

Helmi Conaster passes on

Helmi Conaster, 51, died unexpectedly Oct. 23 at her cabin on the Yukon River at Eagle Island. Helmi and her husband, Ralph, have been well known along the river between Grayling and Kaltag for operating the Eagle Island Checkpoint on the Iditarod Sled Dog Race. The family is featured in the book "The Last Great Race." Ron Strickland devotes a chapter to Helmi in his new book "Alaskans, Life on the Last Frontier".

Helmi, born in Kiel, Germany on Jan. 23, 1941, immigrated to Florida in Sept. 1958, to work for her aunt. Two weeks

after her arrival, she met Ralph Conaster and the couple were married May 23, 1960. In 1961, Helmi gave birth to her son Steve. They moved to Sitka in 1964 where they began fishing commercially in the remote areas of the Alsek River near Yakutat.

Thinking that she would like to experience Bush Alaska, Helmi agreed to try living on the Yukon River. If she didn't like it, Ralph bargained that the family could move back to town after a year. Beginning with the spring break up in 1975, the couple fished the Yukon in sum-

mer and trapped during the winter.

For the first years, they lived in a tent. Once they mastered the necessary skills, they built a series of comfortable log cabins. Their home became a frequent place to stop for travelers along the river. Helmi's hospitality was legendary. She was famous for her mooseburgers and stew. During the Race, her care and feeding often restored tired mushers back to strength to finish the race.

Rev. David Kinney conducted a memorial service for Helmi on Oct. 27 at the Lazy Mountain Baptist Church in Palmer. In addition to her husband and son, Helmi leaves three stepchildren. The family asks that donations be made in her name to organizations that serve children in Alaska who experience disabilities.

—Submitted by David Maltman