

Trapper Bill McDermott

The Brazeau District in Jasper National Park had to be one of the best places in the world to be a backcountry warden. With endless valleys and basins to explore, the abundant wildlife, the awesome patrol cabins, the boundary patrols, I couldn't believe my fortune! I was assigned the District in 1983, quite different to the remote and wild country of the Smokey River District that I patrolled the previous season.

Over the years, the Brazeau had some big poaching cases and even an incident where the District Warden was robbed at gunpoint of his horses, gun and boots, then locked in the tack shed. There were also the characters, such as; Nada Hallett, Southesk Outfitter, the nutty French professor that stayed at Smallboy's Camp, Ronnie Moore, Park Outfitter and a gambit of regular hunting folk which could all make some interesting story telling. One of the most colorful of them, was Trapper Bill McDermott and here is my story about him.

'Hey Bill, Trapper Bill,... its' me, John the Warden, are you home ' I yelled as I rode up to his tiny cabin built right on the old seismic trail just across the river from the park boundary. There was no sneaking past his place, as if he heard you, he'd be out his door in a flash with his old .303 Enfield in hand yelling obscenities. Bill had quite the cardboard sign attached to his door. It warned people to 'leave him alone, he wanted to die in peace', as he was 'tired of this dog eat dog society' signed 'Mad Trapper Bill'!

As usual though, Bill stepped out in his long handle underwear, hard hat and a big friendly greeting for coffee. This time I came with a can of tobacco, sometimes it was coffee or a loaf of my wife Lise's homemade bread. Bill was always grateful and it wasn't long before he had the coffee boiled, poured and a couple smokes rolled. His quaint little log cabin with its dirt floor was just big enough for the two or three to sit comfortably. It was always nice to warm up, especially on a chilly late fall day, but in no time you'd be ready to strip down to your own underwear as well!

Trapper Bill purchased the trapping rights a few years previous but those days were pretty much gone. This was now only a place for him to live a solitude life away from the city. He survived by the good will of a few people; a friend from Hinton, an outfitter, and on occasion the Jasper Warden Service that would fill his meager food orders and supplies. He had an old snowmobile and used it even in the summer to skid firewood and the odd deer. He tried his hand at gardening, had a couple sled dogs but neither lasted long.

I didn't get to know a lot about Trapper Bill's life, as usual, he just wanted to chat about the news of the day. I did know Bill was born and raised on a trapline in the wilderness of the Nahanni. He raised a family in Entwistle, Alberta where his life changed for ever when his wife was killed by a drunk driver while she was walking down the highway. Bill also told me about the horrible headaches that he got and how it would drive him mad. He said it was from the metal plate in his skull to repair a shrapnel wound he got while serving in the Korean War.

This did not stop Trapper Bill from having a memory like an elephant. I remember how he kept little notes on anything he could find to write on, such as the back of rolling papers or paper matches, all kept in one of those large pickled-egg jars for safe keeping. He would amaze me by telling me the exact date and time of my last visit, or other visitor, then poke around his jar, pull out one of the many pieces of paper to show me!

Just about every winter, Bill would understandably, get a little "bushed" and make a call for help using the radio at Issac Creek Warden Cabin. One time, during the dead of winter of 1983, a ham operator from Norman Wells picked up his distress call; Bill said he froze his feet, cut himself and was bleeding bad. RCMP from Hinton initially responded and as the helicopter approached Bill ran off into the bush. The RCMP only went a short distance and gave up, concerned the Mad Trapper might shoot at them. The Edmonton Journal and radio stations picked up the story, really embellishing it. Warden Al Stendie, who was interviewed was not impressed, and was concerned about Bill hearing it. Needless to say the Warden Service flew in with a care package and looked after the situation.

Since this was often a regular winter occurrence, the Parks Service would rightfully contact the Provincial authorities to deal with Bills' calls for help. Bill was finally given a cabin key so he wouldn't damage the door anymore!

Another time I remember well, is when Social Services from Rocky Mountain House flew in on a very cold clear January day in 1987. When Bill found out the social worker was Lise's brother Chris Hanson, they connected immediately. Chris remembers Bill saying "my dear, sweet Lise, and all her wonderful pies and bread...". Bill got his care package and a good visit. He never wanted or asked to be taken out.

Another year or two later, Bill was finally moved out of his Brazeau home by some concerned friends. I never did find out where he ended up or what happened to him. We just hope he found a place where he was content and at peace with himself.

John Niddrie Invermere, BC. February 2019

