

1000 MILES BY DOGSLED: The Journeys of Mary Joyce

OVER SEVENTY YEARS before Sarah Palin became Alaska's most recognized woman, Mary Joyce was making headlines. Best known for her thousand mile dogsled trek between Juneau and Fairbanks, Alaska in 1935, Mary Joyce was also a nurse, stewardess, lodge operator, bush plane pilot, radio operator and barkeeper. After her famous trip, Mary Joyce became an important and well-loved figure in Alaska who was regularly invited to speeches and ceremonies throughout the U.S.

Mary Joyce was born on a remote farm outside Baraboo, Wisconsin probably in 1899. Throughout her life, Mary tended to be evasive about her exact age and requested her tombstone read "Arrived in Alaska 1929." Mary's mother committed suicide when she was very young. Raised by her aunt and uncle in nearby Reedsburg, Wisconsin with several cousins, Mary was remembered for her love of adventure.

After high school, Mary went on to receive a nursing degree in Chicago. In 1928, Mary and some friends took off on a motor tour heading west approximately along what would later become the famous Route 66. Drawn by the glamour of the growing movie industry, their final destination was Hollywood. Mary found work as a nurse in the first aid station at Paramount Studios and later at Hollywood Hospital where she would meet the Smiths who would lead her to Alaska.

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 Alaska's Inside Passage in their private yacht. Hack was a World War I veteran who suffered from alcoholism and other post-war health issues. After visiting Twin Glacier Camp during this trip, Mrs. Smith decided to buy the property. The lodge, accessible only by air or water, was located 40 miles south of Juneau on the banks of the Taku River. Mrs. Smith decided to put Hack in charge of her new acquisition in part because its remote location was far from any source of alcohol.

Mary Joyce was hired to stay on as a housekeeper and Hack's nurse but quickly took on other duties. The Hank and Mary stayed on at the lodge year round developing the property. Each spring, Hank's mother sailed north on her yacht to deliver a boatload of supplies. Mary developed many outdoor skills including catching, cleaning and smoking the hundreds of pounds of salmon the lodge's Huskie sled dogs needed through the long winter. Some thought Hack and Mary were romantically involved but they never married and Mary remained single throughout her life.

When Hack died in 1934, the Smiths deeded the lodge to Mary which by then had grown to include 14 buildings, 15 sled dogs, and three head of cattle. Joyce turned the camp into a tourist resort with lodging to accommodate 30 guests and gave it a new name: Taku Lodge.

Following Hack's death, Mary kept busy entertaining guests at the lodge and directing day-to-day operations. She also accepted an offer from Pacific Alaska Airways to coordinate their twice-weekly run from Juneau to Fairbanks becoming the first female radio operator in Alaska.

It was also during this time, according to recently published notes, Mary started to think about tackling a solo dog sledding trip. Mary recorded some of the feedback she got when she announced her intention: "But you can't do that, there are mountains



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**Is there any reason why a woman
shouldn't be as capable as a man?**

- Mary Joyce

continued...

1000 MILES BY DOGSLED, CONT'D.

or something you can't get over. Anyway it's no place for a woman." Mary recorded further "Thus man disposes of woman. That settled, I went quietly about my business of getting ready."

In December of 1935, Mary set out on a dog sledding trek with native guides, as a representative for the city of Juneau to the Fairbanks Winter Carnival. The rate of her progress slowed when she became ill en route, causing the public to fear for her safety. Three hundred miles from Fairbanks and realizing she would not complete the trek in time, Mary flew to the Winter Carnival but later returned to her sled and completed the mush after the event. For this effort she was awarded a Silver Cup from the city and a rare "Honorary Member" title from the Pioneers of Alaska. Her story attracted national media attention.

Despite her new celebrity status, Mary returned to work at Taku Lodge. It wasn't long though before she was drawn to a new adventure when she took up flying, becoming one of the first female pilots in Alaska. Her career as a bush pilot, however, was cut short when she accidentally collided with a boat. Mary did better with her next endeavor as an airline stewardess, as only certified nurses were eligible for hire at the time. While traveling the Seattle-Alaska route as a stewardess for Pan-American Airlines, Taku Lodge remained Mary's home base.

Mary's experience with running dogs proved useful during World War II, when the U.S. Navy commissioned her to haul radio equipment by dog team. As the war progressed and the threat of Japanese invasion seemed imminent, she sold the Taku Lodge and moved to Juneau. During the war years, she returned to nursing, caring for patients at St. Ann's Hospital. After the war, Mary purchased the Top Hat Bar and the Lucky Lady in Juneau, where she entertained her customers with tales of her adventures.

In 1950, Joyce ran as a Democrat for the office Alaskan Territorial Representative. Although she lost the election, Mary became a prominent figure in Alaska and a fixture at any major event. In 1976, she died following the second of two heart attacks.

Mary's beloved Taku Lodge continues to be a popular shore excursion for cruise-ship passengers and has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Taku Glacier Lodge draws thousands of visitors each year and contains much of Joyce's memorabilia, including the dogsled she used on her famous thousand-mile journey. ❖

SOURCES: *Mary Joyce: Taku to Fairbanks, 1,000 Miles by Dogteam*, Mary Anne Greiner, AuthorHouse, 2007. *Taku*. Karen Bill and Janet Shelfer, Will Publishing, Alabama, 2006. www.Litsite.org