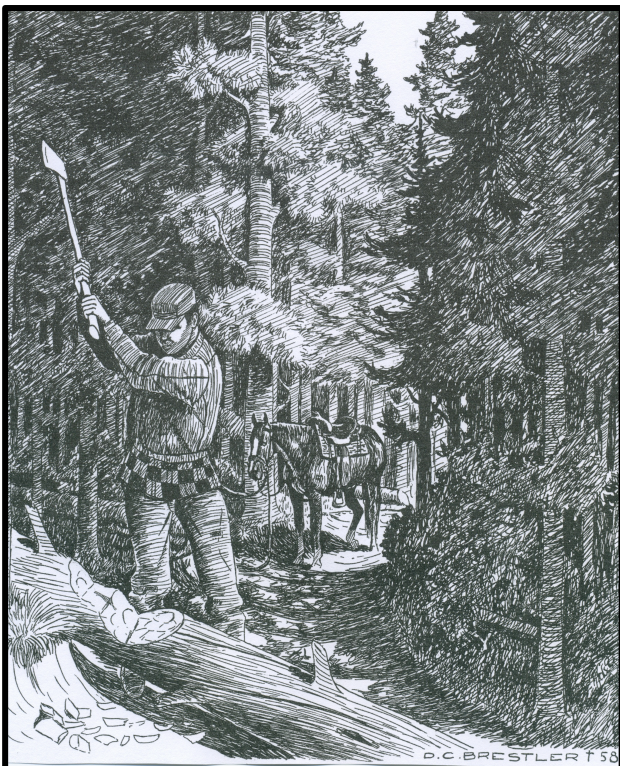


Don Brestler

Permission was granted by Don Brestler to quote his story and use his photos from his book, Face Into the Wind by Don Brestler.

Don Brestler lived at Twin Butte, Alberta. He was a songwriter, cowboy poet, western artist, writer and illustrator. Don lived the life of a cowboy for many years. His passion for the mountains, wildlife and the western way of life is demonstrated in his wonderful art. He illustrated two of Andy Russell's books and sketched cartoons for the Pincher Creek Echo and the Crowsnest Promoter. For four summers Don worked for Andy Russell packing and guiding. Dave Simpson bought out Andy so Don worked for Dave for a couple more summers. Don enjoyed working with the horses and spent seven months at the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch training horses for the national parks. Later, he was successful in his application to the Calgary Police Force and worked there for over seven years. Don married Ingrid and they have two daughters Cory and Joni. The family bought the Twin Butte Trading Post in 1968. A few years later they moved to the McIntyre Ranch where Don worked before taking a job delivering fuel for 21 years. Don passed away in September of 2019.

Although Don worked for only a short time at the Ya Ha Tinda his experiences there were indelibly etched into his memory. He said with great fondness "It was one of the best summers of my life." Don graciously granted permission to excerpt this account of his time at the Ya Ha Tinda. The following are his words.

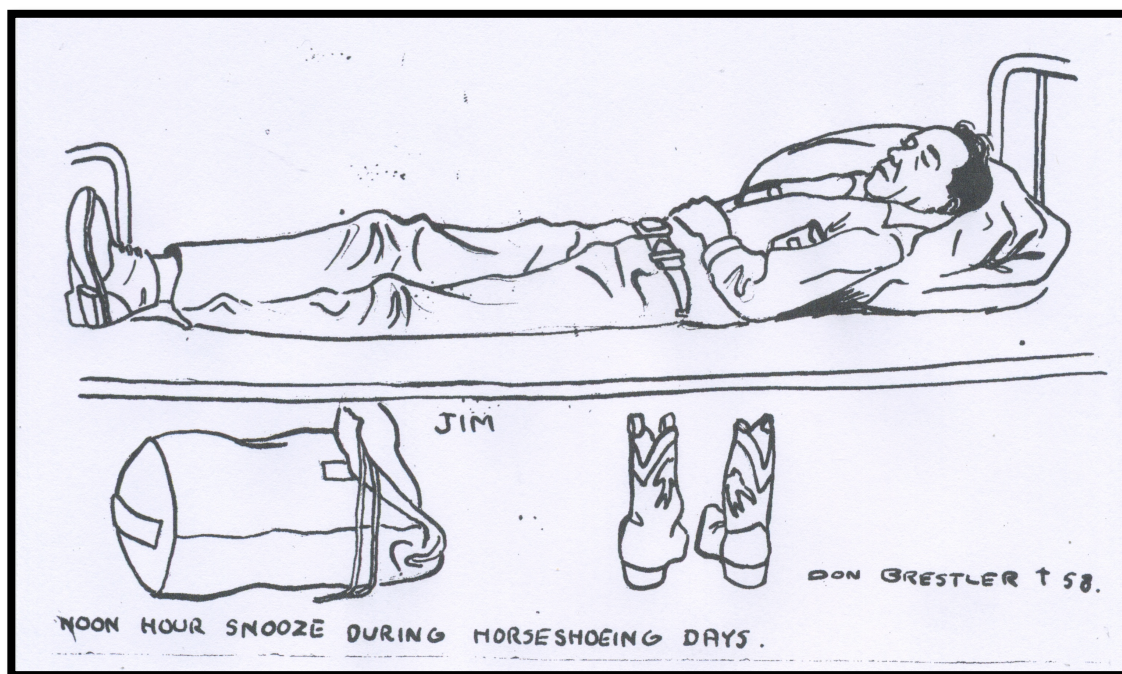


In January of 1958 I went to Banff and got a truck driving job with the National Park Service. They were slashing trees and widening the road 14 miles north up the valley from Lake Minnewanka.¹ I hauled the cut cordwood away and stockpiled it. I also helped to gather and burn brush. The valley was filled with smoke from the burning piles. It really smelled nice. There were 30 guys working and staying at Cuthead Camp. It was a good crew and fabulous food. We had generated electricity and had hot running water for showers. One day we were cleaning up brush from where an old corral once stood. When I smelled the disturbed horse manure, I had the greatest desire to be back working with horses. Shortly after this, Bob Hand, the Chief Warden, asked me if I wanted to work at the Ya Ha Tinda Ranch. I couldn't say "yes" quick enough.

It was a dark, rainy night when the wardens drove me into the ranch. The narrow winding dirt road was nothing but deep ruts and mud. We got stuck three or four times and had to pull ourselves out with the winch on the front of the truck. The guys had to saw through a couple of large evergreen trees that had fallen across the road. After the long, slow drive through the trees we finally came to a large, open, grass covered valley. At last, the Ya Ha Tinda (Little Prairie in the Mountains). I was introduced to Mickey Gilmar, the foreman, and Evelyn his young wife. Evelyn was an excellent cook. After coffee and a little visit in the old log ranch house, I was directed to the little old log bunkhouse. It was back to an outhouse, hauling water, wood stoves, and slop buckets and I liked it. I fell into bed exhausted.

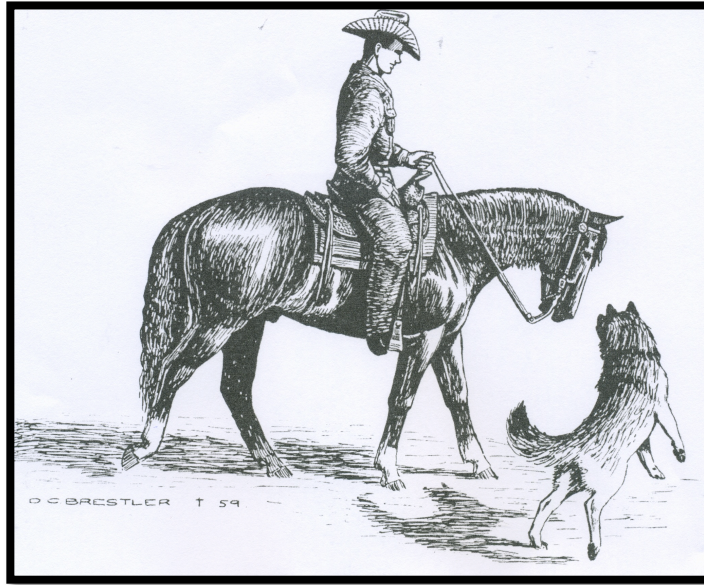
In the early daylight the next morning, I looked out the window to see what the ranch really looked like. I liked what I saw – my kind of country; surrounded by mountains and it was beautiful! The log buildings and corrals were set just at the edge of the trees with a view looking across a wide space of grassland to the Red Deer River and the high treed hills across it. In the yard I was greeted by two friendly dogs – an old blind Labrador called Major, and a small grey shepherd-cross called Smokey. We soon became pals. At the breakfast table, Mickey said that when he wrangled the horses in, there were six Bighorn rams standing by the big wooden front gate. Mickey drove me in an old Dodge power wagon around the ranch to familiarize me with it. There was elk everywhere! In bunches of 200 we roughly counted 800 head. The grass was eaten right down in the pasture. The following day there wasn't an elk to be seen. They had all pulled out for Banff Park, five miles west. There were 80 head of horses on the ranch. They were a little thin and a couple of brood mares were lousy and had to be treated.

I paid rent on the bunkhouse but very rarely did I have it to myself. There were wardens, biologists, and crews coming and going. The ranch was a busy place. The horse shoeing crew from Banff – Jack Rae, Slim Haugen and Jim Burles came and stayed with me for three or four days while they shod all of the warden's horses that were going to be used that summer.



Jim Burles – Noon hour snooze in the bunkhouse courtesy of Doug Burles

I had eight three-year old colts to break for riding and packing. They were a nice bunch and not too snorty. It was a pleasure to break horses in the summer rather than in the winter like at the Knight Ranch.² I could wear light clothing and riding boots. As it turned out at first, it rained a lot and I had to wear a slicker and gumboots in a sloppy corral. Later it turned dry and nice. I don't mind corral dust at all. Mickey allowed me to work by myself and at my own speed, which I really appreciated. The colts handled nicely, and we progressed from the small round, heavy log corral to the larger, rectangular pole corral and then out into the open. I rode them through creeks, belly-high brush and heavy trees. Only about half of them bucked with me. The rides got longer and a little harder. My favorite ride was on the trail to the top of the Clearwater summit and back a distance of 10 miles.



Little Smokey loved to come with me on all of my rides. When I was leaving the yard, he would get excited and jump up high in the air right by my horse's nose and do a complete twist around. I was riding west through the trees up a cutline one hot afternoon and heard a branch snap behind me. Looking around I saw a cougar about 30 paces away bounding across the opening. He followed us in the trees for a long ways up to a hillside clearing. When I stopped my horse, he sat behind a bush about 20 paces away. The cougar didn't pay any attention to the horse and I but his head was going back and forth intently watching Smokey. Because of the bush, the colt and Smokey couldn't see the cat and somehow never smelled it. I turned away and slowly rode out into the clearing. The cat bounded along in the trees for a ways and then took off. It rained that night and the next morning I saw a cougar track in the mud by the barn. I put a can over it and later showed it to the foreman. He kept a close eye on his two little girls for the next week.³

Mickey taught me how to throw the one-man diamond pack-hitch and helped me to break the colts to pack. Basically we packed them with wooden blocks and turned them loose in the yard. After hitting the trees a few times with their packs, they would avoid going where they couldn't get through. With seasoned packhorses we had to make a number of trips over the summit and up the Clearwater River to Indianhead Camp. A new warden house was being built there. We had to pack in food and

² The Knight Ranch is a famous ranch owned by the LDS Church and is located on the Milk River in Southern Alberta where the author worked as a young man.

³ Foreman Mickey Gilmar had 2 little daughters, Jayne and Judy at this time.

different kinds of building supplies. It was a 25-mile trip and took two days. I really enjoyed it. A grizzly was hanging around their camp and causing a bit of trouble. I had my night horse picketed out on a little clearing. Just before dark I checked him and saw the silvered grizzly a short ways away. I then tethered my horse in the yard. That night the grizzly came through and ripped my saddle pile apart, and left bite marks on a saddle and a pair of chaps. A week later, Smokey,⁴ the Indianhead warden, shot the bear from his back door. These pack trips were most enjoyable. I hated to give them up. When haying time came I got to do the mowing with a team of workhorses, one being a bronc. The loose hay was stacked near the barn.

One hot summer day I had the bunkhouse to myself and decided to give it a much needed long overdue spring cleaning. I don't care much for housework but it had to be done. I dusted and damp wiped all of the log walls, swept, washed and polished the linoleum floor, and tidied everything up. I left the windows open to let the place air out. Deciding to go for a little walk, I hiked to the tall hidden falls on Bighorn Creek. Two hours later I returned and walked into the bunkhouse. There, standing in the middle of the floor was the milk cow chewing her cud. The place was a mess! She had peed a bucket full and pooped a huge pile of sloppy manure that splashed all over the walls, the bed and the stove. When I yelled at her, she couldn't get out of there fast enough, slipping and falling down twice before getting out the door. The open bunkhouse was too welcoming for her to resist. It provided a nice, shady, cool spot to get away from the flies. The second cleanup was a lot harder than the first one. It now smelled more like a barn than a bunkhouse!



I grew to really like the ranch and felt that I was actually part of it. It was a haven hidden away from the rest of the fast-paced ever changing, civilized world. We were on our own with no one to really bother us. I started treating the ranch like it was ours, and grew protective and possessive of it. Autumn arrived. There was a bit of snow on the ground and the ponds were forming thin sheets of ice on them. The countryside was aglow with colors. It was a beautiful fall and there was a great feeling in the air of freshness and being alive! Fall has always been my favorite time. In the morning when I

⁴ Kurt Guttman (Smokey) Went to Jasper National Park in 1955 where he worked on the trail crew and at the government sawmill. He then worked as a patrolman for a season and was responsible for the Tonquin Valley. In 1957, he started as a park warden in Banff National Park. He worked in the Eisenhower (Castle Mountain), Indian Head and Saskatchewan River districts. In 1965, after they opened the "Snowshoe Curtain" Smokey and his family moved to the Yukon where he was offered a job as a park warden and then as a resource management officer. He retired in 1989 after almost 35 years with the federal government.

went to get in the horses, I saw seven moose in the wrangle pasture by the swamp. I also heard the bull elk bugling and listened to it echoing down the valley. What a thrill to be in this great country and be part of it. The horses were also feeling good and bucked and kicked on their way in. Mickey decided that I should take four colts and go on a six-day pack trip through the mountains, to familiarize the horses with the terrain, packs and trails. Since I was going into unfamiliar country, he showed me on a map where to go. I would be going over three mountain passes and into four water drainages – the Red Deer, Pipestone, Siffleur and Clearwater. I would take turns riding and packing the horses. They would carry my food, bedding and feed oats. I would be staying at night in five different line-cabins. I would lead the three packed colts that would be tied to each other head to tail. I was a bit apprehensive of going into strange country by myself with only colts, knowing that the weather at this time of year in the mountains can change drastically in as little as an hour. The morning that it came time to go, Mickey helped me to pack up. I rode down the bank, crossed Scalp Creek and headed west for Scotch Camp. At each camp I would unpack and walk around the small fenced pasture to check it out. They were all in good shape. Turning the horses loose, I fed them their oats and then concentrated on getting a fire going in the cabin and rustling up some supper. Later, I would cut some firewood and fill the wood box. In the evening after signing the guest book I would relax and read the wardens' hunting magazines by the light of a coal oil lamp.



The next morning I would catch the colts with a few oats, pack, mount up and be off to the next place. Cyclone cabin was right up on top of one of the passes. This was Gerry Lyster's⁵ main cabin. It turned colder and the trees had a fair amount of snow on them that would come down on us as we brushed against them. Things went well and I saw lots of country. Sometimes when crossing a tiny frozen stream, the second colt would jump across while the last one would hang back. This would result in a hank of tail hairs being pulled out of the second colt's tail. Going up the Little Pipestone trail, I saw some Ptarmigan that had already turned white for the winter. The cabin up here was in the open above timberline and just under a windswept shale pass. On the side of the backhouse⁶ was two big, muddy grizzly paw prints and a round nose print. Across each window of the cabin a heavy plank was nailed with spikes sticking out of it. I definitely was in bear country. The small pasture was

⁵ Gerry Lyster was a park warden in Banff National Park

⁶ Outdoor toilet

walled in on three sides by steep rock. A short fence with a gate in it closed off the fourth side. I didn't trust it, so I put gunnysack hobbles on the colts that night and hoped that a grizzly wouldn't come by. When I blew the lamp out that night I could see light between a number of logs. It was pretty wild and rustic up here.

The next morning the hobbles were frozen and difficult to get off. It was cold going over the wide open pass and the trail was hard to find so I just started picking my way down the Siffleur Valley. There was supposed to be a trail leading off to my right that would take me over a higher pass between the mountains. I couldn't see where the pass was because the tops of the mountains were all covered in with a heavy low hanging cloud. I started getting into heavier trees lower down and still no side-trail. When I came across an old cabin with it's roof caved in, I knew that I had come too far. I felt sorry to the tired little colts as I had to turn around and go back up the valley again. At treeline I veered off to the left but still no little sign or pile of rocks or anything to indicate where the trail was. I was a little lost and was concerned because it was starting to get late. Finally, the clouds lifted and I could see where the pass was, so I picked my way up a game trail. When we got over the pass the sun came out and I could see away down the Clearwater Valley. What a relief, I was joyous. The well-defined trail went by a beautiful little blue lake. A sign on a tree read "Clearwater Lake". Where was some kind of sign when I really needed it? We ran out of snow before we got to the Clearwater cabin. There was no fenced pasture up here, just a drift fence from the canyon below the rock face of the mountain above. The next morning there were no colts. I couldn't find any tracks or fresh manure. I was sure that they wouldn't go back, so I figured that they must have gone around the drift fence. It was a nice day as I walked down to Indianhead Camp. I was now back in familiar country. Smokey⁷ was there and said that he hadn't seen the colts. He loaned me a horse and saddle and I headed back up the trail. The colts were waiting for me at the gate. I camped at Indianhead that night. I lost a day's travel but didn't care. Smokey and I had a good visit. He played the guitar and sang me a few of his own songs. I had just started writing my own songs that summer also. The next day down on the Clearwater Flats there were a bunch of pinto horses. These belonged to Phil Temple, an outfitter who camped and hunted this area. Leaving the Clearwater, we went over the summit and back down to the ranch. This had been the best packhorse trip of my life. I proved to myself that I could do it.

When I left the Ya Ha Tinda, I looked back at the mountains to see Warden Rock just one more time. It had been a great summer and it had provided for me a memory that I will treasure forever!



Warden Rock courtesy Marie Nylund

⁷ Kurt "Smokey" Guttman was the Indianhead warden at the time