

Ron Lyle: Forest Rangers, Multitaskers

By Norma Ruecker

When it comes to the government's stewardship of the backcountry none of the former rangers we have interviewed in this series feel that we are doing a better job today than we were decades ago. When told that there are no longer patrolmen or guardians in the wilderness back country, retired forest ranger Ron Lyle responded with "that is no good, the public can do what they want, when they want." Ron believes that, by rights, the government has an important obligation to protect the wilderness but he does not hold out a lot of hope. It is obvious to him, and has been for years, that the wilderness is simply not important enough to government.

Today's management belies just what a very special place the wilderness is to an old ranger such as Ron. He told me, with a great deal of pride, about his lifestyle and adventures as a ranger. Born on a farm in the Alberta prairie, he attended school in Tilley. As a young man he was a private in the army and served in Italy and France during the Second World War. Soon after the war ended Ron joined the Forest Service and began a ranger's life in the Clearwater area. At that time all work was carried out on horseback so rangers were required to own at least two horses. He received his first horse from his father and purchased another. A ranger was always on the look out for a good horse and, to Ron, a good horse meant one that was "reliable with a bit of speed". When Ron joined the Forest Service it was thought that wild horses could be tamed and utilized by the rangers. The rugged pair of Ron and his horse, Tony, participated in what turned out to be the last big forestry horse roundup in the Clearwater Forest. In 1949, Harry Edgecombe (ranger at the Meadows) wrote a poem about the event: *The Forestry Round Up*. The poem recounts how rangers from the Red Deer to the Brazeau Rivers trailed wild horses through the mountains through the crusted snow of spring. After several



Ranger Ron Lyle on patrol with his horse Tony in 1966

weeks of hard riding the rangers did not have a great deal to show for their efforts. Only 35 head were corralled. When it came to the best way of finding a ranger a good horse, the wild horse round up was a disappointment.

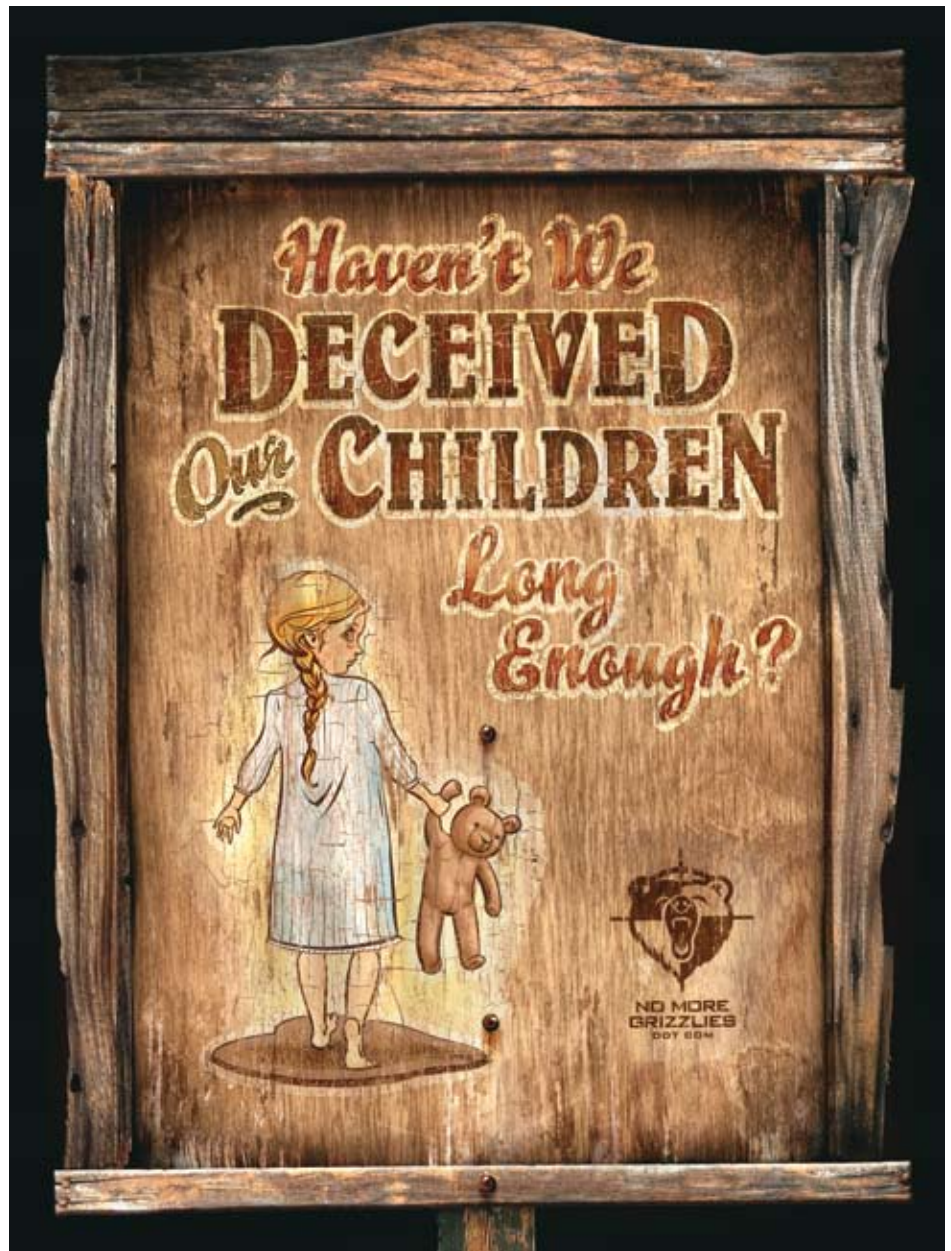
Ron still harbours a great love and respect for the wild horses of the wilderness. Often, while packing supplies up to the lookout towers, he would be challenged by a wild stallion aiming to take his pack string. Snapping his reins and the occasional yell were usually enough to keep the stallion at a distance and his pack string safe. While these experiences might have annoyed some they did not bother Ron at all. He felt the animals belonged there. Not surprisingly then, Ron took a stand against the public capture of wild horses. He wrote a report outlining his opposition and refused to issue permits for their capture. He sympathized with people who wanted to try to tame a horse for personal use, but thought many people took advantage of wild horses by rounding up large numbers for sale. He felt strongly

that these wild animals should not be exploited by the human greed for money.

The rangers of Ron's generation spent a great deal of solitary time in distant patrol cabins and often rode out alone. But, they were a close-knit bunch who often went to extraordinary measures to help out a friend. In 1952, while on foot out near the Meadows patrol cabin (30 miles due west of Rocky Mountain House), Ron accidentally roused a black bear out of her food cache. Ron was mauled by that bear and suffered severe injuries. In excruciating pain, Ron, through sheer determination, located one of his reliable horses grazing in the area and used it to help him stagger back to the patrol cabin. He might not have survived that attack without the heroics and help from fellow rangers, a local doctor, a brave bush pilot and the townspeople of Rocky Mountain House. Ron knows he was extremely lucky to survive his bear encounter; amazingly perhaps, he still has a love for bears.

As other former rangers have told us, Ron thought he had the best job in the world. He treasured the time spent on the trail and he enjoyed fishing and hunting in what he calls “a simple life.” However, a ranger had many jobs that made it far from play. Poaching big game was a problem and Ron charged many hunters for not having hunting permits. Ron says he was strict with the hunters and the outfitters he dealt with and sent a good many back to clean up the mess left in their camps. He feels most behaved themselves because they wanted to maintain a good relationship with the Forest Service. Supplying the lookout towers, monitoring animal and fish populations and maintaining the telephone service were among the many jobs of a ranger. Telephone lines traveled from southern to northern Alberta through the forest country and it was a ranger’s responsibility to keep them operational. Once a ranger knew the line was not working, he would head out into the backcountry with a string of packhorses, sometimes for many miles, to correct the problem. Often times, a fallen tree would be the cause and simply cutting it down could repair the problem. Telephone lines would also frequently need repair. Rangers were pretty skilled at climbing poles to repair the lines and Ron repaired some telephone lines while standing in the saddle atop his horse. Undoubtedly this will not be on a poster used today for demonstrating workplace safety.

Ron spent many years at ranger stations with one loyal companion - a Pomeranian named Tony. He chuckled as he told me how Tony used to protect him from the chipmunks. Ron married Francis, his wife of more than forty years, in 1967 and they resided at the Prairie Creek Ranger Station until Ron retired from the Alberta Forest Service in 1978. They moved to Creston, B.C. where Ron worked on a seasonal basis for the B.C Forest Service and then on to Invermere where Ron worked full time until 1988. He recalls doing a lot of forest fire fighting while in B.C. He thinks fighting fires was a job rangers never really got enough credit for especially since being on the lookout for forest fires was one of the major duties of the Forest Service.



Does this little girl know something our politicians don't know?

The Lyles finally settled in Calgary. In his retirement, Ron enjoyed playing cards and taking the odd pack horse trip with friends. As I visit with the 86 year old, he is amazed to know that in recent years, I have been to the Clearwater on horseback and have seen his precious herds of wild horses. He asks me if I know how to tie a diamond hitch, the knot that secures the packs to the pack saddle. I have to admit that I don't, but that I am often the third “man” at the back end of the horse pulling it tight. He acknowledges it is easier with two people but, with a twinkle in his

eye, he proudly tells me how he can tie the diamond hitch by himself. It pleases him to know that people still travel the wilderness in the old way; for Ron, it is the only way.

The tale of Ron's bear encounter has been described in Outdoor Junkie (Robin Huth) and The Alberta Forest Service: 1930-2005 (P.J Murphy et al). The poem, The Forestry Round Up, may also be found in The Alberta Forest Service: 1930-2005 (P.J Murphy et al).