

## Beaver

In the early years, the backcountry of the park was accessed by a system of trails: Moose Trail, Elk Lake Trail, Fish Lake Trail and so on. Many of them were logging roads with origins back to the Dominion Forestry Service before the Park was formed. In winter, they could be travelled with horses and sleighs; in the summer, by pickup truck...maybe. They were dirt and became muddy when wet.

Each District Warden was responsible for keeping the trails in his district passable. They were essential access to fight fire and for back country patrols. Backcountry patrols in summer included removing fallen trees, filling mud holes, repairing timber bridges, and dealing with beaver damage.

The arch enemy of trail maintenance was the beaver. The beaver would dam up creeks and rivers forming large ponds. The ponds flooded the trails turning them into impossible mud bogs. Bridges and culverts would be washed out when ponds overflowed the trails.

A beaver dam is an almost indestructible engineering marvel. Removing one by hand or machine is almost impossible.

## Dynamite

Blasting a big section out of a dam was the best and easiest way to lower the water level. It was, however, a temporary solution. Even after blasting away a very large section of a dam, the beaver would have it rebuilt within a couple of days if not within hours. But in the meantime, the water level was lowered enough to prevent damage to the roadway. Some dams were blasted several times throughout a summer.

Even a dynamite blast would have little effect on a dam unless the charge(s) were placed correctly. A section of water pipe would be driven deep down under the dam and filled with sticks of dynamite. In the case of a big dam, a number of pipes would be placed in a strategic way that would lift out a section of the dam. A blasting cap and a timed fuse would be inserted into the last stick of dynamite loaded. Once the fuse was lit, one made a hasty retreat to a safe distance and waited for the geyser of water, mud, and sticks followed by a loud whump. Great fun!

On one occasion, wardens Emmet Millard and my dad set up to blast a big dam at Sugar Creek, between Silver Grove and Rabbit Cabin, where the pond threatened to overflow the south boundary road. A number of charges were placed, fuses lit, and a quick retreat to safety made. The blast was very successful. A large section of the dam, almost completely intact, was lifted high in the air and fell in the middle of the roadway on top of the bridge deck. Dad and Emmet spent the remainder of their day manually clearing the roadway. Beaver one, wardens zero.

On another occasion, warden Cliff Millard set a charge under a dam, lit the fuse, and retreated to safety. Nothing happened. A scary circumstance indeed. It would take a very brave man to investigate a hang fire on a loaded charge. Instead, Cliff resorted to his high powered rifle. It took a number of shots from a safe distance until a hit was scored on the visible stub of pipe and the charge exploded.

## Fences

One of the beavers' favourite tactics was to build their dam inside of a culvert or directly under a bridge making blasting impossible without damage to the road or bridge. The solution was a fence of posts and wire screen stretching from one shore in an ark out in front of the bridge and back to the opposite

shore. The beaver would then build their dam along the screening and away from the bridge. If the dam required blasting, the fence would be sacrificed and rebuilt later.

On one occasion, again at Sugar Creek, my dad with the aid of two young indigenous men who were working at the Park for the summer, were building the fence. Posts had been installed out from each bank as far as could be reached wearing hip waders. The operation then moved to a raft. Pounding posts with a heavy hammer from the unstable raft was precarious. At some point, my dad missed a hammer swing and ended up in the water. His helpers thought it was hilarious and were having a great laugh at his expense. Warden in the water was a great joke until they realized he was still wearing his hip waders and they were filling fast. He was quickly rescued back onto the raft. Disaster averted but not the hilarity. Wet Warden jokes continued for the remainder of the job.

## **Beaver for the Queen**

Somewhere deep in the colonial history of Canada, it was deemed that a pair (one of each gender) of live beaver was to be gifted annually to the British Monarch of the time. On more than one occasion the procurement of those beavers was tasked to the wardens of Prince Albert National Park. They were then shipped to a zoo in England.

A beaver's genitals are internal and determining the gender of a live beaver is a tricky task indeed. They have very large teeth and sharp claws. It's doubtful that on every occasion the beaver shipped met the pair criteria.

The zookeepers who received the beaver in England assumed, because they came from cold Canada, they were tolerant of cold weather. Not so, beavers live their lives in or under water or in their well-insulated mud and stick houses. They seldom experience temperatures below freezing. They sometimes perished in their new home.