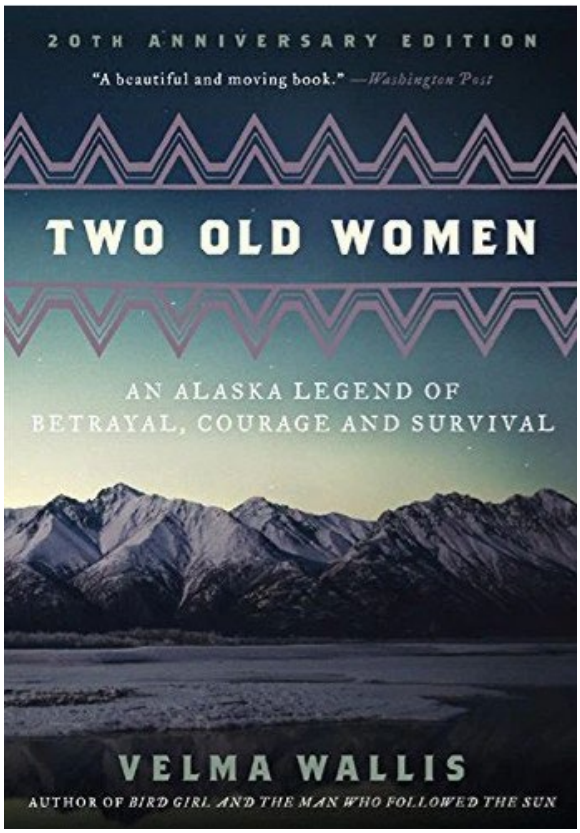
Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend Of Betrayal, Courage and Survival by Velma Wallis

Martin County Library System Book Discussion Kit:

Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival by Velma Wallis

Included in the Kit:

- Book summary
- Author biography
- Discussion questions
- Recipe suggestions



Book summary

Based on an Athabascan Indian legend passed along for many generations from mothers to daughters of the upper Yukon River Valley in Alaska, this is the suspenseful, shocking, ultimately inspirational tale of two old women abandoned by their tribe during a brutal winter famine. Though these women have been known to complain more than contribute, they now must either survive on their own or die trying. In simple but vivid detail, Velma Wallis depicts a landscape and way of life that are at once merciless and starkly beautiful. In her old women, she has created two heroines of steely determination whose story of betrayal, friendship, community, and forgiveness "speaks straight to the heart with clarity, sweetness, and wisdom" (Ursula K. Le Guin).

Two Old Women was published in 1993, at a time when an Alaska Native woman writing about her culture was not the norm. The story explored hard choices made by a nomadic people when caring for the few could harm the many.

Would readers think less about the people who would desert their elders in such a manner? Velma published it anyway. Velma's book was a hit in Alaska and soon went global being translated into seventeen languages. It won the Western State Book Award in 1993 and the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Book Award in 1994.

(Source: https://www.womenwhodared.org/velma-wallis)

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Meet the Author



Velma Wallis grew up in the Fort Yukon area of Alaska near the Arctic Circle. Hearing her mother, Mae, tell stories of her Gwitch'in (Athabaskan) ancestors was so powerful it lead her down the unexpected path of becoming a world-renowned author.

After dropping out of high school, Velma was determined to write stories. After a great deal of personal work and earning a GED, she wrote the story of Two Old Women. How it came to be published may read like fiction. Her brother, Barry, was convinced this book needed to be read by others. He encouraged his cousin to share the manuscript with her professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Lael Morgan a longtime Alaska journalist, author, historian and UAF instructor used the manuscript in her writing class for discussion with her students. They loved the story and also thought it should be published. When the students started brainstorming fundraising ideas, Lael knew it was time to explore publishing the story with Epicenter Press. Two Old Women became a real book.

(Source: https://www.womenwhodared.org/velma-wallis)

Discussion Questions

1. What is the most serious conflict or problem for Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak? How do they overcome it?
2. How do the memories of Athabaskan culture and tradition contribute to their survival?
3. How do the women manage to overcome their loneliness?
4. When The People finally make contact with the women, how have the women changed from when Dagoo last saw them?
5. What was the lesson Dagoo has learned since The People left the women behind?
6. What does the well-trodden path between the two camps represent?
7. Identify situations where individuals apologize or admit they are wrong. In each case, what motivates the apology?

8. Locate a map of Alaska and where Wallis lived. Identify the areas where the women may have traveled. Learn about the way the land in that area is used today and where the Athabascan people might live.

(Source: https://www.humanitiesmontana.org/wp-content/uploads/Two_Old_Women_DiscussionQuestions.pdf)

Recipes

Blueberry Bread

Serves: 20 (1 loaf)



Ingredients:

- 2 cups self-rising flour
- 1 cup milk
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 cup sugar option: sugar substitute
- 2 cups blueberries
- 1 stick of butter

Directions:

Mix eggs, butter and sugar together in medium to large bowl. Add flour, milk, and vanilla. Then add berries to mixture. Put in baking pan and bake in over at 350 degrees for approximately 40 minutes or until done.

(Source: https://anthc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Nellie-final-2024.pdf)

Recipes Continuation

Clam Dip



Serves 9

Ingredients:

- 1 8-ounce container cream cheese, softened
- 1/4 cup sour cream
- 1 6-ounce can chopped clams
- 1 tablespoon chopped or dried parsley
- 1 minced garlic clove
- 1/4 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- Dash of Tabasco sauce

Directions:

Blend together until smooth. Cover and chill.

(Source: https://anthc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Nellie-final-2024.pdf)