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Andy Russell Still Ready To Give Polluters “Hell”

By Andy Marshall

On painkillers for a sore hip, Andy Russell concentrates hard when rising from his chair. He walks across the room slowly and unsteadily.

His north-facing window at the Pincher Creek seniors' home he now lives in looks onto a manicured garden and a shopping centre. The memory-filled log house at the Hawk's Nest Ranch he's called home since 1937 is hardly 40 kilometres away, abutting the wild beauty of Waterton Lakes National Park. But this new outlook from Vista Village could be a continent away for this almost 88-year-old colossus whose face is turning as craggy as the rugged mountains he has spent so much time in.

“We old guys make room for other people,” he says in that throaty drawl, so familiar to tens of thousands of Albertans from his decades-long career as a beloved public figure.

Titles such as mountain man, conservationist, cowboy, writer, broadcaster, photographer, filmmaker, public speaker, rancher, political candidate, husband, father, trapper, hunter, wilderness guide, horse trainer are part of a resume as colourful and flavoursome as you could find.

Described as one of the most engaging storytellers in Canadian history, he can recall with remarkable clarity the smell of a river or the flight pattern of an eagle from well over half-a-century ago. The memories of dropping out of high school to run a trapline, train horses and then learn to become a mountain guide, remain vivid. The stories still flow as freely as the mountain streams he knows so intimately.

And despite the occasional forgetfulness of a name – his large, gnarled hands reaching for his head – despite the more restrictive physical circumstances of his life, an ember of passion catches fire once more.

“Nothing lasts for ever, not even me,” he says. But “I'd like to live to 200 to give 'em hell,” he adds, a broad smile further creasing his face. Indeed, he wants to be remembered for “raising hell.”

Prime objects of his wrath are the oil and gas companies that have, in his words, polluted most of Alberta's water courses in their search for wealth. “They don't give a damn,” he growls. Whether it was fighting giant multinationals like Shell and Esso over a proposed sour gas line or resisting the bulldozing of seismic lines on the Eastern Slopes, Andy Russell has put his money where his mouth is. “I'm not afraid of any of them,” he says. His still-sparkling eyes take on a special glint as he suggests how little the industry's assurances of safety and environmental responsibility can be trusted.

Andy is equally disgusted with a provincial government that he says likes to treat environmentalism as a swear word. “Ralph Klein ... how can we tolerate that man for a leader?” he asks in exasperation.

His plea, particularly resonant with the current priorities of the Alberta Wilderness Association, is for a clean-up of the province's water courses. “What we've done to our watersheds is awful,” he says. And while frustrated with what he considers a lack of progress by the AWA with this issue, he urges the organization to maintain consistent and constant pressure on industry and the government to clean up.

“I'd love to have you working for me,” he says in a videotaped message to be aired to AWA members when Andy receives the association's Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award in absentia this November. (His son Charlie will accept it for him.)





“There’s a great deal to be done. Let’s get at it,” he adds.

Conservationist ideals have been at the base of most of Andy’s activities. He played a prominent role in the fight against the Oldman River Dam, and has written and spoken passionately about his regard for Canada’s natural areas. He’s still campaigning on behalf of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society’s proposal to expand Waterton Lakes National Park to include British Columbia’s Flathead River valley.

In his Memoirs of a Mountain Man, published in 1984, he writes about the incursions of the energy industry, unconcerned “for watersheds, landowners’ rights, or wildlife habitat.” He pleads for a more “delicate balance” between cold-blooded greed and conservation interests.

The Memoirs are among his 12 published books, celebrating with eloquence and humour the wilderness, and the creatures and humans inhabiting it. A 13th book, based on his numerous published magazine articles, is expected out soon. Andy’s first published piece was in a 1945 edition of Outdoor Life, produced in New York.

In 1959, after a career as a guide and outfitter that had spanned 25 years, he helped organize a successful delegation to capture Dall sheep in the Yukon. Encouraged by the film footage he shot on that expedition, he and his two eldest sons (including Charlie) embarked on a three-year project to study and film the life of the grizzly bear.

The result was a unique peek into the needlessly (from Andy’s perspective) feared animal. In all, Andy produced three feature-length films. The grizzly film led to the book Grizzly Country, which, according to reports, is in its ninth printing.

Andy’s gradual conversion from hunter to photographer spawned a prolific number of pictures, about 5,000 of which are now contained in the archives at the Banff Museum. As the guiding business declined, he turned in the 1960s to ranching. With a wry look, he’ll tell you about his unsuccessful run for the Trudeau Liberals in 1972 to represent a riding in Lethbridge, the city where he was born.

Along with the horsehair fly swatter and the bear-claw necklace that adorn the walls of his new home is the framed certificate of the Order of Canada he received in 1977. He proudly shows the Golden Jubilee Medal he received last year from Queen Elizabeth II. And because he didn’t complete his formal schooling, there’s no hiding his pleasure with the certificates of four honorary degrees from Alberta universities.

Other awards include the Crandall Award for Conservation, the J. B. Harkin Conservation Award, and the highest honour that CPAWS gives to individuals. Alberta Sustainable Resources Development recently inducted him into the Order of the Bighorn.

“I don’t have the stamina I used to,” he concedes. He makes few public appearances, although just 10 days before this interview he had met with a group of Peigan with whom he’s enjoyed a warm association over the years. He’s stopped writing now and laughs about his first experiences with a computer. When a technical glitch wiped out a whole bunch of text, “I was tempted to get a six-shooter and blast a hole in the middle.”

Andy is confident, though, that his offspring will grasp the torch of championing the wilderness. “I have sons to take my place,” he says.





As the interview ends, he notes: "Although I've had setbacks and disappointments, it's been a wonderful life, no fooling." He remains seated, his once-animated face in quiet repose.





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A Tribute to Andy Russell

In 2003, AWA gave Andy Russell an Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award in recognition of his contribution to wilderness conservation in Alberta. Andy couldn't make it to the award ceremony, so his acceptance speech was videotaped. Even though he was in pain from a recent fall, he spoke to us with all the magical power of a born storyteller. This is what he said.

Well, I can say this to you, in respect to our province of Alberta, which I'm sure you all love and I love just as much as anybody could. At the same time, you and I have traveled this province - we don't have to be told the beauty and the power of this province by anybody. And quite frankly, we've not taken care of it very well. And what we've done is good but what we should be doing is a whole lot more, and very, very important.

What this outfit [AWA] is doing is of greater importance than I think its members know. And while we've gone a long ways and done a lot of work, we haven't even got started yet. And we need to have a consistent and constant pressure, not only on industry but on the government itself, to clean up.

We're in a hell of a shape really, considering the time we've had and the resources that we have to work with. We have got nowhere really. We haven't even got started yet. And it might scare you to death for me to tell you that we could start with our rivers and our creeks and, if we clean that up and get it going, there's some other things that are waiting for us to do.

You know, I'd love to have you all working for me, I really would; working under my direction, showing what needs to be done. I'd love it. I'd love it. And you'd probably end up cursing me because you wouldn't be able to sleep, you wouldn't be able to turn around in your tracks without me having something that I wanted you to do.

We'll let it go at that. There's a great deal to be done. Let's get at it.

AWA extends our deepest sympathy to the family of Andy Russell. We will all miss him and his passion for Alberta's wilderness. As a tribute to this great man, who had so much energy and passion for wilderness and wildlife conservation in Alberta, AWA is proposing that the Castle Wildland be protected as the Andy Russell Wildland Provincial Park.

