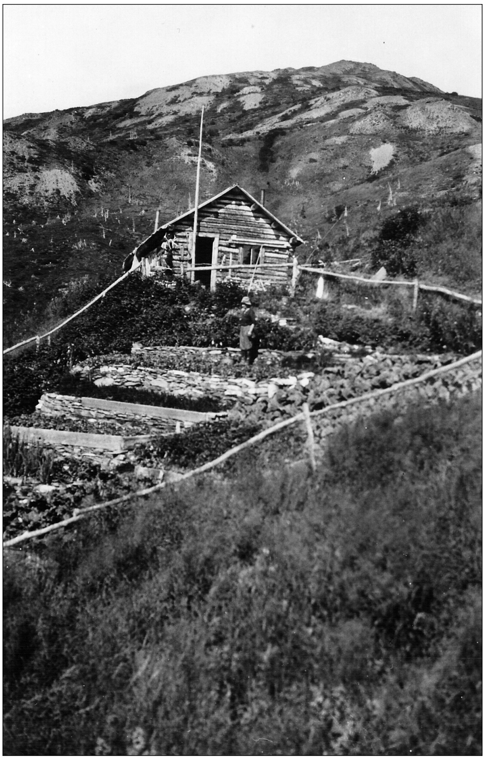
INTRODUCTION

Fannie Quigley became a legend in the Kantishna country, a mining district located at what is now the end of the Denali National Park Road. She arrived in the area in 1905 and stayed until she died alone in her cabin in 1944 at the age of seventy-four. She staked her share of mining claims and actually mined them; she also learned to hunt caribou, sheep, and moose and to trap fox, wolves, wolverine, and at least one lynx. She was famous for her wilderness cooking, including her flaky piecrusts made from rendered bear lard. She grew remarkable gardens full of vegetables and even many flowers on rocky slopes above tree line. And of course, there was her potato beer.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Mount McKinley was the object of intense interest among explorers from the eastern United States, many of whom were also striving to conquer the North and South Poles and other remote spots on the globe. A total of nine expeditions to the mountain's peak between 1903 and 1913 resulted in nearly a dozen books and countless articles in magazines of the day, such as *Outing*, *Scribner's*, and *National Geographic*.

Fannie's story first attracted me as I read about her during the course of research on the history of Mount McKinley National Park (now called Denali National Park and Preserve). At the University of Alaska Fairbanks, digging in the Francis P. Farquhar Collection of materials on the early climbers, I came across a yellowing magazine article from 1913, which turned out to be Fannie's first appearance in print: a piece in *Outing Magazine*. The author, climber and artist Belmore Browne, had written a series of five articles about his adventurous attempt on Mount



Fannie's cabin and garden on Quigley Ridge in the Kantishna. *UAF Fannie Quigley Collection 80-46-283*

McKinley in 1912. Heading back to civilization, he and his party had stopped at Fannie's for dinner. Calling her "one of the most remarkable women I have ever met," Browne gave this description of the then forty-three-year-old Fannie:

> Of medium height, her body had the strength and ruggedness of a man's. Below her short skirt came the leather of her rubber shoe packs and a flannel shirt covered her strong shoulders. But the most striking part of her were her keen, humorous eyes.
>
> She lived the wild life as the men did, and was as much at home in the open with a rifle as a city woman is on a city avenue, and she could not only follow and hunt successfully the wild game of the region, but could do a man's share in packing the meat to camp. From a physical standpoint she was a living example of what nature had intended a woman to be, and furthermore, while having the ability to do a man's work, she also enjoyed the life as a man does.[1]

Clearly breaking the mold on expectations for women of her own era, Fannie set an example for the modern wilderness women who would follow her into Denali National Park. Here was certainly an interesting character! Yet it was the caption on the photograph accompanying Browne's article that particularly grabbed my attention: "Mother McKenzie's Cabin." Who, I wondered, was Mother McKenzie?

Many popular articles have been written about Fannie, and the next thing I read was a story by Grant Pearson, a former Mount McKinley National Park superintendent, in an old *Alaska Sportsman Magazine*. The quintessential, mythical Fannie as presented by Pearson was a composite of all the stories that have come to be associated with her: how she arrived with her husband, Joe, a prospector; how she was known for her hunting and wilderness skills and her wild-game cooking; and how she had trudged up across the Chilkoot Trail back in 1898 and earned the nickname "Fannie the Hike" in the Klondike. Pearson clearly affirmed the fact that Fannie had been married to Joe when she arrived in Kantishna.

Because the genealogists' club in Fairbanks had made an index to obituaries in the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner,* I was easily able to find Fannie's obituary, printed on Monday, August 28, 1944. It summed up everything about her that had been printed previously or was known at the time, which would be accepted as fact for the next fifty years. "One of Alaska's most colorful pioneers came to the end of her tread last week," it began, "when

Fannie Quigley died quietly and alone in her little house in the Kantishna where hundreds of park visitors, explorers, scientists, trappers and prospectors had visited her in the past 30-odd years since she settled there at the edge of McKinley National Park, a hundred miles from the railroad." The obituary ran through such facts as there were succinctly: "Born in Wahoo, Nebraska, March 18, 1871," she "ran away from her Bohemian home at an early age, learned to speak English while working her way westward along the railroad, and took up the trail of gold with the stampede to the Klondike in 1898." And then there came the kicker: "Many remember her place on No. 3 Above on Hunker Creek, and her marriage to Angus McKenzie in 1901."[2]

At least I had the answer to the "Mrs. McKenzie" question. But by the late 1940s, it seemed that no one who wrote about Fannie remembered her marriage to Angus. Grant Pearson had not mentioned it. Nor had he mentioned that Joe and Fannie had been divorced seven years before her death. In fact, in his account of Fannie's later years, he had stated (erroneously) that Joe was dead. But what had happened to the marriage to Angus? And when did Fannie really marry Joe?

Whenever I asked the local pioneer women about her, they looked askance, dismissed her, or simply giggled. It took me a while to figure out that she was one of those characters who, though beloved, was also endowed with some earthy characteristics: to put it plainly, she was loud, obstreperous, never spoke without swearing, and had a drinking problem. Finally, someone gave me a copy of Mary Lee Davis's book *We Are Alaskans*. Davis, a Wellesley graduate who visited Fannie in 1921, put a colorful spin on things when she noted that "her language was fairly Shakespearean in its rugged raciness."[3]

The newspaper obituary continued with a report of the funeral given for Fannie by her fellow Pioneer Women of Alaska: "And thus she was given up to immortal legend, for so long as there is an Alaska, stories will be told and retold with gusto and admiration for the lively mite of a woman whose famed personality, salty vigor, and great kindness are heart and sinew of the last frontier."[4]

Indeed, Fannie has become an "immortal legend." The stories have become a text, a narrative that repeats itself like a standard canon: "The Time She Shot the Two Caribou," "The Moose in the Middle of the River," "Crawling inside the Caribou Carcass," "Sewing Joe's Nose."

But what of the real woman behind the legend? Even the facts of her life, taken mostly from the obituary or from stories Fannie herself told to friends, have assumed a mythological status: "Leaving Home at an Early Age," "Working Her Way West on the Railroad," "Dance Hall Girl," "Fannie the Hike," "Meals for Sale." The myth of Fannie Quigley has inspired articles, stories, poetry, music, and plays. Was any of it true?

In short, I was intrigued, I was confused, and I was hooked. But there was a problem. I came suddenly to the realization that in spite of all that had been written, *no one even knew her name*. Without a maiden name to attach to the legend, details about her family, why she went north, or why she stayed for nearly forty years in her home in the high hills near Mount McKinley remained obscured by the tall-tale quality of the stories surrounding her.

Modern historians have access to a variety of resources, such as census data, mining claim records, newspaper indexes, court records, and city directories. But no information about Fannie's early life was accessible without that crucial piece of information—her maiden name, her birth name. Without that name or the background it would reveal, Fannie would remain a prisoner of her mythological status, presented as a symbol of the greater myth of the frontier.

Finding a maiden name became the crucial task. The marriage to Angus McKenzie was, I believed, the key, and so I wrote to the Yukon Office of Vital Statistics. My hand trembled as I opened the government envelope that came back a few weeks later—and not just because it was below zero as I checked my rural delivery box. The Yukon officials would not send a copy of the marriage certificate, but they did supply the information on it: "Fannie Sedlacek," the letter read, "daughter of J. and Josephine Sedlacek of Wahoo, Nebraska was married to Angus McKenzie, of Bruce, Ontario, Canada on October 1, 1900."[5] So there it was, a key that would unlock homestead records, census records, a past.