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DETERMINED ACTIVIST CARRIES A POWERFUL, SCIENTIFIC STICK

By Andy Marshall

When Bill Fuller corresponds with the Alberta premier, he still enjoys a chuckle out of addressing him as “Comrade Klein.” It’s certainly a much more subtle salutation than the stubby middle finger offered by then Environment Minister Ralph Klein to Bill and others gathered in Athabasca in the early 1990s to witness the government’s approval of the Alberta-Pacific pulp mill there despite all the environmental evidence against it.

The greeting may seem out-of-character for the otherwise low-key, polite, almost diffident manner of the tall, distinguished scientist who has been preparing academic papers, writing books and composing letters and submissions on behalf of conservationism throughout his adult life. But it offers a clue to the activist passion that still burns brightly within the 79-year-old former University of Alberta biology professor. He even keeps a photo of Klein and his derisive digit.

Moreover, as with almost anything Bill says or writes, there is well-thought-out reasoning behind his choice of word. Through his close ties with the former Soviet Union – he’s visited the place seven times in the past 35 years and counts many Russians among his friends and peers – he has amassed from the once-Communist country an impressive collection of mostly scientific books that adorns the walls of his Athabasca area cedar log home.

Among the collection is a book about conservation in the Soviet Union from Stalin to Gorbachev. It relates the conversion of many natural regions into Communist reserves and their resulting degradation. “That’s exactly what Klein’s been doing here,” Bill says quietly. “He’s taken native, untouched land and turned it into a Communist reserve where people can raise pigs or cut the forest.”

The failure of the province to preserve all of the Chinchaga from the forestry and energy industry clutches through its Special Places program in recent years was just another example for Bill of the ongoing evidence of Alberta’s cavalier disregard for the value of its wildlands.

Those who know Bill say he is relentless in his ability to present a rational and unassailable scientific case for his opposition to development that he considers detrimental to the natural world, in particular the boreal forest and Canada’s northern rivers. “He has amazing energy for scientific debate,” says Louis Schmittroth, founder of the Friends of the Athabasca River Environmental Association, formed in 1988 to fight the pulp mill. Bill’s scientific knowledge and contacts with other scientists were big factors in the recommendation from a review panel that the pulp mill not be built.

In time, the province overruled that recommendation, as it later ignored the Forest Conservation Strategy cobbled together by a disparate group, including industry and conservationist representatives, of which Bill was also a member.

Bill participated in the Northern River Basins Study, also in the 1990s, as a back-up member for conservation interests.

“They wouldn’t have me as a full member ... I don’t think this government likes me,” he says. Schmittroth knows why: “When Bill sees skullduggery, he’s not afraid to speak up and make enemies.”





Whether it was taking on – and defeating – the Slave River Dam in 1983 and the plans to build facilities inside Banff National Park for the 1972 Winter Olympics, or his more than half-century-long advocacy for the buffalo and other northern mammals, Bill has invariably turned to science, tinged with a dab of humour, to make his point. Even though the Al-Pac mill in Athabasca was built, Bill is credited with having a hand in persuading pulp mills to use the more benign chlorine dioxide in their pulping process, as opposed to straight chlorine.

Is he an activist? “I don’t get out on the streets,” he replies. “I write letters. I try to educate people.”

Education has been a huge part of his contribution – as a biologist for what became the Canadian Wildlife Service in Fort Smith, NWT from 1947-56 and in Whitehorse, Yukon from 1956-59, and then as a professor in the U of A zoology department from 1959-84, including five years as department chair.

“I liked teaching,” he says simply. He has remained a U of A professor emeritus since retiring almost 20 years ago and also keeps current as an adjunct professor at the University of Athabasca, offering biology and ecology courses.

With five co-authored books, at least 46 refereed papers, 23 conference papers and 19 other articles in scholarly journals to his name, research has also, obviously, been a major part of his life. Although he doesn’t have quite the same name recognition as U of A colleague and water guru David Schindler, he is a highly respected and renowned international mammalogist, says Harvey Scott, another retired U of A professor who has come to know Bill through their association with the Friends of Athabasca.

Apart from his work with the buffalo, muskrat and other northern mammals, Bill made a unique contribution to the efforts to bring back the whooping crane from the brink of extinction when he discovered the nesting site of the only remaining flock of whooping cranes during his years in Fort Smith.

His lifelong companion since those Fort Smith days has been his wife, Marie. They most likely first met in a biology laboratory at the University of Saskatoon where he was a senior student helping direct the labs, and she was a second-year anatomy student.

“I don’t know what triggered it, but she caught me,” he says. They married on May 31, 1947 in Regina, where Bill had grown up and gone to school after being born in Moosomin, Sask. Within days of the wedding, they were in Fort Smith, where a local told Marie, “You’re just the 21st white woman in this town.”

“We’ve been best friends. She’s meant an awful lot to me,” Bill says on their 56th anniversary. Their life together was jolted when Marie suffered a stroke a week or so earlier. At the time this piece was written, Marie was still in the Athabasca hospital with movement of part of one arm restricted.

An active social life and convivial relations with many of the local Metis and Aboriginals are among Bill’s good memories of those years in the north. Responsible then for wildlife research in Wood Buffalo National Park and the southern Mackenzie district, Bill has retained the awe he first developed for the buffalo. “A magnificent beast,” he says. His PhD dissertation at the University of Wisconsin was on the biology and management of bison in Wood Buffalo National Park.

Bill’s attachment to the north really began as a student working with the Northwest Fisheries Investigation at Lake Athabasca and then at Great Slave Lake, NWT, where he completed research for his master’s degree.

Among the honours given to Bill during his career was a Canada Centennial Medal in 1967. He is a corresponding member of the All-Union Theriological Society of the USSR, and, in 1989, he was awarded





the Pimlott Award by the Canadian Nature Federation. Two years later he received the William Rowan Distinguished Service Award from the Alberta chapter of the Wildlife Society. AWA will present Bill with an Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award later this year.

Although Bill may be slowing up – walking has been restricted in the past few months by a pulled back muscle – he’s still ready to tackle the political establishment.

Like so many who have studied the environment, he sees tough times ahead. “It’s obvious we’re heading for a pretty serious discovery – maybe as early as in the next 50 years – that this earth won’t support all the people who are on it.” He worries, for example, that his own four offspring’s children and their children may lose the chance to see the real forest.

Brought up in a regular church-going family, Bill now rejects the idea of a theological God. “If there was a God and I were he,” he notes dryly, “I wouldn’t think much of what my people were doing. I don’t know if I would save them or not.”

That ultimately means it’s up to us humans to try and make a difference. When he sees abuse of the world, “I still get mad,” he says. “More people should get mad.”

