

People of the North / Explorers & Adventurers
Land, Sea, Air / Dog Mushing

Mary Joyce: Alaska's First Lady of Adventure

By Jennifer Houdek

Mary Joyce was a woman ahead of her time. Reaching adulthood during era when most young women were either a “flapper” or getting married and “keeping house,” Joyce chose a path that some would consider hardship; others would view as glamorous. During Alaska’s territorial days, she owned and operated a remote lodge, became the first woman radio operator in the territory, mushed dogs long distance, and flew her own Bush plane. She next joined Pan Alaska Airways as a stewardess, then settled in Juneau where she worked in nursing and bought a couple of popular bars. And, unlike most women of her generation, through it all, she never married.

Joyce was born in Baraboo, Wisconsin, in about 1899. She attended nursing school in Chicago, Illinois and in 1928, left for Hollywood, California. In 1930, she was hired by a wealthy couple—Mr. and Mrs. Erie L. Smith of the Smith-Corona fortune—as a private nurse for their son, Leigh Hackley Smith, or “Hack,” while they embarked on a cruise along the Inside Passage in their private yacht, the *Stella Maris*. Hack was a World War I veteran who suffered from alcoholism and other post-war health issues. His parents felt they couldn’t leave him alone without nursing care. After visiting Twin Glacier Camp in Alaska, Mrs. Smith decided to buy the property for a second home. The lodge, accessible only by air or water, was located forty miles south of Juneau on the banks of the Taku River and between two glaciers. A physician with the Alaska-Juneau Gold Mine, Dr. Harry C. DeVigne, had built it in 1923 as a hunting and fishing camp.

The Smiths decided to put Hack in charge of their new acquisition. He stayed year-round, as did Mary Joyce, who took care of housekeeping and her nursing duties. Hack supervised construction of new buildings and renovation of other structures. The duo raised and trained huskies as freight animals, and for their guests’ entertainment. Each spring, Mrs. Smith sailed north with a boatload of supplies. They’d haul the freight from the anchored yacht to shore with a skiff, then up the hill to the lodge using dog power.

When Hack died at age thirty-seven in 1934, the Smiths deeded the lodge to Joyce. At that time, the complex consisted of fourteen buildings, fifteen sled dogs and three head of cattle. Joyce turned the camp into a tourist resort with lodging to accommodate thirty guests. She gave it a new name as well: Taku Glacier Lodge.

Soon the business was thriving, with Joyce cooking and entertaining her guests, as well as directing day-to-day operations. As if she weren't busy enough, she also took accepted an offer from Pacific Alaska Airways. They needed a station on the Taku River to coordinate their twice-weekly run from Juneau to Fairbanks. In accepting the post, Joyce became the first female radio operator in Alaska.

The following year, Joyce was invited to participate in the 1936 Fairbanks Ice Carnival set for March. Always ready for an adventure, Joyce decided to drive her dogs on the thousand-mile journey, however she knew that to travel safely, she would need guidance. Leaving in late December, she hitched up five dogs and joined a group of Natives headed for Atlin, British Columbia. Her guide's name was Chocak Lagoose.

At Tulsequah, the party crossed the nearly frozen Taku River. Journaling as she traveled, Joyce wrote: "Chocak Lagoose scolded his sons and made them put boughs over holes so I could not see the water underneath while crossing. 'White Lady plenty scared.' Crossed on my hands and knees and dogs followed like soldiers. Crossed upper Taku and another place over rapids on huge cakes of ice three feet apart help by sweepers and snags. Put chain on Tip (lead dog) and each dog fell into water, pulled them out on another cake of ice. In places, just room for sled on ice cakes with water leaping over and gurgling underneath."

Joyce crossed the river safely and then crossed the Naxina River to rendezvous with another guide. After three days of travel to summit Sloko Mountain, Joyce and her team made it to Morton Hot Springs and then to Atlin, where they rested for six days. With her new guide she followed the Portage Trail into Yukon Territory and across Tagish Lake. Continuing, they followed the White Pass and Yukon Route railroad tracks from Carcross to Whitehorse. In Whitehorse, Joyce stocked up on food and supplies and changed sleds.

The next three hundred miles would prove the most hazardous of the trip. Traveling between Burwash Landing and Tanana Crossing, the team had no shelter, and temperatures dropped to -60° F. Unwilling to quit, Joyce and another guide followed the

Kluane River and made it to the Alaska border on February 24. They forged onward through a blizzard and deep snow, finally reaching Tanana Crossing.

Upon arrival, Joyce learned that she had unknowingly gained media attention as her progress was tracked and reported locally and nationally. She also realized that she would not make it to the carnival in time if she continued by dog team. Joyce made the decision to finish the journey by plane, with a plan to return to her dogs afterward. And as promised, as soon as the carnival ended, she flew back, harnessed up the dogs, mushed the final two hundred and fifty miles into Fairbanks, arriving on March 26, 1936. The *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* reported on her arrival: “Bronzed by the blazing spring sun reflected from measureless realms of snow, tanned by winds and weathers of all sorts, yet with light heart and buoyant step, Mary Joyce, courageous 27-year-old musher, made her triumphant entry into Fairbanks completing a journey of some 1,000 miles by dog team and hanging up a record seldom if ever before reached in a woman’s world of achievement.” The account held one possible typographical error: If she were born in 1899, she would have been 37, not 27.

Joyce did not allow her celebrity status to go to her head. She returned to her work at Taku Lodge, and to her other claim to fame: a cow that loved to eat raw salmon. However before long, she was drawn to a new adventure, and she took up flying, becoming one of the first female pilots in Juneau. Joyce set another record, performing her solo flight after only five hours of training. Her career as a pilot, however, was stunted when she accidentally collided with a boat on the Gastineau Channel. Joyce next set her heart on joining the ranks of airline stewardess, as only certified nurses were eligible for hire. And while she loved traveling the Seattle-Alaska route, Taku Lodge remained home base.

Joyce’s experience with running dogs proved useful in the 1940s during World War II, when the U.S. Navy commissioned her to haul radio equipment by dog team. In 1948, as the war progressed and threat of Japanese invasion was imminent, Joyce sold her beloved lodge to Mr. and Mrs. Royal O’Reilly and moved to Juneau. During the war years, she returned to nursing, caring for patients at St. Ann’s Hospital. After the war, Joyce purchased the Top Hat Bar and the Lucky Lady, where she entertained friends and tourists with stories of her adventures.

In 1950, Joyce ran as a Democrat for the office Alaskan Territorial Representative. Although she wasn’t elected, she became a prominent figure in Alaska and was regularly

invited to speeches and ceremonies in both Alaska and the Lower 48. In 1976 she died following the second of two heart attacks. She is buried at the Evergreen Cemetery in Juneau.

Today the back wall of the Lucky Lady holds many pictures, newspaper clippings and maps commemorating Joyce's lifetime of accomplishments. The Taku Lodge, renamed the Taku Glacier Lodge in 1949, has been through a handful of owners. Ron and Kathy Maas bought the lodge in 1971 and spent years renovating the old camp. In 1979, the Maas family opened Taku Glacier Lodge as the flightseeing and salmon bake tourist attraction it is today. In 1993, Ken and Michelle Ward of Juneau bought the lodge and today it continues to be a popular shore excursion for cruise-ship passengers who disembark at Juneau and board a Bush plane for the flight to the lodge. The Taku Glacier Lodge draws thousands of tourists each year and still holds many of Joyce's memorabilia, including the dogsled she used on her famous thousand-mile journey.

LINKS:

Taku Glacier Lodge History, Wings Over Alaska:

<http://www.wingsairways.com/taku-lodge-history.html>

Mary Joyce profile, *Alaska* magazine, March 2002:

http://www.alaskamagazine.com/stories/0302/feature_maryjoyce.shtml

“A Prairie Home Companion” visits Taku Glacier Lodge, Folk Alley Blog:

http://www.folkalley.com/archives/000734.php?entry_id=734

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about Mary Joyce and her times 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 **MARY JOYCE ALASKA**.

MORE READING:

Baldwin, Bert P. *Northern Highlights and Mary Joyce*. 1977, 1976 1st edition.

Bell, Karen and Janet Shelfer. *Taku: Four Amazing Individuals, Four Incredible Life Stories, and the Alaskan Wilderness Lodge that Brought Them Together*. Birmingham, Ala.: Will Publishing, 2006.

DeVighne, Harry Carlos. *The Time of My Life: A Frontier Doctor in Alaska*. Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1942.

Sumner, Sandi. *Women Pilots of Alaska: 37 Interviews and Profiles*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL:

Mary Joyce Photographs and Papers, ca. 1899-1976. Alaska State Library. Collection includes three photograph albums and 773 black-and-white photographs. The Mary Joyce Collection contains personal photographs, documents, correspondence, and newspaper and magazine clippings spanning Mary Joyce's lifetime. This collection contains materials held in Joyce's possession during her lifetime. Additional materials were added by Mary Anne Greiner, Joyce's cousin, following Joyce's death in 1976. Most materials in the collection are directly related to key figures and event in Joyce's life, cover the Alaskan regions of Juneau, Taku River, Fairbanks, and are of related interest to the history of Alaskan aeronautics, dog sledding, film-making, glaciology, politics, and art.

Shell Simmons Photograph Collection, 1929-1996. Alaska State Library. 2,104 color and black-and-white photographs, plus three 8mm films, 1 videocassette, stereo slides and viewer. The images cover Alaska aeronautics, the history of Alaska Airlines and Alaska Air Transport, Inc., Bush pilots of Alaska, aircraft accidents. There are files on Shell Simmons, Bee Reidel Simmons, Mary Joyce, W. Bergstrand, and Gordon Graham. Places include Cordova, Hasselborg Lake, Haines, Atlin (B.C.), Juneau, Ketchikan, King Salmon Lake, Kluane Lake (Y.T.), Telegraph Creek (B.C.), and Tulsequah.

Lloyd Jarman Photograph Collection, 1929-1980s. Alaska State Library. About 1,200 black-and-white photographs in 12 albums, and two videocassettes (VHS and beta). Includes photos of Mary Joyce. Most incidents and events from Alaska's aviation history between 1929 and 1940 are covered in Jarman's images. His detailed annotations include names of commercial and bush pilots and bush planes, World War II bombers, famous pilots and flights, passengers, detailed aircraft information, airplane crashes, airlines, airports and hangars mainly around Southeast and remote Alaska but also in Washington State and Africa.

Harry T. Becker Photograph Collection, 1932-1945. Alaska State Library. Collection includes 241 black-and-white photoprints. Includes photographs of Will Rogers, Wiley Post, Mary Joyce, and Carl Benjamin Eielson, also moose, bear, red fox, seals, northern lights, winter sunrises (timed exposure), sled dogs and dog teams, scenics, hunting, fishing, mining, gold nuggets, airplanes and pilots, transportation, Alaska and non-Alaskan Natives, and communities, ca. 1932-1945.

Maxcine Williams Photograph Collection, 1929-1983. Alaska State Library. 1,716 color slides, 117 color and black-and-white photographs in three photo albums. The collection contains many images of flowers, most are identified by their botanical name. In addition are images of the places in Alaska that Maxcine traveled to collecting flower specimens. The collection includes images of Ann Coleman, Ada "Bob" White Sharples, Lydia Fohn-Hanson, Dr. J.P. Anderson, Mary Joyce.

MOVING IMAGE:

Orphans of the North. Norman O Dawn, Bob Webster, Ann Henning, Eleanor Phillips, John Pool, Mary Joyce. 1940. VHS videocassette (56 minutes, black and white). Two orphaned bear cubs, an orphaned girl and a sourdough miner experience adventure in Alaska.