

Carl Miller: Trailblazer

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One day in 1994, early recreational trails visionaries Jay Lucas and Don Portman were meeting in the Methow Trails (formerly Methow Valley Ski Touring Association and then Methow Valley Sport Trails Association) office when the door opened and in walked Carl Miller. “We’re back,” Carl said. “We want to be a part of this. What can we do to help?”

Carl, who was raised on a homestead in the Rendezvous along the Gunn Ranch Road, had left the valley in the early 1960s to pursue a career as an urban firefighter in Spokane. But upon retirement he returned, with his wife Roxie, to settle back home in the place that had always captured his heart.

Carl grew up skiing, in the way that all Methow kids did back in the day, says Roxie. “You put on a pair of skis and clomped up the hill and skied down it. There were no lessons or clubs or anything. You just figured it out.” Carl figured it out, both for sport and for checking the traplines he set in the Pearrygin Lake area, which he’d access by ski or snowshoe.

Carl’s offer to get involved with Methow Trails wasn’t just idle chatter; he likes to get things done. While he was living in Spokane, Carl spearheaded trail improvements and the construction of the warming hut at the Mt. Spokane Nordic ski area. “Someone mentioned they needed one,” Roxie says, “and Carl said ‘We can do that.’ And the next thing we knew he had the Army Corps of Engineers working on it.”

“That’s the big deal about Carl,” Roxie continues. “I remember someone telling me that ‘Carl would kindly force you into working for him many, many hours.’ He always said it was ‘for the good of the children. He made it so you couldn’t say no.’”

Saying no simply isn’t in Carl’s nature. When Carl offered up his services to Methow Trails, Portman and Lucas, who was Methow Trails’ Executive Director for 30 years, gave him and Roxie a hefty task: figuring out who owned each piece of land along what is now the 30km Methow Community Trail. “Carl jumped in with his whole body,” Lucas says. “He volunteered for everything.”

“Every organization dreams of having an army of Carls on their team,” says Methow Conservancy Executive Director Jason Paulsen. “Anyone who has ever tried to tell Carl ‘no’ understands this deeply.

Carl always inspires a ‘yes,’ and his can-do attitude continues to shape so much of what makes the Methow Valley unique today.”

Collaboration

Soon after his return to the valley, Carl was asked to join the Methow Trails board, where he “mostly listened,” says Lucas, “but when he spoke, it was always accurate and meaningful.” Carl wasn’t the perfect board member, Lucas says, “but he was damn close. He didn’t like ‘the process’—he wanted action.”

Says Methow Trails Executive Director James DeSalvo, “When Carl spoke he had something important and



valuable to offer, specifically because he represented so many different generations, interests, and often under-represented pieces of our community vital to making this whole trail system work.”

Portman says that Carl is legendary in his ability to coalesce groups of people to accomplish a task. Carl is connected to a broad social group that ranged from longtime residents, ranchers, loggers, and farmers to newcomers to the valley, and he leveraged these relationships to secure public support for the trails system. “He could see a way forward for people to work together,” Lucas notes. “He did the same thing with Kiwanis—pulled people together for common goals.”

Through Carl, Lucas gained access to some of the people whose support of the trail system proved critical. “Carl knew Nordic skiing and what it could mean for our valley,” says Lucas. “It carried more weight when he talked about it with people than when I did.”

Portman explains that “Carl’s perspective was really helpful to the board. He had a good feeling for what the average skier wanted. He knew that most people didn’t want a challenging race course; they wanted scenic trails with varied terrain.” Some board members wanted trails like Bob, Portman says, speaking of the notorious loop of steep hills with twists and turns in the Wolf Ridge area. “But Carl kept urging us to serve the average recreational skier. His overview and outlook was so nicely balanced, it made the character of the trails work out best for everyone.”



Connection

Regarding Carl’s ability to unite people around place-based projects, Roxie says simply, “He loves this place. He loves the land—we both do. Everything Carl does, it has been out of love for the Methow Valley.”

Paulsen, who worked closely with Carl when Carl co-chaired the Methow Conservancy’s Imagine the Methow campaign, echoes an understanding of Carl’s connection to this place, saying that Carl has “a deep respect for the families who have known and worked this land for generations, recognizing that having a deep love for the land of the Methow Valley and wanting to see it cared for well is a shared value from which all sorts of opportunities can grow.”

Construction

One of Carl’s many noteworthy projects in the Methow Valley is the construction of the warming hut at the Chickadee Trailhead near Sun Mountain, and he did it in classic Methow style. Ardis Bynum, then a



Forest Service employee and Methow Trails board member, knew that the Forest Service was planning to remove some hazard trees from Lone Fir Campground. “Let’s take these logs and give them to Methow Trails to build a day lodge at Chickadee,” Bynum said.

Carl took the logs to the McMillans’ mill near Carlton and had them cut into boards. Doug Potter designed the building in his signature “shackitecture” style and framed it with his crew. After that, says Lucas, “Carl put on a work belt every day and showed up with a crew of volunteers to complete the building. He has this incredible ability to harness people’s energy to get things done.”

Paulsen agrees. “Anyone who has had the pleasure of working along-side Carl on the many community projects he has led knows that there are few people you will ever meet who work harder, and even fewer who could make you feel as appreciated as Carl when he flashes that twinkle in his eye in your direction that says ‘job well done,’” he says. “Carl inspires you to work harder and do more.”

Carl’s contributions to the trails system extend beyond hut construction and landowner identification. “He spent time learning the trails,” Lucas says. “The distinct areas weren’t linked the way they are now. It took a lot of expansion work when we were ready to connect them. Carl got involved with the physical construction of trails, particularly in the area out near Wolf Ridge where you climb up the switchbacks. He was out there a lot. He knew all the contractors and worked alongside them.”

Community

Carl’s motto, Roxie says, has always been “Don’t talk it to death—just ‘er done.” Many times, Carl’s swift response to community needs set the stage for widespread volunteerism.



Paulsen remembers, “I’ll never forget the time in 2014 when Carl helped orchestrate a work party in support of a local rancher who had lost a key section of fence line in the Carlton Complex Fire. Not only did everyone who Carl solicited turn out to help, but Carl was there from start to finish, with all the right tools to share, working harder than men and women half his age in the 100 degree heat. Carl understands that words are nice, but actions are what count when a community need arises.”

No slouch, Carl inspires others to work hard, for their own good and the good of the community. Roxie describes Carl’s approach to firefighter fitness in Spokane. “He felt like a lot of the guys weren’t in great shape. So he got them all riding bikes to work.” Firefighter fitness improvement, and so did camaraderie. “A lot of us got really involved with bicycling after that,” Roxie says.

“Carl and Roxie’s ‘can do, get ‘er done’ work style has touched nearly every mile of our 130+ miles trail network,” says DeSalvo. “Anyone who appreciates the trails in the Methow should tip their hat to the effort these two have put into the system.”

Portman says that Carl doesn’t just answer the call to service; he actively seeks out ways to contribute to the community. Once, Portman says, he remembers a comment that characterizes the Carl Miller “get ‘er done” spirit. “I don’t have much to do today,” Carl said. “Let’s find something to build.”

