

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

Part II

By Donna Love, for the *Pathfinder*

Writer's note: This is Part II of a two-part article. In Part I, which appeared in the *Pathfinder* last week, we learned that Norman Fitzroy Maclean was born in Iowa in 1902, the firstborn child of Rev. John Maclean and Clara (Davidson) Maclean. In 1909, his family moved to Missoula where he graduated from high school. In 1921, the year Maclean went away to college, his family leased and built a cabin on the shores of Seeley Lake. After becoming a professor of Shakespeare and the Romantic Poets, he married Jessie Burns from Wolf Creek in 1931. Most summers Maclean and his family returned to the Seeley Lake cabin, forever linking the Macleans to Seeley Lake. This installment begins with 1938, the year Maclean's brother, Paul, was murdered.

1938 was a pivotal year in Maclean's life. It was the year his brother, Paul, who worked in public relations at the University of Chicago, was murdered in Chicago. Maclean often said his brother's death was connected to gambling debts. According to Maclean's son, John, "The police believed Paul was killed in a robbery that may or may not have started as a simple fist fight. Paul had cashed a weekly paycheck, but the money was missing from his wallet when his body was found. No one was ever charged with the murder."

Maclean tells of the time following his brother's death in his essay, *Retrievers Good and Bad*, written in 1977, "Then, shortly after these things happened to the dog, my brother was murdered. I try to say it the way it was – without premonition, never to be explained and never to be assimilated. It had no past and it never went on and turned into something else. It just was – suddenly, shockingly and forever.

"After the funeral my father and mother and I spent several weeks at our cabin on the lake. It was early May, and the forest floor of the cathedral of thousand-year-old tamaracks was covered with dogtooth violets, which are really lilies. Around the lake they are often called glacier lilies, probably because it is only about twenty miles from our lake to the glaciers. We thought they were the most beautiful and fragile flowers we would ever see, and we tried not to walk on any of them.

"My father aged rapidly. He never hunted ducks again and had to give up most of his trout fishing. His feet dragged when he walked, as if his leg muscles had atrophied so he could not fish the big river any more or even the creeks that were hard to get to. Mostly, he fished in the lake in front of our cabin in a flat-bottomed boat he had made many years before..."

Following that difficult time, Maclean returned to teach in Chicago. Two years later, in 1940, he received his second Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. It was also this year that he received a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

When WWII began, Maclean wanted to enlist in the Navy, but the University requested that he not. Instead he served as dean of students from 1942-45, and from 1943-45, he served as acting director for the Institute on Military Studies and co-authored, *Manual of Instruction in Military Maps and Aerial Photographs*.

His first child, Jean Burns, was born in Chicago on January 26, 1942, and his son, John Norman, was born in Chicago on May 10, 1943. All the while he was teaching days and working nights at the Institute. He has regrets of this time, later saying, "I feel I never picked up the children at the age when I should have. I was tired all the time."

His daughter, Jean, who taught at the University of Chicago Law School, is now a lawyer practicing in Chicago. His son, John, is a journalist and author. Maclean said in an interview, "She (Jean) loves the outdoors and is a good caster. But my son is the great fisherman. He's one of the finest fisherman I'm sure, of his generation..."

In 1949, "thirteen out of sixteen smokejumpers were burned to death within 56 minutes after they had collected and folded their parachutes" on the Mann Gulch Fire near Helena. Intrigued, Maclean began to study and write about why the smokejumpers died.

From 1952-62, Maclean was Chairman of the Committee on General Studies in Humanities, which he founded. He loved teaching



Norman Maclean teaching as a professor at the University of Chicago, 1933.

Shakespeare and said, “He [Shakespeare] must have known more about writing than anybody else ever did.” Maclean could spend the whole first day of his Shakespeare class on the two opening words of Hamlet, “Who’s there?”

From 1962 to 72, Maclean had the honor of being the William Rainey Harper Professor of English Literature at the University.

In 1968, after thirty-seven years of marriage, Jessie died of emphysema. Maclean said, “The last years she lived with an oxygen tank, but she never whined, I never heard her cry. She died in December 1968, in Chicago, and I thought I died with her.”

In 1973, at age 71, after forty-five years of teaching, Maclean received his third Quantrell Award for Excellence in Teaching and retired the same year. His children encouraged him to write down the stories he liked to tell. When he started he thought that it was too late for him to be a writer so all he “hoped to do was write a few things well.” His first short stories were published in various places.

While working on his first “little” book, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, he said, “A man has to have a lot of reasons for writing his first book after becoming seventy and a least a couple of them should be good in case at that age the book isn’t.”

To write the book, he said, “So when I went about writing my first book, as you will see, I went back to my memory of Montana for my energy and to my years of teaching literature for the power lines to conduct it.”

While writing he worked most days from nine to twelve and then took a long bath in the afternoon, thinking about what he was going to write next because, “It’s hard enough to write without having to think about what to write.”

A River Runs Through It, his most acclaimed work, was published in 1976, by the University of Chicago Press. It is the only work of fiction the University has ever published. Maclean didn’t speak of the book as a story about the tragedy of his family, he called it “a love poem” to his family.

It was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in Letters, but the story, a semi-fictional account of Maclean’s family, was considered too close to real life to be fiction. John added, “...the remarks from Pulitzer jurors that year, including the editor of my paper, *The Chicago Tribune*, were that no ‘worthy’ candidate had been proposed. Boy, were they wrong.”

Fly fishermen were some of the first to read it. One said, “There are hundreds of books and articles on how to fly fish, but only Maclean tells you how it feels.” Through fly fishermen it spread to others.

Later Maclean explained the source of its name as being from “an ordinary farmer’s expression as ‘a creek runs through the north forty.’” He also liked the running rhythm of the three R’s. The “It” he said, is the “it” of Shakespeare, meaning, “the world to come.”

All the while he was also working on the Mann Gulch story. In a speech in 1979, he said, “the long story I am working on now is the tragic story of the Mann Gulch fire.” He explained that while it was true that he was on the fire before it was completely contained, it wasn’t biographical. His research for the book came from interviews, Forest Service and insurance documents, and his own personal knowledge about the fire.

In 1980, Maclean, who continued to write and speak at events, received an honorary Litt. D. from Montana State University, which was followed in 1981 by an honorary Litt. D. from the University of Montana.

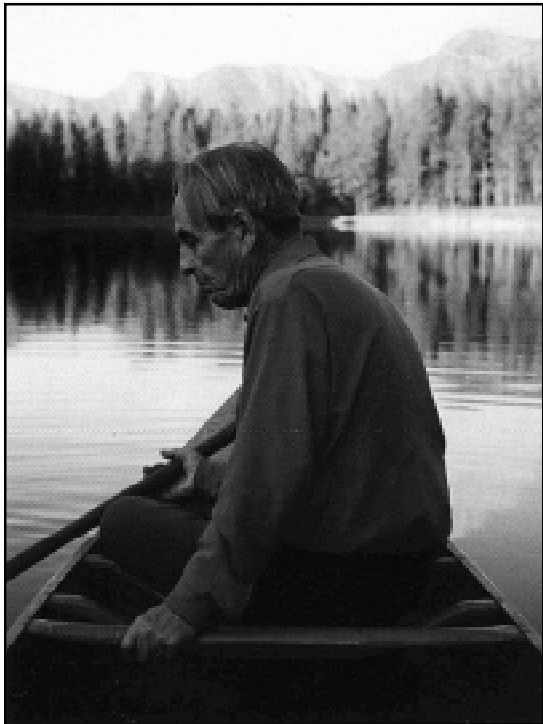
In 1987, Maclean was presented the Montana Governor’s Award for the Arts in Literature. In his acceptance speech, he said, “This honor..is coming from my home state, the state in which I was brought up and which determined my character for better or worse, the state where I and my family built a log cabin on one of its most beautiful lakes and a cabin I have returned to all but two of the last sixty-five years and to which I hope to return to as long as I am physically able or at least as long as I can continue to remember, when I find myself standing in the next room, what it was I went in there to find.”

In the meantime, *A River Runs Through It* was still gaining fame. In 1986, in an article written by Suzanne Vernon, first for the *Pathfinder*, and then used in *Cabin Fever*, Maclean told Vernon, “everyone from Paramount to summer school students” was interested in making the book into a movie. When Robert Redford visited him, Maclean told Vernon, “I feel at ease when I talk to him,” so Redford got the deal in 1988.

Then on August 2, 1990, Norman Maclean died in Chicago at the age of 87.

Two years later, *A River Runs Through It*, the motion picture was released by Columbia Pictures, directed by Robert Redford and starring Brad Pitt and Tom Skeritt. Also in 1992, at the urging of John and Jean, The University of Chicago Press published *Young Men and Fire*, posthumously for their father. John wrote, “The editing changes by me, Jean, and an editor at the University of Chicago Press, were minor.” *Young Men and Fire* won the National Book Critics Circle Award that same year.

And now, Maclean’s son and daughter, John and Jean, have given the Seeley Lake Historical Society Museum permission to honor their father. John has shared several of his father’s personal items including fishing reels, a fishing shirt, and a tackle box from the cabin. Jean has provided photos. We thank John and Jean for sharing their father with us.



Norman Maclean, later in life, enjoying the beautiful waters of Seeley Lake, 1980. Photograph taken by Virginia Wald.

Seeley Swan Pathfinder — Thursday, June 2, 2005

Many guests and community members joined us on Sunday, May 28 at the museum for the grand opening of “Norman Maclean, Seeley Lake, and the Cabin That Runs Through It” display. If you missed the grand opening, don’t hesitate to visit the museum. The display is sure to take you back to an earlier time in Seeley Lake, a time when dogtooth violets, so beautiful and fragile to walk on, carpeted the valley floor.