

RECALL OF THE WILD

Marmie Hess – Footprint shaped by our Foothills

By Carolyn Campbell

Calgarian Margaret (Marmie) Hess came to know southern Alberta well in the early and mid decades of the twentieth century. Over the years, its mountains, foothills and plains shaped her life. Today, her breadth of knowledge of this part of the West, its native artists, ranches and wild lands, has few equals. I met with her recently to hear some of her stories and reflections.

Love of plains and mountains

Marmie has had a close connection to the lands of southern Alberta from her earliest days. “I was born near the Elbow River opposite Woods Park in Calgary. Some of my earliest memories are of the sounds of water, seeing the movement of the river and smelling the fresh air. Calgary was a lucky city to grow up in, placed between the foothills and mountains to the west, and the prairie to the east. There are the rivers, wetlands and oceans of grass. Southern Alberta has unique sunlight and clear night skies. We have altitude and latitude, and we keenly experience the four seasons.”

Her school friends were descendants of those who came west as explorers, Mounties, railroad people and missionaries. “It instilled in you an

awareness of that environment: where the water was to make a camp, how careful to be with fire on the prairie.” From a young age, the importance of the high country and the plains became inter-twined. “In the prairies, where there’s water, there’s food. And you knew that the foothills are where the water comes through, starting from the mountain snow and glaciers.”

Marmie became a capable horsewoman. “My Dad was from an era where if you wanted to get somewhere, you either went by horse or by driving a horse. I rode a great deal with him, and from an early age I knew and loved the distinct interaction humans can have with horses.” From a Mountie who rode cavalry in the South African war and then emigrated to the Canadian prairies, Marmie learned much about the discipline of horsemanship.

First Nations communities also made a lasting impression on Marmie. She and her young friends watered their horses at a place on the Elbow River favoured by the Sarcee (Tsuu T’ina) people before they would continue on to the country. Marmie sometimes stayed with family friends in Banff, and saw the Stoney (Nakoda) people in their wagons driving towards Banff for Indian Days. In later years she studied pictographs of the Rockies’ Eastern slopes for the National Museum. “I was part of a research team trying to figure out how people came from the



A love of high country and plains is reflected in much of Calgarian Marmie Hess’s life.

Pacific, through waterways or mountain passes.” Marmie also came to know many Native artists. “They influenced me very much. They know everything in nature has a spirit, and each thing contributes and inter-connects.”

She feels privileged to trace her love of the Rocky Mountains from the influence of master mountaineer and surveyor M.P. Bridgland, who married her

mother's cousin. "Uncle Morris" worked for the Dominion Lands Survey; nearly every summer for 28 years he ascended, surveyed and photographed peaks in Alberta and British Columbia. Marmie and her family passed many fascinating winter evenings watching shows of Bridgland's hand coloured photographic slides, and hearing his stories of mountain landscapes, wildlife and geology. After he retired, Marmie was able to spend some summer holidays with her uncle, hiking and observing the alpine country with him. Marmie recalls that as the Icefields Parkway road from Banff to Jasper was constructed in the 1930s, Bridgland took her to see how the route was developing along the land contours.

At the University of Alberta, Marmie studied geology. After two years in Edmonton she transferred to the University of Toronto to complete her BA. There she enrolled in the first geography classes taught in Canada by famed geographer and explorer Dr. Griffith Taylor, who had just arrived to found the U of T's geography department. In the years to come, Marmie would teach at a number of post-secondary institutions in Calgary and abroad. "My lectures always connected to themes of how people, culture and art are shaped by the natural environment."

Marmie's father's work took him up and down the Eastern Slopes, and she would often accompany him. She became familiar with many areas between Banff and Rocky Mountain House, sometimes following old explorer routes on horseback. As a young adult she deepened her love of the mountains with trail riding into areas such as Skoki in Banff National Park, and thrilled to the early days of downhill skiing at Sunshine.

From Rangeland management to Kananaskis Advisory Committee

Marmie's love of horses and foothills led to her forming a strong connection with cattle ranching country in the Eastern Slopes. "Cattle and horse ranches are run as businesses, to produce food and for people's livelihood. But there's still a strong sense of nature, a constant watching of conditions. You cannot assume any two years will be the same. Many things affect how many animals are placed in an area, and how a rancher weighs growing or bringing in feed. In winter, the animals have to drift with a winter storm and be

able to continue eating. In summer, you watch the water sources, and you watch the condition of the grasses. The whole thing is, never to get greedy." As an Eastern slopes land owner herself, Marmie took her stewardship responsibilities seriously. "From listening to the experience of area ranchers, you learn that."

In 1978, the Peter Lougheed government decided to establish Kananaskis Country to help fulfill its commitment to maintain at least 70 percent of the Eastern Slopes in a natural and wilderness state. That year, the government chose Marmie Hess and eight other Albertans to serve on a new Kananaskis Citizen's Advisory Committee to provide advice on the development of public facilities in K Country.

I asked Marmie about the need for protected areas. "We need places where nature is without controls. And," she added wryly, "we need rules in those places so the public cannot do what it will later regret. But, at the same time, tourism in the mountains is very important. This landscape is some of the best we have to show to ourselves and to the rest of the world."

Marmie recalls her work on the committee as quite varied. "Many people presented their ideas and experiences to our group – we tried to find what was their personal vision of enjoying Kananaskis Country, and then we looked at the feasibility of trying to make that a reality. I want to laud Peter Lougheed for his vision, for the support that he and the civil servants gave to our ideas, and for the tempo with which things were accomplished."

In examining options for facilities, the committee learned where wildlife had their established territories. "We looked at their watering spots and trails and tried to upset their habitat as little as possible." Marmie also pointed to Kananaskis' accessibility as very significant. "We wanted visitors to be able to enjoy the area without much cost to themselves. As the only Committee woman, I provided a perspective on how to make outdoor facilities friendly for families and seniors. We suggested trails with a bit of paving close to campsites so that a parent could push a stroller there. And it was important to have picnic tables that wheelchairs could fit under. William Watson Lodge, where

people with disabilities could stay in the mountains, was really unique."

Outlook

In 2003, Marmie accepted an honorary doctor of laws degree from the University of Alberta and delivered the November 20 convocation address. In her remarks, Marmie referred to values held by Dr. R.C. Wallace, the University's president when she studied there in the early 1930s. "President Wallace believed that the measure of a liberal education is what we do with our leisure time, that is the time spent contributing to our family, community and nation beyond the bounds of vocation or profession."

She urged graduates to keep part of their leisure time unstructured, to "walk in the woods where we can commune with nature, reflect and experience our essence and our connection with the 'timeless' rather than the fleeting."

Today, Marmie remains busy with community service. She also takes a keen interest in the latest books published on western Canadian natural and cultural history, and keeps up with researchers in these disciplines at Alberta's universities. "Alberta's natural areas get right into your personal being. I consider myself very fortunate to have been shaped by them. We have so much here to be curious about." 🍷



The plate Franco holds in this picture was made to memorialize his beloved horse.

PHOTO: K. MIHALCHEON