

# “Harrisons”

By Cyril Shokoples

**Somewhere near Mica Dam - August 1980** - “Bring your pack over here so we can weigh it.” Did he say weigh it? I panic and begin stuffing things in my pockets to bring my pack weight under the limit. I throw my camera around my neck. Maybe I should stuff my ice hammer in my pocket, that’s heavy. I take my ice axe off and put it in the pile beside the others. I think I have squeaked in under the wire with twenty pounds of gear bulging from under my Goretex and pile jackets. Finally my turn comes and I jump into the helicopter and fly in to Clemenceau. My very first Alpine Club of Canada General Mountaineering Camp (the GMC) is underway and I’m going in as an amateur leader.

Little did I know at that time that this would start nearly twenty years of adventures in some of western Canada’s wildest settings. Over the years, I would meet everyone from Everest summiteers to total greenhorns and some of the most fantastic characters of the mountains. What I began attending as an amateur leader, I would continue as an assistant guide and finally a full mountain guide. Perhaps the most amazing people I would encounter however would be the Harrisons, particularly Bill and his son Brad.

Since 1946, the Harrisons have been associated with the GMCs, when Bill had his first contract with the ACC in the Bugaboos. It was here that Bill met first two of an impressive list of well known mountaineers he would encounter, Edmontonian Rex Gibson and Waddington pioneer Roger Neave. Rex was an exceptional climber of the day and Roger would become president of the ACC from 1966 until 1968. The Wates - Gibson hut in the Tonquin valley would later be named after Rex Gibson and Cyril Wates. Both Rex and Roger would become long time friends of Bill. In 1947, Bill again outfitted for the Alpine Club for the Glacier Station GMC near what is now Rogers Pass. This was before the Trans Canada highway ran through the pass and travel in that area was either by rail or by horse. Bill tried in vain to return to Spillimacheen directly after the camp and was turned back by heinous travel conditions, but would later make the epic overland journey successfully, a tribute to his backcountry skills and horsemanship.

With the death of Bill Harrison in 1993, his youngest son Brad continued to manage and outfit these camps that epitomized the spirit of the Alpine Club from its inception. In actual fact, Brad had been passed the torch years earlier when Bill’s gradually failing health began to take its toll. This is a tribute to these two great men, one now deceased but not forgotten and the other continuing to go where his father before him had gone and well beyond. This is also a tribute to the entire Harrison family, who has carefully brought so many through the rugged isolation into the heart of the mountain ramparts to where we chose to climb and find our own special mountain experiences.

William Orton Harrison, known simply as “Bill”, was born in Galena, British Columbia on December 9, 1904. At the time I first met him in 1980, he had already been guiding and outfitting for over fifty years. I failed to realize then that he had forgotten about more places than I had ever dreamt of going to. He had led pack trains into the true wilds of Alberta, British Columbia and the Yukon with some of the most famous guides and mountaineers ever to ascend Canada’s mountains. Among the many notable characters that rode alongside Bill were Conrad Kain, J. Munroe Thorington, the Feuz's, Christian Hasler, Lillian Guest and Lizzie Rummel. Despite more than sixty years of guiding and outfitting, he spoke of all whom he had met as “fine fellows.”

To learn the ropes, while still attending school, Bill worked for Walter Nixon the well established outfitter in the Columbia valley. They eventually became the best of friends and would take their own "packer's holidays" away from the dudes. Most of the hunting trips in those days were with U.S. hunters whose primary interest was in animal heads. Conversely, most of Bill's hunting was not for sport but rather for meat. In 1921, still very early in his career, Bill worked with Dr. Walcott, the renowned archeologist from the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC. Bill became his personal guide and they worked the high country for several months. Dr. Walcott was well known for cataloging the fossil beds of the Burgess Shale in Yoho National Park, British Columbia.

In 1924, he bought his own pack train and helped Walter Nixon guide people up to the Lake of the Hanging Glaciers in the Purcell Mountains. This was hardly the trip we would envision today, as it is quite likely that horses had rarely if ever been there before and few had ever laid eyes on this most spectacular of mountain and glacial landscapes from the shores of the lake. The logging roads we use to aid in access today were still decades away and even now the trek to the lake is not to be taken lightly. Brad still proudly displays a black and white photo of his father's trip to this area in his Vancouver home.

Despite the close association with Alpine Club camps, the ACC was hardly the only group that Bill worked for. He blazed many a trail over the more than half century of his career. Beginning in the early years and continuing throughout his career, Bill guided and outfitted for mining, hunting, fishing and survey parties. His home turf, the Columbia mountains, were mineral rich and of significant geological interest. Place names like Galena, Malachite and even Bugaboo (a dead end mining lead) attest to the significance of mining and minerals in this general area. Bill's work with topographical surveys were mostly with government horse parties in areas like Nordegg and Clearwater in Alberta, the Big Bend highway in the Columbia valley and from Revelstoke to Sicamous in BC.

In 1930 Bill received his Blacksmiths certificates and bought hunting territory on his own in the Upper Kootenay. Over the years he rode and tramped the Kootenays most extensively and constantly took groups all over the Beavermouth, Quartz, Vowell, Big Bend and Spillimacheen Creeks. On April 26, 1936, Bill married Florence Isabel Smith in the Anglican Church in Edgewater, British Columbia. Bill continued his outfitting and the couple had their first child, Doreen Elizabeth in 1937. Their family continued to grow with the births of five additional children; Emily Marina in 1938, Gordon William in 1940, Stanley Neville in 1944 and Beverley Lorraine in 1945. In 1957, Bradley James was the last to be born, more than a decade after his siblings.

After helping to outfit the General Mountaineering Camps in 1946 and 1947 a few years were skipped, but beginning in 1954 in the Goodsir range the Harrisons would be associated with every subsequent GMC to date. The camps of the 1940s and 50s were a far cry from the camps of the present. Environmental consciousness has changed the character of the camps from the gargantuan mega camps with a hundred or more people (up to 250!) to much smaller events with a maximum of forty people. Bill brought the GMCs through the end of the heyday of the large camp era where tents were canvas, stoves were wood burning and the ladies wore long dresses (although I am told the ladies climbed in more reasonable garb). One of the hallmarks of a Harrison camp is the exceptional meals and any GMC participant in the past forty three years can attest to this fact. Securing the best kitchen staff is a critical aspect of an outfitters job!

In speaking with Bill's wife Isabel, she recalled the kitchen crew cooking over wood burning stoves and having her jeans get so hot that she could not touch them. There were far too many people to

feed in one sitting. This was when the wilderness was still truly wild and fires at night were an evening tradition. Campfire circles were large and part of the social scene. Tent sites were segregated into male, female and married areas. This was true adventure and many of the mountaineering parties were the first to stand upon countless summits in far too many ranges to mention.

Setting up the camps in those days was a daunting proposition with half the battle just being the transport of the requisite gear into the site. It was not unusual to have three to four tonnes of food and equipment to transport to a camp. The logistics were akin to moving an army through the nightmare of obstacles that were the mountains in those days. Getting to camp could include cutting trails, river crossings, rafts, swimming the horses, swarms of insects and all manner of other trials and tribulations. Horses were the vehicle of choice for transporting this mass of food, canvas, stoves, wooden boxes and even hay. This was truly not a task for the faint of heart and called for the talents of a smart and tough wrangler and outfitter with a lot of “horse sense”. Bill rose to this challenge time and again. By the late 1960s the era of smaller camps and helicopters slowly began, but Bill still preferred the pack trains.

While listening to a tape recorded interview conducted by Lizzie Rummel with Bill,<sup>i</sup> Brad occasionally burst into laughter as Bill understated certain aspects of his outfitting career. Bill always had an excellent string of horses and trained them well. He was once quoted as saying, “Make sure the horse knows more than the dude does.”<sup>ii</sup> When Lizzie asked whether he ever had to chase down his pack train in the morning, Bill stated “never”, to which Brad smiled and exclaimed, "he's lying through his teeth." Further on the subject of horses, Bill proclaimed if he ever had horses that behaved like that, he would shoot them. Brad's reply was, "he'd never lay a hand to a horse, never mind shoot one." If there was ever a problem with a horse, it was never the horses fault, it was the rider!

In 1967 the Government of Canada conferred the Centennial Medal upon Bill Harrison in recognition of his valuable service to the nation. Bill was involved in the Yukon Alpine Centennial expedition that year and was one of the few to be singled out for special mention during the 30th anniversary celebration at the Guide's Ball in Lake Louise in 1997. Around 1967, Bill's youngest son Brad went to his first GMC. Brad was not yet in his teens, but already his love for the mountains was growing along with his respect for his father. In 1976 Bill was awarded an Honorary Membership in the Alpine Club of Canada, the only non-climbing member to ever receive such standing in the club. The club cited that it was “impossible to list all the ways in which Bill has helped the General Mountaineering Camp run smoothly”.

All of the other Harrison family members were an integral part of the GMC scene through the decades, attending in various capacities. Over the years I had only met Bill, Brad, Gordon and Greg (Bill's nephew) and they all had an uncompromising work ethic and the ability to work tirelessly in assembling or running the camps. I felt privileged to visit Isabel in 1996 on Vancouver Island where she lives with her daughter Marina, another former GMC veteran. While there, various Harrisons told tales of the times they had spent in the numerous camps. They also told incredible tales of the early years, including when Bill traveled by steamer to Golden with his family to pick up a washing machine!

The hospitality I was shown during this visit made it more than evident why the Harrisons were so respected in conjunction with these events. It is only my poor memory that prevents recollecting the myriad other tales that they recounted of the joys and hardships of camp life. They all spoke of Bill fondly and I came to know him through their eyes as a hard working man true to the tradition of

pioneering guides and outfitters of his day. He was a character in his own right with an unmistakable deep voice that in itself demanded your attention. I came away knowing I had experienced a special view back through the looking glass of time.

When I flew into Clemenceau in 1980 the transition from horse to helicopter was almost complete. The camps had diminished in size in large part due to concern for the pressures such a group would have on the flora, fauna and overall environment of an area. Brad's role in the GMC continued to grow after the 1980s and it became increasingly evident with time that he would inherit the role of outfitter and camp manager when Bill eventually retired.

The inevitable occurred on March 11th, 1993 when Bill Harrison passed away. His funeral was in Radium, British Columbia and his eulogy was delivered by Brad. Even though I knew Brad far better than I knew Bill, I was deeply saddened to hear the news and mourned along with the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others he had touched over the years. I only realize now how special he was. Indeed he was one of the finest of the "fine fellows".

With his dad's passing, Brad has the distinction of spending more time at GMCs than any other person alive. In the last decade or more, he has in fact often spent five or more weeks per summer orchestrating the thousands of tasks that make such a camp run smoothly.

Brad had already taken over as outfitter to the GMC years before and is an outdoor guide in his own right. Pressures from various jurisdictions and from within the ACC itself would make Brad's role in the Alpine Club GMC increasingly difficult from the perspective of mitigating environmental impacts. Where once it was acceptable to have multiple large campfires, it is now unacceptable to have any ground fires at all. Electric fences around food storage became a reality in some areas. Nylon replaced canvas and no wood for tent poles or any other purpose could be taken from most if not all areas. Instead of throwing a diamond hitch, the current outfitter must know his way around a helicopter and know how to load a sling. The few remaining large canvas tents are assembled with prefabricated timber bolted together. The task of assembling the finest kitchen staff available remains critical.

With big camps come big permit requirements. Even when all the requirements for permits have been fulfilled, the reality is that even a simple misstep or misunderstanding can jeopardize the ability of a camp to return to an area in the future. Camps must now be self contained and everything must be done with an eye to minimizing the impact. In effect, they must be the model of a large camp that insofar as possible sets the standard for others. In the last two decades the changes have been remarkable and they are continuing. The Harrisons have been the ones who have had to ensure that any impacts are minimized or eliminated. Committees and officials can talk all they want; the Harrisons have to put the words into action. They were and are "where the rubber meets the road".

In addition, the pressures from guests or "clients" for ever increasing levels of service with no additional cost make the camps of the 1990s as difficult to manage as the larger events of fifty years ago. In the 1990s, there are the new concerns about liability and profitability that add more heat to the pressure cooker of the camp manager's duties. As his father before him, Brad has risen to the challenge. Those who know him well know that his daily pace is frenetic and many are convinced that he sleeps only a few hours a day, if at all, during a GMC. He is the first to rise and often the last to go to bed. On some days he has been known to get up at 3 am well before all others, begin the process of preparing the early breakfast, wake those getting up for early breakfast (4 am), prepare a massive breakfast for those assembled, take a group up a peak and return to camp in time for supper

and to chair the evening climbing committee meeting, all the while managing the rest of the camp as well. I have been to camps where Brad has done the 4 am breakfast for 4 continuous weeks without a break. Furthermore, even the initiated have little idea of all the tasks undertaken by Brad in the weeks before and after a GMC. It is all too easy to take such things for granted when the camps run so smoothly.

The amount of information running through his head as he zips from one task to another would make it difficult for a super computer to keep track of his movements. You only have to watch a camp being set up or taken down to realize that his understanding of the logistics is borne of 30 years of experience, first as a young child watching his father and now as the conductor of the frenzied symphony. You have to remember only two things during setup or take down; follow directions and stay out of Brad's way!

His regular life in Vancouver is hardly any slower and his air travels are the stuff of legends. His energy in promoting the camps and his other outdoor business activities is also truly fantastic. This is not to mention that he is part owner of Golden Alpine Holidays which offers hut to hut ski touring and hiking. If you can believe it, he also holds down a "real" job with Canadian Airlines. He has indeed perfected the technique of being in two places at once. The Alpine Club recognized his many efforts in managing the club's largest camp by awarding him a special Service Award in autumn of 1992. (He had actually been nominated for the Distinguished Service Award, but was ineligible due to his status as an ACC staff person.)

**Vancouver October, 1997** - Listening to the tape recording,<sup>iii</sup> I hear Bill's booming voice fill the room and I am at once transported in my mind to the fireside at Robson Pass. There are just two of us beside the glowing coals. I sit beside Bill Harrison, not thinking at all about the greatness of this man who knew the likes of Kain and Hasler and Feuz. He is simply "Bill". It is his voice reaching from the grave, recalling the many "fine men and ladies" he had the pleasure of sharing the wilderness with. His was a world of hardships and toil amidst the towering Columbias and Rockies in the days when a trip to the Bugaboos meant three days of hard packing from Spillimacheen through tangled bush and deadfall along old mining trails. He wouldn't have it any other way.

Brad Harrison and I sit absorbed in the interview. Hearing Bill's voice again brings a full range of emotions in us both and it is evident that Brad has a fierce pride in his father. A man whose strength and integrity served as Brad's model for his own career in the mountains. A man whose family shows the same pride and is deserving of their own accolades. These are the Harrisons that I have known and it has been my humble honor to share a few moments of their lives.

Rest easy Bill.

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## **Eulogy for my Dad**

As delivered by Brad Harrison - March 19, 1993

This is the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. I am not usually at a loss for words but find myself in trouble here. On behalf of my family and myself, I would like to thank everyone for making the effort and taking the time to be here today. It is very much appreciated.

Because of my association with the Alpine Club, I have met many people who knew my father in his favourite place, the back - country. To a one, they spoke of the same qualities that we his family and you his friends had grown used to; Honesty - his word was better than any written contract; Integrity; Skill - he seemingly could fix anything; Reliable. A tireless worker.

During the past week, as we recalled memories, his wonderful and ever present sense of humour was obvious. With a glint in his eye and a subdued smile on his face he would set off on a mission to baffle some unsuspecting dude. For me, his most endearing quality was his non - judgmental acceptance of each and every person he met. He truly looked for the good in everyone. Most people claim this quality, few really carry it out. At his eightieth birthday party he stood in front of two hundred people and said, "I love you all." He meant it.

We are fortunate to have been touched by him. He was fortunate to have seen so much beautiful countryside, to have had excellent health and to have a wife who loved him as much last week as she did fifty six years ago. In an age where man's humanity to man seems to be on a downward spiral, I was fortunate to need only look as far as the next room, up the trail or across the river to see a role model whose values and qualities one could only hope to aspire to. It causes me great pain to lose you, but I will always be grateful for what you have given me.

Thank you father.

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<sup>i</sup>A conversation with a Pioneer - Bill Harrison - Pioneer series.  
conducted by Lizzie Rummel (April 10, 11, 1976)

<sup>ii</sup> Bowlegged Bill Smoothed the way  
by Gil Parker, Vancouver Islander - March 4, 1990

<sup>iii</sup> A conversation with a Pioneer - Bill Harrison - Pioneer series.  
conducted by Lizzie Rummel (April 10, 11, 1976)

