

# Norman Maclean, Seeley Lake, and the Cabin that “Runs Through It”

## Part I

By Donna Love, for the *Pathfinder*

Writer’s note: When my husband and I lived in Choteau we became friends with the Pulitzer Prize winning author, A.B. Guthrie, who had a home there. While visiting Choteau two summers ago we were thrilled to see a new community museum display dedicated to Guthrie. I thought how great it would be to have a Seeley Lake display honoring our local writer, Norman Maclean.

I contacted his son, John, a friend of the family, who still owns his father’s cabin with his sister, on the west shore of Seeley Lake. He agreed. At our son’s college going away party, John had the chance to meet Addrien Marx, President of the Museum Board. Addrien picked up the project. This spring John and his sister, Jean, sent many items to us for use in their father’s display. Colleen Nicholson handled photographs and printing. My part was to write the interpretive panels.

While working on the panels, I found myself wanting to know more about Maclean. Colleen shared the book, [Norman Maclean, American Authors Series](#), (Confluence Press, Lewiston, Idaho, 1988), a collection of some of Maclean’s essays and speeches.

Much of the information for this article came from that book, though some is from the web site, [answers.com/topic/norman-maclean](http://answers.com/topic/norman-maclean), and some from Cabin Fever. I am also grateful for Sentinel High School students, John Nugent and Jessica Cox, who explored Maclean’s high school years for the *Missoulian* (April 7, 2003).

In my article, which follows, I left footnotes out for the sake of flow, but words directly written or spoken by Maclean are placed in quotations. Due to its length, my article will appear in the *Pathfinder* in two installments. This is the first.

Norman Fitzroy Maclean was born in Clarinda, Iowa on December 23, 1902, the firstborn child of Rev. John Maclean and Clara (Davidson) Maclean, immigrants from Canada. In 1909, Norman’s father, a Scottish Presbyterian minister, moved his family to Missoula, Montana to pastor the Presbyterian Church, which is still at 235 S Fifth Street.

Originally from Nova Scotia, Maclean’s father loved the United States so much that Maclean wrote that his family didn’t have “an American Dream” - they had “American Dreams.” One of his father’s biggest was the dream of the “great education” that could be had in the United States, “and the necessity of every person to be educated.”

Maclean and Paul, his brother, who was three years younger, received much of their early education from their father. Home schooling consisted of studying and writing from nine to noon. Maclean’s afternoons were his own.

Maclean was home schooled until 1913, when truant officers caught him “out hunting,” during school hours so at the age of ten and a half he started public school. Paul attended school at age seven.

Maclean’s childhood was as normal as could be expected for a minister’s family living in Missoula during the 1910’s. In his essay, “Retrievers Good and Bad”, published in 1977, he wrote that his “mother was a fine working woman, but she had one shortcoming. She ran the church and all that, she had a family to take care of and she was stable boy, as it were, for a succession of large female Chesapeake Bay retrievers. But she was not a dog trainer, and my father on the opening day of duck season expected not only a well-fed and well-kept dog, but a perfect retriever. Since he would not train the dogs himself, it may be difficult to understand just how he expected them to show instantaneous perfection, but this is what he expected from hunting dogs and firstborn sons.”

In 1920, Maclean graduated from Missoula County High School, the only high school in Missoula at that time, which is now Hellgate. His younger brother, Paul, graduated in 1923. While in high school Maclean played football, was the business manager of the school annual, and wrote for the school paper. His nickname was “Preacher.”

His brother, Paul, “Polly,” played football and basketball, was in dramatic club, and Penrod, was a class Vice-president, took a first place in the Dixon Declamation contest and a second place at the State Declamation contest. He was on the school paper and annual staff. In addition, he was vice-president of the Latin Club, and an organizer of the Senior Carnival.

Maclean said of those years, “My family...didn’t talk about how much we loved each other. It would have been unthinkable. But fishing was the one place where we could say how much we admired one another.”

At the age of 14, Maclean began working at the “box factory of Polley’s sawmill in Missoula.” In 1917, too young to enlist in the military for World War I, he began working in logging camps, and for the United States Forest Service at a time when the older “young”



*Norman and his brother Paul taken when they were young. The picture was taken by Rembrandly Studio.*

men were off to war.

Maclean later wrote that he went to work for the Forest Service “because I then thought I would enter the Forest Service as my life profession and so should be moving around seeing many different forests of the northwest.” He spent three summers working in the Bitterroot Mountains and one in the Kootenai National Forest.

The short story, USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook and a Hole in the Sky, and the story Black Ghost from the book Young Men and Fire, published posthumously by the University of Chicago Press in 1992, were, according to one article, “semi-fictionalized accounts of these experiences.”

In 1920, Maclean enrolled in school at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Each summer Maclean returned home.

In 1921, his family leased land from the Forest Service, and built a cabin on Seeley Lake with the logs used to clear the land. Maclean means “son of a carpenter,” and Maclean called his father “a wonderful carpenter.” The cabin was the third cabin built on the west shore of the lake. Maclean’s son, John, related that there were no roads to these cabins so building materials were ferried across the lake in boats.



*Jessie Maclean, Norman’s wife, in a boat on Seeley Lake, photo by Norman Maclean.*

On August 27, 2004, John wrote a letter to Jeff Hagener, Director and Commission Secretary of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, stating, “The Maclean cabin, the first one north from Seeley Lake Campground, is now the oldest cabin occupied continuously by the same family in the Seeley Lake area. It is something of an historic landmark. Parts of five books have been written in the cabin including my father, Norman Maclean’s, classic, *A River Runs Through It*, and my own influential, *Fire on the Mountain: The True Story of the South Canyon Fire*.”

It was to this cabin that Norman Maclean returned almost every summer since he first went away to college. He mentioned the cabin in most of his speeches and stories, referring fondly to it as “a cabin that was only sixteen miles from the glaciers.”

In 1924, Maclean received an AB from Dartmouth College. From 1924-26, while working on his Master of Arts, he was also a teaching assistant. In the fall of 1926, he returned to Montana for two years to work for the Forest Service. He attributed his return to not knowing where he was going. He said, “I wrote the chairman of the English Department and asked if I could get somebody to take my classes... because I didn’t think I ought to go back any more.”

It was during this time in Montana that Maclean met his future wife, Jessie Burns, a red headed, freckle faced girl from Wolf Creek. While in college his father became head of the Presbyterian Church in Montana and part of Wyoming so his father and mother had moved to Helena. Maclean met Jessie in Helena through a friend. On that December night, while returning to Helena from a party, their car broke down in a blizzard and Maclean walked four miles into town for help.

Jessie and Maclean dated off and on and that next spring, after a harrowing trip through a flooded mountain canyon to visit Jessie’s family, Maclean told her, “You know, I’m pretty impressed with the way you drive that car. Some day I might ask you to marry me.”

Jessie replied, “Well, you better get used to high places before you do.”

In 1928, Maclean moved to Chicago, the “one institution of higher learning that was thought to exist west of Appalachians by the populace east of the Appalachians” and took a job as a graduate-assistant in English. Maclean said that meant, “going home late Friday afternoon, having a couple shots of Prohibition gin, going to bed right after dinner and reading thirty students times three [sections] of 1000 word compositions on ‘How to Fill a Silo.’” Through this he joked he became “an expert on corn.”

Jessie, who worked in an accounting office, joined him for a time in Chicago, but returned to Montana to work until they could be married. In summer, Maclean continued to return to Montana, and in 1931, after he was promoted to instructor at the University of Chicago, he married Jessie on September 24. His father performed the ceremony in Helena.

The newlyweds lived in Chicago, but returned to Montana most summers. Maclean liked the University of Chicago. It was much different from Dartmouth for “there wasn’t this strict social and economic stratification of society according to whether you’re an instructor or an assistant professor or an associate or a full professor.”

Maclean seemed to be at ease in both Chicago and Montana, admiring people from both realms. He wrote, “...there were quite a few card players in western Montana who would have taken the money from the world famous intellectuals who gathered at noon in the card room of the Quadrangle Club in those days (and since).”

In 1932, Maclean received his first of three Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. He described a great teacher as “a tough guy who cares deeply about something that is hard to understand,” and felt that teaching was “something you can do – or not do – when you are fairly young.”

In addition, he felt that “something less than half of the great scholars have not been great teachers.” A teacher’s genes, he concluded, included three items; a “freshness of the World,” a gene that “leads students to making discoveries,” and “at least half” of a gene that gives them a “hankering” to write.

Maclean moved to Chicago just before the Great Depression, and he said of these years, “There was this very deep feeling of despair

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and anger”...but, “You wouldn’t see it often either in town or when I went back to Montana. I think most people try to cover up their feelings about the despair they are going through.”

To be continued...

(Next week – Paul’s death, what the family says about it, and the writing of [A River Runs Through It](#).)