

RECALL OF THE WILD

This is the third 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.

Gordon Mathews: A Life Well-Spent in God's Country

By Norma Ruecker

"I thought this must be God's country" says 98 year old Gordon Mathews while reminiscing about his first wilderness experience. It was 1938 when Gordon decided to escape the "dirty thirties" in central Saskatchewan. A hunter and trapper all his life, he thought Alaska would be the place for him, so he started to bum his way west. With only \$2 in his pocket, and in need of work, Gordon was happy to accept an offer from a Banff outfitter to help move horses from a lease north of the Panther River. This was Gordon's first taste of the Alberta wilderness. He never moved on to Alaska and spent the next 37 years as an outfitter, a wrangler and forest ranger in the wilds of Alberta.

Gordon worked for a number of years as an outfitter in the Banff and then the Lake Louise areas. There he guided fishermen in summer and hunters in the fall. He also did the horse work, including training and shoeing. While shoeing a horse brought in from the wild, the frightened horse became aggressive, reared, and struck Gordon with his hooves. The incident left Gordon with a broken back and in a body cast for three months. That put an end to his hard days as an outfitter. Gordon's best memories were of packing "real" fisherman from Lake Louise into the Baker Lakes. He did not miss "babysitting" tourists or guiding in late fall when grazing was poor and he would lie awake at night wondering where his horses would be in the morning.

While working on the Bar C Ranch in the Ghost River area, Gordon was offered a job as a "lookout man" by the forest ranger. It was obvious to the ranger that Gordon still needed some time to heal, so Gordon spent the next six months in the lookout atop Blackrock Mountain. There were two tasks for a lookout man:



Dealing with magnificent predators such as this 200 pound cougar was a dangerous and difficult duty of forest rangers. Gordon was forced to kill this cougar because of its appetite for his yearling horses.

to watch for fire and to ensure that the telephone line was in service from the top of the mountain down to the tree line. The job of lookout man was a lonely existence; his only friend that summer was a mountain goat.

The next spring Gordon hired on as a ranger in the Alberta Forest Service. The qualifications for this position were to have a saddle horse and a packhorse of your own. Gordon was stationed in the Ghost River area for 10 years and during this time he married his wife Ida. They lived in a cabin near Water Valley in the summers and at the Ranger station in the winters. Daily diaries and monthly reports were due no later than the 3rd day of the month and had to be mailed from the nearest post office - located 25 miles away in Morley. Gordon recalls those cold and bitter -30 winter trips to the post office with the wagon road blown shut with snow and a feed of oats tied to his saddle, "No use packing lunch," he grins, "it would be frozen." Once he posted his reports he would treat himself to a

chocolate bar and go out to the barn to eat it while his horse ate the oats. Then, it was back into the saddle for the return trip back to the Ranger station. About those fifty mile roundtrips at -30 Gordon now laughs: "It's much different today, my neighbour has a heated 4 wheel drive truck."

Although fire was always the priority for a forest ranger, Gordon's description of the job shows that it involved much more than that. It included being fire warden, game warden, forest ranger, forest officer, cattle wrangler, weatherman, and person responsible for dealing with aggressive predators in the area.

Gordon enjoyed the ranger life because he loves horses and working outdoors. He says the best thing was that he pretty much got to be his own boss, a timeless idea that no doubt appeals to many of us today.

But even great jobs have their drawbacks. What Gordon did not like about his ranger days was the "officer" part. Too many times he had to testify in court and those occasions were, by far, the least favourite part of his life as a ranger. Work in the Ghost and Elbow also included responsibilities for cattle. Here the job included counting the cattle in and out of the forest reserve, making sure they were salted, and moving them on a regular basis so they would not overgraze an area.

Gordon spent two years in the Elbow and then was moved to Kananaskis. The lakes were what drew people to Kananaskis and Gordon encountered many more tourists there; although many of the tourists were interesting people from all over the world he certainly missed working with the ranchers.

Fishing and hunting licenses were sold from the Ranger station and the weather report needed to be sent everyday at noon. Gordon's wife Ida did most of the office work as Gordon took care of the many other duties including packing supplies into one of the two fire

towers. He adds with a chuckle, “they got two rangers for the price of one.”

In the 1960s “progress” began to barge through the door of his wilderness. The Kananaskis Ranger station received power and Gordon was provided with his first Forest Service truck. Getting a truck was one thing, being able to drive it was something else. He could only drive it down to the station when the weather was good since the roads were not maintained at that time. He typically left the truck at his nearest neighbour, Dominion Forestry, and he relied on his horse to travel back and forth to the truck. Essentially, he used it just for the run to the post office at Seebe or for the monthly trip to Calgary as, even when weather was good, Gordon preferred to do most of his ranger work on horseback. In those days forest rangers lived and worked “24/7” at the station; they only were allowed one day per month to go to town for supplies and to deliver reports to the Calgary office.

Gordon and Ida remained at the Kananaskis Ranger Station for 15 years until Gordon retired in 1975 with more than 25 years of service. In the thirty-nine years since retiring he has never been back to Kananaskis; he does not want to see how his wilderness has changed. People tell him, he says, that the roads are paved. Gordon showed me a photograph taken by Ida. It is a wonderful image of two bull elk standing

head to head with their antlers locked and Gordon reminisces about the day the picture was taken in the “best” meadow in Kananaskis. He gently hangs the picture back on the wall and remorsefully says, “I understand there is a golf course there now.”

He speaks about his days in the Ghost where he worked the area between the Big Red and the Little Red rivers on horseback; now much of that type of work is done with ATVs and helicopters. What hurts Gordon the most is reading in local papers about the off road vehicle damage inflicted on the Waiparous area. He finds it hard to believe that some of today’s Albertans would do that and that police are required on weekends to keep these abusers of the landscape out. Discussing such travesty brings tears to his eyes.

The creation of a tag system to control hunting is something that Gordon is proud of. “There is not a single person in Alberta who has to hunt for his supper; therefore, no wildlife population should be pushed to extinction.” Gordon explained to me how much damage could be done to the population of a local elk herd over a five-year period if just seven cow elk were removed from that area at one time. For Gordon, we would not have today’s tag system and the more plentiful wildlife populations it has contributed to if he and other forest rangers did not

document the numbers and kinds of animals that hunters were hauling out of the wilderness. In the old days, Gordon believes meat hunters did more damage to animal populations than sportsmen and trophy hunters but acknowledges that this may not be the case today.

To Gordon the growing human population is the greatest single threat to the wilderness. He understands that people with steady jobs in the city deserve to be able to recreate on the weekend but is concerned that more and more people do that in wilderness areas. In the old days he feels there was a different class of people, with a different set of attitudes, who visited the wilderness. He believes they had more respect and that people used to come to the wilderness because they truly loved it. “Now,” he says, “people just come because they can.” He worries we have become a spoiled and entitled society that believes it has a right to everything. For him, the results of this are troubling and incomprehensible. Fortunately for Gordon, he has not returned to Kananaskis to witness the increased development, fished out lakes, and animal populations that seem to be in irreversible declines.

In light of this view, what should our governments do? Gordon’s answer is that the province should be looking after and protecting wilderness areas as a service to its citizens. “When they are gone,” he offers, “there is no looking back.” The single most important reason for protecting wilderness should simply be its unspoiled beauty, the same beauty that first led Gordon to believe he had found God’s Country in Alberta’s mountains and foothills. 🍷



Meadow by Jacqueline Treloar 2004. PHOTO: D. VONESCH