

Festival focuses on life, writings of Norman Maclean



Erin Madison, emadison@greatfalltribune.com 10:14 p.m. MDT July 3, 2015



(Photo: AP File photo)

John Maclean has been busy looking through family photos and gathering information to share at the upcoming In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean Festival.

"I've been looking at old photographs," said John Maclean, son of famed author Norman Maclean. "People love pictures. It kind of tells the story."

John Maclean will share the story of his family at the Footsteps of Norman Maclean Festival to be held July 10-13 in Seeley Lake. He is one of an impressive lineup of speakers who knew and worked with Norman Maclean.

"I think we're bringing together an incredible array of people," festival organizer Jenny Rohrer said.

This is the first year of the festival, which aims to celebrate Maclean's "A River Runs Through It," and to uncover extraordinary memories and little-known aspects of the Montana life of Norman Maclean.

John Maclean will offer a glimpse into that life by sharing the history of the family cabin located on the shore of Seeley Lake.

"We've been there nearly a century," John Maclean said.

His grandfather, the Rev. John Norman Maclean, secured a Forest Service lease for the cabin in 1921.

"He and my dad and my Uncle Paul built the cabin," John Maclean said.

Norman Maclean used the cabin as a writing retreat, as does John Maclean, whose books focus on wildlife.

"Seven to nine books, depending on how you count it, about the American West have been written there," John Maclean said.

Norman Maclean used the cabin mainly as a research base, which is how John Maclean uses it as well. John Maclean documents his field notes there and does a little writing from the cabin.

"I think my dad did about the same thing," he said. "In both our cases, we had to get away from the West to really write about it."

The cabin on Seeley Lake continues to be the Maclean's main tie to Montana.

"It has been what has held us to the state through all these years," John Maclean said.

Keynote speaker Pete Dexter will recall the week he spent with Norman Maclean in 1981. Dexter was a newspaper reporter at the time and wrote about Maclean for Esquire magazine. Dexter's time with Maclean inspired Dexter to transition from being a newspaper reporter to a book author. He went on to win a National Book Award.

"We've got Pete who is going to tell that interesting story," Rohrer said.

On Sunday, a panel will discuss the research Norman Maclean did for his book "Young Men and Fire."



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"Norman really uncovered a cover-up the Forest Service did with that fire," Rohrer said. "He unraveled what really happened that day."

Panelists Laird Robinson, retired USFS smokejumper, and Alan Thomas, Maclean's editor at the University of Chicago press, will describe how they witnessed Maclean spending approximately a decade researching, writing and revising the book. Fire scientist Dick Rothermel will share how his research at Missoula's Fire Lab helped Maclean solve the mysteries of the Mann Gulch Fire.

Up until his final illness and death, Maclean still tinkered with the manuscript and would not release the book.

Norman Maclean, author of "A River Runs Through It" and "Young Men and Fire." (Photo: Tribune File Photo)

O. Alan Weltzien, author of "The Norman Maclean Reader," will discuss Maclean's unpublished writings. Maclean was a serious Custer sleuth in the 1950s and '60s and spent about four years writing what would have been his first book on Custer and the Battle of Little Bighorn, before mostly abandoning it.

"He just knows all kinds of stuff about Maclean," Rohrer said of Weltzien.

On Saturday, there will be an open mic session where Seeley locals can share their memories of Maclean.

Maclean's cleaning lady who still has a box of letters from Maclean will speak during that time. So will the man who taught Maclean to tie flies, Rohrer said.

On Friday and Saturday, there will be tours of Maclean's favorite fishing holes. There will also be two guided hikes to Mann Gulch. However, those hikes are already full.

Some events during the festival require advanced reservations and tickets. Other events are free. For a complete schedule, visit macleanfootsteps.com.

This inaugural festival is planned to be an annual event, Rohrer said.

Next year the festival will likely focus on the making of the movie, "A River Runs Through It."

Future years may focus on other Montana authors.

In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean Festival

What: Festival focusing on the writing of Norman Maclean, author of "A River Runs Through It" and "Young Men and Fire"

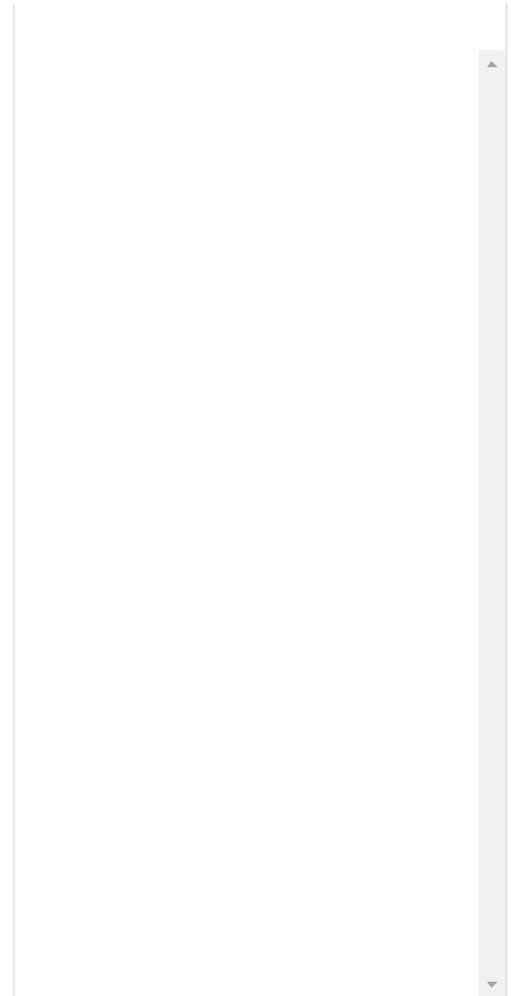
Where: Seeley Lake

When: July 10-13

For more information, tickets and a complete schedule: macleanfootsteps.com

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