

## Village Church Comes Full Circle

by Shawn Strannigan

In the early '50s, John Gillespie (the founder of Arctic Missions, later to become InterAct Ministries) launched a radio program from Anchorage which carried the Gospel into the remotest areas of Alaska.



Children at Holikachuk Bible Chapel

Athabaskan residents of Holikachuk listened faithfully to the “Sunday School of the Air” broadcast, but the lessons they heard over their battery-powered radios just caused them to hunger for more of God’s Word. Determined that their children be taught from the Bible, 20 adults signed a petition (many just putting an “x” as their mark), asking Johnny to send a missionary to their village.

Johnny responded to their request and sent single missionary Barney Furman. He was followed a year later by a young missionary family. And Gale and Jeanie Van Diest immersed themselves in village life for 12 years.

Gale and Jeanie’s introduction to Holikachuk the summer of 1954 was challenging—they were dropped off by float plane on the Innoko River into the heart of a

deserted village, with all the residents away at fish camp. But the resourceful couple got to work and by September they moved into a primitive house they helped build.

The Van Diests ministered in Holikachuk until 1962, when the village was relocated to its present location on the Yukon River. Because it was now situated near Grayling Creek, the name was changed to Grayling.

They left Grayling in 1966, having paved the way for other InterAct missionaries to continue the Lord’s work there.<sup>1</sup>



The Van Diest family in 1964

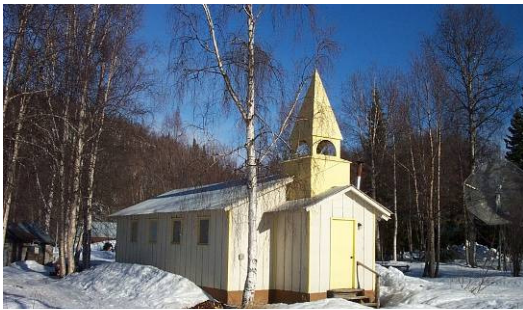
After pouring out their lives in this tiny Native community, Gale and Jeanie are delighted to see the present fruit of their past labors. InterAct missionaries Walter (now with the Lord) and Virginia Maillelle came to the Lord through the Van Diests’ ministry in Grayling.

“We buried a son in the village in ’57,” Gale said, “and our house burned down in 1959. By God’s grace I was able to save our three children—and Jeannie’s accordion! We experienced tough times, but we learned so

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<sup>1</sup> Those missionaries include Barney Furman, Ken & Jennetta Hughes, Del & Marilyn Mitchell, Marty Van Diest, Steve Basinger, Dave & Jan Penz, Gene & Helen Parkins, Dave & Debbie Kenny, Doug & Marlin Prins, Dennis & Celesta Richardson, Bruce & Flo Walters, and Jim & Sue Manzella.

much from our friends there. They taught us how to live and survive in bush Alaska—how to hunt, drive dog teams, trap and skin



The Grayling church has changed over the years, and so have the people inside.



... there wasn't any electricity in the early years, no running water. No contact with the outside world except for mail. It will never be that way again."

Things have definitely changed in the village of Grayling—and some of the changes are for the better. Where the Native residents were once dependent on missionaries to teach them how to obey and follow God, now their own people have been raised up as leaders.

"It has taken 50-plus years for an indigenous church to arise. One of the three leaders of the church today, Marvin Deacon, accepted the Lord during my Sunday School class," Gale recalled.

Sam Burkett, who leads worship for the Grayling church each Sunday, came to the Lord a few years ago through the ministry of InterAct's Jim and Sue Manzella.

"Things are going good," said Sam. "The Lord is touching hearts; lots more people are coming. Prayers are being answered. People are praying for us."

"The church has come a long way since we started coming," agreed Maranda, Sam's wife. "We now have a Joy Club for kids on Wednesday night, and I want to start a weekly prayer meeting."

Maranda faithfully sends out a newsletter from Grayling each month, filled with testimonies, Bible teaching and prayer requests.

How awesome that the church in Grayling has come full circle. Over 50 years ago, they gladly received the good news from a radio broadcast. Today, some who came to the Lord through the ministry of InterAct are now teaching and preaching the Word to their own—and beyond!