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Famed logger Red McCollister dies at 92

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By Eric Barker of the Tribune

Charles (Red) McCollister was well-known for leading log drives down the rivers



Charles (Red) McCollister looks over logs in the mill pond near the Potlatch Corp. mill in Lewiston
... Lewiston Tribune file



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Charles (Red) McCollister, a logger, camp foreman and leader of the annual log drives down the North Fork of the Clearwater and Clearwater rivers, died at the age of 92.

McCollister gained a level of fame for leading the springtime log drives 90 miles down the rivers from the mouth of Isabella Creek to the Potlatch Corp. mill at Lewiston. He died Saturday at the Royal Plaza Care Center in Lewiston.

He was known as a demanding boss who treated his men fairly and watched out for their safety during the dangerous enterprise.

"He was fair, of course, but he was a strong boss," said Don Vigue of Lewiston, who participated in three log drives and worked for McCollister in logging camps. "He would never ask a man to do anything he wouldn't do himself."

Vigue recalled one cold, drizzly spring day at the start of the log drive when McCollister's hand-picked crew milled about the banks of the river reluctant to start in such cool weather. He said McCollister spotted a big cedar log hung up in the river and led by example.

"Red took a peavey and said 'Don, let's you and me go get the first one,' " he said. "He and I hit the water almost to our arm pits and waded out in the river and rolled that first log and made our way back to shore. Everyone was ashamed Red and I had to get that first one and got started."

McCollister served as foreman of the log drives for 17 years and started on the log drives in 1950.

"He learned the hard way," said Don Profitt, who worked on the drives for 16 years, the last three as McCollister's main assistant. "He worked a peavey before he was boss."

Before the North Fork of the Clearwater River was blocked by Dworshak Dam, loggers would cut logs during the summer, fall and winter and stack them next to the river. When the river swelled with spring runoff, the logs were released to float to the mill in Lewiston. However, logs frequently became hung up on rocks, shallow areas and in eddys, and form jams. McCollister's crews would work for weeks and even months following the logs and using ropes, peaveys and even dynamite to free the jams.

"He was a good man to run the job. He looked out for the safety of the crew," Profitt, of Lewiston, said.

A floating barge, known as a wannigan and comprised of two bunkhouses and a cook shack, followed the drive. Profitt said McCollister made sure everyone got along and did their jobs, but he also listened to those under him.

"He was over everything, and the nice thing about him, whatever decision you made he went along with it and he always asked what you thought about this or that," Profitt said. "He respected our opinions and judgments on moving the timber down the river."

The log drive was the frequent subject of newspaper articles that often featured interviews and pictures of McCollister. He even had a role in a Walt Disney movie, "Charlie the Lonesome Cougar," where he played a logging camp foreman. The role was not a stretch. For years McCollister was in charge of Potlatch Forest Industry operations at Camp T and Eagle Point.

The annual drives came to an end in 1972 when the North Fork was dammed. McCollister continued to run logging camps until his retirement in 1982.

His obituary is on Page 5C of today's Tribune.

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