

DAVE KLEIN, '53

By Sam Bishop

Historical photos courtesy of Dave Klein

Dave Klein bought a used Model A Ford in spring 1947 so he could drive from Connecticut to Alaska. His biggest challenge wasn't geographic. The Ford's engine was in pieces.

Klein put the engine together, and, trusting his novice wrench work, drove the car with a buddy across the freezing Great Plains of Canada and up the newly opened Alaska Highway to Fairbanks.

After spending the winter in Fairbanks, Klein found his mechanical home schooling handy the next summer. While driving back to the Lower 48, he and a friend had to replace a decapitated piston in tiny, remote Fort Nelson, B.C.

The only auto shop was closed when Klein coaxed the Model A into town on three good cylinders, the fourth smoking like a locomotive. Residents said the shop owner could be found in a particular cabin, where he was on a drunk.

"He was, but it was a planned drunk apparently," Klein recalled. The inebriated garage owner granted permission to use his outdoor ramp, so Klein and his friend went to work under the elevated car.

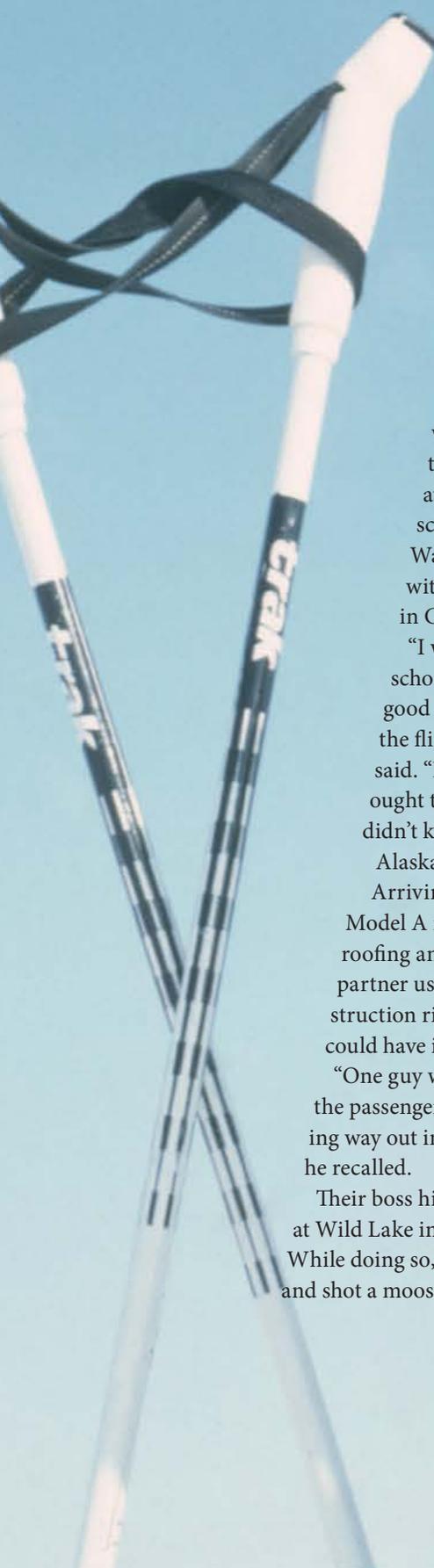
"It was right in the middle of mosquito season. We didn't have anything but citronella or something, and it wasn't very good," Klein said. "Your hands were all greasy and you ended up in a pretty bad way afterward."

The repaired vehicle survived until Spokane, Wash., where he sold it for bus fare home to Connecticut.

The cold, the mosquitoes and challenges of traveling in the North didn't discourage Klein, and he gladly returned in 1951 to enroll at the University of Alaska in wildlife management.

Despite a few additional challenges, he's still there, now as a professor emeritus, and hundreds of graduate-level biology students who followed in his footsteps are grateful to have benefited from his guidance. Klein retired 17 years ago at the age of 71, but he keeps an office at the Arctic Health Research Building that overflows with documents, memorabilia, awards and wildlife curiosities that include

Dave Klein during a field trip on the Seward Peninsula in late winter of 1982.



three African porcupine quills the size of knitting needles. From that office and a home off Yankovich Road just north of the Fairbanks campus ski trails, he consults with graduate students, conducts research and prods policymakers about Alaska's wildlife and their habitats.

Klein grew up in New England, a "country kid" who always felt drawn to the woods. He briefly attended flight training school at the end of World War II, then landed a job with a state forestry crew in Connecticut.

"I wasn't a very good high school student, and I wasn't too good with the math required by the flight training program," he said. "I knew that I ultimately ought to go to the university, but I didn't know what to do."

Alaska resolved that uncertainty.

Arriving in Fairbanks with the Model A in June 1947, Klein found roofing and siding work. He and a partner used the car as their construction rig, an arrangement that could have inspired a *Three Stooges* skit.

"One guy would hold the ladder on the passenger side and it would be sticking way out in the front and in the back," he recalled.

Their boss hired them to build a cabin at Wild Lake in the Brooks Range that fall. While doing so, they fished for lake trout and shot a moose and a few Dall sheep.

"I fell in love with Alaska," Klein said. "And by this time I realized there was a wildlife management field and that's probably what I should strive for."

No such program existed yet at the University of Alaska, but Klein ended up on campus anyway. The Fairbanks Experiment Farm, a federally funded station run by the university, needed someone to milk its dairy herd, and Klein got the job.

"So I got familiar with the university here, and that was so nice. It was so small. I took all kinds of courses that I wouldn't have otherwise, and the cost was almost nil."

As spring 1948 approached, though, he resolved to return to the States to pursue his education. He had found the focus that would sustain his career for decades to come: Alaska's wildlife.

So he pointed the ill-fated Model A southward as soon as a spring flood had cleared. Arriving home, he enrolled in the University of Connecticut, found another milking job to pay for it and graduated in three years with a bachelor's degree in zoology and wildlife.

"I was dedicated, and then I became a good student. I had motivation," he said.

Meanwhile, the University of Alaska created the Alaska Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit on the Fairbanks campus in 1950. The federal government paid for the unit leader's salary, and the university provided the offices and faculty status for the leader, an arrangement that continues today.

The unit's first leader invited Klein to enroll in the master's program, which he did. Ten years later, after a job as a federal biologist in Southeast Alaska and a brief stint with the new Alaska Department of Fish and Game, he was running the unit and finishing up his PhD.

In the midst of this busy career, Klein married a Petersburg schoolteacher named Arlayne, and they began a family. Though she and Klein divorced in the 1970s, she remarried (with the last name Knox) and also still lives in Fairbanks. Their children are Martin, who works as the auxiliary and contract services manager at UAF; Peggy, of Homer; and Laura, of Seattle.

After becoming the cooperative wildlife unit leader in 1962, Klein spent the next 35 years there. He moved to the position of senior scientist in 1992 when the wildlife unit merged with the fisheries unit. He retired in 1997.

Throughout those years, his primary job was advising graduate students as they worked on master's and doctoral degrees. He counts 66 students who completed such degrees under his direct tutelage. Their theses sit in his office bookshelves today.

Klein's students feel lucky to be part of his legacy.

Bob Ritchie, who received a master's degree from UAF in 1976, said Klein obviously loved to study large mammals, but "he could be just as inviting and engaging with a project like mine, which was a land plan for the upper Yukon."

They traveled together along the upper Yukon River during the study. Ritchie was hooked.

"He was the reason that I stayed at the University of Alaska," Ritchie said.

Pat Valkenburg, a retired Fish and Game biologist, estimated that Klein sat on the thesis committees of hundreds of other students. That's how they first met when he was studying for his master's degree in the mid-1970s.

"He loved to take students on field trips, and I loved to go along," Valkenburg said.

Ken Whitten, who earned his master's degree studying Dall sheep in Denali National Park and Preserve in the early 1970s, said Klein often tried to combine field research with another passion — skiing.

"It was virtually a sure thing that if you had any field work to do, Dave would come out to help, and suggest that we do it

on cross-country skis," said Whitten, now retired from Fish and Game.

Maria Berger, who studied bison under Klein's guidance for her 1996 master's degree, recalled a spring ski trip into the mountains near Cantwell.

"He, in his 70s, was outpacing us graduate students," she said.

Rod Boertje, who researched caribou in Denali during the late 1970s and early '80s for his master's degree, said Klein would often come along on field trips.

"I think that's what he lived for. He wasn't one of those couch potato kind of professors," Boertje said.

The trips weren't always for research. Often, they were just to have fun, to hunt or to build a cabin or tent frame to make the next trip more comfortable. Decades ago, Klein, students and friends created a primitive stone cabin above treeline on a ridge overlooking the upper Chena River drainage.

"We had pretty good fun building it and staying in it," Valkenburg said of the cabin.

Berger said snowdrifts would bury the cabin in the winter. Visitors had to know where to dig to find the door. When a





◀ In 1987, Dave Klein and a Danish wildlife technician work in northern Greenland to fit muskoxen with satellite collars.

Lower left: Klein's students take a grazing ecology field trip near Cantwell in March 1975. Among them is Dan Roby, far left, who now is wildlife unit leader for the cooperative fish and wildlife research unit at Oregon State University.

Below: Dave Klein at his home earlier this year.

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large group visited, some would camp in tents, braving intense winds. The cabin was snug and quiet, "while to the people up in the tent, it felt like the wrath of God was descending upon them," Berger recalled.

Klein's abilities and his generosity with his personal life draw lasting admiration from his students, even those he has ended up opposing in

contentious debates about wildlife management.

Klein served on a National Research Council panel that in 1997 said Alaska's ongoing efforts to cull wolf and bear populations in certain areas weren't supported by enough science. One criticism mirrored Klein's long-term problem with state management in general: "Data on habitat quality are inadequate" to know whether the land can support more moose and caribou when predators are culled.

Boertje was the state's most prolific researcher on the topic during his 31 years with Fish and Game. UAF granted him an honorary doctorate this year, with Klein's endorsement.

Boertje said the state's studies showed "pretty conclusively" that predator control can be done well. Valkenburg, who spent 26 years as a state biologist and then served two years as deputy





Dave Klein, then a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, looks at a reindeer shot in 1957 as part of a study on St. Matthew Island in the Bering Sea. The reindeer at the time were very healthy. This one weighed 400 pounds. Within a few years, the reindeer herd had overgrazed the island and the population crashed. Today, there are no reindeer on the island.

commissioner starting in 2009, said the efficacy of predator control was clear by 1997. “Now it’s much more so,” he said.

With so many connections to the state’s wildlife managers, Klein acknowledged that he sometimes feels conflicted.

“The hard part for me is, when I disagree with where Fish and Game is going, I don’t want to come down hard on them because their staff are top-notch,” he said.

Klein said he believes state policymakers too often overlook the less obvious benefits of predators. Research on the Kenai Peninsula, for example, links healthy moose with abundant bears.

“They’re partners with the salmon in spreading the marine nutrients around in the system, which makes for good habitat for moose and other wildlife,” Klein said. “Why are the moose so big? Why do you have big antlers? It’s the damn salmon.”

Klein’s students admire his enthusiastic curiosity about such relationships and the sharp field skills that lead him to pose interesting questions.

Martha Kopplin, who earned a master’s degree in 1981, recently retired from UAF, where she was involved in introducing K-12 students to science. The job reinforced her view that alert observation is the key to good science. “I have to credit Dave for that,” she said.

Klein’s former students marvel that his keen senses function fully even when he appears to be asleep, a condition sometimes provoked by Friday afternoon seminars.



Dave Klein sits in his office in the Arctic Health Research Building on the Fairbanks campus in June. He is surrounded by decades of collected books, papers, photographs and memorabilia. Master’s and doctoral thesis papers written by the 66 graduate students he advised fill one shelf on the far wall. Hundreds of slides taken during his personal and professional activities, which have brought him to Portugal, Russia, Greenland and beyond, fill the cabinet behind him.

When the time comes for questions, though, Klein belies the impression.

“His hand would be the first one up, and he would ask this very deep, insightful question, so he had to be aware of your presentation,” Ritchie said.

In March 2000, a few years after Klein retired, former students organized a research symposium in Fairbanks to recognize his contributions. At the end of the conference, Klein offered some remarks.

“We all pretended to fall asleep,” Whitten recalled. Fortunately, Klein enjoyed the prank, he said.

“He brings a lot of life and color to his science, and humor, and that’s wonderful,” said Brian Barnes, director of UAF’s Institute of Arctic Biology.

In the 1980s, Klein and Bob White, another biology professor, were Barnes’ faculty mentors, which meant they bought the beer when they got together, Barnes said.

“I’d sit in the middle of them, and they’d argue,” Barnes said. It was a fine introduction.

“He tells great stories,” Barnes said of Klein. Even if a tale dates back 60 years, “he’ll tell you what the weather was like.”

Barnes credits the strength of today’s cooperative unit to Klein and his legacy. It’s the largest cooperative unit in the country, with five full-time scientists. Many of their former students work for state, federal and private employers in Alaska. Klein, who has spent considerable time in Greenland, Scandinavia and Portugal, also lured numerous students from foreign countries.

“It’s a real nice pipeline,” Barnes said. “And Dave had a big hand in putting it together.”

For example, after graduating, Ritchie helped establish ABR Inc., a biological consulting business headquartered in Fairbanks.

“Seventy-five percent of our senior staff have advanced degrees from UAF, and a number were affiliated with Klein’s regime there,” Ritchie said.

Valkenburg said Klein helped guide hundreds of students to success in their fields.

“He helped to create a very congenial learning environment that was very fun and sociable,” Valkenburg said. “That was his tremendous contribution.”



Highway workers repair an Alaska Highway bridge across a river south of Whitehorse, in Canada’s Yukon, in May 1948. High water that spring washed out parts of the road and its bridges. Dave Klein and a friend had to wait here briefly while driving his Model A back to the Lower 48.

Today, Klein continues as an active member of the Fairbanks campus.

“He’s here at work more days than not and completely engaged both physically and intellectually,” said Barnes, the IAB director. “It’s really incredible.”

Sam Bishop is an editor and writer at Marketing and Communications. Born in Alaska, he worked previously as a newspaper journalist for 27 years in Fairbanks, Anchorage and Washington, D.C.

Web extra: See more of Dave Klein and his exploits at www.uaf.edu/aurora/ and listen to an upcoming interview with him on KUAC FM and www.kuac.org.

Alumni in this story: Maria Berger, '96; Rod Boertje, '81; Dave Klein, '53; Martha Kopplin, '81; Bob Ritchie, '76; Pat Valkenburg, '76; Ken Whitten, '75

Dave Klein stands next to his Model A shortly after he and a friend pushed it through a flooded section of the Alaska Highway in spring 1948. The car stalled during the crossing when the cooling fan kicked water onto the ignition system.

