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## Vivian Pharis: Deep Love for Wilderness Springs from Summers on Ranch

By Leslie Beaton Hedley

"They had lonely lives and they were full of stories," says Vivian Pharis of the trappers and wilderness dwellers who once gathered at the ranch where she spent her childhood summers. The Gold Bar, her grandparents' spread near the headwaters of the Peace, "was sort of a hub for the area.... The ranch had a post office and a school – it was almost like a little village. It was also where people would take off and go up the Peace River on big riverboats. So there were a lot of different people, amusing characters.... We sat around in the evenings and these old guys would go on, like Andy Russell, storytelling."

Those tales, so intimately connected to the ranch and its breathtaking locale, planted an enduring love for wilderness in the heart of young Vivian, who grew up in the Yukon and northern British Columbia, but considers those summers in Peace River country a highlight of her childhood. Her "most abiding hobby," fossil-hunting, began on the banks of the river there, and it was there she learned to ride a horse. "I could not wait to make the day-long journey [to the ranch] and was always reluctant to return to town life and school two months later," she remembers.

The subsequent appropriation and flooding of the Gold Bar, now under a reservoir created by the Bennett Dam, paradoxically sparked a fire in Pharis, then a university student. Already passionate about the natural world, her resolve to fight encroachment became stronger at the loss of the beautiful area. That theme, preserving and restoring nature, runs like a brightly coloured thread through the life of Pharis, one of this year's Alberta Wilderness Defender Award winners.

This latest honour is one of several for Pharis, who – along with her husband, Dick – received the National Survival Institute's Heaslip Award for Environmental Stewardship in 1982. A decade later, she was named one of the *Calgary Herald's* Women of Consequence, and in 1995 she received an award for Personal Achievement from the Canadian Council of Ecological Areas. Such tributes, however meaningful, can't begin to sum up a life dedicated to wilderness preservation.

Infused with a love of nature when she was a child, Pharis studied biology at University of Calgary. While a student there, she hiked regularly with a group of backcountry enthusiasts, among them Richard Pharis, the young botany professor she later married. After her botany degree, she completed a BEd and then taught high school biology and art for ten years.

Pharis explored her creative side by studying textiles at Alberta College of Art, as it was then known. "I was thinking of preparing for something I'd be able to do as I got older," she says wryly. She needn't have worried – filling her time hasn't proved to be a problem. She'd intended to specialize in wood sculpture, but "the year I went to specialize, the fellow who did wood sculpture went on two years' sabbatical."

Instead, she earned her degree in fibre arts, which has remained a lasting interest. Pharis says she got "too involved in other directions" to make a career of textiles, but she still enjoys creating beautiful things with her hands; in particular, she likes working with the tanned hides gleaned from her many years of hunting.

Pharis's pursuit of art was to provide an unexpected boon to the Alberta Wilderness Association: while at ACA, she found time to volunteer at the nearby AWA office. She began to devote her time to the organization in new ways, one of which was taking volunteers on horseback trips into the Bighorn to clean up camp areas, a project undertaken in conjunction with the Forest Service.





"We would bag about two tonnes of garbage a year," she recalls. "It took ten years to make our way through the Bighorn." When the Forest Service developed the Adopt-a-Trail program, AWA adopted the historic Bighorn trail and Pharis has continued to lead the way in keeping this area maintained. Her knowledge of the Bighorn enabled her to edit AWA's recent book on the area, as well as write a number of the chapters.

Pharis has been an AWA Board member for almost two decades. Back in the 1980s, while serving for seven years as the organization's president, she was one of AWA's representatives and a strong force in helping to develop integrated resource planning for the Eastern Slopes of the Rockies, with her area of focus being the Bighorn. Though she would like to see these IRPs updated, she is proud of the work done to preserve the Eastern Slopes and to protect public lands from being sold. It was a different era, she says.

"The media was right behind us. That was back in the heady days when we were making a lot of progress as a young organization.... We were in on the fundamental decision-making; we wouldn't get our way, necessarily, but we had valuable input.... We had a voice." The government was much more open to public input then, Pharis says, but she is hopeful the "closed door" attitude of the current government will give way with new leadership.

Pharis preserves nature in her hobbies as well: she has raised chickens for many years, and last year she purchased forty Columbia Rock chicks, now just coming into laying. "I'll end up with about 20 Columbia Rocks, which is an old breed," she says. She has developed an interest in another heritage breed that is quite rare: "The" Canadian horse. When she came across a book on Canadian horses, she knew one of these could replace Dick's 26-year-old mare. After seeing some of the horses at Spruce Meadows, she was sold on the breed, and the Pharises are now proud owners of a true Canadian.

Preservation and restoration has taken root in Pharis's life "downunder" in New Zealand as well, where she and her husband winter while working at their vineyard. About a hundred years ago, when the area near Christchurch was converted to agriculture, Pharis explains, "they just denuded everything. There's no native vegetation left, so there's a big process on right now to try to bring the native vegetation back. I started doing this ... along with my vineyard manager.... Now [one of the universities there] has developed a whole program to help vineyards introduce native plants, and I'm working with them as well, on our property."

With all this work, you might well wonder, is Pharis able to develop the art she studied years ago?

"When I get back home, I seem to have so much to do out at our acreage and with AWA, I just don't get time," she says. At the moment, she's content to undertake the occasional textile project, but she also enjoys listening to CBC radio and reading when she can.

Her love of the Eastern Slopes has not abated: "I continue to live in this province, though I hate the politics, because I love these Eastern Slopes," Pharis says. She also remains constant in her love of fishing and hunting – particularly grouse-hunting with one of her "various Labrador retrievers" at her side. And you can be sure that, wherever the landscape, she'll keep a sharp lookout for fossils.

Wilderness encounters, a love of beauty, the companionship of horses and dogs, a fascination with fossils – though the birthplace of these enduring themes is now underwater, it seems the Gold Bar's legacy still thrives in every aspect of Vivian Pharis's diverse life.

