

# Murie legacy going strong 50 years later

By Steve Duerr | Posted: Wednesday, October 30, 2013 12:15 am

Fifty years ago this month, conservationist Olaus Murie died. Friends planted a tree and erected a memorial at the north end of Jackson. The big yellow willows thrive today just north of the Jackson Hole and Greater Yellowstone Visitor Center on North Cache.

Olaus Memorial Rock sits humbly next to the National Elk Refuge fence and the pond fittingly nicknamed Goose Pew Pond. I imagine Olaus loves the grazing and grooming attention from the geese; the meanderings of the goslings in the spring; the children who romp about, set loose from the car, on summer vacations with their families; and the elk bugling this time of year, enduring sentries in the American wilderness he loved and helped preserve.

His friends inscribed these words on Olaus' Rock: "The plantings in this park are in affectionate memory of Olaus Johan Murie, 1889-1963. Biologist, naturalist, neighbor and friend, defender of wild country, he came to study its elk and this valley became his home. 'Man has need of Wilderness. O.J.M.'"

Olaus and stepbrother Adolph left their prairie home in Minnesota for territorial Alaska in 1921. There they met and eventually married stepsisters Mardy and Louise. What they learned as federal biologists about Alaskan caribou migrations came to play a critical role in the globally significant conservation legacy of Jackson Hole. That history began when Olaus was assigned to study the southern Yellowstone elk migrations in 1927 and led to these amazing accomplishments:

- The biological science-based expansion and success of the National Elk Refuge
- The creation of Grand Teton National Park as we know it today: The park was enlarged, in part due to Olaus' field work, to include the migration corridors and sagebrush plains along the Snake River, with the expansion of the 1929 park into the then locally controversial 1943 Jackson Hole Monument.
- While Olaus was based at the Murie Ranch in Moose, the planning of the 1956 science expedition to Alaska that led the way to the establishment in 1960 of the Arctic Wildlife Range (later the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge)
- The adoption by the U.S. Congress of the Wilderness Act in 1964

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Olaus' first employer, then called the Bureau of Biological Survey) National Conservation Training Center, is located on a beautiful bluff above the Potomac River outside Washington, D.C. Here conservation professionals are inspired by the legacy of previous leaders. At the time the campus was constructed, John Turner of the Triangle X Ranch family was the director of the service. Mardy and Olaus Murie were friends of the Turner family, and John

was inspired as a boy by Olaus' mentoring at the Murie Ranch.

As a tribute to Olaus and the Murie family, four lodges at the National Conservation Training Center are named for national leaders: Rachel Carson, Ding Darling, Aldo Leopold and the Muries. John had a hand in the interior design of the Murie Lodge, which includes a bull elk mount and, nearby, this framed accolade about Olaus at the time he received his 1949 doctorate from Pacific University: "He was a man of the world terrestrial, an authority on its animal life, an interpreter on Nature's art, a student of her design, and an exponent of Wilderness, in terms of the human spirit."

In that context — the spirit of place — Olaus' words from his and Mardy's book "Wapiti Wilderness" are displayed at the entrance to the Craig Thomas Discovery and Visitor Center in Grand Teton National Park: "Jackson Hole is more than a valley with a sky-piercing range of mountains. ... It is a country with a spirit."

Olaus' light dimmed as he became part of the ages on Oct. 21, 1963, but Mardy's light began to shine. Through the heartache and loss, she set off on her solo life path with tenacious commitment and pure passion. After four decades of struggle she became known as the grandmother of the U.S. conservation movement.

In 1998, at age 95, Mardy traveled from Moose to the White House to receive our nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. At the time the film "Arctic Dance" was made about the Muries by Charlie Craighead and Bonnie Kreps, Mardy was about 100 years young.

When Mardy was interviewed by Terry Tempest Williams in the kitchen at the Murie Ranch, Terry asked, "How did you do it? How did you carry on without Olaus and achieve so much hard-won conservation success?"

Mardy's eyes twinkled, then welled up with tears.

"I did it for him," she said.

For information about Olaus and the Murie family, go to [MurieCenter.org](http://MurieCenter.org). Please visit Olaus Memorial Rock on North Cache and the Murie Ranch in Moose.