

MARDY MURIE, WITH PENNY AND DOTTIE
1980

MRS. MURIE: ...this was some years after we moved to the Ranch. As I say, we were in New York and we had this appointment with Angus Cameron about some matter that he and Olaus were interested in. I can't even remember what it was. Finally, at the end of the conversation he said something about how I should write the story. Olaus probably had told him that I had grown up in Fairbanks, and so on. Olaus kept encouraging me. I can remember how keenly I felt that I could not tell our story. Except that I had written it for the children.

PENNY OR DOTTIE: It was not that you couldn't. It was just that you felt it was private? It was not that you didn't feel you had adequate words?

MRS. MURIE: No, I felt that I could write it fairly clearly, but I had a feeling that it was something that didn't belong to anybody else. It was a very strong inner feeling in me. We were over in Lander for some reason or another. Olaus was lecturing over there. There was this friend over there at Casper College who said something to me that just sort of struck me. And Olaus had been saying the same thing in different words. But this woman sort of made it feel differently to me all of a sudden. And I mention it in the forward I think, that Margaret Demarest said something like, 'Don't you think that when you've been fortunate enough to have such experiences that you sort of owe it to some of the rest of us to share it a little?'

INTERVIEWER: She sort of touched a cord of social obligation.

MRS. MURIE: At the same time I had a letter from Angus. He said, "Write me a couple of chapters. Anything, it doesn't have to be the first chapter, just anything you feel like writing at this point." So I wrote the story of going out over the trail with the first and last trip of the old NC Stage Line on spring break with I was fifteen. He wrote back and asked me to send two or three more. He said he didn't care what chapters they were, just anything. I did that. I wrote, I guess the early days in Fairbanks. He wrote me back and said not to send my any more. He was sending me a check as an advance on royalties. He told me to finish the book. He was just a psychologist, that man, or a trapper! He had me trapped then! I have a whole big fat envelope of letters from Angus Cameron. What a delightful soul he is! Then of course, after that came out, he wrote and said that he now wanted me to write a book about Wyoming. I told him, "I don't know enough about Wyoming". He said, "I didn't mean that. I mean the part of Wyoming that you do know." Then Olaus said, "Well". Olaus had been writing these chapters about his various experiences during the Elk study, intending maybe to make a book of it some day. So Olaus said, "Why don't we combine them, and make those two into one book?" We both worked on that. When I was finishing *To the Far North*, we had a young friend who was just divorced. She was sort of at loose ends. She wanted some place to stay and was

willing to come out. She came and spent the winter with us and did the housekeeping, and I set myself up with a typewriter in the room where I am now sleeping. It was [sounds like] Mildred's bedroom. I just devoted myself to the latter part of *To the Far North*, that's how it got finished.

INTERVIEWER: One of the things that impresses people when they read your book is this sense of total recall. You do keep a journal.

MRS. MURIE: Not all of the time.

INTERVIEWER: How much is there, and how much is in your head? There are many conversations in your book.

MRS. MURIE: Well, I remember those conversations. I'm just blessed with that kind of a memory I think. I don't think it's any great credit to me. But I do remember things fairly well. I did keep a journal on every trip. I kept a journal all through our honeymoon trip up the Koyukuk and the Old Crow River, and the Sheenjek expedition particularly. By that time I had sort of had a feeling that maybe some day I would do something. That was such a marvelous experience, that summer of 1956 up there. I wanted to put as much of it down as possible, at least for the children. Then I found, when I came to write the book that I couldn't seem to word the things any differently than I had done it at first writing, sitting on a hillside somewhere. So most of that Sheenjek section is just lifted from my journal.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of things?

MRS. MURIE: Did I put in the journal?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

MRS. MURIE: Well, "Today, George went out early this morning and when he came back he told us about seeing Lynx, and just how the Lynx had acted" and so on. "Brian had gone in this direction and Bob went across the river and Olaus and I went up toward the mountain" and we what we saw and all of these things. And at night, over supper we compared notes and everybody told what they had seen that day. We were all having a marvelous time.

INTERVIEWER: The writing about your childhood you found easy to do? That was the place where you wanted to start?

MRS. MURIE: Yes. It all sort of came to me, and as I told you the other night, when I sent the type script for that part to my mother for suggestions and help, all she did was

send it back to me and say, “How did you remember all of that?” She had forgotten a lot of those things. It brought it back to her.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have much help from your editor, or did he have to put what was there?

MRS. MURIE: Practically none. They didn’t alter things. I remember when they sent back the first typescript edited. And it looked as though it had measles. I thought, ‘Oh dear me, I’ve done terrible job!’ But then when I began to read and examine it, it was just little tiny, minor things. There was no real editing, I would say. Angus just let me go my own way.

INTERVIEWER: People speak about writing for a particular audience. When you said that at first you were going to record this for your children, did they continue to be the audience that you had in mind while you were writing?

MRS. MURIE: No, I think later on I was probably, if I thought about that at all, probably half consciously thinking of this friend who had said, ‘you owe it to some of us to share this’. I was thinking of just writing for someone who would be enough interested in that kind of experience to enjoy hearing about it maybe.

INTERVIEWER: Was it difficult to come to a decision about how much you should tell your reader, or about how much you should assume that they knew? Say, about animals or the north, or anything specific?

MRS. MURIE: No. I was just telling them the things that I had learned. Because when I married Olaus I had an English major. I knew very little about wildlife. I just knew that I liked to be outdoors and look at things. But I hardly knew a Robin from anything. My stepfather had taught me quite a bit about wildlife, but aside from that. I didn’t have any feelings of trying to teach people a lot of things, or inform them particularly. Mostly, it was just the writing of the experience as I felt it, at the time, and as I lived it. It’s a pretty personal kind of narrative I think. It’s not very objective. I’ve been really amazed at the number of fan letters I’ve had about *To the Far North*.

INTERVIEWER: It was such a personal document, but I think people feel it personally and want to respond.

MRS. MURIE: Maybe it is something like that, apparently they did. And I remember when the book came out and I sent a copy to my son Martin. He wrote back and said some nice things about the book. He said something about the Old Crow part. He said, “Of course, being an Old Crow veteran, I know all about these things. I can have an opinion.” He was ten months old when we took him on that trip. He doesn’t remember a thing about it! And he has never said to me exactly how he feels about it. The other night

when I was lying there with that temperature, and kind of half feverish, I was thinking about a lot of things. I suddenly thought, 'How on earth? How could I have done that?' Once in a while....

INTERVIEWER: Do you mean that trip?

MRS. MURIE: Making that trip and taking that baby way up into the wilds like that with no other human support except his father and Jessie Ross. There we were, the three of us, and the baby. Yet, at the time, it just seemed the thing to do and I had no qualms about it. Now, I look back. Sometimes I just get real terrified thinking back on it! Fortunately, the only time that that baby had any illness at all was when we were in touch with civilization. We stopped at the Rampart House at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Station. It's on the border. The nice mounted policemen there were so delighted to see us. We were the first boat up the river, and we brought mail to them. We spent a whole day there. He insisted on giving me some Klem powdered milk to mix for the baby instead of the Dryco that I was carrying for him. That didn't agree with him. He had a tummy ache. The other time was when we came back down the river. We were in the Old Crow village and the Episcopal Missionary insisted that we stay at his house. He was just lovely. Mr. McCollum was his name. He gave Martin some kind of hard tack pilot biscuit to chew on and he had about four teeth then. He managed to get a couple of chunks off and swallowed them whole I guess. Then he had a tummy ache. As long as we were out in the complete wilderness he never had a thing wrong with him.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of milk did you give him?

MRS. MURIE: Dryco. [?]

INTERVIEWER: And that was it?

MRS. MURIE: Oh no, we carried cereal: Cream of Wheat, and some other cereal. I guess we had oatmeal along, and dried fruit. I'd stew the dried fruit and put it through a sieve and feed him that. Apricots and prunes. When we had any meat, we had a young Bear and we had a couple of geese. I'd give him the broth or the juice off of that.

INTERVIEWER: Did he like that?

MRS. MURIE: Oh yes, he ate everything. He loved Grayling. I wondered if it was a little soon to give him Grayling. It was when we were coming back down. He was then twelve and a half months old.

INTERVIEWER: Are the fatty, the flesh of the Grayling?

MRS. MURIE: No, it's like Trout. It's quite dry.

INTERVIEWER: What do Indians feed their babies?

MRS. MURIE: He was crazy about that fish. He ended up eating about half of an eighteen inch Grayling. Jessie Ross came and sat by me in the tent and said, "It won't hurt him, I know it won't hurt him. It's just perfectly good food for him!" We carried a case of tomatoes so that I could... There was no such thing as Gerber baby food or anything like that. We carried about six dozen oranges. And we could have carried more because they kept perfectly. Jess put them down in the bottom under the bottom layer of the scow. I guess that next to that cold river water they just stayed perfect. So I had orange juice for him.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever compare notes with Indians in say, Old Crow as to how they fed their babies at that age?

MRS. MURIE: No. I never did. At that time most of the Old Crow Indians didn't speak English. They all crowded around the baby.

INTERVIEWER: Where they surprised to see you there with a child?

MRS. MURIE: Oh my goodness! They just crowded on the bank, and surrounded me. I stood there holding this bright...he had quite blond, curly hair and great big black eyes. For most of them, it was the first white baby they had ever seen. They were just entranced by him. Right away, they went and started making moccasins for him. By the end of the day he had two pair of little Indian moccasins.

INTERVIEWER: How did you dress him?

MRS. MURIE: In little coveralls. Do you remember coveralls? My mother made them out of lightweight, kind of soft denim.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have diapers?

MRS. MURIE: Oh yes! And we washed the diapers every night and would hang them on bushes to dry. He had a sweater suit. One of those wooly sweater suits. It had leggings and sweater and cap to match. That was for when it was cool. But the coveralls had long sleeves and long legs and so he was protected from the mosquitoes. We couldn't even have him out in the mosquito open air. When we got up into Old Crow River the mosquitoes were so thick. He was kept under a mosquito tent inside the scow. He and I just sat in there.

INTERVIEWER: [You were] Tender morsels.

MRS. MURIE: Then, when Olaus set up the tent at night, he'd just come and grab the child and run and put him in the mosquito proof tent. I remember what a haven that tent was. We burned a little beauhac [sp?] to kill the few mosquitoes that got in while it was being set up. Then I could turn Martin loose, and he could crawl all around in that tent and get some exercise. He just crawled around and around in there.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, that's a long time during the day to be quiet.

MRS. MURIE: Well, if we were on an open place at noon, where we could get ashore, we'd take him out. I had a cheesecloth, soaked in Citronella that I'd put around his neck. That helped to keep the mosquitoes away. We didn't have these other modern repellents in those days.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a little backpack, or a stomach thing to haul him in?

MRS. MURIE: No, I didn't have anything like that because we were in the boat almost all of the time. We had a harness for him. And when we were traveling, he sat in this big packing box bed he had. He had this harness on and it was clipped into screw eyes on the side of the boat. He had freedom to move around, but he couldn't fall overboard. Someday maybe he'll tell me about how he feels about that. I don't know whether inside himself if he feels that his parents were neglectful of him or not. But of course, there were no germs up there. There was no disease for him to get. It was just the hazards of the trip itself.

INTERVIEWER: Which must have caused you a lot of worry!

MRS. MURIE: Well I worried about coming back down through that canyon, yes.

INTERVIEWER: How did that go?

MRS. MURIE: It went just fine when we finally got to it. It was like an old dragon in the back of my mind all summer. We had broken the crankshaft and had no power. Olaus and Jess had cut big sweeps out of Spruce trees. Olaus rode the scow in front and Jess steered with the motorboat rudder in the back. The baby and I sat out on the open part with life preserver vests pinned to him with big safety pins all over. I had one on too. I remember when we went down that great big shoot, there is about a four-foot drop. The baby was just having a wonderful time. I was holding him, and he was reaching out to that white foam, going "Coom, coom, Coom!" [Baby talk] He was as happy as could be! Sometimes I look back and think, "Dear me!" I have really lived enough for four lives!

INTERVIEWER: When you went back to Old Crow, when you saw it, didn't you want to go back?

MRS. MURIE: No, I've never been back to Old Crow since that first time in 1926. I went back to Bettles [?] in 1975. That was on the Kuyokuk.

INTERVIEWER: I used to love the *Letters Written From Old Crow*. Was it written by Annie?... Do you remember in Fairbanks [Newspaper] there was a column at least weekly.

MRS. MURIE: Josie.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever meet Josie?

MRS. MURIE: No, but I had a letter from her. It was years after we were up there. We were already living on the Ranch up here. It was about 1950 I suppose. I suppose we still got one of the Alaska papers. Somehow we heard that the Catholic Priest at Old Crow and the Royal Canadian Mounted Policemen, and the village council had voted to have some sort of skiing program for the young people to keep them out of mischief. They needed skis. Olaus went down to Bill Jensen and also Mr. Robertson and other folks down at the sporting goods store. They donated skis that were perfectly good, but had been used, and some boots and poles and I don't know what all. Sig Olsen, Jr. who was with the Game and Fish up in Fairbanks by that time sent word that if we could get them to Fairbanks, he could get them flown over to Old Crow in one of the government planes. After that, I had a letter from Josie. And I had a letter from the Priest. And I had a letter from the Mounted Policemen. They were thanking us. I think also they sent sometimes they'd send little clippings about what their young people were doing. You know, they did very well!

INTERVIEWER: They had a very successful program. I remember that they used to go to Anubik to compete.

MRS. MURIE: Yes! Jenny Wood went over there with them, not with them, but with some other troop, and met them all over there. Yeah, they went to ski meets and they did very well!

INTERVIEWER: This was their first introduction to cross-country skiing in this little Indian town. It was very isolated.

MRS. MURIE: The Catholic Priest who was there at that time, Fr. Boucher, I believe his name was, must have been a terrific man. And he was a good skier. He decided that that was something that they could learn. Both the boys and the girls just did very well.

INTERVIEWER: Well, they were used to being on 'webs' before weren't they?

MRS. MURIE: Yes that was all they knew.

INTERVIEWER: The Fairbanks *News Miner* used to print these letters from Josie. Was Fred Stickman also [involved]?

MRS. MURIE: Fred Stickman was down at New Alto most of the time, and then he was at Galena.

INTERVIEWER: He also wrote great letters, but the paper would never edit them.

MRS. MURIE: Oh no, they appeared just the way they were.

INTERVIEWER: They appeared in this marvelous, more than a pigeon English, but in a really delightful, fresh approach to the English language. *The Tundra Times* used to also have, I think, some correspondents from Old Crow.

MRS. MURIE: Yes, they did too.

INTERVIEWER: Is that still going? Howard Rock died didn't he?

MRS. MURIE: He died.

INTERVIEWER: Did somebody take over after that? That was supposed to be *the* native newspaper for Alaska, started by an Eskimo.

MRS. MURIE: I think its still going. I haven't seen a copy lately. There was something about Howard Rock in one recent; it must have been *Alaska Magazine* or something that came. He was given some kind of an honor at some kind of banquet they had in his honor not long before he died.

INTERVIEWER: He ran the newspaper under the most difficult circumstances.

MRS. MURIE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: It was originally subsidized by a man from Boston. Do you remember who that was? He had a yearly subsidy that allowed it to keep going. But eventually that ran out.

MRS. MURIE: Oh, I didn't know that.

INTERVIEWER: He had a very difficult time with the paper. [Mr. Rock]

MRS. MURIE: I remember going in there with Olaus to talk to him several times when we were back up there. I guess that was 1956, probably. Then we were up there again in

1961. I think that paper served a very good purpose. I think it began to give the native people a sense of some sort of status and worthwhile ness and dignity.

INTERVIEWER: It also have them a common voice because they had never been able to speak before as a group.

MRS. MURIE: Yes, they hadn't had any way to speak out. I think it probably helped a great deal in their action when Statehood came on, to demand some of their rights.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of an audience did it have besides just the Indians.

MRS. MURIE: I think it had a large audience. A lot of people subscribe to it, I think. There was a lot of various kinds of news in it.

INTERVIEWER: I know it had a fair subscription outside of Alaska. I know people who had been there and were interested in their causes, and were just interested in Alaska. They had friends there.

MRS. MURIE: Do you remember the old *Alaska Weekly*?

INTERVIEWER: No.

MRS. MURIE: That was a paper published for Alaskans in Seattle for years. That would be a thing that would be important. And it was full of news, all of the time. I've forgotten how often it came out. But Beulah Fairbanks was one of its chief correspondents. She lived in Seattle, but she was totally wound up in Alaska. She made a good many trips up there. She was a journalist. You must have heard a little of her.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MRS. MURIE: She and Bea Mason formed this group called 'Alaska Friends' in Seattle. I don't know whether they are still going or not. I know that my mother belonged to it. I used to go to the meetings with her. And when *To the Far North* came out, or several years later...well anyway, they had a special "do", and they had the book there and an exhibition, and me on exhibition. I was just thinking that that paper would be a great source of early history of Alaska if anyone were ever interested. I am sure. I don't remember how early started publication, but it went on for quite a long time. It had all kinds of news.

INTERVIEWER: It had correspondents in Alaska as well as ex-Alaskans living in Seattle writing for it?

MRS. MURIE: Oh no, it was up to date, up to the minute news from Alaska. It came out once a week. I suppose they have files of it in the archives up in Fairbanks. I don't know when it stopped publication, but not too long ago.

INTERVIEWER: As you see them, what do you see as the historical gaps in Alaska? The areas that have not been explored or written about.

MRS. MURIE: I have never thought of that particularly.

INTERVIEWER: What about native affairs? Anthropologists of course have written a fair amount about that.

MRS. MURIE: Yes. I don't know. And of course that kind of thing is going on now under Zorro Bradley there at the University. He is with the Park Service, but he is at the University.

INTERVIEWER: The Park Service?

MRS. MURIE: Yes, the Park Service has an Anthropologist up there. And he's been up there ever since the Task Force was established to study out these areas that should be parks and lands. He is a wonderful fellow. He and his wife have gotten so, it's amazing because they both come from Santa Fe. Her father was the famous Natt Dodge, the Park Naturalist at Santa Fe Region. He was the authority on the southwest for many years. So her name is Nattalie, spelled N-A-double T-A-L-I-E. Zorro has two or three assistants and they travel all over and they must by now have collected a great fund of information. I think in a way, it may be that southeast Alaska has been neglected in the history. I don't know exactly why I say that, but I just... There may be other things in their history other than just the fishing. But I don't know whether there has been any complete study of what went on in the southeast. They are sort of isolated from the rest of Alaska. I remember in the interior, that area was sort of the 'dog's tale' that was sort of looked down on. It hardly belonged to Alaska.

INTERVIEWER: Life was too easy down there.

MRS. MURIE: Yeah, that's probably it. Well, these two people from New Mexico, Zorro and Nattalie Bradley have bought a place out on Cheeno Ridge. They had a place in town. They weren't on Giest Road. They were on Teal Avenue. Then the neighbors sort of objected to the disturbance of their dogs. They had a dog team. They have an adopted daughter who is now about to graduate from the University. Her name is Pat. She was 16 when I was up there. She is a wonderful girl. And they were all interested in dog teams, so built a house out on Cheeno Ridge. And they have the dogs and travel with them every winter. It's such a contrast to what life in the southwest must have been for all of those years. But apparently they intend to stay in Fairbanks. Zorro paid me the

highest compliment that anybody ever did, about *Island Between* when it came out. It was when I was up there in 1976, I guess. No it was just a year ago in September, when I was up there. [1979] I was at the home of young Carol, she is daughter of my bridesmaid. And she is the Curator, the Paleontologist there. Any way, the Bradleys were there also, and Zorro said, "I am green with envy!" I said, "What's the matter with you?" He told me, "You put the blood and flesh on the bare bones." I had been just afraid to see him, because the book had just come out and I had sent him a copy. I had had a letter from him thanking me for the book. He said that it was making the rounds in his office. Right after that, I was up there and I had been afraid, really afraid to think what the anthropologist might say about it, or feel about, because I am not an anthropologist. I knew I couldn't have given any real scientific slant on those things. I only wrote the book as best I could from Otto's notes, for what must have gone on with those people. I was greatly relieved when Zorro seemed to like it. Other anthropologists might pick out a lot of flaws in it, I'm sure. But I haven't heard about it. That book was more hard work than anything I ever did. I went through three versions of it. It was different than anything else I'd ever done. I wanted to do it for Otto's sake. I am just sorry it didn't come out while he was still alive. But it took all of those years for the University to get around to publishing it. I did it because Dr. Binell asked me to. I would try to do it, but there was such a mass of material. They shipped it down here to me. It took me three weeks just to look through it to kind of just see what was there. There were journals and journals and more journals and all kinds of stuff. That man was a real powerhouse.

INTERVIEWER: How did you organize them?

MRS. MURIE: Oh, I don't know Dottie! [Laughing] It was sort of chronologically. It is a ...[tape ends, nothing on side B]