

## Marge Mullen—cherished friend of Kenai NWR for 69 years

by Candace Ward



*Marge Mullen—homesteader, community builder, and conservationist—in front of “Majesty of the Kenai” at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center (credit: Walter Ward).*

Marge Mullen, a delightful 95-year-old homesteader still going strong in Soldotna, has a very unique relationship with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She alone has known the Refuge for 69 of its 75 years of existence.

Marge first encountered the Refuge in August 1947 as she and her husband, Frank, originally from Chicago, journeyed from Anchorage to stake their homestead on Soldotna Creek by the Kenai River. They rode the train from Anchorage to Moose Pass and then hitched a ride to Mile 38 of the Seward Highway. They hiked for three days and 65 miles westward across the Chugach National Forest and Kenai

National Wildlife Refuge (then known as the Kenai National Moose Range) to reach their homestead destination.

Marge was equipped with a Trapper Nelson backpack and a pair of boots that she wished had been broken in better as her blistered feet attested to. She remembers encountering the Alaska Road Commission workers as they were blasting rock to build the Sterling Highway in what today is a rock face on Skilak Lake Road overlooking Upper Ohmer Lake.

Marge was also amazed at the devastated landscape resulting from a huge wild fire that had started two months before in June—as rumor had it, from the careless toss of a cigarette by a highway construction worker. She recounts that when she reached out to grab a burnt-out tree for balance, it would come out of the ground in her hand. Fortunately, most of the flames from the 300,000-acre burn had already been snuffed out by August rains. As she related, in those days there weren't enough people or equipment to put out a fire that size.

When reaching the “Y” of the Sterling and Spur Highways, she said it looked like a “big bowl of chocolate pudding.” The Mullens staked their claims of 100 acres with coffee cans and a blaze on a tree. Over the years to follow, Marge raised her four children—Peggy, Eileen, Frank Jr. and Mary—along with digging water wells, improving the cabin, cultivating an immense vegetable garden, and rearing 800 chickens for eggs that were mostly sold at Carr's Grocery Stores in Anchorage. In 1952, when Marge was pregnant with her fourth child Mary, Frank was struck by polio, placing even greater responsibility on her. Even with all these challenges she never wanted to return to city life.

Marge was an entrepreneur who established several businesses over the years including a laundry and The Four Seasons gourmet restaurant. She has routinely volunteered in the community at Soldotna Elementary School and for any project where an extra pair of hands was needed. Even in her 90's, she still is very active with the Soldotna Historical Society and its homesteader museum next to Centennial

Park. It was while working for a local dentist, Dr. Calvin Fair, she became “enlightened” about conservation concerns on the Kenai Peninsula. Marge, along with Dr. Fair, Bill Schrier, Jim and Helen Fischer, Mary Miller, George Pollard, Will Troyer and John Hakala, formed the Kenai Conservation Society in the mid-1960’s.

The group took up many endeavors including stopping the flaring off of natural gas from oil operations, working to establish federal wilderness on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and setting up wilderness outings for the public on the Refuge.

Marge fondly recalls all of the group’s wilderness adventures including Fuller Lakes and Surprise Creek Trails backpacking trips, route finding on the Tustumena bench lands, and tide pooling after hiking to Grewingk Glacier across Kachemak Bay. She related that Will Troyer and Calvin Fair always shook down the group members’ backpacks to make sure unnecessary gear was left behind before beginning their treks. However, she also remembers that sometimes Will would pack so light that he only had two hotdogs for food and the group would rescue him by sharing their “eats.”

Marge related that Calvin Fair and Bill Schrier were always the letter writers on issues of conservation and wilderness concern for the Kenai Conservation Society. She also proudly recounts that she testified for wilderness creation on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She remembers that she was “exceedingly red” in the face, because she is a shy person and public speaking was not an easy matter for her.

The grassroots efforts of Marge and the Kenai Conservation Society were instrumental in establishing

1.35 million acres of federal wilderness in 1980 on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge—a very special legacy of scenic beauty, wildlife, and personal challenge to be enjoyed by present and future generations. The Kenai Peninsula was developed to give people livelihoods, but she has always felt that “over the long term, wilderness is the most important treasure on the peninsula.”

*Candace Ward has been a park ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge 32 years. Candace first met Marge and her daughter, Peggy, when they welcomed her to the community during her first year at the Refuge in 1984. Find more information at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.*



*The Kenai Conservation Society, whose conservation activities helped establish Kenai Wilderness, on an outing to Surprise Creek Trail in 1967 (credit: Will Troyer).*