

The following was contributed by Marvin Torwalt. Marvin is a writer/historian living in the Love area and has written extensively on the local history. He is well acquainted with many of the names in the article as well as many others in the "Fire Control Program" or the "DNR" as it was called years ago. One of Marvin's many endeavors is Diamond "T" Custom Video. Check it out, he is a man of many talents, and we are grateful for his contributions. – Chris.

This article is a small part of a local history of the Torch River, Moose Run school districts and covers the years 1916 to 2005. Although the following is not strictly about the early days of the Grassy Lake Fire Tower (SW-15-54-15-W2) all the bits of extra information are inter-related and are all part of the mosaic that made up the history of the site and its place in the Torch River community. With the retirement of resident towerman Walter Kratz its importance in the social life of the community was greatly diminished since there was no longer a human presence there during the times of low fire hazard. That being the case the site was no longer an active part of the community but became just another tourist attraction. With the removal of the old tower structure in the late '70s even that was lost though the Field Officer's quarters and most of the other original buildings remain. The sad fact is that the Grassy Lake Tower no longer exists as a physical or social entity but, at least for now, the name lives on as the "Grassy Lake Fire Cache".

The Grassy Lake Fire Tower

The government operated Grassy Lake Fire Tower was an important part of the community for many years. While the tower at Grassy Lake was only one link in a network of towers that blanketed the forested areas of Saskatchewan, locally, it gave a feeling of security by providing early warning in case of a forest fire starting nearby.

In the early years both the Field Officer/Towerman and the Radio Operator/Relief Towerman lived at the tower site all year 'round.

The Field Officer's job was to enforce the provincial game laws and he sold hunting, fishing and trapping licenses along with manning the tower in the summer. In later years he no longer manned the tower but he became responsible for receiving furs from the local trappers and seeing that they were shipped to the Saskatchewan Fur Marketing Service to be sold at auction for them.

The Grassy Lake Tower sites were also official weather recording stations. One of the towerman's duties was to record daily weather conditions which were forwarded to the Prince Albert office and used in determining the daily forest fire hazard index for the area. These reports were also forwarded to CKBI radio in Prince Albert and some of this information was used in the radio stations's daily weather broadcasts.

Grassy Lake recorded snowfall which reached 107 inches (almost 9 ft.) in the winter of 1955 / '56.

The first fire tower in the Grassy Lake area was built in the early 1920s by the Department of The Interior, part of the federal government's Dominion Forest Service, which administered the forest lands of Saskatchewan at that time. This tower was a wooden structure that was located about four miles north and a mile or so west of the Torch River School. It was one of the network of towers which was inherited by the newly created Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources with the transfer of forest administration to that department. Within a very short time it was abandoned when a second wooden tower was built at a more favorable location about three miles to the east near a small lake called Grassy Lake. In 1938, the 3rd Grassy Lake Tower, the first all steel tower, was built 2 miles north of the Torch River School

and it served until 1973. This was the site of Nels Paulson and Dave Nelson's first trapper's cabin which they built in 1919.

This tower site was quite popular with the local young men, especially with the unattached ones. The towerman through most of its time in service was Walter Kratz and he was amenable to having a drink with the boys on occasion though he never had more than 1 or 2 bottles of beer if he was going to be on the tower the next day. During daylight hours in good weather the horseshoe pits located there were put to good use most evenings and during inclement weather there were usually enough visitors to play 3 or 4 handed Bridge or possibly a Cribbage game or two.

In 1974 a new steel tower was put into service about 5 miles north of the 3rd tower site and the old tower was decommissioned and eventually dismantled. The old tower yard is now the site of the Grassy Lake Fire Cache.

Many of the old timers of the area and elsewhere worked for the Department of Natural Resources from the various Grassy Lake Tower sites. Men like Jeff Bartlett, brothers Oakley (Oak), Claude and John Nowlin, Harry Gade, Jim Brooker, and many others worked out of the Grassy Lake Field Headquarters at various times and in various capacities.

A local resident who worked for the DNR but not at the Fire Tower was Zac (Jackpine) Anderson. In 1938 he freighted supplies to the new Narrow Hills Fire Tower at Lower Fishing Lake using the Narrow Hills Trail (at that time called the Fishing Lake Trail* by the local people).

*** The actual Fishing Lake trail was located west of the Narrow Hills Trail in the general area of where the Hanson Lake Road is today. It passed Upper Fishing Lake and then turned in an easterly direction circling Lower Fishing Lake along its north and east shore. From there it led to the Narrow Hills Tower, joining the Esker Trail just a few hundred yards short of the tower site.**

Prior to 1931, the federal government's Dominion Forest Service administered the forests of Saskatchewan while game and wildlife fell under the jurisdiction of the Saskatchewan government. On August 1st, 1930 the provincial government took responsibility for forests as well as game and wildlife and it was administered by the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Gary Parker, who had been an assistant Forest Ranger for the federal forest service was appointed as the first provincial Ranger (later changed to Field Officer) for the new Grassy Lake District of the DNR and he had his headquarters at the Grassy Lake Tower site with a satellite office at Smeaton.

He held that position from 1931 to '41 and during the early years of his time at Grassy Lake he also manned the tower. He had an assistant whose title was that of Radio Operator. The Radio Operator was the relief towerman when Parker found it necessary to be absent from the site.

One of the Radio Operators for a number of years during Gary Parker's tenure was a family man named Jeff Bartlett. He found it necessary to hire what was essentially a mother's helper to help out with his young family and two of the young ladies of the district who filled that capacity were Torch River's Doris King and Moose Run's Hedwig Sager. Doris King helped out from 1935 to 1937 when she quit to marry Almer Fox. *Hedwig Sager helped out for a short time in 1938.

(*In 1939 she married a trapper, Wilhelm (Bill) Lessing of the River's End district whom she had met while working for the Bartletts).

Shortly after his appointment as Field Officer Parker gave his senior patrolman, Burns Matheson, the job of surveying an area which included the Narrow Hills*, north-west of the Torch River/ Moose Run Districts. Parker, who had hunted and trapped in the area, previously, felt that the unique qualities of the region should be preserved and he wanted to explore the possibility of turning the area into a provincial park.

Using the results of this 2 month survey, Parker pushed for, and achieved, the creation of the 252 square mile Nipawin (later Narrow Hills) Provincial Park which was officially established in January, 1934.

(*What is commonly called the Narrow Hills Esker is in fact a “push moraine” which is formed differently than a true esker. An esker is formed when a glacier melts and material that was trapped inside and on the glacier is dropped and washed into a fan shaped series of ridges. A push moraine is formed by the ploughing effect of an advancing glacier. When the glacier retreats the pushed up material at its leading edge remains, forming a single, long, sometimes curved ridge)

Both Gary Parker and Burns Matheson spent much time in the forest each winter cruising timber and scaling lumber for the various sawmills in the area. One of these sawmills was the Lamb and Sons Lumber Company owned by Walter Lamb and his younger sons.

Both men made repeated visits there in their official capacities and Matheson became a family friend. He made many visits there on his own time and, after his marriage, often brought his wife and infant daughter.

At one point the Lamb and Sons sawmill was set up near the site of the Botony School northwest of the future village of Love (Siding). The Lamb's nearest neighbors were the Clarence Brisbin family who lived about ¼ mile away.

One winter evening in January of 1935 some of the Lamb clan decided to go visiting so they set off for the Brisbin home. When they arrived at the Brisbin's the first thing they saw was 4 huskies staked out in the yard with a northern type dog sled nearby. Upon entering the house they saw the owner of the dogs sitting off to one side of the room. He was tall, lean and unsmiling with penetrating, ever watchful eyes and very few words to say. This was Gary Parker in the mid 1930s, the game warden/ forest ranger for the huge Grassy Lake District. He was on an inspection tour of his vast district and was staying with the Brisbins for the night.

Gary Parker was a transplanted American from one of the southern states, possibly Texas or Oklahoma. He appeared to have just stepped out of the old American west, always wearing a ten-gallon hat in summer and wearing a .45 caliber revolver at his waist while out on patrol. He is reputed to have said that he wore the big Stetson to protect him from the heat while working a forest fire. When patrolling the vast (at that time) Grassy Lake District he always used time tested means of travel, a dog sled in the winter and horseback in the summer, almost guaranteeing that he would never be left out in the bush unexpectedly.

He was a showman and a practical joker who had great skill in throwing an axe or a knife as well as being an expert shot with his revolver. His skill in axe or knife throwing, which he learned as a boy in the US, occasionally proved useful when coming up with practical jokes to play on some of his unsuspecting friends.

Longtime Love (Siding) resident Ted Updike, who was a part-time DNR employee and full time trapper, told this story in which Parker's skill with an axe played a large part.

When Ted would return to his cabin after checking traps on his line his habit was to split some wood for the cabin stove before entering. On one of these occasions Ted searched fruitlessly in the snow for his axe which he always left stuck in his chopping block. Disgusted with a world where someone would steal his only axe he finally gave up the search and went into his cabin only to find a note on the table stating that his axe had climbed a tree. Nothing else, just that his axe had climbed a tree. Stepping back outside he soon saw his axe and it was indeed up a tree.

Now Ted had a problem, his axe was out of his reach in the tree so he needed a long pole to get it down. To get a pole he needed his axe and to get his axe he needed a pole. He did eventually get his axe down but then he had to come up with a way to get even with Gary Parker because Ted knew that Parker was the cause of his axe being up the tree in the first place.

In 1939, Parker authorized a fireguard to be bulldozed from the Torch River in the south-east corner of the Trails End district to the Torch River north-west of the Moose Run district a distance of some 25 miles. The cat that pushed the guard in was operated by man named Harry Lund and a fellow by the name of Hal Thompson operated the grader. The grading of the guard was finished in 1940.

The fireguard followed the forest boundary along most its length dipping into the settled areas in just a very few spots. In the Torch River/Moose Run districts the guard came from the east on the north side of the Kerr homestead (approximately 7 miles by road north-east of the Torch River School) running five miles due west to the site of the new (3rd)Grassy Lake Tower (the new tower was first manned in 1938). From this location it went a further 1/2 mile west, turning north for 1/2 mile along the east boundary of Oak Nowlin's homestead and west for 2 1/2 miles. From there it went 1 1/2 miles north past John Sager's yardsite to Corner Lake, and then west again for 1 mile. This point was 1/2 mile north of Joe Kiehn's homestead. From here the fireguard went a further 2 miles north and then turned west for approximately 2 miles, reaching the Torch River at Murray's Cabin.

This spot on the river was named after a trapper who had a cabin there at one time. To this day the remains of the cabin can be seen a short distance north of the now badly overgrown fireguard between the existing trail and the river. During the late 1960s the 2 miles of fireguard east of Murray's Cabin became part of a pulpwood haul road that crossed the Torch River there and again north of Garrick. The pulp road continued on west until it met the Hanson Lake Road at about Mile 26.

Up the hill to the east of Murray's cabin stands the Horseshoe Bend Warm-up Shelter used by snowmobilers who ride the trail which heads north past there. The old guard is groomed for snowmobiling two miles east of the river to the point where it turned south. The snowmobile trail continues on east following the old pulp haul road until it again joins the guard about 6 miles to the south-east.

The above mentioned trail heading north from Murray's Cabin is the original road which led to the Fishing Lakes area and was used by "Jackpine" Anderson to provision the Narrow Hills Tower in 1938.

The fireguard was well built with fill and culverts or bridges used wherever they were required. It was much appreciated by the settlers who lived near it and many used it to gain access to their homesteads. Since it led to the Torch River it was often utilized by anyone wishing for a few Pike and/or Walleye to add to their diet of red meat and garden produce. In a few spots along its length the original guard still exists and, though badly overgrown is still used for various activities.

About 1955 a proper road was built into the north-east corner of the Moose Run district and the fireguard fell into disuse and much of it was eventually abandoned completely.

Burns Matheson had left Grassy Lake in 1938 and became Field Officer at Beaver House Tower in the Forte A La Corne Forest Reserve ten miles west of Nipawin. Upon Gary Parkers vacating the Grassy Lake Field Officer's position in 1941, Matheson replaced him as Field Officer until 1945, transferring from his post at Beaverhouse Tower. Upon his transfer to Hudson Bay (Junction), he was replaced by Phil Reed. In 1947 Reed transferred out and Earl Bilquist became the Field Officer until Syd Stubbington took over from him in 1949.

In 1951, Stubbington was moved to White Fox and the Grassy Lake Region was taken over by Earl Shannon.

In 1952 Jim Brooker took over as Field Officer at Grassy Lake when Shannon transferred to the new northern mining community of Uranium City.

Brooker remained at Grassy Lake until the closing of that office in 1958 and Syd Stubbington at the White Fox DNR office became responsible for both the White Fox and Grassy Lake districts. The White Fox office was closed in 1963 and the whole region is now administered from Nipawin.

More history on some of the men who worked at the Grassy Lake Tower site

(This is not a complete list, there were many others, patrolmen, timber cruisers and more, who worked away from the tower at their regular jobs.)

Gary Parker - Ranger (Field Officer)/Towerman - 1931-1941

When Parker left Grassy Lake he quit the DNR and managed a hog operation in the Choiceland district. He also acquired a TD 14 crawler tractor with which he did some custom land clearing in the area.

Jeff Bartlett - Radio Operator / Relief Towerman - 1931(?) - 41(?)

Jeff Bartlett was Radio Operator at the 1st and 2nd Grassy Lake Tower sites. He also had the responsibility of manning the tower when the Towerman/Field Officer was elsewhere.

Burns Matheson - Senior Patrolman - 1931 / 38 Field Officer - 1941 / 45

While at Grassy Lake Matheson had met and courted a young lady named Edith Anderson, daughter of Zac "Jackpine" Anderson who also worked for the DNR. They were married shortly before they made the move to Beaverhouse Tower in 1938. In due course they had one daughter, Peggy.

Upon Gary Parker's leaving Grassy Lake, and subsequently the DNR, Matheson replaced him as Field Officer at Grassy Lake. He ended his career in the DNR as Regional Supervisor in southern Saskatchewan. He retired in 1965 and passed from this life on June 28th, 1980.

Phil Reed - Field Officer - 1945 / 47

Upon Burns Matheson's transfer to Hudson Bay (Junction) Reed took over as Field Officer at Grassy Lake.

Earl Bilquist - Field Officer - 1947 / 1949

It is believed locally that in 1948 Bilquist was responsible for having the six miles of homesteader trail upgraded that led west of Grassy Lake Tower to the Moose Run bridge on the

west side of that district.

Sydney (Syd) Stubbington - Field Officer - 1949 / 51

As was previously noted, Syd Stubbington moved to White Fox from Grassy Lake and continued as Field / Conservation Officer for quite a number of years.

Upon the amalgamation of the Grassy Lake and White Fox districts he became responsible for both districts. He was the man in charge during the devastating forest fire of 1961 that burned most of that summer north of Torch River/Moose Run.

He transferred to Strasbourg, Sk. lwhen the White Fox office was closed in 1963 and later became Park Superintendent at Meadow Lake Provincial Park. He retired from the DNR in 1980 while stationed at Meadow Lake. He occupied himself with a variety of jobs for a few years, eventually settling into permanent retirement in Saskatoon.

It is not generally known that he was part owner of a café in Love from 1950 to '52 and that he owned farmland in the Torch River District. The Torch River property was purchased by Stephen Green and is now part of the NorthSask Frontier Adventures hunt ranch. Syd Stubbington passed away in 2009

His son, Barry, who was just a toddler when the Stubbingtons were at Grassy Lake, followed in his father's footsteps and also became a Conservation Officer.

Earl Shannon - Field Officer - 1951 / 52

In 1952 Shannon volunteered to go to the new mining town of Uranium City* in North-western Saskatchewan as Field Officer there, leaving in January of that year and taking young Albert Sager* from Moose Run with him to be employed as truck driver.

. *Uranium City is said to be the reincarnation of the gold mining town of Goldfields which was located on the east shore of Lake Athabaska. Goldfields owed its existence to a gold strike which had taken place in 1934 but with the rising costs of production and the dropping quality of the gold ore the mines shut down in 1942. Although a few people stayed on at the Goldfields site many of the buildings were dismantled and the resulting lumber was barged to Ft. McMurray, Alberta. When uranium was found on the west side of the lake most of the remaining buildings from the old Goldfields site were moved across the lake and helped form the nucleus of the new mining community of Uranium City.

*Albert Sager became towerman at Big Sandy Firetower from the mid '60s to the mid '70s.

Jim Brooker - Field Officer - 1952 / 58

With the closing of the Field Office at Grassy Lake in 1958 Jim Brooker was transferred out of the area. In 1972 he came back to his old stomping ground one more time as a Conservation Officer in Nipawin. He was only in Nipawin a short while until he retired from the DNR and moved to Salmon Arm, BC.

During his time at Grassy Lake there were several stories of him turning a blind eye when a settler who was seriously in need shot a deer or two out of season to feed his family. That was a trait shared by many of the early Field Officers.

Walter Kratz - Towerman - 1942(?) - 1965

The man who, in all likelihood, spent the most years at the Grassy Lake Tower was Walter Kratz. He was a man who was a friend to everyone and when he had visitors he would tell dozens of stories about his trapping experiences and about the people he had met during his years on the tower and in the bush. He was always interested in what you had been doing no matter what your age. In all the years he was at Grassy Lake he never owned a vehicle other than a small, grey Ford tractor. If he had to make a trip to town there was always a friend around that was more than willing to take him.

Born in 1898 of German ancestry, he arrived in the district in the late 1930's and became

tower man in the early 1940's under Burns Matheson. He held that position and trapped in the winter until 1965 when he was finally forced to retire. Prior to the time that he was due to retire at age 65 the Grassy Lake Tower was downgraded from a primary to a secondary tower making it possible for him to stay on the job for an additional two years to age 67.

After his retirement he moved to Creston, British Columbia where he married for the first time when he was well into his 70's.

The 4th Grassy Lake Tower*, built in 1971, is still in operation but the person who is on fire watch there no longer lives at the site but commutes from his/her home every day during the times of high fire hazard.

***The 4th Grassy Lake Tower has since been shut down and dismantled along with most of the other fire towers in Saskatchewan. Structural deficiencies leading to unsafe working conditions were cited as the reason. The loss of the relocated Beaverhouse Tower to high winds bears out that assertion. The few towers that were rebuilt are free-standing structures built to much higher safety standards.**

Fire detection methods have evolved over the years with some of the changes including the decommissioning of all but a few of the fire towers, the discontinuing of the inefficient and often labor intensive one-man fire patrols in the '60s and the utilizing of infrared imaging using today's satellite technology. The loss of the fire tower network guarantees that aerial fire detection will be a very important part of fire suppression well into the foreseeable future.

Through all these years of change and innovation there have been but two constants: fire detection and suppression by aircraft and crews of fire fighters. Fire detection by aircraft was initiated in Saskatchewan by the federal Department of The Interior in 1927, the success of which resulted in the creation of the Saskatchewan Air Patrol in 1928. Patrolling was carried out by the Royal Canadian Air Force using 2 Vickers Vedette flying boats and a Vickers Varuna flying boat which was capable of carrying 7 passengers. The plan was to drop fire fighting crews near forest fires using the Veruna and this proved to be very effective.

The Saskatchewan Air Patrol was modeled after the highly successful Ontario Provincial Air Service which had been carrying out these duties since 1924. Some years after the inception of the Air Patrol the next step was taken with the addition of water tanks to the aircraft to be used in dropping water on fires (water bombing). This form of fire suppression was first tried in Ontario in 1945 using 55 gallon tanks mounted on the relatively tiny DeHavilland Beaver aircraft. The concept was so successful that it evolved into the use of the huge aerial tankers of today.

****I would like to thank Bruce Lamb of Salmon Arm, British Columbia for providing much information on Gary Parker, a man who few of today's local people seem to know very much about and who Lamb had known personally.****

****And thanks to Tom Laxdol of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan for providing information on the Ontario Provincial Air Service and the Saskatchewan Air Patrol.****

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