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Our Town

Callison still guiding the way

By Jan Anderson
Smithers/For the Interior News

At a ceremony held in Kelowna on March 29, the Guide Outfitters Association of British Columbia presented their prestigious Leland Award to Smithers resident, Dempsey Callison.

This honour recognizes professionalism in the ranks of big game hunting guides in British Columbia, Yukon, Nunavut and Northwest Territories. It was established in 2000, in memory of Leland Bradford, a talented assistant guide who died in 1998, at the age of 22.

Dempsey was born far from any roads, near the historical Tahltan village at Shesley, B.C. Fred Callison brought his wife in from Lost Lake by dog team, to be attended to by midwives Nedt cha deech, Eva Dunson, and Rosie Taku (Dennis). When complications set in, Fred climbed a telegraph pole to summon the local doctor for help. On a cold January in 1938, Dan McPhee drove his dog team 43 miles in -40 C weather, to carry Dr. Patchett out from Telegraph Creek. The doctor predicted that the baby would grow to be a powerful man, and urged Fred to name his boy after the World Heavyweight Champion boxer, Jack Dempsey. And so it came to be that Fred and his wife Ethel (nee Quock) named their son Dempsey Patchett Callison.

The family returned to their homestead, but every summer they travelled 80 miles by pack train into Telegraph Creek, where Fred loaded up with supplies to deliver to the telegraph line operators at Shesley and Nahlin. One of Dempsey's earliest memories is of riding into town inside pannier boxes carried by a mule, with him on one side and his baby sister, Lee, on the other.

It didn't take long before horses and hunting became as much a part of the boy as flowers are to fireweed. By the time he was 10 years old, Dempsey was riding lead for the pack train. His family left the area at the end of the '40s, and

Smithers' Dempsey Callison was recently honoured by the Guide Outfitters Association of British Columbia.

Photo courtesy tonybynum.com

some of the ladies in Telegraph Creek still giggle in remembrance of the day when the 16-year-old cowboy rode back into town. Dempsey's handsome looks, coupled with his kind and gentle demeanor, were the talk of the village!

By 1950, Fred and Ethel had separated and Dempsey moved with his father to the north end of Atlin Lake. They began raising horses and were soon managing a herd of 76 head. Dempsey, then a young man, caught the eye of George Edzerza, who mentored the eager cowboy, and offered him his first guiding job—hunting saddle-back rams, moose, mountain goat, caribou and bear.

At the age of 31, Dempsey was allotted the Liard Plateau, one of the last available hunting areas in northern British Columbia and hence earned the title of Big Game Hunting Outfitter. Years later, he purchased a 6,000 square-mile hunting area, located within his native Tahltan lands. He moved to Dease Lake and operated Golden Bear Outfitting until retiring in 2007.

Dempsey is now settled in Smithers, where he often breaks out the horse trailer to load up and explore new trails. Last year, at 75 years of age, Dempsey headed back into the wilderness he loves so dearly. He guided two sheep hunters and also hunted for moose, caribou and goat. Every hunter was successful.

George Bernard Shaw wrote, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." At 76, Dempsey is planning to guide again this fall. If it's true that things get better with age, he must be approaching magnificent!

NB: Dempsey would like to extend his appreciation to Mike and Carol Danielson of Little Dease Ventures for making this opportunity possible, to Jim Peterson and Carmen Nyuli of Tahltan Outfitters for their support, to the hunters who created his nomination, and to the Board and members of GOABC for their consideration. He wishes to thank Tony Bynum for the wonderful photograph, Sitka for their gift of hunting apparel, and Rick Taylor for the outstanding bronze sculpture. He sends his love to his delightful daughters, Cynthia, Camille, and Candis. In particular, Dempsey thanks the Bradford family, for this wonderful tribute to their son, Leland, whom Dempsey knew and respected as a skilled and honourable outdoorsman.

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