



2018 INDUCTEE

SMOKE ELSER

1934-

They say Arnold “Smoke” Elser’s time in the saddle could have taken him from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego, but he was too busy spending more than 8,000 nights in what became the 1.5 million-acre Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex.

Elser learned the outfitter’s trade from legendary old-timers, but his ability to adapt to changing times—and his success in sharing his skills and wilderness ethic with others—set him apart.

When Elser began working in 1964, outfitters took large parties of riders into the mountains. The heavy gear required long mule trains that had detrimental effects in camp and on the stock’s grazing meadows.

Elser was an early adopter of lightweight tents and other gear that reduced the number of mules in his pack strings. In camp, he used scrim, light plastic netting, to help save the grass under tents and the camp’s cook fly. He tied the saddle horses to high lines rather than to trees.

He taught more than 3,000 people these conservation techniques in a horse-packing class at the University of Montana. Yet, it was his and wife Thelma’s campfire stories that captured the imagination of the guests who became new advocates for protecting Montana’s wild country.

A summer pack trip in 1969 is a case in point. Elser’s party encountered a bulldozer punching in a road near the Middle Fork of the Flathead River just north of the Bob Marshall Wilderness boundary.

“Nothing makes you any madder than when you’re telling your guests you’re in a really pristine area and all of a sudden you run into a bulldozer,” recalled Elser in “3 Miles an Hour,” a 2011 Montana PBS documentary that celebrated his legacy.

It happened that the publisher of the *Missoulian* newspaper was in Elser’s party that day. Over that night’s campfire, Elser accepted the publisher’s offer to send a reporter to be a wrangler on his next trip.

The cub reporter was Dale Burk (MOHOF 2018).

Burk’s reporting on U.S. Forest Service plans to develop the Middle Fork, coupled with Elser’s support for wilderness, in part led to the federal designation of the 286,700-acre Great Bear Wilderness and later the 240,000-acre Scapegoat Wilderness, along the southern border of “The Bob.”

Elser’s recognitions include the Distinguished Alumnus Award from the University of Montana Forestry Alumni Association, Missoula’s Conservation Roundtable’s Lifetime Conservation Achievement Award (for Elser and Thelma), and the Backcountry Horsemen of America’s Legacy Award. In 2016, Elser was inducted into the Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame.

“I have never seen a time where Smoke didn’t stand where he needed to stand on behalf of the wilderness,” says Elser’s old friend, journalist Dale Burk.

It’s a safe bet nobody has. ❧

