

A WEALTH OF EXPERIENCE - Dr. Dorothy Novatney served in Alaska for education department and has traveled world

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The fourth daughter of Marie and Henry Holverson was born in Minnesota in 1905, but Dr. Dorothy Novatney is hardly a monument to the Victorian age into which her parents were born.

Now a resident of Morningside of Fullerton, the Ed.D., world traveler, and first field U.S. Department of Education supervisor in the territory of Alaska, has a wealth of stories to tell about her experiences.

The decades in Alaska are the source of some of her most interesting stories, but the years before she moved to Seward's Icebox _ as the territory was then nicknamed _ were also eventful.

She earned her bachelor's degree from Pomona College and her master's from Claremont Graduate School. Despite her qualifications, Novatney had difficulty finding a job.

"This was Depression days," she says. "I taught evening school two or three nights a week at the high school, but . . ."

She decided to study adult education _ a field perhaps offering more job opportunities. After earning her Ed.D. and being hired to work on the Work Progress Administration (WPA) project she participated in as a student, Novatney recalls, "I was getting run down."

Then, what turned out to be appendicitis compelled her to resign in April, 1940. She visited relatives in Washington and then moved on to her home for the next 30 years _ Alaska.

Novatney was hired as an English teacher/librarian at Ketchikan's high school _ a position paying \$1,800 a year _ on condition she take a class in library science as soon as possible.

It wasn't an easy job.

"I was not a very good teacher," she claims, "but I was . . ."

the sternest study hall person. " She was still in Ketchikan on Dec. 7, 1941, and recalls the scandal of that rainy Sunday: the "warming hut for skiers" burned to the ground.

Later, when the bombing of Pearl Harbor was known, it was suspected the fire had been set as a signal for the Japanese.

(Nothing was ever proven, she adds.) By summer, the high school's population had dwindled by half.

In the fall of 1943, Dorothy left Ketchikan for the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. She stayed there until the spring of '45 as an assistant professor, teaching English classes, sociology, and anthropology.

She also acted as curator of the University Museum _ which included Alaskan artifacts such as a stuffed white moose.

Then she heard about a job as field supervisor in the territorial part of the Department of Education. The idea of an on-the-go job appealed to her as much as teaching did not.

It entailed traveling from school to school, visiting teachers and making sure they were certified, checking student progress, and ordering supplies.

Each trip seems to have germinated an anecdote.

On one trip to Adak, an island in the Aleutian chain, Novatney hired a dory to take her to shore from the ship. "I had to wade ashore (from the dory), and water got in my hip boots . . . I got a royal welcome at Adak. They measured the amount of water in my boots and it was over a quart," she recalls.

That night there was a party.

"I pulled an evening dress out of the duffel bag and attended with the teachers. It was the only time I went from hip boots to dancing shoes in one day. "

After nearly three years, she was named Commissioner of the Department of Education.

A change of a different sort came in 1946, when she married longtime friend Bob Novatney.

She had known him for years. They corresponded and went out occasionally, but she was amazed when he suddenly proposed. "I thought he was a friend of the family _ but he was my friend," she says with a laugh.

Her travels didn't exactly diminish. In 1954, she went to Australia on an U.N. scholarship, providing time to study "the organization and administration of small remote schools in Australia," to see if any of their methods could be applied in Alaska.

Not very long after her return, Dorothy resigned. She continued in the field of education, however, acting as the founding director of the Juneau-Douglass Community College, now a fully accredited University of Alaska branch.

In 1971, following the death of her husband, Novatney returned to California, where she has lived since.

Though a resident of a retirement home, she has been far from sedentary. She has travelled across Europe, mainly by bus, and been to Kenya and Egypt. She has also visited Southeast Asia several times.

Since the removal of a blood clot from her brain in 1996, Novatney travel has ceased.

She remains intensely interested in everything around her, however. And while many of her contemporaries wish to reach their hundredth birthday or see the dawn of a new millennium, Novatney has a bigger goal:

"I just want to be around to see the budget balanced," she says with a grin