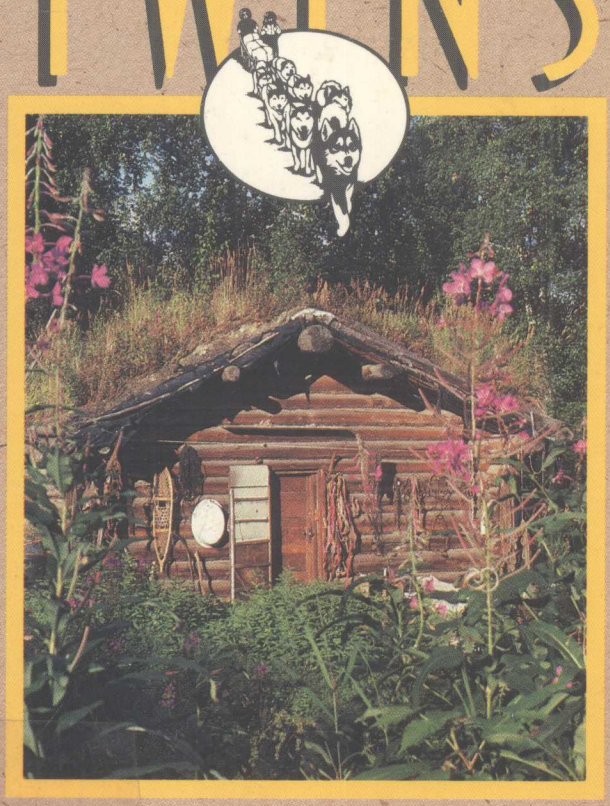
TRAPLINE TWINS



BY JULIE & MIKI COLLINS

TRAPLINE TWINS

BY JULIE & MIKI COLLINS

Alaska Northwest Books™
Anchorage • Seattle

Second printing 1990

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Collins, Miki, 1959–
Trapline twins.
1. Collins, Miki, 1959– . 2. Collins, Julie, 1959– .
3. Trappers—Alaska—Biography. I. Collins, Julie, 1959–. II. Title.
SK17.C58A3 1989 639'.1'0922 [B] 88-34231
ISBN 0-88240-332-X

Design by Virginia Hance
Photos by Julie and Miki Collins

Alaska Northwest Books™
A division of GTE Discovery Publications, Inc.
22026 20th Avenue S.E.
Bothell, WA 98021

Printed in U.S.A.

PREFACE

This is an adventure book. It is not a how-to book, nor does it glorify trapping nor the bush Alaska way of life. It is a book about how we live, our trials and tribulations, triumphs and disasters.

For three years we struggled with the idea of writing this book. We didn't really want to display our precious lifestyle in a permanent form, possibly encouraging others to seek it for themselves when wilderness resources are already stretched, when recent state and federal land sales have threatened us with the problem now menacing many of earth's creatures — loss of habitat. Unlike many writers who chronicle their Alaskan experiences, we have not moved on to other lives and occupations. We *live* in the bush. We *are* trappers. Our adventures are still happening. Many — some of the best — will have to wait for Book Two.

But write it we did, with trepidation and the fervent hope that Our Readers will respect our lives and our valued privacy. Here are some of our favorite adventure stories — chasing a grizzly bear with a dog team, falling through ice, struggling with overflow and cold and exhaustion on the trapline, running sled-dog races; dog stories, puppy stories and trail stories.

Because we both wrote this book, each taking certain chapters, you may be confused now and again. Did Miki shoot that big bull moose, or was it Julie? But don't worry; since we're identical twins, most everyone around us lives in a state of perpetual confusion. If Miki hadn't shot a moose that year, Julie would have, so it really doesn't matter. We each answer to either name anyway.

This way of life is rare today, and dying out as Civilization approaches. We do not take our good fortune for granted, and if we seem selfish for not wanting to share anything beyond the stories our life produces, it is only because we value our lifestyle so much. To share it is to lose it. An eight-hundred-square-mile trapline can support two trappers if handled properly, but no more. But with stories, we can be generous! It has been our privilege to live this life, and now it is our privilege to share it with you.

Dedication

To Daddy and Marmee,
who supported us in the path we chose to follow, and to
our brother, Ray,
who pointed out the trail.

Acknowledgments

Some stories in this book appeared in different form
in periodicals including *Alaska*,
the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, *Northland News*,
Alaskafest, *Alaska Airlines Magazine* and *Alaska Gangline*.
Parts of chapters three and six appeared in different form in
Sports Afield, January 1982 and 1985 Hunting Edition.
Parts of chapters three and five appeared in
Fur-Fish-Game, December 1982 and March 1984.
All appear here with permission from the original publishers.

If you enjoyed reading *Trapline*

you can look to Alaska Northwest Books™ for more outdoor books true stories about life in the North country.

Kootenay Country: One Man's Life in the Canadian Rockies,
by Ernest "Fee" Hellmen.
Kootenay Country is an easy-reading account of author "Fee" Hellmen's life fishing, hunting, and as a big-game guide in the rugged East Kootenay Valley of British Columbia. Beginning in the 1920s when Hellmen was a boy, this selection of anecdotes chronicles the adventures, dangers and pleasures inherent in a life in the Great Outdoors.
224 pages, softbound, $9.95 ($12.95 Canadian), ISBN 0-88240-357-5

The Northwest Sportsman Almanac, edited by Terry W. Sheely.
Now in a take-along, softbound edition, *The Northwest Sportsman Almanac* showcases recreational opportunities from Alaska to northern California and from Montana to the Pacific Ocean (including Alberta and British Columbia). Veteran outdoor writer-editor Terry Sheely has assembled the best work of writers and photographers in a guide that's coffee-table beautiful, tackle-box informative.
291 pages, softbound, $19.95 ($24.95 Canadian), ISBN 0-88240-296-X
291 pages, hardbound, $34.95 ($42.95 Canadian), ISBN 0-88240-295-1

Alaska Bear Tales, by Larry Kaniut.
Kaniut's original book of bear tales has been a best-seller for years. It is a sometimes chilling, always gripping collection of true stories about folks who survived close calls with bears and those who didn't.
318 pages, softbound, $12.95 ($15.95 Canadian), ISBN 0-88240-232-3

Winging It!, by Jack Jefford, pioneer Alaskan aviator.
Jack Jefford tells his own story: the most thrilling, amusing and heartwarming experiences of a "pilot's pilot" who flew everything from biplanes to jets. Edited by Carmen Jefford Fisher, Mark Fisher, and Cliff Cernick. With 57 photos and a map.
320 pages, softbound, $12.95 ($15.95 Canadian), ISBN 0-88240-371-0

Ask for these books at your favorite bookstore or contact Alaska Northwest Books™ for a complete catalog.

Alaska North
A division of GTE Discovery Publications, Inc.
P.O. Box 3007
Bothell, WA 98041-3007
Toll free: 1-800-343-4567

CONTENTS

TRIAL RUN

I stood at the crest of a mountainous snowdrift and looked down from the wind-shaped cornice at the road that emerged from the snow far below me.

"How does it look?" my twin sister asked anxiously.

"We've got about thirty feet of vertical snow," I answered. Miki's hazel eyes widened with surprise. "With a six-foot cornice at the top," I added.

"Can we get the dogs down it?"

I eyed the small trail sled loaded with camping gear, the eight huskies waiting in their harnesses, and my twin sister standing on the runners waiting for my decision. "I don't know, but we're going to try. I don't think we can get around it, and we can't really go back, can we?"

Behind us the deserted, snow-drifted road wound

through mountain passes to the headquarters of Denali National Park. Ahead lay the hazards of the Alaska bush, but deep in that land, beyond an unfamiliar stretch of mountains, was our home. That's where we were going — home. For nine winters we had struggled with school in Fairbanks, but we were finally ready to be graduated from college. During our spring break, before the last of the snow melted, we wanted to mush our dogs to our isolated bush village to avoid the cost of flying them home later.

Our excitement was heightened by just a touch of fear as we turned our big wheel dogs loose from their places in front of the sled. With the light wooden craft free-falling down that monster snowdrift, we didn't want it running over the dogs in front of it.

Miki held the alert team back as I leaped over the cornice and plunged fifteen feet down to where the slope grew less steep. I slid to the bottom, then turned and shouted to the dogs.

"OK, let's go!"

Our two gutsy leaders, Tonto and King, jumped boldly over the crest, dragging the other dogs behind them. The team cascaded down the snow cliff, and then Miki and her sled flew over the edge. She plummeted downward, losing control of the sled near the bottom as it skidded up on the dogs. At the road below, she snapped the sled straight and stopped the team.

Another obstacle behind us. Already we had traveled along gravel roads, on river ice and glazed creeks, and tundra laid bare by an early spring. The sled brake, already battered by exposed tundra tussocks, had broken and been temporarily lashed back into place. The rough going had also broken one of our skis while Miki was skijoring behind the sled, making travel all the more tedious. Despite the troubles we kept on, determined to reach home.

Ever since we put together a dog team at age fifteen, we had dreamed of mushing our dogs from Fairbanks to our lifelong home at Lake Minchumina. This ten-day spring break shortly before graduation was our last chance. We planned to move home permanently in May. The vacation came in late March and an early breakup meant tough going, but we decided to try it. We knew this wouldn't be a pleasure trip, but at the time we had only a little cross-country work behind us and we didn't realize just how much could go wrong.

Now the trail wound up and around Stony Hill, stretching out toward the great mountain, Denali. We toiled steadily upward, one struggling with the broken ski while the other struggled with the loaded sled as it dragged heavily across patches of gravel.

"I think — I think we've come too far," Miki said at last as we stopped to study the map and rest the dogs. "We should've left the road two miles back and dropped down the valley into Thorofare Creek."

I studied the craggy white mountains, with Denali above them all in a curtain of clouds. Below us lay a vast glacial flood plain, the level whiteness broken and spotted by rocky cobblestones. The road stretched ahead of us, inviting us to continue above the valley, but it was leading us up the side of a mountain. To reach the valley we had to go three hundred feet down — almost straight down.

We decided, as usual, to go the hard and fast way rather than backtracking to a safer route down. We intended to follow a sloping shoulder part way before dropping down to a steep, narrow ravine into a gorge which led to the valley. We left the road and jolted over the tundra to a treacherous drop-off just above the narrow ravine. I volunteered to drive the sled down this first plunge. It looked too dangerous to take the whole team down, so we unhooked most of the dogs and let them run

loose. The sled darted forward, gaining momentum as I gripped the handlebow.

We skidded over an icy bank and, as the ground dropped away, my light craft became airborne, shooting over the tundra and arching gracefully downward. It crashed nose-first into the frozen ground.

I spun away from the sled, my grip broken by the impact. The sled skidded and rolled, and I bounced and rolled, then bounced some more before jamming in the frozen tussocks. After lying in the hummocks for awhile I decided to at least try to get up, so Miki would know I was alive. Feeling myself tenderly, I discovered to my astonishment that only my eyeglasses were broken. The sled looked all right, too. Later we realized that the right runner must have been cracked.

"*You* can take it down that gully," I said. "I'm not going down any more hills."

Miki studied the steep little ravine leading into the gorge below. "Why don't *you* go over there and make sure there isn't a frozen waterfall under that snow?"

I walked to the precipice and started down. One foot slipped and without warning I was sliding downward in ice cleverly hidden under a half-inch of snow. Luckily I skidded to a stop on a patch of gravel, and then inched my way down. The entire ravine lay coated with ice.

"We can't go down there," I told Miki.

"We jolly well have to."

"We can't!"

"We *have* to!"

"Well — how about lowering the sled down backward with the towline?"

"OK."

We turned the dogs loose again and Miki guided the sled from below as I walked it down with the long towline.

Two-thirds of the way down I slipped on the ice and the rope snapped away. Miki and the sled glided helplessly to the bottom of the icy ravine, twisting in graceful pirouettes as they slid over bumps and dips.

I brought the dogs down while Miki scouted the last descent. "We're going to rough-lock it this time," she declared grimly.

We wrapped twenty-five pounds of stake-out chain around the runners, but even with the added friction Miki had only a vestige of control, and one railing snapped as the sled ploughed past some thick willows.

Dusk was falling when we broke out onto the wide flood plain. This was no place to camp, with neither a tree for shelter nor a twig for fire. I jogged ahead of the dogs, guiding them across the trackless, rocky ground. After four long miles over the cobbles, Thorofare Creek narrowed into a low canyon. That's where our troubles began.

Two inches of ice had formed over the creek, and the underlying water had later drained away, leaving a hollow shell. The dogs trotted easily over it, but again and again the sled broke through and tumbled two feet down to the boulder-strewn creek bottom. Despite the bad ice we were clipping along fairly well until the sled crashed down again, this time slamming to a halt so violent it threw me from my perch atop the load. Miki dived forward to see what the trouble was, and came up swearing to the best of her very limited ability.

"We've busted a runner!"

Short of total disintegration, a broken runner is the most serious accident a sled can have. The right runner, probably damaged in the earlier crash, had snapped in front of the first upright stanchion. When we tried to move, the jagged edge plowed us to halt.

I ran down the creek to see whether the canyon opened

up soon onto the McKinley River, where we could find spruce trees to camp in. The valley twisted on forever and I returned in despair.

"We're in big trouble," I said.

"We'll never get out of here by dark," Miki added gloomily.

"We can't camp here. There's nothing here, no spruce boughs to sleep on or anything."

"I don't think we've got much choice," Miki said.

A narrow sandbar lay jammed between the boulders of the creek and the gravelly cliffs above us, and we ferried our load up there, dragged the crippled sled over, and set up camp. The darkness in the canyon made our troubles seem all the more oppressive. Back in those rough old days we traveled cheaply, without air mattresses, headlamps or the newer, lightweight cable pickets for the dogs. Miki slept in the sled, as usual, but without the comfort of a soft spruce-bough mattress under me, I lay awake for some time on a skimpy mattress of dog-food sacks and a couple of burlap sacks on the snow. I lay awake thinking until I figured out how to repair the runner with no spare lumber nor even a tree to hack out a splint.

With the new day came renewed determination, and as the sun rose over the rim of the canyon, my spirits lifted. While Miki dried our frost-dampened gear over a willow-twig fire, I fastened the broken ski against the broken sled runner as a splint and lashed the works together with all the twine we had.

We were on the way again, dodging boulders and skidding around icy turns. Then, stopping to check the route ahead, we found bear tracks in the snow. Grizzly tracks. Fresh.

"He's somewhere ahead of us," I said, my heart pounding. Spring bears can be ornery.

"The only direction we can go is downriver," Miki replied. "We sure can't get out of this canyon any other way."

"Right." We hiked up the dogs and went on cautiously, every nerve taut. If the canyon didn't open up soon, we were likely to run up on the bear. Those tracks had been made since the last afternoon's thaw.

Soon eight pairs of ears pricked up and the dogs slammed into their harnesses in unison. The scent of bear changed them from steady workers to stampeding maniacs, and on the glare ice I couldn't check their charge.

A great shadow undulated beyond the cover of thick willows one hundred and fifty yards away. "There he is," I gasped. The dogs went crazy.

"Look out for those rocks! You'll smash that bad runner!" Miki yelled.

"*You* watch for the bear, *I'm* driving the sled!" I shouted back. Miki clung tight to the top of the load as we careened toward the boulders. At the last instant I skidded the sled sideways so the strong left runner absorbed the impact as we crashed and shuddered to a halt.

"Settle down, boys," I growled at the dogs, glancing warily toward where I had last glimpsed the grizzly. We lined out the tangled huskies and they surged forward again, still loping but less frantically. We chased the bear, or rather his tracks, for two miles. Just as the canyon began to open up we saw him again, far ahead of us. Miki grabbed a tin can and banged loudly on it. The grizzly spun around, lifting his head. He stared at us and we stared back. Miki quietly put the can down.

The dogs were rapidly closing the distance between us, and we weren't sure whether the bear would run or charge, but with the broken sled brake skittering over the glazed ice, it was impossible to stop the driving team. Finally the bear turned away, heading for a ravine leading up the canyon wall. We didn't see him again.

The valley widened and the creek opened up on broad flats littered with open channels and cobblestones. Wading the numerous ice-water streams soon soaked our boots, socks and feet, but we kept on, always hoping for better conditions ahead. After fighting our way down the McKinley River for a day, we cut cross-country and ran into deep snow.

Snow cliffs, bare trails, treacherous mountainsides, open water and the grizzly had failed to stop us, but the deep snow did. Four feet of it, heavy with meltwater and almost impossible to snowshoe in, the thick slush slowed our pace to a crawl. With the dogs growing ever more weary, our gear suffering from the abuse, and the broken runner dragging, we covered only twelve miles in three days.

We were out of dog food, school started in just a couple of days, and we were still more than sixty miles from home. Reluctantly we flagged down our brother, Ray, when he flew over in a ski plane to check on us. We cached the sled in the trees, and four hours later, after three round trips with the Supercub to ferry our dogs and gear, we were home.

We had failed to reach our destination unaided, and the defeat stung. Later we realized that the worst adventures make for the best memories. Although in the years to come we were to log thousands of miles in cross-country dogsled trips, that hundred-mile adventure ranks at the top for pure excitement.

Anyway, the dogs were home and that was our main goal. After another month of school we would be home too, home to stay.

2

A GOOD START

Our father, Richard Collins, came north in 1942 to work on the Alaska Highway. He then worked for twenty-five years in the bush for the Federal Aviation Administration. When they transferred him to Lake Minchumina, he stayed with the Flight Service Station there until they tried to transfer him to Anchorage. Then he retired.

Our mother, Florence Rucker, drove the Alaska Highway in 1948 with a girlfriend, also named Florence. After they discovered the difficulty of traveling in a land without roads, Marmee, as we call her, and Florence bought a little Cessna 140. In the next few years they flew across Alaska for pleasure and in connection with their work as geologists.

The 85-horse airplane gave questionable performance on Alaska's improvised bush strips, and when the two returned