

Fred Schroeder: A jack-of-all trades, master of more than one

By Norma Ruecker

Born in Calgary, Fred Schroeder grew up on 17th Ave, just opposite the Stampede grounds. He joined the CPR as a car-man in 1952. When asked “What does a car-man do?” Fred laughed and replied: “A car-man is a jack-of-all trades and a master of none.” Fred always wanted to enter the Forest Service and he fulfilled that dream in 1960 when he became an Assistant Ranger. His time with the CPR was very valuable as it gave him the experience needed to join the Forest Service. Gone were the days when the only prerequisites for being a Forest Ranger were two horses. Over his career his job titles suggest the variety of tasks assigned to him: Assistant Ranger, Ranger, Land-use Officer, Park Officer, Timber Auditor and Aircraft Coordinator. Fred might call himself a jack-of-all trades but I suspect that, over his 33-year career in the Forest Service, he was a master of more than one.

Fred began his Forest Service career as an Assistant Ranger in the Castle River area, southwest of Pincher Creek, where he, his wife Donna and their two children lived at the Castle ranger station. In 1965 he became a full Ranger and moved to the Willow Creek ranger station (west of the Chain Lakes) for five years. He then spent a few months in the Porcupine Hills. His duties in Willow Creek and Porcupine Hills were typical for a ranger on the eastern slopes of the Rockies. He tended to the grazing leases, maintained the telephone line, provisioned the fire lookout towers, submitted weather reports, maintained campgrounds and issued permits and licenses. Although he was provided with official Forest service vehicles, a four-wheel drive truck and a tote goat (3hp motorcycle), Fred still preferred to perform his duties on horseback.

Nature delivered more than a few memorable moments in these areas. Foremost was the April 1967 record snowfall – 88 inches fell in 3 days and



Castle Mountain ranger station 1962

left the Schroeders stranded at the Willow Creek ranger station for two and a half weeks. Army helicopters were brought in to drop food to the station and hay to the cattle in the area. Another time they endured 13 inches of rain in 72 hours – so much rain fell in that deluge that it literally shot out of gopher holes! These events changed the river course and did no favours for Fred’s fishing paradise. He points out that the fishing, although still pretty good, is not like it used to be. Overfishing and habitat loss are, in his opinion, the likely culprits.

After his years in southwestern Alberta, Fred and his family were transferred to Fort McMurray. This was at a time when the population was less than 7,000, Suncor (called Great Canadian Oil Sands then) was just starting up and the Hudson Bay Company still operated a fur trading post in the area. Fred was Ranger for the Embarras district, consisting of a “mere” 5,000 square miles of forest stretching south of Lake Athabasca between Wood Buffalo National Park and Fort McMurray. Here there were no roads; pretty much all work was done by either helicopter or boat as the Athabasca River had been dredged to move barges up to Fort Chipewyan and Uranium City. For a ranger, Fort McMurray was all about fire.

This area is known for its dry lightning (lightning without precipitation) and the caribou moss on the forest floor ignited like gasoline under dry conditions. On a 50-fire night they would mobilize 250 men, seven helicopters, a small fixed-wing plane and a water bomber fleet. One such night, Fred and his crew were off to fight fire along the Firebag River; in error they fought a fire on Marguerite Creek instead. They were proud of their efforts and thought their night was done, but they soon found out they missed their target and that there was still much fire fighting to do along the Firebag. This adventure earned him the nickname Firebag Freddie, a moniker that has stuck with him since the 1970s.

While still in Fort McMurray, Fred became a Land-Use officer, with the primary job of inspecting reclamation projects. He then spent a short time as a Park officer for Saskatoon Island west of Grande Prairie and finally to head office in Edmonton, first as a timber auditor and then as the aircraft coordinator for many years. The aircraft coordinator was responsible for hiring fire-fighting aircraft. Typically this work went to long-term private contractors but during bad fire seasons he would have to hire out-of-province or out-of-country. Responding



Assistant Ranger, Fred Schroeder (left) and Ranger, Fred Facco (right) with Alberta Forest Service truck at the Pincher Creek parade in 1962.

to fires today is so much faster than it was in the early days. Then Fred remembers the bombers only carried 90 gallons; now aircraft commonly carry 2,500 gallons of retardant.

Fred firmly believes in sustained-yield forest management. He admits that a newly regenerated forest may not look like much, but give it 20 years. To him the forests are no use at all if they get overgrown or if you let fire and bugs destroy them. In the 1980s, Fred worked on the early mountain pine beetle problem. Beetle bait traps were set; nets were raised on some sections of the continental divide in an attempt to prevent beetles from spreading. Deadfall was burned, prescribed burns were carried out and certain wood shipments were prohibited. For a time these efforts were considered successful as the beetle did not spread north of the Porcupine Hills.

There was always a job to do and Fred tried to focus on getting a job done rather than getting involved in the politics of the job. He was pleased government accepted his recommendations to remove

grazing in the Livingstone area in order to conserve the rough fescue grasses. He also spent considerable time and effort on the issues of erosion control and timber inspections. He also was very pleased when ATVs finally were prohibited along Willow and Timber Creeks. These areas are among his favourite places and Fred still visits these old stomping grounds and yearns for the day, years in the future, when these damaged slopes will be reclaimed.

Protection and conservation in these areas is important and Fred believes this can only be accomplished through strict regulation. We need to regulate how many people are using the parks and forests and we need to restrict their activities. He notes that the single biggest change he has observed in the last 40 years is simply the number of people who use these areas. He feels that overall population growth has less to do with this than access. Access means more than just more roads; by increased access Fred means the increased use of four wheel drive vehicles that now take people places

where they wouldn't dare take the family car of thirty years ago. He also believes more restrictions need to be placed on lease-holders and that leases in the headwaters regions should be phased out given their significance to water quality and quantity. In a related vein he also feels the headwaters regions need to be better managed allowing for optimum recharge of water.

Fred sees one significant obstacle to his ideal regulatory environment. Staff and enforcement – this regulatory philosophy needs people out in the wilds enforcing the law. Traditionally, rangers were the guardians of the parks and forests; now there are too few out there “on the ground.” Government is centralized; the employees have offices in town; families don't want to live out in the bush anymore. Fred understands that because, as we have seen throughout this series of articles, it was not an easy life. But, his kids had fun out at the ranger station and to this day think it was “the best place there ever was”. In the summers, all the cousins visited and there would be four kids on the back of Old Blue, his swaybacked packhorse. They were out all day catching frogs or playing any game their imaginations could invent. But it was not all fun and games. During the school year Fred got the kids up at 5:00 am and had to drive them 15 miles to catch the school bus into Nanton. They were gone at least 12 hours per day and had a 100 mile round trip each day. With chores and homework, there was no time for anything else during the week – forget about any extracurricular school activities. The life and times of the children of rangers, as well as the forest rangers themselves, certainly have changed dramatically.

Fred served in the Forest Service until 1993. He and Donna have been married more than 50 years and currently reside in Calgary, the city where they both grew up. Although retired for many years now, Fred admits he still gets up at 5:00 am each morning, a habit from the days of sending the kids off to school. In his retirement Fred has mastered yet another skill, being a grandparent. ❤️