

The PennStater

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017



MAGNIFICENT MODELS

The colorful wildlife photography of Michael Faix

SPECIAL DELIVERIES

Fond and funny memories of mail from home

A NATURAL LEGACY

Remembering the Craighhead siblings

GROWTH INDUSTRY

Doing the dirty work on the new student farm

THREE

John Craighead died in September, the last of three siblings who turned their passion for nature into adventurous and influential careers. A look back at the lives and legacies of **Frank Craighead '39 Lib**, **John Craighead '39 Lib**, and **Jean Craighead George '41 Lib**.
BY SALLY ANN FLECKER



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FAMILY TIES

The siblings (shown near their childhood home in Washington, D.C., and on the brothers' property in Moose, Wyo.) got their love of nature from their father, a forest entomologist and environmentalist.

The vehicle is a 1928 Chevy. The year is 1934—the summer after high school and before Penn State. Frank and John

Craighead, in search of adventure, have set out from their home in Chevy Chase, Md., with friends. They are following back roads across the country and camping at night under the stars. They are falconers, an art they taught themselves when they were only 14 by reading all the books they could find on the subject, including a tome that dated back to the year 1615. Their intention now is to observe, photograph, and capture hawks and falcons for training.

They had ambition right from the get-go, these rugged and intent twin boys. **Frank '39 Lib** and **John '39 Lib** would go on to become two of the most influential conservationists of the 20th century, known especially for their groundbreaking work on grizzly bears in Yellowstone, as well as their advocacy for the conservation of wild rivers. (Much of the language used in the National Wild and Scenic

Rivers Act of 1968, protecting 208 rivers in 40 states, would be taken directly from Frank's writing.) But even at this early point in their lives, their pursuits as falconers will garner them international notice and reinvigorate the lost art of training birds of prey.

At this very moment, they have reached Wyoming. They're probably a little on the crusty side. Perhaps their legs are creaky after so many hours bouncing over hardscrabble roads. They bear scratches and bruises from climbing trees with old metal linemen spurs on their boots to peer into nests, from scrambling up rock face and overhang to examine aeries big enough to curl up and sleep in if they dared.

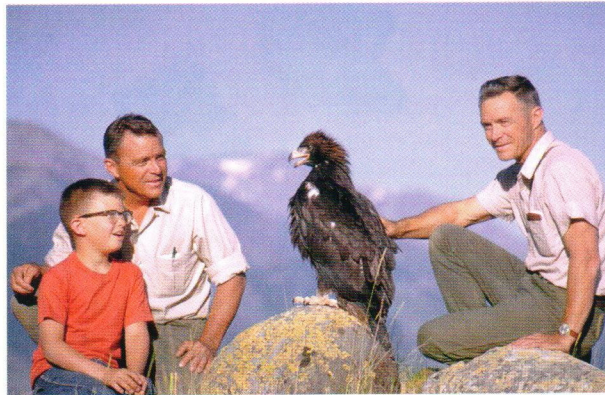
They are worse for wear after being chased back down the way they came by screeching and tenacious mama eagles and hawks.

None of that matters right now. The silver-tipped Tetons lie ahead, one long, slow meadow of wildflowers away. Here is a devastatingly beautiful panorama, a landscape with enough sweep and gravitas to breathe in deeply and explore endlessly. They decide right then and there to return one day and make this their home. This is where they will find their life's work. They've arrived at their destiny as much as their destination.

While the Craighead boys were out west, gazing at the mountains, sister Jean, younger by three years, was still at home in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., with mother Carolyn and father **Frank Sr. 1912 Agr.** It couldn't have been easy keeping up with her adven-

turous brothers, but she was no closer to ordinary than were Frank and John. Almost from the time she could walk, Jean was brought along to hike, canoe, and camp along the wilds of the Potomac River with the rest of the family. Her ambitions, even at a tender age, were of a literary nature. **Jean '41 Lib** would rise to prominence as Jean Craighead George, author of nature fiction for children—as much a leading light in her chosen field as her brothers would be in theirs.

Their father, a forest entomologist and environmentalist, taught his children about the plants and wildflowers, animals and birds they encountered. He also taught them a way of seeing—to be curious, observant, and able to live off the



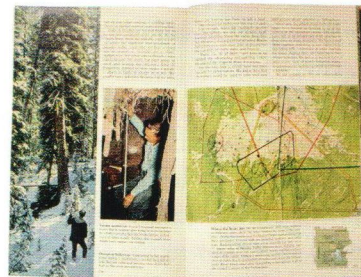
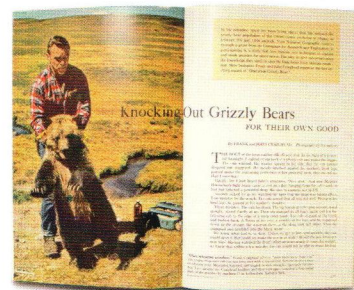
THE WILDLIFE GENE

All three Craigheads taught their children to appreciate the natural world. This 1964 photo shows John and his son John Jr. (at left) and Frank with a fledgling golden eagle in Montana.



FOR THE GOOD OF THE GRIZZLIES

In the 1960s, John (at left) and Frank Craighead did pioneering research in Yellowstone National Park, where they tranquilized grizzly bears and fitted them with radio collars to track their movements. They wrote about their work in *National Geographic*, among other publications.



land. These were the lessons that would carry them forward into their lives and work.

THERE'S A PHOTOGRAPH on her website of a young, beautiful Jean smiling at Yammer the screech owl, who is perched on her finger. You can't help but think of forest scenes from Disney's classic *Sleeping Beauty*, where the songbirds sing to Princess Aurora. But Jean's magic was very real. Her penchant to befriend wild animals started with Nod, the turkey vulture she raised from a fledgling when she was a little girl.

As a newlywed, she and her husband, John George, a graduate student in ecology at the University of Michigan, lived in a snug, nine-by-nine-foot army-surplus tent in the farmlands outside Ann Arbor. The couple befriended foxes, raccoons, a skunk, and innumerable birds, and Jean began writing and illustrating a series of animal biographies based on her daily visitors. Every day, from her tree-covered hillside, she watched the drama of the natural world unfold in ways the scientific literature never captured. That led her to a lifelong resolution to write only about animals and locations that she had experienced herself.

After her time in Michigan, Jean, like her brothers, would find the place that spoke to her heart—the woodlands of upstate New York, a landscape as cozy and dense as her brothers' was open. She raised three children at the home in Chappaqua, N.Y., that she would live in for the rest of

her long life. Yammer the owl was just one of 173 wild animals (including tarantulas, seagulls, and mink) that made their residence there over the years—either inside the house or in the yard. A great horned owl, Bubo, would sit on a perch at the foot of the steps. The smaller Yammer roosted on a bookshelf. A rescued crow routinely checked on Jean's youngest son, Luke, when he was at school. (These days, Luke George is an ornithologist and science director of the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies in Fort Collins, Colo.)

Says daughter Twig George, a school librarian who has written several books of her own on aquatic creatures, "When they're living with you, you get to know their personalities and their characteristics. You can describe their fur and their eyes and the way they move. [My mother] took a lot of that in for her writing."

During World War II, Jean had worked as a reporter in Washington, D.C., first for the International News Service, and later for the *Washington Post*. She also contributed articles to *Reader's Digest*. But she came into her element in the 1950s when she started to write children's and young-adult novels in earnest. Twig remembers her mother clacking along on the typewriter at 5:30 in the morning. She'd cook a big breakfast for everyone, then shoo them out the door. "She had the ability to totally focus with all the chaos around," says Twig. "She'd just go back to writing. Frank and John were like that, too." Says Jean's son Craig, "It was always an adventure. We were encouraged to just get out

and do things. Canoe. Build a raft. Hike. Fish.” (Craig would later become a wildlife biologist in Alaska and an expert on bowhead whales.)

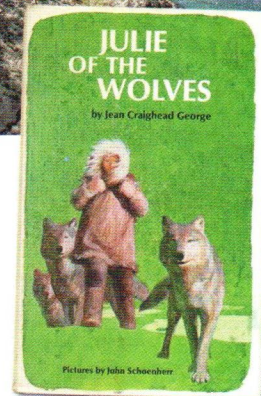
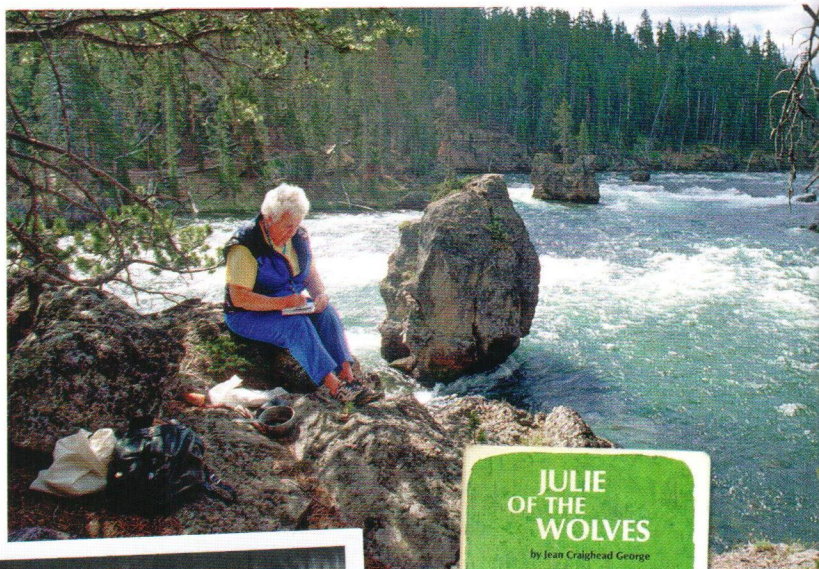
One of the books for which she is best known, *My Side of the Mountain* (1959), is the story of a teenage boy who runs away from his family’s New York City apartment to live in the wilderness of the Catskills. For the novel, she called upon her knowledge of falconry, wild animals, and survival skills. The book was named a Newbery Honor Book by the American Library Association; later, it was made into a movie.

In 1973, Jean’s *Julie of the Wolves* received the Newbery Medal, one of the most prestigious awards in children’s literature. The novel was sparked by a conversation with her former animal-behavior professor at Penn State, C.R. Carpenter, when Jean was named the university’s Woman of the Year in 1968. He suggested she write about wolves because of new findings describing social structures in animals. Jean went to Barrow, Alaska, to learn all she could about wolves—both from experts at the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory and from observing wolf packs in the wild during a week camping on the open tundra with a researcher. Her son Luke accompanied her on the trip.

All in all, Jean wrote 130 books—a number that even her children didn’t suspect until they went through boxes of her papers and manuscripts after she died in 2012 at the age of 92. Active all her life, she was still camping and rock climbing into her 70s. Her last pet was an African grey parrot, Tocca, that she got when she was 85. For two years after Jean died, Tocca would unnerve Twig by calling to her in her mother’s voice.

“My mother didn’t think she was ever going to die,” says Twig. In fact, she was still working on a novel, *Ice Whale*, about a 200-year-old bowhead whale in Barrow, inspired by son Craig’s work. Twig and Craig finished the book. “It was not an easy task, on so many levels,” says Craig. “But it was a very nice window into Mom’s thought process and her sense of wonder. She could see the beauty in everything.”

F RANK AND JOHN CRAIGHEAD. For so much of their lives, one name could not be said without the other. Their interests were almost as indistinguishable as their good looks. Such was their bond that they weren’t brothers as much as alter egos. When they were



NATURAL INSPIRATION

Nature was a theme in all of Jean Craighead George’s books. Above: While researching a book in her early 80s, she stopped to paint along the Yellowstone River. The Airedale at left was one of her few “normal” household pets.

high school seniors, they sat down to fill out their applications to Penn State. On the form where it asked, “Do you have any siblings?” they each wrote, “Yes. One sister.”

Their first exposure to the national stage came in July 1937, when they were 20. *National Geographic* published their story about training falcons and hawks, some of which took place on that plucky trip across country. Their writing brought attention to their charming personalities, their considerable intelligence, agility, and derring-do.

By the time they returned to Wyoming, some years and a war had intervened. They had earned their bachelor’s degrees at Penn State, where they were not above switching places and pretending to be the other twin. Then, recruited by the Navy to develop the definitive survival manual for downed pilots, they served as lieutenants in the Naval Reserves’ Aviation Training program. *How to Survive on Land and Sea* was published in 1943 by the Naval Institute Press and revised and reissued by Frank and John several times over the ensuing decades. The January 1948 issue of *Na-*

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tional Geographic included the brothers' feature, "We Survive on a Pacific Atoll," where they describe being left by the Navy to survive as castaways on a tiny islet in the Marshall Islands. In the article, they discuss the many different uses for green coconuts, where to find fresh water sources, what plants and fish are edible. They recount how to break the forceful grip of an octopus' tentacles (turn it inside out) and how to grab a spiny lobster (from behind, because it swims backwards).

After the war, they each married: Frank to Esther Stevens from Illinois in 1945, and John in 1946 to Margaret Smith, a painter and mountain climber whose father was a Grand Teton National Park ranger. They earned Ph.D.s in wildlife management from the University of Michigan in 1949.

Finally, Wyoming. They bought a 14-acre piece of land in Moose, Wyo., on which they built twin log cabins. Their first children, Lance and Karen, were born on the same day. "Having twins the easy way," they called it. Two more children apiece were born to each family in the years that followed.

Just as Frank Sr. had done when they were growing up, they shared their work and interest with their own kids. In the summers, Jean and her children often joined up with them. "There was a great sense of doing things that were fun and interesting," remembers Jean's son Craig. "There was always a purpose for going on a hike. They'd want to see what flowers were in bloom, how the red-tail chicks were. We'd be collecting data, but having fun. It was fueled by a sense of discovery and zest for life and including all of us in their work."

Adds Frank's son, Charlie Craighead: "All of us were in our element when we were here at the cabins. I can't believe they didn't lose one of us. Derek [John's son] and I would spend all day on the Snake River catching frogs. It was a wide-open world." (Today, Charlie Craighead is a Jackson, Wyo., filmmaker currently at work on a documentary on the complex water issues in Wyoming.)

Frank and John went wherever their work took them—John to the University of Montana, where he led the Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit and helped establish the school's wildlife biology program; Frank to Las Vegas for a while in the mid-1950s to manage the Desert Bighorn Game Range for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and later to the State University of New York at Albany where he lectured as an adjunct professor and oversaw grad students' fieldwork in Wyoming. In 1964 he founded the Environmental Research Institute (later renamed the Craighead Institute). John likewise founded the Craighead Wildlife-Wildlands Institute in Montana.

But both men would always return to the cabins in Wyoming that were both hub and heart. In 1959, Frank and John embarked upon what would be a landmark study of grizzly bears, a species that was disappearing at an alarming pace. Little was known at the time about the bears' physiology, range, and habits. The Craigheads developed innovative tools and practices to sedate the bears in order to measure and weigh them and take their vitals. "Dad and John were good about taking us along," remembers Charlie Craighead, Frank's son. "They were willing to teach any of us what they knew. We'd help make the casts of paws and teeth. They gave us a lot of responsibility."

While the bears were under sedation, Frank and John would place a collar on them for tracking, originally by radio and later by satellite—technology that would eventually be used with just about every species. Although a disagreement about grizzly management with Yellowstone ended the study after 12 years, Frank and John's insights and contributions would eventually help return the grizzly population in the continental U.S. to a healthier size.

THE CRAIGHEAD LEGACY is legend. They put the idea of conservation and environmentalism in the spotlight through their books, their articles in *National Geographic*, and their appearances on *National Geographic* television specials. To their children, they would pass along the "wildlife gene," the pleasure of the outdoors, and regard for the environment and all living things. "I still get people coming up and saying, 'Your father and uncle are the reason I got into conservation,'" says Charlie. "The same with Jean: 'Your aunt's book got me out of the city to Wyoming.' I'm amazed how many people were inspired to change their lives."

Frank died first, of Parkinson's disease in 2001 at age 85. Jean was 92 when she died in 2012 from congestive heart failure. The last of the siblings, John, died this past September, one month after his 100th birthday.

John, Frank, and Jean Craighead were as at home in the great outdoors as they were inside their own houses. They recognized the interdependence of living creatures and their habitats. They walked softly upon the earth.

In her poem "The Summer Day," nature poet Mary Oliver asks, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

The Craighead lives were a very good answer. ■

Sally Ann Flecker is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer.