

A Research Paper

Covenant High School: its beginning and ending in the context of Alaska education

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The chorus of the alma mater song of Covenant High says, “Covenant High, Covenant High/ long live her name in earth and sky/and may her lads be always true/to God’s horizons ever new.” Founded in 1954 by Maynard D. Londborg in the village of Unalakleet, Alaska, the school operated for thirty-one years before closing its doors in 1985. As reflected in the short chorus of the alma mater song, the work of Covenant High School had in view an education that was rooted in the ways of God. The school has left a legacy in Alaska that is expressed through the lives of the many alumni and graduates.

This paper seeks to examine the history of Covenant High within the context of the educational system of Alaska, taking into consideration important developments from the late 19th century on through to 1985, the year that Covenant High closed. The discussion of the context will begin with the architect of the early educational policies of the Territory of Alaska, Sheldon Jackson, and end with a 1976 court case that ensured the building of public schools in every village in Alaska. To understand how Covenant High served the Alaska Native students within this context, thoughts will be shared from interviews conducted with former teachers and staff.¹

Advent of Western Education

*T’was plain to see that God was there
he planted a valley long and fair
he mixed the seas the winds the hills
and covered them all with winter’s chills²*

¹ It is important to see the work of Covenant High in the wider educational context of Alaska, but it is equally important, if not more so, to view it from the perspective of the alumni; this paper does not aim to accomplish that, but it is acknowledged that it would provide a balanced picture.

²“Covenant High School Alma Mater Song”, words by Literature III class, 1957, music by H. Roald Amundsen. Covenant Archives and Historical Library, North Park University, Home Missions: Alaska-Covenant High School , Box 2, 2/4/1/1.

The first part to be examined is the landscape that prompted Jackson to establish schools in Alaska. The beginning of American education in Alaska is strongly tied to Protestant Christian influence.³ Dorothy Jean Ray makes the claim that schools cannot be discussed apart from missions because all of them, with only the exception of the “reindeer schools,” were organized with religion as a foundation.⁴ The reason for this was the appointment of Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian missionary who had first come to Alaska in 1877, as General Agent of Education for Alaska on April 11, 1885. Official sanction had been granted to the concept that Christianity and western education jointly possessed the authority of civilize and to Americanize the Native peoples of Alaska. In his first report as General Agent for Education, he stated explicitly how he anticipated education would transform the culture of the Native Alaskan population.⁵ Under Jackson’s direction, teachers were expected to carry on an active campaign to change the life of the Eskimos because Jackson saw them not as a people with an integrated and workable culture but as barbarians, savages, or an impoverished and almost extinct race, which held distinct promise, however, of quickly learning new ways.⁶

It can be understandable why Jackson thought the way he did, as there was a great deal of turmoil in the Native Alaskan society at the time. The tenuous plight of the Arctic Natives stemmed from the fact that they were unable to cope with the effects of the white man’s presence in the territory, the worst of which included whiskey, prostitution and

³ James Cox in *The Impact of Christian Missions on Indigenous Cultures: The “Real People” and the Unreal Gospel* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 17. Cox points out that the fact that Orthodox had been “Christianizing” the Natives for nearly one hundred years had been totally disregarded by the Protestants. It was American Protestantism which assumed for itself the role as representative of American civilization.

⁴ Dorothy Jean Ray, *The Eskimos of the Bering Strait, 1650-1898* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 206.

⁵ Cox, *The Impact of Christian Missions on Indigenous Cultures: The “Real People” and the Unreal Gospel*, 21.

⁶ Ray, *The Eskimos of the Bering Strait, 1650-1898*, 209.

illnesses to which the natives had no resistance and little defense.⁷ An added factor was that the bowhead whale and walrus populations, the two pillars of coastal economies of the Native people, were decimated due to the arrival of American whaling ships in 1848.⁸

Without a doubt, the times were difficult for Native peoples in Western Alaska.⁹ Jackson made a two-fold plan to address the dire straits he found the Native population to be in: 1) the introduction of Siberian domesticated reindeer as a new source of food and economy and 2) the establishment of schools where Eskimos could learn new trades and find support in their struggle against the debilitating effects of the white man's less admirable qualities.¹⁰ The idea of schools to educate the Native Alaskan of Western ways was about to take flight.

On May 17, 1884, President Chester Arthur signed a bill, called the Alaska Organic Act, granting civil government to Alaska. Through Jackson's influence the law was relatively progressive in comparison to the Native American policies throughout the 19th century. In this policy, Alaska Natives would not be herded onto reservations; they would not be doled annuities; they would not live as public wards. "They ask no favors from the American government," Jackson explained, "but simply to be treated as other citizens, protected by the laws and courts, and furnished with schools for their

⁷ J. Arthur Lazell, *Alaskan Apostle: The Life Story of Sheldon Jackson* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 82.

⁸ Ernest S. Burch, Jr., *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structures of Inupiaq Eskimo Nations* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2006), 2.

⁹ Lazell stated in *Alaskan Apostle* that "Jackson's major achievement in Alaska, if not in his entire career, was that he saved the Eskimo from extinction." p. 83 This is either hyperbolic or naively presumptuous, in light of the fact that the Inuit have survived in the Arctic over many centuries.

¹⁰ Lazell, *Alaskan Apostle: The Life Story of Sheldon Jackson*, 83.

children.”¹¹ The formation of civil government was a precursor to the founding of schools.

In 1880, in New York, Jackson had gathered leaders of denominations who were to establish work in Alaska to make a comity agreement. According to a report from Dr. Henry Field, editor of the New York *Evangelist*, the Presbyterians were responsible for southeast Alaska and Point Barrow; the Episcopalians, along the Yukon River where the Anglican Church had already established mission outposts; the Baptists, Kodiak Island and the region of Cook’s Inlet; the Methodists, the Aleutian chain and the Shumagin Islands; the Moravians, the valleys of the Kuskokwim and Nushagak Rivers; and the Congregationalists, on the Cape Prince of Wales.¹² It was clear that Jackson saw that the task to reach the peoples of Alaska would best take place through the collective effort of Protestant missionaries.

It did not take long for the vision and policy of Jackson to take effect. In 1885 the Moravians, whom Jackson approached about beginning work in Alaska, established the first mission school located in Bethel.¹³ By 1894, there were 24 mission schools under Jackson’s leadership as General Agent for Education in Alaska.¹⁴ But two things happened that began to alter the educational landscape and lead to an increasing involvement of the federal and state governments in the administration of schools.

¹¹ John Taliaferro, *In a Far Country: the true story of a mission, a marriage, a murder, and the remarkable reindeer rescue in 1898* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006), 17.

¹² Cox, *The Impact of Christian Missions on Indigenous Cultures: The “Real People” and the Unreal Gospel*, 17. It should be noted that Cox points out that the Moravians and Congregationalists were not at the meeting, but were included in the plan. There is no mention of the Covenant, who established work in Unalakleet in 1887; of the Friends, who sent a missionary to Kotzebue to establish a mission in 1895; nor the Norwegian Lutheran Synod, who established a station in Teller in 1894. (p. 29)

¹³ Ray, *The Eskimos of the Bering Strait, 1650-1898*, 206.

¹⁴ Cox, *The Impact of Christian Missions on Indigenous Cultures: The “Real People” and the Unreal Gospel*, 77.

First, in 1900 the government permitted incorporated towns to establish schools for white children and as a result, Jackson's influence over Alaskan education began to decrease.¹⁵ This came partly as a result of the increasing population of white people who were coming to Alaska in droves on account of the gold rush. Then in 1905 the Nelson Act was passed by Congress, creating a dual system of education for Alaska, one aimed at providing schools for Native children and the other directed at constructing an educational program for what the act called "white children and children of mixed blood who live a civilized life."¹⁶ These were signs of movement away from primarily Protestant influence to government oversight regarding educational policy.

But it was Protestant missionaries who were the primary agents that executed Jackson's education plan as it has been shown, and this is the context in which the first Covenant missionary came in 1887. We now turn our attention toward Axel Karlson and the work that demonstrated the value the Covenant placed upon education as a means to carrying out mission, and what led to the founding of Covenant High.

The Covenant's work in education

*A river's name a village fair
a mighty wind to pierce the air
a harbor as a safe retreat
the welcome name of Unalakleet*

It is clear that Jackson was attempting to inculcate two values: American values and Christian belief. However, in this time period, the two values were seen to be one and the same, as William McLoughlin has noted that "to Christianize was to

¹⁵ Ibid., 79.

¹⁶ Ibid., 79.

Americanize.”¹⁷ It is noteworthy then, to recognize that it was a Swede who established the first school of the Covenant in Alaska, someone who may not have been motivated by the Americanization of the Natives of Alaska. His name was Axel E. Karlson, and he arrived on the shores of Unalaklik (Unalakleet) on July 12, 1887.¹⁸

A.E. Nordenskiöld, a Swedish explorer, had returned to Sweden from his visit to Port Clarence, Alaska in the *Vega* in 1879. He brought the need for schools and missions in Alaska and Siberia to the attention of the Swedish Mission Covenant. In 1886, Axel E. Karlson and Adolph Lydell were sent to San Francisco to learn English, and one year later they made their way to Alaska, with Karlson establishing his mission in Unalakleet. On October 22, 1889, Unalakleet church records show that twenty-one boys and nine girls “all got new names and some clean clothes and promised to wash their faces every morning.”¹⁹

In 1890, there were 40 students in the Unalakleet school and by 1905, with day and evening schools at Yakutat, Unalakleet and Golovin Bay, Covenant missionaries were teaching 285 pupils. The figure remained high, until in 1927 the U.S. Bureau of Education took over the schoolwork from missions.²⁰ Before that, in 1909, the government had declared that a missionary could not be a teacher; they had to choose. Essentially what occurred was that several Covenant missionaries engaged in what we would call “tent making” today, teaching in government schools while still engaging in

¹⁷ William G. McLoughlin, “The Missionaries’ Dilemma” in *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794-1870: essays on acculturation and cultural persistence*. ed. Walter H. Conser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 38.

¹⁸ L. Arden Almquist, *Covenant Missions in Alaska* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1962), 19.

¹⁹ Ray, *The Eskimos of the Bering Strait, 1650-1898*, 211.

²⁰ Almquist, *Covenant Missions in Alaska*, 58. Cox, in *The Impact of Christian Missions on Indigenous Cultures: The “Real People” and the Unreal Gospel*, p. 89, reported that the Bureau of Indian Affairs assumed responsibility for Native education in 1931.

missionary work as a volunteer so to speak.²¹ From the early days of the work of the Covenant, it can be seen that education was an important piece of that mission.

By 1935, Cox points out that the purpose of education among Natives had shifted from a civilizing function to that of providing the quality education needed to enable them to assume positions of leadership within their new culture.²² Concern began to mount over accessibility of education. Mount Edgumbe High School was opened in 1947 as an all-Native secondary school. It provided both vocational training and an academic program in order to promote the goal of greater accessibility to education in order to be competitive with the white population. Most Native high school students went either to Mount Edgumbe or to other Bureau of Indian Affairs schools in Oregon or Oklahoma.²³

During this time, the Covenant in Alaska was recognizing this need for greater accessibility where a student could be educated closer to home. According to a report by Londborg in 1966, there were two main reasons for starting a school. First, there was need for a secondary education program for Natives in Western Alaska. Secondly, there was a desire to aid in the building of an indigenous church through the training of the young people on the field.²⁴ Along this line, a training program by the Covenant had been created in 1948 in an attempt to provide trained leadership for the church, which was located in Unalakleet for four years and then Marshall for two.²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 61.

²² Cox, *The Impact of Christian Missions on Indigenous Cultures: The "Real People" and the Unreal Gospel*, 89.

²³ Ibid., 90.

²⁴ Maynard Londborg, *Covenant High School: a report*, 1966, 13-14, Covenant Archives and Historical Library, North Park University, Home Missions: Alaska-Covenant High School, Box 9, 2/4/1/1.

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

The concern for education persisted in the minds and hearts of those Covenanters who labored in Alaska, just as it had in the beginning with Karlson. Londborg had communicated with the territorial government to offer correspondence courses under their authority. The reply from the Territory of Alaska was to encourage him to begin a school while offering full support.²⁶ Under the direction of the Covenant Missionary Council of Alaska (CMCA), Covenant High School was started in the fall of 1954.²⁷ The beginning was small and the facilities were meager, but the vision to educate students had become a reality for Londborg and others. At this point, our attention turns to the life of Covenant High School, attempting to highlight its impact from the perspective of former teachers and outline what led its closure in 1985.

Covenant High Wolverines: 1954-1985

*In God's vast tundra glistening there
a simple spire points in the air
and close beside the blue and gold
our alma mater the Lord's stronghold*

The beginning of Covenant High School was marked by a balanced offering of a quality education as well as a concern for the spiritual lives of the students. Sigurd F. Westberg, former missions professor at North Park College, expressed understanding of this view on missions. While attending the eighth annual conference of the United States national commission for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Westberg heard testimony of Africans who said, "high quality education is not incompatible with active evangelism." He concluded:

“ I am convinced that education must be given for itself because the people need it, just as we would give food to a hungry man for his own

²⁶ Don M. Dafoe to Maynard D. Londborg, July 9, 1954, Department of Education, Covenant Archives and Historical Library, North Park University, Home Missions: Alaska-Covenant High School, Box 2, 2/4/1/1.

²⁷ Ibid., 13.

sake. But having done that, it can rightly be made clear that education is given in the name of Christ. If education is offered as a means to conversion, then when the conversion takes place the education has accomplished its end. But such education may fall very far short of meeting the needs of the individual, who must live and grow and contribute in his new nation and his emerging culture.”²⁸

This is the mission philosophy that under girded the work of Covenant High and gives insight to the broader view of the denomination on this matter.

The CMCA, at its annual meeting in 1955, included four statements of purpose in its “Policies for Covenant High.”

1. To provide a good secondary education for the promising young people of Unalakleet and surrounding Covenant villages.
2. To aid in the building of an indigenous church through the training of our young people.
3. To build a student body which will give a fertile and productive field from which to choose future native pastors.
4. To provide a sound basis for the spiritual and social life of the adolescents of our field.

One can see the parallels to Westburg’s statement on missions and education. Such was the DNA of the beginning of Covenant High under the guidance of Londborg.

Between 1954 and 1985, according to the Annual Reports to the Commission of Education of the Territory of Alaska (later the State of Alaska), 375 students graduated from Covenant High while 1,845 students were enrolled during that time period.²⁹ The school began with a class of 7 freshmen, reached a peak enrollment of 105 in 1975-76, and when it closed in 1985 it had an enrollment of 61. Of all the private and denominational schools in Alaska, between 1962 and 1972, Covenant High experienced

²⁸ Almquist, *Covenant Missions in Alaska*, 57.

²⁹ “Annual Reports to the Commissioner of Education” from 1954 to 1985, Covenant Archives and Historical Library, North Park University, Home Missions: Alaska-Covenant High School, Boxes 2 & 3, 2/4/1/1. A document called “Covenant High School Alumni Assn. List” records the names of 372 graduates, a discrepancy of three less from the official reports submitted to the state.

an increase of 284.62% of enrollment, highest of any of the forty-one schools listed in the report.³⁰ The numbers indicate that the school had a relatively sizeable influence, but it is through the lives of teachers that we turn to see the significance of the work.

Al White was an Industrial Arts teacher in Burbank, California at the time Covenant High School had opened in 1954. He and his wife Gladys were introduced to the ministry in Alaska at a Covenant Church that had just begun, meeting in the home of Reverend Robert Honnette. Honnette had recently returned from shooting footage in Alaska highlighting the work of the Covenant in Alaska; he was the first to encourage the Whites to consider moving to Alaska. Having felt that his knowledge of Industrial Arts teaching would be a good fit at the school, they answered the call to go to Unalakleet to teach. However, the major attraction to the White's was an unrestricted opportunity to deal with students regarding spiritual issues.³¹

When he arrived to Unalakleet in 1956, White recalled a meeting with Londborg that was indicated to him the educational goals Londborg desired. He expressed to him that they wanted to have Industrial Arts classes, but his desire was to shoot for the top as far as academics were concerned. Londborg said, "These young people are bright they just need a chance. We're going to have Advanced Algebra and Trigonometry, Chemistry, Physics and whatever else they can take." The desire was to have students be prepared to be able to step into a college setting.³²

From the outset, the goals and methodology of Covenant High School was one of preparing students for the rapidly changing world. The metaphor White would use was

³⁰This is from an unnamed report, Covenant Archives and Historical Library, North Park University, Home Missions: Alaska-Covenant High School, Box 3, "CHS Reports to DOE 1973-'74," 2/4/1/1.

³¹ From an interview with Al White via telephone, May 1, 2008 in Chicago, IL. Digital recording is in my possession.

³² Ibid.

that of a steamroller. White recalled a man coming to Unalakleet, astonished that the school was not teaching the students in their Native language. He said to the man, “English is coming and is overtaking the local languages. It’s like a steamroller that is coming and either the steamroller is going to crush people in its way or there will be people on the steamroller driving it. I would rather have students driving the steamroller.” This outlined the philosophy on how they dealt with the change of culture. In terms of dealing with the changes, White indicated that the mantra of the school was, “Sensitive to the past but preparing for the future.”³³

Covenant High demonstrated a balance in considering the cultural situation of its students. Jim Hjelm, teacher and business manager from 1976 to its closure, said, “In many ways, either by design or by virtue of who was there, it was almost as if CHS was ‘acultural’. There was a lot of respect for what was going on culturally. But there was never any attempt to do anything with languages.” His wife Nancy, also a teacher, pointed out how another teacher, Vicki Duerre, took her students out into the community and interviewed elders in order to preserve local stories, compiling them into a book called *Where the East Wind Blows*.³⁴ This, along with classes such as sled building for example, showed that the school did indeed recognize the past with its cultural ties.

Covenant High was situated in a humble setting. Ken Anderson, a maintenance man, who along with his wife Eleanor served as part of the core staff until 1982, pointed out, “When you think about what Covenant High had, it was very minimal. There was a

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ From an interview with Jim & Nancy Hjelm, March 8, 2008 in Soldotna, Alaska. Digital recording is in my possession.

sense of the school getting a lot out of each dollar.”³⁵ Bill and Anna Marie Oudal, who met at Covenant High, serving together from 1961 to 1977, pointed out that, “Looking back, there have been terrific results over the years, and yet I don’t think we did anything outstanding. We were people who were there and I taught pretty much how I was taught. We did not have any outstanding educational philosophies, or that sort of thing; we simply did our job. We really didn’t do anything extraordinary.”³⁶ Yet it was in this setting where truly outstanding things did happen, educationally and spiritually speaking.

The over arching desire though was to minister to the students spiritual lives. It is what drew people like Al and Gladys White to the work. At the first, not many of the students were followers of Christ, but in the mid 1960’s, many of the kids accepted the Lord, as there was a spiritual awakening. That set the tone for the school, as Christian kids became the leaders of the school.³⁷ Ministry at Covenant High was a constant. Students were required to attend church and Sunday school and so the Unalakleet church would be packed.³⁸ There were many avenues for the opportunity to grow in Christian faith. Students were able to go on Gospel Team trips; each year, sometimes per semester, there was a “Spiritual Emphasis week” to encourage students in faith; and there was the relationships with the staff who cared about the spiritual matters in the lives of their students.³⁹

³⁵ From an interview with Bill & Anna Marie Oudal and Ken & Eleanor Anderson, March 9, 2008 in Anchorage, Alaska. Digital recording is in my possession

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ From an interview with Jim & Nancy Hjelm, March 8, 2008 in Soldotna, Alaska. Digital recording is in my possession.

³⁹ From an interview with Al White via telephone, May 1, 2008 in Chicago, IL. Digital recording is in my possession.

As was mentioned, attendance was booming through the mid-1960's and 1970's. Covenant High was enjoying the prime of its ministry as an educational institution. The basketball team was having great success, the choir attended two music festivals in Anchorage, receiving a standing ovation at one, students enjoyed such events as the annual declamatory contest; Oudal said that, "There were so many things that had come together in a wonderful way that created such an *esprit de corps* among the students, all after the spiritual revival after about 1964."⁴⁰ The Hjelm's had arrived at the peak of this "golden era" and they said the school was bursting at the seams.

The educational landscape in Alaska was about to change however, and it would have a direct impact on Covenant High School. In 1976, the case of *Tobeluk v. Lind* was settled by entry of a detailed consent decree providing for the establishment of a high school program in every one of the 126 villages covered by the litigation. Known as the "Molly Hootch Case" for the Eskimo girl whose name headed the original list of plaintiffs suing the state in 1972 for failing to provide village high schools, the era of public schools in the villages had been ushered in by this landmark decision.⁴¹

The advent of public schools affected Covenant High in two primary ways. One was that the enrollment dropped off, from 102 in 1976-77 to 74 the following year. By 1984-85 the enrollment was at 61, exactly half of what it had been 8 years earlier.⁴² The other result was that the type of student that came to Covenant High School changed from more well-adjusted and motivated students, both academically and socially, to more

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Stephen E. Cotton, "Alaska's 'Molly Hootch Case': High Schools and the Village Voice," in *Educational Research Quarterly*, (1984) [Internet online]; available from <http://www.alaskool.org/native_ed/law/mhootch_erq.html#journal > [7 May 2008].

⁴² "Annual Reports to the Commission of Education", 1976-77, 1977-78, and 1984-85, Covenant Archives and Historical Library, North Park University, Home Missions: Alaska-Covenant High School, Box 3, 2/4/1/1.

troubled ones.⁴³ The Hjelm's indicated that, "There had been strong motivated students, who were spiritually aware too, but as that shifted to where many of the students that came were troubled, it caused a different tenor in the school. It was not that it was bad, but different, and the staff were feeling less and less equipped to deal with the issues that were being presented by the different composition of the student body."⁴⁴ These realities were strong indicators that the season of the life of Covenant High was soon to be complete.

We must mention one other factor that contributed to the eventual completion of the work of Covenant High. In February, 1972, Alaska was transferred from the under the Department of Foreign, or World, Mission to the Department of Home Mission. This meant a changing of financial contributions. A cap was placed upon how much money would be allocated and between 1980-81 and 1984-85, appropriations for Covenant High dropped from \$109,000 to \$50,000. Couple that with the rapidly rising expenses, which in the same time frame increased from \$372,950 to \$420,955,⁴⁵ the financial burden had reached insurmountable proportions.

In December, 1984, the Evangelical Covenant Church of Alaska General Council, in a closed ballot vote, decided to close Covenant High as of June 30, 1985.⁴⁶ This was an extremely difficult decision as the school had become so meaningful to those who attended and worked at the school. There had been a concerted effort to raise funds, but

⁴³ Donald L. Erickson, "A Time to Be Born, a Time to Die'," *Covenant Companion*, April 1985, 8.

⁴⁴ From an interview with Jim & Nancy Hjelm, March 8, 2008 in Soldotna, Alaska. Digital recording is in my possession.

⁴⁵ A CHS business report, Covenant Archives and Historical Library, North Park University, Home Missions: Alaska-Covenant High School, Box 10, 2/4/1/1.

⁴⁶ Erickson, "A Time to Be Born, a Time to Die'," *Covenant Companion*, April 1985, 8.

it just was not happening. Nancy Hjelm put it clearly, “Nobody wanted it to close, but people realized it’s season had come and been fulfilled.”

The motto of Covenant High was “Education with an Eternal Emphasis!” That motto is reflective of the work of the Covenant in Alaska and the value that has been placed upon education by our denomination. The graduates established a legacy, some of which became church board members, Sunday school teachers, church musicians, pastors and Christian parents. Others went on to become teachers, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, corporation executives, commercial pilots, and mayors.⁴⁷ These people have been some of the ones to write the next chapters of life in Western Alaska and in the work of the church. They share a common educational home that exhorted them to be “true to God’s horizons ever new.”

⁴⁷ Erickson, “‘A Time to Be Born, a Time to Die’,” *Covenant Companion*, April 1985, 8.

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