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Margaret Murie

November 13, 1988

Susan McInnis, interviewer.

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Series: Sunday at Noon

Susan introduces Margaret Murie who came to Fairbanks when she was nine years old.

Margaret Murie talked about leaving on the steamer, Jefferson, in 1911 to come to Alaska. Gus Nord was the captain of the steamer. They had a banquet every night with everyone dressing up. During the day she was free to run around and play. She thinks a nine year old child is very observant. She remembers every part of her trip. They came into Dawson in 1911. It was a very busy place at that time. The steamer they transferred to was a large sternwheeler. They traveled to St. Michael. She described the boats. Susan quotes from Margaret Murie's book. Margaret said everyone discovered that it was going to be a big adventure. They had to accept new ways of life. Mining was the thing in Alaska.

She said Fairbanks was a little town in central Alaska surrounded by wilderness. They lived at the edge of town on Bonniefield. They had a four room log cabin. She used to walk from her house through a birch woods to the river. There was a slaughterhouse and a dog pound near the river. Dogs were strictly controlled. She said Wyoming is more free and easy.

Susan asked about Front Street. Margaret said there were about twenty-three saloons in a seven block area. There was a dock where the sternwheelers came in. The NC Company was on Front Street and behind that was the power plant. They furnished steam heat for some of the buildings in town. Northern Commercial had groceries, hardware and a stage line. The other stage line was run by Mr. Orr. When she was 15 she traveled on the Northern Company stage line.

Susan asked about living in Fairbanks. Margaret talked about the modern conveniences in town now. She is impressed with how modern the campus is. She wondered what the town would have looked like if it had only men in it. The woman set the pattern for life in Fairbanks. There was an occupation for every day and it helped dealing with life in Fairbanks. Most houses had a cupboard where you put perishables and they froze. She described wash day. Most of the wells were very mineralized. The water man would deliver good water. The water barrel was stored in the kitchen. They would catch rainwater in the summer.

Susan asked about berry collection. Margaret said after the first frost was on the cranberries they would pick them. They stored the berries in a shallow box in the rain barrel. The cranberries would freeze and they had them all winter. She described her mother cooking with cranberries. Blueberries were put up in

barrels and stored in a mining shaft until everything froze and they were then stored in the cellar. They stored them with sugar. Margaret said summer was berry picking time.

Susan asked about winter in early Fairbanks. Margaret said it was cold. She remembers it was 50 below for three weeks one year. She had to stay at home when it was that cold even though the school never shut down. She remembers walking to school and just seeing an orange glow in the sky. They had the lights on until ten in the morning and then they were turned them back on at two in the afternoon. There was only one school in town. The grammar school and high school were in one building with a bell tower on top. Mr. Gertz was the janitor. He would ring a hand bell when it was nine in the morning.

Susan asked about restrictions on her as far as the parts of town she had to avoid. Margaret said that Second Ave had the NC power plant and it was very noisy. She has always been sensitive to noise. Fourth Ave was the red light district which was restricted. Usually she traveled with her dog, Major. He was a well-trained dog. The skating rink was right below the bridge. Children were special in town. There were a lot of unattached men that didn't have families. Sometimes she was given money for candy. The smallest coin around was a quarter. Dimes and nickels were called chicken feed and not considered worth anything. Some of the merchants didn't even keep the small coins.

Susan asked about the conglomeration of miners, gamblers, bankers and ladies of the street. Margaret said when there was an emergency it didn't matter. Other times the woman set the standard in the community. Women had a lot to do. They were given stature in the community. Women could enter any business they chose. It was an interesting community spirit. It still exists today.

Susan asked about fires. Margaret said the fires usually happened when it was cold. It was very serious. It was usually a hotel or bar. There was a big fire that burned out the middle of Fairbanks. Their next door neighbor, Jessie Rust was an engineer at the power plant and would always start running when the fire bell rang. They would pump water out of the river. The pump would start as soon as there was a fire. The whole town would listen to the pump working. Sometimes the pump would stop. Right next to the school house was the wood yard. They used the wood for the power plant. When the wood wasn't working well enough to run the pumps during a fire they threw in bacon to get it hotter.

Susan asked about March 12, 1914. Margaret said the railroad bill had passed congress. Wickersham had a twenty-two hour filibuster. They had wireless at that time and the news came in right away. There was immediate celebration. The Healy River coal mines could now be connected to Fairbanks. There was a band and parade. Fairbanks could now be connected to the rest of the world. It was the end of the Valdez trail by horse drawn sleighs. Now the automobile is prevalent and the trail is a big highway.

Susan asked about her trip out in 1918. Margaret said she was on the last NC Company sleigh over the Valdez trail. She talked about her trip. In the middle of winter it was a snowy highway. They had charcoal burners to keep your feet warm and wolf skin robes. In the early spring the trail was breaking up and they had to travel at night when everything was frozen. She was in a double ender sled. It was in May and warming up. They went out to Salcha Roadhouse which was run by George Hiller and his new wife from Germany. The next stop was in Delta. They had to cross the Tanana as it was melting. She had to climb up on top of the load and hold onto a rope. The last few feet the horses had to swim and made

it to the bank. It was the driver's last time on the sleigh, too. They didn't want to leave Alaska and some of them joined the military.

Susan asked about people not wanting to leave Alaska. Margaret said there is a freedom of expression in Alaska. It makes an atmosphere of freedom to live every day. She now lives in Jackson Hole and there is a similar feeling. The land becomes important. She said Alaska is the last treasure of wilderness that we will have in the United States and we need to be careful with it. There may be other hidden treasures in the wilderness such as medical cures. Her husband had tuberculosis that was cured by a natural compound found in a bird's saliva – the honey guide. The planet should be treated better.

Susan asked about returning to Fairbanks and meeting Olaus Murie. A friend of hers introduced them. Olaus was working for the Biological Service. Jesse Rust had already made plans to introduce them. Olaus was working with caribou. Margaret said it was the best idea that Jesse Rust ever had. Olaus, Margaret and Jesse went on a long trip to Old Crow together for the summer. The mosquitoes were bad. They had netting over the baby all the time. She described going through the rapids. They honeymooned on the Koyukuk River to Alatna. The dogs were shipped up before they arrived. They met Otto Geist in Nulato. Her husband was collecting specimens for the National Museum and studying caribou. They collected when the boat would stop for wood. He skinned out the animals on the boat deck.

Susan commented about her different life. Margaret said she was used to dog teams and living on the edge of the wilderness. In Wyoming she meets with Smithsonian touring groups and gives lectures on Alaska. Her brother-in-law was Adolph Murie. Her husband did graduate work at Michigan but didn't finish all of his requirements. He was later given an honorary doctorate at Pacific University.

Susan asked about their work in Jackson Hole. Margaret said they moved to Jackson Hole, Wyoming in 1927 to study the Jackson Hole elk herd. They have about 15,000 elk and they were dying of a disease until Olaus discovered the problem. They now have an elk refuge in Jackson Hole and the elk stay there in the winter. The elk used to go out into the desert and have been pushed into the mountains. Their whole family would go out into the elk summer range. Eventually Olaus Murie ran the Wilderness Society. By that time the Survey didn't have research problems for Olaus. Olaus didn't want to live in the city and he was given a chance to work part-time and for the Wilderness Society and was able to stay in Wyoming. There was always some wilderness to save. She talked about saving the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. They returned to Alaska in 1956 with others to look at the area. They were on the Sheenjek River. It was designated in 1960 as a wildlife range. More area has been added with the Alaska Land Act.

Susan asked about a quote from the book about wilderness in Alaska. Margaret said she still has hope for the future. There are now forty-two conservation groups in Alaska. The people are beginning to take responsibility for what happens to their environment. She hopes peoples will see the value of saving the land. She hopes even if people don't visit and see a wilderness they still want to know that it is there.