the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. The two men had gone over the plans together and found that the calculations and structure designs were sound, and would do the job of generating the electricity for the City of Seward. Lyman felt confident that he was prepared and ready to proceed.

The next morning he drove his car over the one lane bridge on Grant Creek and turned down the highway leading to Seward. Donald was in the passenger seat and both were excited

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¹⁹ E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”

²⁰ E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, May 20, 1954.
that the day had finally come to move forward on Lyman’s dream. They pulled up to the building where the meeting was going to be held and parked. Lyman rested his hands on the steering wheel and briefly closed his eyes. Donald waited quietly.

Lyman took a deep breath, then picked up his folder and got out of the car. He climbed the stairs into the building ready to prove to these people why they should sign the contract. Donald followed, ready to answer any questions if needed.

But, something happened at the meeting. The whole summer passed and Lyman wrote to his mother in September, “Since progress on the power project is in abeyance for two or three weeks I’ve taken advantage of the opportunity to get in a few licks on a church we Methodists are building at Moose Pass.”21 In that letter, Lyman was prevaricating about the results of the meeting.

Donald said decades later, “Dad went into the building where the men of the Seward Utility Board were waiting for him. In his confidence and eagerness to finally get the go ahead he took the attitude that it was about time they made the right choice. He could be very grating and pushy sometimes. His tone indicated that any idiot could tell signing the contract was the smart thing to do – he all but said the words out loud. That room full of men sat and listened, and a few eyebrows rose as they listened to him. When he was done, they nodded their heads and told him they would take his presentation into consideration, and have some more discussion about it.”22

Lyman may have left that meeting a little shaken. He had expected those men to get out their pens and sign the contract. He hadn’t expected any delay. Without asking Donald what he


22. Donald M. Graves, Personal communication, 2014.
thought, Lyman jammed the car into gear and drove Donald to the train station. Donald didn’t say much to his dad as he lifted his suitcase out of the car, just remembered the look on the faces of those men. Once Lyman got home, he likely put on work clothes and went outside to split firewood that didn’t need splitting.

December of 1954 is Lyman’s last entry to “Twenty-five Years of Progress.” He wrote down what had happened, but not what he would do about it.

December. Chances that were good in May are so poor, now, that there is no chance to finance. I am $1,200 farther in debt than in May. Failure.

The foregoing account is probably far from unique. But that is no consolation to me. Twenty-five years struggle is down the drain. I’m reluctant to try again with the gnawing specter of failure sitting on my shoulders. . .

23

The Seward Utility Board made the decision not to purchase the power from Lyman. It will never be known if the board simply made a more efficient choice to procure power for Seward, or if they didn’t like the tenor of the presentation made by Lyman. It could have been a final payback from his time on the docks. Whatever the reason, Lyman had invested all of his money and his future on that contract, and he lost it all.

In the faint winter daylight of early December, Lyman sat at the table next to the wood stove, thinking about what came next. He realized that he was endlessly repeating his past and didn’t know how to change it. Lyman was a religious man, but not pious. He prayed and studied the Bible, and attended church to please his wife, but he had his own opinions about God. Now he doubted everything.

On December 12, 1954 Lyman wrote this letter to Hazel, Shirley and Donald. It is addressed “To the Three Who Are of Transcendent (sic) Importance To Me:”

_______________________________________

23. E. Lyman Graves, “Twenty-five Years of Progress.”
Since you know who you are I won’t (sic) name you. There are, of course, many others who are also important to me but this is for you three.

When I have encountered difficulty each – and all – of you have always helped or wanted to help. Sometimes you could but sometimes you couldn’t. This is one of those times and, although you are willing to assume the burden I am not willing to impose it.

Mid-winter and mid-century in life are poor times to look for work in Alaska. There is only one alternative, I not only have to find something I can do but I have to find out, if possible, what I am supposed to do. I can’t take anyone on this search so I have to go alone. I hardly know what I’m looking for and least of all where to find it. There are probably other ways to go about this but none of those I can think of are acceptable to me. They all include burdens of varying degrees upon others. The only burden I will ask you to bear is to let me go without resentment and with understanding if you can. My burden will probably consist of not being able to keep in very close touch with you, although I will if I can.

It is only necessary for you to know this much; that I gambled the past twenty-five years of my life on the power project – and lost. There are so many thousands of dollars involved that I have to begin again where I was twenty-five years ago, except that in exchange for youth I have experience. But youth is in much greater demand than experience.

May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from another. 24

Donald and Shirley both received copies, both hand addressed and dropped in the post office at Moose Creek. When Hazel read her copy, she realized that Lyman was not coming back that evening.

It was an excruciating time for Lyman as his world crashed around him. He also wrote this personal note to Hazel:

I bet everything we had on the power project – and lost.
No matter how you look at it it (sic) is failure.
This isn’t the first time nor even the tenth time. But it is the last time.
To stay here would be an embarrassment to my friends and burden on you.
It will be seven years before I am legally dead but in two years you can be released on grounds of desertion.
There is nothing more I can do for the kids.
In spite of all that you have been able to do I am the one thing the world can neither understand nor forgive – a total failure.

So dry your tears. That’s all you’ve lost.\(^{25}\)

Hazel did not know what to think after she read the notes, but there wasn’t much she could do about it. Just a few weeks later, in January of 1955 Hazel moved, to a small apartment in Spenard, near Anchorage. A few months passed and she and the family feared that Lyman had committed suicide as none of them heard from him. All of their worldly possessions remained at Grant Creek sequestered by the winter snows.

After leaving Grant Creek and mailing the letters to his children, Lyman likely travelled to Seward to purchase passage on a steamer for Seattle. Or, he may have hired on as a deck hand to work his way south. He would have spent time on the decks watching as the coastline undulated with ever changing landscapes of mountains, cliffs, islands, channels and open seas and perhaps he remembered his other passages along this route over the years. He may have wondered if anything would be revealed in the changing view, anything to help him find surcease to his pain.

In his self-imposed isolation, he landed in Seattle, passed through Oregon and travelled down to Southern California. Passage along the interstate was easy; he simply put his thumb out until he landed on Skid Row. He was a man adrift, looking for answers that he no longer felt he knew how to find.

The California sun baked the concrete and the heat waves created inversions as traffic raced by. Lyman wandered randomly along the streets of the run down neighborhood in downtown Los Angeles. Hotel rooms could be had for 25¢ and liquor was available in almost every storefront. It must have felt surreal to Lyman as he looked for whatever might appeal to

\(^{25}\) E. Lyman Graves to Hazel P. Graves, December 1954.
him. Or, perhaps Lyman realized life on Skid Row might be tougher than his life in Alaska. How different from falling asleep under a spruce tree close to a stream, and waking to the clean cold air of a wilderness morning.

He soon realized that continuing to be homeless and helpless was not an option. He found a safe haven and established a friendship with the Reverend Don McCrossan, the Director of The Victory Service Club whose operations were located at the Union Rescue Mission on Skid Row. With food, shelter and lengthy conversations about faith and challenges Lyman began the arduous journey of healing himself. He also began seeking an understanding of the job he was meant to do. The Reverend and Lyman probably began this task with the creation of the list of “Twenty-five Years of Progress.” It isn’t a perfect list, and even though it reflects a brutal self-honesty of most of Lyman’s efforts, it also reflects clear avoidance of unpleasant truths about his life. Close examination of one’s life is difficult, yet Lyman persevered and in this he provided a window into his travails, for himself and his family.

By March of 1955 Lyman had returned to Alaska and to Hazel. How Lyman was welcomed back by Hazel can only be speculated on. There are no notes, no letters saying that she forgave him. No recriminations were preserved. She took him back, and they settled the issues between themselves. But, Hazel took more of a leading role in their financial security. By April of 1955, both had taken jobs and lived in the Spenard apartment where Hazel had taken refuge in January.

There is little left to inform us about Lyman’s mental state when he returned. Hazel added this post script to a letter to his mother: “his general frame of mind has improved since he returned and became so busy he scarcely has time to sit and think about anything else. …But he

just feels he cannot arrange to attend church until he has an organization so built that it can function with his being gone for a time.”\textsuperscript{27}

She also commented about the property at Grant Lake, “We haven’t even been down since Lyman’s return, although we have needed a number of items from the house.”\textsuperscript{28}

Hazel found work for Lyman. He became the Technical Advisor and Construction Superintendent for church congregations and the Methodist Board of Missions in the building of churches and parsonages in Oregon and Alaska.\textsuperscript{29} Within the year they moved to Portland, Oregon, a city filled with concrete and gray skies. There they rented a narrow house that vibrated under a freeway overpass, as diametrically opposite a setting from their former home as possible.

Soon after Lyman and Hazel’s arrival, Shirley drove over there and parked her car at the curb. She held my small toddler hand firmly grasped in hers. Hazel opened the door and we entered into a narrow hallway with darkly scuffed wooden floors and dim lighting from one bare bulb. The living room was to the right, the door firmly closed. My mother asked to see her daddy, but he would not come out.

Time passed and Lyman continued to build the Methodist church he was sent to supervise in Portland. He also began to write letters to his mother again, and visit his daughter’s family. But, Lyman was used to working at his own pace, and this job required him to adjust. He wrote to his mother, “The volunteers are doing quite well, but not nearly well enough. However, I have

\textsuperscript{27} Hazel P. Graves to Helen Graves, April 4, 1955.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} E. Lyman Graves, Personal Resume 1960.
hopes that with the framing of the building under way that they will take more of an interest so I can get the help that is needed to keep the job moving as it should.”

Perhaps the opportunity that came to Lyman in March of 1957 was one that he had hoped for. He was very excited when he got this news and wrote to his mother. “I received another telephone call from the Home Mission Board in Philadelphia this morning authorizing to go ahead with the Kenai Project. …According to current information, the boat leaving Seattle which will call at Kenai is tentatively scheduled to sail April 20. . . . Then I will go on to Kenai as soon as the boat has left.”

Returning to Alaska, and being close to his previous life was initially quite exciting for Lyman. Eventually, the tone of the letters changed and the reality of conditions intruded. Lyman was having some trouble getting finished on the Kenai job. The weather was rough and the volunteers were sometimes not available and he ran out of time to build. Finally, he decided that he must leave and return home, to come back when the weather was better. He did go back and tied up the loose ends, but he found there was nothing more for him there.

How bittersweet it must have been to travel through Moose Pass and look across to Grant Creek on his way to Kenai. He could see his old place, and across the water his friend’s place, both now owned by others. He saw pleasure boats dotting the Trail Lakes and heard the noise of their engines as he paused to buy gas at Moose Pass. How painful to feel the loss, to pass by the bridge he built with so much effort, and know there was no going back. Perhaps that trip influenced what he did next.


31 E. Lyman Graves to Helen Graves, March 21, 1957.
Soon after the church in Kenai was completed, Lyman and Hazel decided to buy ten acres of farmland located on Bainbridge Island. The cattle in the pasture and the pine woods harkened back to his time as a young stockman. Even though he wasn’t on the beach, he was close by and with just a short drive he could see the tides lapping at the rocky beaches and hear the seagull cries. With morning fog he was embraced nearly every day with the sensory memories of the Aleutians. It seemed that Lyman had found the closest place to his happiness that he could find, and he was content.

The property had a humble farm house, a milking shed, some timber, old apple trees, and some pasture. He had created a fish pond, stocked with trout, by damming a small stream. He ran a few beef cattle and continued to build and remodel churches locally, although he was virtually a volunteer in these smaller projects. Hazel held a job on the mainland as a school teacher for boys who had difficulty behaving in regular classrooms. She was quite good at keeping discipline.

Bainbridge Island is where I began to know my grandfather. The property that housed the cattle, the fish, and the tall swing hanging between the pines was amazing, and offered me a glimpse of a different life from the city I lived in. I just didn’t realize that the life he had lived so long before my time was amazing as well.

In all of the stories I had heard over the years, and in all the discovery of that which wasn’t shared, it never occurred to me to wonder is he a success or a failure? I would answer now, yes.
Cold air fills my lungs as I step on leaves covered with droplets of frozen rain cupped within their curling edges and littered across the forest floor. The raindrops, frozen in their interrupted descent, held back from melding into earth’s moisture, are individual for a time. One, plump and perfectly rounded, was surrounded with surface tension that kept it immobile until the air cooled it and it became hardened. Another was elongated and almost broken free. I wonder if they mourn their lost chance to become a rivulet.

Grandpa Lyman had his first stroke the summer of 1967 when he was sixty four, before they knew how to minimize the damage. At first it wasn’t so bad. He could sit up in his hospital bed in Seattle, and speak clearly.

My mother decided that I should attend to him, to see him daily on my summer break. The bus deposited me on the outskirts of the hospital parking lot. I remember the heat of the summer sun and the noise of diesel engines belching as I walked across the barren surface, miserable in my ignorance of how to be a caregiver to one who had never before seemed helpless.

Because Grandpa’s frame was wiry I could help him sit up on the side of his bed. Then I would tuck a napkin under his chin, cut his meat into small pieces and spoon his meal to him. He had no use of his left arm and limited use of his right. His horseshoe fringe of white hair glinted in the window’s light and his blue eyes reassured me. I tried not to stare at his left hand as it cupped uselessly in his lap.
He was always happy to see my awkward, bony, thirteen year old self and we giggled together as I fed him gravy like it was soup. We joked about the ever present gelatin side dish, and I helped him drink his coffee. Sugar, no cream. I imagined that he would get better, and be my long striding Grandpa again, believing I could ignore the inevitable that I could not yet understand.

In this story, I have tried to be in the places where he had been; the far away islands surrounded by the mist, the forests of the Kenai, the loss and yearning for loved ones, the barren search for success and failure. This is how I can show it to you.

May is when the waves and storms are as easy as they will ever be in the Aleutians. Shaking off the shackles of winter weather Lyman is venturing out from sheltered waters, and seeking opportunity. With practiced moves he eases off the skiff’s throttle as he enters the bay of the island. He is amazed at the tonnage of rock spread across the sweep of beach and tall cliffs rearing upwards further than he can crane his neck to see. Spreading a hundred yards from one side to the other, the sandless beach is filled with boulders, all of a size and offering treacherous footing. Larger slabs intrude randomly, offering their own island of stability. There is no greenery on the shore, not even a tussock of grass.

The skiff pushes through the water into the sheltered area. The sky hasn’t changed; it remains the gunmetal gray of threatening rain. He looks up at the boulder beach and a narrow rift promising a path to the interior of the island. It isn’t a valley with gentle slopes. All it can be called is a cut, a steep slice into the cliffs stretching hundreds of feet up, the v-shaped surface covered with rough rock. Seismic quaking has carved out broken bedrock, and the force of rain deluges turned waterfall has pushed them down to litter the base. High above the salty rime of
wave splash and barely holding on at the edges, wind gnarled brush begins a tentative possession in the dark volcanic dust and grit.

Lyman reaches back, switches off the fuel and steps into the shallows. He winces as the cold water soaks his woolen trousers to the knees. Splashing through the uneven footing he quickly pulls his skiff above the high water mark. He looks around in awe of what nature has provided — both enticement and barrier.

In sixth grade I began to notice the pervading grayness of Seattle, the rain, the concrete of the cityscape. Our house never had a blade of planted grass, only large raised planter boxes filled with tomatoes and flowers. The ground next to the flower boxes was a scraggly patch of weeds, while the rest of the property was so steep that rugged Scotch Broom was planted and left to run wild. We children were told to go down the paved hillside to a playground, one square block of ball field, swings and clubhouse, and only five large oak trees.

It is difficult to move around the city without being on concrete. There were concrete stairs to reach the street, concrete sidewalks to move down the block, and concrete roadways for the cars to move along. I suppose I should be grateful that the climate encouraged the growth of greenery in yards as it gave some visual relief to the gray vistas. But, all of that beautiful growth was private, not allowed to be touched or played upon, and closely guarded by rightful owners. Trespassing not allowed. I chafed at the sensory deprivation.

When our family drove to the waterfront and boarded the ferry for Bainbridge Island I held tight to the rail with the wind blowing hard against me. As the fog horns mourned our passing I shivered and waited for the landing, eager to go to Grandpa’s ten acres of forest and pasture, his fishpond and apple trees. He had a swing in the front yard pines that made my
stomach flip as I soared in carnival sized arcs. There were cats that lived under the back porch and berries in the summer. I remember the smell of cedar, the whir of grasshoppers chewing the tall grasses and shouting aloud just to hear myself.

Lyman turns to look at the cliffs and evaluate the ascent and stretches his back after the rough ride across the strait. The murmur of wavelets reminds him of the sea behind. He looks for evidence of red fox, their narrow trails on the cliffs, or scat on the rocky beach. It is the reason he is here on this island, the reason he has spent hours circling and looking for a way in. He sees the dark pigeon guillemot nesting in the boulder rubble at his feet, while scarcely higher petrels and auks nest in the shallow hollows of talus, easy pickings for a determined predator. Further up are rock burrows, deeper into the cliff and harder to reach. Higher yet are soil tunnels hidden in the sedge grasses and on top are the gull’s flat ground nesting sites, which are the easiest of all for fox to find. He must search until he finds their trails because if there are birds to feed them, then fox would have been set ashore here sometime in the last hundred years. The auks and terns circle in the wind above, screaming at his intrusion.

The islands are volcanoes, usually covered by lowering clouds, and he has grown used to this lack of vision, never really knowing what he is committing to when he climbs. The knapsack he carries is filled with hard biscuits and meat wrapped in a cloth. His small canvas canteen isn’t necessary because he can drink from any one of the thousands of waterfalls on the rocky cliffs. He picks up his rifle and slings it over his shoulder, preparing to find places to set trap, to kill the fox and harvest the pelts.

Lyman hesitates before the climb and thinks of Florence and the children, at home in the tiny trapper’s shack on Kanaga Island. Florence will not rest easy until he returns. She doesn’t
trust the sea or the storms when he is gone. She will fix the children’s meals and feed the coal into the stove. She will haul water to heat, and wash the clothes. The wind will try to blow the small clothes away but she will capture them and weight them down with rocks. She will watch and wait for him. He knows it isn’t fair that she must wait, but this is her burden.

He turns and begins the climb. After the first thirty yards, it becomes increasingly difficult. The slope is more vertical. Footing falls away as he attempts to push himself upwards. He grabs at another rock, it comes away and he starts to slide downward. He flattens against the slope, using friction to slow himself. He pushes his body harder into the rocks, arching his neck back to protect his face and eyes. He becomes still, the blood rushing in his veins fills his hearing more completely than the distant crash of waves or the cries of the gulls. He struggles for composure, fights back the fear, and opens his eyes. He sees a small green plant. It has white flowers, only a quarter of an inch in size. It too is precariously perched among the talus; rooted in a windblown pocket of soil scarcely there. He carefully lifts his hand and places it on another ledge about a foot above the plant. With some care, he lifts his torso away from the surface and begins his ascent again. He adjusts his foot placement to avoid the small plant; it seems fitting that he let it live in the spot it has found refuge. He understands about finding refuge.

Lyman keeps climbing the face of the rift for what seems like hours. He eventually reaches an area where he can turn and sit comfortably on a small ledge. Below, he sees the toy sized skiff and Kanaga Volcano in the distant haze. He hopes he will make it home tonight or tomorrow. After a few minutes he stands and begins his climb again. Soon he will reach the top and see what is there.

With a grunt he climbs over the last treacherous rock and faces a fan shaped plateau of sedge grasses and scattered boulders. The sun chooses that moment to peek out of the clouds and
illuminate the tall, serrated edge of the crater looming across the furthest side. The reflected flashes of sunlight draws his attention to the strangely polished roots of the toothsome, jagged barrier. It seems to him a primitive fence, designed to keep things out of the ancient caldera, or maybe within.

It intrigues him. He makes a decision, forsakes his mission of finding fox, temporarily forgetting his family, pushing away his burdens. He looks across the plateau, confident he will find passage to the crater. His pace is quick and he moves with renewed vigor. The wind refreshes him as it hurls cold gusts into his face and he doesn’t falter as he moves past tumbled boulders strewn eons ago in volcanic fury. Soon he is on the final slope leading to the jagged crater. The rim stands tall against the broken clouds, and glints in the fitful sunbeams.

Getting well enough to go home from the hospital meant that you were fine in my limited experience as a child. The day my mother told me that my Grandpa was going home I supposed that he would go back to living on his island farm and building churches. I had no idea that he might not ever be that man again, a man who made me comfortable when I was in his world, someone who had the same kinds of interests as I did. A love of the island woods, a natural rapport with animals, and a fast moving stride on city sidewalks made us two of a kind.

I overheard conversations, about the value of farm acreage on Bainbridge Island. I heard an impossibly large number for the price offered, but I thought Grandpa wouldn’t ever leave the farm. He and I belonged there. Under the guise of being closer to the hospital my step-grandmother sold the acreage and bought a house in a suburb of Seattle where houses had numbers seven digits long and the streets had no real names, just different numbers. My parents pulled up to their new house, no longer the rustic cottage on ten acres of pasture and pine woods
on Bainbridge Island. No concrete block dairy building with four milking stalls, filled with cobwebs and dust, forever waiting for the heifers. No rock skipping pond with tiny little fish that would someday be ready to catch. No apple trees filled with fruit so tart it made my teeth tingle. No swing in the front pines to fly through the sky, pushed by Grandpa as high as he could make it go.

We were shown the vast living room, the lovely kitchen, and the spacious bathrooms large enough for a wheelchair. The beige carpeting was not fir boards mellowed to deep amber gold, the kitchen vinyl was not a linoleum rug. Windows overlooked the yard landscaped with rigid roses, carefully placed rockery and mulch to stop the weeds. No berry bushes were in sight and there were no cats hiding anywhere. Not one tree taller than a roofline graces the sky. I asked to see Grandpa and the cats, but he was taking a nap and we couldn’t disturb him. The cats were happier on the island.

I knew he hated this place, as I did.

Lyman first thinks he will be able to climb the glossy surface surrounding the caldera easily enough. He places his booted foot on the incline and shifts his weight forward. The surface holds him and he climbs a bit further up. He grabs at an edge and suffers a cut on the palm of his hand. It bleeds slowly and the sting is mild but persistent. He wraps his hand in his lunch rag and reaches a little further up the incline for another hold. He gains some height, but he sees the edges at the very top are razor sharp. He also sees that the wall isn’t thick and he is anxious to be inside. He drops his left shoulder and slides the strap of his rifle down to his elbow, where he catches it with his rag-wrapped hand. With a click he opens the rifle and checks to make sure that it isn’t loaded. Reversing the rifle, he strikes the face of the incline with the stock,
wincing as he hears chips clattering down. Checking the gun, he is relieved to find the wood intact, and the volcanic razor edge diminishing.

He takes another powerful swing and feels the impact of the stone against the stock. He strikes it again and again, until larger pieces begin to fall away and an entry opens into the crater.

Looking back at my teen years, I confess to being self-centered and clueless about family obligations. My high school hiking club walked ten miles in on a good trail to the Ross Dam reservoir the weekend that I should have stayed home. We walked through a beautiful fir forest, admiring the abundance of water and the fresh air and were struck silent when we came upon the forest killed by the rising waters. Later in the evening the whiteness of the dead trees glowed hauntingly in the moonlight. But this is not why I remember it so well.

The black skies here were undamaged, the stars a thick carpet filling the sweep of darkness from horizon to horizon. From the city you could not see the stars, and while tales of Orion and Sirius were fascinating, I could not isolate the few among the many. My intent was to absorb myself into the stars and travel from my earthly place to the heavens. I sat in the dirt and leaned back until I lay flat, and I cried.

I did not attend Grandpa’s funeral that weekend. I didn’t want to sit in a stuffy room full of strangers, and hear about what a good man he was, and all of the other platitudes offered by ministers for the comfort of the living. I already knew that I wanted to be where the woods and dirt and the sky surrounded both of us. I wanted to be there with him, in the caldera on a wild Aleutian island.
Lyman carefully edges his way through the gap in the sharp edged ridge surrounding the ancient caldera. He drops down a few feet to an inner ledge and then steps down to the bottom. The wind passes over the top of the jagged edges and continues on. Where he stands, it is silent and breathless. He looks around at the hard glossy surfaces and gritty, dusty bottom. He walks across and there are no animal tracks to be seen, no other boot soles, and no soft leather clad footprints of the first people. He sits down, lies back, and marvels at being in a place that no one else has ever been.

It is nearly eighty years now since my Grandpa climbed to that caldera on an island still lost to me. I am no different than he was, seeking through blind stumbling and earnest effort to find my place. I yearn to see frozen droplets of rain within his footprints in that ancient caldera. But the torrential rains of typhoons sweeping up from Japan, the heavy snows that gather their weight in the Gulf of Alaska have probably worn the sharp edges, and the never ending winds have smoothed the gritty soil and rendered it trackless.
Bibliography


