

How Great Was My Valley



Editor's note: *The following essay was inspired in part by Christyann Olson's reflections on growing up in the Crowsnest. Her article appeared in the June issue of the Advocate.*

By Joe Lothian

I grew up in the Crowsnest Pass area of Southern Alberta and I lived on the edge of a wilderness of my imaginings. It was a wilderness of mountains, hills and valleys, of creeks and rivers, the haunt of bear and cougar, the pasture of deer and elk, a place where moose browsed willows and coyotes called to the moon. Mist wreathed peaks sheltered sheep and goat, hawks and eagles rode the thermals and surveyed the panorama of my wilderness beneath their wings.

I was to learn later that it was not a wilderness at all, man's footprints were there, not large or heavy but evident in the horse trails herding pastured cattle, the scorched rings of old campfires, the lynx log traps of early trappers and the remaining decaying stumps of those forest giants harvested through selected logging. To a boy growing up on the fringes of this imagined wilderness my knowledge was second hand and sketchy. I knew that in the back forty of the rock ranch I grew up on there was a wireline winding its way off into the hills. I learned the wireline connected the Ranger Station in our town to a distant Ranger Station deep in my wilderness. I also knew by hearsay that during the summer months a fire lookout was staffed on the top of Livingstone Mountain. My imagination fancied myself manning that lofty lookout. As a boy I had an insatiable appetite for adventure stories and my mind peopled my distant wilderness with the characters of my favourite books. From my imagined high mountain lookout I could visualize Jean Isbel gliding through the sun speckled pines on the trail of the Jorths or "Deathwind" tracking Wingenund,

the sachem of the Delawares, through the forest. I saw Davy Crockett grinning down a bear. Such are a small boy's fantasies.

The wilderness of my imaginings has been civilized by progress. In the interest of tourism and fire suppression years ago the government of the day built a road through it. I speak of the Livingstone Valley and the creeks and rivers that feed the Livingstone before it joins the Oldman and cuts through the mountains. On the plains the Oldman feeds the South Saskatchewan, the river that in turn nourishes the larger Saskatchewan. The waters of my wilderness flow into Lake Winnipeg before spilling into the Nelson on their way to Hudson's Bay. There I imagine they wash the bones of Henry Hudson.

Let's not forget the fathers of these waters, the mountains hoarding their snowpacks through the long winter to flush out the spring run-off, to maintain the deep pools and the sparkling riffles favoured by a slash jawed cutthroat. The Crowsnest, Window Mountain, Beehive, Livingstone, and their cousin ridges, Cabin and Sugarloaf are among those that stand out for me.

Then there are the marching ranks of lodgepole pine, and spruce, greening the valley bottom and sometimes climbing to the crest of the ridges. There are the alder, the willow shading the running streams and the stands of creek side big green timber, moss festooned and growing out of the windfall remains of their ancestors. This was a part of my wilderness before the advent of the clear cut and a political policy that sees the forest as little more than fibre. Too much of what remains is threatened by the march of progress. Some march, some progress!

It was, it still is a wonderful valley to visit. Once it was a paradise for hunting and fishing; now it is over hunted, over fished, and over traveled. I retain a sense of proprietorship when I venture into my remembered wilderness that will be forever with me. I know it belongs to all but I still resent the intrusion of others into my valley, trampling on the memories I share with family and friends. I resent the roads beyond roads, I resent the evidence of capped gas wells, of clearcuts, of trail bikes and quads cutting trails through meadow and bush. That is the reality of my wilderness now, but today's compromised picture does not erase the fond memories of another time. Ah Wilderness! And now a road runs through it.

That road is the forestry trunk road, graveled and well maintained. It gives access to all and perhaps that is as it should be. Before the road was built access was by horseback or by Model A's with enough clearance to scabble over rocks and light enough to push or wrestle through river fords or out of bog holes. And then there were the occasional mechanical breakdowns that demanded the skills that came with graduating from the Haywire Technical School. God bless my cousins for having both the vehicles and the skills needed to keep them on those tracks in the foothills.

My first explorations into my wilderness were by foot or by horseback. Later they came in a cousin's Model A. Those were magic days indeed. As the years rolled on growing prosperity changed my access to the Livingstone – from a car and tent, to a trailer and to the ultimate camper's degradation, a motorhome.

Today my valley is no longer a wilderness, except perhaps to the youngest among us, but it still is beloved. It is the summer cabin of our family where we are free to pick a different creek or a different campsite each time we venture into the Livingstone Valley. This time away from the city is a time of renewal, family, and companionship. It's time that makes life sweeter. Like the Livingstone's waters the stories flow, knitting the generations together. Recounting these memories is how we pursue happiness.

Yes, the Livingstone Valley has changed. The mark of man is well writ on what was once my wilderness. The logging industry has pushed their roads up the creeks to harvest the old growth forest. When the old growth is gone they chop away at the smaller timber, timber that a generation or two ago was too small to cut. Main roads spawn smaller roads in watersheds where bull trout once spawned. Quads chew through the timber; trail bikes carve their paths through the sensitive sod of the open ridges.

Some wise philosopher once wrote you can never go home again. He might have added that you can never go back to what was. I reluctantly accept that. My memories sustain me. I was in a fishing paradise. In hindsight I wish that paradise was regulated more strictly than it was. Instead of fishing

with bait I wished I'd followed the example of those purists, the fly fishers. In retrospect, I regret not following their example of casting a fly and doubling the pleasure of landing a two pound cutthroat with a split cane rod rather than a steel telescope rod, a baited hook and a weighty sinker.

We fished for trout during the summer months working the creeks in accordance with the regulations that closed different parts of the watershed in alternate years. That was government policy to protect the fishery. I thought it worked. A baited hook cast into a pool seemed always to attract a greedy small bull trout to your offering before a cutthroat had time to put on a napkin. We had little respect for Alberta's now provincial emblem in those early days. Those greedy little bull trout were thrown unceremoniously back into the bush as being of no account. I hope the current regulations protecting the bull trout, "no black, put it back" and the evidence of the occasional large bull trout patrolling logjams suggest the prohibition is having a salutary effect.

The orange slashed cutthroat were the fish of choice in those days and they were plentiful and of a size to grace any creel. These remembered cutthroats too are disappearing from the creeks of my valley.

When the rods were put away the rifles

were oiled and sighted in. Hunting season was about to begin. A hunting license was a permission to hunt, there were no draws or tags, there was a season on deer, on elk, on moose, on sheep, and goat. There were limits of course but a winter's larder could be achieved on one successful hunt. Hunters awaited the first heavy snowfall to drive the big game from the high ridges to the valley bottoms and the horse parties went forth to collect nature's meaty bounty. It was not an uncommon sight to see a returning party moving through town with the carcass of an elk or deer anchored to the pack of a skittish horse. My valley had much to offer and before the road ran through it, access was limited to the resourceful, to those with a love for the great outdoors and the wonder of my wilderness.

All past is prouge and one cannot go back again. I want to take you back into that past to share with you the stories of my wilderness, of my valley, to invite you on a journey to remember a time now past. That time cannot come back again except in the memories that enliven a campfire gathering, lighten a long winter evening, or raise a chuckle in a shared recollection.

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