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Ed Walker and Frances Park were married in the chapel at Elmendorf Air Force Base on April 29, 1944.



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Romance at Denali

Interview by SHARON BUSHELL

Last week: In early 1943, Staff Sgt. Ed Walker, along with eight other members of the Alaska Scouts, was stranded and starving on Amchitka Island.

After 28 days on Amchitka with almost nothing to eat, a Navy boat arrived loaded with grub. We piled it inside our cabin till there was no room, and the rest we covered with tarps. I cautioned everybody, "Now go easy on this food. Your stomachs are totally empty, so don't eat a lot at first." I ate sparingly, or at least I tried to, but I finally had to leave the camp. That food was just too tempting.

Kiska was to be the last island we secured. I led a regiment of a dozen demolition experts in to blow up all of the big rocks in the bay so that our landing barges could get to shore. There was evidence that the Japanese had very recently departed. Quite a few of them had committed suicide. After that, the war in the Aleutians was over.

Dale Sims and I got comfortable while we waited for a way to get home. There was quite a bit of lumber on the beach and some whale bones, so we built a barabara. We dug a hole, put the whale bones and timbers across and covered it up with anything we could find on the beach. It was actually very comfortable. There was a little creek there, and we had the materials, so we built a steam bath.

Then, within a few weeks, we were back in Anchorage, all of us that were left. Captain Thompson knew we'd get squirrely if we hung around town, so he detailed groups of us to run surveys in various parts of the territory.

One day Lt. Acuff said, "Hiram, I've got a good idea. Let's go to McKinley Park for a week." I said, "If you can get me a pass, I'd love to go."

We caught the train early the next morning. What they did in those days was take soldiers from Anchorage — up to 300 at a time — to McKinley Park, then pick up the ones who were there from Fairbanks and take them back north.

The ratio of men to women was tremendously disproportionate, something like 10,000 to 15,000 to one. So you had to plan ahead. Lt. Acuff and I knew the manager at the hotel at Mount McKinley, and we arranged ahead of time to have private rooms. The next part of the plan was to hope for a miracle. And that's just what I got.

I pulled a little stunt in Nenana involving jumping off the train when we got close to town. I then ran to the liquor store, bought a case of bourbon, put it under my arm and ran back to the train. I ran for the front car rather than the back, where I would end up, 'cause I had seen the marshal and he was eyeing me pretty hard. Pretty soon, he hollered, "What you got there, soldier?" I threw it up in the air like it was light as a feather and said, "Box of crackers," and I boarded the train.

I ran like mad through three cars. When I came to my car, I stopped and took off my jacket, which was very noticeable for a



Ed Walker rides a float in a Valdez parade in 1979. The Walkers owned the 101-room Village Motel. "I had to have the biggest," he said, so he built the business one room larger than his competition's.

Photos courtesy of Ed Walker

soldier — as Alaskan Scouts we weren't required to wear regulation clothing. I pulled down my suitcase, put the bottles in and tossed it back up on the rack. Then I handed the empty box to a soldier and he threw it out the window on the far side of the train. I was seated and lighting a cigarette when the marshal came through, looking for the guy with the box of crackers. He went right on by me.

Watching all of this was the woman who was to become my wife of 48 years. And, being a lady with a capital "L" as well as a teetotaler, Frances Park was not tremendously impressed.

Still, I managed to make some sort of favorable impression, because the next day she allowed me to join her for lunch. For the first time in my life, I was tongue-tied. Remembering the beaver dam I had seen on the lake, I said, "Have you ever seen a beaver house?" "Goodness no," she said, but she thought it sounded like fun. So we spent the day outside, walking and talking.

Within just a couple of days of getting to know this amazing woman, I was head over heels in love with her. I'd had plenty of girlfriends, and I had no interest in marriage; in fact, I was deathly afraid of marriage. But when I met Frances, I knew all that was over. We just hit it off something fierce.

She had a quick mind and a great sense of humor, and there wasn't a thing under the sun we couldn't talk about. She was an only child, raised by her wealthy grandparents. She was a college graduate and a professional journalist. I was raised on a farm, had always worked with my hands and hadn't finished high school. Then the Army had me playing football and skulking around in the Aleutians. That was all I knew.

Frances Park was one of 15 women hired in Washington, D.C., when they were just starting to build the Alaska Highway, which at that

time was a project so secret that the women had no idea where they were going or what for. Frances, with a lot of administrative experience under her belt, became the director of transportation for the highway project.

For three days at the lodge at McKinley, the two of us did a lot of talking and socializing with our friends. They had an ice-skating rink just outside the lobby, and one day Frances said, "Let's skate."

I said, "Sure, if you can find me some skates." (I was pretty sure she couldn't, because I was so big. I had never ice-skated in my life.) So here comes Frances with a pair of skates that fit me. I put 'em on and was surprised that I could even stand up. So I went around gently to get the feel of it. Then I thought, well, I better show off a little bit here, so I started going faster. Pretty soon I was going so fast, I fell right on my face and slid into a snowbank. When I looked up, everybody was applauding. Some even shouted for me to do it again. I was really embarrassed, but I was also fool enough to do it twice more. Then I hung up my skates and watched Frances from the lodge.

Frances and I were married at the chapel at Elmendorf on April 29, 1944.

I was discharged from the Army in June of '45, and right away I got a job in Goodnews Bay, working in a platinum mine. Frances, who was three months pregnant, soon joined me. That's where we were when we celebrated V-J Day.

At the end of the season, we went back to Anchorage. I got a job as a warehouseman with the (Civil Aeronautics Administration), earning a poke so I could go to college.

I was still working there when our son, Bob, arrived on the 15th of December, 1945.

Two weeks later, we were on our way to Washington, D.C., where I was to start school on the GI Bill. In less than a year, I passed the ex-

it exam at George Washington University, which allowed me entrance to the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines in Fairbanks.

We were so glad to be back in Alaska, living in a little log cabin that a friend of Frances had offered us for free.

We were in Fairbanks for eight years. I went to college and also worked at Eielson (Air Force Base) for two years, but it became too much. Though I hated to stop my education, it just had to be. By then we had four children, and they came first. I went into the concrete-block business with Con Franks, and we were successful at that for quite a while. Then money ran short, and I opened a restaurant (Chicken in the Ruff), and we managed to hold out a couple years longer.

We then moved to Delta and later to Valdez. When the earthquake happened, I was already in the house-moving business, so I had plenty of work to do, moving structures from the old town to the new town. Through the years, we have started a newspaper (Walker's Weekly) in Delta, built a 101-room hotel in Valdez, raised four children, and Frances and I traveled around the world several times. I wrote a book titled "Twenty Women Who Helped Make America Great" as a tribute to Frances when she died in 1992.

These days, I keep myself busy designing household items to help handicapped people, looking into the patenting process and dreading all the paperwork involved. I'm 86 now, and I plan to be 100, so there's still some time to enjoy life, even if I'm a little slower than I used to be. The body may falter, but the spirit is strong!

Sharon Bushell lives and writes in Homer. Her books, "We Alaskans" and "We Alaskans II," feature her stories about Alaska pioneers that have appeared in the Daily News. For more information, visit her Web site at www.wealaskans.com.

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Alaskans
Part 2 of a 2-part profile

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GERJEVIC: Caring bus rider helps out harried mother

Continued from H-1

the little boy safe, more or less quiet and happy. He turned again to the window, keeping a one-handed grip on the lip on the slider track. There was plenty to watch: dark spruce, lightened by the snow on their boughs, reflection of

back to the window, and as he kept watching the scene there, he began to lick the black metal edge of the slider track. Casually, with that natural, everything-to-the-mouth test babies and toddlers give what they find.

The woman in the seat behind him said nothing, but she turned to her own window and felt

for the little boy while the young woman next to him caught her breath.

She got her gear together, and her snow-suited boy followed her with little steps as she got the stroller and herself off the bus. The driver was patient. As the bus pulled out from the stop, I looked out the window and caught the young