

**People of the North / Explorers & Adventurers**  
**Community Life / Education**

**Margaret E. Murie, Grandmother of American Conservation**

**By Jennifer Houdek**

*We owe much to the life's work of Mardy Murie, a pioneer of the environmental movement, who, with her husband, Olaus, helped set the course of American conservation more than seventy years ago. Her passionate support for and compelling testimony on behalf of the Alaska Lands Act helped to ensure the legislation's passage and the protection of some of our most pristine lands. A member of the governing council of The Wilderness Society, she also founded the Teton Science School to teach students of all ages the value of ecology. For her steadfast and inspiring efforts to safeguard America's wilderness for future generations, we honor Mardy.*

— President William J. Clinton, January 15, 1998,  
awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Margaret E. Murie

Margaret E. (Thomas) Murie, America's "Grandmother of the Conservation Movement," was born into a polished, well-educated Seattle family, and spent her childhood in the upper echelons of Fairbanks society, as humble as they were. Known as "Mardy" from childhood, she found support in her parents when she expressed a desire to obtain a college degree. However, afterward, rather than follow her mother's footsteps, donning beautiful gowns and attending gala events, Mardy married a field biologist named Olaus Murie and joined him in many Alaska wilderness treks with a baby on her back. The girl that could have married into wealth and power traded a house with running water and electricity for an Alaska log cabin with power or water, surviving harsh winters of -50° F, or tenting on the tundra. Interviewed by columnist Tad Bartimus near the end of her life, Mardy laughingly recalled: "So many women have said to me, 'My goodness, how did

you manage raising [three] children in the wilderness, wasn't that awfully hard?' I would say, 'Think of all the things I didn't have to do. I didn't have to go to a bridge party, I didn't have to wax the floor, I didn't have to answer the telephone, I didn't have to be on a committee.'"

With Olaus, Mardy would devote their thirty-nine years of marriage to exploring and protecting Alaska's vast, open spaces, hoping to secure it from development for all time. For her lifelong commitment to conservation, Margaret E. Murie was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President William J. Clinton in January 1998.

She was born Margaret Thomas in Seattle, Washington, on August 18, 1902. In the fall of 1911, Mardy's stepfather, Louis R. Gillette, sent for nine-year-old Mardy and her mother to join him in Fairbanks. Gillette was an Assistant U.S. Attorney in Alaska. For Minnie Gillette, the excitement of rejoining her husband was overshadowed by the fact that she had only three days to pack all of their belongings, and that she was pregnant with Mardy's half-sister, Louise. But there was no possibility of delay for sailing. Mardy and Minnie were booked on the last steamer of the season. They had to leave Seattle for Alaska before the first "freeze-up" or they'd have to wait till spring. After three weeks of traveling, the little family made it to Fairbanks, where they rented a small four-room house at the end of town. They would live there for ten years.

Mardy remembered her youth in Fairbanks with fondness, especially the good times with the Jess and Clara Rust family, their next-door neighbors. The Rust children were about the same age as Mardy's younger siblings, Louis, Louise, and Carol, and she would often help watch the children. It was Jess Rust who introduced Mardy to her future husband. In June 1921, Mardy, after two years away at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, was back for the summer and visiting the Rust home for dinner. Another guest was Olaus Murie, a young biologist of Norwegian heritage, who was working as a field researcher for the U.S. Biological Survey. Mardy and Olaus hit it off and spent the evening in conversation. Although their career paths would keep them apart for the next four years, they maintained a long-distance relationship.

On June 13, 1924, Margaret Thomas became the first woman graduate of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines, now the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She

had spent her last year in college engaged to Olaus. The couple was married on August 19, 1924, at 3:00 a.m. on the banks of the Yukon River. The next day the Muries set off for their trip of a lifetime—a 550-mile journey by boat and dogsled. Part honeymoon, part scientific expedition, the trip took eight months as they traveled along the Koyukuk River and through the Brooks Range.

The Muries welcomed their first child, Martin Louis, on July 10, 1926. Mardy had moved to northcentral Washington three months before the baby was born while Olaus stayed in Alaska to track, photograph, and record Alaska brown bears on the Alaska Peninsula. The couple had been apart for six months when Olaus finally saw his three-month old son. The difficult time apart cinched a decision for both of them: as life partners, they would not allow themselves to be separated again. Olaus, Mardy, and baby Martin returned to Alaska together, and along with their friend Jess Rust, spent the summer on the Old Crow River, searching for waterfowl to record and photograph.

In 1926, the U.S. Biological Survey, precursor of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, sent Olaus to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to conduct studies on elk. The couple instantly fell in love with the area, as it reminded them of Alaska. The Muries made it their home for thirty years, and Mardy gave birth to two more children, Joanne and Norman. From 1945 to 1962, Olaus served as director of the Wilderness Society. The Muries also partnered with his brother and her sister, Adolph and Louise “Weezy” Murie, who had married in 1932, to purchase a dude ranch in Moose, Wyoming. Their hearts, however, never left Alaska. In 1956, Mardy and Olaus left Wyoming and set off to the north again.

However, when Olaus died in 1963, Mardy returned to the cabin in Moose. Reflecting on their thirty-nine years of marriage in her memoir, *Two in the Far North*, Mardy wrestled with overwhelming grief: “It is good to have entanglements with many people; in time of crisis, they demand your attention and give you no time to brood. And if people keep dropping in, you know the pattern of your days and there are no empty hours, so you are carried along until one day you realize that the grief and the missing are never going to go away, but that on top of them somehow you must build a rich experience of living, woven of involvement with others’ joys and sorrows, and their partial dependence on

your listening, and of your own still active curiosity of life. Perhaps, I am most thankful for that.”

In honor of her late husband, Mardy continued their work of nature conservation. The Muries’ efforts as leaders of the Wilderness Society had a direct bearing on the protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in 1960. And in the summer of 1964, she was called to Washington D.C., to be present in the Rose Garden when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act. The legislation protected millions of acres of wilderness across the nation. Murie returned briefly to Fairbanks in 1976 for commencement at the university where she was awarded a Doctor of Humane Letters degree. Throughout her remaining years, Murie received many more awards and honors.

One of Murie’s greatest accomplishments was her part in supporting the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), which was signed into legislation by President James Carter in 1980. ANILCA increased national park acreage from 7 million to 50 million acres; added 54 million acres to the National Wildlife Refuge System, and 56 million acres to the National Wilderness Preservation. In congressional testimony supporting the Alaska Lands Act, Murie said: “I am testifying as an emotional woman and I would like to ask you, gentlemen, what’s wrong with emotion? Beauty is a resource in and of itself. Alaska must be allowed to be Alaska, that is her greatest economy. I hope the United States of America is not so rich that she can afford to let these wildernesses pass by, or so poor she cannot afford to keep them.”

Olaus and Mardy spent their lives tirelessly traveling Alaska and working to preserve its beauty and pristine wilderness from development. Together with Olaus and later alone, Mardy wrote scores of letters, presented countless lectures and promoted legislation for conservation. She never remarried, instead devoting her life to the cause of conservation.

In 1997 the Murie Ranch was declared a National Historic District. Ongoing environmental protection and preservation efforts in locations all over the country are supported from the ranch site under the umbrella of the Murie Center.

Margaret E. Murie was 101 years old when she died in her log cabin in Moose, Wyoming, on October 19, 2003. At Mardy’s death, the Murie Center celebrated the

woman who left an indelible mark on the history of conservation: “She had a passion for wild places expressed eloquently in her writing, her speeches and her testimony at hearings. Her steely resolve to protect wilderness belied her warm and welcoming personality and drew an unending stream of visitors to her home—conservationists, scientists, school children and anyone else who wanted to talk, to discuss strategies, to learn.”

## **LINKS:**

### **The Wilderness Society:**

[http://www.wilderness.org/AboutUs/Murie\\_Bio.cfm](http://www.wilderness.org/AboutUs/Murie_Bio.cfm)

### **Winners, Presidential Medal of Freedom:**

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0002285.html>

### **Sierra Club remembers Margaret E. Murie:**

<http://www.sierraclub.org/pressroom/releases/pr2003-10-20.asp>

### **University of Alaska “Info Spot”:**

<http://www.alaska.edu/opa/eInfo/index.xml?StoryID=163>

### **Anchorage Press review, *Two in the Far North*:**

<http://www.anchoragepress.com/archives/documentc122.html>

### **NPR, “Fifty years later, a passion for the wild endures”:**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5582159>

## **VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Alaska’s libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about Margaret E. Murie and her work with Olaus Murie in Alaska. Visit your local library or go online to see what’s available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **MURIE**.

## **MORE READING:**

Alaska Geographic Society. *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*. Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Geographic Society, 1993.

Breton, Mary Joy. *Women Pioneers for the Environment*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998.

Craighead, Charles and Bonnie Kreps. *Arctic Dance: The Mardy Murie Story*. Portland, Ore.: Graphic Arts Center Publishing Co., 2002.

Murie, Margaret E. and Olaus Johan Murie. *Wapiti Wilderness*. 1st edition. New York: Knopf, 1966.

Murie, Margaret E. *Two in the Far North*. 1st edition. New York: Knopf, 1962.

Murie, Margaret E. *Island Between*. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 1977.

Murie, Margaret E., Olaus Johan Murie, Terry Tempest Williams. *Two in the Far North*. 5th edition. Seattle: Alaska Northwest Books, 1997.

Murie, Olaus Johan. *Journeys to the far North*. Palo Alto, Calif.: American West Publishing Co., 1973.

Murie, Olaus Johan and Margaret E. Murie. *The Alaskan Bird Sketches of Olaus Murie: With Excerpts from his Field Notes*. 1st edition. Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1979.

Schaller, George B. *Arctic Valley: A Report on the 1956 Murie Brooks Range, Alaska Expedition*. 1957.

Waterman, Jonathan. *Where Mountains are Nameless: Passion and Politics in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; Including the Story of Olaus and Mardy Murie*. 1st edition. New York: Norton, 2005.

### **For Juvenile Readers:**

Bryant, Jennifer and Antonio Castro. *Margaret Murie: A Wilderness Life*. 1st edition. New York: Twenty-First Century Books, 1993.

### **VISUAL MATERIAL:**

*Arctic Dance: The Mardy Murie Story*. Bonnie Kreps, Charles Craighead, Sandy Ostertag. 2001 Director's Cut. VHS (75 min) Moose, Wy.: Craighead Environmental Research Institute; Montreal, Quebec: NDj Media Distribution. Depicts the life of environmentalist Margaret E. "Mardy" Murie, who, along with her husband, Olaus Murie, co-founded the Wilderness Society.

*Arctic Wildlife Range*. Consultants: Olaus Murie, Oakleigh Thorne; Photographer: H. Robert Krear. 1959. Thorne Films, Inc. Color 16 mm motion picture film (20 min). Pictures some of the wilderness beauty and the native plant and animal life found in the Arctic Wildlife Range in northern Alaska. Shows views of animals in their natural habitats, including caribou, grizzly bear, ptarmigan, and gyrfalcon.

## AUDIO:

### Howard Berkes' Profile of Mardy Murie on NPR's *All Things Considered*:

<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=feature0704>

***Celia's Alaska: Pioneer Stories of Denali.*** Celia Hunter, Amy Mayer. 2002. Digital sound recording CD (67:53 min). From CD cover: "Every other Thursday from August 1999 until November 2001, the public radio show *Alaska Edition* featured Celia Hunter as a 'Fairbanks Pioneer.' In each segment, Celia shared an episode from her life—adventures in the air, camp tales, dog stories, and observations of Alaska and Fairbanks as they grew and developed. Before Celia died in December 2001, she and radio producer Amy Mayer began planning a CD compilation of the Fairbanks Pioneer stories. This CD is the culmination of that idea, in honor of Celia."

## ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

**Clara Rust Papers, 1904-1978.** Held at University of Alaska Fairbanks, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library. The Clara Rust Papers contain newspaper clippings on a wide variety of Alaska subjects, a personal file centered around her life and her involvement in community affairs, a file on the Pioneer Women of Alaska, a publications file and a scrapbook with postcards and photographs. ***Bio/History:*** Clara Hickman Rust was a Fairbanks historian and writer who came to Fairbanks in 1907 to join her father, Zach Hickman, a newspaperman who had come over the Chilkoot Pass to Dawson in 1898 and subsequently founded two newspapers: the *Klondike Nugget* and the *Fairbanks Miner*. In 1910 she married Jesse W. Rust in Fairbanks, where she was to live a long and active life, recognized for her participation in local and state affairs. She was a charter member of Pioneer Women of Alaska, served two terms as president, was named woman of the year by the Soroptimists and Fairbanks Mother of the Year. Her newspaper columns, "News of Pioneers," ran for many years, first in *Jessen's Daily* and then in the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, and her biography *This Old House* was written by Jo Anne Wold.

**William Yanert Papers, 1899-1942.** Held at University of Alaska Fairbanks, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library. This collection consists of miscellaneous poems, William Yanert's "Yukon Breezes" extensive correspondence with his family, Margaret Murie, Clara Rust, and other pioneer Alaskans, and a photograph of William and his brother, Herman, in front of their cabin at Purgatory on the Yukon River. ***Bio/History:*** William Yanert (1864-1942) came to Alaska with the U.S. Army. He stayed on after his discharge in 1899, becoming a trapper and explorer. He and his brother settled in Purgatory, on the Yukon River, in 1903. The river steamers would stop in at Purgatory for wood, and Yanert became friends with many of Alaska's pioneers. Yanert trapped, wrote poetry, carved ivory, and enjoyed his life along the Yukon.