

True Trapper Spirit

The true trapper spirit is alive in The Pas and in the daily life of Sonny Lavallee. Sonny was born into a family whose livelihood relied on hunting, fishing, and trapping. He grew up downstream in a small community called Pine Bluff in 1948. Pine Bluff was a small, registered community where 25 families homesteaded. It was here that Sonny with his brothers and sisters, mother and father lived off the land. His father, Edward Lavallee supported the family with trapping, hunting, and fishing. The family travelled back and forth from The Pas and Pine Bluff. In the summer they would spend time at Kelsey Lake fishing. Around 1955, the Lavallee family relocated to The Pas. As a child and going into his teens, Sonny grew up with dog mushing and the trapper lifestyle. He valued the importance of gathering with family and friends during the long winter months to dissipate cabin fever.

Sonny attended public school once Kelsey School Division was built and opened. He did not particularly like school and like a lot of students at that time, he decided to go to work and opt out of high school. He started working in construction as a teenager and learned much on the job as a carpenter's assistant. His employer recognized his ability and took him under his wing, offering him an apprenticeship. He went to Red River Community College earning his ticket in Carpentry. One day while working on the Richardson Building in Winnipeg, he looked down and said to himself, "that is a long way to fall". The paper mill was just starting up in The Pas and that was when he returned to The Pas for work. He was hired as a papermaker and worked in this position through many owners, starting with Churchill Forest Industry, Manfor, Repap and Tolko. He spent 40 years working at the papermill, retiring just before the Canadian Paperworks took ownership.

Sonny met his wife, Orra in The Pas, married and together they raised 3 children. He loves spending time with family and receives much joy from his own children, seven grandchildren and 2 great grandchildren. As a grandparent, Sonny says that they keep us going and give us much joy. He has spent time influencing his grandchildren to get involved with volunteering with one northern event that is near and dear to his heart: The Northern Manitoba Trappers Festival (NMTF).

Sonny was always interested in the NMTF. His great uncles were dog mushers, and his great aunt ran for Carnival Queen contest. His granddaughter Chloe Dorian ran for Fur Queen and now sits on the Festival Board. When Chloe was little, Sonny would put her on the float with the fur queens. For some reason this just stayed with her, she was always interested in running for Fur Queen. Sonny was known for doing many little things to encourage youth to get involved in the Trappers Festival. He would give his grandson enough Festival buttons to distribute to the class. Two of his grandsons, Zander and Matt are involved with the NMTF youth board and absolutely love it. They see how they can help the community through volunteering, running events and meeting people. "All the little things we do keep the Festival going". He loved seeing school buses filled with children to come out and watch the dog races. The children remember these things. It is a special festival that brings people together.

The Trappers Festival youth board have 13 youth members and are eager to get other youth involved. It all starts by encouraging your children and grandchildren to get involved and leading by example. Sonny is a good example of a committed, dedicated volunteer who continues to give back to the community.

Sonny was always interested in dog mushing and his northern heritage as he grew up living that life. When Sonny was in his thirties, he would go down to the races as a spectator, but with the intent to get involved. He would go to the race site and ask if he could help. He was encouraged to join the Kinsmen

as they administer the dog races for the NMTF. The Kinsmen appoint a volunteer member to assist the NMTF to run the dog races. Sonny joined the Kinsmen and started as a volunteer on the NMTF board in 1980, continuing with this volunteer work until 2018. With 38 years of festival volunteering he has been involved in each event at one time or another. He has been the Chairperson many times and has run each event including the Fur Queen Pageant. He strongly believes that the festival is a big deal for our community and has promoted it locally and around the world. There is a lot of interest in our Festival. It is a one-of-a-kind historical event. It attracts visitors and mushers from around the world. We have had visitors from Japan, Australia, and many other parts of the world. Some dog mushers come here prior to competing in the Iditarod Race in Alaska. Rotary exchange students get involved, see a great event and are exposed to our northern heritage.

All of the events are designed to have a great time, something to look forward to for one week in February. The Festival was designed to get people out of their cabins, gather in town, and get together with family and friends. They forgot about everything else and had a great time. They would meet in the town bar and have a few brews, brag about beating their neighbor in competition and head out to challenge each other in dog racing from these interactions. While the guys were out racing, others would create a street dance or a competition in best furs, best tea boiling and best bannock making. The festival is different things for different folks, but each year people come out to appreciate that there is a festival put on for the community. We have a community, let us get out and celebrate with others.

During the time he was involved with the Festival, he spent a lot of time researching as well as promoting the event. When the Cambrian Hotel burnt so did a lot of history about The Pas Dog Derby and the Carnival Queen. "There was a lot of history within that building that went up in flames". But this is what we know. The idea of a Northern festival started in 1916, known as The Pas Dog Derby and was held annually most years until 1930. The Great Depression caused the Festival to be forgotten for approximately 18 years. In 1948 the event was revived under the name of the Northern Manitoba Trappers Festival and has continued each year with the true spirit of volunteerism and sponsorship. This year the NMTF will have a new look due to Covid-19. It will be offered in some form, but not in its full format due to restrictions. Many mushers cannot travel from the United States, Quebec and overseas. He knows that the pandemic situation and restrictions on travel may create a different look for the NMTF this year. But Sonny is confident that the Festival will come back with enthusiasm when people are able to gather again, similar to what happened after the Great Depression.

There is a great group of volunteers sitting on the Festival board. They give up a lot of time. Kudos to them. Sonny would put in hundreds of hours from September to Festival. A lot of the time he would sit thinking and pondering on how to improve things. He spent a lot of time in face to face conversations with sponsors and people in town. He felt that it meant a lot more to meet in person and made a lot of friends, meeting in the coffee shop. Many OCN people appreciate the festival; they also have the Opasquia Indian Days which Sonny loves to participate in as well.

Sonny volunteerism has been recognized and acknowledged by our community. He has received the Citizen of the Year not once, but twice and was presented with the Order of Manitoba award in 2010. He was invited to the Lieutenant Governor's House with his family to recognize his volunteer work and involvement with the Trappers Festival. He attended this honorary event and made friends with Fred Penner who was another recipient being acknowledged that evening. He enjoys meeting new people and conversing with all walks of life. Sonny makes friends wherever he ventures. He is well known and

respected in the tri community and on the walking trails. Although he no longer sits as a NMTF Board member he encourages those in the positions to call him if they have questions. He is just a phone call away.

Sonny has been involved in service groups and totally understands the value of these groups. In his words, "The Kinnettes, Kinsmen, and Rotarians work together to make sure that we have great things in The Pas. Satisfaction is what comes from being involved. When you get involved you naturally feel good about yourself. You cannot buy this type of service anywhere."

"We have a great thing happening here with the NMTF. We do not want to let it go, it will be hard to get it back up and running. Let us keep it going!"

Sonny Lavallee has given hundreds of hours of his time as a master volunteer for our tri community. He is a great role model to his children and grandchildren. Sonny has dedicated much of his life to ensure the Northern Manitoba Trappers Festival stays vibrant, alive, and strong. Thank you for your major part in Making Shift Happen.

Submitted by Denise Duncan

Make Shift Happen

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