

Lee Downes, North Fork community leader, dies



Lee Downes, left, receives a medal from Tom Countryman more than 68 years after Downes served in post-war Europe in this photo from 2020.

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Lee Downes, a longtime North Forker and community leader, died Oct. 3. He was 95.

Downes was born June 21, 1928 in Columbia Falls.

His grandfather and his mother homesteaded just north of Columbia Falls, about three miles north of town.

“When I was a boy I used to herd my grandfather’s cattle up along the North Fork Road for pasture,” he said in an oral history along with his late wife, Marietta, in 2012, recorded by Tom Edwards.

Downes was in his mid-20s when he left the U.S. Army in 1953 after stints on the Russian border during the Cold War. He headed home to Montana with about \$2,800 in mustering out pay.

That same year, with \$1,600, he bought 192 acres along Cyclone Creek, purchasing an old placer mining claim. In 1954, he built a cabin there with timber he crafted into three-sided logs.

The Downes family typically occupied the cabin near Cyclone Creek seasonally, though Downes also spent time there in the winter when he had a contract job in the area with the Forest Service or he was logging.

In 1961, Downes married Marietta Louise Downes. She had lost her first husband, Neil Christenson, when he was killed in a hunting accident. Downes said Christenson was his best friend.

Downes did what he could to help Marietta in the years following Christenson's death and eventually the two became a couple.

Marietta had two daughters and two sons from her first marriage. Downes moved in with the family in a house near Martin City. He and Marietta later had two daughters, Kerri and Marilee.

In the mid-1960s, the family purchased what they eventually came to call "the river place" or The Soaring Eagle Ranch. The 136 acres were west of the North Fork Road in the vicinity of the big sign that informs northbound motorists that the road ahead is bordered by private land for many miles.

In 1976, Downes built a cabin on the property. Marilee and Kerri helped peel the logs. A few years later, Marietta, Kerri and Marilee joined their father and the family lived full time at the ranch along the North Fork Road.

Living off the grid, the Downes's found it was less expensive to live up the North Fork than in town. They had no electric bills and they hand-pumped water in the early days. They grew crops in the garden and canned the produce.

They did have a generator, which they used sparingly.

"When the generator was running, that day you washed your clothes, you vacuumed the floor. You baked that day. Everything was done that day, and then we were good until the next time we needed it, which would be about once a week. And you get kind of almost frugal in what you have up there, because you didn't want to burn it all up because you didn't know when the fuel would come up, or the propane. But down here if the electricity goes off we have nothing. We have the wood stove, and we still have him (Lee) splitting wood," Marietta said.

In the oral history, he recalled the early days of Polebridge.

"There wasn't much there in the early days. The store was there, and that was about it. Polebridge, where all the lots are, was a big hay meadow," he said.

There were plenty of outdoor adventures and hunting stories over the years.

One day, Downes followed tracks of an elk and the bootprints of what he assumed to be hunters across the family property. Ultimately, he saw evidence that an elk had been shot, but nary a hunter in sight. He suddenly realized, too late, that a grizzly bear had claimed the carcass.

Downes said as soon as he made eye contact with the bear, the animal charged. At first, a thick stand of lodgepole pines thwarted the grizzly's advance. But then the bear found an opening and quickly approached to within about 30 feet.

"I shot it in the neck," he recalled. "It didn't die right away. He stood up and was grabbing at the lodgepoles and then fell over dead."

In 2020, 68 years after serving Downes received his Army of Occupation Medal. The medal was created in the aftermath of World War II to recognize those who had performed occupation

service in either Germany, Italy, Austria or Japan.

Columbia Falls native Tom Countryman, a retired Naval Hospital Corpsman Master Chief, was able to secure it for Downes.

Downes was an excellent sharpshooter and but he was drafted and sent overseas. He landed in Casablanca, Morocco and eventually served in Italy and Germany.

“I wouldn’t take a million dollars for the experience and I wouldn’t give 10 cents to do it again,” he said with a laugh in a 2020 interview.

Services for Downes have not been finalized.