



# northern exposure

THE UNUSUAL CAREER AND ADVENTURES OF DR. EARL GRAVES.

STORY BY JOE MONTGOMERY

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARY GRAVES ZAHN

*“There is nothing especially interesting about veterinary practice in Alaska. Most of the villages and towns up here are far too small to support a veterinarian.*

*“The local practice is primarily small-animal practice. My own experience goes back many years, to the time when I first came up in 1927 as the first Territorial Veterinarian.*

*“I get many letters from veterinarians who are interested in coming to Alaska, and they ask about the possibilities this region has to offer. It is my opinion that if these men are making a living at present, they should stay where they are.”*

These are the words of Dr. Earl F. Graves, who earned his DVM at Kansas State University in 1927. His remarks were written for the journal *Modern Veterinary Practice* and published Nov. 1, 1958. His career took several interesting turns, but being the first recognized veterinarian in Alaska territory gives him special distinction as a K-State alumnus.

## *Early years*

Dr. Graves was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and grew up in Leavenworth and Marysville, Kansas, the latter where he graduated from high school. He had enlisted in the Army during World War I, but lied about his age to get in because he was not yet 18. Dr. Graves was stationed in Fort Bliss, Texas, and learned to fly, but was not commissioned as a pilot. After the war, he left the army, and spent time in Texas and New Mexico to “punch” cattle.

“He loved horses and horseback riding, but not the local food,” writes daughter Mary Graves Zahn. “It also gave him a permanent dislike of snakes, especially rattlesnakes.”

Dr. Graves decided he wanted to attend college to become a veterinarian. He came to Manhattan where his parents were living at 1030 Fremont Street. His sister was attending K-State at that time, so he could save money by living

*Left: Students attending the College of Veterinary Medicine's anatomy lab in 1926. Students (from left) are Ramon Acevedo, Horace Mills, Albert Lauts, Jack Spurlock, Earl Graves, Louis Smith, Norman Howell, Clifford Conger, Robert Elsea and Glen Dunlap.*

*Right: Dr. Earl Graves helped fur farmers in Alaska care for their animals. He found the industry to be "problematic," however, and left the business in 1930 before going on to earn a master's degree in 1933.*



at home. As a way to earn money, he served as a student assistant in the pathology laboratory. Dr. Graves was blessed with natural artistic talent, so he ended up drawing a sizeable series of anatomical images for his professor's lectures and publications.

### *North to Alaska*

After graduating, Dr. Graves began considering the job in Alaska to service the fox and mink farmers. Before leaving, the Biological Survey arranged for Dr. Graves to visit upstate New York where he would train for a month at the National Experimental Fur Farm in Saratoga Springs.

"My duties then were to call upon the fur-farmers, and to help whenever I could, and to test the few head of cattle yearly," Dr. Graves wrote in the 1958 article for *Modern Veterinary Practice*. "The only pioneering aspect of my practice consisted in sewing up a few cows which had been clawed up by bears, but, since the bears have been killed off, that type of problem no longer arises."

His daughter Mary penned a biography about her father. She writes, "The position in Alaska paid \$4,000 plus expenses, a salary we cannot relate to today. The job consisted of travelling all over southeastern Alaska, the edge of the mainland, Kodiak Island, and up the center of the mainland to Fairbanks.

"Earl briefly returned to Manhattan and married his fiancée [Katherine "Kitty" Faulconer]," Mary writes. "She was a Kansas State graduate in home economics and assistant to the dean of the home economics department. Their honeymoon was the long trip from Manhattan to Seattle and from Seattle to Juneau by steamship. They had no permanent abode although they lived in southeastern Alaska most of the time. They always travelled together. Earl published a great deal on the raising of fox and mink in local publications and national fur raising publications."

### *Caring for fur farms*

Stories about Dr. Graves' work were included in a book published in 2012 called, "The Fur Farms of Alaska: Two Centuries of History and a Forgotten Stampede" by Sarah Crawford Isto [The University of Alaska Press].

"Graves worked six days a week in conditions that ranged from pleasant to arduous to hair-raising. For example, in July 1929, he enjoyed three nights in the luxury railroad hotel at Curry performing a newly assigned duty — TB (tuberculosis) tests for the cows that supplied milk for the dining room. The following day he traveled to the whistle stop of Caswell, where he walked nine miles to inspect two mink farms. In December, he traveled to a fox farm on Eleanor Island in Prince William Sound. He waited for four days to get

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Dr. Earl Graves  
on relocating to Alaska

a boat to the island. Then after working for more than a week alongside the farmer to demonstrate trapping and pelting techniques, he waited three days for weather before attempting to return to Cordova.”

Dr. Graves found the fox farming industry to be problematic, and not just in terms of animal welfare.

“Alcohol, specifically moonshine, was a problem on island fur farms, not just according to Graves, but according to others acquainted with fur farmers,” write Isto. “Earl Graves was not a teetotaler,” she notes, but that “... Graves had no patience for men who concentrated on their stills and neglected their animals.”

### *Moving on*

In 1930, Dr. Graves had had enough, so he resigned his position in Alaska and briefly went into fur farming in Spokane Bride, Washington.

Dr. Graves then decided to work on a master’s degree, which he earned at the University of Wisconsin in 1933. Wisconsin did not have a veterinary college at the time, but did offer several veterinary courses. He wrote a thesis on “Diseases of Furbearing Animals.” He then took a job as the veterinarian at the Wisconsin Game and Experiment Farm in Poynette, Wisconsin, for the Wisconsin Conservation Department.

A sudden illness took Kitty’s life, but Dr. Graves would later remarry and start a family. He bounced between jobs in Colorado and Wisconsin, and was then contacted in 1940 by the governor of Alaska to see if he would return. The new focus of his job would be on helping dairy farmers of the Matanuska Valley Cooperative.

### *Final chapter*

After several years, Dr. Graves grew tired of “many nights, in below zero temperatures, stripping down in no heat barns to deliver a calf.” In 1952, he moved to Anchorage and started a small animal practice, but also saw birds and a few wild animals.

“Because of his love for animals, he kept his fees reasonable, did some for free, or allowed poor owners to pay their veterinary bills weekly or monthly,” Mary writes. “He remained there until his early death of a rather rare disease at age 63.”

Dr. Graves is buried in Manhattan with both of his wives. Later his son would be buried there after being killed in the service. Dr. Graves is survived by two daughters: Mary, and Victoria Ault. 🌐

# Dr. Earl Graves

*the artist*



Fig. one

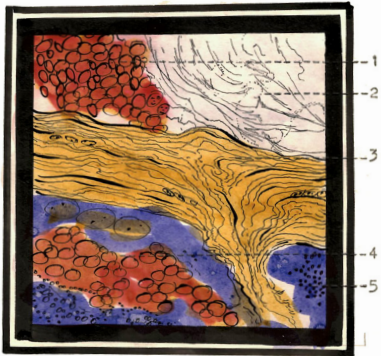
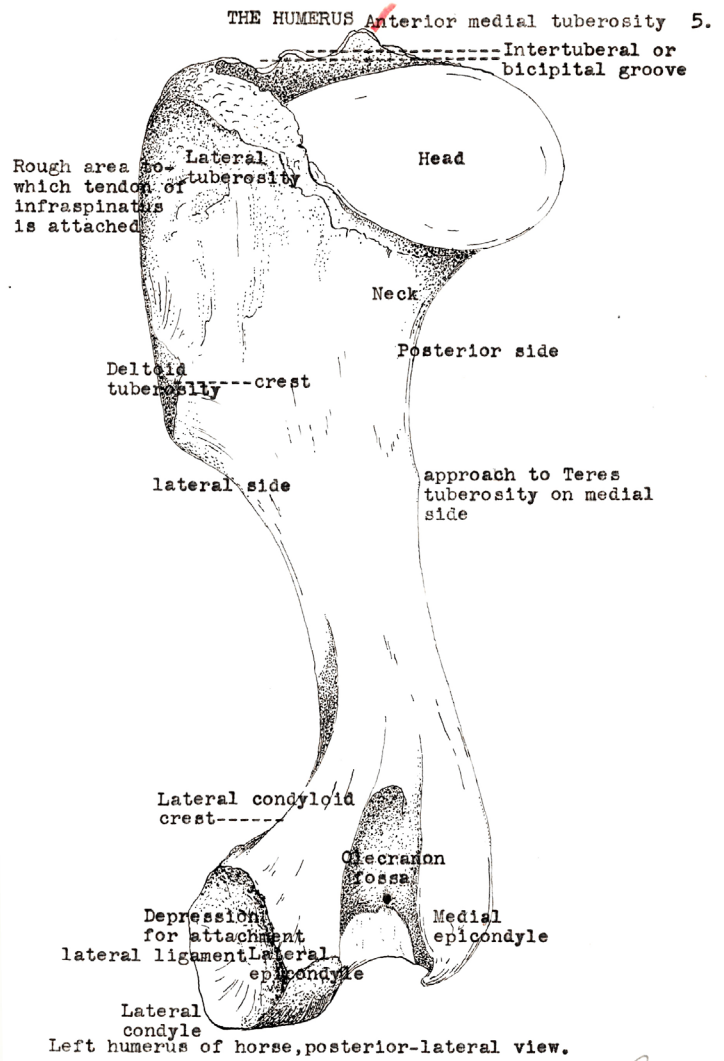
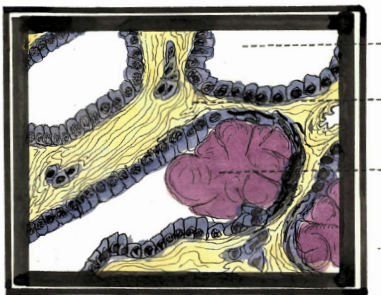
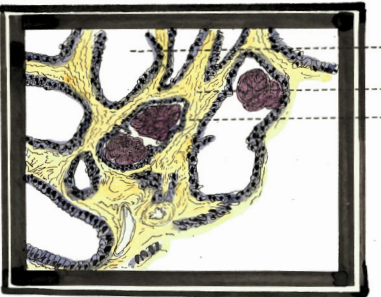


Fig. onwe



*Earl F. Graves*  
Earl F. Graves.

*Anatomical drawings from Dr. Earl Graves' 1925 and 1926 histology notebooks.*