

FEATURING: Jessica Lange, tragedy on K2, the war on obesity, and prizewinning landscape photography

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FRIEND OR FOE?

Sarah Palin has the White House in her sights, and she hasn't taken any prisoners on the way. Christine Toomey talks exclusively to the Alaskans who know the real woman behind the 'hockey mom' veneer



THE ICE QUEEN

She looked like an ordinary 'hockey mom' thrust into the national spotlight. But in her Alaskan homeland, there are people who know the ambition and ferocity of Sarah Palin. Christine Toomey learns about the woman who would be America's vice-president

Small-town America does not come much more remote than Wasilla. Thousands of miles from Washington, DC, and close to the Arctic Circle, almost on the other side of the world, this is on one of the furthest-flung frontiers of the USA. Cabin and porch homes here ring icy lakes encircled by snow-capped peaks. By British standards, Wasilla – population 9,780 – would count as little more than a village. But here in Alaska it awards itself city status, and by the yardstick of this vast and sparsely populated state, it is. In most distant communities like this, ambitions tend to remain modest. But Sarah Palin always planned on being a winner, one of Wasilla's big fish. It is unlikely she ever thought her journey would take her much beyond the state border. Yet in little more than 10 days from now, the self-styled "hockey mom" could find herself planning the decor of an office in the White House – a beat away from being the leader of the free world.

At the end of a garden path in Wasilla is a wilderness cabin home like many others here, with a set of antlers adorning the front porch or nailed to a tree painted with the name of the occupants. But like Palin, who spent part of her youth in this house, her parents, Chuck and Sally Heath, have gone further than most Alaskans. To the side of their path, by the front door, stands a mountain of moose and caribou antlers that towers above visitors' heads, built from the bleached "racks" of countless "field-dressed" wildlife. It is a reminder that the Heaths are proud and enthusiastic hunters, and a clue to how high their daughter set her sights.

The day Senator John McCain hijacked the election agenda by announcing an unknown outsider as his running mate, television crews and journalists descended on Wasilla to find out who America might be about to elect as vice-president. But as the global financial crisis bit and the election merry-go-round moved on to other pressing concerns, so did much of the media circus, leaving behind a community that had hardly broken ranks. A few talked ad nauseam, either to criticise or to praise Palin. But the quiet ones who really knew her kept their counsel, out of either loyalty or fear that she would be back in Wasilla after the election, looking for payback. Then, after weeks of quiet, doors slowly began to open. People began to speak to me about the Sarah Palin they know well – or too well.

Quite extraordinarily, Chuck Heath and his wife, Sally, take me into their home, where few but the most favourably disposed local



newspapermen have recently been welcome. Seeing me shudder slightly at the stack of antlers, and concerned perhaps that the excessive display may colour my judgment, Chuck explains that he and his family did not shoot "every" animal in the pile: "Some of 'em were killed by wolves."

Alaska is not a place for the faint-hearted. This becomes clearer when I settle at the counter of the family's open-plan kitchen, where Palin must have listened so intently to her father's hunting and fishing stories after she had accompanied him on his forays into the wild. Chuck perches on a stool by my side, in a baggy hooded sweatshirt, while his wife, in a girlish pink gingham blouse, busies herself making chocolate puddings, and the couple reminisce about Palin's childhood.

"It's a different breed of person who ends up here in Alaska," says Chuck, a retired science teacher and sports coach who brought his young family from Idaho to "the Last Frontier" state when Sarah, the third of four children, was two months old. "People here tend to be more adventurous." He describes how he would regularly take his children ice-fishing and hiking in temperatures of -20C to -30C in winter, and how in the summer he would take them on long runs in the early morning. The whole family

would often compete in 5- or 10-kilometre races. Sarah and her father ran marathons. "Sarah got a lot of stern discipline from me and a lot of love, devotion and faith from her mom. I wasn't mean to her, but I'd push her a lot in sport and outdoor activities. I taught her to believe she could do anything in the world she wanted to do if she put her mind to it," he says, slapping the counter top triumphantly.

"We didn't expect it to go this far, that's for sure," his wife chimes in. There is a hint of surprise and bewilderment in her voice, as if she fears her daughter's ambition has taken her to, or beyond, her limit – an impression strengthened when she admits to being "dumbfounded, absolutely floored" on hearing that her daughter was McCain's surprise pick as running mate.

It is a testament to the secrecy and speed with which McCain broke with expectations to pick 44-year-old Palin for the Republican ticket that not even her parents were in the loop – as they surely would have been if the process of choosing had been anything more than a last-minute gamble to wrest the headlines away from his rival, Barack Obama.

Chuck simply laughs, shrugs his shoulders good-naturedly and continues telling stories about his daughter's childhood. For Palin, school

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days often began with a moose hunt, long before the bell went for first lesson. Her father would take her along before school started, "for safety reasons, because I didn't want to go alone". While stuffed animal heads and skins, including those of several bears, line nearly every wall of the Heath household, he claims that for his family, as for most others in the area struggling financially at the time, the purpose of hunting was to put food on the table.

He tells a story about driving Palin to school one day when he was planning to teach a lesson on animal dissection. "I handed her a pair of moose eyes and told her to hold 'em real quick. She didn't want to, but she did it," he says, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "She wasn't into the killing. But she'd always help me field-dress the moose. When you shoot a 1,200lb animal, one person can't do that alone." Chuck patiently explains that by "field-dressing" he means

"gut 'n' cut". I must still be looking a little confused because he expands: "Y'know, throwing the legs around, pulling it apart, skinning it and cuttin' it up into 100lb chunks." He then pushes home the point that while his daughter would "carry a gun and shoot a few caribou, killing wasn't her priority".

Maybe not. But by the time she had become a high-school student, she had clearly developed a killer instinct that would become even more apparent when she entered politics aged only 28, first as city councillor, then as two-term mayor of Wasilla. While much of the media coverage has portrayed Palin as a maverick "softball" candidate lacking the experience to deal with high office, there are people here in her home town who know her well and suggest much more worrying traits than inexperience and unpredictability. There is a high body count of people who have dared to disagree with Sarah Palin, shown a reluctance to do her bidding or, in her eyes, failed to support her wholeheartedly – among them some who say they too have been hunted, carved up and cast aside along her path to power. These people warn, as do even her closest friends and family, that in Palin's eyes there are no grey areas, no room for doubt. There is only right or wrong, black or white, "good or evil". Her father Chuck's word for it is "stubborn". One of her friends calls her "dogged". If Palin believes something to be true, it is – no amount of evidence to the contrary will sway her, and everybody else had better believe it too.

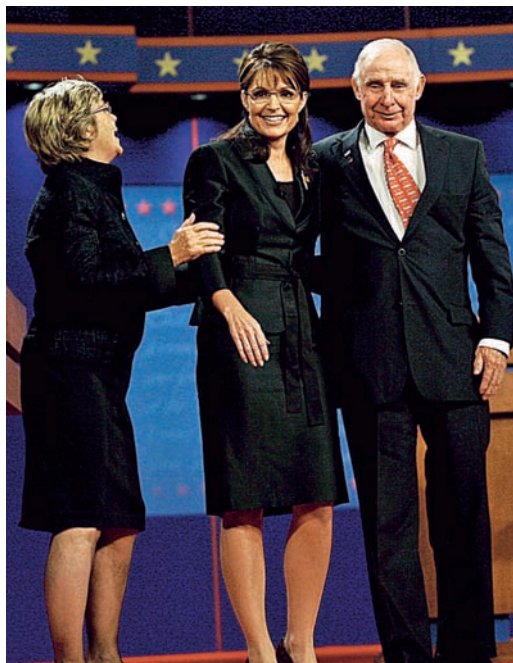
The possibility of a person with such firm and, as I discover, sometimes extreme convictions, coupled with a fighting righteousness, coming so close to ultimate power is sobering even for some hardy Alaskan souls. To understand why, you need to wait patiently for Palin's Wasilla to welcome you into its world.

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Talk to most Alaskans and the size of their state – more than twice that of Texas – will soon crop up in conversation. Many readily reel off statistics to awe "outsiders", as all non-Alaskans are called. Alaska, the 49th state, joined the union just 50 years ago. Its citizens pride themselves on being independent and tough. Palin's husband, Todd, for instance, was once an Independent Alaska activist wishing to cede from the US.

Living in such a hostile environment of ferociously low temperatures and little daylight in winter – with many communities, including the capital, Juneau, only accessible by sea or air – leads to a mentality summed up for me by the pastor at the Wasilla Bible Church that Palin regularly attends. He says living in Alaska at best forces one to embrace challenge and, at worst, "fosters arrogant self-reliance".

These days, sprawling Wasilla is less than an hour's drive north of Anchorage on a new highway. But when Palin grew up here it was, in the words of one of her childhood friends, "a rustic, backwoods kind of place" with little more than a petrol station, a dry-goods store and a huddle of log cabins at its core. So when ➤



Top: Palin feeds her youngest child, Trig, on a campaign bus in August. With her are John McCain and his wife, Cindy (right), Palin's husband, Todd (left), and the campaign manager, Steve Schmidt. Above: with her parents, Sally and Chuck, after the vice-presidential debate in St Louis on October 2

Palin captained her high-school basketball team, the Wasilla Warriors, to victory in the 1982 junior state championship, seeing off teams from many larger metropolitan areas – even competing with a fractured ankle – it was cause for a big community celebration. The team came home to a heroes' welcome. The event is central to Palin's sense of self. It was perhaps the first time she tasted the limelight and the tingle of power that comes from being the centre of attention, the leader of the pack. These days she boasts on the campaign trail that everything she needs to know about leadership – and perhaps her need for the spotlight too – she learnt on that basketball court.

One man who has known Palin since she was eight and is still among her closest mentors is Curt Menard, currently borough mayor of the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) valley in which Wasilla sits. The Menard and Palin/Heath families are firm friends, and I am greeted at Curt's front door by the dog that he and his wife gave Palin as a puppy – since returned to them, on the grounds she now has no time to look after him. "Winning that basketball championship was huge," says Menard, who broadcast live commentary for a local radio station that Wasilla residents called "cabin radio". Competing teams from that time dubbed Palin "Sarah Barracuda" because of her talent for elbowing aside the opposition. The nickname stuck. "At the time, we thought it was a compliment," says Michelle Carney, another member of the team. "It wasn't until she started playing politics that people began using it as a negative."

All the girls on the team went on to gain a college degree, says Carney. "That was very unusual for a small town in those days. All of us learnt to have very high expectations after that." But while her team-mates went into fields such as teaching, accountancy and police work, Palin had her sights set on more public recognition. Her ambition was to become a sport commentator and television presenter. She had the looks. To help finance her way through college, she started entering beauty competitions in her early twenties, aiming for the Miss America title. In 1984 the Miss Wasilla sash was slipped over a red ballgown she made herself. Next came the Miss Alaska pageant. Since becoming vice-presidential candidate, she has played down this chapter of her life, saying she found parading before judges in a swimsuit degrading. "They made us line up in bathing suits and turn our backs so the male judges could look at our butts – I couldn't believe it," she told *Vogue* magazine, for which she posed last year.

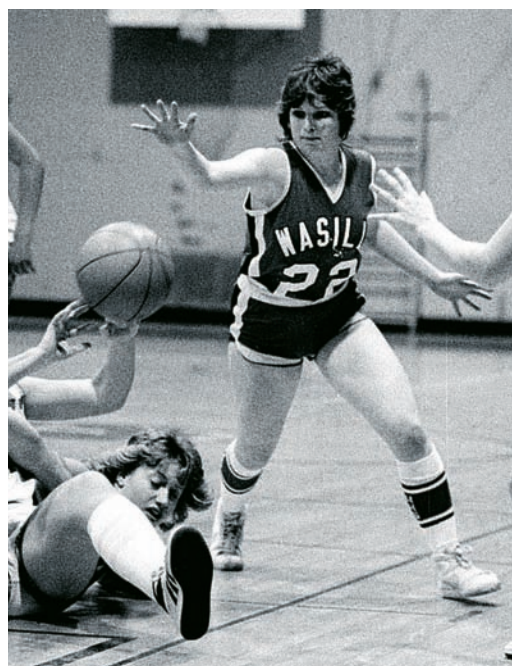
But another of her childhood friends, who followed the same tiara trail, talks enthusiastically about how entering beauty contests gave them confidence. "You learnt real stage presence," says Kristan Cole, now an estate agent and one of a small group of women with whom Palin goes target-shooting in Wasilla. "None of us were thrilled about putting on a swimsuit. But you have to understand, if you didn't have other

Right: Palin as a child, holding shrimp caught by her father in Alaska. As a girl she often began the day by joining him on a moose hunt.

Below: with her high-school basketball team, the Wasilla Warriors, which she captained, playing in Alaska's 1982 junior state championship



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talents, you weren't going to get anywhere."

While Cole did a turn as a jazz dancer, Palin played the flute. All the girls were also required to make a speech to the judges and answer questions that Cole describes as "pretty challenging. It wasn't like, 'Gee, what's your favourite colour?' I remember, for instance, being asked who Yasser Arafat was. They expected us to know what was going on in the world". Palin's father says that his daughter was an avid reader of newspapers from childhood. Cole says her friend's favourite books were *Old Yeller* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. When I mention that Palin's negligible foreign experience – she applied for her first passport last year, once elected governor of Alaska, to visit members of the Alaska National Guard stationed in Kuwait – is a concern of those who believe her underqualified for the job of vice-president, Cole bristles and says this is "laughable". "Those competitions taught you how to handle yourself in international settings," she says primly. "They

taught you how to sit down to a formal state dinner. You know, you learnt proper protocol, like which fork to eat with." Her reply echoes the beauty-pageant-like answer Palin gave one interviewer asking about her international expertise: she said it stemmed from the fact that Putin flew through Alaskan airspace, and that from some parts of Alaska you could see Russia in the distance. There is an edge of pride in Cole's voice as she mentions that she won the title of Miss Alaska in 1982 – Palin was joint runner-up two years later. Cole says she thinks Palin tried for the title again the following year, before adding loyally that when she watched her friend compete in the competition the first time, "I remember thinking she was going to be really successful. She had such charisma. I am certain," she concludes, "she will be president of the United States one day."

When I ask Curt Menard where Palin's drive comes from, his insight strengthens an impression I gained at the start of dozens of interviews. The first thing her father, Chuck Heath, asked me was: "So what are you famous for?" He repeated the question several times before rummaging through a drawer to show me snapshots of a recent canal-boat holiday that he and his wife took in Wales. It's just a jocular refrain. But I wonder then if being born the third of four siblings played some part in Palin's determination to stand out from the crowd. "When children are a way down in the pack, they often want to excel, show they can move forward and get into Dad's favour – especially girls," says Menard. "On reflection, I think there was some of that going on with Sarah."

In the years following Palin's beauty-queen quest, "she bounced around a bit", as Menard puts it. She attended five universities in six years before completing a journalism degree at the University of Idaho in 1987. She then worked for several months in Anchorage as a sports commentator before eloping with her high-school sweetheart, Todd, and starting a family. Four children followed in quick succession. A son was named Track because of Palin's love of sport. Two daughters, Bristol and Willow, were named after local creeks where the family fish. A third daughter, Piper, is named after the floatplane parked where the family now live on the shores of Lake Lucille in Wasilla. The fifth child is a son born earlier this year with Down's syndrome, called Trig, meaning "strength" in the Yu'pik Inuit language of Todd's family.

In the midst of raising her children, Palin was approached in 1992 to stand for the Wasilla city council by businessmen looking for someone to represent "the younger crowd". She took to politics like a swan princess. "She developed a taste for it pretty quick," says Nick Carney, the council member who took her from door to door introducing her to voters. "She was very good at getting people to vote for her. She would tell them anything she thought they wanted to hear." Laura Chase, who was Palin's mayoral campaign manager four years later, expands: ➤➤➤➤

"She has this way of talking to you that makes you think you are the only person on the planet. She's like a chameleon. She knows what people want her to be." Carney, who no longer lives in Wasilla, was one of the first to fall victim to what he, Chase and others see as a pattern of betrayal of those who helped her up the ladder. "As soon as you cross her, she is vicious and writes you off as the enemy. She can't stand dissent. She believes she is right about everything," says Carney, who crossed swords with her early on. Chase was another casualty, followed by a series of dismissals and resignations, including those of Wasilla's police chief, public-works director, city planner, museum director and chief librarian.

"People accuse Sarah Palin of hanging onto the coat-tails of others to get where she wants. But that's not true," says Chase. "She doesn't need to hang onto their coat-tails. She will have taken the coats off their backs and walked across their bodies to get where she's going, and once she gets there she will surround herself with yes people. She doesn't like to have people smarter than her around." Such stinging criticism can't be dismissed as small-town bitterness and envy. What they say is a recurring theme among those who have worked with her over the years.

On the campaign trail, Palin touts her achievements as mayor and chief executive of Wasilla as the seedbed of her political experience. While supporters cite new businesses, roads, a sewage system and a sports hall as her local legacy, critics say that she increased the city's debt to \$22m before she left office in 2002. The sports hall was built on land the city did not have clear title to, and has been the subject of litigation ever since. "Sarah is a results person, not a process person, and that sometimes upsets people," says another long-term friend and the one-time deputy mayor, Judith Patrick. But it was during a short stint as head of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, after failing to secure a US Senate seat, that Palin really made her political mark. Noticing senior commission staff using office computers to do work for the Republican party, and granting favours to companies they were supposed to be regulating, she reported them for a violation of ethics. Her reputation as a whistleblower and political maverick willing to take on the party's "good ol' boys" was hatched. She then used this stab at the Establishment to campaign on a clean-government platform and become governor of Alaska in 2006.

Despite record popularity ratings, in part due to her decision to hand out bumper cheques to voters as a dividend from Alaskan oil profits, her administration was soon mired in controversy – not least because of her habit of firing those who crossed her or her family. The difficulty she has in separating the personal from the professional is highlighted by a recent investigation into allegations that she abused her office as governor to further a personal vendetta. The probe found she unlawfully pressured Alaska's top public-safety official to sack a state trooper involved in a



Above: Palin at the University of Idaho in the 1980s. Left: in 1984, during her beauty-queen years. Bottom left: Palin models a T-shirt in 2004, after a senator dubbed residents of her area 'valley trash'. Bottom right: Palin campaign badges

'SHE DOESN'T NEED TO HANG ONTO PEOPLE'S COAT-TAILS. SHE WILL HAVE TAKEN THE COATS OFF THEIR BACKS'

messy divorce with her younger sister, Molly. After refusing to bow to the pressure, the official was fired. The "Troopergate" inquiry also found that Todd Palin, Alaska's self-styled "first dude", involved himself in state politics to such an extent that he amounted to a "shadow governor".

"Sarah believes she is above the law," says the president of Alaska's State Senate, Lyda Green, a lifelong Republican who was a friend of Palin until they fell out over the style in which Palin began to run the state.



When legislators wanted to discuss state matters with the governor, the difficulty they had in tracking her down led some to wear "Sarah Is Missing" badges on their lapels.

"What is important for people to understand is that, once elected, Sarah Palin has little use for the legislature," says Green. "If people don't agree with her, she brands them as the enemy and does what she wants anyway. No one should underestimate her ambition."

That this makes her a "maverick" of the sort that McCain likes to be seen as, Green and others doubt. As election day has drawn nearer, even McCain has shown signs of frustration with Palin. He has tried to distance himself from her tirades against Obama that have drawn cries of "terrorist" and "kill him" from the crowds. If McCain loses this election, he could find he is the latest in a long line of those "field-dressed" by Palin: she could use their joint run for the White House to launch her own bid for the presidency one day.

Much of what I hear about Palin, from people who have known her for years, makes more sense after I meet the man once called the "most hated liberal in the valley" by Wasilla's newspaper The Frontiersman, after he wrote a book encouraging tolerance of homosexuality.

Howard Bess is a Baptist minister who now lives in nearby Palmer. We meet in a busy diner on the road between Palmer and Wasilla, the part of the Mat-Su valley some call "Alaska's Bible belt" because of its large number of evangelical churches. The grey-haired priest catalogues the battles he fought with Palin when she was mayor of Wasilla, not only on gay rights but on abortion – she opposes it even in cases of rape or incest – and on censorship. The row over whether Palin tried to ban a list of books from her library has surfaced repeatedly during her run for the vice-presidency. She argues that she was simply asking a hypothetical question when she inquired of the chief librarian, Mary Ellen Emmons, what the procedure would be for removing "socially objectionable" books from the shelves. After Emmons stood her ground and said that such censorship would not be accepted, she was fired. She was later reinstated after a public outcry, but has since left Wasilla to work in a library several hundred miles away and, like other government employees I approach who fear that speaking out could cost them their jobs (a not-unreasonable concern given the governor's track record), she refuses to talk about what happened.

But Howard Bess swears such a list did exist, and that his book was on it. "Sarah Palin entered politics in the middle of a fierce culture war here in the valley," he says. At the heart of it was abortion – she is said to have picketed a hospital that carried out terminations. Gun control was an issue too: she campaigned for the right of gun-owners to carry ➤➤➤

FROM TOP: AP; ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS; AP (CAMPAIGN BADGES); GETTY IMAGES

concealed weapons. "Sarah Palin's world is divided into the whitest of white and blackest of black. If she thinks she is right about something, she will wage all-out war, and her history shows she is always at war with someone," says Bess. "Her mental structure is little different than that of an Islamic fundamentalist. The churches she attends are understood by some to have an apocalyptic view of the future, and believe she will be the leader of a new world order when Jesus returns."

The Wasilla Assembly of God Pentecostal church, which Palin attended for nearly 20 years and where worshippers "speak in tongues" when overcome by the Holy Spirit, has become particularly sensitive to media scrutiny since the appearance of a three-year-old video showing Palin being blessed there against the evils of witchcraft. Its senior pastor, Ed Kalnins, tells me he has been instructed not to talk to the press until after the presidential election, and warns me not to talk to any members of the congregation about Palin. On my way out of the church, I notice a leaflet promising "Deliverance from PMS", explaining how premenstrual problems are the work of Satan.

While happy to talk about the Alaskan psyche, pastor Larry Kroon of the Wasilla Bible Church, which Palin now attends with her family, also refused to discuss her beliefs. But some of them are a matter of record. She has campaigned for creationism to be taught alongside evolution in schools. She has also said she does not believe global warming is man-made or driven by pollution. She supports drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and has sued the federal government to block a listing of polar bears as an endangered species. She also allows big-game hunters in Alaska to shoot wolves and bears from low-flying planes.

"Some people may try to demonise Sarah Palin, and that is unfair. She is a true believer. She is on a mission," Bess sums up in a more conciliatory tone. That, of course, is precisely why McCain picked her. As the influential conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh has said, "Palin equals guns, babies, Jesus" – the holy trinity of the Republican Christian right.

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From the moment Palin stepped onto the stage at the Republican convention in St Paul on September 3 and delivered her "pit bull in lipstick" speech, she electrified the presidential race. "What's the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull? Lipstick!" she hollered in her folksy western twang – playing up an image of herself as a future "mother of the nation" prepared to fiercely defend her brood. When she lined up four of her children behind her on stage, including her unmarried 17-year-old daughter – whose pregnancy, along with Palin's Down's-syndrome son, she has used to trumpet her pro-life stance – questions were asked about how protective she is of her own. Despite claims that she consulted her family before accepting McCain's offer of the vice-



Palin in Alaska with one of her daughters and a caribou she had just shot. 'It's a different breed of person who ends up here in Alaska,' says her father, Chuck. 'People here tend to be more adventurous'

SHE HAS SUED THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO BLOCK A LISTING OF POLAR BEARS AS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

presidential nomination six days earlier, it later emerged that they were only told after the decision was made, and had little time to adjust to the prospect of being thrust into the limelight.

In the weeks that followed, Palin appeared to throw the Democrats severely off-kilter. Obama made the blunder of picking up on her convention rallying cry by sniping: "You can put lipstick on a pig; it's still a pig." His comment spawned a rash of demonstrations in which women sported pig masks painted with lipstick to show support for his opponent's running mate. Polls swung towards McCain.

For a while there was a cross-party, quasi-feminist celebration of Palin. Commentators fell over themselves to hail her as a breath of fresh air. Then came the series of television interviews in which she floundered. It was in one of these that she said Putin flying through Alaskan airspace counted as foreign-policy experience. The fiasco led some respected right-wing commentators and staunch Republicans to demand that she step aside for the sake of the party. One said: "She makes George W Bush sound like Cicero."

The gibberish she spoke in interviews became instant fodder for late-night comedy shows, including a brilliant and widely broadcast satire by Tina Fey – particularly alarming for the McCain camp, as it simply repeated verbatim one of Palin's incoherent answers on the economy. When Wall Street went into meltdown, many floating voters, especially those in the white working class with jobs, homes and retirement plans on the line, swung back to

Obama. Following her mauling by the media, some rallied to defend her as a plucky outsider who had been exploited and then eaten alive by the powerhouse elite. This highlights the source of much of her appeal. At a time when disillusion with Washington and Wall Street is at a high, it is precisely because Palin is perceived as representing "Joe Six-Pack" that many will vote for her and McCain on November 4.

Nowhere was this more evident than at the Tailgaters Sports Bar & Grill in Wasilla on the night that Palin's debate in St Louis with her rival Joe Biden was broadcast on television. It was a home-town crowd, but the room fell silent every time she delivered her populist soundbites peppered with "doggone it" and "you betcha!", slamming the "toxic mess" wrought by corporate America. Yet when Biden, a silver-tongued US senator and Washington insider for more than 30 years, gave his more measured answers, diners jeered "Blah, blah, blah" and turned to talk among themselves. It was during one of these noisy interludes that I learnt more than I really wanted to know about life in Wasilla, when a young woman leant across and gave me a tip on how to skin a willow ptarmigan – Alaska's state bird – without a knife. Perhaps because I mentioned being taught how to fire a 20-gauge shotgun in Palin's shooting club, I now learnt that stepping on the bird's wings, yanking its legs backwards and twisting its head ensures "the breast falls into your hands like butter".

Within minutes of the end of the debate, Palin was taking to another stage in St Louis to soak up the applause of the Republican faithful. Standing directly behind her on the podium were her parents, Chuck and Sally Heath. Sally could be seen beaming and chanting "USA! USA!" in unison with the crowd. Chuck, tie askew, looked more stagestruck and unsure what to do. Then his daughter turned, gave him a broad smile and he gave her the thumbs-up.

Whatever happens in next month's presidential elections, Sarah Palin has, for the moment at least, found a new answer to her father's catchphrase: "So what are you famous for?" ■

PHOTOGRAPH: AP

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