

LORRAINE MAY ALLISON  
1946-1987

Sunday mornings in our Yellowknife household are sourdough pancake mornings. As the winter sunlight streams in the kitchen window, the pungent smell of the sourdough I mix fills my head. The smell transports me back more than ten years to winter Sunday breakfasts in Inuvik. In my memory, Peter Usher, George Calef and I are striding up the deserted main street, our boots squeaking on the hard snow covering the boardwalk. We turn up the lane beside the research lab and enter a small red house where we are greeted by a noisy dog, Lorraine Allison's good-humoured smile and that same pungent sourdough smell. Peter produces a tin of real maple syrup; George and I have brought bacon from the Hudson's Bay Store and we all have our appetites with us. We sit down to plates heaped high with pancakes, mugs of steaming coffee and the merry chatter and laughter of close friends.



Lorraine's sourdough came from Alaska. She had spent two summers there almost in the shadow of Denali's high peak, studying the behaviour of foxes denning near the Thoroughfare River. She had brought it to the Mackenzie Delta from Whitehorse, where she had been working on wildlife surveys for the Canada Land Inventory map series, after successfully obtaining her Master's degree in biology from the University of Toronto. The sourdough had travelled with her across the North. In Inuvik, she divided it in two and gave me half. When I let it die years after, she supplied me with more, which I have still.

If anyone had said my sourdough would outlive my friend Lorraine, I would have laughed outright. I couldn't imagine a healthier, more energetic person. Lorraine skied well and fast. As a girl in Edmonton, she had skated competitively. She loved to walk, to climb and to ride horses. She ate carefully and kept herself trim, fit and attractive. Her mind was quick, and she

worked as hard as anybody I've ever known. She loved field work in the Arctic and the energy the endless summer daylight gave her. Her longtime friend John Russell recalled joining her in Alaska one summer while she was observing foxes. At her memorial service, he recalled:

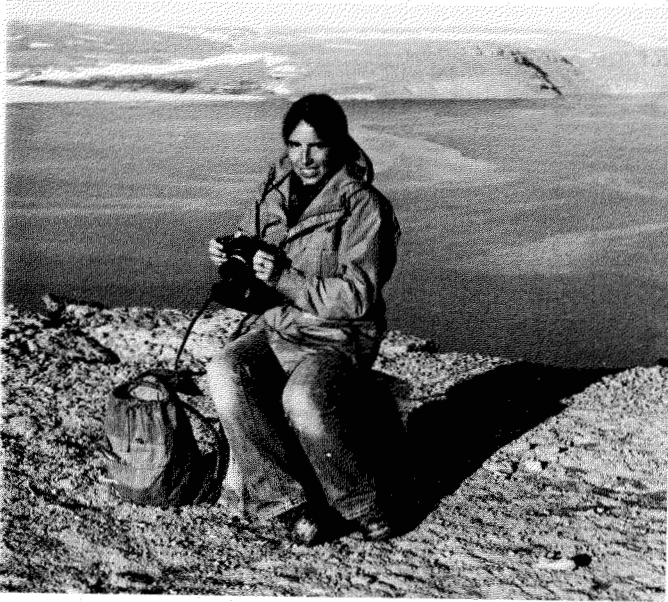
The den was beside a wide gravel flat that was part of the Thoroughfare River. Beyond the flat was the Muldrow Glacier and beyond that was Denali, a mountain so huge that all who see it agree that its size is hard to comprehend. Even though the peak was 40 kilometers away, it seemed like we should be able to reach out and touch it.

As we recorded the rompings of the fox pups near us, we occasionally became aware of wolves and Grizzlies passing by at a distance; or the cackle of a ptarmigan and the clatter of hooves on gravel as caribou fled from insects. While we sat there being our scientific selves, we could, if we relaxed a little into subjectivity, feel the lines of connectedness between all those different elements of that dazzling scene. After that experience, there was never any question in my mind as to why Lorraine had chosen this northern location for her work.

Lorraine approached her work for the aboriginal people of the North with the same enthusiasm and dedication she had put into her biological field work. For months, she and Annie C. Gordon, one of the Inuvialuit field workers, went from house to house to house in all the Beaufort Sea and Mackenzie Delta communities where Inuvialuit live to inform people about the Arctic Gas Pipeline proposal. As part of COPE's field work team, they collected and organized the people's concerns so that their evidence could be presented to Mr. Justice Berger effectively and clearly. Later Lorraine and I sat up night after night preparing cross examination for the expert witnesses called by the gas companies and the government. During the Delta production phase in the hearings, she assembled panels of witnesses for COPE, drawing on expertise from Canada and abroad. She helped these experts to put their evidence on paper in the most powerful case presented by any intervenor at the inquiry.

Lorraine taught me a lot about biology, and even more about integrity and the pursuit of excellence. I used to joke that we should trade degrees. I said I would give her my law degree in exchange for her Master's in biology. She didn't think it was a fair trade. She was right. I realized that years later when I saw her working for the Government of the Northwest Territories at the Beaufort EARP hearings. She asked questions with the precision and persistence of an accomplished barrister. At the same time, she knew the science against which to test the answers she received to her questions. She didn't need my law degree. She was an accomplished environmental advocate without it.

After the Berger hearings were completed, Lorraine moved from Inuvik to the Pincer Creek area of southern Alberta. She bought land, started her biological consulting business and married cattle rancher Bill Elton. Bill shared her love and sense of responsibility for land. Together they built a ranching and feedlot business, while Lorraine continued her biological consulting work in western and northern Canada.



Lorraine loved animals, wild and domestic. Her dog Atimwa went everywhere with her during the years she lived in Inuvik and Yellowknife. He even made daily appearances at the formal hearings of the Berger inquiry, walking obediently at Lorraine's heel and curling up at our feet to sleep through the long days of testimony.

Lorraine fought cancer the way she fought for the wise use of the environment, with logic and discipline. She won the first round, too. She followed her doctors' advice to the letter. She was determined to be one of the survivors. Five years after her initial bout with the disease, the doctors advised her that there was no sign of recurrence. She felt she had won. Her friends shared her relief and happiness. It was shortlived. Within months of the "all clear" signal from her medical advisors,

Lorraine was seriously ill. She lost this second round and died on January 26th.

Lorraine lost her life, but she never lost her humanity, her love of life or her interest in her friends. In a letter she wrote two weeks before her death, she wrote this way about her son:

Boyd is growing up fast — it's amazing to see what can happen to a bright kid who gets turned on by kindergarten. He is so stubborn and hard-headed — where does he get that from? — that I hold little hope for him as a conventional scholar.

Lorraine was herself no conventional scholar. But scholarship was always important to her. It was amply evident in all the work she did. With that in mind, Lorraine's friends are in the process of soliciting monies for a memorial scholarship in the field of northern conservation studies. The scholarship will bear Lorraine Allison's name. I believe that is how she would like to be remembered.

I turn over the pancakes on the griddle. They are porous, golden brown and nearly as good as the ones Lorraine still makes in my memory. I can taste them on the roof of my mouth, sharp and bitter as grief and sweet as sunlit winter morning memories. Are pancakes breakfast fare in the Great Beyond? If so, I'm sure Lorraine is sharing her recipe and dividing her sourdough with friends. Bon appetit, my friend.

*John U. Bayly  
Yellowknife, N.W.T.*

*Editor's note:* The Lorraine Allison Scholarship Trust Fund is administered by the Arctic Institute of North America. Contributions may be made to the University of Calgary in care of the Arctic Institute.