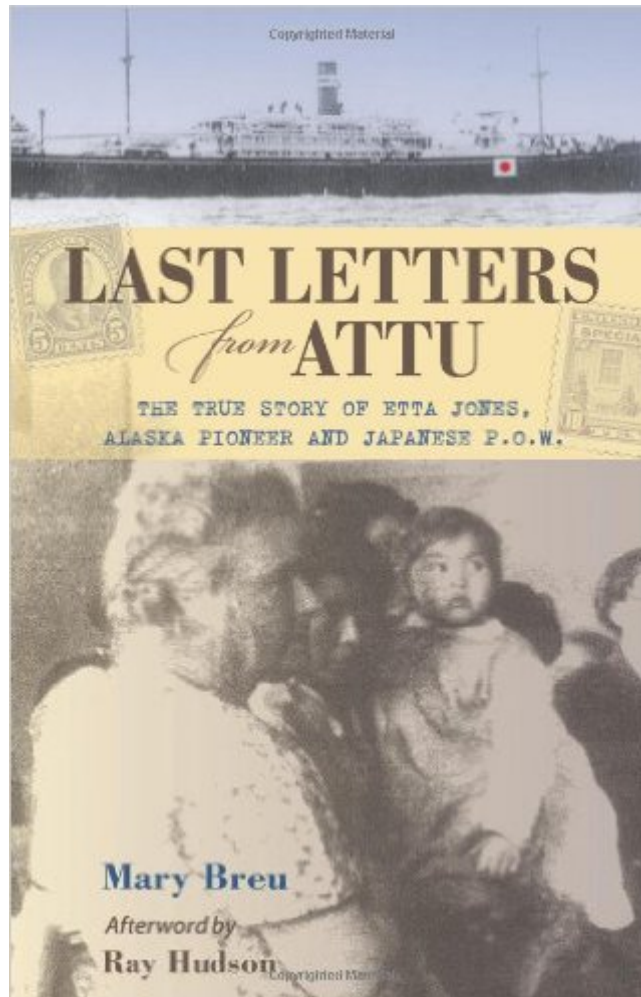


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# Last Letters From Attu: The True Story Of Etta Jones, Alaska Pioneer And Japanese POW



## Synopsis

Etta Jones was not a World War II soldier or a war time spy. She was an American school teacher who in 1941 who along with her husband, Foster agreed to teach the Natives on the remote Aleutian island of Attu. They were both sixty-two years old when they left Alaska's mainland for Attu against the advice of friends and family. Etta, and her sister moved to the Territory of Alaska in 1922. She planned to stay only one year as a vacation, but this 40 something year old nurse from back east met Foster Jones and fell in love. She married and for nearly twenty years they taught in remote Alaskan villages including their last posting on Attu Island at the far end of the Aleutian island chain. Etta's life changed forever on that Sunday morning in June 1942 when almost 2,000 Japanese military men invaded Attu Island and Etta became a prisoner of war. She was taken from American soil to Japan and given up for dead. This is the story of a brave American, a woman of courage and resolve with inextinguishable spirit.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the category of "Things You Should Have Learned in School": Which American community was invaded by the Japanese army during World War II, its citizens either killed or taken to Japan as Prisoners of War? Don't know? Neither do most Americans. The answer to this gap in our education is the village on the island of Attu, the final island in Alaska's Aleutian chain. Last Letters from Attu tells that story, and others about Alaska, using many wonderfully descriptive letters and documents written by Mrs. Etta Jones, one of the prisoners. While the war story is compelling and significant, the book provides much more. It begins with Etta Jones moving to Alaska from New Jersey for what

she planned to be a year's adventure and finding not only the love of her life, but her home in the world. The book tells of her daily activities in Alaska's 1920's, 30's and 40's. It's a great glimpse into a lifestyle that has all but disappeared, a story of a honeymoon via dog team, a view of what it was like to live in a remote area with mail service that was determined by when someone else happened to be traveling past the village and of making do and thriving in a beautiful wild country. It's an appreciation of living among Alaska's first residents, Etta and Charles Foster Jones' Athabascan, Aleut, Yup'ik and Alutiiq students and their families. There is truly something for everyone in this book, with tales of an enduring and deep love, teaching students who spoke only their native language, building radios, living off the land, providing medical care, getting caught in bad weather, meeting authors and others with a role in Alaskan history, prospecting for minerals, the beauty and lifestyle of many parts of Alaska, the events leading up to World War II, the horrors of invasion, and finally the resilience of Mrs. Jones and Australian nurses who suffered as prisoners of war and then returned home to face their losses and rebuild their lives. This book chronicles the life of a remarkable woman. Getting to know Etta Jones through her own words, the reader obtains an understanding of why she loved Alaska and develops profound respect and admiration for this diminutive, warm, enduring, resourceful lady. Author Mary Brey's *Last Letters From Attu* would be an outstanding read even if it was fiction. It's even better, because every person, place and event in the book is real. This book succeeds on every level. It's well-written, perfect either as a leisurely bedtime read or as, in my case, a devouring cover-to-cover one day feast. The narrative is appealing to most ages and to both male and female readers. The author's exhaustive research brings out details that keep the story alive and interesting, and the book is well-illustrated with photos of people and places, including Japan. As a record of some of the events of World War II in Alaska's Aleutians, it can proudly take its place on the short-list of must-reads, along with such classics as *The Thousand Mile War*, *Journal of An Aleutian Year* and *When the Wind was a River*. As a description and appreciation of early life in the north, provided by Etta Jones' detailed letters, it belongs on everyone's "Alaska shelf".

I was inspired to read this book after watching a documentary on the Japanese invasion of Attu. It is a significant piece of history that has been buried. Though I attended school in Alaska, had studied AK history, the invasion was not mentioned. That was in the 1950's. Perhaps, only time allows time for perspective. I was particularly curious about how the Japanese would have treated white women who were POW's inside Japan. I'd read plenty about the horrors that American men suffered as slaves and prisoner's (inside and outside of Japan) and wondered if the treatment of women was

more lenient. The curiosity on that subject faded as I began reading Etta's account of her early experiences in the "out-back" of Alaska in the 1920's. What she described was astonishing, not just the hardships of living without modern amenities, but the sketch of the Eskimo's, how they lived, what they were like, and though they were desperately poor, had a short life span, had an egregious diet, they coped with hardships and had an internal happiness that is hard to comprehend, considering the trials. And she fleshes out behaviors of other native groups with equal clarity. Etta's adventurous spirit drives her letters, much as she "drove" her own dog team, mushing across unforgiving terrain. Her marriage to Foster Jones seemed to solidify her love of Alaska. She found joy in simple things, places, making Christmas dinner from canned meat or pies from preserves. Their unwavering curiosity and talent of flexibility made their lives, and those they encountered, better. No complainer, she. After the capture of Etta and the Attuans, the murderer of her husband, the book's pace slows, in part due to all the government correspondence. While the focus was on Etta's capture and Foster's murder, newspapers in "The Lower 48" did precisely what they do today. They created outrageous, salacious stories. The real sorrow is that they did not follow the tragic capture, treatment, and/or dispersal of the natives and I wonder if this isn't the greatest tragedy of all. After the war, the US government shipped as many of the surviving natives to an adjacent island, as would go, upon their release. However, reports failed to mention that the island where Attuans were sent were old enemies, didn't speak the same dialect, etc. Possibly, they didn't know or care. The fanciful basketwork that Attuan women made may now be lost in history, along with all of their other traditions. Without Etta's descriptions and photos, there might be any indication of their artistry. A worthwhile book about a delightful, resilient lady caught up in a history of which the world would never learn.....without her "Last Letters."

This is a fascinating look at a courageous woman, her experiences in early twentieth century bush Alaska, and her role as the first American woman taken prisoner by the Japanese. The book details what happened at the beginning of World War II on Attu to Etta Jones and her husband, and the harsh reality of Japanese internment. But it also is a very interesting examination of public school teachers in bush Alaska, sometimes introducing children to western education for the first time ever. The isolation, harsh weather, and necessary individual resourcefulness is nothing short of amazing. If you are interested in fairly recent Alaskan history or the war in the Aleutian Islands, this book is definitely worth your time.

The first half of the book follows the lives of a teacher and her husband in remote areas of 1930s

Alaska. Their observations of Native cultures and the harsh climate form a fascinating narrative. In 1941, as the only Caucasian Americans on the tiny island of Attu, they are captured by the invading Japanese and swept into the nightmare of war. A very moving read.

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