

RECALL OF THE WILD

This is the second of a new Wild Lands Advocate series featuring interviews with Albertans who had the 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.

Elmer Kure – the Man Who Never Gave Up on Conservation

By Dorothy Dickson

Elmer Kure grew up on a farm in Spruce View east of Innisfail on a road leading to the Eastern Slopes. From his father he learned that the basis of good farming is stewardship of the earth by practices such as crop rotation. However, when they bought some new land to add to the farm they had a disagreement because his father wanted to follow the usual practice of clearing the land of all natural features to gain more land for crops. Elmer, on the other hand, wanted to leave a wooded area and small wetland untouched.

He lost this first foray into land conservation and protection of wildlife habitat but went on to win many more.

Young Elmer sometimes shot hares or grouse for the pot and he earned money by shooting ground squirrels for a local fox farm. He was paid by the squirrel and had to buy his own ammunition so every miss was money out of his pocket. He soon became an accurate shot and 'don't fire unless you are sure' remained his hunting ethic.

The Alberta Fish & Game Association, to which Elmer belonged, usually elected as President the member who had served as a Vice-President for four years but in 1958 they decided they needed someone who was prepared to be politically active and speak out on their behalf. They wisely chose Elmer, who has been effectively 'speaking out' on many hunting and conservation issues ever since.

However, his 'speaking out' was always done with courtesy and respect for other points of view, so he was able to be on friendly terms with politicians such as Ernest Manning and Harry Strom and his understanding of politicians and the political system has stood him in good stead ever since.

He delighted in being out in wild areas of the Province with his hunting buddies and his joy in, and respect for,



Elmer Kure at the inauguration of the Antelope Creek Ranch west of Brooks.

nature grew as they explored. Over the years he became a strong voice for those hunters, naturalists and environmentalists who believed that if you wished to use, enjoy and learn about nature, you had to accept the responsibility to work to preserve it and that included supporting the establishment of areas where all wildlife was protected.

In the early 1970s, when public awareness of conservation was growing and Alberta established the first Ministry of the Environment and the semi-autonomous Environment Conservation Authority (ECA), there were so many issues needing work, public hearings to attend and proposed policies to discuss, that the President of the AFGA asked Elmer to become the Association's Executive Director. In 1973 he handed the farm on to his son and took the job full time - but, at his insistence, at half salary because, typically, he thought there

were better ways to use their money.

Elmer was of the strong opinion that the time had come for the AFGA to have a wider and more conservation-minded outlook at the whole environment of the remaining wild lands and to take a major role in preserving their inherent values, rather than just their value to produce game for hunting. This view received considerable opposition but was gradually accepted by other members and certainly increased the Association's respect among conservation organizations such as AWA. That Elmer was always willing to work with others for a cause he felt was important was clear when he worked alongside the Federation of Alberta Naturalists in routing pipelines away from vulnerable prairie areas and agreed with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society's efforts to keep the winter Olympics out of our National Parks.

He was not so popular with the ranching community when he opposed grazing in much of Cypress Hills Provincial Park. The pictures he took on opposite sides of the fence dividing the parkland from the grazing lease helped to convince the decision makers to agree with him.

He represented the AFGA on the Renewable Resources Committee of the ECA Public Advisory Committee (PAC) at the time the original Eastern Slopes Policy was being written. Its main aims were protecting watersheds and ruling where recreational activities, including hunting and fishing, were appropriate and where protection of wildlife habitat should be given precedence. Public hearings were held throughout Alberta and Elmer attended every one of them, contributing greatly to the resulting recommendations that led to a generally good policy - which, unfortunately, was altered and considerably weakened years later.

The struggle for better protection of the beautiful and biodiversity-rich Eastern Slopes continues, but we

still have the three strongly protected Wilderness Areas for which Elmer fought so hard or – one of the achievements of which he is most proud and for which we are very grateful to him.

His interest in farming encouraged him to support the PAC proposal to site drilling rigs in the corners, rather than the middle of quarter sections and he encourages the landowners now fighting over power line routes. However, he is not comfortable with those current farming practices aimed at producing more and more per acre. He thinks the cost of depleting the soils so much that they need increased use of chemical fertilizers and the heavy use of pesticides, is too big a price to pay and will eventually do more harm than good.

When hunting bison in the Slave River lowlands in 1960, Elmer diagnosed anthrax in the herd and alerted the government. From that grew his interest in wildlife diseases which

fuelled his strong opposition to game farming. That such opposition was not successful is one of his greatest regrets and, of course, it was not long before the predicted spreading of disease from confined operations to wild animals was proved correct. The useless slaughter of ungulates on Alberta's eastern border to try to stop the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease has only recently been stopped and the AFGA and other groups are increasing pressure on the provincial government to close the remaining game farms before the brain disease spreads further. Elmer firmly believes that wildlife, alive or dead, should never be for sale.

One of his pet projects which still brings a big smile of satisfaction to his face was the preservation of the Antelope Creek Ranch to show how things could be and should be done in a way that sustains the land's natural values as well as its economic and recreational ones.

When it was for sale and the government would not pay the asking price Elmer and a friend set about raising the money. He alone raised \$450,000 – no wonder they gave him a gold-coloured shovel at the inauguration.

Elmer's advice to those who want to bring about changes that will improve protection of the environment is to start at the community level, listen to other opinions and be flexible when possible. But if you decide something must be opposed, stand up and say "No" and mean it. Keep saying no for however long it takes, never back down or just give up. The many committees on which Elmer was asked to serve attest to the respect in which he is held by fellow conservationists and hunters and the awards he won reflect their gratitude for his achievements. His continuing dedication inspires us to follow his advice and never give up. 🍷