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AWA Founder's Legacy Shines Bright

By Andy Marshall

The sparks flew whenever Bill Michalsky and the other founding members of the Alberta Wilderness Association met in Bill's Lundbreck ranch house living room to plot strategy more than 34 years ago.

"It was definitely lively," recalls his daughter, Sue, barely seven at the time. "But it took them a while from sitting and complaining to coming up with the idea of starting the AWA."

The seemingly thoughtless destruction of the natural world around them by commercial and industrial interests is what fired this group of outfitters, hunters and ranchers to hold that historic formation meeting on June 19, 1968, in Lundbreck. Bill, voted in that evening as first interim president, called it "the continued and often unjustified shredding of our wildlands."

Bill died six years ago at 76, but the urgency of that message fires up the Association and its membership today. The push to preserve valuable wildlands habitat is an even hotter issue today than it was three-and-a-half decades ago.

And an ember of passion still burns in Sue's heart for conservation principles that she attributes to her father.

"He certainly educated a lot of people about conservation," she says. And regarding her own career with the Nature Conservancy of Canada, managing the 13,000-acre Old Man On His Back Conservation Area in southwest Saskatchewan and working on other conservation management strategies, she notes: "Yes. It's completely his influence." One of the main differences between them, though: "His heart was in the mountains, mine is in the prairies."

"There are still times I have conservation-related questions and I think, 'He would know about that,'" she adds. "I wish he were still around."

Both Sue and her older brother Mike, who helps run the Lundbreck family ranch when he's not working as a mechanic there or operating his eco-tourism business in Africa or pursuing his love of photography, spent many of their formative years in their father's company, joining him in the camps on some of his numerous outfitting tours.

"We both grew up to be very close to the outdoors," she says.

Marian, Bill's loving companion for 46 years of marriage, confirms the commitment: "We lived conservationism." Eight years younger than Bill, she had grown up in the homestead next to Bill's original family place north of Burmis. A year after their wedding in 1949, the couple took over his parents' homestead, which they ran for 11 years before settling on the Lundbreck ranch.

The sixth child of Polish immigrants—his dad worked as a coal miner in the Crowsnest—Bill left school after Grade 8 to become a trapper and learn about ranching. He even honed his skills as a calf roper, travelling the rodeo circuit and winning day money at the 1947 Calgary Stampede. After being awarded his first big game outfitter's licence in 1955, Bill spent the next 36 years guiding throughout western Canada and even into Alaska. At the same time, he and Marian devoted their lives to the family ranch.





While he had a particular fascination for bighorn sheep, his interests embraced all aspects of the natural world, whether it was hunting for fossils, photographing the glorious mountain scenery and its inhabitants or writing about his varied outdoors experiences.

“We were always hardworking people,” says Marian, also a frequent companion on Bill’s outfitting tours, cooking, tending horses and even guiding. “It’s a good way of life.” While others were inclined to call him Bill or Willie, incidentally, Marian preferred William.

Marian served as secretary for some of the early AWA meetings. She recalls, too, the long sessions until after midnight in their living room, drinking coffee and sometimes beer. People like Dick Pharis and Floyd Stromstedt were among the frequent visitors in the organization’s early years.

“It was worth it to go on a trip to eat Bill’s wife’s cooking,” says Steve Dixon, another key artillery in the firepower that propelled the AWA into active existence.

The AWA’s early commitment to challenge the Alberta provincial government’s perceived preoccupation with economic development over conservationist values put them toe-to-toe with politicians like Social Credit premier Harry Strom, and later the new Conservative star, Peter Lougheed.

“My father wasn’t a big fan of politicians,” laughs Sue.

But he possessed the style reminiscent of many of the old-time ranchers. “He wasn’t great at addressing a crowd, but he could talk to anybody. He was not intimidated by status or anything like that,” she explains.

In fact, in retrospect and with the experience of being married to an Aboriginal, Sue compares her father to an Aboriginal elder. “He would quietly point things out, tell his story,” she says. “He liked to do his teaching out on the landscape.”

She recalls his broad spiritual beliefs and his pursuit of philosophical ideals. And considering his abbreviated formal education and the fact he never left the Crowsnest area as a young person, “what struck me was how broad-minded he was.”

An avid reader, particularly of historical works and explorers’ journals, he also spent a lot of time writing. In his later years, he turned his hand to poetry to describe his life’s experiences.

Many of his articles appeared in *Outdoor Life* or *The Western Sportsman* magazines. But, says Sue, sitting in her Eastend, Saskatchewan office with former files bearing such titles as “Cougar Hunts” or “Land Management” close at hand, “a lot of his most interesting material was never published.”

Aside from his involvement with the AWA, Bill volunteered with groups like the Friends of the Oldman River, the Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition and the Willow Valley Trophy Club, always with the view of promoting conservationist values. “I don’t think those sentiments will go away,” says Sue.

