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# CODY LIVING

An Exclusive Magazine Serving The Residents of Cody, Wyoming

*Back Home*  
after their 20 year  
Alaskan Adventure,

**MELISSA &  
ELGIN COOK**





# MELISSA AND ELGIN COOK,

back home in Burlington after a two decade adventure in bush Alaska

BY STEPH WEED

PHOTOS BY SABINE OEXMANN PHOTOGRAPHY

**CL:** *Can you tell us about your husband and how you met?*

**MC:** Elgin was the misplaced Wyoming cowboy I found in Detroit, Michigan. This sharp-looking cowboy wandered over to the Midwest and brought me home on his horse. Okay, I'm getting carried away with the story. Maybe it wasn't a horse; it was an airplane. In 1986, we returned to the tiny farming community of Burlington, Wyoming, and that's when our story began.

**CL:** *If there was one word to describe each of you, what would it be?*

**MC:** Melissa is driven, and Elgin is humble.

**CL:** *Now that you are back home in Wyoming, what have you been up to?*

**MC:** We built our home, wrote and published my book, and started our YouTube channel, Wyoming Jeepers. I serve on the board for Wyoming Writers, Inc. and volunteer for the local fire department while maintaining my EMT certification.

**CL:** *Out of the many challenges during your time in Alaska, what do you consider your biggest gift?*

**MC:** My story. The Call of the Last Frontier allows me to relive my Alaska experiences daily as I share my tale with those who dream of going to or living in the Last Frontier.

**CL:** *Are there other adventurous stories you have not yet told?*

**MC:** Absolutely! The question is, where to begin? I cut thirty thousand words from my memoir, and that content will keep Alaska Bush Life going for quite some time. From 1990–92, Elgin and I lived in an extremely remote location in Montana, where he taught three elementary children in a one-room schoolhouse. When we left college, I expected to have a white picket fence and a sidewalk in front of my house, but life happened. Opportunities knocked, and we answered.





**CL:** *Melissa, are there more books on your horizon?*

**MC:** That is the million-dollar question. I have several true stories brainstormed with a few chapters written. Here's the rub: most true stories are interesting because something terrible happened. I love to laugh. Authors spend their lives talking about their books, and I choose happiness. I want to write another book that leaves people feeling uplifted, laughing in some places, crying in others, but in the end, they are sorry the book ended because it made them feel alive and connected. I haven't found that story yet. But I will. Check out [www.MelissaCook.us](http://www.MelissaCook.us) for updates.

**CL:** *In your book, you mentioned how lonely life in Alaska was; many people would say the same about Wyoming. What are your thoughts?*

**MC:** The loneliness sank deep into my soul at times. It didn't go away in a day, a week, or even a month—it laid just below the surface for twenty years. Wyoming has roads between towns, and the residents are less transient than in bush Alaska. In the end, loneliness is a state of mind, and it doesn't matter where you live—you can be lonely anywhere.

Wyoming and remote Alaska have other things in common. Both places have access to plenty of public lands to explore. Neighbors help each other out. And, I felt safe wandering the docks in Alaska just as I now walk the streets of our small Wyoming town without worry.

**CL:** *I was astonished to hear how much you've accomplished while being so active and ambitious, especially after your multiple sclerosis (MS) diagnosis. What an inspiration! Do you have any advice for others living with MS?*

**MC:** My best advice for MS warriors—that's what we call ourselves—is to find the right treatment plan for you. In 2011, I became permanently

disabled, despite being on medication; then, I began a new medication that changed my life. I recommend keeping your distance from sick people, getting your rest, avoiding undue stress and heat, and remembering to smile. Attitude is huge. I'm a smiler by nature, and I love to laugh. My extrovert personality means everyone is a friend, so if you see me coming, look out! I love to chat. I help others with MS by sharing my story on [www.MSsymptoms.me](http://www.MSsymptoms.me). The mission of this blog is to inspire, encourage, and educate.

**CL:** *Another blog you write is Alaska Bush Life. Please tell us a little more about that blog.*

**MC:** Many readers of *The Call of the Last Frontier* say, "I didn't want the book to end." *Alaska Bush Life* is my way of giving readers what they are asking for—more. More Alaska stories. More adventure. And more photographs of a world many of them will never see. Check out [www.MelissaCook.us](http://www.MelissaCook.us) for more.

**CL:** *What is Wyoming Jeepers, and how did you get started with off-roading?*

**MC:** We have been exploring off-road paths for decades. We began by posting short video clips on social media to share our adventures, garnering plenty of positive feedback from viewers. This motivated us to create a show for those who could not or did not know how to see all the beautiful sights we were discovering. Wyoming Jeepers began filming full thirty-minute episodes in December 2020. Join us for the ride on <http://wyomingjeepers.com>.

**CL:** *What do you each enjoy doing in your downtime?*

**MC:** Capturing beautiful photographs of landscapes and people has



been a lifelong passion. I also have the itch to travel. I want to see it all. I knew retiring young meant fewer dollars for checking off places on my travel bucket list—I'll probably never see the penguins in Antarctica—but I'm finding plenty of adventure in the Big Horn Basin.

Elgin would say, "What downtime? Melissa has me working all day, every day." And he wouldn't be lying either. Elgin is a fantastic photographer, plays the guitar, loves the outdoors, and enjoys a competitive game of golf. He tinkers with our Jeep, is known for his computer skills, and is a jack of all trades, meaning he can fix just about anything.

**CL: Where do you think you got your sense of adventure?**

**MC:** Can one be born with adventure in their blood? I moved to bush Alaska at twenty-eight, bungee jumped at thirty-eight and retired at forty-nine with a bucket list of adventures yet to come. I do not let the grass grow under my feet.

**CL: What characteristics helped you and Elgin stay in bush Alaska for twenty years?**

**MC:** Our plan was to retire twenty years after accepting our first teaching job in Alaska, and we were willing to adapt to a different climate and culture to achieve our dream. Over the years, we were flexible in the teaching assignments that required us to be self-starters, well-organized, and capable of instructing multiple grade levels simultaneously. We developed hobbies in technology, writing, golfing, and quilting to sustain ourselves through the dark, lonely winters. Keeping an eye on our goal, having a positive attitude, and a great sense of humor helped. Did I say golfing in bush Alaska? Yes. We puttied in the hallway, chipped into a net in the spare room, and practiced our irons on the old town dump covered in wood chips.

**CL: Do you have a mantra you attribute to your successes?**

**MC:** Happiness is a choice I make every day, every hour, and sometimes, by the minute. But make no mistake; it is a choice. How I choose to see my circumstances is up to me. There are no rewinds in life. I cannot go back to relive a day that has passed. That's why I make the most of every day because tomorrow is not guaranteed. I mark my calendar to ensure I achieve the things I want to do in life.

**CL: With twenty-plus years of experience, you and Elgin are obviously passionate about teaching. What has teaching taught you?**

**MC:** I left my college days kicking and screaming—not literally, but almost. I loved to learn. Then I became a teacher and discovered learning is a lifelong activity.

**CL: Do you have a favorite time of year?**

**MC:** Red, yellow, orange. Pumpkins, ghosts, turkeys. The smell of fresh apple cider and hot cinnamon donuts from the cider mill still makes my mouth water. Raised in the Detroit area, I dreamed of returning to Michigan in the fall and checked that off the bucket list in 2016. Though I will say, the Wyoming aspens mixed in with the pines are also a delight to see.

**CL: To date, what do you consider your greatest accomplishment?**

**MC:** My marriage. Elgin and I do almost everything together. Over the years, we have shared classrooms as teachers, office space as school district administrators, and now in retirement, we work together on The Call of the Last Frontier and Wyoming Jeepers. We are a team, and I am grateful my teammate is my best friend.

**CL: What is at the top of your bucket list?**

**MC:** Don't laugh; I mean it. Alaska. I think you're laughing now. Alaska is the largest state, and if cut in half, it would still be the largest state. We never saw the northern lights, Denali, or the Iditarod Trail. We missed the Kodiak bears, riding the ferry all the way up the Inside Passage, and visiting Cordova, Valdez, and the Kenai Peninsula. So yes, Alaska is at the top of our bucket list.

**CL: What is your signature baked item that friends or family members would request you to make?**

**MC:** Banana bread. My secret: I add cinnamon.



**CL: Can you share something about yourself that not many people know?**

**MC:** I attended elementary school in the projects of downtown Detroit and learned how to read in fourth grade. Being highly motivated to overcome a difficult childhood, I graduated a year early with honors from one of the top high schools in the nation. I have lived the life that exists on both sides of the tracks.

**CL: What is the best advice you have ever received?**

**MC:** I know it sounds a bit cliché, but my advice is to get an education or a trade. An education ensures you can take care of yourself. For me, the benefits package I had as a teacher provided security for the rest of my life when multiple sclerosis ended my career.

**CL: All marriage is work, but you and Elgin must have been especially tested during those Alaska bush years. What do you think helped get you through together?**

**MC:** We worry more about each other's happiness and needs than we do our own, and we function as a team.

\*\*\*Melissa's book is available for purchase locally: Buffalo Bill Museum Bookstore, The Thistle, The Little Box Gift Shop at CRH, Yellowstone Gift Shop, Cody Styling Company