

A Family for the Outfit

*Harrisons and the
General Mountaineering Camp*



by Zac Robinson

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A Family for the Outfit: Harrisons and the General Mountaineering Camp

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Front cover photos:

Centre: Base Camp at the 1965 Glacier Lake GMC. Photo by Marjory Hind. Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (V46/29 ns 15 5).

Top left: Bill Harrison at the 1980 Mount Clemenceau GMC. Photo by Marjory Hind. Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (V46/43 ns 7 35).

Top right: Brad Harrison at the 1999 Moby Dick GMC. Photo by Bill Milsom.

Bottom left: Gordon Harrison at the 1967 Steele Glacier GMC, Yukon.

Bottom right: Isabel and Lorraine Harrison at the 1965 Glacier Lake GMC. Photo by Gordon Harrison.

Back cover photo: The Harrison family celebrating Bill and Isabel's fiftieth wedding anniversary in Sorrento, B.C., April 26, 1987. Left to right (back): Brad, Marina, Gordon, Lorraine, and Stan. Isabel and Bill in the front.

Title page photo: The dining tent at the 1998 Mount Alexandra GMC. Photo by Roger Laurilla.

Bringing Mountains to Members

Sixty-two years ago, the Alpine Club of Canada and the Harrison family first came together, when Bill Harrison won a contract to outfit the 1946 General Mountaineering Camp in the Bugaboos. Harrisons have been outfitting the camps ever since. As chance would have it, this year's GMC was also in the Bugaboo/Vowell area. Bill's youngest son, Brad, was the outfitter. It seems particularly appropriate, then, that the Harrison family, with Brad as its representative, is the Patron of the 2008 Mountain Guides Ball.

Reading about this remarkable family, you will discover men and women of great physical and mental vitality. The amount of physical and mental effort required to organize hundreds of people in the backcountry—to wake them in the pre-dawn hours, to feed and encourage them, to teach and lead them, humour and entertain them—is simply staggering. The Harrisons have been doing just this for sixty years.

The uninitiated might think that tackling this mammoth amount work for such a long duration indicates a serious genetic fault, one which is, apparently, passed on from parent to offspring. They would be wrong. The Harrisons have shown an inordinate amount of ingenuity in finding a vocation that has allowed them to work and play together in the outdoors, as well as build a history and legacy that lives and breathes within them.

I have had the privilege to attend the GMC over the years with Bill and Gordon, as well as with Brad. In fact, our two families, the Harrisons and the Roes, have shared time at the camps since the late 1950s, when my father, Dick Roe, started attending the GMC as camp doctor. Dad soon brought his eldest son, Rick, to camp and eventually introduced me and my other brothers and sisters to the tradition. With my family having spent over seventy weeks at the GMC as climbers, camp doctors, and amateur leaders, I think that I am well qualified to extend my heartfelt thanks to the Harrisons for their past, present, and future efforts in bringing the mountains to the members of the Alpine Club of Canada.

This publication, the tenth in the Summit Series, introduces the Harrisons and describes their love and commitment to the outdoors, as well as their steadfast friendship to both the Alpine Club of Canada and to the many employees, guides, cooks, and volunteers who have served at the GMC over the years. I would encourage you all to read and imagine the lives of the Harrison family revealed in the following pages. I cannot think of a more deserving Patron than Brad Harrison and the Harrison family.

Cam Roe
President
The Alpine Club of Canada

It was no small task to plan such a camp, to be placed on a summit 6000 feet above the sea, and at a distance of nearly a score of miles from the nearest railway station. It was an even greater task to provide at such an inaccessible spot for a hundred people and to carry thereto on pack ponies the thirty or forty tents, with necessary equipment and provisions.... The great success of the camp was almost wholly due to the skill, energy, and business-like determination of the outfitters—the men in buckskin—who started out to make the camp a success and did so.

—Frank Yeigh, 1907

Writing in the inaugural issue of the *Canadian Alpine Journal* (CAJ), Frank Yeigh (1860-1935) made a remarkable observation. Commemorating “Canada’s First Alpine Club Camp,” the Toronto-based writer and Graduating Member of the fledgling Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) praised—first and foremost—the extraordinary efforts of the club’s outfitters, those who provided the wherewithal and knowledge necessary for backcountry travel and tourism. This will not be surprising to anyone who has spent time at the annual General Mountaineering Camp, now simply known as the GMC, the ACC’s flagship operation and longest running climbing camp of its kind—anywhere. The commitment required to smoothly manage the first “tented town” of 1906 differs little from that which is required

today. What makes Yeigh’s commentary so wonderfully unusual, though, is a matter of historiography. Mountaineering writing, too often, perhaps, solely honours the events and individuals that pushed the physical and mental boundaries of the sport: the pioneering ascents and the visionaries who realized them. Sometimes lost in the retelling is the fact that much of this celebrated past was dependent upon the labour of “others”: Aboriginal hunters and guides in the sport’s earliest years, women, or working-class mountain guides, mapmakers, packers, trail hands, and labourers. Outfitters, especially, as well as their families and staff, played a central role in not only the mountaineering and exploration history of the Rockies and Columbias, but also in the region’s economic, environmental, and transportation histories. Their contributions warrant decided positioning in the larger story of western Canada.



The dining tent accommodated one hundred, where meals were served from early morn till late night.
—Frank Yeigh, 1907 *Canadian Alpine Journal*.

The Alpine Club of Canada is proud to have as its Patron for the 2008 Mountain Guides Ball neither a cutting-edge climber nor a long-standing icon of the mountaineering community. In fact, this year's Patron isn't even an individual. It is a family of outfitters, particularly a father and son, whose dedication to the ACC and the wider mountaineering community spans over half a century.

The Harrisons have been associated with the GMC since the years immediately following the Second World War, when Bill Harrison, a well-established outfitter from Edgewater, B.C., secured in 1946 his first contract with the ACC in the Bugaboos, just west of Spillimacheen, in Purcell Mountains. There, Bill met climbers who became long-time friends, such as Rex Gibson (1892-1957), an amateur leader from Edmonton and already an institution in the Canadian mountaineering scene, and Roger Neave (1906-1991), an early pioneer of the Waddington area in the Coast Range. The following summer, Bill again outfitted for the GMC, this time at Glacier Station, near Rogers Pass. It was fifteen years before the Trans-Canada Highway pushed its way over the densely forested Selkirks. Travel was still either by rail or horse.



"Father and son." Bill and Brad Harrison, c. 1960

Outfitting the 1954 GMC in the Goodsir Range, just south of Field in Yoho National Park, Bill began a lasting association with the ACC and remained the camp's outfitter for the next thirty years. With Bill's death in 1993, his youngest son, Brad, continued the family tradition. Brad, who had ridden to his first camp on his brother's horse at the age of four, was, in fact, already deeply involved in the management of the GMC. He had taken the reins nearly a decade earlier when the economic downturn of the 1980s threatened the viability of the operation. Under his leadership, the camp was scaled back and modernized to address to the economic concerns of the day, and has steadily since—summer by summer, camp by camp—grown in popularity as it rolled into the twenty-first century towards its own centennial year.

Club members, today, again speak of the GMC like it is "a pilgrimage to Mecca; everyone should do it at least once in their lives. Guides, staff, and participants all talk about the special atmosphere in camp, the sense of history, and the camaraderie encircling the camp, not just the climbing."

Everyone attributes the success to Brad, who holds the unique distinction of having spent more time at the GMC than anyone else in the camp's 103-year history. In fact, in the last decade and a half, he's frequently spent five or more weeks each summer coordinating the thousands of tasks that make the camp run smoothly, all the while holding a full-time position with Air Canada, co-owning and operating a series of backcountry ski lodges, and, most recently, presiding over the Backcountry Lodges of British Columbia Association, an advocacy group that represents over twenty-five wilderness lodges across the province.

This publication is a tribute to these two remarkable outfitters: one who is deceased but not forgotten, the other continuing to go where his father before him had gone—and well beyond. It is also a tribute to the entire Harrison family, who have carefully brought so many to the backcountry of the Rockies and Columbias, where their guests chose to climb, hunt, fish, take pictures, survey, or ski, all finding their own special mountain experience.



Bill Harrison at the 1986 Fairy Meadow GMC. Photo by Brad Harrison.

William Orton Harrison, known simply as “Bill,” was born in Galena, near present-day Spillimacheen, B.C., on December 9, 1904. He lived in the Columbia River Valley most of his life, and remembered well the day when his family travelled from Windermere to Golden by steamboat to purchase a hand-operated washing machine. Most travel was by horse in those days. Bill learned the ropes at an early age while working for Walter James Nixon (1882-1952), a pioneer guide and outfitter in the Kootenays, with his pack train during the summer holidays while still attending school. The family lived on a rented farm near Spillimacheen, and, later, on another small farm just south of Brisco, but it was clear to Bill at a young age that “farming just wasn’t any future, so I stuck to packing.” There was little shortage of work in the game-rich valley.

“I was with Walter Nixon for years and years,” Bill said of his apprenticeship, “packing for tourists, mountaineers, hunters, and fishermen, all over these here Kootenays.”

Nixon had come west from Ontario as a young man and began ranching in the upper Columbia River Valley around 1905. Occasionally serving as a game warden in the Kootenay River and Leancoil districts, Nixon spent most of his time guiding, work that steadily developed into a bustling outfitting business based in Invermere. For years, each fall, when the busy hunting season came to an end, Bill accompanied him in the hills for their own “packer’s holiday” away from the dudes. “He always looked forward that,” Bill fondly reminisced, “and so did I.”

In the decades following the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), the number of mountaineers, anglers and hunters, and other wealthy tourists, dramatically increased in the main ranges. So, too, did their significance to the local economy. The impetus was provided, in part, by the CPR’s international advertising campaign, not to mention published accounts in alpine journals, popular periodicals, and books, which all promoted the west as an untouched, curative playground, ripe for adventure and teeming with game. Bill remembered well a two-week trip that he and Nixon guided for

Walter Nixon, guide and outfitter, securing a load on a packhorse, Windermere Valley, B.C. Courtesy of the Glenbow Museum (NA-1135-56).



John Murray Gibbon (1875-1952), the shrewd CPR publicity agent from Montreal, over Sinclair Pass and north along the Kootenay River to Leancoil in 1919. Construction of the Banff-Windermere road had just begun, and the establishment of Kootenay Dominion Park was only a year away. Gibbon, along with his photographer, was after salable images of wild animals along the trail. “There was lots of game in those days,” Bill maintained, “and it was all packhorse work.”

Most of the horse parties were outfitted for American sport hunters. Sheep populations thrived in the South Kootenay before the 1940 epidemic of lungworm disease, and many well-heeled tourists came north hoping to shoot an animal from each of the major species. Trophy heads were the norm, not the exception. Sportsmen prided themselves on hunting for sport and trophies rather than food, and thus disparaged those—too often Aboriginal peoples—who ate the meat of their quarry. Not bound by such prejudices, Bill packed the meat out for himself and other local families.

The unique geology of the Columbia region was also a magnet for outsiders, particularly mining prospectors, who first rushed to the area as early as the 1860s. There are few drainages that do not contain evidence of their search. The nearby Bugaboos, for instance, now famous for alpine rock climbing and heli-skiing, took its name from a myriad of failed ventures in the 1890s. Gold was never found. Most claims were abandoned after a few years. But prospecting did continue in the region, particularly to the north, and there was much mapping and survey work to be done. Beginning in 1920, Bill spent two long summers in the employ of the Topographic Survey of Canada, packing for Dominion Land Surveyor Morrison Parsons Bridgland (1878-1948), a co-founder of the ACC, and his assistant, Calgarian Ley Edwards Harris



J. Murray Gibbon, Charles D. Walcott, and Banff outfitter Tom Wilson in the Yoho Valley, 1924. Courtesy of the Glenbow Museum (NA-1263-1).

(1890-1983). Relying on phototopographic and triangulation surveys, the outfit mapped the backcountry of the Clearwater-Nordegg area of Alberta, the Big Bend Highway of the upper Columbia, and from Revelstoke to Sicamous, mostly using government horses.

In the absence of gold, fossils made famous the geology of the wider region, especially the northern section of Yoho National Park. There, in 1886, workers building the CPR hotel at Field first recorded an abundance of “stone bugs” on the nearby slopes of Mount Stephen. The reports attracted Charles Doolittle Walcott (1850-1927), an American invertebrate palaeontologist and Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C., in 1907. The fossils, in their superb preservation, were unlike anything he had ever seen. Walcott returned season after season and collected more than 65,000 specimens from what he called the Burgess Shale, named for nearby Burgess Pass and Mount Burgess, and now designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Bill first met Walcott at Lake Louise during the summer of 1922. Although Bill was with another outfit that summer, Walcott enlisted his services for the following two seasons.

Walcott travelled with a full camp, his wife, and a cook, and was in need of a young man to look after his horses. Bill far surpassed the job description. “I was his body guard the whole time I was with him. He wanted me to go out everyday with him on a horse. I’d stay with him, look after him, bring him home again, and see that he got to his bed—that man was nearly seventy-five years old at that time! That’s quite an age. He was a wonderful man.” During an interview conducted in the 1970s by Lizzie Rummel (1897-1980), Bill proudly put on display a framed panoramic picture of the Lake of Hanging Glacier taken by Walcott in 1923.

“I made my first trip there with Dr. Walcott. He sent me this picture. We spent three weeks up in that country. It was a real nice trip.”



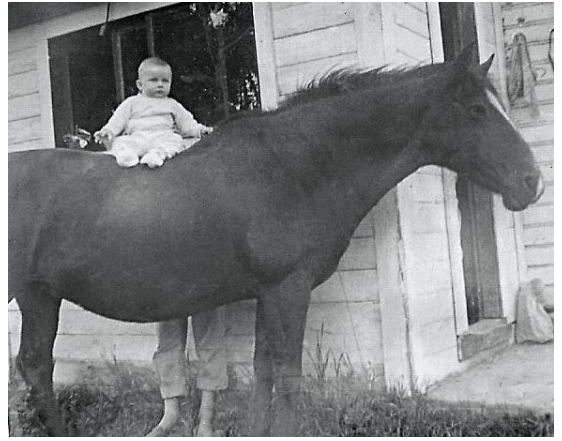
Lake of the Hanging Glacier. Photo by Charles D. Walcott, 1923.

In 1924, Bill bought his own pack train and kept it busy by moving survey crews from camp to camp. He worked at Nordegg, now on the David Thompson Highway, at Lardeau south of Revelstoke, as well as up the Beavermouth, Quartz, Vowell, and Spillimacheen creeks. At the decade’s end, Bill bought hunting territory in the upper Kootenay and started his own seasonal guiding and outfitting business. Business slowed. The economic slump, which was symptomatic of a much wider sickness, brought increasing hardship and despair to the working families of the Columbia Valley. Ever resourceful, Bill learned to be a blacksmith in 1930 and earned his certificate in horseshoeing and wheelwrighting after a two-year apprenticeship. He shortly thereafter set up a small blacksmith shop in Edgewater. The Great Depression reached its bottom in 1932. Slowly, the economy climbed from the trough.



Bill Harrison (right) and Tom McCready (left) packing, c. 1960s. Photo by Gordon Harrison.

In the spring of 1936, at the Anglican Church in Edgewater, Bill married Florence Isabel Smith (1915-2005), a young woman from Vancouver who had moved to the Columbia Valley with her parents, Herbert and Jane Smith. Bill continued blacksmithing and outfitting, and the couple had their first child, Doreen Elizabeth, in 1937. Their family continued to grow throughout and after the wartime years with the births of five additional children: Emily Marina in 1938, Gordon William in 1940, Stanley Neville in 1944, and Beverly Lorraine in 1945. In 1957, Bradley James was the last to be born, more than a decade after his siblings.



Baby Brad gets his first riding lesson. Edgewater, 1957.

The Second World War stopped the Depression cold and brought unprecedented prosperity to Canada. Everyone was working. Bill served with the 81st Company Invermere of the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers, who formed in 1942 to patrol the remote areas of the province and calm public unease over possible enemy activities. Loggers, trappers, prospectors, and ranchers typically assumed this distinctive role because of their knowledge of the local topography and terrain. The end of the war in 1945 brought about an even larger transformation in work, one that was inextricably tied to leisure. Across the country, in spite of the war debt, the *boom* had begun: a housing boom, a baby boom, a mining and drilling boom, even an immigration boom. Newcomers fit well into a country that was now overwhelmingly urban. Prosperity had its rewards. A new forty-hour work week and an overall increase in annual vacation time became standard in many industries, affording workers greater opportunities to pursue leisure out of doors. Outdoor recreation became a mass phenomenon. Attendance in Canada's national parks skyrocketed from approximately 500,000 in 1940 to nearly 2 million in 1950, and 5.5 million in 1960. Membership in the ACC swelled for the first time in decades.

Bill recalled his many years of outfitting the club's summer camp with great fondness and pride. "I spent one year in the Bugaboos, one year in the Selkirks, I skipped a year or two, and then I took them on for twenty-two consecutive years—and I'm still going!" he

proudly told Lizzie Rummel in 1976. Bill's first GMC, held close to home in the Bugaboos during the summer of 1946, was a memorable one. The main camp was located at the uppermost fork of Bugaboo Creek, not far from where, twenty years later, Austrian-emigrants Hans Gmoser (1932-2006), Franz Dopf, and Leo Grillmair would build their famous Bugaboo Lodge. Ken Jones (1910-2004), who was both cooking and guiding at the 1946 camp, recalled that "there was a mob there that year. It was a record attendance for an ACC camp of about one hundred and eighty five people." Celebrated as the first Canadian-born mountain guide, Jones was given his start by Bill as "a wrangler and general gopher" years earlier as a teenager. The two were no strangers to the Bugaboos. Although Bill had guided prospectors in the area a few years before, he and Jones, along with Swiss guide Walter Feuz (1894-1985), had brought the renowned English climber, Katie Gardiner (1886-1974), to the foot of the area's famous granite spires in 1935.

The 1971 Farnham Creek GMC.
Photo by Marjory Hind.
Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of
the Canadian Rockies. (V46/36 ns 81).



Outfitting a two-week climbing camp for 180 people was a very different proposition. These large and well-organized events brought in club members from all over North America, as well as foreign visitors. Often catering to well over 100 climbers, the camps were situated in remote forested valley bottoms with access to a handful of peaks, some unclimbed and often exceeding 3000 metres in elevation. Setting up the camp in those days was a daunting proposition, with half the battle being the transport of the requisite gear to the site. It was not unusual to have three-to-four tonnes of food and equipment to transport. Just getting to the camp often involved cutting trails, negotiating river crossings, building rafts, swimming the horses, coping with swarms of insects, and dealing with all sorts of other trials and



Bill Harrison skidding lumber to the 1965 Glacier Lake GMC. Photo by Marjory Hind. Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (V46/29 ns).

tribulations. Thirty-plus horses were typically used to transport the mass of food, canvas, stoves, wooden boxes, climber's personal gear, and even hay. The undertaking in 1946 involved three days of hard packing from Spillimacheen along overgrown mining trails. Once on site, participants' tents—which were segregated into male, female, and married areas—and the large canvas kitchen, dining, and supply tents all needed to be pitched. Lumber had to be felled and skidded in by horse. Outhouse holes needed to be dug. It is impossible for the uninitiated to imagine the work involved in catering such a large enterprise.



Packing up at the 1968 Lake O'Hara GMC. In the right foreground is Bill's famous bear dog, Tim. Photo by Marjory Hind. Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (V46/34 ns 2).

Meat wasn't always stored in coolers at the GMC. During the fifties, sixties, and seventies, Bill brought a full quarter of beef into each camp and butchered it on site. In those years, the camp dog was critical to keep the bears away! Photo by Gordon Harrison, c. 1970s.



Bill packed in the food and gear for the 1947 camp near Glacier Station at Rogers Pass. Because road construction through the pass did not commence until the late fifties, horses and gear were all sent in by rail. Few would have considered riding the horses back to the Kootenays through the Selkirks. But Bill took his pack train home through the remote ranges south of Rogers Pass. His first attempt, via the Duncan River, became impossible due to overgrown packers' trails and rough terrain, and he was forced to return to Glacier and ship out by rail. On another attempt, three or four years later, he ascended the Beaver River, crossed the divide to the North Spillimacheen, and descended the long valley to his home. It was the first time a pack train had ever been driven from the height of Glacier National Park, perhaps the country's most significant mountain pass, south into the Columbia River Valley.

Beginning in 1954 in the Goodsir Range, the Harrison family has been associated with every subsequent GMC to date. Bill's wife, Isabel, for instance, cooked for several camps, but most years she took care of all inquires, supplied scheduling, assisted in hiring the kitchen staff, and the myriad of other tasks that were required on the "outside." She fondly reminisced about the kitchen crew cooking for hours and hours over wood-burning stoves and having her jeans get so hot that she could hardly touch them. There were far too many people to feed in one sitting. The children helped at various jobs. Marina, now living on Vancouver Island, remembers working up through the ranks to become a cook for various camps. Lorraine sometimes worked alongside her sister in the kitchen as one of the many servers. One of the hallmarks of a Harrison camp was the exceptional meals, and securing the best kitchen staff was a critical aspect of the outfitter's job. Bill tried to always hire local help. The schedule was the standard three meals per day, plus a four a.m.

Camp cooks. Left to right: Annie May Mitchell, Hilda Hammond, and Isabel Harrison. Photo by Gordon Harrison.



The GMC staff enjoy a sing-a-long, c. 1950s. Left to right: Unknown, Marina Harrison, unknown, Bill Harrison, Margaret Christensen, Betty Sawchuck (standing on the packer's box), and Bill's younger brother, Harold Harrison.

breakfast for those going on a longer climb, as well as the inevitable late dinner for a party returning to camp after sundown. No one went hungry because they could not make it back to camp on time. It was often a long day for the cooks.

"We didn't even think about climbing," recently laughed Betty Sawchuck, who, born and raised in the Columbia River Valley, was the head cook from 1953 to 1960. *"We just worried about getting everyone fed when they got back from their day. But it was still just a holiday for me."*

Gordon and Stan Harrison frequently helped their father with the packing. And there was always wood to be split. It was during Gordon's first camp in 1954 that he met Albert H. MacCarthy (1876-1956), a member of the club since 1911 and famous for his first ascent of Bugaboo Spire (1916) and mounts Logan (1925), Louis (1916), Robson (1913), among others. "Gordon was staying in camp. He was just a young lad then,"

remembered Bill, proudly. “He and Captain MacCarthy used to get together everyday and clean up the yard—nice and neat, you know. He talked to Gordon all the time. Gordon never forgot that.” Unable to walk out from camp that summer, the elderly club statesman was carefully taken out on horseback. It was to be MacCarthy’s last camp. Gordon returned for the next eighteen consecutive summers.



Gordon, Bill, and Stan Harrison, c. 1950s.

Similarly, young Brad rode out with Phyllis B. Munday (1894-1990), then the club’s honorary president and past editor of the CAJ, from her last GMC at Mount Robson in 1974. Canada’s Governor General had, just a year earlier, named Munday a member of the Order of Canada for not only her mountain climbing, but also her service to others through the St. John Ambulance Brigade and the Girl Guides of Canada. Fittingly, the 1974 camp marked the fiftieth anniversary of when, from the 1924 Robson GMC, she and Annette Buck (d. 1946) succeeded in becoming the first women to stand on the highest peak in the Rockies. Munday’s presence at the camps was missed.



Cutting wood at the 1963 Eremite Valley GMC.
Photo by Gordon Harrison.

“Things were different without her,” Gordon recalled. “Everyone always waited with excitement for Phyl Munday to arrive at the camp. She made the whole thing complete. That’s just the kind of person she was.”



Isabel Harrison and Phyllis Munday
at the 1974 Mount Robson GMC.
Photo by Gordon Harrison.

The effects of postwar development and escalating tourism in the mountain backcountry, along with the growing environmental movement abroad, rekindled the ACC’s conservationist roots in the mid-to-late 1960s. Increasingly aware of the impact of the large camps (the 1962 Maligne Lake camp hosted 250 people!), the club began to limit the size of the operation. Minimum impact was in fashion. Helicopters were sometimes preferred to horses because of their speed and the substantial reduction of wear on the trails. Bill still *favoured* the pack trains. “The horses made the trails in the first place,” he once said, “now they won’t let them walk on them!” For

Bill, like many of his generation, conservation meant a return to a simpler time, a return to the past, before forestry access roads cut deep into the backcountry. “They’ve almost spoiled the glory of the whole thing,” he once decried. Helicopters, perhaps, embodied modernity’s worst aspect: the degrading intrusiveness of convenience. But the club gladly stuck with Bill’s services, even for the heli-assisted camps.

Helicopters were used for the first time to ferry guests and supplies in to the 1967 Steele Glacier General Camp, which, held in the Centennial Range of the Saint Elias Mountains, formed part of the club’s Yukon Alpine Centennial Expedition. Also for the first time, propane stoves and heaters were used in place of wood-burning stoves. With only fifty participants and no firewood to cut, Bill and Gordon outfitted the camp with a reduced staff of three cooks, four servers, and themselves. Bill’s younger brother, Harold Harrison (1912-1992), who had helped out at several camps during the fifties and early sixties, supervised the staging camp seventy-five kilometres beyond Kluane Lake. The whole undertaking was a grand success. Honoured guests included, among others, Lord John Hunt (1910-1998), famed leader of the 1953 British expedition to Mount Everest, as well as Judy LaMarsh (1924-1980), the Secretary of State and second only female cabinet minister in Canadian history. “My dad always raved about Lord and Lady Hunt,” recalled Brad, who, much still to his chagrin, was deemed too young to make the trip north. “The Hunts were always keen to help out with daily chores, the dishes, you name it. They had no airs. They just liked being a part of the camp.” Writing in the 1968 CAJ, the ACC’s Vice President praised Bill and the mountain guides—Hans Gmoser, Hans Schwarz, and Peter Fuhrmann—for doing their “regular wonderful job.” For Bill’s part, the Government of Canada conferred on him the Centennial Medal in recognition of his “valuable service to the nation.”



A Bell 47 servicing a GMC in the late 1960s. Photo by Marjory Hind. Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (V46/34 16).

“Four Old Reprobates” at the 1980 Mount Clemenceau GMC.

Left to right: Bob Hind, Bill Harrison, Bruce Fraser, Aileen Harmon, and Margaret Fraser. Photo by Marjory Hind. Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (V46/43 ns 7 35).



With three decades of family history invested in the club's annual camp, Brad became increasingly involved in the family tradition. Gordon, who diligently worked alongside his father for much of the fifties, sixties, and early seventies, had started his own family and found it more and more difficult to be away from home during the summer months. Tragedy beset the Harrison family in 1974, when Bill and Isabel lost their oldest daughter, Doreen. She had been visiting the family for a weekend from Edmonton, AB, and suffered a cerebral aneurysm. The onset was sudden and without warning. Doreen passed away the following day in the Invermere hospital. In those years, Bill's job at the camps was made easier by the occasional addition of other outfitters, such as Glen Kilgour; but, as the decade's end grew near, it was increasingly evident that, with time, Brad would inherit the role of outfitter when his father retired. In 1976, the ACC recognized Bill's years of service by awarding him an honorary lifetime membership. To this day, he remains the only non-climbing member to receive such distinction. Bill and Isabel left the Columbia River Valley in 1978 to make their home in Armstrong, B.C. He continued to attend the GMC for another ten years.

Alison Dakin and Bill Harrison
outside the cook tent at the 1985
Wates-Gibson Hut GMC.
Photo by Brad Harrison.



"Conversation between Bill and Chance" at the 1980 Mount Clemenceau GMC Photo by Marjory Hind. Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (V46/43 ns 7 33).

The early 1980s was a difficult period for the ACC. "The club was not in great shape financially," remembers Bruce Fraser, a long-serving amateur leader at the GMC. The danger signs were such that, after attending the ACC's 1982 Annual General Meeting in Vancouver, Peter Fuhrmann, the first president of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides, privately wondered if the club's national initiatives were at an end. To make matters worse, the summer camp, faced with dwindling attendance, ran into record deficit. Financial losses from the 1984 Glacier Circle GMC were almost more than the beleaguered club could endure. It had little choice but to consider cancelling its annual tradition. Fuhrmann assumed the presidency and initiated a period of rebuilding. The GMC was put out to tender. It was a last-ditch effort.

The overall management of the camp had always been conducted through the club's head office. Historically, Bill was contracted to look after the outfitting and catering, nothing

more. Guided by a deep sense of familial duty, Brad took total control in 1985. He put together a proposal, drew up a budget, arranged logistics, secured requisite permits, and hired the staff for a two-week, hut-based camp to be held at the Wates-Gibson Hut in the Tonquin Valley, all under the agreement that if even one dollar was lost on the venture the camp would be finished—permanently. Brad, Alison Dakin, another GMC veteran, and Wayne Bingham comprised the staff. Don Vockeroth returned as guide with three amateur leaders, including Cyril Shokoples, an assistant guide at that time.

Blessed with perfect weather, the eighteen participants in the first week and twenty-three in the second were able to summit a peak every day. The camp even turned a small profit. Despite the mosquitoes, it was an unqualified success. Writing in the 1986 CAJ, Bingham thanked all those who participated. “I sincerely hope that we shall meet again at the 1986 Fairy Meadows GMC.”



Participants and staff at the 1985 Wates-Gibson Hut GMC.
Photo by Brad Harrison.

Brad had never been so busy. He had just taken a full-time position with Pacific Western Airlines (later subsumed by Air Canada) in 1985, working on the ramp at Vancouver International Airport, when the opportunity arose to enter into a backcountry ski-lodge venture with Bingham, Alison, and her older sister, Tannis Dakin. The timing was good. Ski touring had become an increasingly popular activity in the Columbias and Rockies during the mid-to-late 1980s. Ticket sales at the major ski resorts were down as more and more people ventured out into the backcountry in search of deep powder snow. Even the popular ski magazines of the period began to favour images of off-piste mountain terrain. According to local ski-history aficionado Chic Scott, however, “nothing has marked the boom in backcountry skiing in Canada more than the proliferation of commercial ski lodges.”

Golden Alpine Holidays started in 1986, when Bingham and Alison built their first two lodges, Vista and Sunrise, in the Esplanade Range of the Columbia Mountains, just north of Golden, B.C. The foursome built a third lodge, Meadow, the following year. “There was hardly any competition at that time,” Brad recalled. “We were maybe the third or fourth into the market.” Managing to retain his position with the airline, Brad quickly honed his ability to be in two places

Peter Findlay at Meadow Lodge, Golden Alpine Holidays.
Photo by Brad Harrison, 2004.



at once—a skill that he would master over the next twenty years. Although Bingham and Tannis remained with the company for only a handful of years before seeking opportunities elsewhere, Alison and Brad operated the lodges for nearly two decades. Brad's shenanigans and off-coloured jokes were as legendary as his clients' devotion. Although Alison admitted that they never made much money, every season brought "a lot of good skiing, lots of challenges, and never a dull moment." In Scott's estimation, "the lodges became one of the most successful backcountry ski operations in B.C."



Alison Dakin, "the boss." Photo by Brad Harrison, 2002.



Tracks down Cairn Peak near Sunrise Hut, Golden Alpine Holidays, 2004. Photo by Brad Harrison.

Louise Guy in base camp on the shore of Houston Lake at the 2005 Mody Dick GMC. Photo by Jordan Smith.



Hard work and dedication brought the GMC and the ACC through the difficult 1980s. Under Fuhrmann's leadership, the club

established, among other key initiatives, various internal committees to address and resolve areas of concern. Lucky for Brad, Louise Guy of Calgary became the Chair of the Camps Committee in 1986. In an effort to renew interest among club members, Guy mailed out hundreds of hand-written invitations. She even paid for the postage. "I went through all the lists of anybody who had ever been at camp," Guy remembered, giggling. "And, if they were still alive, I wrote to them!" History played into her hand. The good fellowship of the past camps made the GMC easy to promote. The 1987 Farnham Creek GMC quickly sold out and a third week was added to the program. Brad has been sending home happy campers ever since. Louise Guy hasn't missed a summer.

By the early 1990s, Bill had slowed down significantly. His career had left him bowlegged; but, even so, despite all frustration, he regularly belittled his problems. Instead, Bill, like so many of those involved in the pioneering days of guiding and outfitting, was happy to reminisce about the “good old days,” about life on the trail with likes of Conrad Kain (1883-1934) or J. Monroe Thorington (1895-1989), or of the shared camaraderie between fellow travellers in the hills. “It seems to me,” Bill once said, “that all those men you met in the hills in those days were all real fine fellows: real mountaineers, real hosts, as kind as they could be. They’d do anything in the world for you—give you anything they had if you wanted it.” Bill lived his life by those words. He passed away on March 11, 1993. His funeral was held at Radium, B.C., and Brad delivered his eulogy.

“Good old Bill mending tent” at the 1982 Vowells/Bugaboo GMC.
Photo by Marjory Hind. Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (V46/39 ns 7).



Eulogy For My Dad

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 backcountry. 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. Skilled, he seemingly could fix anything. A tireless worker. Reliable. 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-judgemental acceptance of each and every person he met. He truly looked for the good in everyone. Many 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 had a wife who loved him as much last week as she did fifty-six years ago. In an age where humanity to many 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.

The ACC's General Mountaineering Camp steadily grew in popularity after the mid 1980s, although the number of participants per week has remained near thirty. A fourth week was added in 1992; nine years later, a fifth was included to meet the demand. Brad dutifully oversaw it all—literally. The changes at the GMC have been remarkable. Moved up beyond the treeline, it became an entirely

self-contained camp, a model that set the standard for others. No matter what the provocation—profitability, liability, environmental, or health and hygiene issues—Brad consistently rose to meet the challenge, summer after summer. The ACC recognized his many efforts in managing their flagship operation by honouring him with a special Service Award in the autumn of 1992.

Base camp at the 2003 Snowy Pass GMC with the Chaba Icefields behind in early morning light.
Photo by Roger Laurilla.



Brad and participants washing dishes on Canada Day at the 2007 Mount Alexandra GMC.
Photo by Roger Laurilla.



“Those who know Brad well know that his daily pace at the camp is frenetic,” says Cyril Shokoples, now a veteran GMC guide and friend of the Harrison family. “Many participants are convinced that he only sleeps 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 well before everybody else at three a.m., begin the process of preparing the early breakfast, wake those getting up for early breakfast (four a.m.), 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 four a.m. breakfast for four continuous weeks without a break.”

Brad's enthusiasm and compassion for his guests extends to all of his employees, upon whom, he maintains, "the success of the camps depends." Many have loyally worked at the GMC for years. "I keep coming back for the camp atmosphere," says veteran GMC guide Helen Sovdat, "and because Brad's work ethic and energy inspires me." One of only a few female mountain guides in Canada, Sovdat never forgot the time when a participant, who was initially keen to join a trip, decided not to go upon discovering that she was the guide. Brad investigated and learned that the guest's hesitation stemmed from nothing more than an outdated, sexist myth of female frailty. He convinced the guest otherwise and returned to Helen with only two words: *bury him*. The guest returned from the next day's outing—"crawling on his knees"—with a new found respect for his guide.

"Every year, Brad does something to make our lives easier. It is important to him that our work is comfortable," maintains Laurie MacMillan, who has cooked at the camps for nearly a decade and a half. "At Moby Dick [1999], Brad came into the cook tent and told us that he had some extra wood and asked what he could build to help us out, thinking that maybe we could use something practical like an extra table. We told him that a lounge chair would be nice. He rolled his eyes, shook his head, mumbled under his breath, and walked out. We sort of forgot about it until he came back awhile later with a three-person lounge complete with reclining positions! We were sort of surprised, but that's Brad."

Brad maintains semblance and order in the kitchen at the 1999 Moby Dick GMC. Left to right: Brad Harrison with cooks Sarah Harper, Vicki Meaghar, Laurie MacMillan, and Elaine Gruenwald. Photo by Roger Laurilla.



Brad Harrison and Helen Sovdat studying the maps at the 2003 Snowy Pass GMC. Photo by Cyril Shokoples.

In 2003, suddenly and quite unexpectedly, Brad announced that he was scaling back his involvement with the GMC. The time had come for him to move on to other pursuits and pass much of the camp duties back to the ACC's head office. "Something had to change," said Brad, recently reflecting on his decision. "I was operating the lodges with Alison, working full-time in Vancouver, and running the summer camps, which was a year-round job in itself. It was far too much." Brad's energy for the GMC had seemed boundless, but no longer. News of his retirement provoked an outpouring of emotion and adulation from those attending the 2003 Snowy Pass GMC. Most could not imagine the camp without Brad. Ironically, as it turned out, he could not imagine himself without the camp. Brad hired and trained two new managers instead and simply shortened his stay.

What follows is an account of two typical days in the life of the Brad Harrison at the 2004 GMC. Printed in the ACC's Gazette, it was the best way he could explain his motivations for staying:

Pain and Pleasure at the Icefall Brook GMC

by Brad Harrison

Between eyelids that resist every attempt to open and the cloudy vapours from the condensation-laden exhalations of my own breath, I can barely discern that my wristwatch says 3:47—which would be in the a.m. My partner, long-time GMC guide Peter Amann, grumbles mostly incoherently about the distance to the outhouse and the earliness of the hour. I have now been up for eleven minutes and can placate Peter with the fact the coffee has been nearly brewed. A glimmer of sunshine noses out above the Lyell Icefield, a portent of what will be an awesome day.

The folks, still huddled and snoozing in their tents, are all participants at the ACC's annual GMC. We are hanging out in the Lyell high camp; spending only one night here is the normal gig. After putting the poor citizens of Week One through the torture of walking to and fro on the seven-kilometer "white treadmill," known as the Lyell Icefield, the GMC powers-to-be decided to set up a more conveniently located high camp for the following weeks. Practicality was the engine behind this decision, but ethereal realization was the result. The high camp was one of those truly cool places where one could spend time. This was my home for four nights during the summer of 2004.

In my usual pleasant and thoughtful manner, and with incorrigible abandon, I decide to roust the remainder of the participants. To me, of course, the obvious and most efficient manner in which to accomplish this goal is to throw egg-sized rocks at their tents. The resulting resonating bang, which certainly is much louder inside the tent, is bound to wake the dead. A number of participants reiterated that they were actually



Brad Harrison leads a rope team at the 2004 Icefall Brook GMC. Photo by Jacqueline Hutchison.

nearly dead after being marched from base camp to the summit of Christian Peak—3,358 metres—and back yesterday. They failed to remember that I climbed an extra sixty-four metres chasing an errant water bottle that was supposedly safely nestled in its owner's pack. In my opinion (the only one that I see value in listening to), I should be the one grouching.

Today, Peter and I are going to take them to the summits of Ernest, Edward, and Rudolph peaks, all of them reaching over 3,355 metres (11,000 feet). It isn't very often that one is able to bag three 11,000-foot summits in one day. I am suitably jazzed and do my best to impart that enthusiasm on the now fully grumbling participants, some apparently not very receptive to my method of rousing them. Undeterred by their derisive comments—even ones about my mother—I carry on cooking breakfast and ply them with porridge, coffee, and tea.

As we enjoyed the sunset yesterday, Peter and I informed our entourage that we would allow them to relax and that we wouldn't be departing until exactly 4:30 a.m. I thought this quite generous, an opinion that clearly wasn't shared. In any case, we departed at exactly 4:33 a.m. I let everybody know that we were embarking on a long day; but, with regular breaks and a good pace, all would be well. After a two-hour, non-stop jaunt, we found ourselves at the base of an imposing slope that leads to the Rudolph-Edward col.

Much to my surprise (thank goodness I had my iPod on, for it had insulated me from a barrage of insults and complaints), I found it hard to believe that some of the participants were unhappy with my pace. Incredulous, I apologized and promised to turn my iPod down for the remainder of the trip. That seemed to calm everybody, and the three folks who had frantically tied into Peter's rope hesitantly returned to mine.

We managed to ascend the steep south slopes to the col and skittered our way up the northwest snow/ice face of Rudolph. The views, of course, were spectacular. Other than some of the Scottish contingent, who managed to blunder into a few crevasses, while ostensibly searching their pockets for nickels, our descent down Rudolph and climb back up Edward proceeded without incident. The summit of Edward was truly serendipitous as we located the summit register, which was filled with anniversary pins. We all took one each—well some took two or three, but I won't name names. George used his pin to hold up his pants; I guess two days of death marching had decreased his pelvic diameter. He still wasn't talking to me. I had to presume that I had insulted him on day one. He had looked a bit tattered after charging up the initial 550-metre climb from base camp. While stumbling after his escaping water bottle, I merely noted that he looked like a wino chasing a rolling nickel. You can't please all of the people!

After descending into the Edward-Ernest col, our party decided to reorganize—rather separate. Peter lifted the spirits of his group by letting them journey directly back to high camp and avoid climbing Ernest. I immediately separated my group in case they would have time to be corrupted by the wisdom of Peter's ways and abandon me. Reinigorated, we charged to the summit of Ernest and enjoyed a leisurely, eight-minute snack. Our journey back to the high camp worked like clockwork. Upon a post-trip

debriefing, it was discovered that my clan was too tired to complain. This is a trick I learned from my mother, who would allow me to play on the freeway until I was either run over or was too exhausted to ramble on. In either case, she reckoned she was a winner.

We joined the other party for an extended thirty-four-minute lunch break—so lengthy because Peter and I had to buckle up the high camp. Funny, spirits were very high on what should have been a grueling three-to-four-hour plod back to the main camp. Participants began to realize that they all had accomplished an enormous amount in two short days. They might be a bit weary, but nobody could ever take away their achievements. Climbing four 11,000-ers in two days is no mean feat. Mother Nature had been at her opulent best, affording us perfect weather and incredibly favourable travelling conditions. This is what the GMC is all about.

This is an abbreviated account of two days in my life as the manager of the Icefall Brook GMC. It is typical and as rewarding as it seems. I want to thank Bonnie Hamilton and Andrew Findlay for their very complimentary articles that were written as farewells to me last year. The reality is that I didn't really leave, just shortened my stay.

Turns out I need the GMC more than it needs me.

Can't wait to see you at Moby Dick next summer.

Nick Zupan leading a party to the summit of Rudolph Peak (Lyell 1) during the 2004 Icefall Brook GMC. Christian Peak (Lyell 5) looms in the background. Photo by Brad Harrison.



Held in the Battle Range of the Southern Selkirk Mountains, the 2005 Moby Dick GMC boasted six sold-out weeks, each hosting thirty-three guests and eleven staff. Participants raved about the new showers—which, masterminded by Brad, provided hot water on demand—and buzzed with



Brad receives an old packer's box from ACC President Cam Roe at the 2006 Centennial GMC in the Premier Range. Photo by Roger Laurilla.

anticipation for the following year's Centennial GMC in the Premier Range of southern Cariboo Mountains, just north of Valemount, B.C. Brad and the GMC committee had selected a new location to mark the ACC's 100th anniversary. It would be a summer to remember.

In the late spring of 2006, just weeks before the setup crew was scheduled to begin their annual task, a problem arose. Early snows the previous fall had prevented a proper reconnaissance of the location. Brad, relying solely on second-hand information, found the site completely unusable. Twenty days remained before the first week's participants would arrive. "I thought we were screwed," Brad chuckled. "But you find a solution—and you make it work." There was no time to spare. After studying the area's topography,

he found a suitable location for a base camp, which would afford easy access to various scrambles. A high camp, however, close to the upper Kiwa Glacier, was also necessary to gain the area's high alpine. Travel between the two sites, while doable, did not look pleasant. After an emergency conference call with ACC Director of Club Services Sandy Walker, Club President Cam Roe, GMC Committee Chair Masten Brolsma, VP Activities Roger Laurilla, and others, it was decided that a helicopter would shuttle participants between the two camps at the mid point of each week. The high camp needed to be fully functional with a permanent manager, cook, and supplies. The gamble paid off. While the logistics were a constant challenge for the staff, the two-camp GMC created a positive and memorable experience for the participants, who unanimously raved about the split week. So positive was the response, in fact, that Brad and the GMC Committee remain optimistic about repeating the formula at future camps.

Climbers on X-Ray Ridge during the 2006 Centennial GMC. Photo by Nancy Hansen.



Although Brad and Alison sold Golden Alpine Holidays in the fall of 2006, Brad never really left the backcountry ski industry. Since the boom of the eighties and nineties, the market had grown to include at least twenty-five backcountry commercial ski lodges throughout western Canada. Fortunately for them, Brad now serves as the Executive Director of the Backcountry Lodges of British Columbia Association, an information-sharing group that represents the interests of lodge owners clear across the province. And Brad is still skiing. He anticipates getting out even more. With his long tenure at the Vancouver Airport drawing to an end, Brad recently assumed the responsibility of coordinating the public safety programs and curriculum for the Canadian Avalanche Association, a non-profit, non-government organization based in Revelstoke, B.C., that serves and supports the diverse community of professional avalanche operations across the country. If history is any indication, the next generation of backcountry professionals is in good hands. They've hired a Harrison.

It has been written that climbing camps were once the backbone of Canadian mountaineering. In some ways, perhaps, the same is true today. The GMC continues to simplify arrangements for individuals to climb in exceptionally beautiful and often remote areas of the Columbias and the Rockies. It provides the occasion for the inexperienced to meet and climb with more seasoned mountaineers. Because of the companionable setting, the challenge of the activity pursued,

Week Five participants and staff at the recent 2008 Vowells/Bugaboos GMC.
Photo by Zac Robinson.



A sombrero-clad Brad sets the track from Sunrise Hut, Golden Alpine Holidays, 2004. Photo by Lynn Martel.

and the absence of other worldly distractions, friendships and memories form that often last a lifetime. No camp like it exists anywhere else in the world, certainly not one that has endured for over a century. Looking back over the past 100 years, we can be justifiably proud of the numerous unspoken individuals who have taken a central role in ensuring the vitality and longevity of this grand tradition. They, too, have a long, rich, and proud history.



Brad Harrison and Kayla at the 2001 Remillard GMC.
Photo by Roger Laurilla.

In 1998, Cyril Shokoples wrote a little-known article for the *Canadian Alpine Journal* titled “Harrisons.” It was a tribute to a family of outfitters from the Columbia River Valley whom he first came to know as a young, aspiring guide volunteering at a mountaineering camp somewhere near Mica Dam in August, 1980. Eloquent and heartfelt, his final words serve best in closing to any toast befitting this extraordinary family, the Harrisons, who started out to make the camp a success and did so.



Brad Harrison on Tamarack Peak with Bugaboo Spire in the background. Photo by Cyril Shokoples, 2008.

Bill Harrison serving as best man at Grant Atchison's wedding in Golden, BC, 1985.



Vancouver, October 1997: Listening to a tape recording, I hear Bill's booming voice fill the room and 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 Häsler 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 triggers a full range of emotions in us both. It is evident that Brad has 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 members show the same pride and are deserving of their own accolades. These are the Harrisons I have known; it has been my humble honour to share a few moments of their lives.

Rest easy, Bill.