

Thomas Neil Davis passed away at his home near Fairbanks, Alaska, December 10, 2016. Neil was born February 1, 1932, in Greely, Colorado, to Bon and Bernice Davis. The family lived in many places before their arrival in Alaska; Neil and younger brother Lewis stayed in an orphans' home in Chicago before living in Iowa with their aunt and uncle Louphena and Irwin Hensal.

In 1944, the boys joined their parents in Fairbanks. Neil's folks were among the original homesteaders of what is now North Pole (Santa Claus Lane was originally named for Neil, the street named for Lewis is still so named). Neil worked at the homestead and his father's sawmills, attending high school in Fairbanks when possible. He was an apprentice mechanic at Wien Airlines rebuilding aircraft engines before entering the University of Alaska as a science student in the fall of 1950. His auspicious start at the Geophysical Institute was a job painting a loading dock.

Neil returned to Ames, Iowa, to study and visit high school sweetheart Rosemarie. They were married there in June of 1951 and drove to Fairbanks in 1952, the first of many adventures together. They began building a cabin at what was then called Totem Park at the base of College Hill. Daughter Pat was born in February of 1953.

Neil received a B.S. degree in geophysics from the University of Alaska in 1955. An opportunity arose for him to attend the California Institute of Technology so the family sold the Totem Park cabin and moved to Pasadena, California, where son Doug was born in 1956. They spent summers in Fairbanks building a new log home west of the University. On completion of his M.S. degree at Caltech in 1957, the family returned to continue building their home and Neil's career. These pursuits took Neil all over the world where he studied rockets and launching facilities, and enticed other young adventurers to come to Alaska. He earned his PhD in 1961 from the University of Alaska and daughter Debbie was born in 1962 in Fairbanks. The family moved to Maryland while Neil worked for NASA at Goddard Space Flight Center.

In 1965 they came home to Fairbanks and Neil returned to the Geophysical Institute as assistant director where his work on Poker Flat rocket range began in earnest. Ground was broken in 1968, the first rocket lifted off in 1969, and more than 300 major launches followed.

Neil, not just brain but also brawn, engaged in many mountaineering adventures with friends; Rosemarie accompanied him on some hefty field trips, including one to do research after a major earthquake in Huslia.

A leg puller and prankster, Neil delighted stepping into diverse roles, playing the crusty old miner or absent-minded scientist when it suited him. He and colleagues had great fun producing skits and parodies for Geophysical Institute Christmas parties.

A slayer of trees and power lines, Neil was also a builder extraordinaire, using whatever might be at hand or found in a dumpster. He built sheds, cabins, boats, a steam engine and a rocket range. Although not a natural mariner, Neil participated in the infamous Nenana Raft Classics, and family vacations often included boating, inevitably resulting in one or all parties drenched and freezing.

Neil published dozens of scientific papers and in 1976 started the *Alaska Science Nuggets*, a weekly newspaper column where he honed his craft and talent for writing. He wrote 12 books on a wide array of topics including the aurora, energy, permafrost, health care, history, as well as chronicling his own life in a series of three books, *Battling Against Success* (an account of Neil's younger days in the interior), *Rockets Over Alaska – the Genesis of Poker Flat*, and most recently *Head, Tail, & Guts Included – The Story of a 1950s College Education in Alaska & Warmer Climes*.

Neil retired in 1981 from university and was appointed professor emeritus of geophysics in 1982. He served as chair of the Alaska Power Authority in the late 1980s.

Early retirement allowed Neil and Rosemarie to travel extensively with friends as well as grandchildren and dogs on cross-country treks in the “Bitchin Cruisin Van.” These trips enabled Neil to do first-hand research for his books and provided fodder for some of his most-loved writing, the annual “he said, she said” Christmas letter that he and Rosemarie would craft relating the misadventures of the year.

Snowbirds for several decades, Neil and Rosemarie flitted between Friday Harbor on San Juan Island, Washington, and Fairbanks. They cruised Europe, boated the Amazon and travelled to Australia. When great granddaughter Marina was born, they moved back to Alaska permanently.

Neil's life was a fascinating mixture of pioneering spirit, cutting-edge technology and science. He was a supportive and loving husband and father, always encouraging his family in their own pursuits. He was a mentor, a leader, a builder; he was kind, funny, and generous, and he was humble. He "had a joy and exuberance for life that was infectious," "was a dynamic individual with an incredible sense of humor," and "was a wise soul."

Neil is survived by his wife of 65 years, Rosemarie; son Douglas Davis and daughter-in-law Sonja Benson, granddaughters Dawn and Star; daughter and son-in-law Deborah and Ulises Gonzalez, granddaughters Allanah and Kristen; and Patricia's son Thomas Pollard and his mate Varpu Lotvonen, great grandchildren Marina and Jasper.

Neil was preceded in death by parents Bernice and Bon, brother Lewis, daughter Patricia, and favorite meter-scale dog Foxy.

A celebration of Neil's Life will be held Saturday, January 14, 2017, at 3:00 p.m. at the University Community Presbyterian Church, 3510 College Rd. For information call [378-2988](tel:378-2988).

In lieu of flowers, please make donations to the Patricia A. Davis Memorial Scholarship or the Bon V. and Bernice Davis Scholarship fund via the University of Alaska Foundation.

The family thanks Fairbanks Funeral Home and the University Community Presbyterian Church for their services, as well as our Fairbanks, UAF and other far-flung family, friends and colleagues for their support.