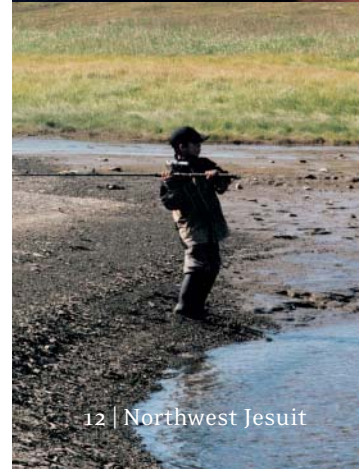




Mainly for the
Magic

*Photos and Text by
Brod Reynolds, S.J.*



My first visit to Toksook Bay was in the early fall of 1973. I was 24, still several years away from ordination, and working for our province newspaper, *The General Exchange*. We had 50 Jesuits in Alaska then, and I was supposed to report on the work they were doing among the people.

Most of our work was, and still is, based in the Diocese of Fairbanks, so I first landed there and interviewed the Jesuit Bishop, Robert Whelan, and the Jesuit Superior, Fr. Lom Loyens, who was also teaching anthropology at the University of Alaska. My next visit was in Kotzebue, to report on Fr. Mike Kaniecki, a Jesuit missionary and bush pilot. Fr. Kaniecki later replaced Whelan as Bishop. There were numerous other stops, but eventually I landed in Tununuk, a small village on a coastal island in the Bering Sea, to meet Fr. Frank Fallert.

He was a burly man with a head of curly black hair and wire rim glasses. He met me at the airstrip wearing a flannel shirt, black work pants and a grin the size of Alaska. I don't know how long he had been out there, but he acted like I was his best friend in the whole wide world. That first day I think we must have stopped at every house in the village—some maybe twice. Tununuk still had a kasheem, the Yup'ik traditional men's lodge, and that night there was Eskimo dancing inside. I remember sitting in that dimly-lit room, listening to the loud pounding of sealgut drums, watching the gesticulating dancers, and knowing that I would someday return to this island.

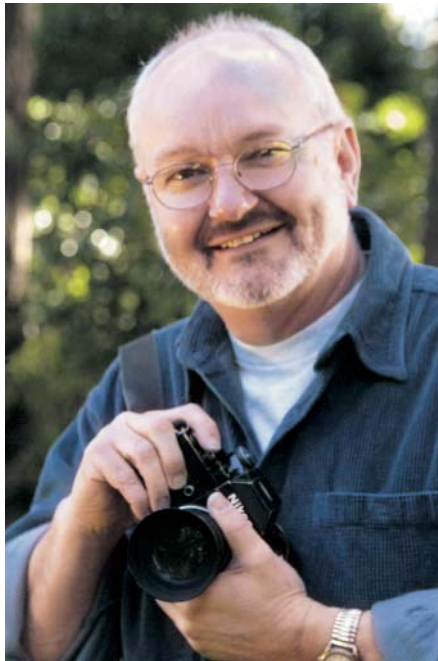
The next morning Frank wanted to visit another village on Nelson Island, a place called Toksook Bay. It was a new one, he said, less than 10 years old. A handful of people from Tununuk and Nightmute decided to move closer to their traditional summer fish camp, so they lifted their houses onto oil drums

and floated them across the water to a flat piece of ground inside of Toksook Bay. Frank had built a church there and he wanted me to see it.

We went around the island by boat, passing by some of the most isolated and lonely land I have ever seen; tall treeless hills, stretches of open tundra and rock strewn, deserted beaches. On one there was a dead walrus lying on his back, tusks pointing straight up.

Toksook was a cluster of small, unpainted wooden houses laid out along two dirt roads over a narrow strip of beach. As soon as Frank landed his boat the villagers started coming out to greet us. We made our way up to the church, a long wooden building with an A-framed entrance and living quarters attached to the side. For the next day-and-a-half I stayed with Frank as he visited the families there. When I boarded the plane to leave, there was a big lump in my throat. I didn't know it at the time, but it was in my heart too.

That was 30 years ago. Since then I have written about Toksook Bay for *National Geographic*, published a mystery novel using it as the setting, and



Fr. Brad Reynolds, S.J.

documented the evolution of the village in several photo exhibits. I still have a lump in my throat whenever it's time to leave there.

People wonder why I keep going back to that place. It's mainly for the magic. When you stand on the frozen Bering Sea and all around you is white silence, or watch mysterious musk oxen galloping across a hill of tundra, it feels like magic. But most of the magic is in the village. It exists in the people themselves; in their laughter, their open smiles, their compassion, and the tender way they live with one another. In the old days there were shamans who worked the magic—curing illness, keeping peace, and interpreting the world around them. I think a little of the shaman's blood now courses in each

Yup'ik's veins. There is nowhere else on this earth where I have experienced the healing, the peace and understanding that I have found in Toksook Bay.

Today the village is a booming metropolis of five hundred souls. Several more roads have branched off from those original two and there are a lot more boats clustered along the beachfront. St. Peter the Fisherman Church is still there, much the way Frank left it. He died in 1990, and inside the church the people have erected a plaque in his memory. There's a younger Jesuit working on Nelson Island now, Fr. Dave Anderson.

Last year, during a sabbatical, I spent several months in the village among people who are now old and dear friends. The kids I photographed in 1973 are grown up now, with children of their own. I am photographing them, too.

Brad Reynolds' The Twin, which appeared last October in a book of short stories called The Mysterious North published by Signet, has been selected for the World's Finest Mystery and Crime IV, due out later this year.

