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Steve Dixon: The Man Who Loves to Fly

By Andy Marshall

At 84, Steve Dixon still loves to fly his own aircraft over Alberta's foothills. But much of what he observes from 10,000 feet makes him queasy. The spreading blotches from forestry clear-cutting, the scars of oil and gas activity, the crisscross of roads and pipelines – they're patterns of an intensifying industrialization of the wilderness that darken his view of the province's horizon.

"You see what's going on from the air . . . the future doesn't look good," he says. He's sitting with Helen, his wife of 62 years, in their prairie farmhouse, about 45 kilometres southeast of High River.

"We're overpopulated. Everything is being consumed, and the wildlife are dying out," is the stern assessment from one of the Alberta Wilderness Association's founding members who still maintains an active involvement with the group today.

A once-avid hunter who regularly stalked big and small game in the foothills as long as 65 years ago and who recalls when cougar tracks were as common as rabbits, Steve has seen the damage close-up on the ground, too. "Once the roads opened up, the game went down. People slaughtered at a hell of a rate."

Short and wiry, with large, muscular hands constantly on the move to emphasize his words, Steve speaks of the passion prompting the launch of the AWA almost 40 years ago. He had been active with the Fish and Game Association, but its lack of commitment then to strong conservation principles sparked his vow to start another group for that purpose.

He repeats the challenge from fellow Fish and Game member Bill Michalsky, now dead but also long active with the AWA: "When are you going to do it?". Rarely a man to mince his words, Steve shot back: "As soon as you and I get together for a meeting."

Official records cannot be found of their initial gatherings in Lundbreck in southwest Alberta during the early 1960s, but the groundwork was laid, leading to the AWA incorporation by 1969.

The Association mostly comprised sheep hunters, "tired of climbing mountains and finding a Pontiac had driven up the other side," says Floyd Stromstedt, the first officially-elected AWA president.

"Steve was one of the sparkplugs," is his recollection. With his feisty approach, Steve was also good at doing the necessary research for strong presentations to government or business. "He's like a brass band when he speaks. Everyone hears him," says Floyd, now living in Berwyn, northwestern Alberta.

Early projects undertaken by Steve and the AWA still remain hot issues today, notes AWA director Vivian Pharis, whose husband, Richard, was a first vice-president in the new organization. Pushing for the preservation of the Castle wilderness area is just one example. "It shows the AWA hasn't varied from its original goals and ideals," she says.

From Steve's perspective, a turning point in Alberta's degradation occurred after the election of the Peter Lougheed Conservatives in 1971. The message was clear: All of the province, including the wilderness, is open for business. Since then, successive governments have maintained a position of encouraging industrial and commercial development over the interests of preserving wilderness ideals, he says.

"Once you destroy the wilderness, you can't bring it back," warns Helen.





The seeds for Steve's lifelong commitment to conservation were sown by his Grade 1 teacher while he was growing up in Kamsack, Sask., he says. By the time he and his family moved to Calgary in the 1920s, his love for the wilderness and for hunting was confirmed.

His mechanic father soon opened up a shop in Brant, close to where Steve runs his farm today. Steve already knew Helen by age nine and, at 22, he married his childhood sweetheart. She shared his love for the wilderness, often accompanying him on his many trips into the foothills and the mountains.

"I had good genes," says Steve. "I could climb and walk all day." Because they couldn't afford horses, he learned to pack out heavy game carcasses, too.

While in Brant, Steve picked up the intricacies of mechanics and lathe work that have helped him do all the servicing for the various aircraft he's owned, including the four-seater Piper Archer and the Ultralight in his hangar today. He even made his own rifles and mounted home-built scopes on them.

After serving in the Air Force during the latter part of the Second World War, Steve bought his first aircraft, a Cessna 120, in 1947. Three years later, he and Helen started farming south of Brant, eventually expanding their land base to 960 acres. As in other aspects of his life, Steve has methodically applied conservationist principles to the farming operation. Virtually no fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides or other chemicals for him. Nevertheless, his outstanding yields and seed quality still raise eyebrows at the seed cleaners in nearby Vulcan.

Another secret he's prepared to share with neighbouring farmers, but one they seem loathe to adopt, is his use of a blade system to work the soil. It conserves moisture in the soil far more efficiently than other tillage methods. He proudly displays some of his inventions: The Stev-Lock for securing trailers (samples of which have been auctioned off at recent AWA functions) or the planer-blade cultivator designed for small acreages.

Without the efforts of the AWA, Steve wonders how much more threatened the wilderness would be today. "They've put up some tremendous battles. I'm amazed how they've held out." While his active lobbying days are over, he plans to continue flying for as long as he can and keep his eye on things. "The bird sees more than the worm," he says, his sharp, blue eyes still sparkling.

