

# The ALASKA JOURNAL®

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# A Fairbanks Girl in Prince William Sound

By Margaret E. Murie  
Photos courtesy of the author

**F**airbanks and Prince William Sound are both in Alaska, but there the similarity ends.

Growing up in Fairbanks on the banks of Chena Slough in that flat Tanana River valley, with my mother and my scholarly lawyer stepfather, and then in 1918 at age 15 suddenly traveling to Port Ashton in Prince William Sound to get acquainted with my father, stepmother, older half-brother, two uncles and two young men cousins, plunged me into the warm and vigorous and lively life of a seagoing fisheries family business totally alien to all I had known.

I couldn't tie a bowline; I couldn't steer a seine boat or any other boat; I couldn't read the compass. Worst of all, I couldn't row.

One of the first Sundays the family traveled in one of the seine boats over to Montague Island to watch a salmon trap being lifted. When we were

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**Margaret E. Murie** was born in Seattle, but spent most of her childhood in Fairbanks. She was the first woman graduate of the University of Alaska, and two months after her graduation married biologist Olaus J. Murie. She worked closely with him during his years with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and after 1946 as director of The Wilderness Society. Her book, *Two in the Far North* (available from ANWP), chronicles those early adventurous years. Since her husband's death in 1963, Mrs. Murie has continued working in the cause of conservation, and in 1976 was honored by the University of Alaska with a Doctor of Humane Letters degree. She now makes her home at Moose, Wyoming, in the Teton Mountains, where she wrote these memories for the *JOURNAL* between visits from her grandchildren. *The Alaskan Bird Sketches of Olaus Murie* is also available from ANWP, please see page 54 for details.



anchored in a little cove, Pete Keyo, captain of the seine boat, took me out in the tender for a rowing lesson. Father stood on deck watching while I went round and round and never straight ahead. My brother Franklin told me long afterward that Father, not at that moment his usual dynamic hearty self, was muttering: "My Gawd; a Thomas who can't row!"

I learned. I even learned to cook a meal on the little stove down in the fo'c'sle in fairly choppy weather, to climb up and down slippery ladders and to wear my knee-high rubber boots nearly all the time.

I learned about camping out from my stepmother, who was a great outdoors-woman and had her own little clinker-built boat with Evinrude outboard motor. We went off for four or five days at a time through all the lovely wooded islands with their enticing coves and beaches, which make up that western part of Prince William Sound. We hiked to the upper reaches of many of these islands, my stepmother rejoicing in the absence of devil's club and the presence of open grassy meadows starred with wild violets and bog hyacinth — quite different from Southeast, and a lot drier.

We watched one day from our beach camp a fight between a large whale and a killer which went on for at least 45 minutes. We went ashore hurriedly on another day to give over the channel between two islands to a pod of six large whales. We explored, we had our adventures, we came back safely and told Father where we had been, and he nearly always said: "Good Lord, what were you doing way out *there*?"

But that summer of traveling about gave me a picture of that part of Alaska, a knowledge of camping skills, a respect for time and tide and storm, which I would never have had otherwise. We traveled across the front of glaciers, taking care not to go too close; we rounded the ocean end of islands

when the little Evinrude motor riding on big ocean swells would be out of the water entirely, going "ticky, ticky, ticky" way up there in the air.

We admired the Oriental aspect of the shoreline hemlocks; we got acquainted with puffins and auklets and cormorants and kittiwakes and many other ocean birds; we knew the bays and inlets and little coves and lovely sandy beaches of all those islands — Montague and Knight and Bainbridge and Elrington and Latouche — and of course Evans, which had in the past been called Hoodoo, and on which, in Sawmill Bay, both our Port Ashton of the Franklin Packing Company, and a cannery of the San Juan Packing Company, were located.

**T**wo summers and a year of college later, I came back to Port Ashton as an employee. I was to be the storekeeper, a totally new experience in every way.

And the place had grown. The first morning Father took me on a tour. In that rather large bay of Evans Island, very sheltered because it had an island lying out in front, the cannery buildings were all built out from shore on piles: the saltery at the right-hand end as you faced the settlement, the long dock across the whole front, with salmon cannery and canned kippered herring cannery, another long building behind it and the salmon warehouse and cooper shop at the left-hand end, making the other bar of the H. The shore end of this building was the store, above it the staff rooms, and upstairs over the warehouse end of the building was the big recreation hall.

In the saltery, which two years before had been the only large building, everything was buzzing. The row of skillful "herring chokers" — girls in yellow oilskin clothes — stood at the long counter. The sloping sides of the bin above had little doors through which a pile of herring slid when they pulled them aside. The girls wielded that special clever little knife: flip, slash, throw behind into a big trough, throw more salt on. When the trough was full, they stopped and began packing into barrels, every motion learned, exactly

the same pattern, a steady rhythm; more salt on every layer. When the barrel was full a young man with a special kind of hand truck, or dolly, scooted the barrel away to the brine room where it was watched until the brine tested exactly right by a tester, which looked like a big thermometer.

The cooper's shop was another example of perfect skill and timing. Father said: "Isn't it great to watch a man who knows his job the way George does?"

From an olfactory sense a herring saltery is pretty harmless. A salmon cannery is something different! Father said when we stepped into it: "You'll get used to the smell after a while." H-mm. This was only a one-line cannery, meaning one line of counters, more girls cutting up salmon, packing it into cans. Against the back wall was the huge white-painted steam boiler in which both salmon and canned kippered herring were processed. It was presided over by handsome cousin Ted and his crew. Because the boiler was so nice and warm, people were prone to lean against it. One morning we discovered that some clever soul had been busy in the night. On the boiler's white side in huge very neat lettering: *Lena Genster*.

Back of all these buildings, along the mossy-rocky, tree-scattered shore, ran a long railed wooden walkway, leading, to the right, to various tent houses set here and there wherever the terrain permitted, and to the left, to the mess hall with girls' dormitory rooms above, and more dormitories for men farther along the shore. Up on a little knoll sat a little house we called The Look-out, where, in that summer, lived Mr. Imlach, the Scottish saltery foreman and his family.

Father took me through every building and finally guided me to the newest addition, behind the saltery and against the shore: the two-story fish meal and oil plant, full of noise and smells and machinery. No waste was going out into the bay now. On the outside this plant was ordinary enough; on the inside it was horrendous — the odors, that is! But, as with the salmon cannery, we "got used to it" and it

*Masquerade parties were popular social events in territorial Alaska. Margaret Thomas Murie, 19 when this photo was taken, dressed up as an Indian maid for a party in Fairbanks.*





*Sheltered by an island out front, Port Ashton lay in a large bay of Evans Island in Prince William Sound. There, the Franklin Packing Company had a herring saltery and salmon and kippered herring canneries. From an olfactory sense the herring saltery was pretty harmless. But the salmon cannery was something different! In front of the plant a scow was being built on the dock.*

furnished some fun. Part of the storekeeper's job was to sometimes entertain tourists who were wandering about while the weekly steamer was unloading and loading at the dock, so I took them on tours. The visit to the fish meal plant never lasted very long. Hankies to noses, the lady tourists abandoned that part of the tour pretty quickly!

I had a day in which to get settled in the nice room off the staff living room. Next day I reported for work. Mitchell Spaeth, the young man who had been storekeeper the year before and then been promoted, gave me my instructions. In the back corner of the store space, sat the gentle gray-haired bookkeeper, "Daddy" Mitchell in his glass-walled partitioned-off office. He became my mentor. For example: "Mardy, did you remember to order more snose by this steamer?" (I had been told by Mitch Spaeth that Copenhagen snuff must be ordered frequently because after a certain age it was not so good. And nearly all of the Scandinavian fishermen used it.)

On the second morning Daddy Mitchell said to me: "Did you check over the first aid cabinet? See, there it is, on the back wall."

First aid! I knew nothing about it. It was no impossible task to keep canned goods, jams, cheese, Norwegian toast and other foodstuffs neatly at one side of the store, oilskins, boots, shirts, bolts of cheesecloth, denim, etc., on the other. But the first aid cabinet, a big white metal thing hanging on the wall, was full of mysteries and I hoped I never had to deal with any of them.

Not so! The third day Mrs. Imlach, wife of the Scottish saltery foreman, brought their 10-year-old son into the store. "Miss Thomas, you know I'm working in the fish; I can't handle Willie's burn. He spilled acid in his palm and it has to be tended to every morning."

Dear good little Willie! He sat patiently on a stool while I unwrapped the hand each morning, gritted my teeth at the sight of flesh burned deeply, smeared on ointment as gently as I could, wrapped and tied the bandage. We were both learning about life.

One comforting thought was that four miles across the water on Latouche Island was Dr. Anderson. The doctor ministered to the lively company town of the Kennecott Copper Company, and he was also equipped with an infirmary.

The other comfort — "Scottie" — I didn't know about until the morning when Mr. Imlach and another tall Scot

came rushing through the back door of the store leading one of the girls clutching a handkerchief to her left wrist. The gibbing knife had slipped and cut a vein. Scottie took charge. "Get me a lot of bandage; I'll make a tourniquet. Go find Mitch and tell him to get the motorboat over to the dock; she has to go to Latouche."

That all ended well. And I learned that Scottie had been in the British Army in World War I, had won the Victoria Cross and had had a lot of first aid experience. He also played the bagpipes, and that is one of the poignant memories of that summer: evenings on the dock, daylight until very late, with Scottie in his kilt, standing out on the front of the dock, playing his pipes. I loved it. Father did not.

"No wonder the Scots are a warlike people. That's enough to make anybody want to get up and fight!"

Most of us worked all day; those who slept were the seine boat crews, who worked at night. For the rest of us, playtimes were the evenings, light until 10 o'clock at least, and Sundays. There were endless things to do; the young men played catch on the long dock. (I don't know how many balls went into the bay.) Scottie played his bagpipes; couples, lovesick or otherwise, went out on the bay in rowboats, or motored to the little coves where one might catch crabs. When a tar barrel had been emptied, that was the occasion for a picnic on the little beach beyond the saltery. We roasted wieners, and sang



songs and watched the tar barrel, set alight and floating down the bay.

If Franklin (for whom the company had been named) was around to play his accordion for us and join in the fun, it added greatly to my joy, because I had a bad case of hero-worship for my handsome older brother. But that summer he was foreman of the whole plant and very busy. However, the two older cousins, Ted and Newt, kept a sort of cousinly eye on my doings, which after all were pretty harmless — among all the young men working at the plant or coming over from Latouche or coming ashore from the Coast Guard cutter to take part in our dances, none seemed to measure up to the brother or the cousins. If they were good dancers, that was all I required. As for Father, it was his first experience of monitoring a young daughter. One day he would say: "That's right, Daughter, safety in numbers; play with all of 'em." And the next morning: "Good Lord, how many of these young squirts do you need to have hanging around?"

My stepmother was not at Port Ashton for most of that summer, but above all the male supervision I had that year, there was my dear Aunt Minnie, Uncle Newt's wife, Ted and Newt's mother. We had come up together from Seattle and she was a wonderful companion and a wise woman. This summer she and Uncle Newt were living down Elrington channel watching a herring trap. Some of those summer evenings a few of us would row across the bay and walk overland to visit them. I would give her all the news and we would have a "mug-up" with her and Uncle Newt and travel back to Port Ashton, still in daylight.

The mug-up was a continuously observed fisherman's tradition. It probably started on the seine boats. The fishing was done at night, and usually went on until about 2 A.M., when the crew would gather in the fo'c'sle and mug-up — drink cocoa and eat Norwegian toast, cheese and jam. They would then turn in for a few hours sleep. But wherever they were, they had to be back at the cannery at 7 A.M. to unload their catch of herring. After that, a few

more hours sleep perhaps. On shore, the mug-up was also part of the routine. Whatever games or races or boating had been going on, people gathered in their tents and little houses about 10 o'clock for the same ritual. That is why I had to keep the 25-pound wheel of cheese and cookies (which the Scottish folk called "sweet biscuits") and barrels of Norwegian toast in the store.

(Norwegian toast was what it was called at the canneries; in Norway it is Kavring; in more sophisticated circles I guess it would be a rusk. We got it from the marine supply house in Seattle and it came in barrels, the tops of which were a layer of white muslin covered with a layer of burlap, fastened with a metal hoop — this was to keep the toast from becoming damp, for it must be tender and crispy. In 1956 my husband and I went up and down the Seattle waterfront trying to find this product; we wanted some for our expedition to the Brooks Range, but it seemed to be a thing of the past.)

All this time I was learning a few things about being a storekeeper. Once in a while a halibut boat would come chugging into the bay. The seine boats went "tra-deedy, tra-deedy" quite fast. The halibut boats went "ker-chug, ker-chug" very slow. Some of these halibut men were fairly rough-looking fellows, but they were all polite. They came into

the bay to buy a few things at the store; perhaps they were surprised to find a young girl in charge, and I am still wondering about one pair who asked for four fathoms of cheesecloth. I said nothing, went to the bolt and measured off eight yards of cheesecloth and handed it to them. Did they just want to know whether I knew what a fathom is?

One afternoon a grizzled, smiling, little man appeared in the doorway. "Hi, how are you? I came over from the back side of Latouche; have a little mining claim there. Thought you might have some things I need. Do you have any dried fruit? They were almost out of it at Latouche and I'm very fond of stewed fruit."

Pleasant little fellow he was, and he bought quite a few pounds of prunes, apricots, peaches, raisins. When Father came in that evening I told him about my customer. "Ho, ho, ho, Daughter, you've just outfitted a bootlegger!"

Another thing I soon learned, and that was that when all the mothers were at work in the saltery or cannery I was sort of expected to keep an eye on their children. And the children, aged 5

*Hardly looking like the typical cannery workers they were, these partygoers at Port Ashton filled their nonworking hours with games and dancing.*





to 11, were like monkeys, and why none of them got drowned before the summer was over the good Providence only knows. I would hear some commotion, run out of the store. "Johnny Cameron, you come right down out of those rafters!" Or, "Jennie, what are you doing with those barrels? Take them right back to George."

But how swiftly it all went! The high point of the week was steamer day, of course. Once a week the regular passenger steamer of the Alaska Steamship Company came alongside the dock, unloaded whatever groceries and supplies we had ordered, and loaded whatever herring and salmon and fish meal and oil were ready to go to market. While this was going on the captain and the passengers usually wandered about, and if someone happened to be a musician, no matter what time of day or night there would be an impromptu dance in our recreation hall. We never knew exactly when the steamer would arrive. Often there was a big rush to get a shipment ready for loading; several times I found myself up in the loft next to the fish meal plant, late at night, sewing up the tops of fish meal sacks. All of us did whatever needed to be done, and Father and Franklin praised us all and made us proud to be there.

I must not forget the highlight of the social life of those summers. In the next cove of Sawmill Bay was the plant of the San Juan Packing Company, friendly neighbors. One Sunday in the summer there was always a joint picnic, when all the people of both plants went on a trip down Elrington Passage to a special place where there was a fine long beach. Seine boats, perhaps eight in all, would load up with people; and the trip to the picnic beach, which took a couple of hours at least, would be a noisy one, with some of the boats racing one another, and much shouting, laughing and singing all the way. On the beach, baseball games, foot races, sack races, potato races, and eating and eating. Happy times.

I remember, too, the Saturday night dances. One Saturday a whole troop of us went over to Latouche on a seine boat to dance in their recreation hall;

the next Saturday a merry crew from Latouche would come over to dance in our hall. I have often wondered if any people anywhere ever danced as much as Alaskans did in those days! I remember Chris Johnson, a fine-looking young Swede who worked so hard at Port Ashton all summer, and then danced away the whole winter in Seattle!

Not far from the herring trap in Elrington Passage there was a group of buildings which ostensibly had been a small herring saltery the year before, but which some clever deputy marshal from Seward found to be a front for a bootlegging establishment. The owners were found guilty, the whole plant was sold at marshal's sale, and Father was the successful bidder. There were a few interesting items, including a nice rug for our staff living room, and a nice rocking chair, and an old English ivory-handled fish set, which I simply walked off with at the end of that season and which is now in my daughter's home in West Hartford, Connecticut. But two other items were more exciting. One was a lovely old Emerson square grand piano which somehow Franklin and Ted and the crew of one of the seine boats managed to take apart, load onto the deck of the boat, transport to Port Ashton, unload, and maneuver up the stairs and into our recreation hall.

The other was a nice little motor launch and this was just what Father needed to run about in, to see how the boats were all doing, to watch for signs of herring runs, to do business over at Latouche. He put Cousin Newt in charge of it and they renamed it *Montague*. That little launch took us on trips to all sorts of interesting coves and passages and to the salmon traps. Aunt Minnie often went with us on these Sunday trips, and she and Father kept us entertained with recitations of poetry they had had to memorize in the New Brunswick schools in which they had grown up.

*Behind him lay the gray Azores,  
Behind, the Gates of Hercules,  
Before him not the ghost of shores,  
Before him only shoreless seas.*

This much I remember from "Sail On." I wish I had been trained to memorize

as Canadian schoolchildren were in their day.

Summer sped on all too quickly to its climax. The seine boats had been bringing in herring, but "the big run" had not yet come through. Every day I would hear Franklin and Father and Uncle Newt discussing the weather, the tides, the possibilities, all mysteries to me. Then one late afternoon Father and Newt came back from a scouting trip in the *Montague* and Father came into the store. "Find Mitch, Daughter, and tell him to run over to Latouche. I promised Dr. Anderson that if I possibly could I'd let him see the big herring run, and I think tonight is going to be the big night."

Mitch brought young Dr. Anderson back with him about eight o'clock. Franklin and all four seine boats had already set off in various directions. Newt had the *Montague* ready at the

*Margaret's older brother, Franklin Thomas, posing in a borrowed kilt for a masquerade party to celebrate the end of the fishing season. Franklin was foreman of the plant.*







First Annual Picnic Franklin Packing Co. Elmerington Island Aug. June 30" 1918

front of the dock. I was there. Father laughed: "I figured I didn't need to tell you to be ready!"

It was late August, thus nearly dark when we slid out of the bay, and almost immediately there was the full moon coming up. There was something strange about the water. All of us except Newt were in the open stern cockpit, watching. Father said, "Look down into the water."

"It's soda pop!" I exclaimed, "there are bubbles; it's fizzing!"

"Yes, it's fizzing because it is so full of herring — can you see them now?"

Yes, we could, but how could there possibly be that many herring in the whole world?

That was an unforgettable night. We traveled to all the seine boats. They were all pulling in full seines. Down in Elrington Passage the *Loyal* had already filled her hold, and Franklin was there. There was great shouting and consultation as we came up as close to her as we could. "Just look at this scene," said the young doctor. "Boats, men, nets, moonlight and fish. I wouldn't have missed this for anything."

After a little while the doctor and I realized that the *Montague* was about to tie onto a seine full of herring and try to tow it to a small cove two miles up the channel, where it could be secured

and left until some boats unloaded in the morning and came back to get it. How carefully Newt put the motor to slow speed ahead, how slowly we moved; at first we could not be sure we were moving at all; Father and Newt together at the wheel, Dr. Anderson and I in the stern, watching the shore which was so close to us, watching the outline of a tree against the moonlit sky. Yes, we passed that one, we are moving, and all those barrels of fish coming along behind us. It was by now about 1 A.M. Father came back with a small dip net in hand, leaned over the stern, scooped up half a dozen herring, killed them, cleaned them, handed them to me. "Here you are, Daughter, the fire's going in the galley. Time for our mug-up."

Have you ever cooked fish that fresh? They danced around in the pan while they were fried — but in a few minutes they were delectable food, with hot cocoa, Norwegian toast, and jam. All the while our valiant little *Montague* moved her burden, inch by inch, into the little cove.

It was about 4 A.M. when Father and I climbed the stairs to the staff rooms. Relieved of its heavy task, the *Montague* had sped over the glassy water to Latouche and delivered the doctor back to his duties. Now for a few hours sleep before I had to open the store.

*The social highlight of the summers was a joint picnic with the San Juan Packing Company, when seine boats would load up people from both plants for a day on a fine long beach. Baseball games, foot races, sack races, potato races and eating filled the happy Sunday.*

A night to remember, and nearly the end of that happy summer.

And nearly the end of an era in Alaska's history, too. A way of life stormy, hard and exhausting, fraught with success and with failure, tintured by greed and ambition, swayed by the mysterious ways of fish between joy and disappointment.

But for me, something to remember — the beautiful bays and inlets and channels, the forests and the green slopes dotted with flowers, the whales and the puffins and the auklets. All these I think are still there.

The boats and the docks and the buildings, the sturdy Scottish and Scandinavian people, Scottie at the end of the dock on those summer evenings with his bagpipes; the flaming tar barrels, the picnics, and the fun and the dancing and the laughter and the hard work, the boys and the girls, in love and out of love — all these are gone.

But I remember and am thankful that I knew them all. □