

By Sherry Simpson

**Photos By
Clark James Mishler**



DEFENDERS OF THE LAND

Ginny Wood looks through a screen in June during a trip to Camp Denali, which she founded with friend Celia Hunter. The women were photographed together [INSET] in 1992, a decade before Hunter's death. "We quarreled some. We laughed a lot," Wood said. "We did a lot of things together that we couldn't have done separately."

LOVE OF ALASKA

INSPIRED GINNY WOOD AND CELIA HUNTER

TO CREATE THE STATE'S CONSERVATION MOVEMENT

GINNY HILL WOOD GAZES THROUGH THE BUS WINDOW at the rolling panorama of Denali National Park and Preserve. All the way to Kantishna, she remembers not just landmarks, but her life here: the mountains where she hiked with clients; the slope of a long-ago bear encounter; the valley where she saw 12,000 caribou.

Even at 84, Ginny's eyesight remains keen enough to spot a distant cluster of Dall sheep.

On her way to Camp Denali to celebrate the lodge's 50th anniversary with former employees, she has brought along the ashes of her oldest friend, Celia Hunter. Together they've traveled many long distances—as war-trained pilots, as unquenchable young women tramping the world, as co-founders of Camp Denali, as Alaska's most stouthearted conservationists.

In a way, Ginny and Celia invented a new kind of Alaskan. They fought nationally for wilderness and cared deeply for unnamed trails and unbroken meadows near their Fairbanks cabins. They were fiercely self-sufficient, yet great believers in community. They loved the solitude of backcountry and the companionship of others, adored speed but treasured stillness. They listened but were not afraid to speak up. They felt at home in the mountains and happy in their gardens.

And now Ginny Wood is taking Celia Hunter back to the beginning—or one beginning, anyway.



It's not easy to untangle two lives that braided like a river down the same valley, each fork finding its own way. Much is fast becoming fixed into legend, especially since that morning last December when Ginny found Celia curled up on her bedroom floor, as if she had lain down to nap. Memorials and remembrances followed, recalling enough stories to fill a book. They should have, except Ginny and Celia were too independent to collaborate on writing it.

During the Camp Denali celebration, Ginny tells chapter after chapter of their lives. After spirited childhoods in the rural Northwest, each woman discovered flying and joined the

Women Airforce Service Pilots to ferry fighter planes during World War II. They met after the war, heading north to deliver two Stinsons from Seattle to Fairbanks, a 30-hour trip stretched by winter into 27 days. After landing on Jan. 1, 1947, they remained to fly cargo and work for a budding tourist agency. In 1948 they traveled to Europe, and the hunger and destruction they witnessed led to disillusionment with America's "complacency and smugness," as Celia said. Alaska seemed their only refuge, and they settled permanently in 1948.

"If I were in my 20s now I don't know where I would go," she said later. "I don't think the adventures we had will ever be repeated in Alaska."

They created their own adventures. In 1950, Ginny married Morton "Woody" Wood, a Denali Park ranger. At the suggestion of Park Superintendent Grant Pearson, the trio bought land on a ridge overlooking Wonder Lake. The mountain was clouded, so they asked a friend to return on a clear day and assess the view.

"We got a postcard from him that said one word: 'Wow!'" Ginny said. Camp Denali began in 1952 as a few wall tents offering an unparalleled view and the opportunity to explore the backcountry. "We didn't really think it through then," Ginny admitted. "We weren't going to feed people. They were just going to come and play, and we'd play with them."

The first clients were three Juneau women who, oddly enough, wanted to eat. So Celia cooked on the ground using a Primus stove. "This hadn't been in our plans, but we learned our first lesson about Camp Denali—it had a life of its own, and we had best go with it," Celia wrote later.

The adventurous somehow found their way there, and if they were willing to work hard, they could stay. Ginny once



Celia Hunter [FAR LEFT] poses with Ginny and her husband, Morton Wood, near Camp Denali in 1952, the year that the trio opened the camp as one of the world's first eco-tourism lodges.

Wood takes in the view from a Camp Denali cache [RIGHT]. "You're never going to replace Ginny and Celia," said Deborah Williams of the Alaska Conservation Foundation.

COURTESY OF CAMP DENALI

told Liz Berry, their first camp cook, "We've got too many people. We only hired five and we've got 20!"

Berry, a well-known Fairbanks potter, said the women were extremely capable people who, despite having "night and day" personalities, spent so much time together they acted like an old married couple. "One would finish the other's sentence, and the other would say, 'Well, if you say so.'"

They had an unforgettable effect on their young staff. "I never knew women could speak their minds," said Nancy Simmerman. Alison Claus remembers how Celia once marched up to a group of miners and took away their guns because weapons weren't allowed within the park.

Formidable. Unflappable. Fearless. That's how people regarded Celia. And Ginny was creative and farsighted. "Ginny had a vision for things, whether it was a trail or the camp," Berry said.

They didn't always agree, but they made a good team. "Celia's slogan was, 'I can do anything Ginny thinks up.' I was the dreamer," Ginny said. Ginny's motto later became, "I can do anything Celia will help me do."

One fall, a bear trashed several buildings and burned down the warehouse ("We kept strike-anywhere matches above the jam," Ginny explained), but no one considered shooting the bear just for being a bear. The camp newsletter pointed out:

"This is what we like about Alaska. The land, the climate, the elements are neither for you nor against you. They are just there, and how you measure up to the challenge of coping with them is the true measure of yourself—not how you manipulate others."

Camp Denali occupied only part of their year. Log cabins they'd built on a hill near Fairbanks became the warm focus of a neighborhood known as "Dogpatch." Ginny ran a guiding business, Tundra Treks, and gave birth to a daughter, Romany. Ginny and Woody eventually divorced.

As one of the world's first eco-tourism lodges, Camp Denali never stopped growing in vision or reality. In 1975, the partners decided to find buyers with similar ideals. To protect it from major development, they sold it with no down payment to Wally and Jerri Cole, Denali residents who would preserve its philosophy and atmosphere.

"And you can see it's still here," Ginny pointed out.

Then they could concentrate on protecting wilderness. Ginny once wrote that the "conservation movement in Alaska then was not something you joined, it was something you started." In 1959, while lobbying to establish the forerunner of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, they formed a conservation group for Alaskans, "because always we heard, 'We don't like Outside

conservation groups telling us how to live in Alaska," Ginny said. "We got mad at the Sierra Club, too, sometimes when they told us what to do."

Of 11 people who met at Ginny's cabin, eight were scientists. "We could go to a hearing and wow them because we got our facts straight," she recalled.

Eight years later, the Alaska Conservation Society had 750 members. The group fought the Project Chariot proposal to use nuclear blasts to excavate a harbor near Point Hope. It publicized economic and ecological flaws in the Rampart Dam project that would have flooded seven Native villages under a reservoir larger than Lake Erie. It raised questions during construction of the trans-Alaska oil pipeline and helped shape the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. It has become part of Celia's legend that the night before she died, she was writing letters to urge U.S. senators to vote against oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

But longtime friend Libby Hatton said Ginny and Celia were equally engaged in local issues, "maybe especially the smaller ones—saving a trail here or a park there."

Their honesty, hard work, passion and humor made them indomitable, said Deborah Williams, executive director of the Alaska Conservation Foundation (co-founded by Hunter in 1980). In the 1970s, when land issues

were critical, Celia served for more than a year as interim executive director of the Wilderness Society, and for seven years on the Joint Federal-State Land Use Planning Commission. Ginny still serves on a state advisory board on recreational access and contributes to grassroots efforts.

Friends say it was easy to underestimate the two diminutive women in their Nordic sweaters, and Celia in her trademark braids. At her memorial, Larry Mayo recalled their appearance at a hearing.

"Celia came to the podium with tennis shoes on and said, 'I'm one of those little old women in tennis shoes.'" Ginny followed—also wearing tennis shoes.

Because they liked people, people liked them, Williams said. (Celia was memorialized not only for her accomplishments but as a "world-class giggler.")

"It was really hard for the other side to plow them down," Williams said. "What are you going to do when you have Ginny's or Celia's sparkling eyes looking at you? The other side had to reckon with them."

For decades, they testified, wrote letters and published widely. Celia produced columns for the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* and *Alaska* magazine, and Ginny continues writing for the Northern Alaska Environmental Center's newsletter. They received major environmental awards, including the first Lifetime Achievement Award from the Alaska Conservation Foundation. Ginny has an ecotourism award named after her.

"You're never going to replace Ginny and Celia," Williams said. "It's sort of like someone leaves a job and they have to hire three or four people to take their place and still it doesn't have the same feel about it. Because they've inspired so many people, there are people to do the work. But I don't think that we're ever going to be able to replace their specialness. People like that are so rare. And we were just fortunate to have them in Alaska at the right time."

The two are linked in the public eye,

but Ginny insists, "We've lived separate lives." Celia shined publicly. Ginny, though considered a fine speaker and eloquent writer, prefers working behind the scenes, pondering and choosing words carefully. Celia surrendered her ham radio for e-mail, while Ginny not only resists computers but refused to haul a mobile phone into the garden to take messages for Celia.

"Celia enjoyed being in front without being obnoxious about it, without being a gloryhound, and I'd just as soon be in the background," Ginny said. "She was a competitive person—fair, but she liked a good fight."



Two women who loved flying fast planes were hard to slow down. Ginny guided in the Brooks Range for many years before trading her backpack for a raft. Both loved cross-country skiing. Mark Berry, who spent summers at Camp Denali as a child, shook his head as he remembered visiting the octogenarians at home a few years ago. He found Celia hauling a gas-powered weed trimmer on her back and Ginny on hands and knees, tilling the garden.

"It dawned on me, 'These are not normal people. This is a different breed,'" he said.

Celia traveled so much that, for the sake of convenience, she eventually sold her cabin and moved into Ginny's base-

ment. Ginny nurtured the garden, and Celia was the electrician and chain sawyer. They shared breadmaking.

"I used to always think my bread was better than hers, and it isn't," Ginny said.

In her Northern Line newsletter column, Ginny wrote that she misses Celia's bursts of laughter, "insufferable cheerfulness so early on dark, bleak days," and undaunted attitude.

"We quarreled some. We laughed a lot. We did a lot of things together we couldn't have done separately," she said. "In physical things, she'd pick up that end and I'd pick up the other end without ever saying, 'You do this and I'll do that.'"

The pioneer conservationists always cultivated hope through hard work. In a radio interview days before her death, Celia made a bequest to the next generation: "I think what I'd like to leave with people your age is the idea that change is possible, but you're going to have to put your energy into it."

And Ginny said that though she is sometimes disappointed in the world's prospects, she believes even a small group of people can make a difference. She should know.



Celia's friends gather on Cranberry Ridge to remember her and others with deep connections at Camp Denali. Some things have changed

here in a half-century. Log cabins replaced the tents. The food is gourmet. Trees thrive in the windbreaks. What's timeless is this veil of bird song, the delicate tundra flowers, the grand landscape.

As the group scatters ashes and lays stones for a cairn, the clouds evaporate, and the Great One appears, just in time. Nobody is surprised.

"Things always went Celia's way," says Libby Hatton. "Why not now?"

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