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"First Official" One Room Schoolhouse Teacher in Gustavus, Alaska.



Fashionable Miss Helen Lindstrom, age 20, came by steamer to Juneau, Alaska and on to Gustavus by small boat to be the first teacher to teach in Gustavus' brand new schoolhouse. Click for more information...

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In about 1924/25 Jennie Parker, newly married to Bert Parker, agreed to "teach" the 4 children of Strawberry Point, Alaska. She had no formal training but was available to help as the need was so great.

May (Parker) White had pleaded in Juneau with the territorial Commissioner of Education, Lester D. Henderson for help with the education of her children. It was agreed that Jennie Parker would act as teacher for the Strawberry Point District as the minimums required by Territorial Law could not be met (6 children within a required radius of miles and however many miles it was, there were more miles then covered all of Gustavus, and simply not enough children no matter how one "fudged" their ages).

There was no school facility so Abraham and Edith Parker opened their Good River homestead home and Edith's bedroom (a spare room, cozy and small just off the kitchen that she often used for sleeping) became the "classroom".

The students were Henrietta (age 7), Charles (age 5), and Gloria (age 3!)White, and Glen Parker (age 16). Territorial funds were not in abundance, so a few new, but mostly used materials were all that was available. There were even some school desks installed so that the proper atmosphere could prevail.

The pioneers at Strawberry Point were thankful for any help that could be obtained and all went well until two problematical things happened almost at the same time. First, in January of 1925, the little territorial funds that were available ran out altogether. Second, "teacher" Jennie Parker became pregnant and became too ill with morning sickness to continue.

So in February 1925, the proud but short lived idea of a school at Strawberry Point, Alaska came to a complete stop. Everyone got their heads together. Something had to be done. There were children needing to learn math and their A B Cs, and more approaching school age coming along.

The need for formal education was growing, not diminishing. And in 1925/26 with no possibility of schooling on the horizon, May took her children to their Thane, Alaska home but yearned to return to her family and home (the "Bear's Nest") in Gustavus. The territory continued to hear from May and the Parkers of what the pioneers considered a desperate situation.

It was decided that Abraham Parker and his sons would draw up plans for a new school and submit them to the territory for consideration. Perhaps if the territory of Alaska could view the Strawberry Point folks as serious about educating their children, maybe something would change.

The timing was right. In 1927 the Legislature passed a measure to fund a schoolhouse for the community of Gustavus (Strawberry Point). It was \$2000.00 (a considerable sum) and the whole of the community rejoiced!

Abraham and his sons got the contract and plans were immediately put into motion. Materials had to be cut and gathered. But they were going to get a school, so a young teacher was procured named



Helen Lindstrom and she immediately took a steamer to Juneau. It is believed that the Parkers went to Juneau to receive her and bring her out to her new home in Gustavus.

There was only one problem. The school being built on the western shore of Salmon River, just north of the bridge was not finished in time for the start of school. What to do? It was decided that Miss Lindstrom would live and hold school at Charlie Parker's vacated house until the new school and classroom were ready.

Long before the school year of 1927/28 was over, the school was not only finished but *furnished* as well. It was reported that the Sears and Roebuck furniture that the territorial secretary had ordered shipped directly to Gustavus was less than luxurious. In fact, it was "barely livable". It certainly was not the least bit comfortable. There was a pull out couch bed that was so flimsy and the mattress pad so thin, that it was a wonder that any teacher agreed to stay.

The brand new proud little schoolhouse boasted not only a fine classroom (complete with a pull down set of wall maps, chalk board and all ages in one), but an eager new teacher named Helen Lindstrom installed in the tiny living apartment with kitchen, sitting area, storage closets, and, of course, the ugly, poor quality furniture as well. It would be home to the first several teachers at any rate, and no one (no matter how fashionable or particular) ever complained.

The building itself was simply built, wood framed (painted white) with a block foundation. There was a wonderful covered front porch and the porch steps became a favorite gathering place for the children who could barely contain their joy and enthusiasm at having such first-class facilities. The schoolhouse was initially heated with coal, but later outfitted for wood to increase the warmth. There was a well built attractive outdoor bathroom (boys/girls/teacher) facility for everyone, as was of course, no different than what everyone else endured.

But take a good look at the photo given to May (Parker) White from Helen Lindstrom, dated September of 1928. Helen came in a very fashionable package, complete with ankle bracelets, pearls, and the latest in clothes. It was reported that at least some of the Parker boys were quite taken with her, and it is believed that she corresponded with them long after she moved on to greater ambitions.

We wonder----what did she think of Gustavus? Did she fit in and enjoy the children? As was the custom of the day in Territorial Alaska, she only stayed a year or two, but will forever be known as the first "official" school teacher in the one room little schoolhouse in Gustavus, Alaska.

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www.gustavushistory.org

Preserving The History of Gustavus, Alaska.

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