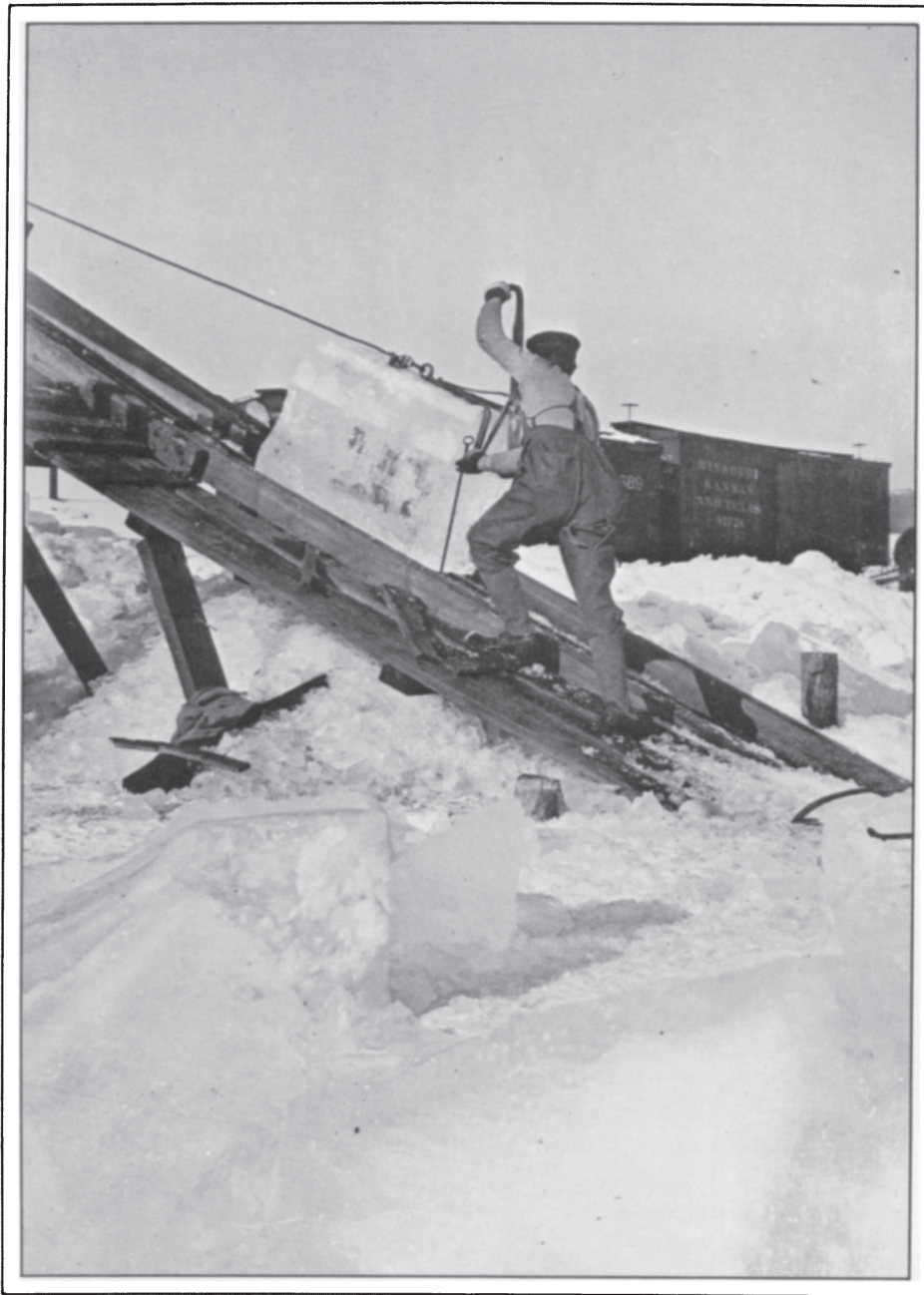


# Game of Marguerite Greenfield with the Great Northern



Loading ice at Elk Park, Montana, ca. 1925

MONTANA THE MAGAZINE OF WESTERN HISTORY

# Freeze-Out and Her Battle Railway, 1920-1929

by Joan Bishop

Marguerite Greenfield was at the high point of her career in May 1921, when *American Magazine* featured her in a full-page article about the ice lady from Helena, Montana. "She is the owner of a flourishing ice business," wrote interviewer Betty Dishon,

which she has built by grit, seven year's hard work, and an absolute and definite refusal to admit she might possibly be beaten. Don't get the idea that she is one of those arrow-collar, man shirt wearing, swearing types of women, for she isn't. She is small and dainty and attractive and her clothes are the most feminine sort—neither is she a clinging vine who weeps on every visible masculine shoulder and coos at men and wears georgette crepe waists and flower-bedecked hats.<sup>1</sup>

Marguerite's outspoken personality and her work as a woman managing what was traditionally a man's business entertained readers. She told Dishon, "What do men know about ice anyhow? . . . It is a woman who buys it and uses it for the preservation of her foodstuffs. Why shouldn't a woman go into the ice business?"

Although "everyone said it couldn't be done," Marguerite owned and managed the Independent Ice Company for twenty-two years, from 1912 to 1934. What had begun as a small wholesale operation in Helena had grown to include major Great Northern Railway contracts that she filled with ice cut from a high plateau pond at Elk Park.

The Independent Ice Company no longer exists, but Marguerite Greenfield left a record of her business dealings. Between 1916 and 1934, Marguerite kept a journal, and in its ninety-eight pages she described the full range of her work, from harvesting to deliveries, from pond to ice box.<sup>2</sup> She frequently wrote about her conflicts, first with a local Helena competitor and later with officials of the Great Northern Railway. Although her father, Charles Greenfield, helped her and lent support when times got rough, it was her intelligence, imagination, and stamina that kept her going. She was able to keep her business and fight to expose railroad officials' graft to finally satisfy her most demanding critic, herself.

**M**arguerite was born in Helena, Montana, in 1883. She grew up in a sheltered family environment in the handsome three-story Victorian home her father built at 520 Hauser Boulevard. Her early years with two younger brothers and a sister were happy ones; and the few letters, the report cards from Helena High School, and the newspaper clippings about parties she attended portray her as a good student and popular friend.

Her father, Charles Greenfield, was originally from Baltimore. He and his wife, Marietta, came to Helena in 1883 from Denver, where he had been a newspaper reporter for the *Denver Tribune*. Well liked and respected as a “gentleman” who was “cool, deliberate, calm, and loyal,” he succeeded in this future capital city, where he became city editor of the *Helena Daily Independent* and then editor of the *Helena Herald*. Very much a booster, Charles actively participated in the Commercial Club and also served on the library and school boards.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 1921, Charles changed professions and for ten years was the agricultural agent for the Great Northern Railway.

In many ways Marguerite was her father’s daughter. Like her journalist father, she loved to write, and she composed several western stories and historical sketches. She also had a talent for parody, and sometime in her young adult years she wrote a twelve-page spoof of Helena society.<sup>4</sup>

As Marguerite grew older, she grew more independent, traveling to California during the summers with her aunt, Sallie McBrine, a Helena schoolteacher who lived with them. She had less in common with her mother and her pretty younger sister, Marietta. It was often Marguerite who took on the more mundane household responsibilities to free them for “the fierce round of formal functions” that many upper middle class women craved. In a letter to Anna Nelson, her future sister-in-law, Marguerite hinted that she was growing bored with this routine, a feeling that may have eventually led her to seek a different occupation.

Describing a day spent preparing for a party, Marguerite wrote, “Marietta felt ‘wispy’ and was making a dress and mother was not feeling well, so I was kept busy. Three people on the bosom of nothing to do are too many.”<sup>5</sup>

At some point during her late twenties, it appears that Marguerite refused the offer of “a simple life” from a prospective suitor in Corvallis, Montana, and instead decided to go into the ice business.<sup>6</sup> Why did she choose the ice business? Perhaps her father suggested it when she told him that she wanted to do something different. He knew the business climate in Helena and may have thought there was room for another company. And since Marguerite



All photos courtesy MHS Photograph Archives

Marguerite Greenfield in front of the Broadwater Natatorium and Hot Springs in Helena, ca. 1900

could rent her friends’ ponds for the ice supply and build storage sheds by the alley next to her house, there was no risk of an overwhelming financial investment.

Beyond these practicalities, what was it about the ice business that fired her imagination? The interview she later gave *American Magazine* provides some answers. First, she loved working outdoors. To national readers who had already heard stories about life in the Rocky Mountains, this made good copy. “I was born

1. Betty Dishon, “A Woman in the Ice Business.” *American Magazine* (May 1921), 54.

2. Marguerite Greenfield’s Ice Journal was loaned to the author by her niece, Ann Jancic, of Helena. Other information on Greenfield can be found in the Charles Diggs Greenfield, Jr., Family Papers, MC 166, Montana Historical Society Archives [MHS], Helena. Unless otherwise noted, all of Marguerite’s quotes are from her journal.

3. William A. Campbell, “An Editor Passes On.” *Helena Daily Independent*, November 27, 1934.

4. Marguerite Greenfield, “Tales from the Village Watch-Tower.” n.d., Greenfield Family Papers, MHS. In the story, local matrons fight over the attentions of a visiting French author, Henry Dupin, who came to the “village” with the intention of comparing the women of the Rockies with those of the Andes, the Himalayas, and the Alps.

in Helena," she said. "I ride, swim, and row and do all things that keep one outdoors, so zero weather and a snowstorm do not affect me at all."<sup>7</sup>

She liked the ice business, she continued, because in marketing the indispensable home commodity she provided an essential service:

Of course in the summer time I'm ready to quit, when I am hunting help and all the rest of it, but when I realize that there is no substitute for ice, and that people must have it, I just wade into the work and get through. People can substitute for almost everything, but there is no substitute for ice—it has got to be delivered. They can burn the piano if they have to, when there is no fuel, but they can't keep the baby's milk sweet with substitutes.

Finally, running an ice business suited Marguerite's personality. At heart she was a showman, which along with her sense of humor heightened "the fun I get out of it." The incongruity of it all amused her: "It was just too funny to see folks making all that terrible fuss over poor little me going into business, and then watch them stare with surprise." Later when she confronted difficult challenges to her business, this light tone disappeared, but she still retained her sense of humor, which sustained her and helped her see the wry side of things. In October 1933, for instance, she wrote in her journal: "The ice business is like a perpetual horse race, sometimes lucky, sometimes not."

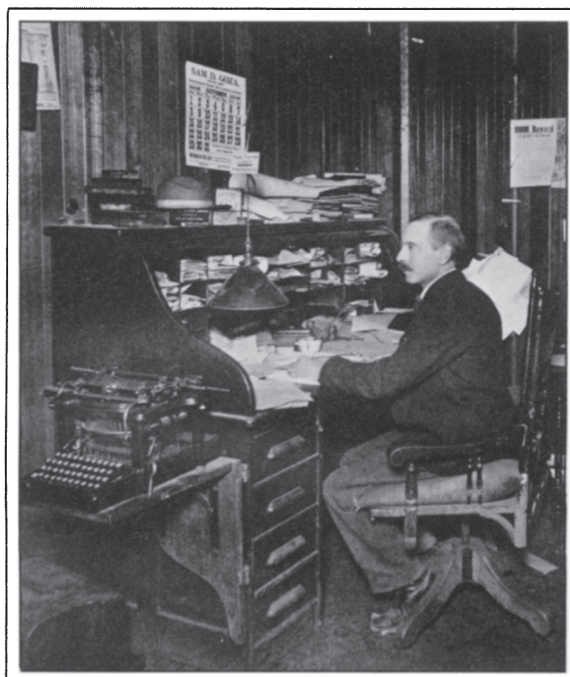
With "unlimited enthusiasm" Marguerite started her business in Helena in 1912. Sam Bartos, a family friend, taught her the trade. She learned how to use a horse scraper to keep the snow off the pond's surface so the ice would grow. She learned how to prepare the ice for cutting, making certain that the initial marking was accurate. Bartos taught her that if the blocks were not uniform they would thaw more rapidly, before the all-important summer deliveries.

During the first cutting operation, called "sinking the header," ice handlers made a channel the length of the area using seven-foot ice saws that had long teeth and special perpendicular handles for better leverage. If the first cut was made correctly, forming a proper wedge-shaped strip, the block could be forced under the flow. A second cutting enlarged the channel, giving large floats room to move freely. Then

5. Marguerite Greenfield to Anna Elizabeth Nelson, December 27, 1912. Greenfield Family Papers, MHS.

they could be prodded with pike poles, moving them to the loading area where workers used splitting forks to separate the lengths into twenty-two-inch blocks before loading them onto waiting bobsleds.

From specially constructed storage sheds insulated with sawdust, Marguerite operated a growing wholesale and retail operation. She found that there was always a market for her ice. An average Helena family who owned, for example, a Sears icebox costing \$10.00 contracted with an ice company for deliveries by purchasing coupon books for \$3.00, which were good for 500 pounds of ice.



Charles D. Greenfield in his office at the Helena Daily Independent, 1905

**F**rom the beginning, Marguerite knew that she would face stiff competition. Meyer Fish, who ran the Helena Ice Company at 378 Water Street, resented her entry into the market. There was nothing passive about his resentment. For years Fish had bought out other fledgling ice businesses. Undoubted-

6. Ward Myron Sackett to Marguerite Greenfield, October 20, 1910: "It's too bad you are not sufficiently interested in the simple life to take it up. Since your departure I find it hard to settle down to work." Other letters followed on March 27 and July 23, 1911. Greenfield Family Papers, MHS.

7. Dishon, "A Woman in the Ice Business," 54.

ly, he thought he could ease Marguerite out as well, but he underestimated her tenacity.

Fish's first move was to cut prices. As Marguerite later claimed, he may also have been behind a series of "accidents" at her ponds. Too often water mysteriously drained out as the ice was forming, causing ruinous collapses. And once a dynamite blast destroyed her entire harvest before a scheduled early morning cutting, forcing Marguerite to hire a crew of watchmen.

Finally, W. A. Campbell, her father's newspaper associate and editor of the *Helena Daily Independent*, printed articles that were sympathetic to Marguerite's plight. He even made a more direct, personal attack in an editorial printed on April 23, 1915: "It is merest rot for any man to say that he controls the ice supply of Helena."

Despite these setbacks, Marguerite continued to build her business, and Fish worked almost as hard to get her out. She claimed that he tried to steal her better drivers with promises of higher pay. She also suspected that he was behind the too-frequent health inspections of her ponds. When she saw an advertisement that Fish had run on May 6, 1915, headed "Duck Pond Ice is Dear At Any Price," she attacked. The notice inferred that her ice "was taken from a pond frequented by ducks and was therefore unclean and unsanitary." In June 1915, she charged Fish with slander and malice in a \$20,000 damage action.<sup>8</sup> Even though she lost the decision months later, Marguerite's public accusations compelled Fish to stop his more blatant tactics and accept the fact that she would continue to do business in Helena.

Marguerite's business showed yearly profit increases during the first five years, proof that she had learned the work and could be resilient in the face of stiff, and sometimes unfair, competition. In October 1917, she made nine thousand dollars, "quite a gain compared with just over two thousand dollars in 1913," she wrote. "Ice business and all prices just booming."

It was the weather, as well as her hard work and Helena residents' demands for ice, that helped maintain this "boom." A series of cold winters had given her the opportunity to make two and sometimes three cuttings a season. In 1919, however, the weather turned against Montana's agriculturalists, as the whole state faced a crippling drought. Marguerite noted in her

8. *Helena Daily Independent*, June 21, 1915.

journal for November: "Snow came too late to help the water supply." In January, the ice was only thirteen inches thick; a mild chinook could have ruined the crop.

Even under normal conditions, Helena was rarely consistently cold enough to guarantee a natural ice supply. Both Marguerite and Meyer Fish frequently had to get additional shipments from Great Falls or Butte. To stave off future disaster, Marguerite and Fish—acting competitively—looked into financing their own artificial ice plants. In 1920, Fish built a twenty-two-ton capacity artificial ice plant in Helena. Marguerite had other ideas.

The previous December she had decided to move her business to a larger, colder, and higher location. She found that for \$1,000 a year she could rent a two-acre pond and ice house (ninety feet by seventy-nine feet) from F. F. Hayes at Elk Park, fifteen miles north of Butte. The business was located on the old Montana Central line between Butte and Helena, which had been completed in 1888. On this line, part of the Great Northern's system, she could lease loading rights for thirty cents a foot. Her pond operation would be one of many that dotted the Montana landscape, servicing local communities and providing necessary ice for the great transcontinental rail networks.

Excited about this fresh start, Marguerite wrote in her journal on December 12, 1919: "Temperature said to be -60. At least this is one place where ice will grow quickly and be thick enough to cut." Elk Park ice also had a reputation for being "especially clear and pure; so good that many customers in Helena take it when they have a party."

**J**ust after Christmas in 1919, Marguerite packed for the move. She traveled by rail, or perhaps in her mother's Model T Ford, going south from Helena past the mining communities of Clancy and Jefferson City, over the Boulder Hill twenty-nine miles to Boulder, the Jefferson County seat. From there the route followed the Boulder River west to Basin, where the road again turned south, climbing the last twelve miles up Bison Creek Canyon to Elk Park. The Elk Park plateau, surrounded by forested slopes, ran nine miles up the valley to Woodville, where it met the Silver Bow County line at 6,732 feet on the Continental Divide.

Marguerite's pond lay at the north end of the plateau and was fed by Bison Creek, Nez Perce Creek, and numerous other meandering streams. "The wind whistles through it [the plateau] and out of funnel shaped openings in the mountains at both ends of the plain, which makes it cold winter and summer—many many degrees colder than other places equally high in altitude," she wrote. Marguerite lived in a two-room cabin, sheltered by a mountain ridge and large granite boulders.

In 1920, the census for Elk Park listed 132

some place. Maybe it is. But goodness, the ice business keeps me busy every minute and then one is so sleepy at the end of the day outside in the cold clear air, that night life is not missed.

On December 19, 1919, as Marguerite prepared for the first harvest, she wrote: "Ice twenty-four inches thick. Men and foreman ready to start." She had a crew of seventeen men, most of them from Butte. Luckily, Hayes's original foreman, a Mr. Jones, wanted to stay on. He was a great help and she liked him.



Ice workers at the Independent Ice Company at Elk Park cut the ice into uniform blocks using this gas-powered saw, which Marguerite called "Maud."

residents, and the small community included a dairy, a stone quarry, and the Elk Park and Butte Extension Mining Company. The residents of Elk Park had diverse backgrounds. As Marguerite wrote: "Put your finger on the map of Europe any place and Elk Park can produce a citizen of that country. All are foreign born up here except the school teacher, Mrs. Ritten, a family ten miles away, and myself."

Marguerite's father insisted that she have a companion in this isolated location, so Jenny, "one of the neighbor girls, stays with me every night."

I ask father if he thinks it is safer for me to be murdered in company rather than alone? Everyone thinks Elk Park is a lone-

Jones is a character if there ever was one: fat and squarely built, he does not look as if he could move even himself. On the contrary, he moves like a cat and can handle more ice in less time than any man I have yet seen.

He shells the incompetent ice jugglers out of the house as if he were shelling peas from a pod. Keeps me busy supplying him with recruits.

During that first year, the men used Marguerite's newest investment, a gas-cutting field saw—which she called "Maud"—that cut cakes of uniform size. After the cutting, a crew of eight "expert ice handlers," at wages of \$6.50 to \$7.00 a day, gathered at the loading area to separate

the scored floats into blocks with ribbon bars. One seventy-seven-year-old man impressed her:

His job is to bar loose. He can keep the other seven busy taking it away. He actually carries his loosening chisel away with him. The men declare he sleeps with it under his pillow. Each one has his own sacred and personal pair of tongs and woe betide the man who takes another's pair by accident.

The final operation in the process was the most impressive: a chain conveyor belt carried the blocks up to a thirty-foot-high tower, where they dropped down a chute into railway cars. The crew could load five to eight freight cars a day—"ice that goes clear to California. Must be heavy shrinkage," she wrote in August 1920.

Unfortunately, Jones left Elk Park in 1920 for personal reasons. Marguerite was disappointed in the new foreman, named Bob, and after a short while on the job she observed that he "is simply not there."

Today he put a man on the jack—the hook that guides the ice into the house—who was as slow as the itch. This slow poke could not get out of the way of a load that came back and his leg was broken. . . . Fortunately the passenger train came along soon after. We put him on a cot in the baggage car. I went in with him and up to the hospital.

In February 1920, she had decided that Bob, "not an observing foreman at all," and his "worthless tribe had to go." Supervising crews and hiring and firing exasperated her. "Men are like the wind, blow here and there. Some of them work while they are on the job, but the spirit is one of change and go," she wrote, undoubtedly after a long day.

**S**ince first leasing the Elk Park pond, Marguerite's high hopes for profits had focused on prospective Great Northern Railway contracts. The railroad was the key to her operation, with its own orders for icing perishable shipments and for use on dining cars, in air-conditioning systems, and for transporting refrigerator cars full of ice to other businesses.

She anticipated that the new contracts would entail hard work: managing a bigger business and supervising a larger crew as well as dealing with railroad officials and local workers on

the line. With seven years of experience behind her, she was confident that she could succeed. But Marguerite knew little about the national rail situation and underestimated the extent of the difficulties ahead. The inefficiency, dishonesty, and mismanagement she faced were symptoms of a rail system that was ailing throughout the nation. At the end of World War I, the newly denationalized networks had been returned to private operation in poor repair and short of rolling stock. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover had labeled the railroad situation a "witches' cauldron," writing in his *Memoirs* what Marguerite knew firsthand: car shortages and delivery delays were demoralizing the nation's economic climate.<sup>9</sup>

Marguerite was shocked at the practices and attitudes of the Great Northern's operating and traffic departments. The first shock came when she discovered that she could not count on regular orders until she dealt with—and presumably appeased—Fred Wear, the railway division superintendent who sent her orders from his office in Great Falls. As early as January 1920, Wear forced the issue. She wrote it as she heard it:

Had a telephone message saying there was a big contract waiting for me and what price did I ask?

Said, "\$1.25 per ton F.O.B. Elk Park."

Was then asked, "Where does the division superintendent get his?"

I answered, "His what?"

Man said, "His rake-off. He always gets one from all ice sales."

I said, "I never would pay any rake-off on anything; do not believe in doing business that way."

Second telephone call after supper asking me to change my mind: "It would be worth your while to be more generous."

Said, "No" a second time.

Marguerite refused any compromises, even after F. F. Hayes, the previous owner of the pond, told her she was "like a mule. . . pig-headed and stubborn." Hayes warned her that "I did not realize what Wear and his bunch could do to me in the way of persecution."

When Wear's retribution came, Marguerite saw it for what it was: "Petty spite work begun," she wrote in her journal in May 1920. "Orders given that only early morning trains will stop,

9. David Burner, *Herbert Hoover. a Public Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 177.

also those late night. We have always heretofore stopped both trains both ways on a flag stop.” She complained to the Montana Railroad Commission, which had been formed in 1907, and they temporarily rescinded the “no stops” order.

There were other repercussions as well. One ice buyer for a fruit company, for instance, “told me he thought he ought to warn me that Wear said I was most unreliable.” In 1922, Wear hired Peter Hriston as section boss on her line. It took only a few weeks for her to figure out that Wear had put him there just to harass her: “He tells the men getting off the trains to work on the pond, that there is no work!”

Hriston was in charge of moving cars and general track maintenance, with local control over her loading operations. One of his duties was to keep the track clear, but as Marguerite wrote,

400 ton order for Butte. Hriston simply neglects to clean snow off the tracks as is his duty. Instead he stands with two helpers and watches my men do his work. Useless to complain.

Poor car service was the worst consequence of her refusal to give Wear a cut, which meant sometimes asking \$1.50 per ton instead of \$1.15, with Wear taking the thirty-five cents difference as a commission. On another occasion she wrote, “Ready to load a 7000-ton order. Fifteen loaded cars from the previous 3100 ton order are still near the boarding chute. Cannot get these moved.” She lost both ice and money, “for over ten days not a car was moved, while I kept a big crew and horses waiting. . . . no results from constant telegrams” to Great Falls.

**M**arguerite tenaciously fought the system, always devising new ways to get around Hriston:

No cars at all for days. To get them moved. . . . have to be out on the track at four or five AM and order the cars taken away, so I can work that day. Jennie and I set the clock for that ungodly hour, but we get the cars out of the way.

After two years of tough local combat, Marguerite decided to write directly to Great Northern officials at the head office in St. Paul

about Superintendent Wear’s dishonesty and breach of contract.<sup>10</sup> She was determined to expose the corruption she had experienced.

On the contract issue, Marguerite received a reply from M. L. Countryman, vice-president and general counsel for the Great Northern. Countryman overruled C. O. Jenks, vice-president of operations who was in charge of Wear’s division, and instructed his purchasing agent to compensate Marguerite. “I am surprised and would suggest that you examine the purchasing department’s file,” Countryman wrote to Jenks on October 3, 1923. “I have repeatedly advised that there was a valid contract for the purchase of 7000 tons of ice, and that there was an unjustifiable breach thereof. . . . and that has cost this company over \$1300.00.” He concluded: “Permit me to say that if you would take the advice of the legal department before acting in disregard of contract obligations, it might result in saving the company money.”<sup>11</sup>

Countryman and Jenks, however, ignored her charges about Wear, so Marguerite decided to take her complaints to the top. On January 23, 1924, she wrote directly to the president of the Great Northern Railway, Ralph Budd, who replied on January 26 that he was “very much disturbed over any reflection against the honesty of any officer of the company and would give proper consideration to the charges you have made against Mr. Wear.” Fortunately for Marguerite, Budd was Charles Greenfield’s friend.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps they first met when Budd visited Helena banker T. A. Marlow, Charles’s acquaintance, who was a director of the Great Northern Railway. Budd made many trips west and might have spent time with Greenfield on other occasions. At any rate, Budd’s respect for Charles’s work as agricultural agent had much to do with his intention to give Marguerite’s charges “proper consideration.”<sup>13</sup>

During February and March, however, Marguerite heard nothing. Frustrated by the delay, she wrote more letters to the head office, threatening to publicize the dishonesty that permeated the awarding of rail contracts. The

11. M. L. Countryman to C. O. Jenks, October 3, 1923, GN President’s File.

12. Ralph Budd to Marguerite Greenfield, January 26, 1924, July 15, 1929, GN President’s File. Ralph Budd, born in 1879, had been an engineer for the railway across the Isthmus of Panama in 1906 and the Oregon Trunk in 1910. He was a protégé of James J. Hill and became president of the GN (1919-1932) and president of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company (1932-1949).

13. William C. Campbell (Helena), conversation with author, January 25, 1985.

10. Great Northern Railway President’s File 12662, Division of Archives and Manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul [GN President’s File].

threat worked. On April 2, Budd wrote to Jenks—"personal and confidential"—telling him that Countryman was being sent to talk with both Marguerite and Wear in an effort to avoid "undesirable publicity" or, worse, "discomforting legal proceedings."<sup>14</sup>

In Great Falls during the second week in April, Countryman and I. Parker Veazey, Jr., attorney for the Montana Division, conducted "a rather thorough investigation of Miss Greenfield's complaints and charges." The officials

and yet avoided calling her a liar. His remarks—pages of opinion about Marguerite's character—probably damaged her case the most. "Miss Greenfield is entirely honorable and means to be truthful," he wrote, but "her trouble is that she has an exaggerated idea of the moral superiority of a woman over a man in business transactions, and thinks that business transactions must have some shady coloring unless a woman is in charge." He concluded: "She has impressed me as meaning all right, but a nervous



To move ice from the pond to Great Northern Railway cars. Marguerite's crew used a conveyor belt that carried the ice blocks up into a thirty-foot-high tower. The workers loaded five to eight freight cars a day by dropping the ice down a chute from the tower.

met with the principals and took a statement from Hriston, in which he claimed: "I have never at any time threatened to burn any building of hers. . . ."<sup>15</sup>

The most unusual part of the investigation was F. F. Hayes's statement, in which he managed to deny having told Marguerite about graft

wreck, having no place in business."<sup>16</sup> Marguerite never read or heard about Hayes's testimony. From the beginning at Elk Park, Hayes had been her confidant, and we know from later journal entries that she considered him a friend for as long as she lived in Elk Park.

14. Ralph Budd to C. O. Jenks, April 2, 1924, GN President's File.

15. M. L. Countryman to Ralph Budd, April 17, 1924, GN President's File; statement by Peter Hriston, 1924, GN President's File.

16. "Statement of F. F. Hayes Regarding Complaint of Miss Greenfield of the Independent Ice Company," April 1924, GN President's File.

17. M. L. Countryman to Ralph Budd, April 17, 1924, GN President's File.

18. M. L. Countryman to Marguerite Greenfield, December 17, 1924, GN President's File.

19. M. L. Countryman to C. O. Jenks, December 20, 1924, GN President's File.

20. Marguerite's journal entry for October 4, 1921, opened: "Bought Elk Park pond today to Hayes great surprise."

**O**n April 17, Countryman sent Budd an eight-page summary of the investigation, concluding “that none of these charges are justified by the facts.” Hayes’s statement had obviously affected the hearing’s outcome, and Countryman reiterated his sentiment that “she was not free from the feminine tendency to confuse actual facts with impressions, suggestions, and irresponsible hearsay.” Countryman suggested that Budd write Marguerite a “tactful letter” to end this “tempest in a teapot.”<sup>17</sup>

Marguerite was not mollified. In another spate of letters east, she called the investigation “a white wash” and singled out I. P. Veazey as the one who had been “most unfair to me.” Countryman responded on September 11, 1924, writing that he had “cherished the hope that you would have no further complaint.” He wrote again in December, suggesting that she should collect more facts and hire a lawyer.<sup>18</sup>

Countryman knew that his reply would irritate Marguerite, but he did not anticipate that it would anger Jenks, who believed that Marguerite should be ignored. Irritated himself, Countryman explained his position to Jenks: “I was not bluffing. . . . The woman may not be mentally deranged.” Concluding his letter of December 20, 1924, Countryman added:

I note your view that no investigation is necessary. . . . I share your confidence in Mr. Wear, but does it follow that we should ignore or refuse to give any hearing to a woman who persists in making serious accusations? It is not my understanding that Mr. Budd desires that no attention be paid to Miss Greenfield.<sup>19</sup>

As Countryman understood the situation after the investigation, Budd did not want Marguerite’s charges dismissed. Both men concurred that “serious accusations” were involved, but they still hoped to avoid a suit. They were also receiving conflicting signals. Marguerite’s descriptions of Wear’s abuses carried weight, but her letters themselves were not impressive. Long, rambling sentences and numerous typing errors with handwritten corrections and additions caused men like Jenks to think that her accusations were as wild as her form. It may be that at this point Ralph Budd’s knowledge of her father’s position and her family background gave her an edge, the

21. See Richard C. Overton, *Burlington Route, A History of the Burlington Lines* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965); John Willard (Billings), conversation with author, December 31, 1984.

credibility she needed for further negotiations.

From January 1925 until October 1928, Marguerite continued to fight the system, becoming more frustrated. She finally reasoned that she was beaten in two major ways. First, her complaints had to weave their way through the bureaucracy. Poor car service, for example, was Wear’s doing, but writing to his boss about the problem took valuable time, and “the traffic department cannot intervene until there is a complaint, and no one can complain before the losses or delays occur.” Financially she could not sustain such delays; her expenses had become higher since she had bought the pond—to Hayes’s surprise—and had higher payments to make.<sup>20</sup> Second, the railroad men who supported her had little power. Many were “indignant over these activities but they are helpless. A suit in this case would be hard to fight, as my witnesses would only lose their jobs if they testified.”

Marguerite’s difficulties with the Great Northern Railway did not stop at the division level. The finance department, operating out of St. Paul, was slow in accounting for her shipments. On July 29, 1923, she recorded: “Finally receive the check on last winter’s ice. Will be behind for years after this experience.”

Although Great Northern officials failed to ferret out their employees’ abuses, they did work to make major rail improvements that should have helped Marguerite’s business. Ralph Budd worked with a sense of urgency, probably because there was still the lingering threat that public pressures would lead to the re-nationalization of the lines. Railroad officials for all lines faced stiffer competition from improved canals, expanded pipeline facilities, fledgling airlines, and motor transport; and they knew that only substantial improvements would keep the railroads viable.<sup>21</sup>

Great Northern officials responded to the growing competition by making track maintenance a priority, along with upgrading rolling stock, including the construction of all-steel freight cars. They also went ahead with plans for new, high-speed freight locomotives and major improvements in plant operations. These efforts had begun to pay off by 1926, when Budd made his annual fall tour of the far western lines. In Butte, he announced: “Because of increased business, 15 additional crews will be added to the Montana Division. . . . Fruit shipment from Washington and Oregon have started in big

volume. More freight will go from the northwest than in any previous autumn.”<sup>22</sup>

Because icing the fruit trains was a large part of Marguerite’s business, she should have benefited from the improved freight service and the increasing demand from the East Coast. But she was still stymied by the division superintendent and hassled by the railway section boss.



These workers, using pike poles and splitting forks, moved the sheets of ice and split them into blocks before they were dragged on sledges to the storage shed.

“Terrible struggle to get cars,” she wrote in the summer of 1929.

Hriston simply impossible. . . . New stunt: has taken to writing the most vulgar and terrible things about me all over freight

22. *Butte Daily Post*, September 20, 1926.

23. F. G. Dorety to Ralph Budd, September 23, 1929, GN President’s File.

24. Kathleen Brady, *Ida Tarbell: Portrait of a Muckraker* (El Cerrito, California: Seaview/Putnam, 1984).

cars. This is the end. I have not spoken to him for years. . . . try to attend to my own affairs, but he will not let me have any peace.

In October 1928, Marguerite renewed her efforts to improve rail service by again writing directly to Ralph Budd, charging his operating and traffic departments with graft, lack of car service, and general persecution. Her detailed descriptions of what she considered intentional poor service alarmed the Great Northern’s legal department. Attorney F. G. Dorety wrote to Budd, “We had always complained that she gave us nothing specific to investigate. Apparently she is now watching every car and collecting specific data. I think it very likely that this on the advice of some attorney.” Marguerite was getting ready to sue the Great Northern.<sup>23</sup>

**W**hat kept Marguerite going after seven years of “persecution”? She probably received a lot of advice and support from her father, who as a Great Northern employee was in a position to help. Charles was then in his late seventies and had the time to help Marguerite without jeopardizing his own future.

Marguerite also drew support from a very different source: her identification with Ida Tarbell. Tarbell had been a crusader who gained prominence in the 1890s when she wrote a series of articles for *McClure’s Magazine* exposing the oil trust.<sup>24</sup> Marguerite wrote in her journal:

The “History of a Great Northern Shipper” will be the record of a ten years battle out here and won’t be unlike Ida Tarbell’s story of the Standard Oil Company—on a smaller scale of course—but will open eyes of railroad men to one of the great obstacles in the way of the railways: the lack of cooperation between them and the petty persecution many of the shippers endure from ignorant men in the wrong place.

Marguerite saw herself as battling railway corruption, and she tried to emulate Ida’s independent style. She was perhaps a bit more personally voluble in her letters to Budd than Ida had been to Standard Oil officials, but her style seemed to be effective.

25. Marguerite Greenfield to Ralph Budd, November 12, 1928, July 19, 1929, GN President’s File.

To support her case, Marguerite frequently wrote about those railroad men who sided with her, such as L. B. Woods, a former Great Northern passenger agent in Helena: “now dead and safe from persecution. . . . said I had no hope of justice until I finally could get it to your attention and he doubted if that were possible.” She also claimed that she had “scores of friends on the road” who knew of “the dirty deal you have got for years” and admired her for standing up against “the Old Man, Fred Wear.”<sup>25</sup>

seen.” He then detailed the officials’ administrative and personal weaknesses and agreed that she had “certainly received scant treatment” at Jenks’s hands in 1924.<sup>26</sup>

Marguerite had no interest in teaming up with Veazey; she was still upset with his earlier “disparaging of her.” Nevertheless, on December 4 she sent Budd a copy of Veazey’s letter, adding that the lawyer’s suggestion “only intensified my decision to take drastic action to have my rights as a shipper.” She also told Budd that



Marguerite Greenfield stands in front of the company’s storage shed, where blocks of ice were insulated with sawdust until they were sold.

Then a “lengthy and unusual” letter from former Great Northern attorney I. P. Veazey raised her spirits by providing more evidence to support her arguments. In his letter of November 29, he wrote that he wanted to “help straighten out some of your misunderstandings” and suggested that she hire a “good lawyer” (perhaps Veazey himself) and sue the Great Northern for no more than the nominal \$500, “since you have always properly professed a friendship for the Railway company.” He suggested instead that she make her “heavy demand for punitive damages against individuals. . . . Fred Wear and the queerest vice-presidents the railroad has ever

she disagreed with Veazey and thought that, as president, Budd should bear the full responsibility for her ill treatment. At the head office, Veazey’s letter particularly irritated attorney Dorety, who commented that it was “a most extraordinary situation to find a lawyer advising litigation against his client and ex-associates.”<sup>27</sup>

During 1929, Marguerite sent dozens of typed pages to St. Paul, threatening to take legal action. Budd might have turned the whole case over to his legal department, especially after he received a letter written on August 6 from T. A. Marlow, his friend and a Helena banker, who

26. I. Parker Veazey, Jr., to Marguerite Greenfield, November 28, 1928, GN President’s File.

27. Marguerite Greenfield to Ralph Budd, December 4, 1928, GN President’s File; F. G. Dorety to J. A. Lengby, December 10, 1928, GN President’s File.

bluntly described Marguerite as “off her nut.” But Budd continued to monitor Marguerite’s complaints, keeping the channels of communication open because of his friendship with her father. As Marlow had reminded him, “Charles Greenfield is as good a man as we ever had in Montana.” Budd’s legal advisors cautioned him about a probable suit and urged him to stall. Marguerite had something of a history of threats without legal action, and maybe this one would be stillborn as well.<sup>28</sup>

“My father, if you ever ask him, will tell you what he knows.” In October, she wrote:

You have too much at stake not to see the truth. . . . If I were in your position, with my knowledge, I would answer the following questions:

What do I owe to myself and my character?

What do I owe to the public?

What do I owe to the stockholders?

What do I owe to the loyal, honest men



Some of Marguerite’s ice operation can be seen behind this ice worker, who is guiding a large block of ice to the cutting area. At the edge of the pond to the left sits the Independent Ice Company’s large storage shed.

It is also possible that Budd maintained personal contact with Marguerite because he knew she was sincere in her concern for “his road” and was more interested in “justice” than in monetary compensation. “All of these matters are of the moment to railroad vitality and to me now,” she wrote in January 1929. A few months later, she reminded him, “The GN is losing thousands of dollars now and has such difficulties in getting extensions.” She then added,

whose lives are devoted to railroading and who suffer acutely from conditions claimed to exist?

Then she made it clear that she would withhold litigation if Budd would meet with her when he came west on his annual fall tour.<sup>29</sup>

Her efforts finally began to pay off: “Things have started my way,” she wrote in her journal. “Word from the president that he will be in Butte in the near future to hear what I have to say. About time.”

28. Thomas A. Marlow to Ralph Budd, August 6, 1929, GN President’s File; F. G. Dorety to Ralph Budd, August 2, 1929, GN President’s File.

29. Marguerite Greenfield to Ralph Budd, January 21, September 14, October 16, 1929, GN President’s File.

30. Dishon, “A Woman in the Ice Business,” 54.

31. Marguerite sold the pond to L. Lyndon of Butte, who ran the business for six more years.

On October 5, Marguerite, Ralph Budd, and several railroad attorneys met in the upstairs parlor of a Butte hotel. According to Marguerite, the meeting lasted three hours. Irritated as Budd was—your letters “came down on me at home and at my office like rain,” he had written her—Marguerite was certain that he listened to what she had to say. She had gone to the interview fully prepared and armed with proof of graft: for example, “over \$40,000 on an extra gang, which sum of money was sent to Greece,” possibly a reference to one of Hriston’s deals. She recorded that Budd was shocked at what she told him. “Once he gasped, ‘Is there no one honest on my road?’”

Marguerite responded to Budd’s courtesy and concern: “I was sent out of the room when the question of libelous writings on the freight cars came up.” But her bitterness over “eight years of persecution” subsided, and she even excused the president’s “lack of activity” as “something not under his control because there are so many cliques on the railroads.”

Marguerite considered the meeting a success. The Great Northern’s management dismissed Hriston that fall and in January demoted Wear, who moved east. She paid with her silence, agreeing not to publicize the Butte meeting.

**F**or the next five years, Marguerite tried to keep her business going. She had become fond of the wind-swept plateau at Elk Park, where during the summer she also ran a weekend tea room for friends from Butte and Helena. Throughout her fourteen years at Elk Park, Marguerite remained a fighter, sometimes for causes that had nothing to do with the railroad. In November 1927, for instance, she criticized the state’s highway department for failing to select what she considered the most advantageous route for a highway—a route that ran near her pond—and for hiring a contractor who was “scamping on the job.” But her greatest challenge had been getting Great Northern officials to listen to her.

In the end, Ralph Budd had finally been convinced that Marguerite’s case was legitimate. Her honesty, her impressive testimony, and her father’s influence had combined to help support her charges against the railroad, and she had won. But Marguerite’s victory after her meeting with Budd came too little and too late. In January 1930, she wrote in her journal:

Perfect peace at last! Car service with not a hitch or delay. Why could I not have been given half as good service for the past years and been out of debt, instead of always being at a loss on contracts?

Railroad workers old friends now, just delighted that I beat the Old Man [Fred Wear] at his game of freeze-out. . . . Saw Mr. Hayes and told him I had won, but was nearly broke, but thought it was a good fight at that.

“All I have to do is sell ice,” Marguerite wrote on January 1931, as drought and the Depression damaged Montana’s economy. “Selling is now quite a difficult feat, as the gay and carefree spenders of two years ago have turned into very careful buyers.” She added, “With improved car service I might do a little better, but of course just as I got the railroad situation cleared up, along came the stockmarket crash.”

Technological changes also affected business, since home electric refrigerators and railway refrigerator cars decreased the demand for natural ice. The Independent Ice Company’s profits took a nosedive: “Sell only \$100 worth of ice,” she recorded in September 1933. “Have no money at all. Fashionable state.”

By 1934, Marguerite was bankrupt, her “checkered ice career” over. Her journal ended abruptly with no conclusion, after years of hope, pride, anger, and bitterness. That journal, which describes her years at Elk Park and documents her battle with the Great Northern Railway, portrays this outspoken woman’s “refusal to . . . be beaten” in her fight against a corporate adversary.<sup>30</sup> In 1934, Marguerite sold the pond, closed down the Independent Ice Company, and left Elk Park. She moved back to Helena, where she lived until her death in 1968.<sup>31</sup>

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