

Telling Alaska Highway stories



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From left, Allison Tubman, Bill Dolan, and Kathy Jessup overcame logistical hurdles to write and plan the Alaska Highway Roadshow, which makes a stop in Fort St. John on Saturday.

Musical trio weave history and memories into music

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When we catch up with Kathy Jessup, she's taking a few days at One Island Lake to relax after a series of rehearsals in Fort Nelson in preparation for the Alaska Highway Roadshow, which kicked off in Alberta on July 3, and makes it's way to Fort St. John Saturday, July 8.

Jessup was born in Fort Nelson, but now lives in Edmonton, as much as the travelling storyteller lives anywhere.

She's an Alaska Highway Kid, she says, along with her brother Bill Dolan, who will also be performing in the show, telling short anecdotes about the life of a trucker on the highway and performing music. He comes by it honestly, having spent time working as a trucker and listening to his dad's stories.

Frank Dolan was one of the first commercial truck drivers on the Alaska Highway, and along with his wife Kay, ran Lum n' Abner from 1953 to 1961.

"As a child you think, 'Dad's telling another story,' but as you get older you realize that, unless preserved, the story dies with the teller," says Jessup, who travels around the country and around the world as a story teller.

It was those stories that got her thinking about the Alaska Highway, not for its

75th anniversary, but for a trip to a story telling festival in Scotland.

"In 2013, I was invited to a Scottish story telling festival," says Jessup. "The theme was journeys, so I pitched them stories about the Alaska Highway. I knew Europe was crazy for Northern Canada. They said yes. So, I had to come up with a set."

Coming home, she started thinking about the stories she had told and the upcoming anniversary of the Alaska Highway. She talked to her brother, who knew her father's stories as well, and the two began brainstorming.

They approached the Peace Liard Arts Council and pitched the idea of a tour. So in 2015, she began lining up sponsors and began roughing out the tour.

"I knew I wanted to go to the smaller places along the highway," she says. "And as I did my research, a tour skeleton started to form."

One of the important things she needed was the First Nations perspective. She found it in Allison Tubman, a descendant of guide Charlie McDonald and author of *The McDonalds: The Lives & Legends of a Kaska Dena Family*.

This led to a few logistical problems, as Dolan and Tubman both live in Fort Nelson. Fortunately, modern technology allowed the three to plot of the shape of the show,

which Jessup says is a weaving of stories and music.

"It just fell together," she says. "It was like musicians jamming, and everything just coming together."

Alongside the stories of the First Nations and pioneers and music, there will be a screen with photos showing the early settlers, the truckers, the First Nations. "It's a combination of photos, memories, history and music," says Jessup.

But it's not boring history, she's quick to point out.

"As a storyteller, what you don't want to do is do a historical lecture. You find a personal way in. The way you craft the story is to use your own family's story as a way in. It's personal, but anyone who worked as a trucker, for instance, will be nodding their head. It won't be that the Dolan family will care, and nobody else. You don't just tell facts, but you want to form an emotional connection. We want to make sure the audience doesn't feel shut out. We want people to feel connected. We want the show to feel authentic and real."

Jessup says it's important to remember these stories. "Every year, more and more elders die. There are fewer vets travelling up the highway. Even my father died a few years ago. I used to be able to call him up and ask him to tell me more, but now he's gone."

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ROADSHOW FROM B5

By the time she gets back home, she'll have logged 4,000 kilometres from Edmonton to Whitehorse and back, maybe more, as they are waiting to find out if they are doing an Alaska leg as well.

"We will if the permit gets stamped," she says. "That would be special. We would be doing it from construction HQ in Edmonton all the way to Fairbanks."

And once that tour is done, there's talk

about taking it to the National War Museum in Ottawa. "We're just looking for a sponsor. That would be amazing to go there."

Jessup says she's looking forward to the tour. Even if she's no longer living along the highway itself, "the highway is in my blood. I am a highway kid."

The Alaska Highway Road Show hits the North Peace Cultural Centre on Saturday, July 8.