



DENALI: WHO WE ARE

By Vanessa Juszczak

*There is a long list of reasons people are drawn to Denali and its surrounding areas: adventure - wilderness - stillness - wildlife. But whether you were born here, or transplanted here, there is always one answer near the top of the list, when asked "why did you stay?" **The people.***



If you've stopped in Healy in the last 44 years, there is a good chance you might have met Patsy Speer. Known as Miss Pat, or Grandma Pat, she has been a welcoming face in the area since she arrived.

Originally from Arkansas, Pat and her husband Wendell were living near Marmaduke, running a catfish farm. A few seasons of bad harvest resulted in a search for other work, and eventually her husband found himself in Alaska, working for the Alaska Railroad in Healy. In short order, he found a job at Usibelli Coal Mine*.

"My son came up to visit his dad for the summer of 73', and I came up to pick him up, and I fell in love with the area and the people. And I'm still in love with the area and the people. It was the best move we ever made."

Pat departed for several months, to wrap up their affairs for the move, and returned in the middle of the winter. "February 7th, 1974 we drove down off the hill (Otto Lake) and it was -40° below zero - that was my welcome to Healy."

At the time she arrived, there wasn't much to the town of Healy itself. There was a Roadhouse, the Otto Lake Lodge, a KOA (Kampgrounds of America) campground, a small school, the railroad community known as Brown Town, the mining community of Suntrana, and not a whole lot more. But that didn't deter her in the least.

Her first job was a combination dishwasher, waitress, and cook at the Healy Hotel, where she worked for a few months. But shortly after KOA brought in 3 motel units, and she took over maid work there. By winters end, she had moved into the grocery store of KOA where she remained for years.



It was this position at a focal hub of the community that led Pat to develop the relationships she did with the people of the valley. "I became Grandma Pat in the 70's, because I knew everybody from Cantwell to Nenana! When I was working in the store, it wasn't the adults I'd talk with, it was their children, if you can believe that. I had more grandbabies than Carter's got oats! Their parents would come to do laundry and they would just stay upstairs and visit with me. I've got lots and lots of different memories of all the families over the years. I feel like I did something worthwhile when I was working there."

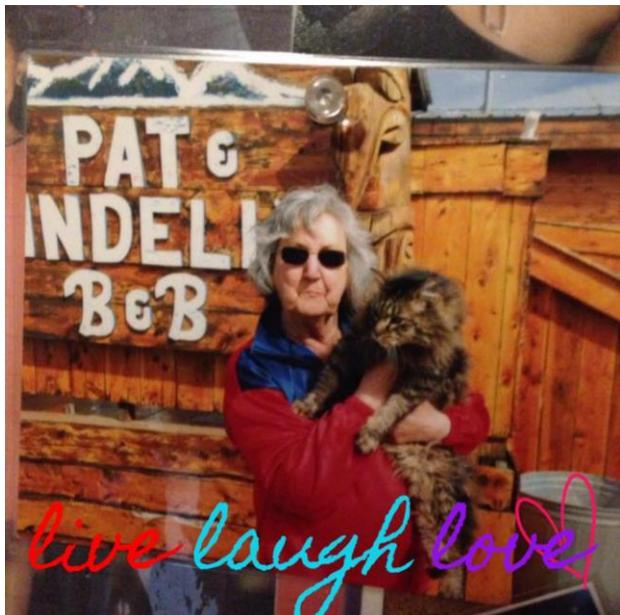
Pat was also entrepreneurial. "In the late 70's I started selling clothes out of my van. I would go to Arkansas and come home with a whole group of clothes. That was one

thing - it was hard to find shirt tails long enough to fit some of these men here, so I went toward the bigger sizes on the men's clothes."

In 1980, Usibelli Coal Mine opened the subdivisions along the Healy Spur Road, relocating the mining town of Usibelli. Pat and Wendell moved their trailer, and then built a new home on the same lot. "Now Wendell built the house. He and Healy built the house - cause anybody that didn't have a job, he had them over working. It really was the house that Healy built."

In 1986 her husband retired from Usibelli Coal Mine and Pat decided she would join him. They went on a drive across the country, all the way to Mississippi, but there was never any doubt she would return home. Nor that she would stay busy.

In 1992 Pat & Wendell's B&B opened and for 17 years they greeted visitors to Denali National Park with southern hospitality. Some of those guests she keeps in touch with. It doesn't matter if Pat



has known you for your whole life, or a minute. You are now her friend.

Pat finds joy in her community and finds many ways to continue supporting the town that she feels has been so good to her. You will find her at nearly all community events, and she is usually volunteering in some way. A founding member of Morning Star Baptist Church, she still takes time weekly to organize snacks for the children's AWANA program – becoming Grandma Pat to yet another generation of Healy's youth.

She has served in the local Aurora Club, a group for local Seniors who wished to still be active in the community – she regularly serves meals for visiting sports teams at the school. “When I first started I really didn't know what I was doing. Now I'm an old timer, and I feel like I should be telling them what to do, but I don't!”



When asked why she still stays here, her answer was simple. “Well, there's my family. My grandson alone would keep me here. But the main thing, about when I moved here, is I was treated with so much respect. I mean - I was somebody. That was different for me. And that's always stuck with me. People still treat me that way. And I'm going to be buried up on that hill.”

* The discovery of coal in the Healy River Valley is mainly responsible for the existence of Healy. Prior to the mining operations being established in 1918, Healy was nothing more than a stop along the rail line. In 1923, a spur off the mainline gave train access to the mouth of the mines, and production increased steadily. Today Usibelli Coal Mine is the only active coal mine in the State of Alaska and is still the largest employer in the area.