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First-Ever AWA President Enjoyed Varied Repertoire

By Andy Marshall

Curmudgeonly and kind, Floyd Stromstedt clearly marches to his own drumbeat. "Yeah, you could call me 'ornery,'" he says in a rich baritone voice from his Berwyn home in Alberta's Peace River country. "I don't follow the crowd, I know that."

The first-ever elected president of the Alberta Wilderness Association, serving from 1969-1972, Stromstedt has enjoyed a remarkably varied life, from farm boy to oilfield technologist, pilot to opera singer.

"I guess I've done a lot of things," comes the understated response from the 63-year-old man. He's relaxing in his den, surrounded by two mounted bears, a moose, a wolf, antelope, mule deer, hawks, owls and other creatures he has hunted or found in his unending travels across the province. He still drives the few kilometres to Grimshaw each day to run the seed cleaning plant there. Three single-engine aircraft, in varying need of restoration work, occupy the hangars at the quarter section he lives on with his wife, Karen, whom he married almost 30 years ago. They have a 27-year-old daughter, Carla. He has a son, Cameron, from an earlier marriage.

Sharing the 1948 Cessna 170 with a partner, "I fly every chance I get," says Stromstedt. His thirst for adventure and the outdoor life must be in the genes. His father, John, who recently died at 91, emigrated as a young man from Sweden to farm in the Peace region, and, after various twists and turns, settled with his wife on the land Stromstedt occupies today.

Young Floyd grew up learning all aspects of farming. In 1957, at age 18, he came to Calgary to take welding and diesel mechanics programs at what today is the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology. Somehow, during those early years, he also spent time at the Banff School of Fine Arts and took singing lessons in the city. In fact, he won the junior operatic class at the Kiwanis Music Festival shortly before his 20th birthday and later took part in Calgary Opera Society productions.

In the next decade and a half, he turned his hand to careers as a camp cook with a geological survey in the then Northwest Territories, a service station operator on 16th Avenue N.W., a trencher with Standard Gravel, a battery operator in southern Saskatchewan oilfields, an engineering technologist in Calgary's downtown, and helping build basements with a cribbing company. For one fascinating year, he even managed a 20,000-acre ranch near Hanna, Alberta.

In the mid-1970s, after buying a quarter section near his parents' Berwyn property, he and Karen moved back north. They lived there for 17 years, before taking over the family place when the parents had retired to a seniors' home. Apart from his mixed farming activities, Stromstedt hauled grain, built basements and was a delivery driver for the local equipment dealer. He started with the seed cleaning plant 10 years ago.

He also continued his amateur singing activities, becoming a regular performer with the Peace Players. He's still asked to sing at weddings and funerals. At a recent seniors' home official opening, he performed Bless This House.

"I've never been a career man," he says. But, his physical stature -- five feet nine inches, almost 200 pounds -- gave him a capacity for sustained, hard work. "I just got a job and paid my bills as best I could." He admits, though, to a phobia about money. "I'm not too keen about material things, other than my planes and my rifles."





It was his frustrations as a sheep hunter thwarted in his forays into the Foothills by the growing encroachment of industrialization that brought him together with people like Bill Michalsky and Steve Dixon (highlighted in the December, 2001, *Wild Lands Advocate*) to officially launch the AWA.

But, his intentions from the beginning were to attract as wide a range of people as possible to the fledgling organization. "About 900 individuals feel strongly enough to become members of this group," he explains in an April, 1971, letter. "Of these 900 souls we find: some who love horses, some who hate horses; some who hunt, some who hate hunters; some who fish, some who do not fish; some who backpack, some who prefer day hikes; some who paint pictures, some who take photographs; some lone wolves, some with five children; some church leaders, some Girl Guides; some ranchers, some urbanites; and on and on, ad infinitum."

The vision then, as it is today, was the protection of the diminishing wilderness. "Protect this wilderness in whatever way necessary, but SAVE it!" Stromstedt exhorts in that 1971 letter.

A 1970 missive to then Alberta premier Harry Strom further confirms Stromstedt's commitment to the cause. It resonates well today.

"Alberta's forested areas are a complete checkerboard of seismic lines, liberally interspersed with roads, railways, landing strips, power dams, etc. This is painfully obvious from the air," he writes. "The greatest mistake in Canadian history was made that day in 1930 when the provincial governments were granted jurisdiction over natural resource development. There is too great an incentive for current selfishness; to 'ride the boom'."

He shared that passion in classrooms and meeting halls across the province. He recalls clearly the clashes with Social Credit government leaders of the day. He became a lightning rod for many of the other disaffected conservationists dismayed by the proliferation of timber, coal, gas, oil and grazing leases in the wilderness.

However, the cost of attending conferences all over the country became a burden, and his position as AWA president was hardly eased by the fact that he was working for a major energy company at the time.

In 1972 he wrote what he now acknowledges may have been a melodramatic letter announcing his resignation. The position possibly cost him his marriage, a car (involved in a crash while he was trying to get a report completed) and a job. "I was just burned out," he says simply. He has not been involved since in the organization.

"I'm proud to have been associated with it," he says. "I didn't have the wherewithal to carry on the fight."

Circumstances since, particularly increasing overpopulation, have made him even more pessimistic about the world's future. But, he respects AWA for maintaining its push for conservation. "You have to keep flailing away," he says.

Never a man who particularly liked large crowds, Stromstedt remarks that his best hunts may have occurred when he was alone. He can't throw a 45-gallon drum of gas into the back of the truck like he used to, but he still likes to remain active.

And, he speaks easily about the epigraph that could be placed on his headstone when he dies: He was a good baritone; he was a good pilot; he was a good rifle shot; and he could light a fire with one match. "You can use that in your story," he says.

