

Merit award: Nehrbas was a dynamic booster for Fairbanks

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Community perspective

Mary Jane Fate recently won the coveted George Nehrbas award.

Who in the heck is George Nehrbas? There probably aren't more than 10 people in Fairbanks that know much about him.

George was a tall, slim, energetic, civic-minded, local businessman who always put Fairbanks first and who had the ability to bring others along with his ideas. An example is the Chamber of Commerce log cabin building (now the Yukon Quest headquarters) at the corner of First Avenue and Cushman Street. He sparked that idea and saw it through.

George was established in Fairbanks before World War II as the Ford agent, with a U-car rental business at the southeast corner of Second Avenue and Noble Street. He was also was a well-known outdoorsman, especially in hunting.

My dad was much more reserved than George, but for some reason the two of them hit it off soon after our family moved to Fairbanks in 1943. In the fall of 1945, George invited my dad and myself (I was 17 then) along with his shop foreman, Ray Newman, to go along on a duck hunting trip to Healy Lake. He put his large wooden river boat in the river at Rika's Roadhouse landing at Big Delta for the 60-mile trip up the Tanana to the lake.

We first stopped at the Indian village upon entering the lake to exchange greetings. George was already acquainted there. About 20 people greeted us, along with a new young male school teacher. A few years later, most of the residents were wiped out by an epidemic.

We had a good duck hunt, all by ourselves, and picked up a moose on the way home.

George owned several choice riverfront lots in Slaterville. He sold two of them to my dad and built a ranch-style home for himself and his wife, Laura, on two others. He introduced advanced features such as double cement walls with insulation between them and radiant floor heat.

Maintenance on wood riverboats was a constant problem, and George had gone through several of them. His solution: aluminum. He had the first aluminum riverboat in Fairbanks. It was built in Seattle, 32 feet long with a wide beam. It was heavy and not entirely successful, but it was the forerunner of what all riverboats have become.

George had a dislike for small airplanes, but when I invited him to accompany me on a successful sheep hunt to the upper Alatna River in 1956, he jumped at the chance. Maybe, in a way, it was payback for the duck hunt he took this kid on when I was new to Alaska.

Sad to say, an airplane was his undoing in 1960. As far as I know, it may have been his second airplane trip. He accompanied a prominent local attorney on a fishing trip to Clear Creek near Talkeetna. A wing was damaged on the Aeronica float plane while in the water at Clear Creek. The pilot was first going to fly back to Fairbanks alone, but, at the last minute, George decided to come along. On the way home, the pilot decided he needed to stop in the river at Nenana for gas. The airplane crashed on landing at the junction of the Nenana and the Tanana rivers. The pilot survived, but George drowned. This fateful accident, in September 1960, ended the life of one of Fairbanks most prominent boosters.

Of lesser interest, George's wife, Laura, later sold the two remaining Slatterville lots to yours truly in 1964. This is where we built, raised our family of three boys and have enjoyed our view of downtown Fairbanks for 47 years. George and Laura did not have any children.

Chuck Gray is publisher emeritus of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner.