



Florence Rucker (Collins), Houston, Texas 1947.

Florence Collins personal collection, photograph taken by Florence Robinson.

FLORENCE COLLINS

Florence Collins, geologist and aviator, was a woman of adventure and an important part of Denali National Park and Preserve's long history of scientific research. While a geology student at the University of Chicago, Florence Rucker (Collins) met Florence Robinson (Weber) on a school project and the two became fast friends. "Ru" and "Ro," shortened versions of their surnames, were inspired to learn to fly after visiting a WWII fighter aircraft exhibit. Furthermore, Florence reports, one could get gas for planes but not autos due to wartime rations. After Ru and Ro became "Sunday afternoon airplane drivers," and after the war ended, the women learned to drive automobiles and drove the Alaska Highway in 1948.

Enamored with Alaska, both women took jobs with the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in Fairbanks after graduate school. Ru and Ro explored Alaska vigorously, embarking on a few long river trips in the Arctic and flying around, for "there was no other way to see the territory in those days," until they were sent back to work in the USGS office in Washington, D.C. in 1954.

Life in the Sky

In D.C., Florence and Ro reported they felt like "birds in a gilded cage." They found their freedom by purchasing a SuperCub with floats and flying it back to Alaska in 1956. The two traveled to remote locations across Alaska in their SuperCub, and Florence recalled many years later that, "people were shocked to see two daring young women." Envious of the men who were assigned to geology field work, Florence craved time in the field. In her personal explorations, Florence discovered intriguing vegetated sand dunes near Minchumina, a community with a large landing strip located near the northwest corner of Denali National Park and Preserve. Geology and flight brought Florence to Lake Minchumina where the purchase of a cabin and meeting Dick Collins would open up the next chapter of her life.



Florence Collins and Florence Robinson, pictured here with their Cessna 140.

Florence Collins personal collection.



Florence and Dick Collins picnicking, 1981.

Photo by Julie Collins.

Family Life at Lake Minchumina

Florence married Dick Collins, a pilot employed by the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA), in 1957. In the ensuing years, airplanes would continue to be an integral part of her life in accessing their remote home and flying friends, supplies, rescue missions, and family outings. Florence and Dick and their three children, Ray, Miki, and Julie, embraced life in a bush community.

Florence and Dick built their own cabin, home-schooled their children, traveled by dog team, and filled the table with game meat, fish, and berries that they hunted and collected.

Florence's life in Minchumina also included her pursuit to better understand the local geological history and in 1985 she published a scholarly article on the vegetated sand dunes of the area.

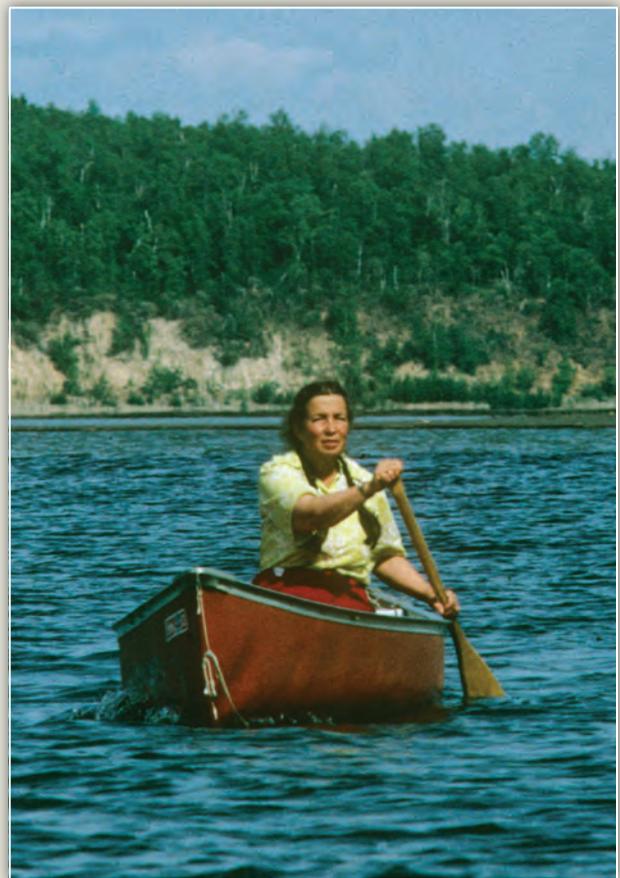


Florence hauling furniture behind a snow machine.

Photograph by Dick Collins.

Leadership and Public Service

With her breadth of experience and conservation ethic, Florence became an important conservation voice throughout Alaska's interior. For over 20 years, Florence "artfully guided" the Subsistence Resource Commission (SRC), promoting cooperation between subsistence users and Denali National Park and Preserve. She was one of the founders of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center (NAEC) and faithfully contributed to its monthly newsletter for over 20 years. In recognition of her legacy, NAEC gives out a Florence Collins award in honor of significant contribution to conservation in Alaska. In 2007, Florence was awarded the National Park Service's Summit Award for Lifetime Achievement. Florence's life of adventure, public service, and leadership inspires belief that one woman's life can be exemplary in many ways.



Florence canoeing on Lake Minchumina, a favorite pastime, 1981.

Photograph by Julie Collins.

Sources: Florence and Dick Collins Oral History, October 1998, Denali National Park and Preserve Museum Collection. • Florence Collins Interview about Slim Carlson Oral History, December 2004, University of Alaska Fairbanks Collection. • Ginny Wood and Florence Collins Oral History, May 2004, Denali National Park and Preserve Museum Collection. • Personal Communication, Miki and Julie Collins, June 2014. • "Recollections of Mom at 90 and Her Pioneering Spirit," Julie Collins, May 29, 2011, *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*.

For more information about Denali National Park and Preserve: <http://www.nps.gov/dena/historyculture/index.htm>