

Sid Marty:

A Man for Alberta's Mountains

By Lindsey Wallis



Sid Marty has been writing since the 1960s. For more than half a century his love of Alberta's wild spaces has made him a powerful voice for conservation as a journalist, prose writer, songwriter, and poet...occasionally while staring down a bulldozer at a protest site.

His time as a warden in the mountain parks, the time he spent growing up along Seven Persons Creek near Medicine Hat, and his current residence, tucked in the shadow of the Livingstone Range along Highway 22, have imbued his work with the quiet power and honesty of a man who is inextricably tied to the land.

Christyann Olson, Executive Director of AWA, sums up Marty's influence:

"Sid has, for years, influenced thoughts and actions through his books, his prose and his songs. For the most part he is likely unaware that he has made a difference to conservation in Alberta, in that quiet and most likely immeasurable way. AWA is recognizing Sid at this time for all his years of caring for the environment, for speaking out softly and more recently for protesting loudly about logging in the Castle. Logging that has taken a toll on the ecosystems and that, through protest and defiance, has stopped and given nature respite and time to heal and hopefully

will lead to legislated protection. Sid is highly regarded and when he stands up others learn from him and feel empowered to take an informed stand too."

The son of a "truck driver with a grade-school education and a feisty Limey war bride," as he puts it in his book *Leaning on the Wind*, Marty grew up in Medicine Hat at a time when kids were free to play in the wild spaces that surrounded the dusty, windswept town.

He and his friends passed time along Seven Persons Creek fishing and camping, looking for scorpions and black widow spiders, building forts, and playing cowboys and Indians. It's where Marty says he first developed an affinity for flowing water and learned watersheds are the heart of our wild lands. In *Leaning on the Wind* he writes:

"Out from the amber water of Seven Persons Creek, out from the riverine forest of willow and cottonwood, a love of wild creatures and wild places crept stealthily into my heart. I learned in childhood what every prairie creature knows: it is the coulee, the creek bottom, the river valley that offer the only shelter from the freezing winds of winter and the hot winds of summer. The coulees teemed with deer, pheasants, cottontails and grouse."

After a brief stint as a graduate student in Montreal Marty returned to Alberta and joined the warden service. It was there that he says he became aware of the power that wild places have to help us slow our lives down and live in the present moment. "You get the chance to live with a clear

mind and experience that older lifestyle," he says. "It connects us to our ancestors in a way – traveling at a slower speed and taking in everything that's around us. People were here 10,000 years before we showed up. You get in touch with those old souls."

The job of a park warden in the 1970s was never dull. It required Marty to be, in turns, an excellent horseman, skier and mountaineer, as well as carrying out mountain rescues and law enforcement duties (there was a history of law enforcement in his family – his great grandfather, grandfather, and a great uncle all worked as sheriffs). "It was a wonderful place for young people to be – it gave me a lot of personal satisfaction," says Marty.

Even the routine patrolling around town and breaking up drunken fights at park campgrounds was made tolerable by the variety of the work and the long stretches spent in the backcountry. "The best part of the job was the ability to travel in wild country for up to 24 days at a time," Marty says. "If you went to a new district they would give you four or five horses who would show you around – they knew where everything was. If you had any doubts you just gave them their head and they would take you to the next campground. I enjoyed the backcountry work more than anything else."

Marty left the service at the end of the 1970s, only partly of his own volition. He says he was fed up with the bureaucratic ineptitudes that he witnessed and was sick and tired of things like a ski hill development being pushed ahead despite evidence that it would be harmful to the park (he



With the Livingstone range in the distance its easy to see why Sid and Myrna Marty chose this landscape to make their home and raise their family.

points out the continuation of that attitude with the recent approval of an expansion at the Lake Louise ski hill). “There were a lot of problems with politics in Banff,” he says. “We were always getting accosted by people in the tourism industry who had someone’s ear in Ottawa so you were limited in what you could do for wildlife management and conservation.”

The final straw was when the publication of his book *Men for the Mountains*, in which he levelled criticism against park management, got Marty confined to a desk, despite it being well-received by the public and even receiving accolades from the Assistant Deputy Minister for Parks Canada in Ottawa. Being young and impatient, as he says, he chose to hand in his badge rather than sit at a desk.

He did manage to get a certain amount of satisfaction though, when, in the early 1980s, the same people who made his life so difficult were sued for negligence. This was due to their handling of bear management in the park, which resulted in sever-

al people being mauled and one (human) fatality. Marty writes in depth about the events of this period in his book *The Black Grizzly of Whiskey Creek*, which was nominated for a Governor General’s Award in 2007.

Since his time with Parks Canada Marty has made a living as a freelance writer on his and his wife Myrna’s “ranchette” as he calls it, at the foot of the Livingstone Range. There he continues to draw inspiration from the beauty of the landscape. In the heart of ranching country, Marty can wander out his back door, up through the bullpines to a hilltop where one can see all the way to Chief Mountain in Montana. In *Leaning on the Wind* he writes, “The bull-pine inspires me to persevere, to strive, to endure. It is at war with the wind, but it contemplates the rock of the infinite. The sedentary life of a writer goes very much against my grain at times, and then I climb up among the bullpine, into the teeth of the wind. The one force fills me with the fierce breath of creation; the other gives me

purchase, bears me up, stiffens my resolve.”

While Marty freely admits that writing is a hard way to make a living (“It’s not something you get into these days with the idea of getting rich,” he says laughing), he thinks it is the role of writers to be a voice for the land, which can’t speak for itself.

“It’s up to writers to try and put those landscapes (that we feel are so important) on the map so they become real to other people,” says Marty. “We have a road called the North Burmis road which is the most beautiful road in Alberta but the fewer people that know about it the harder it is to protect it so in a way you have to bring some of these landscapes into reality or bring them to light for other people if you want them to back conservation efforts.”

He has been rewarded in his literary efforts over the years by people who were influenced by reading his books or hearing his music to pursue a career in conservation, whether as a park warden or environmental lawyer. Marty himself was influenced by the writings of Edward Abbey,

American author and outspoken environmental advocate.

He says he was particularly gratified by a letter he received after a piece of his on B.C.'s spirit bears ran in *Canadian Geographic*. "I got a letter from some hunters who, after reading the article, were horrified to understand that they could be shooting a black bear with black fur but it could have the genetic coding of a Kermode bear. They were going to stop hunting black bears," Marty says.

One of the other roles he has taken on is one of translator. He says: "It became clear to me quite a while ago that one of the roles of writers who address these things is to keep abreast of some of the scientific literature and translate it to a wider audience. Sometimes science isn't so good at getting its work into the public domain."

For Marty, the use of the landscapes in southern Alberta is the most pressing environmental concern for the province. "It is just a free for all on the eastern slopes – it's like the Wild West in terms of clear-cut logging, oil and gas development and ATV use," he says. "For quite a while the ATV lobby has pretty much dictated the recreation policy on the eastern slopes. We need to make more opportunities for low-impact recreation."

He points to the lack of law enforcement, especially conservation officers in the field, as one of the major problems. "I learned that asking people to do the right thing isn't good enough – you need to have people on the ground representing the government who are there to enforce the regulations for the benefit of the whole population."

Marty is optimistic that the new NDP government will create positive change but realizes that they are being cautious right now. "We can't even imagine yet all the chicanery that went on with the previous government," he says. "I think they have to go through a period where they can sort everything out and hopefully they will listen to the other voices, not just the voices of industry and motorized recreation. There are a lot of young people out there with new ideas and the new government would do



*The road to Prairie Bluff. In 1987 Sid Marty joined Mike Judd in trying to stop Shell Canada from building this road to Shell wellsites on Prairie Bluff. Shell Canada served AWA with a statement of claim for over \$100,000 because of the non-violent protests that took place at the Prairie Bluff/Corner Mountain construction site. Sid recounts this episode in his book *Leaning on the Wind*.*

well to clean house and listen to them."

AWA isn't the first organization to recognize Sid Marty's contributions to public life in Alberta. In 2009 Sid received a Lifetime Distinguished Achievement Award from Mount Royal University. A video interview with Sid on that occasion is available at http://www.mtroyal.ca/Alumni/legacy_video_09.shtml.

Recently, Marty has once again taken up the banner of environmental activism and has been on the front lines of protests near his home. He chronicled his first real taste of resistance to the Alberta government in *Leaning on the Wind*, when he stood down a bulldozer with Mike Judd, protesting the

development of a gas well by Shell on Prairie Bluff in the late 1980s. At the 2015 Martha Kostuch lecture in November he will share his recent experience at the standoff in the Castle, where members of the AWA and Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition were protesting logging by Spray Lake Sawmills and some were subsequently arrested.

AWA hopes you will be able to join us when Sid Marty delivers the 2015 Martha Kostuch Annual Wilderness and Wildlife Lecture on November 20th at 7pm at AWA's home in the Hillhurst Cottage School. 🍌

A freelance writer & photographer, Lindsey loves tramping through Alberta's wild spaces, whether on foot, horseback or skis, now with her new baby girl in tow.