

Chapter 1

Daffodils and the Missed Boat

The bright yellow daffodils looked so inviting, especially in the foggy Seattle early morning. I looked longingly at the splash of color in the vendor's cart, but my traveling companions read my mind even before I spoke.

"Let's take some daffodils to the north country," I suggested weakly, seeing their disapproving looks.

"We're late. We have only twenty minutes before the boat leaves, and we'd better not stop," came the ultimatum from the other three.

There were four of us bound for Alaska. They were my pastor-husband, Mac, and I, fresh from an Idaho pastorate. Joining us on a self-supporting basis were Orville and Lucille Roe. We had responded to a call to Alaska, a true frontier in the pioneer days of the mid-1930s.

When we arrived in Seattle we were disappointed to learn that all of the northbound ferries were docked for the winter. Winter storms were too dangerous for these ships to sail, even the inland passage to Alaska.

As we inquired about transportation, we had found a small freighter that would take us north. Now as we hurried along the gloomy Seattle street, we were finally on our way.

Arriving at the dock, we paid the cab driver and accepted his cheerful "Good luck!" as a fitting farewell. To us who had lived away from the ocean, the small freighter named the Zapora seemed like a mammoth liner.

The Roes and we dashed breathlessly up the gangplank, expecting the boat to pull out immediately now that we were aboard. But no one paid any attention to us, and we watched wide-eyed as a huge crane lifted large mouthfuls of freight and dropped them in the gaping maw of the dark hold, swallowing each load with a seemingly ravenous appetite.

I looked at the yet-to-be loaded cargo and thought about the daffodils. Would there be time to return to the vending cart? My traveling companions were absorbed in watching the loading process and didn't notice me as I scampered down the gangplank, the picture of the golden daffodils dancing in my mind.

ALASKAN ADVENTURE

Block after block I ran, but no flowers could be found. Then a piercing whistle echoed through the heavy atmosphere - the freighter was leaving!

Gasping for breath, I sprinted for the dock, my feet beating a rapid tattoo on the wet pavement. At last the murky waters of Puget Sound loomed ahead. My heart jumped to my mouth as I saw the Zapora pulling out to sea with a rapidly widening moat of black water between it and the dock.

“Hey, wait for me!” I yelled as loudly as I could. I could see in the distance the surprised look on Mac’s face and the astonishment of the Roes. They couldn’t hear my cries of anguish, but they finally saw my waving arms.

As I waited breathlessly, the Zapora slowly changed its course and painfully backed to its berth. I raced up the lowered gangplank to be greeted by my worried companions. My stammered excuses about esthetic beauty received a cold reception from the stony-faced officers.

Retreating from the chilly atmosphere of disapproval, we staggered on the swaying vessel to go explore our sleeping quarters. We found the conveniences primitive and crowded. Each tiny stateroom was so cramped that only by one of its occupants crawling into the bunk bed could the partner stand. But through the rose-colored glasses of youth, we accepted the bunks, the tiny washbasin, and the shared shower as luxuriously adequate.

The clang of the dinner bell told us it was time to join the ship’s officers for lunch. There the pleasant, jovial atmosphere erased all previous strained feelings, and we all shared in the ship’s fare.

What a meal! Fried potatoes, fried meat, fried onions, fried doughnuts, and a thick soup with carrots and onions floating like little islands in a sea of oil. The topping of a rich cornstarch pudding for dessert warned us in advance of a coming rebellion from our digestive tracts.

As the Zapora sailed into the rougher waters of the Straits of Juan de Fuca, the corkscrew motion of the ship began to have its effect on our stomachs.

All but Mac lurched to the ship’s rail to, relieve themselves of the Zapora’s culinary offerings. None of the suffering three could appreciate the humor of Mac’s story of the seasick passenger who found himself leaning over the ship’s rail.

“Look, the moon is coming up,” his wife called to him.

ALASKAN ADVENTURE

The seasick traveler groaned his reply, “Does that have to come up too?”

Observing the greenish cast of his passengers’ faces, the sympathetic captain suggested that we walk the deck in the brisk, salty atmosphere. But a short, stumbling stroll sent us back to our respective bunks in the bowels of the ship.

Some hours later the sea calmed its angry lashing of the Zapora, and the sun peeped palely through the menacing clouds. Lucille, Orville and I, still shaky from our experience, joined the still-healthy Mac on deck. There we enjoyed the passing panorama of bays, fjords, and green-clothed islands. Towering tall in the slate-colored sky were ridges of peaks, each with a snowcap tied securely under its chin.

As the boat headed north, the evening sky slowly covered the scene with an enveloping shroud of fog. The Zapora’s deep-throated foghorn began to sound its eerie, ghostly moan. To calm our expressed fears the purser told us that as this sound echoed back from the rocky shore, the pilot would be able to judge the ship’s distance from the hazardous coast. There, jutting teethlike rocks had gored many an unwary ship and sent it down into the frigid waters.

At the clanging of the evening dinner bell, the Zapora passed the entrance of the Canadian coal export city of Nanaimo. The Canadian towns didn’t interest us any more than did the ship’s fare. Seasickness still reigned supreme over us captive three.

Sympathetic well-wishers suggested salty crackers, olives, and celery to help absorb the stomach juices. One of the strangest antidotes suggested was to put a lead plate in one shoe and a copper plate in the other. This, one observer claimed, was to control the flow of electricity in the body and thus subdue the seasickness. We didn’t try this idea but assumed it would be no more effective than the other suggestions, none of which worked.

One time the queasy feeling in my stomach was not due to the food, but to my uneasy thoughts about the future. For a few fleeting moments I remembered my parents’ questions about why we had to go into such a cold north country and possibly face unknown hardships and dangers. I pondered my father’s foreboding last words, “I’ll never see you again.”

Day after day droned on in wearisome patterns of wintry gray. Our daily game consisted of watching the little villages, canneries, and lumber mills play hide-and-seek with the Zapora. They nestled in little pockets of land and sea. The boat always found them and stopped at

ALASKAN ADVENTURE

each one, leaving mostly shipments of beer and liquor. At these periods of calm, our stomachs quieted down long enough so we could eat, but we lost the food as soon as the ship sailed again.

Our first Sabbath on the Zapora dawned in a dismal pall of sleet, snow, and rain. Our tiny stateroom served as the church for our group, with the congregation perched on both lower and upper berths. During Sabbath School we looked through the open porthole and saw a school of porpoises frolicking alongside the ship. To us it seemed a good omen.

Later, when the Zapora docked for a few hours in Ketchikan, we climbed the long wooden stairs to the small Adventist Church. There we hoped to meet our new mission superintendent, Harold Leslie Wood. In the church we found the friendly members and the Wood family gathered for a party.

Paralleling the warm reception for pleasant memories were the big slices of angel food cake and the refreshing punch. These tasted extra delicious to us now that our feet were planted firmly on solid ground.

The houses of Ketchikan, a small fishing village, were perched precariously on the steep palisades of the high hills. The mountains rising up from the sea kept the city from expanding too far from the shoreline.

Our visit gave us an opportunity to learn more about our colorful superintendent. His varied past experience included that of a car racer. Now, as preacher, heading the embryonic Alaska Mission, his skills as a mechanic, explorer, pilot, and boat navigator were put to good use. His was a scattered parish, with one member for every 53,000 square miles of Alaskan territory.

Ketchikan had the only organized church in the vast mission. The church building had been built with logs blown in by winter storms from the nearby Canadian shores. Pastor O. W. Herwick, a consecrated worker who was able also to work with his hands, enlisted the aid of some dedicated Scandinavian fishermen to build the church.

A peremptory whistle from the Zapora cut short our visit. We hurried to the ship and up the gangplank. During the night the freighter stopped briefly at two villages and a sawmill community. Then, while the ship made an early-morning stop at Wrangell, Lucille and I hurried to find a grocery store to purchase some dill pickles - a suggested seasickness remedy.

Quieter waters brought better health to the erstwhile seasick trio, but Pastor Mac then took our place at the rail and in the bunk. The

ALASKAN ADVENTURE

saffron shade of his face testified to the rebellious condition of his digestive system. Sicker than the rest of us had been, he was suffering from yellow jaundice.

After passing through the Wrangell Narrows, a tight crooked channel marked with buoys and beacons, we heard the welcome words from the first mate, "We're sailing into the harbor of Juneau."

We rushed to the deck to get our first glimpse of what would be our new home.