

# THE BIRTH OF ALASKA AS THE FORTY-NINTH STATE IN THE UNION

## Told in Dramatic Story Of Bob and Vide Bartlett

By THOMAS A. SNAPP  
Times Staff Writer

Come readers, join me for what is the most interesting story I have heard since coming to Alaska. It's the story of Alaska's senior Senator Bob Bartlett and Mrs. Bartlett, but more than that, it is the story of the birth of the 49th state.

The story was given to Tundra Times through an exclusive interview with Mrs. Bartlett recently in Juneau.

The parents of both Bob and Vide Bartlett were miners in Dawson shortly after the turn of the century.

In those days if prospective parents had money enough, the wife went outside to have a child. Bob's parents did and he was born in Seattle. Vide's parents didn't have the money so she was born in Dawson.

Later both the families moved to Fairbanks and the two grew up together. They went to elementary and high school there and fell in love.

After high school, Bob went to the University of Washington where he took a straight academic course; Vide went to the University of Southern California and took an academic course and teacher training.

Vide returned to Alaska and became a teacher at Wrangell; Bob returned to Fairbanks where he became a reporter on the Fairbanks News-Miner.

In those days, the News-Miner was a four-page paper and Bob did most of the writing. Forbes L. Baker, now a state representative, ran the linotype machine.

In 1930, Bob and Vide decided to get married. In those days of chivalry, it was the fad not to be married in one's own hometown but to slip off secretly to a nearby town for the wedding.

The Joe Crossons had gone to Nenana to get hitched but Bob and Vide chose Valdez. When Bob left the paper on leave, Bernie Stone, the editor, gave him a note to deliver to George Sullivan at Valdez.

On August 14, 1930, Bob and Vide were married in a simple wedding in the Episcopal Church there. Father Kippenbrock, now living in Baltimore, Md., performed the ceremony.

"Tony and Dorothy Dimond stood up for us," said Mrs. Bartlett.

Bob was so shaken up on the wedding night that for dinner he drank tea instead of coffee. He usually was a big coffee hound.

After the wedding, the pair started back to Fairbanks in a beat-up wreck of a car, a Paige.

"We began to have one flat tire after another, 14 in all," Mrs. Bartlett said, "and we had the last one on top of Donnelly Dome, which I believe is the coldest place in Alaska."

They spent the night there until in the wee morning hours when some hunters came by and sold them a fire, and they proceeded back to Fairbanks to announce their marriage.

Forty miles from Fairbanks, however they were met by a large delegation to congratulate them. "Everybody and everybody's brother was there," Vide said. "The note Bob had delivered had asked for full particulars about our wedding and it was printed in the Fairbanks paper before we got back."

Since he was married, Bob felt he ought to have a raise in pay so he asked Bernie Stone, the editor of the paper, for one.

Stone agreed that he ought to have a raise and the next day put

his name on the masthead, "Associate Editor." But no raise was forthcoming.

"My mother in Los Angeles didn't help matters—she threw us for a terrible loss," Vide said.

Her mother was worried that she would feel the cold in Fairbanks and felt she needed a fur coat.

"We wired her and asked how much a fur coat would cost, and promptly she sent one, C.O.D. for \$200!"

"Well, we didn't have \$200 or any part of it. We didn't know whether or not we should send it back or what."

"Bob went to see a banker who was known never to have made an easy loan, Dick Wood, president of the First National Bank."

"People would say his kindest eye was his glass eye."

"Anyway Dick talked with Bob and said, 'Tell you what I am going to do. I will loan you the \$200 and you can pay it back at \$20 a month.'"

\$20 was an awfully lot of money. Bob was making only about \$200 a month and take out 10 per cent and you can see it wasn't easy."

Mrs. Bartlett says that first year was probably the hardest year they have had. "We ate more beans and hamburger than we ever have before or since," she said.

They lived in a little building on Front Street in Fairbanks that is now been remodeled into a restaurant.

Soon Bob became the Alaska correspondent for the New York Times and as such, he wrote an article prophesying there would be a Democratic sweep in the Alaska election. He even went so far as to predict that the states were going to elect Roosevelt as president.

Tony Dimond, delegate to Congress, was so impressed that he gave Bob a job as his secretary. So Bob and Vide sold all their worldly goods in order to get the fare to go to Washington.

"We just hated it there," Vide said. "And the first job that came along, Bob took it. It was a new post, as assistant administrator to FHA in Juneau."

The Bartletts lived a year in Juneau and then Bob's father died and they took over his mining business on Independence Creek, near Miller House between Fairbanks and Circle City.

The Bartletts as miners did very well and soon were able to buy some nice, new equipment. Because the mine had only a tent house, Mrs. Bartlett and their 2-year-old daughter lived 30 miles away at Circle Hot Springs.

The houses there were heated with hot water piped from the the springs and vegetables grew well irrigated by the water.

"It was hard work but Bob enjoys the outdoors and looks back on that period in our lives as perhaps the happiest," Mrs. Bartlett said.

The Bartletts employed two 18-year-old boys to help them at the mine. Both were "bottomless pits" and almost ate the Bartletts out of house and home.

"We could hardly pack a lunch for them big enough for their midnight snack and then they said they weren't getting enough to eat. Can you imagine!" said Mrs. Bartlett.

"Bob's mother would send down an extra pie occasionally."

Bob thought it was important to run the best possible mess house so we could get the best possible young men to work for us, even though it cost us a lot.

Mining near us were the Von Hansens and I learned from Lydia



Mrs. Vide Bartlett

Von Hansens of a new product, a powdered milk that was rather cheap, that you could make pitchers of milk with and would help keep body and soul together and cavities filled faster.

The two 18-year-old youth whom Mrs. Bartlett had trouble feeding were Fritz Wrede, brother of Bob and Ray Wrede, of Fairbanks, and John Dimond, now a justice of the Alaska Supreme Court.

In 1930 or 1931, there was a very heavy earthquake in central Alaska. It knocked all the dishes out of the Bartlett's cupboard. At the mine they thought someone had accidentally set off a stick of dynamite.

One of the boys who had not awakened for the midnight shift was so startled he went to work dressed in his store clothes rather than his working clothes.

In 1930, Bob Bartlett left the mining business when he was appointed by President Roosevelt as Secretary of Alaska. For all intents and purposes the position was roughly that of lieutenant governor in other states.

In 1932 Tony Dimond announced he would retire from Congress and Bob decided to run for the post. There were three candidates in the Democratic primary and it was a long hard battle. Bob and Vide put almost everything into the campaign but it was worth it. Bob came out the winner.

The campaign wiped us out. It took us a long time to come out of that," Mrs. Bartlett said.

The first and most important plank in Bob's first platform was statehood and the first thing he did upon getting to Washington was to write a statehood bill and throw it in the hopper. But, of course, it didn't go anywhere.

From then on, Bob and Vide worked feverishly for years for statehood, encountering many frustrations and disappointments.

"At first people called it a dream. It was a long struggle that completely engulfed our lives," Mrs. Bartlett said.

"Bob knew when Rayburn said he would see that it was done, it would be done. Sam was a great power in the whole country, really."

When Bob got back to his office, he telephoned Vide at home to give her the news which she says was her "biggest thrill."

In the late spring of '58 the House passed the statehood act and Rayburn worked closely with Lyndon Johnson, then the majority leader of the Democrats in the Senate, and the Senate also passed it.

When the bill was passed Mrs. Bartlett was sitting in the gallery. Ordinarily those in the gallery are not supposed to make a sound.

But when the bill was passed the whole gallery rose up cheering and shouting. "They were not supposed to applaud but try to stop them at time like that," Mrs. Bartlett said.

"After all, it was the first state to join the union since 1813."

"I was so excited I can't tell you who else was in the gallery but I do remember the grandson of Sandy Smith, a colorful character of Alaska, was sitting beside me."

When Bob returned to Alaska, he was met at the airports by large crowds and was elected in 1958 to the Senate with one of the largest majorities ever to elect a U.S. senator. He received 85 per cent of the votes.

The other plank in Bob Bartlett's first platform when he went to Congress as a delegate in 1944 was for T.B. Hospitals. He put in a bill to have them established and the bill passed right away. In fact, the incidence of TB went down so dramatically fast, it was reviewed in medical journals all over the country.

T.B. Hospitals were practically a thing of the past when Alaska finally got statehood. The other plank of Bob Bartlett's first political campaign.

(To Be continued)

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