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Tim  
Woodward

## 'Last of the mountain women' dies at 72

Idaho lost a legend this week. Frances Wisner died Monday in Grangeville, taking with her a part of what made the state special.

Chances are you didn't know Frances; not many people did, though thousands knew her by reputation and through her writings. She was the little old lady, and I mean that in the most flattering sense, who spent half a lifetime alone in her log cabin on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. She was one of the toughest, most independent and genuinely colorful people to live in the Idaho backcountry, and the backcountry won't be the same without her.

### Pioneer

In many ways, she was a throwback to the pioneers. She outlived two husbands and spent more than 20 years living alone in her little house at Campbell's Ferry. Seventy-two when she died, she had fended for herself in the wilderness, coping year-round with its risks and hardships, without help from anyone. Only in recent years did she accept assistance. Some hunters from her native Texas offered to help cut her firewood, and she grudgingly agreed.

She had shot eight bears in her front yard. When an intruder sneaked into her cabin one morning and caught her in her baby-doll pajamas, she pointed a rifle at his chest, told him he had one second to get out, and that if he didn't, the only tears she would shed would be for having to clean up his blood. The man was a good judge of human nature. He got out.

If she had wanted to, she could have been a celebrity. Some of the biggest names in the country had offered to make her famous, but fame didn't interest her. Unlike her late friend Buckskin Bill, she not only didn't seek the limelight, but consistently shunned it. Solitude was part of why she came to the backcountry, in 1940, and she never tired of it. If Buckskin Bill was the last of the mountain men, she had at least as legitimate a claim to having been the last of the mountain women.

I'll never forget meeting her. When I was writing to request an interview, a friend suggested offering to bring her a carton of Doublemint gum, which he had heard she liked. A few weeks later, she wrote to say that she didn't chew Doublemint; she smoked Luckies, but would see me anyway. Expecting a grizzled hag with a grimy Lucky hanging from her lip, I stepped from the backcountry mail plane at the "airstrip" that served her home, and shook hands with an immaculate, white-haired woman in a floor-length skirt, a ruffled blouse and a frilly bonnet. That was Frances. Miles from the nearest settlement or neighbor, she lived by her own high standards.

We talked for perhaps an hour that day, sitting in the sunshine on a little bench beside the brook that ran through her front yard. Her insights were delightful. She had a way of answering questions with stories or anecdotes that started out having nothing to do with what was asked and ended up perfect answers every time. Living alone makes some people dull, but not her. There was wisdom and humor under that bonnet, and they were expressed in ways that continually surprised and amused those fortunate enough to know her.

The attic in her cabin seemed almost to be made of books. When I asked whether she had read them all, she said she had. Then she thought better of it and said, "No, come to think of it, I haven't. There are certain people who are concerned with saving my soul, and they send me religious books. I've read all but those."

That was in the spring of 1981. That summer, a *Los Angeles Times* reporter came to interview her. One of the wire services ran his story, and she received 1,500 letters from admirers around the country. She was invited to appear on *The Today Show*, and refused. She had a standing invitation to be Johnny Carson's guest on *The Tonight Show*, and refused that, too.

She never did get over being mad about the time her picture appeared in *The National Geographic*.

### Different breed

"She was the last of a different breed," Bill Cassel, publisher of the Grangeville paper that ran her nature column for 40 years, said Tuesday. "Frances could have been famous, but she enjoyed her privacy too much. She was at best a reluctant celebrity."

She fought cancer for 30 years. In 1956, Cassel said, she wrote that "cancer was a word more frightening than hate or hell or damned."

She was an observer for the National Weather Service, and for her unusually detailed and punctual data received an award given to less than 1 percent of its 3,000 observers.

She was an honorary member of the Grangeville Smokejumpers Association and the Idaho Pilots

## Frances watches ruffled grouse

Editor's note: On Friday, December 20, Frances was flown to St. Joseph's Hospital in Lewiston. She had been ill for several days.

Zeke West and Alice Rickman pulled and pushed Frances up the hill to the airstrip on a sled. Longtime friend Tom Close is staying at the Ferry with Gretchen.

On Sunday, December 22, Frances underwent abdominal surgery for an intestinal blockage. She will remain at St. Joseph's through the holidays.

Frances underwent surgery for cancer once before in 1956. She likes to receive letters and cards and it is hoped that now, as in 1956, her thousands of readers who have been following her column in the Free Press will not let her down.

Please address cards to Frances Z. Wisner, room 3C29, St. Joseph's Hospital, P.O. Box 816, Lewiston, Idaho 83501.

This column, written in early December, was the last column written by Frances before leaving Campbell's Ferry.

by Frances Z. Wisner

**CAMPBELL'S FERRY** — Across the draw from the little house at the Ferry grows a clump of seedling apple trees. It is a tall tangle of interlocking branches, covered with bloom in spring and fruit during summer and fall. Branches are too tangled for bear to climb up. Nor for people to gather fruits, except what can be reached from the ground.

But the birds have no problems. They perch on branch to pick at an apple. Should fruit fall to the ground, either bear or deer get the apple, but bird pay no mind to that. Just works away on fruit still in the tree.

In winter, with snow on the ground and tree branches bare of fruit and leaf, ruffled grouse "work" the tree. They move slowly from branch to twig, picking tin bug or gnat.

This afternoon of December 3, it was two grouse who spent a couple of hours (while Frances watched them) de-bugging the branches. Where so many bugs come from, we've no idea, for those birds were in the tree yesterday, also.

Could be that those tiny winged things we see hovering above the snow take rest time on braches. Snow mosquitos is what Don Lee used to call them.

Other days the grouse will be in the elderberry below kitchen window. Working bugs, 'tho once, in summer, Frances watched a woodpecker boring out the rotted core of a broken branch on the elderberry. Finally Woodpecker thrust his tongue into his boring, to withdraw the awfulest looking worm. Birds are welcome in trees at the Ferry.

For anyone to attempt to catch every rat or mouse inside these forests would be foolish. 'Tho every resident does try to trap the pesty varmints once they invade house or outbuilding. On the porch is one Hav-A-Hart rat trap and a smaller live trap for mice.

The mouse trap sets with a wind-up mechanism (much as one winds an alarm clock) which is good for 15 mice before it must be re-wound. A trouble free mouse catcher. It works, too. But we'll never know just how that weasel managed to catch himself. Just know that the strangest noise was all over the porch, but Gretchen was looking at mouse trap, carefully, not getting her nose too near.

Had its language been more peaceful, chances are Frances would have taken trap beyond the old garden and released Weasel. There was no surity that the bit of fury would not run up her arm and begin chewing on Frances's face. A few days later she dumped it alongside the latest caught wood rat.

She has no war against all rats and mice. Just those which invade house and outbuildings. A colony of mice live in the wood ricks, nor are they bothered by Frances.

Since snow covered the ground, each morning in that part of the trail to weather station which goes between two ricks of wood there are fresh mouse tracks. Out of one rick, across the trail into another rick.

Two of the trails are well packed. Another, the tracks are further apart and not so many.

Beyond the wood ricks, tracks cross the path, from nowhere to nowhere. Just a hole in the trailside snow, with scampered tracks in trail, then another hole into the snow. Are there mouse tunneled road systems under the snow?

The few table scraps which Gretchen does not eat are tossed onto the snow near the wood ricks. Should mouse find them before the ravens, mouse is welcome.

Winter in the Canyon - a time of grouse in fruit trees, mouse near the wood pile while, below the house, rimmed with shore ice and glimmering with ice bridges, the river still runs down hill.

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