

RECALL OF THE WILD

Zoë Preston – WW II Decoder, Avro Arrow Design Artist, Builder of K.C. the Bear

By Vivian Pharis, AWA Director

Just before this past Remembrance Day, I interviewed Zoë Preston, unaware of the strategic role she had played in ending WW II and defeating Nazi Germany. This story unfolded matter-of-factly, as just another event in her long and varied life.

Now nearly 92, this diminutive woman is well-known to AWA and other Calgary area conservation groups for her feisty defense of the boreal forest and for using her artistic talents to single-handedly build K.C. (for “Kananaskis Country”) – the giant replica grizzly bear that so often presides at AWA functions and events involving wildlife.

When I brought Zoë to AWA for a photo session it had been quite a few years since she had seen K.C. in his assembled glory. She was astounded by his size and kept exclaiming “*how could I have built him – he’s so much bigger than I am!*” Then she recalled the year she spent designing and constructing K.C. in

her living room. Never having seen a live bear Zoë relied on the intimate knowledge of human and horse anatomy learned during eight years of studying art as a girl in England. Zoë was fascinated to learn that the bear’s skeleton is more like that of a human than that of a horse. The front legs are like grasping arms and a bear’s paws are so hand-like they can hold a fish. A bear’s pelvis, upright as a human’s, allows a bear to stand. All these features had to be incorporated to make K.C. as realistic as he is. For a full year K.C. occupied Zoë’s living room; his nose touched one wall and his tail the other. Zoë had to crawl under the bear to access her china and cutlery at the far end of the living room.

Today Zoë has replaced K.C. in her living

room with many art projects. They, like K.C. before them, occupy most of the room. She says of herself, “*I’ve come to the conclusion that I am not an ordinary person.*” She attributes much of the flow of her life to having followed intuition and chance. She takes environmental cues from her garden by observing how patterns of weather and climate are reflected in trees and in the behaviour of her garden plants.



Zoë and K.C.
PHOTO: © C. OLSON

In the late 1980s Zoë sometimes flew north by bush plane to visit one of her sons who was working in remote locations in the Northwest Territories and northern Saskatchewan. These flights gave her a bird’s eye view of the vast forest mosaic below her, of the patterns of water and of the occasional sharp intrusions by humans in the form of roads, clear cuts and well sites. There is no more impressive way to understand the state of the land than to see it from above. Zoë saw and realized this landscape was beginning to feel many such sharp intrusions.

In the late 1980s the Alberta Government, with Ralph Klein as Environment Minister, quietly advertised Alberta’s forests to world investors. This incensed Zoë. She wrote

letters to the *Calgary Herald* and attended some of the swell of public meetings that momentarily appeared as Albertans realized what their government was doing. To this day, Ralph Klein’s name riles Zoë because of the key role he played in the great forest giveaway. A vivid recollection for her is of television footage showing Ralph Klein walking through an Alberta aspen forest with Japanese investors. The Japanese

were saying “very nice, very nice” as Klein told them they “*were more than welcome to ‘Alberta’s weeds.’*” Zoë reacted as only she could by building an amazing larger-than-life puppet effigy of Ralph Klein that made the rounds of public meetings and protest rallies. It became a media hit.

What circumstances created this feisty artist-activist? Zoë was born in Brisbane, Queensland into a family of rambling characters, with a mother of wealth and an inventor father who came and went through their lives, three sisters, a brother and extended family living on cattle stations. Her childhood was chaotic and unbounded. Between the ages of five and ten Zoë lived at Terrica Station, one of Australia’s most beautiful and prestigious sheep stations, where she had been taken to recover from diphtheria

and to be a companion to the owner’s son who was her age.

While a governess-teacher was wholly responsible for their care and gave them exceptional schooling, the children were allowed great freedoms, especially during holidays. Zoë embraced station life. She learned to ride, to muster and dip sheep, and even to class wool. Each evening the governess read the children stories from the classics. Life was ideal. But, at age 10, this idyllic childhood ended suddenly. The Duke and Duchess of York and their entourage were invited to Terrica and all available rooms were needed to accommodate them. Back in Brisbane, the wild child Zoë had difficulty adjusting to regimented school life. She focused on amassing a



One example of Zoë's passion for combining art and politics.

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large collection of bottled insects, spiders, snakes and an aviary of live birds that people remember her for to this day.

Zoë's inventor father preceded the family to England in 1932. When it became apparent he was not returning to Australia, Zoë's mother packed up her family and moved them across the waters to a home outside of London. Zoë was now fifteen and it was time for a career. Her mother suggested she become a riding instructor at a nearby stable, but Zoë surprised herself and her family by announcing she wanted to attend art school.

The nearest school was the Kingston School of Fine Art. She attended the school for five years and won a scholarship from Kingston to the prestigious Royal College of Art in the north of England. With World War II imminent, able-bodied British men were being conscripted. They included all the "Masters" of the art schools. Zoë is scathing in her reflections that those left to instruct had no real knowledge of painting or of the theory of colour. If it had not been for her discovery of pastels (all the colours there in chalk form) she fears she would have been stuck forever in a world of black and white. For five years at Kingston, Zoë drew the human body from every angle and from bones through to skin – a grounding that was to serve her well.

After a further three years of study at the Royal College of Art, Zoë was ready to start her career but it was not to be in art. With Britain at war even girls were being conscripted into the Wrens (Women's Royal Naval Service). Zoë was among them. She was assigned to a bunker location and a position so secretive she could not even tell her parents. She would become a decoder – part of the legendary Enigma Project at Bletchley Park that used a finely engineered early computer to decipher coded German messages. For the last two years of the war Zoë worked at a large machine with another young woman. One fed in messages through keys as on a typewriter, adjusting three inner cogs that re-set the keys and the other adjusted a set of wire plugs. The ability to decode German messages is credited as one key to Britain and its allies winning the war. Bletchley Park has recently been declared a historic site because of its strategic role during the war.

When the war ended Zoë met and married a tall Canadian who had served on British submarines and moved with him to Toronto. Two sons soon arrived and with money scarce for the growing family Zoë took a job as a design artist. Her employer was the ignominious Avro Arrow project, Canada's attempt to build a technologically advanced aircraft. Chance had again allowed Zoë

to play a part in a strategic development. The arrival of a third son ended her design career and soon her marriage ended too. Now on her own with three boys, the ever-resourceful Zoë took on a variety of jobs in rural Ontario, always supplementing her income by raising a large garden and a pen of chickens.

Eventually her sons dispersed west and Zoë moved to be near them. She came to Calgary just as Alberta's boreal forest was being put up for wholesale disposal to the forest products industry. She sums up her environmental sentiments in a poignant question: "*Why can't politicians love their country enough to protect its environment first and foremost?*"

Presently Zoë is scrambling to finish projects and shares my common complaint about having too little time. She is writing her memoirs for her sons and grandchildren and is researching an invention of her father's – a pump used in breweries around the world which she thinks has been adapted into a heart-lung machine used to this day during heart replacement procedures. And she is trying to complete an incredible, fanciful children's book, illustrated by drawings made from the staged arrangements of a coterie of intricate mouse-human puppets she has constructed. 🍌