

A secluded Big Sur cabin with a surprising past, lost in Dolan Fire

IN LATE August, a cultural icon was lost to the Dolan Fire. You probably never heard of it, since it was in private hands since its construction in the 1930s and, for the last 47 years, sat deep in a canyon in Big Sur.

The icon was a small cabin known as the Haida House, and it was the creation of legendary wood sculptor Dudley Carter.

Carter was well known in the Pacific Northwest, where he was born and developed his talent for sculpting large works from wood with a two-bladed axe.

History Beat

By NEAL HOTELLING

However, from 1934 until 1941 he called Carmel home.

Born near Vancouver, British Columbia, in May 1891, Carter was raised on a backwoods homestead on the Stave River where the family had a small lumber operation, and he worked in the business from the time he was 6. The rustic lifestyle shaped him into a rugged individual.

Fascinating totems

When Carter was a young teen, his father was hired as a teacher in an indigenous village on Cormorant Island in Queen Charlotte Sound. Carter attended the school and absorbed the ways of the Kwakiutl people, which were already disappearing as they adopted European ways. Carter marveled at the totems and their native buildings.

A few years later, the family returned to the homestead and obtained work on the

construction of the Stave Falls Dam hydroelectric plant. By the time it was completed, Carter was in his 20s and had trained as an engineer and topographer. This, coupled with his knowledge of woods, made him perfectly suited for a career as a “timber cruiser” and forestry engineer.

Scurvy cruiser

In an interview with filmmaker Abby Sher, who produced a documentary on him in 1982, Carter explained: “A timber cruiser is a man thoroughly trained in the different types of timber, how to get around in the country, and how to estimate the value of these timber stands. The timber magnates will want to know the different species, sizes, quality of the timber and how you’re going to get it out. Are you going to float it down a river or are you going to require a railroad? And so, you send a timber cruiser to find out.”

Carter had steady work in the booming Canadian timber industry, and in 1919 married Teresa Easthope, who, in 1922 gave birth to their daughter, Mavis. Carter, meanwhile, had a very active life and kept his body lean and muscular — he was 5 feet, 9 inches and weighed 135 pounds — but his diet of canned goods during weeks in the woods was not good for his health.

According to various contemporary sources, at age 33, his body collapsed from scurvy. While he was recovering, he began experimenting with his axe to sculpt wood. He returned to cruising — with a healthier diet — but when work ceased due to the Great Depression, he turned to sculpture.

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Dudley Carter, in 1936, works with his axe on the Forest Theater grounds, as he puts the final touches on his massive carving, “Wek-Wek and the Holukmeyumko”

PHOTO/WASHINGTON STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE SUBJECT IS A REDISCOVERED LIFE

WANDERING THROUGH a metaphysical force field can be a wondrous way to spend a life. Celebrated Monterey Peninsula artist Suzanne Yost McCourt almost apologetically called it “kismet,” as she recalled a curious series of unsolicited encounters that altered the course of her art career.

An early harbinger, perhaps, was the statewide contest she won for the drawing she made of her cat lapping up Mayflower-brand milk, a rendering for which she won “a big-girl bike” that was too large to ride, since she was only 5 1/2 years old. McCourt vividly recalled feeling envious of the second-place artist, whose prize was a glistening, pink, battery-powered Barbie Dream Car.

Her father was a nationally famous golfer, though she admitted having little awareness of it at the time. Dick Yost was a college kid when he won Oregon’s state championship in 1950. Three years later, he won the Pacific Northwest Amateur crown, and in 1955 he was named to the U.S. Walker Cup team, which routed the Great Britain/Ireland team on the Old Course at St. Andrews, Scotland.

Gone too soon

Yost played as an amateur in the Masters in 1957, the same year Suzanne was born, and went on to play in the Bing Crosby “Clambake” Pro-Am at Pebble Beach multiple times, the last on Suzanne’s birthday in 1971. He played rounds with Hall of Famers Byron Nelson and Ben Hogan, and his best friends included golf greats Ken Venturi and Harvie Ward (a Walker Cup teammate).

“I got my father’s athletic genes, though I’m sure I didn’t appreciate it then,” said

McCourt, who was a dancer by age 7, a rough-and-tumble tomboy who played street football with the boys through her childhood, and became a volleyball star in high school.

Her father died in 1973 at age 43, a victim of what golfers called “19th-Hole disease” — alcoholism. His wife, Tita, and his

Carmel’s Artists

By DENNIS TAYLOR

three daughters were left penniless.

“I was 16, my sister, Linda, was 14, and our youngest sister, Molly, was 6,” Suzanne remembered. “As the oldest, I was certainly aware over the previous year that something was going on, but it wasn’t something people talked about in those days.”

She graduated high school intending to become a doctor — a male-dominated profession back then — but instead became a registered nurse.

“I did that for eight years, some of it as a student nurse while I was putting myself through school,” she said. “Nursing could burn you out because there was never enough staff. Nowadays you’re only allowed to have four to six patients, but back then I’d have 14. We were running a neuro unit floor when we were 23 or 24.”

In 1982, in Newport Beach, CA, she met Dan McCourt, a financial tax man who became her husband a year later. They’ll celebrate their 38th wedding anniversary in June.

Suzanne’s mother conquered her own alcoholism later in her life, a battle that led to another moment of kismet for the artist.

“During her recovery, my mom opened up more about Dad’s past. Dad’s golf memorabilia was tucked away in closets and the garage for many years due to grief. Opening his red box to connect our family golf legacy was the start of our healing,” McCourt said.

Cartoons

Dick Yost’s red box was a treasure chest of golf memorabilia — newspaper clips, photos, awards, tournament invitations, letters to her father from Bing Crosby and Bob Hope, and cocktail napkins doodled upon by “Dennis the Menace” cartoonist Hank Ketcham (a friend of her parents, turns out). One such doodle, dated 1971, is a drawing on Del Monte Lodge stationery of the impish Dennis holding a golf club, inscribed “Cheers to the Yost Clan from Dennis and his poor ol’ dad, Hank Ketcham”

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PHOTO/BONNIE MENARDI

Suzanne Yost McCourt’s diverse artistic journey is currently focused on abstracts.

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