**Paddlers pay tribute to historic Sheenjek expedition**

By Meghan Murphy

There was a lot of silence as the two friends floated 110 miles south on a remote river in northeastern Alaska in July. But the silence wasn’t between them — it was all around them.

"It was phenomenal,” Stan Havlick said of his trip with Mike Fallon on the Sheenjek River, which flows south from the Brooks Range. “It was way beyond our expectations. We experienced total silence and serenity.”

The two floated the Sheenjek in honor of a 1956 expedition in the river's upper valley that was part of an effort to protect the lands that now comprise the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

The original expedition included their friend, 95-year-old Bob Krear, who recorded the endeavor in motion pictures and photographs. Famed conservationist Margaret Murie helped organize the expedition.

Murie grew up in Fairbanks and in 1924 was the second student to graduate from the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines, now the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The new UAF life sciences building was named in her honor in August 2013.

A new honor will grace the Murie Building’s walls in August 2017. Fallon and Havlick asked Krear’s friend, sculptor Susan Raymond, to create a bronze plaque that portrays the 1956 expedition's five principal members.

“These wild places are becoming fewer, and wildlife is under pressure,” Raymond said. “It was a privilege for me to work on something that shines a light on those people protecting these areas.”

Havlick is a mountaineer and adventurer who has bicycled more than 20,000 miles from coast to coast across six continents to raise funds for the Colorado Cancer Foundation. Fallon is a retired fish culturist from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game who used to stock Alaska’s ponds and lakes.

During their Sheenjek trip, they soaked in a 360-degree landscape with no signs of humans past or present.

“There were so many ‘Wow’ moments,” said Fallon. “It was amazing to pass through and view it all.”

**The expedition**

Havlick first heard of the 1956 expedition from his wife, Margaret, who was reading Murie's autobiographical book, “Two in the Far North.”

Then fate nudged Havlick toward Alaska.

“I met Bob Krear at a nice little dinner party in Colorado,” Havlick said. “Then many months later Bob introduced me to Mike, and that's where the friendship developed. I said to Mike ‘Well, why don’t we canoe the Sheenjek and get up to Last Lake where they spent these wonderful couple of months in 1956 for that initial expedition?’”

All three friends live in Colorado. As Fallon and Havlick prepared for the trip, they listened to Krear’s firsthand accounts of Alaska's Arctic.

“We spent many hours visiting with Bob,” said Fallon. “We enjoyed reminiscing about his life and his contributions to the Murie expedition.”

Krear told them that he met Margaret Murie and her husband Olaus, a wildlife biologist and The Wilderness Society's president, through their son Martin. Krear and Martin Murie had trained together in the U.S. Army’s 10th Mountain Division.

Krear had helped his unit successfully fight the German mountain troops in the northern Apennine Mountains of Italy but turned his eye to biology and cinematography when he returned home.

The Muries asked Krear to be a cinematographer on a 1956 expedition to study the ecosystems of the upper Sheenjek Valley and the importance of keeping those ecosystems intact.

The campaign to protect the area had been underway for several years, but the Muries hoped to strengthen that effort.

The expedition also included University of Alaska ornithologist Brina Kessel and George Schaller, a young university alumnus who became an eminent field biologist and author.

“We were five very different people,” Krear said in a phone interview last month. “When we got up there, Olaus Murie never once told any of us what he wanted us to do. He seemed to realize that we just fall into our own niches, and that's exactly what happened.”

Krear said their work gained the attention of other environmental organizations and the public. Books, articles and movies about it brought the remote part of Alaska to people who likely would never visit it.

Because of these efforts and those of many more people, a part of northeast Alaska gained federal protection in 1960 as the Arctic National Wildlife Range. In 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act designated the range as part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which now encompasses more than 19 million acres.

Kessel and the Muries have since passed away. Krear, who became a wildlife biologist, maintained his friendship with Margaret Murie until she died at 101 years of age.

And although Krear had always wanted to float the Sheenjek, he said he is just as happy to listen to Havlick and Fallon’s own Sheenjek River stories.

**Dedication ceremony**

Raymond, Fallon and Havlick will dedicate the plaque in a public ceremony at 2 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 10, in the Margaret Murie Building, 982 N. Koyukuk Dr. The UAF College of Natural Science and Mathematics and the Institute of Arctic Biology are hosting the event.

For more information, call 907-474-7608 or visit <http://cnsm.uaf.edu/dedication>.

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Cutlines:

*Photo courtesy of the Murie Center*  
Bob Krear took this photograph at a camp near the Sheenjek River in 1956. From left are Brina Kessel, George Schaller, Don “Doc” MacLeod, Mardy Murie and Olaus Murie.

*Photo by Mike Fallon*  
Stan Havlick paddles down the Sheenjek River in July 2017.

*Photo by Mike Fallon*  
A mountain rises above the Sheenjek River in July.

*Photo by Stan Havlick*  
Mike Fallon, a former fish culturist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, displays an arctic grayling caught during a float down the Sheenjek River in July.

*Photo courtesy of the Murie Center*  
George Schaller and a squirrel face off in a camp along the Sheenjek River in 1956.