

This is the first of a new Wild Lands Advocate series featuring interviews with Albertans who had the unique opportunity of living and working in Alberta's backcountry when it was still largely wilderness. Writers will interview those who have known and loved wild Alberta for many decades, bringing you singular perspectives and stories from their colourful lives.

Ray Hill – Life as a Backcountry Ranger

By Vivian Pharis, AWA Board Member

It was not easy being accepted into the ranks of the Alberta Forest Service when Ray Hill decided on his career. In addition to a substantial drop in pay to \$160 a month, he had to supply his own gun, saddle, and two horses. It was 1955.

Ray began life in Ontario, but during a 1945 summer vacation to a relative's ranch west of Turner Valley, he fell under the charm of rolling, timbered hills and tall blue peaks. After a few years as a ranch hand, he broadened his education with construction and heavy equipment operation, all of which would prove practical for a backcountry ranger who needed plenty of jack-of-all-trades skills.

Ray also needed a practical partner, and he found one in Margaret Hemus, a Turner Valley ranch girl who became his wife and the mother of their two sons as well as a teacher, secretary, records keeper, radio operator, and much more. Ranger stations were small cabins heated by wood, sometimes without electricity or running water. Margaret, hardy and adaptive, was up to the task. Later, Ray named a lovely lake in the headwaters area of the Waiparous River after her.

Ray and Margaret were posted in 1955 to the Sheep River Station, known then as Bighorn Station. Ray was assistant ranger, but he also commuted for months at a time, over four years, to the Forestry Training Centre at Kananaskis and Hinton to receive his forestry schooling. The rustic Red Deer Ranger Station east of Mountain Aire Lodge was their next posting, and in 1960 he became chief ranger at the Ghost River Station.

For 16 years the Hills made the then-remote Ghost Station their home. They settled in with a milk cow, two beef cattle, and saddle horses. Margaret schooled the boys until they were old enough to catch the school bus at the Bar



Ray Hill in the mid-1980s during his days as an Alberta Forest Service at the Canmore Ranger Station PHOTO: M. HILL

C Ranch and make the long, bumpy, and dusty or snowy journey to Cochrane each day. Many travelers of the challenging new "Trunk Road" stopped at the Hills' home for a rest and a visit.

Early days in the Ghost were full and hard, but never tedious. Regular duties ranged from monitoring rain gauges and submitting daily radio reports (Margaret's responsibilities) to supervising land use and rehabilitation work, cutting trails, inspecting pasture conditions and cattle grazing under permit, minding campers, constructing campsites and lookout roads, and finding lost hunters. In later years, administering the growing oil and gas and timber sectors became a major part of the work load.

During Ray Hill's term in the Ghost District, his work crew often consisted of minimum security prisoners. Up to 20 were housed in the original Aura-Cache Ranger Station throughout the year, serving their sentences through useful contributions.

The vast Ghost District stretches east-west between the National Park and Forest Reserve boundaries, and north-south between the Red Deer River and the Stoney Indian Reserve. Horses were the early means of transport and even

when four-wheel drive vehicles began to take over, they remained a necessity. Toward the end of the Hills' tenure at the Ghost, helicopters joined the transport force.

Until about 1970, Alberta Forest Service rangers performed double duty as peace officers with authority to carry a gun and enforce regulations. Especially as off-roading became popular, enforcement began to consume more time, spelling the end of the idyllic side of life at the no-longer-remote Ghost Ranger Station.

By 1970 about 400 km of seismic lines had been cut through the district; although 50 percent were reclaimed, there was no legislation to close roads. Conditions were ripe for an explosion in the sport of off-roading. Although Ray spent cooperative time with early Jeep clubs, numbers increased and destructive monster trucks joined the mix. In the 1970s Ray's superintendent asked him to develop a recreation plan for the Ghost.

His plan, which included a rotating use system that would take pressure off sensitive areas and allow others to rehabilitate, was never implemented, and as the wild qualities of the Ghost diminished, Ray and Margaret decided it was time to leave. In 1976 he took up new ranger duties in the brand new district of Kananaskis Country.

Retired now to a lovely property overlooking the mountains near Cochrane, Ray Hill fondly recalls the Ghost District. But a recent trip back to the Ghost left him disheartened. He encountered trucks and motorbikes coming out of the protected Ghost Wilderness Area. He saw that new pine beetle-control logging at the top end of the TransAlta road included the more coveted spruce. He said with a sad shrug, "There's no need to cut the spruce to get the beetle. There's no enforcement happening here. The most precious watershed in Canada has no protection. It makes no sense." 🍷