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An Educational Frontier: Hannah Breece and the American Colonial Project in Alaska

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of Hannah Breece, a government schoolteacher in early 20th-century Alaska, as an agent of U.S. internal colonialism. Through an analysis of her experience in Alaska, this study explores how education functioned as a tool of assimilation, aiming to bring 'modernity' to indigenous and Russian-descended communities. Breece's experiences illustrate the mechanisms of tailored migration, whereby specialized workers were deployed to the colonial frontier to reshape native societies through structured educational, religious, and legal interventions. While Breece was deeply committed to her mission, her reflections reveal tensions within the colonial project. She recognized the failures of the American education system in Alaska, and her accounts highlight the interplay between colonial education, missionary work, and governance. By centering on Breece's account, this article situates her within the larger framework of U.S. expansionist policies while acknowledging her personal agency in carrying out, and at times questioning, their implications. Her story exemplifies the contradictions of colonial rule: the belief in progress through education, the erasure of indigenous cultural practices, and the unintended consequences of assimilationist policies. Through this case study, the article contributes to the broader discourse on American internal colonialism, demonstrating how individuals like Breece navigated the space between personal conviction and state-imposed transformation.

Keywords: *colonial Alaska; colonial education; Hannah Breece; indigenous communities; internal colonialism*

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the long nineteenth century, Alaska, like much of the American West, became a focal point for American colonial ambitions. After declaring independence from Britain in 1766, the United States spent much of the next hundred years establishing itself geopolitically in North America. From the initial base of the Thirteen Colonies, major milestones included the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the Northwest expansion between 1819 and 1845, and the Southwest expansion between 1845 and 1860 (see Burns, 2017, and Edling, 2021). Following the Civil War of 1860-65, territorial expansion was focused on the settling of the American West. Although there had been migration westward across the Prairie in the mid-nineteenth century for economic, social, and religious reasons, official incorporation of many western territories into the United States did not occur until much later (Teggin, 2022, p. 63; Frymer, 2014). As the United States expanded its borders and consolidated control over the continent, it also became an aggressor against many indigenous peoples who occupied the land that the United States laid claim to. This is connected to what is known as the process of internal colonialism, an action whereby minority groups are exploited within a wider society and denied the same rights, privileges, and economic opportunities (see Chávez, 2011, and N. B. Chaloult & Y. Chaloult, 1979). This line of thinking has since been developed by scholars such as Gesa Mackenthun (2000) and Ramón Gutiérrez (2004) in the American context.

Whereas the formal purchase of Alaska went through on 18 October 1867, the negotiations and American desire for northwest expansion had been ongoing since the time of the Crimean War (1853-56) (Golder, 1920, pp. 411-412). The transfer of Alaska was an attractive prospect to both sides, with Russia in need of cash and facing growing difficulties in justifying the possession of such a remote and low-value territory. The United States, on the other hand, were keen to round out its Pacific seaboard and to weaken the British position in the Pacific northwest (Luthin, 1937, pp. 168-170). Britain, it must be remembered, held a sizeable interest in the region due to its Canadian possessions,

something that spurred the United States into colonial behaviors. It is in this way that we must also view Alaska and the neighboring Yukon as a frontier space between two competing powers. Such frontiers were dynamic spaces which saw the mingling of peoples, cultures, and ideas over a number of years. This study aligns with Richard White's (1991, pp. 1-3) view of the American West as being more important as a powerful symbol and cultural identifier than as a specific place. Alaska and the Yukon were a space of great social, religious, and migratory change in the late nineteenth century (Coates, 1987, pp. 145-147). This is something that Breece's account will be used to bear out.

Following its purchase from Russia in 1867, the United States sought to incorporate Alaska into its national framework, extending its influence through education and religion in particular. Using education as a tool for social homogenization, a standard colonial practice, the United States government sought to reduce the influence of two distinct socio-cultural elements at work in Alaska. First, the previous Russian Orthodox education and religious instruction, which was distinct from the largely Protestant congregations in the United States (Murray, 2013, pp. 91-92). Second, the historic native Alaskan cultural identity, which revolved around family, community, and spirituality (Barnhardt, 2001, pp. 6-8). The latter aspect was complicated by the fact that Alaska was home to a diverse range of communities from multiple linguistic and ethnic groups, a burgeoning Creole community, and a mix of American, Canadian, and Russian settlers (Burch Jr., 1979, pp. 123, 134; Easley, 2008, pp. 73-74, 80-85). Educational development was slow in Alaska, with American missionaries arriving in the 1870s and 1880s, followed by the establishment of Organic Act schooling from 1884 and Nelson Act schools after 1905. This was capped by the Bureau of Indian Affairs also establishing schools in the early twentieth century (Williams, 2011, p. 190).

At the heart of the United States' efforts to educate and transform newly-settled territories were individuals such as Hannah Breece (1859-1940) who were sent from the metropolitan East. There had been a long history of New Englanders in particular contributing to this cause, along the lines of what Lubick (1978) has described as a sort

of "missionary zeal" (p. 27). Breece (1997, pp. 3-4) herself was sent to Alaska in 1904, having previously taught for twenty years in Pennsylvania and four years in the Rockies. The diary of her time spent teaching in Alaska, edited by her great-niece, the urban theorist and activist, Jane Jacobs (1916-2006), provides a wealth of evidence to discuss in connection with US colonial activity and educational efforts in early twentieth-century Alaska (see also, Jacobs, 1961, and 1970). The contents of Breece's diary also provide an opportunity to engage with the fascinating theme of women's roles in early America. As per Snyder's (2012, p. 421) thoughts on the matter, it is felt that there is a need to refigure women's place in such histories, enabling them to be framed as having their own agency in colonial expansion and state building. This is further connected to what Mary Beard (1987) has discussed as the concept of 'women as force' in history. What is curious in Jacobs' editing of Breece's diary, however, is that while women are not a central theme in her wider work, she has reimagined the world from a mixed-use perspective (Rosenberg, 1994, p. 139). This is something that enables the account of Breece to be told in a more open fashion.

Finally, Breece's sojourn in Alaska must also be considered in terms of what is often described as the colonial 'civilising mission'. This is a process whereby colonial powers sought to enforce cultural homogenization and reduce the influence of traditional societal systems (d'Errico, 1999; Liebersohn, 2016). This often played out as a traditionalism vs. modernity paradigm, whereby the colonial metropole viewed the colonial periphery as savages. This is a serious consideration for the present study as Breece's (1997) self-proclaimed mission was to bring native Alaskans "benefits now available to them from civilization and from Uncle Sam's care for his less fortunate children" (p. 5). This is a theme that Breece refers back to often in her account and was the driving force of her presence in Alaska. Although her dedication likely came from an altruistic belief in helping others, her views, like so many others during the colonial period, did not fully take into account the beliefs, needs or wishes of those on the receiving end of her instruction. As shall be discussed in this study, individual actors such as Breece had the potential,

intentionally or not, to promulgate colonial attitudes and demands upon vulnerable and often marginalized societies to a great extent.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology, combining primary and secondary source analysis to investigate the role of Hannah Breece as an educational agent of U.S. internal colonialism in early twentieth-century Alaska. The central source is Breece's published diary, *A Schoolteacher in Old Alaska* (1997), edited by her great-niece Jane Jacobs. The diary is approached both as a first-hand narrative of frontier life and as a mediated text shaped by Jacobs' editorial interventions. Close textual analysis of Breece's reflections provides insight into her perceptions of indigenous communities, her pedagogical practices, and her interpretation of the American civilising mission.

To situate Breece within broader historical processes, her account is read alongside scholarship of U.S. government legislation on Alaskan schooling, missionary records, and contemporary studies on U.S. expansion, colonial education, and internal colonialism. This comparative approach allows for the identification of structural patterns in educational policy while also foregrounding the subjective dimensions of Breece's experience. The analysis pays particular attention to recurring themes of assimilation, religion, gender, and the tension between progress and cultural erasure.

In addition, this study draws on postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks to interrogate how individual agency and state policy intersected in Alaska's colonial frontier. Concepts such as the 'civilising mission' and 'women as force in history' guide the interpretation of Breece's role as both a participant in and a critic of U.S. colonial practices. By combining textual analysis with theoretical framing, this methodology highlights the contradictions of Breece's position and contributes to understanding how colonial power was exercised and contested through education in early twentieth-century Alaska.

DISCUSSION

THE QUEST TO TEACH AND 'CIVILISE'

The transfer of Alaska to the United States in 1867 brought with it both a new

territory and a population, but also a host of other responsibilities which the U.S. government became responsible for. Foremost of these was how to provide for the new population and to educate its youth. As a result, it found itself with a growing need for teachers to travel west. Although Hannah Breece's time in Alaska is the focal point of this study, she was by no means unique in making the journey west. Indeed, despite the relative invisibility of women's place on the frontier due to stereotypes brought about by the Turner thesis, which emphasized male achievements, women's place in frontier communities was central (Walsh, 1995, pp. 241-242). This is connected to Snyder's (2012, p. 421) view of the need to reframe women in early America to demonstrate their agency. Lois Fawcett's (1933, pp. 142-145) study of Harriet Bishop's time in Minnesota Territory in the mid-nineteenth century bears out how early the process of volunteer migration to teach began, and the establishment of a New England Association in Helena, Montana, in 1869, together with Edward Tenney's quest to found a college in Colorado in the 1860s, show just how organized voluntary educators were in the nineteenth century (Lubick, 1978, p. 29; Dunn, 2012, pp. 535-537).

However, these were early cases before Breece's time. Breece (1997, p. 4) was sent to Alaska in 1904 as a salaried teacher by Sheldon Jackson, U.S. Education Agent for Alaska, presumably under the terms of the Organic Act of 1884 (Barnhardt, 2001, p. 11). As such, she may be seen as a state-sanctioned agent of change in the region, with a twofold mission to educate and instill American values. Previous missionary and volunteer teachers, whilst furthering this same aim, could be considered to have acted with the United States' consent rather than formal direction. Using education for cultural homogenization was not an uncommon strategy for colonial powers when dealing with a colonized population. The intention was that the educated youth would return to their communities and unknowingly act as agents of change themselves by bringing new knowledge and cultural traits (Jester, 2002, pp. 1-3; Jones, 2014/2015, pp. 5-6). It is in this way that U.S. education policy and Breece's presence in Alaska were connected to the concept of the colonial 'civilising mission', whereby the colonizer attempted to force the colonized to adopt metropolitan

cultural behaviors and traditions. Breece's (1997) preconceptions about her mission underline this, with her preparation for teaching in Alaska consisting of studying "primitive races" (p. 4) from the perspective of American anthropologists. Her contention at this point was that she would be bringing civilization to inferior peoples (ibid., p. 5).

Over the course of fourteen years, Breece taught at several schools in Alaska that ranged from coastal towns to rural inland villages in the sparsely populated Alaskan interior. Starting at Afognak Island, beside the larger Kodiak Island in the Aleutian chain off the southern coast of Alaska, Breece's account describes both the challenges she faced as a teacher as well as some fascinating details about Alaskan-Aleutian society, in particular, her description of the Russian-descended Aleuts, societal structure, and economic pursuits (Breece, 1997, pp. 11, 16-17, 36-38). This dovetailed with her description of anthropological elements of material culture, such as religious iconography, diets, and sea travel by kayak (ibid., pp. 15, 31, 134-135).

In many cases, the narratives she gave echoed descriptions provided in more modern anthropological and ethnographic studies such as those of Burch Jr. (1979, pp. 141-143), Easley (2008, pp. 73-75), Quimby (1944, pp. 3-8), and West et al. (2010), demonstrating the utility of her diary as a multidisciplinary source.

Breece's diligent chronicling of her experiences in Alaska did not, however, mean that she necessarily admired those around her; instead, it might be suggested that she tolerated them for the sake of her mission. This is something that the following quote bears out:

> I have always been careful when working among inferior races to convey to them that I have their interests at heart and love and respect them as people, but that I do not come among them to sink to their level but to uplift them. If this standard is not adhered to, little can be done to improve their lives […] I am superior to an uneducated native woman and give her to understand that I realize it. She knows it herself. But I want them to realize I have faith that the ability is within them to improve themselves and their lives and their children's lives. They are more uncivilized in more ways than I may say here. But I want to draw a line between "whitizing" and

> civilizing them (Breece, 1997, p. 104).

In this extract, Breece makes it quite clear that she viewed herself as morally and socially superior to the indigenous people she lived with. This was expected behaviour given the prejudices and stereotypes against indigenous people at the time. What is interesting in the above quote, however, is that she explicitly draws a line between attempting "civilizing" over "whitizing" (Breece, 1997, p. 104). On the one hand, it may be seen as overt racial profiling; on the other, it could be viewed as an acknowledgement that the U.S. government could only interfere so much in native society. Either way, Breece still made it clear that she wished to "improve" (ibid.) them.

When it came to societal regulation and the care of children on the frontier, it must be acknowledged that it was often women who led in this area. This was likely due to what Hinckley (1980, p. 37) has discussed as the stereotypical relationship opinions on the frontier, with common assumptions about the place of women among these. As Sundberg (2010, p. 207) has highlighted, women not only participated in frontier life, but also shaped their own identities and experiences there. Whereas much progress has been made in recent years towards a more authentic depiction of women's role, Castañeda (1990, p. 8) has correctly pointed out that it took a period of revisionist scholars beginning in the 1970s to slowly update the broader narrative. It is in this vein of thought that the actions of women such as Breece must be reappraised; clearly, women such as her had the potential to play a large role in the reformation of society on the frontier. This is something that can be witnessed in the following quote, in which Breece describes her strategy for conditioning Russian-descended pupils of hers to act out their assumed superiority over the Aleut population by becoming involved in 'training' them:

> During the first week, when I was teaching little children a game during the recess period, the Russian pupils rounded up every single one of the twenty Aleut children, big and small, and before I knew it the Aleuts were fleeing to their village with the Russians in pursuit. Then the Russian children came back triumphantly. Now they had the school to themselves […] I asked the Russian children to tell me about the situation and listened to their scorn and complaints. I laughed along

> with them and told them I did not wonder they had chased the Aleuts away, they were so ragged and dirty. I reminded them that I had not seated them alongside the Aleut children but kept them apart as far as that was possible […] But then I asked how many had a grandmother or grandfather who lived in the Aleut village. While I could see they were thinking about that, I proposed a compact with them. If I tried to be patient and was willing to teach such ragged pupils, would they help me to tame them and teach them? […] If we all worked together, I said, soon there would be no dirty Aleut section in our nice school. I pictured how it could be when the Aleuts were clean and neat and could talk English and we would all be like one big school family. How many would like to train the Aleuts? Everyone volunteered to help (Breece, 1997, pp. 17-18).

Breece felt her role went beyond that of a teacher of the three Rs, and that life skills and sanitation came under her remit too. Whilst her objective of providing improved education and sanitation to the Aleuts likely came from a noble place, her methods of achieving these mirrored traditional forms of social control and transformation connected to the so-called 'civilising mission' (Liebersohn, 2016, pp. 383-387). For this to be accomplished in the colonial-imperial space, a degree of collaboration from sections of the indigenous population was necessary. This is reminiscent of Frederick Lugard's famous 'indirect rule' method of colonialism (see Apata, 1992).

Whereas Breece's strategy appears to have had the desired effect of directing the rowdy Russian children's energy into a project, it cannot be denied that she was channeling their prejudices to achieve this. Once again, this channels beliefs common at the time surrounding the need to eradicate traditional native culture and viewing the frontier as a wild space lacking any degree of formal control (Jester, 2002, p. 1; Faber, 2018, p. 24). Breece's methods and recorded opinions are also highly critical of the indigenous Aleuts and show no concern for their culture. This is a pattern that is consistently present in her diary throughout her time in Alaska (Breece, 1997, pp. 39, 72, 99, 133). It is ironic in this respect that, according to Jones (2014/2015, pp. 3-4, 7), many groups of indigenous Alaskans were in favor of Western education. However, they felt this must not come at the expense of their heritage. Problems such as schools being

built on tribal land, certain students being refused access, the school curriculum, and schools claiming legal jurisdiction over children were all reasons for complaint and were grievances that led to the founding of the Alaskan Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood to address these issues (ibid.).

In her diary, Breece quite naturally described her efforts in a positive light and sought to portray how her bringing of so-called modernity was necessary. The case of her using the Russian children is a good example of this; so too is that of the quote below:

> I then asked the mother to undress the boy and wash him. She was furious and insisted it would kill the baby if I made her put it in him in water. There was no point of contact between my words and her conceptions and no way to bridge them with more words. The only recourse was an object lesson […] So I took her baby and, in spite of her efforts to stop me, removed his filthy rags and put him in the tub and he had the washing of his life. He was a sturdy six-month-old and kicked and crowed while he was bathed. Then the girls helped and together we dressed him in new, clean clothes. The old ones went into the fire […] When it was all over, and the mother saw her child so clean and comfortable, lying there in his little white bed, she thanked me over and over in Russian, 'Spaseba! Spaseba!' (Breece, 1997, p. 104).

Breece took it upon herself to forcibly separate a mother from her child to clean and dress it. Whilst it cannot be denied that improved hygiene and sanitation were beneficial for the child, Breece acted with arbitrary power and lacked the medical or governmental authority to do so. As an agent working for a colonial power governing the region, Breece's behavior and attitude align with those of colonial officials in global empires at the time. In seeking to dismiss the mother's supposed superstition about bathing potentially killing her child, Breece (1997) determined to use an "object lesson" (p. 104) to enforce her will. Again, her use of language and aims were very heavy-handed and mirror the type of ends justifying the means approach commonly seen in colonial settings and used by colonial officials.

ALASKA AND A MODERN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Although Alaska has one of the highest populations of indigenous people in the United States, policymakers have tended to ignore the history of education in Alaska. Indeed, it was only in the latter half of

the twentieth century that indigenous claims and opinions have been listened to (Barnhardt, 2001, pp. 1-2). Prior to this, there was a long chain of educational interventions which did not take indigenous needs into account. Teaching efforts by Russian Orthodox missionaries under the Russian American Company were the starting point for this, with attempts to teach going hand in hand with conversion to the Orthodox faith. Interestingly, Orthodoxy was also seen as being directly linked to 'Russianness' (Murray, 2013, pp. 94-95). This is important both in terms of the colonial history of Alaska, and the fact that intermarriage with native Alaskans and the employment of Creoles were encouraged by the Russian American Company. This was not something replicated by the Americans after the transfer of Alaska in 1867, and was something which left the Creole population with a confusing identity and a sudden lack of societal status (Easley, 2008, pp. 84-86). The situation for the Creole population was also exacerbated by the sudden influx of American fortune hunters after 1867 (Lain, 1976, p. 146). Although, as Shortridge (1977, p. 88) has commented, American attitudes towards Alaska alternated between hope and frustration, this did not stop the mass migration of people and the change in demographics. With a burgeoning settler population in a frontier-colony setting, this presented a challenge to the United States government in terms of implementing an effective and modern education system.

The problem, as Case (1984, pp. 4-8) has discussed, has been that the U.S. government did not deal with native Alaskans as it did with other indigenous communities, thus depriving them of aboriginal status and claims. It was not until 1905 that a formal distinction between native and non-native Alaskans was made, and not until 1932 that indigenous Alaskans were given the same legal status as Native Americans (ibid.). This is a serious issue since, as Tippeconnic and Gipp (1982, p. 126) have laid out, Native Americans differ both culturally and legally from other minority groups in the United States, with there being numerous congressional acts, treaties and court orders that have codified their status. Prucha (1984, p. 1128) reaffirms this reality by acknowledging that native Alaskans have never been fully incorporated or represented in federal policies developed for Native Americans. Whereas

literacy programs flourished during the Russian period and there is ample evidence for a long and proud history of cultural learning practices, there was a marked change of approach under the Americans (Dauenhauer, 1982; Kawagley, 2006; Jones, 2014/2015). This reflected the type of cultural transformation that the U.S. government was aiming for, with the 'Westernization' and cultural homogenization of Alaska to reflect the broader United States being preferred. As Burch Jr. (1979) has noted, the result of such practices served to create a manufactured stereotypical category of people during what he calls the colonial period (c. 1898-1960), which he loosely termed as "non-whites" (p. 134).

The first step in moving beyond reliance on missionary and volunteer schools was the 1884 Organic Act, which delegated responsibility for the schooling of all children to the U.S. Department of the Interior. This saw local schools opening in villages, as well as a small number of vocational boarding schools (Wexler, 2006, pp. 17-18). Sheldon Jackson, the education agent who sent Breece (1997, p. 4) to Alaska, played a leading role in this movement. It ultimately proved that the education bureau was unable to provide schooling to all, so Congress devolved responsibility to local authorities to support schools through taxation. The continued struggle to adequately provide schooling hereafter led to the 1905 Nelson Act, which allowed for the establishment of schools outside of incorporated towns; however, whilst new schools were built, only European-descended children were encouraged to attend (Barnhardt, 2001, p. 11).

Despite the limitations placed on attendance, Breece (1997, p. 32) herself considered the act to be a positive piece of legislation, even though she was ordered to admit only Aleuts to her school. Despite the slow progress being made, access to education in Alaska continued to be a problem into the twentieth century. Although new schools were being built each year and individual teachers, such as Breece (ibid., 32-33), allowed native children to attend school as 'visitors', there was also the problem of young children being sent away to federal 'Indian' boarding schools in places like Arizona, Oklahoma, and Oregon (Williams, 2011, p. 190). This contributed to the breakdown of cultural and community ties, as well as accelerating the assertion of U.S. colonial control in

Alaska. Breece (1997, p. 189) herself held that any educational benefits the children might have gained from these boarding schools were made obsolete by their dislocation and unhappiness upon returning. This is something described in the following quote:

> Southeastern Alaska had long interested me because it was the home of hundreds of native people who had been sent to the United States for their education, in hopes that they would be able to solve problems for their race at home when they returned […] The older native people had looked forward to bright days when these educated young people returned. But often, instead, the educated sons and daughters turned into one more problem […] Observing cases instance by instance, it seemed to me that the returned students were usually so uprooted and dissatisfied that their unhappiness annulled what knowledge they may have gained in distant places of how to improve conditions for their people […] I finally reached the conclusion that native children and young people should be taught in their own settlements, in schools adapted to their own ways of life (Breece, 1997, pp. 188-189).

What is interesting in the context of this quote is that Breece appears to have come full circle and grown to realise that sweeping educational policies were not always appropriate for minority communities. This was a far cry from her initial viewpoint of considering native Alaskans to be uncivilized and in need of American salvation (Breece, 1997, pp. 4-5, 11, 39). It is also an important consideration given that those creating educational policies for remote territories such as Alaska were often thousands of miles away in Washington D.C. and had no first-hand experience of the needs of the people they were legislating for. Prior to venturing to Alaska, Breece's (1997, pp. 4-5, 14-15) only knowledge of the region was through Jackson's museum at Sitka and attending anthropology lectures and summer schools, for example. There appears to have been a point of inflection for Breece during her time at Afognak, which saw her begin to appreciate those she was living with. She concluded that "In Alaska everyone was your friend and interested in you" (ibid., p. 50) and that in remote regions such as Alaska, "stronger friendships could form in a month than would develop in years where there was much that was distracting

and artificial" (ibid.). This was a small step, but it was significant given that it represented the beginning of a change in perception of Alaska; she was now thinking of it as the U.S. proper and not simply a far-flung colony in need of civilizing.

Breece's more holistic view was informed by both the practical limitations of laws such as the Organic and Nelson Acts, but also by witnessing the real-world challenges facing children and families in Alaska. A regular and nutritious source of food was her primary concern, though she was also aware of societal difficulties such as alcohol addiction and the breakdown of familial units. Whereas hunting and fishing were common sources of food and income, something Breece (1997, pp. 22, 36, 100, 136) also discussed, she was all too aware that children often had to make do with bread alone (Quimby, 1944, pp. 3-5). Breece (1997) firmly believed that "Children seldom learn well when they are undernourished" (p. 22), and took steps to support them. Foremost of these efforts were the provision of cooking lessons, breakfast clubs, and petitioning the government to provide emergency food vouchers (Breece, 1997, pp. 20, 107-108, 136). In seeking to develop cooking skills and nutritional literacy, Breece foreshadowed many contemporary efforts to combat child poverty and malnutrition (see Bernardo et al.; Chilón-Troncos et al.).

What the following excerpt shows us, however, is that the situation for Breece's students was complicated:

> In their anxiety and deprivation, they thought that the miserable hooch would help them. I had a suspicion that the children were even less well off than could be expected. So I told them to bring a piece of pilot bread to school the next day and they would get a nice dinner, but anyone not bringing the bread could not eat dinner. Every last one brought the piece of bread […] I had judged rightly. The bread had been made of flour from the fermented mess left in the bottom of hooch barrels. After school that day I stormed to the village and made the biggest racket of which I was capable. They would not, I made sure, use their flour that way again – the flour that should go into bread for the children and themselves (Breece, 1997, p. 143).

Breece deduced that the parents of her students were using their flour to brew liquor and were then using the leftover scraps to make bread. While it is an unfortunate and

unjust stereotype that many indigenous North American communities facing poverty fall to alcoholism, there was clearly an issue facing the people at Iliamna, where Breece (1997, pp. 92-100) was based at the time (see also, Utami, 2021). Indeed, Breece (1997, pp. 13, 23, 39, 49, 143) condemned the consumption of alcohol and the presence of saloons as a societal sin, something she frequently made reference to in her diary, but it is also fair to comment that she sought to do something about it rather than simply criticize from the sidelines.

Breece's first run-in with the Kenais people's homemade liquor involved her ransacking the camp for every possible hiding place and led to her tipping away a barrel full of alcohol. Although Breece (1997, pp. 138-139) admitted that she felt very alone and unliked after this, she claimed that the villagers later apologized to her. Beyond Breece's (1997) statement that she made "the biggest racket of which I was capable" (p. 143) in response to the production of illicit alcohol, it is fair to comment that she also advocated on behalf of her students in broader matters too. Due to the rural situation and the harsh conditions, Breece's (ibid., p. 33) students were often required to work to provide food and to support their families. This was in line with societal expectations and rites of passage in which boys were often educated and trained by their uncles, and girls undertook work with the women of the community (Jones, 2014/2015, pp. 4-5; Quimby, 1944, pp. 30-31).

Of course, if children were pressured into working during their childhood and could not attend school, they would not progress at the pace as their contemporaries who benefitted from full-time schooling. Whereas hard physical work in the outdoors was primarily a factor impacting boys, girls also faced significant challenges of their own. In particular, the prospect of being married off at a young age severely curtailed their opportunities; whereas sixteen was the legal age of consent, Breece (1997, pp. 43-45) remarked that this was often ignored in rural Alaska at the time. Children left behind with a widowed father could also face the reality of him remarrying soon after and abandoning them. Breece (ibid., p. 48) noted that a man could remarry forty days after his wife had passed and that it was often the case that men gave away their children on the forty-first day. Although

orphanages and residential schools had been established in Alaska by the beginning of the twentieth century, it cannot be denied that arbitrarily removing children from their homes and communities would have hurt their ability to learn and thrive (Hirshberg, 2008, pp. 22-27).

CONCLUSION

Breece, as a teacher employed to educate indigenous children along the lines of her twenty-five years plus teaching experience in America, may be concluded to have been an active participant in the colonial civilizing mission in Alaska. Curiously, while efforts such as this clearly advanced colonial agendas, they also served to give a greater insight into the key role played by women in the colonial-frontier setting of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is something which has historically been slow to be unpacked and given proper reference to in the wider scholarship of much of the twentieth century. Whereas Breece may be seen as a colonial actor, there is also ample evidence to suggest that she genuinely cared about her students and took steps to protect them. We have seen this with her attempting to provide adequate nutrition to children and combating the production of illicit alcohol. It is in this way that we may conclude that Breece was more of a passive colonial agent who was ultimately driven by a personal conscience and a sense of duty rather than any grand colonial plans. Finally, her diary charts the implementation of federal education policies such as the 1884 Organic Act and the 1905 Nelson Act, providing a fresh perspective on events from the local and personal levels. As such Breece's diary, and others like it from the colonial-frontier period of American history, are valuable resources for interdisciplinary studies examining the history, lived experience and journaling of the era. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the growing interest in the study of colonial-era diaries and may lead to fresh perspectives in the field.

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