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EMMA MCCRARY: 1930-2011

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Emma McCrary, a trailblazer, dies at 80

McCrary believed the deeper people got into the woods, the more they would care for them

By JASON HOPPIN

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SWANTON — Emma McCrary, who carved hundreds of miles of trails through Santa Cruz County's wilderness to help bring others closer to the natural wonders around them, died Friday after a battle with

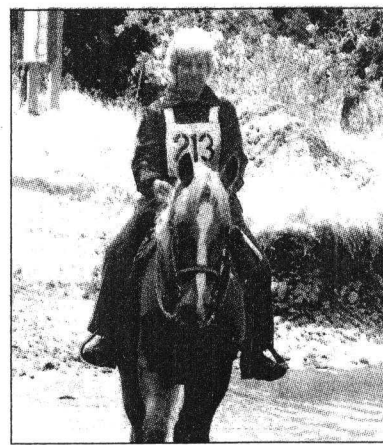
cancer. She was 80.

Using her cherished horses and a sharp chain saw, McCrary, a member of a prominent logging family, shaped paths through Henry Cowell, Fall Creek, Wilder Ranch and Pogonip parks, forging ahead with hard work and a philosophy that the deeper people got into the woods, the more they

would care for them.

"I think it's good for people to know how those trails got where they are," said husband Homer "Bud" McCrary, co-owner of Big Creek Lumber. "She left a legacy of concern for other people in allowing

SEE MCCRARY ON A6



Emma McCrary was so at home atop a horse, when she was a girl she used to regularly ride from her house in Palo Alto to her grandparents house in Morgan Hill — a 12-hour journey.

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MCCRARY

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them to get out into the forest, because if she hadn't done what she did, a lot of those trails wouldn't be there."

McCrary was as beloved as she was tough, a child of the Great Depression who bought her first horse, Chiquita, over her father's initial objections. She worked trails until the end of her life, and even testified in front of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors the day she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.



MCCRARY

Her calm determination was legendary, and friends say it came without pretense or ego. As a girl, she would ride Chiquita from her home in Palo Alto to her grandparents house in Morgan Hill, a 12-hour journey.

As a 17-year-old, she found work on the McCrary family ranch in Swanton.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

The raging 1948 Pine Mountain fire burned 20,000 North Coast acres. Big Creek Lumber was a fledgling company at the time, and among the firefighters was Bud. Though Bud's face was covered with soot, Emma later proclaimed that she fell in love the moment she saw him smile.

Bud proposed after a two-week courtship, but Emma's father forbade her from doing so until she turned 18. The wedding was held on her birthday; that it also happened to be Christmas Day did not dissuade her.

McCrary was around animals from a young age, and was active in 4-H. She was also a longtime board member of the Santa Cruz County Horsemen's Association, and hosted annual rides on the miles of trails she cut for herself on the McCrary's Swanton property. She also served on the board of the North American Trail Ride Conference.

But her lasting legacy

comes in the form of miles of trails she helped build, often with her husband and a unique trail-cutting machine. Bicyclists, hikers and equestrians alike enjoy her work, with the trails sometimes challenging but often rewarding users with impressive vistas.

She was as skilled with a chain saw as she was on a horse. Bob Berlage, who works in Big Creek's forestry department and lives near the McCrary's property, came across her one day about a decade ago. She was in her early 70s, standing on her horse, wielding a chain saw.

"She was literally standing on her saddle and cutting a rather large limb off. There were two things going on there: this was an extremely brave woman, and a very good horse," Berlage said. "She was a phenomenon. More energy that the vast majority of people a third of her age."

BLAZING A TRAIL

Emma McCrary was known to disappear into the mountains for hours on end, threading her horses through dense woods and imagining new pathways. A partial list of her trails includes the Wheel, Cabin and Zane Grey trails in Wilder Ranch; the Lost Empire, Big Ben, Escape and Spur trails in Fall Creek; and the U-Con trail connecting UCSC and Rincon Road.

"I think she wanted to get people out into the forest and let them see the beauty and experience the beauty. She saw the beauty in a well laid-out trail along the mountain-side. She saw them as a work of art," Bud McCrary said.

McCrary worked with state parks to build several trail connectors, rode horse patrol and at one point was the only civilian allowed to carry a chainsaw in state parks.

"A lot of people write letters and do things on paper. Emma went out there with a chain saw," said Robin Musitelli, a friend and former Sentinel reporter. "The word 'determined' is hardly adequate."

Her legacy is everywhere, but perhaps unknown to those who don't know the stories. Lost Camp, a trail through Fall Creek State Park, was

BIOGRAPHY

EMMA MCCRARY

BORN: Dec. 25, 1930

DIED: June 24, 2011

HOME: Swanton

OCCUPATION: Mother, volunteer trailblazer

COMMUNITY

INVOLVEMENT: Active in 4-H; former board member, Santa Cruz County Horsemen's Association and North American Trail Ride Conference

SURVIVORS: Husband Homer 'Bud'; son Ken; daughters Carol and Emmy Lou. Her son Michael died previously.

SERVICES: Memorial service pending.

not named after some long-forgotten loggers redoubt, but because McCrary became lost there in 1987.

In 1973, she wrote a book called "Influencing Horses" that took a new approach to raising horses. Her gentler style came decades before "The Horse Whisperer" popularized the idea.

"That book was way ahead of its time," said Claudia Goodman, head of the Horsemen's Association. "It's only in the last 10 to 15 years that a lot of the ideas that she had are coming to the fore."

McCrary's approach to nature was symbiotic to the views of the family she married into. The McCrarys have operated Big Creek in a way that has earned praise from environmentalists, rebuking harmful logging practices and selling hundreds of acres of land over the years for preservation.

After surgery following her diagnosis 11 months ago, doctors warned McCrary to take it easy. She didn't. Her family bought her a chain saw that started with a push-button rather than a rip cord.

"That made her happier than anything," Bud McCrary said.

A celebration of Emma McCrary's life is being planned.

"There really isn't anybody like her," said friend Mary Fenton. "We're going to miss her."