

JAMES TWEEDIE AND JUDY HUNTLEY – DEFENDERS OF ALBERTA’S SOUTHWEST WILDERNESS

By Vivian Pharis based on an interview by Courtney Townsend

We won! We won! The words burst out of the open AWA door loud enough to alert all of Calgary. They were meant to be heard all the way to the Crownsnest Pass. They came roaring from the be-whiskered mouth of a man who was near to exploding with excitement. Such a win had been anticipated for decades, was hugely deserved, and demanded to be shouted from the rooftops.

It was September 6, 1994 and James Tweedie had just learned that the Energy and Resources Conservation Board (ERCB) had refused Amoco Canada a permit that would have initiated a sour gas drilling program in the pristine, highly picturesque Whaleback, just a stone’s throw from his Southwest Alberta home.

James and his life partner of some 35 years, Judy Huntley, were seasoned conservation warriors when around 1990 they organized what is perhaps Alberta’s first effective landowner-rancher-conservationist network. The groups worked harmoniously to jointly oppose Amoco’s application at a formal ERCB hearing. By 1990 Judy was totally immersed in environmental work, serving

on the Board of Directors of both the Alberta Environmental Network and the Canadian Environmental Network, but she still found time for local, grassroots organization. Working in her own back yard, she fostered good relationships between landowners and conservationists that made it possible to jointly oppose Amoco. Winning the Whaleback’s freedom from industrial servitude was, for James and Judy, a culmination of decades of what often seemed like hopeless struggles to keep parts of the world they knew best in a peaceful, beautiful and naturally intact state.

The part of the world James and Judy had come to know best and found worth fighting for was Southwest Alberta – Waterton Lakes National Park, the Castle River headwaters and the Oldman River. This is all strikingly beautiful country, but also country under many industrial and developmental pressures. That these lands retain much of their beauty and remain reasonably intact is in no small part due to the tireless efforts of these two provincial immigrants.

James and Judy arrived in Alberta in 1972, young and idealistic. They

came to work on a Waterton area cattle ranch for the winter and fell in love with the local splendour. Judy had previously succumbed to the spell of Alberta’s mountains from spending eight summers camping and horseback riding in the headwaters of the Oldman River and parts of Banff National Park. Having met at the University of British Columbia while pursuing degrees in anthropology, the two arrived in Alberta as almost seasoned combatants in defence of human rights, First Nations peoples and disappearing wilderness. They had been activists at the UBC, and continue to be so to this day, standing up for those things they hold most precious; things like ancient forests, wild places, intact nature, local responsibility and sustainable communities.

The early years of their Alberta life were spent on a property south of Pincher Creek. It was a great jumping-off place from which to explore the Waterton and South Castle areas, and they became intimately familiar with the complexities of the region. Not all of the complexities they learned about, however, involved beauty and nature appreciation. James and Judy were becoming increasingly disturbed by growing industrial intrusions into the area they had come to know and love.

There was already a large sour gas plant within two miles of their home and drilling was happening all around them, even high into Eastern Slopes valleys on the edge of the national park. Mining, logging, resort development and off-road vehicles presented more public land issues. James and Judy soon joined the Alberta Wilderness Association, an organization which arose in the Pincher Creek area because of these same land and wildlife habitat threats. AWA had identified key lands it wanted protected in the South Castle headwaters, lands that had once been part of Waterton Lakes National Park. James and Judy



James and Judy in their beloved Whaleback in 2003 at the site where Polaris Energy proposed to drill for sour gas. The EUB rejected the application. PHOTO: J.L. LAWSON



Turn Away. 8”H x 7”W x 12.5”L Serpentine. PHOTO: © LORETTA KYLE

took up this cause as local activists and Judy joined the AWA Board of Directors, remaining there four years.

Realizing that living near a sour gas plant would not be a healthy place to raise their two children, James and Judy found a lovely property at Maycroft on the south bank of the Oldman River, west of Highway 22 and moved there in 1983. Their move to Maycroft put them in a strategic position when the Alberta Government announced it was building the controversial dam on the Oldman River. The two became key local players in protracted opposition to the dam, the construction of which James and Judy call “one of the greatest catastrophes in the history of Alberta.” AWA, Friends of the Oldman River (FOR) and many local people fought the dam through lobbying, massive demonstrations and legal action, winning support even at the Supreme Court, but finally failing to stop construction. Today, the dam stands as a monument to government obstinacy, but since its construction no other dams have been built in Alberta.

By the late 1980s, James and Judy were seasoned conservation activists in a province with a growing history of industrial supremacy and governments that catered to development. They had become hard-nosed themselves as a result of so many battles to protect lands where democracy and fairness were precluded, even from official proceedings as those of the Energy and Resources Conservation

Board. But what resulted from one such hearing left James and Judy stunned, horrified and very disheartened that both their government and the oil and gas industry could and would run rough-shod over the public and the environment in their endless quest for resource exploitation.

The 1988 ERCB hearing involved a drilling program Shell Canada wanted to develop for the top of Corner Mountain or Prairie Bluff Mountain near Pincher Creek. The mountain had once been in the park system and was within the South Castle River headwaters. It was also zoned by the province as off limits to industry and motorized use and Shell’s program had initially been rejected by the Deputy Minister in charge. However, Shell met with a key Minister behind closed doors and gained permission to proceed. AWA called for an ERCB hearing which was granted, but the organization was denied a slight delay that would have allowed a key technical witness to attend and argue that the drilling target could be reached from below the mountain by directional drilling. Shell was granted permission to drill from above and to construct a horrendous road up the side of the mountain, leaving a scar that will remain for centuries.

AWA organized a mountain-top demonstration as the road and wellsites were being bulldozed into place. Shell’s work was held up for about a week

but the company was soon granted an unprecedented injunction to keep all the public off the mountain entirely. AWA president Vivian Pharis was served with a \$100,000 Statement of Claim and several key protesters, including James Tweedie, were named in the SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation). An embittered James said the experience was a “horrible, horrible thing that unraveled the entire focus of the Eastern Slopes Policy, and was meant to prevent people from carrying out their legal activism on behalf of public lands.”

But the experience also steeled James and Judy’s resolve for more battles, some of which they would go on to win, like the one to save the Whaleback. Some battles are ongoing, and their continued participation is testimony to the ongoing strength and determination of these two eco saviours. These battles include their work for the goals of the Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition, a group they helped found.

Seeing the need for a local group to address public land issues in the South Castle headwaters and to work directly for its protection, James and Judy have worked towards its goals for several decades. The *Crown* in the organization’s name represents “Crown of the Continent” – an initiative to see



Mating Dance. 23cmH x 17L x 12W Serpentine. PHOTO: © LORETTA KYLE

the lands of the larger area that includes the International Peace Park, the upper Flathead of B.C. and the Castle River headwaters of Alberta, being protected as one large, continuous ecosystem. Although the Castle headwaters were named as a “Special Place,” called the Castle Special Management Area in 2002, it remains unprotected by legislation. James is the CCWC’s current conservation director and Judy is its executive director. Their work, and that of the CCWC, is not yet finished.

Judy still acts on behalf of AWA too, as steward of the Beehive Natural Area in the headwaters of the Oldman River, a beloved place she first roamed through as a child.

For these two there is no question or doubt about why they do what they do; it is clear to them. “I am here to try and protect some things that don’t have a voice,” says James. “Wilderness protection is about giving a voice to those who can’t speak. We work on these things here, with the resources we have, just as other AWA people apply their skills to



Participants in AWA’s 2009 Whaleback hike learn about the 1994 Amoco hearing at the site where the company proposed to drill for natural gas. PHOTO: I. URQUHART

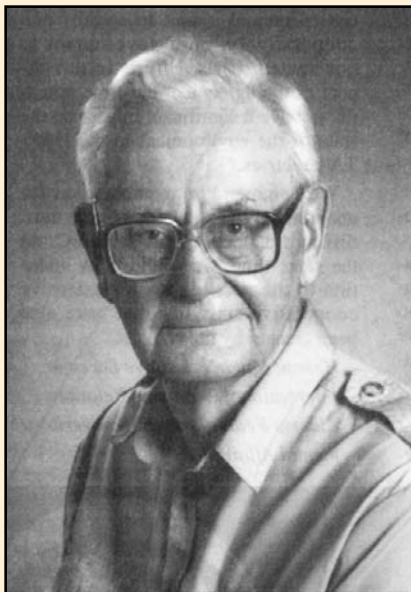
protect places precious to them.”

“We live our lives walking in beauty. That’s how it is.” They also live their lives protecting this beauty and the rest of us owe them our gratitude.

James and Judy will receive a Wilderness and Wildlife Defender’s award on November 20, 2009. 🐾

IN MEMORIAM

DR. WILLIAM A. (BILL) FULLER
June 13, 2009 at the age of 85 years



Too many people pass away who I wish I could say I knew very well – Dr. Bill Fuller was such a man. Like too many academics I have met from the “hard” sciences faculties at the University of Alberta my contacts with Bill were all-too-brief. But, they were memorable. When Larry Pratt and I wrote our book about the industrialization of Alberta’s boreal forest I interviewed Bill about the government’s plans. Bill was a remarkable source of information for our work. The insights he offered – both his professional ones as one of Canada’s leading biologists and his activist ones as an “intellectual heavy weight” who opposed the Alberta-Pacific project – strengthened our analysis significantly. With respect to the Al-Pac hearings Bill demonstrated just how influential individuals may be in the public

policy process. The depth of his scientific knowledge and his contacts with scientists on both sides of the issue (many of whom were taught by Bill) clearly encouraged the review panel to recommend against building the Alberta-Pacific pulp mill. His scientific expertise, especially with respect to the north and its ecology, as well as his passion for environmental conservation led many national and international committees to seek his advice and counsel over the years. Alberta Wilderness Association was privileged to award Bill a “Alberta Wilderness Defenders” award in 2003 – in recognition of the positive role Bill played with respect to promoting the conservation agenda. His knowledge, passion, and empathy will be missed greatly.

- Ian Urquhart