

JUNE HELM (1924–2004)

June Helm, an anthropologist who worked for 50 years studying the culture and ethnohistory of Dene in the Mackenzie River drainage, has passed away at the age of 79. In declining health for many weeks, she died peacefully in her sleep on 5 February 2004, at home in the company of her husband, Pierce King.

Born in Twin Falls, Idaho, on 13 September 1924, June spent her early years on her family's farm, where she developed a lifelong passion for horses. In 1930, during the height of the Depression, June's family moved to Kansas City, where her father found work as a mechanic-machinist. After high school, June enrolled in anthropology at the University of Kansas, transferring soon after to the University of Chicago (1942). She graduated in 1944 with a PhB in 1944. The two-year PhB program was designed to provide a general education for students wishing to pursue a specialized advanced degree (Ono and Helm, 2002:274).

In 1945 June married Richard S. "Scotty" MacNeish, a Ph.D. candidate in archaeology, and soon after travelled with him to Mexico for his dissertation fieldwork. The next year, June undertook her own master's research in a rural mestizo community in Estado de Tamaulipas, Mexico.

In 1949, Helm and MacNeish moved to Ottawa, Canada. While June worked as a sessional lecturer at Carlton University (1949 to 1959), MacNeish was employed as an archaeologist with the National Museums of Canada. During MacNeish's archaeological fieldwork in the Northwest Territories in the summer of 1950, he learned of a teaching opportunity in the community of Jean Marie River. In 1951, June and her research partner, Teresa Carterette, went to the community as volunteer English teachers, launching a 50-year career in the North. June's work in Jean Marie River (1951–52) formed the basis for her dissertation at the University of Chicago, which granted her a Ph.D. in 1958. She and Scotty MacNeish divorced amicably the same year. (MacNeish died on 16 January 2001, after a car accident near Belize City, Belize. At the age of 82, he was still active in archaeological field research.)

Over the next three decades, June made many trips north (in 1951, 1952, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1959–60, 1967–72, 1974, 1976, and 1979). During these years, she undertook ethnographic research and field excursions along the Yukon and Northwest Territories western Arctic coast, at Jean Marie River, Fort Good Hope, Deline, Fort Simpson, Lac La Martre, and Rae. In 1959, Nancy O. Lurie joined June for five months of fieldwork in Lac La Martre, beginning a 25-year focus on Dogrib ethnography and a research partnership that produced several influential and important articles, books, and reports. Helm and Lurie remained close friends, keeping in regular contact and visiting often throughout Helm's life.

June became one of North America's most eminent anthropologists, holding a tenured position at the University of



June Helm.

Iowa from 1960 to 1999. In March 1989, she suffered a serious stroke, resulting in partial paralysis on her right side. Despite this handicap, she maintained regular office hours at the university until her retirement in December 1999. She held many professional appointments, including President of the American Anthropological Association (1985–87), Chairman of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (1978), consultant to Justice Thomas Berger during the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry (1975–76), and Advisor to the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories (today the Dene Nation) in land-claim research in 1974, to name just a few. There were honours as well: F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor of Anthropology (1996–99), University of Iowa Distinguished Achievement Award (1995), Elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1994), and many others (Armstrong, 1989).

June's numerous publications have made a significant contribution to Dene ethnography and ethnohistory. Her 11 books and monographs and over 40 chapters and articles, most focused on the Dene of the Mackenzie drainage,

have left an important record of historical and ethnographic documentation. Most recently she published *The People of Denendeh: Ethnohistory of the Indians of Canada's Northwest Territories* (2000), a crowning achievement to a career spanning six decades.

In 1996, John B. Zoe, a Dogrib researcher and tribal council official, and I contacted June to ask if she would vet a paper we had just jointly written. She readily agreed, and over the next several years we developed a close friendship. In 1997, John, Dogrib elder Elizabeth Mackenzie, her daughter Mary Siemens, and I traveled to Iowa City to meet June, and to accept, on behalf of the Northwest Territories, the Dogrib caribou skin lodge collected in Rae by Frank Russell in 1894. June had been instrumental in having the lodge returned to the Northwest Territories. Her friend Nancy Lurie, and her student, the late Beryl Gillespie—both respected ‘northern’ anthropologists as well—joined us, making for a very interesting visit. (Beryl Gillespie passed away in September 2002.) In 2001, with my family in tow, I flew to Ontario, rented a car, and drove to Iowa City to visit again with June and her architect husband Pierce King, whom she married in 1968. We were treated like family and will remember our visit with great fondness.

Starting soon after our first contact in 1996, June and I talked frequently on the phone and I came to cherish our regular weekly conversations. She was a caring friend, mentor, and advocate, sharing freely her extensive knowledge and experience, and I learned a great deal from her. During one conversation, not long before her death, she spoke at length about another ‘northern’ anthropologist, the late Cornelius Osgood, who began his research in the Northwest Territories on Great Bear Lake in 1928. When June completed her PhD dissertation in 1958, she sent it to Osgood at Yale University with a request that it be reviewed for publication in the “Yale University Publications in Anthropology,” which he then edited. Osgood refused to publish it, telling her in a letter that he felt that it wasn’t anthropology, but more in the realm of sociology. It is not surprising that June, as a woman working in a male-dominated field in the 1950s and 1960s, endured such reproachful chauvinism and gender bias. She met Osgood in person only once, in the early 1970s, while attending an Athapaskan conference in Ottawa. Despite suffering what must have been a hurtful rebuff for a young academic, she spoke of him in very respectful terms, characteristic of her usual grace. To our benefit, the National Museums of Canada published her dissertation in 1961, under the title *Lynx Point People*.

June and I spoke for the last time two days before her death. It was a tearful conversation that she used to say goodbye and to give me several messages to take to friends in nearby Dogrib communities. On the Saturday following her death, my wife, Ingrid, and I drove to Rae to visit with June’s longtime friend, Dogrib elder Elizabeth Mackenzie. Over tea, Elizabeth reminisced about June, recounting their first visit in 1959. Upon her arrival in the community

of Rae, June had visited Father Amourous, the local priest, who advised her to set up her tent in Elizabeth Mackenzie’s yard. Each year afterward, Elizabeth directed her children to prepare the tent site, looking forward to the return of her friend. “She was always happy with the people,” Elizabeth told us, “and the people were always happy with her.” Elizabeth indicated that she would make an announcement in church the next day telling June’s many friends of her passing.

Early on Monday morning, 9 February 2004, just a few days after June’s death, I received a call from Linda Urban, one of two teachers at the Louis Norwegian School in Jean Marie River, a Slavey community of 50 people. She and her young students had been reading through June’s *The People of Denendeh*, and she had contacted me to find out June’s address because the children wanted to write her a letter of appreciation. Working on plans for a school heritage fair, they had learned much about their grandparents’ lifeways and wanted to tell her how much they appreciated her efforts to record in print and photography an earlier time in the community. Part of the fair was to include a theatrical production entitled “New Year’s Eve, 1952, in Jean Marie,” developed directly from June’s account.

From her office window, Linda Urban can see the old log schoolhouse built by the local men in 1952, a direct result of June and Teresa Carterette’s foray into teaching. The log schoolhouse, one of the first community day-schools in the Northwest Territories, is significant because it provided the means for local families to keep their children in the community instead of sending them to residential schools far away. The teacher’s call was one of those remarkable coincidences: the community where June began her career in the North tried to reach out to her just days after her passing. It is also a fitting tribute that children today are finding value in her work, and I know that June would have been deeply moved. The children of Louis Norwegian School will write their letter and send it to June’s husband, Pierce King.

Over the last four years, June worked to organize her photographs, audiotapes, field notes, letters, and other documents for donation to the Northwest Territories Archives. Just a few months ago, a large shipment of her material arrived. As an expression of her deep respect and fondness for the people of the North, she felt it important that her research materials be returned to the North. In conjunction with her efforts to return the caribou skin lodge, these donations constitute a major contribution to the preservation of Dene historical and ethnographic documentation. They will continue to gain in importance as future generations of young Dene find value in them.

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