

## TROUBLED TRIBUTARIES: ALBERTA ANGLERS, FISH FIGHTS, AND THE RACE TO SAVE MOUNTAIN COLDWATER STREAMS, 1900-1930

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ISBN 978-1-77385-689-6

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## *Tending the Highwood's Underwater Gardens*

They stood about on the rough trail beaten in the cow pasture along the Highwood River. It was an otherwise quiet Saturday afternoon in July 1926, just up on the benchland above the river valley. At the very spot where the first of many cattle gates opened and closed to anglers driving west along the river in new-fangled, noisy, and cantankerous automobiles, the members of High River's angling protective association were stopping drivers to ask where they were coming from and just where they were headed with their fishing rods.

Town anglers were taking such interest in these matters for a reason. As Calgary's own streams grew crowded with pot fishers and urban industry and construction affected waterways, the popularity of countryside visits and recreation in "nature" had exploded. During the early 1920s—a period so difficult economically and demographically for towns like Didsbury, Fort Macleod, Lethbridge, and High River—automobiles quickened the pace of outsider visits to rural areas. Farmers owned autos, but urbanites used them in ways that thoroughly rankled countryside folk. City "auto-tourists" arrived like gawking, intrusive, and rude colonizers, seemingly ready to take whatever a town could offer and make demands for whatever it did not.<sup>1</sup> The influx of outsiders, many of them intent on fishing, expanded significantly with automobile use, spurring some of the largest and most influential conservation campaigns of the interwar era.

Few Alberta towns mobilized so methodically and with such determination as High River anglers did in the 1920s. Throughout the decade, its angling protective association wielded considerable political influence to shape fisheries policies, with its members guarding the trout sanctuaries of the magnificent Highwood River.

## *The Calgary Auto-Tourist*

As almost everyone knew, most of the visitors to the Highwood in 1926, trammelling ranges and driving pell-mell over riverbanks in automobiles, hailed from Calgary. The city's population, although still growing sluggishly after the wartime hiatus, exceeded sixty-five thousand. Poised for the next boom, Calgary was a city with aspirations of rivalling the status of Winnipeg, which, before the war, had been the region's chief commercial and cultural centre and the point of entry to Canada's West. Calgary's bustling literary clubs, women's auxiliaries, social scene, and arts-supporting, theatre-going classes were mobilizing for economic prosperity.

Nothing seized Calgarians' imagination quite like the ultimately modern contrivance, the automobile. In 1921, the city's *Morning Albertan* ran sections devoted to automobiles, their maintenance, and their use, especially in countryside visits. It also ran no end of reports on the abuse of the new transport device, often in the hands of inexperienced drivers. There was the case of Thomas Stinson, who "ran amuck" with his vehicle and, on Ninth Avenue, ran down a certain G. C. Abernathy, who was visiting the city from Champion. Reportedly, "after running over him," Stinson calmly backed the car off the man's body and . . . drove away at a good rate of speed." He then flattened Allan Laughton, who was riding his bicycle. Stinson was finally apprehended at his home and arrested.<sup>2</sup>

Calgary streets were already becoming congested with automobiles. In 1914 auto registrations in Alberta topped 4,700, a tenfold increase from only four years before. Dozens of automobile models were seen on Calgary's streets by that time.<sup>3</sup> People were speeding down roads to the peril of pedestrians and parking vehicles along curbs overnight, contrary to a bylaw ordering them to use garages at their residences. It is surely ironic that they also turned to their cars to escape all the mayhem and "overcivilizing" effects of city life. With the help of technology, they could escape the mess of modernity and retreat to the countryside to fish the upper stretches of Southern Alberta rivers and streams. One was the *Morning Albertan's* society page columnist, Daisy MacGregor, who clearly relaxed along the Highwood to cast her line in the war years.

Although early vehicles notoriously broke down or blew tires, and most roads were "dirt trails riddled with almost impassable ruts,"



FIGURE 3.1

Daisy MacGregor, Society Editor of the *Albertan*, fishing the Highwood, 1918. NA-2772-10, Glenbow Library and Archives.

automobiles made possible the great urban invasion of the countryside and spurred the growing popularity of outdoor leisure.<sup>4</sup> In the case of fishing and hunting, the rapid growth of Calgary, which had led to the flushing out of game from its nearby forests and fields and the crowding of local stream fronts, gave urbanites all the more reason to procure an automobile. As one sportsman explained it, by 1921 one needed to go as far from Calgary as Innisfail (just south of Red Deer) to find the last braces of rapidly disappearing prairie chicken. A car was the best way to get there.<sup>5</sup>

Among the well-heeled Calgarians taking to the wheel in those years was Austin de Burnus Winter, a lawyer who was also one of the city's most sophisticated sportsmen. Born in Exeter, England, in 1882, Winter moved to Calgary in 1903 and was admitted to the bar in 1909. He arrived in Calgary just in time to witness streams drained of fish and fields emptied of pronghorn antelope and native birds. His conservation concerns dovetailed well with the work of John F. Eastwood's Calgary Fish and Game Protective Association, and Winter became involved with others in the association who were scrambling to replenish

these wild places. He and his associates talked of replacing the disappearing antelope with Swiss chamois.<sup>6</sup> More immediately, in 1907, Winter, Fred J. Green, and George I. Wood, all Calgarians, brought in bobwhite quail, the broods travelling comfortably in a heated rail car to be liberated at Midnapore, just south of the city. Unfortunately, most of them froze to death in the famous cattle-killing blizzards that winter. But, in 1908, Winter's group tried again with Hungarian partridges purchased from a Pennsylvanian dealer. The birds multiplied quickly. An Oregon breeder supplied Chinese ringnecks in 1928 and, later, Mongolian pheasants. But their greatest work was possibly in transplanting chukar partridge in a bid to replace the now-disappearing prairie chicken. The plan was simple: raise the broods, distribute them to other associations for careful guarding, and see that they multiply in the province's far-flung fields and forests.<sup>7</sup>

Winter had broods pecking at seed in the backyard of his posh house in Mount Royal. The home on 21st Avenue and 6th Street West in Calgary's most exclusive neighbourhood perfectly captured his work ethic, his flair for introducing the exotic into western environs, and his passion for all things sporty. Built on a precipitous slope, Winter's home was designed to capitalize on its location and impressive landscaping. The winding front steps led through a garden lined with blue spruce and past Japanese lanterns, a tile-roofed mailbox, and shaded pagoda, all contributing to an oriental theme.<sup>8</sup> But it was not a quiet retreat, by any means. Winter himself was an avid dog-man and kennel keeper. He bought setters and retrievers from distant US dealers and entered them in competitions convened in the foothills. His evenings were spent corresponding with sporting associations in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. From American and English dealers, he purchased guns and replacement parts, and handcrafted hobnailed boots for the next spring duck hunt.<sup>9</sup> Winter was also an unapologetic "moderationist" in the post-war prohibition era. His sporting companions made sure to share their supply of "splendid stock" with him on their shooting trips.<sup>10</sup> In the run-up to the big Alberta plebiscite on prohibition in November 1923, voters were to decide on continuing the wartime booze restriction or choose between various wet options. One of Winter's bird-hunting companions joked with him about evoking the ghost of Alberta's legendary imbiber, Bob Edwards, to foresee whether the vote would mean "moisture" in Alberta's weather forecast

or more “internal dryness” in the province.<sup>11</sup> Winter threw himself into the campaign of the Moderation League of Alberta.<sup>12</sup> So did R. A. Darker, serving as the league’s secretary, who invited Winter, as a lawyer, to attend meetings and show that “every trade, business, profession or calling” was represented in the movement to end prohibition.<sup>13</sup> In the end, the Moderationists prevailed. Almost 94,000 Albertans voted to allow government sales of liquor through permits and the controlled sale of beer in licenced establishments. Almost 62,000 voted to continue prohibition.<sup>14</sup>

By 1923, Winter and most of his friends had cars, which were providing “every travelling comfort” for their owners and their dogs and attendants, as one friend told Winter: he saw “no reason for spending money on hotels and taking long scouting drives in the morning. Each evening we will locate a roosting ground and park our car close at hand.”<sup>15</sup> Cars like these had removable seats so that sleeping bags could be stretched out, and the trunks could carry cooking equipment and food stuffs. Winter frequently caught lifts with friends who were more than happy to provide the gasoline if he brought along his dogs, rated as some of the best sporting animals in the city.<sup>16</sup> To one of his bird-hunting companions purchasing a Hudson sedan, Winter only trusted that he had fully considered “our annual chicken shoot.” Beyond the comfort of driver and passengers, it would need “space for the usual impediments, the game and the bird dogs.”<sup>17</sup>

Drivers rambled almost anywhere in cars in those years. They used autos more like mechanical horses on four wheels. In roadless areas, they cranked gears to get over rocky slopes, backed up to gain momentum needed to climb hills, and splashed across creek and riverbeds. They chugged their way into otherwise remote spots, their backfiring engines an endless source of consternation to farmers and ranchers. Many tended to leave a trail of garbage behind them when they returned to the city. At least in the eyes of locals, there was nothing more obnoxious than Calgary’s automobile drivers.

One of their choice destinations for fishing: the Highwood Valley. In 1922, the *Calgary Herald* recognized that over the past eight to ten years, the upper sections of the river had become “the poor man’s playground” for Calgarians. Banff had its appeal to well-off Calgarians, but it was in the Highwood’s forestry reserve where picnicking is “altogether unrestricted in the matter of free and easy personal liberty of action,”

provided that Calgaryans respected the very liberal reserve regulations. A Calgary man “with a car and his pleasure-seeking family” needed little in ways of supply and only a short forty-five-mile drive from High River brought everyone to the rock grade of Mount Head and then the “far-famed” Cataract Creek fishing holes, “wherefrom several five-pound cutthroat have been taken.” The *Herald* writer himself claimed to have landed Cataract cutthroat beauties “using only a willow pole, a rough string, and a chunk of raw beef dangling on a hook.” He now saw the fish delighting “to battle with the man handling expensive tackle, alluring flies, and a wading costume from head to heel; also a wicker basket.”<sup>18</sup>

Frank Watt, of the recently formed Highwood River Angling Protective Association, grew concerned with these hordes of Calgary visitors. Watt, a construction worker from Guelph, Ontario, had come to Alberta in the late 1890s and, ironically, had helped build most of the roads and bridges along the Highwood River that later so frustrated him. He also served as a district school trustee and was an avid reader who prided himself on being well-informed about national and local issues.<sup>19</sup> Apparent to this road builder were the deleterious effects of visiting automobilists on the once “splendid” fishing holes along the Highwood. Now “heavily fished” by anglers “who never had an opportunity to do so before,” Watt reported that his river’s trout were “scarce and very wary.”<sup>20</sup> The river had been spared the impact of railroad construction up its valley, of big-scale coal mining, such as that in Bankhead and Canmore, and the hydroelectric development of the sort beginning on Banff’s Lake Minnewanka. Although seasonally affected by the heavy upstream logging and the spring log drive organized by the High River-based Lineham Lumber Company, the Highwood had retained its robust fish populations well into the pioneer period. The Lineham company’s log boom just north of the town limits, which provided a narrow bridge for traffic, served anglers well: in the fall, mountain whitefish came up the river to the boom. Early pioneers remembered the bridge “lined with boys with long bamboo poles with brass wire snares attached to the end of the poles, snaring the fish. Others were fishing with hook and line.”<sup>21</sup>

As early as 1913, however, E. W. Miller, chief inspector of fisheries for the Department of Marine and Fisheries, saw a dramatic increase in automobile traffic along rivers in the southern areas of the province, with

the Highwood drawing the biggest crowds. George Stanley, a physician soon to be High River's representative to Alberta's legislative assembly, had alerted the fisheries department to the increase, commenting that the Highwood "is probably the most important river in Southern Alberta as far as fish is concerned."<sup>22</sup> With local pressure growing on the department of fisheries, the river got S. H. (Sam) Smith, who lived in the small settlement of Pekisko, as a paid guardian. A Conservative Party man respected by the many ranchers on the western sections of the river, Smith proved a good choice. Smith was lauded by cattleman Frederick Ings, whom Miller described as "living in the heart of the best fishing waters" of the Highwood and who was among the "many persons much interested in the preservation of trout."<sup>23</sup> During open season, Smith patrolled the river four or five days of each week. Helping him was the Calgary-based fisheries department overseer, J. S. Hoad, who also visited the river and issued tickets to offenders. There was also the High River detachment of the North-West Mounted Police that maintained its own patrols of the mountain stream.<sup>24</sup>

The Highwood's reputation grew after the war, and so did visits by automobile-driving tourists. Regarded as one of the premier fly-fishing spots in the west, the river was especially popular because it was accessible by the railroad from Calgary, which ran through High River, and had good road access as well. None other than Chicago's Dr. H. J. Morlan, of the powerful conservation organization, the Izaak Walton League of America, and one of the editors of *Outdoor Recreation*, visited the Highwood in the interwar years. Having fished "all over the world," he concluded that there was "no more beautiful or deserving stream anywhere" than the Highwood. In 1925, having "cogitated over the possibilities of that magnificent stream," Morlan wrote a letter to fellow anglers in High River urging them to take up the cause of protecting the river from overfishing. "To neglect this stream in my opinion would be nothing short of treason," Morlan wrote. "And after all, we are ALL Americans, even though we fly a different flag."<sup>25</sup>

Morlan really did not have to convince High River people about the merits of their river. They had an almost mystical relationship with it. The Highwood is a mountain stream, born officially at 1,752 metres above sea level, where Mist and Storm Creeks join in the slate-grey crags of the Rockies in what is today Peter Lougheed Provincial Park. The river's origins in such perpendicular circumstances lend it a dangerous,

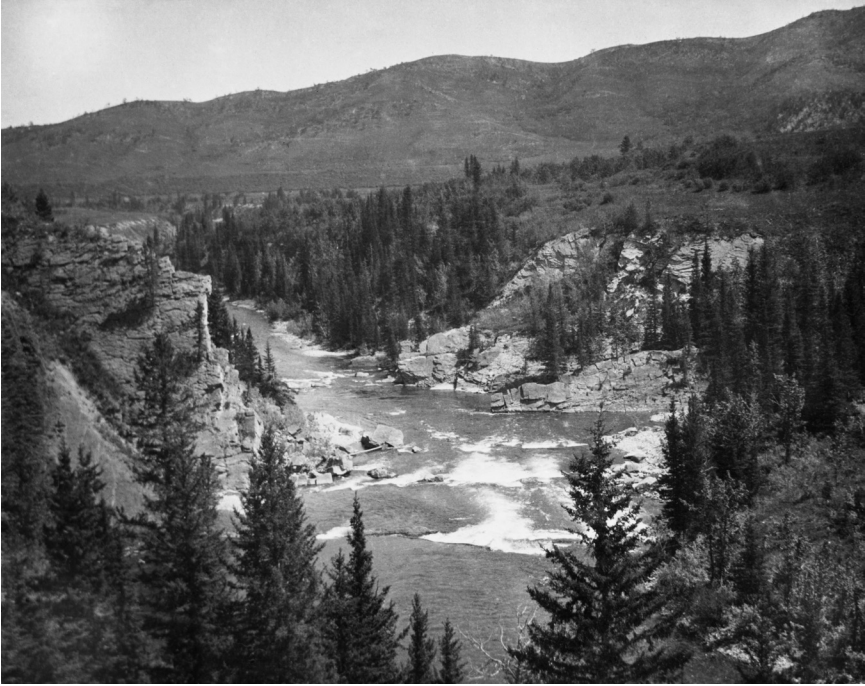


FIGURE 3.2

Early view of the Highwood Valley. NA-695-79, Glenbow Library and Archives.

almost feral, character. At its higher elevations, the Highwood is chiefly fed by snowmelt, and the cliffs, mountain mosses, and stands of lodgepole pine near its source are almost perpetually soaked in moisture. The spirit of the river, its essence, is created in swirling mountain clouds and mists, as if the water flows from heaven itself.<sup>26</sup>

In its higher reaches, the Highwood tumbles out of V-shaped valleys. Ranchers have difficulty getting cattle close enough to the river to drink in these areas, but, at 1,416 metres above sea level, the river slows and spreads out into a U-shaped valley, scoured in ancient times by glacial ice. The waters lose speed, and in many places, like a dog following its nose, the river meanders back and forth among glacial terraces. People living along this stretch of the river, now fully in ranching country, learned long ago not to discount the river's power, even at this slower rate of flow. The Highwood can easily change course on its gravels,

and, from time to time, it bucks its floodplain and destroys everything a farmer or rancher owns.<sup>27</sup>

From the earliest days of the settlement, High River citizens knew and respected the river that flowed through their town. They lived their lives to the sound of its waters. They knew it could flood in spring, during runoff, and in winter, with ice jams. Old-timers referenced their lives according to the Highwood's high-water marks, remembering the big floods, such as those of 1899, 1902, 1908, and 1912, when the river decided to rise and inundate their living rooms. High River citizens were reminded of the river's power in the great flood of 2013. As photographs in the Museum of the Highwood later made plain, during floods, the grey waters could swirl right through downtown, carrying board sidewalks with it.<sup>28</sup> The unpredictability of its waters, however, never detracted from the Highwood's beauty. The river had such life that it could even console pioneers whose hopes were dashed, as it apparently did a certain Harry Albert Ford. After spying coal seams along the river's western stretches, Ford had purchased leases, dropping his real-estate work, and sank his capital—too little, it turned out—into a failing mine. Despite this cruel reversal of fortune, the *High River Times* later found him quite content, ensconced in a cabin above the floodplain, in the company of his Airedale. The Union Jack flew from a flagpole, the paper reported, and both man and dog seemed “at peace with the world” in the Highwood valley.<sup>29</sup>

Dr. H. J. Morlan's concerns about overfishing on the Highwood River were long understood by High River citizens. Frank Watt, as mentioned, complained in 1922 that autos now opened Highwood streams to angling by outsiders.<sup>30</sup> Herbert N. (“Bert”) Sheppard, whose ranch house to the west of High River—appropriately called Sheer Cliff Ranch—looked directly over a magnificent escarpment onto the Highwood near present-day Longview, was likewise concerned, especially with the damage done to riverside hay meadows by campers. “Not only do people camp and drive through the hay meadows tramping down the hay,” he reported in 1922, “but they are most careless about fires.” He now saw “thousands of people from the cities and adjacent prairies who since motors have come into use, and especially during the last four dry years have enjoyed the use of the Forest Reserve as a picnicking and camping place, and while there have passed the time fishing.”<sup>31</sup>

The problem expanded in scope in the mid-1920s. Willow Creek, with its headwaters close enough to the Highwood basin that High River anglers included it in their protection efforts, flowed south to the Oldman, within reach of bustling, growing towns including Stavely, Claresholm, Granum, and Fort Macleod. On a visit to the Willow Creek area in 1926, R. T. Rodd, who was by then the fisheries inspector for Alberta, noted that “there are hundreds of people from the small towns such as Nanton, Stavely, Champion, Carmangay, etc. who during the summer months, fish in the Willow Creek and make trips into the foot hills for camping.” Nor was he blind to the result: “No doubt these campers, or fishing parties, cause considerable trouble,” he surmised, by opening gates and letting cattle out as well as leaving “rubbish, tin cans, etc.” behind them.<sup>32</sup>

Since the law gave anglers a right of access to streams, including streams flowing through private property, those seeking sport in out-of-the-way fishing holes ended up raising the hackles of a lot of farmers and ranchers. Calgary angler Henry Stewart, claiming thirty years of experience fishing the streams west and southwest of the city, was irked by the hostility he was feeling among country folk in the foothills by the late 1920s. In a letter to the *Calgary Daily Herald*, he reminded his fellow urban anglers of their right to fish, despite reports that “people living on land running into streams chase anglers off with shotguns and vicious dogs.”<sup>33</sup>

In response to Stewart’s letter, conservationist and public speaker Dave Blacklock took the opportunity to write to the *Herald* to complain about the campers who were chugging by car up and down the Highwood and the Bow, mangling stream fronts. He suggested Stewart take up land along one of the heavily fished streams. He would know what a local resident had to contend with when he had to “put up broken fences, shut gates, [and] catch and remove tin cans from the lower jaw and hoofs of cattle, due to careless campers.”<sup>34</sup>

The invasion of visitors, with their apparent lack of concern for the welfare of locals, bothered High River people at precisely the same moment when the community’s own prospects seemed bleak. The town’s fantastic growth in the first decade of the century—from a mere 153 souls in 1901 to 1,182 in 1911—had stalled during the war years. The 1921 census showed that High River’s population had increased by only

sixteen people since the war's end, and townspeople watched rival communities now attracting settlers, railway stations, and investment.<sup>35</sup>

Quite apart from the implications for the economic fortunes of High River, the expansion of settlement elsewhere in the area had potentially grave implications for the Highwood. Always a source of natural wealth, it now nourished not only High River citizenry but also the bustling and quickly growing communities downstream or via the Little Bow River.

### *High River Anglers Organize for Tributary Closure*

As early as 1918, locals began organizing to remedy the problem of overfishing. Drought conditions in the foothills were tempting individuals to take fish below legal size. At least a thousand such fish, High River's anglers reckoned, had been poached "in a big killing of under-sized trout" in the 1918 season alone.<sup>36</sup> Conditions were no better the next year. Tributaries ran so low in 1919 that, by August, anglers in the town were seeing dead fish floating in the river, killed by elevated water temperatures in parched tributaries.<sup>37</sup> The *High River Times* fretted about dour angling prospects: "We fear the waters of the Highwood River have been sadly depleted of all its large fish."<sup>38</sup>

In High River, one of the most impressive groundswells of support for conservation moved toward tributary closure, an idea that took hold in 1918. Even before many young men returned from the war, town elders began pushing for tributaries to be closed, believing that these fed the Highwood with its prized trout. As one resident stated, this critical habitat was now visited by "larger numbers of people from Calgary, Lethbridge, Vulcan, Okotoks and other towns around about" who would "camp out for days at a time, salting down their catches in barrels."<sup>39</sup> A meeting held in 1919 brought together Edward McCorquodale, Henry Gould, and a number of other professionals from the town, notably W. D. Elliott, the town's most respected fly fisher and considered "the most informed angler in our community."<sup>40</sup>

At that meeting, forty-eight anglers from the town and nearby ranches demanded that, "for the preservation of good sport in the future," the government close "all tributaries of the Highwood," as well as Willow Creek, on the grounds that these streams constituted "the natural breeding grounds for trout."<sup>41</sup> The petition, sent to Ottawa by George Stanley, had an immediate effect. The department dispatched



FIGURE 3.3

Distributing hatchery fry on the Highwood River, Fish Guardian Sam Smith seen on the left. NA-0695-67, Glenbow Library and Archives.

its Winnipeg-based central region chief inspector, George Davidson, to confirm the poor state of the streams in question, and, in May 1919, as High River anglers had requested, a federal order-in-council closed the Highwood's tributaries (erroneously including Willow Creek as one of its tributaries) to angling for two years, later extended to 1922.<sup>42</sup>

High River's stream closure idea spread. Dealing with their own disappointing creels, Calgary conservationists followed High River's example to push for more stream closures. During the summer of 1919, drought conditions had had a grievous impact on the streams in Eastern Slope watersheds, including the Bow River. A common complaint among anglers was that fish on the river were undersized, a phenomenon to which G. C. Langley, a Calgary fisheries officer, was able to attest. Langley reported that, in 1918 and again in 1919, he had to catch and release a hundred trout in order to bag ten or twelve fish large enough to keep.<sup>43</sup> Langley sent on to Ottawa a petition from Fish Creek anglers demanding that Bow and Elbow Rivers tributaries be closed for one or two years to recover.<sup>44</sup> In Robert Darker's SAAA meetings, members raised concerns that unless tributaries were closed for at least two years, "it would be difficult to obtain a good day's fishing" anywhere.<sup>45</sup>

Darker's group pressed the government to close Bragg Creek and Fish Creek, "which are the natural breeding place for trout," all tributaries of the Elbow River, and Bow River tributaries (except the Ghost River) on its north side from Calgary to Rocky Mountains National Park.<sup>46</sup>

The fisheries department, overwhelmed by grassroots support for the measure, especially the SAAA's recommendation that all streams in Southern Alberta be closed, complied.<sup>47</sup> In 1920, an order-in-council closed for two years "all Southern Alberta tributaries," including those of the Red Deer River.<sup>48</sup>

Drought prompted other changes. On Pekisko Creek, a major tributary of the Highwood, fires in the foothills burned off much of the snowmelt water that fed the creek. Several years of low spring and summer precipitation also lowered water levels to the stream's very gravels in some places. The creek ran right through George Lane's Bar U ranch, one of the most important spreads in the Pekisko valley.<sup>49</sup> Lane had built irrigation works to help relieve his ranch, but it was obvious that few fish remained in the creek, all the way from its headwaters in the foothills to the point where it now slipped listlessly into the Highwood.<sup>50</sup> Even with such tributaries closed to fishing, fish populations had to be revived.

To save the situation, Lane made a bold request. He asked the Banff hatchery to plant no less than 1.5 million cutthroat fry in Pekisko Creek and another million in the upper sections of the similarly parched Willow Creek.<sup>51</sup>

The request must have raised the eyebrows of R. T. Rodd, who was the hatchery's superintendent at the time. In those years, the Banff hatchery was lucky to produce half a million cutthroat fry annually, and almost all of them were destined for the mountain streams in the park itself.<sup>52</sup> All the same, the hatchery was willing to help. Rodd arrived in High River with about fifty thousand fry to be released into Pekisko Creek. They were not cutthroat, however, but rainbow trout, and the stocking constituted the fisheries department's first real experiment in planting the new fish in Southern Alberta streams. Rodd had little difficulty planting the rainbow fry darting about in the water-filled milk cans he had brought. Lane had sent a truck and cars to the High River rail station to meet him. On arriving, Rodd was duly greeted by "several of the good sports of that town." With the help of Lane's vehicles, the fry arrived in good shape for their release into Pekisko Creek.<sup>53</sup>



FIGURE 3.4

Hunting Party on the EP Ranch, with Alec Ballachey (left) and Edward, Prince of Wales, third from left. NA-2046-4, Glenbow Library and Archives.

With the planting an apparent success, in 1920 High River anglers formally created their association, its members dedicating themselves to guarding the streams they had helped close while lobbying for more hatchery fry to renew life in their river. The association was composed of very serious anglers. Prominent among them was W. D. Elliott, the manager of the local branch of the Bank of Commerce.

Elliott revered the Highwood. As he later wrote in his bank's in-house magazine on his experience on the river: "No you cannot go out and fill a creel by simply casting a nondescript fly any place on the stream, not by any means." Hooking a fish on the Highwood required skill. But for Elliott the river was more than about its trout. It was also:

the scenery; the benches; acres and acres of wild geraniums, tiger lilies, Marson meadow, a picture crammed with flowers against the mountains—sun rises and sunsets that a man would give millions to live with—and then that tumbling, foaming, tempestuous, clear-as-a-crystal mountain stream. Here a rushing torrent, there a limpid pool, a nice quiet run, rapids, and

above all, no dirt, no dust—ozone purified by being swept over miles of clean, clear snow-fields and tall green forests.<sup>54</sup>

At their first meeting, the Highwood anglers elected Elliott president, Edward, Prince of Wales their honorary president, and George Lane their honorary vice-president.<sup>55</sup> Although Edward, Prince of Wales, was voted merely as the association's figurehead president, there was rationale in his appointment. The Prince had purchased his spread, the EP Ranch, in 1917, and in his frequent visits to Western Canada, he rode horses on his land and fished in the stocked lake on his spread and along Pekisko Creek. Most socialites in Calgary relished the opportunity to join Edward for grouse hunting or angling, followed by dinner around his lake at the ranch.<sup>56</sup>

The Highwood River Angling Protective Association, as it was named, charged \$2 for a membership. In addition, the annual fishing permit fee had recently been raised from \$1 to \$2, this to reduce the numbers of permit-holding anglers and raise government revenues to pay guardians to better enforce the law.<sup>57</sup> Angling the Highwood as a member, then, would now cost \$4 in fees (almost \$60 in today's money). The association's membership immediately moved the request to the federal government to keep the Highwood's tributaries inside and outside the forest reserve closed to angling. They also lobbied for the Highwood River itself closed for a year west of the Gunnery Grade, in the Bow River Forest Reserve.

In addition to their motions, the association wrote up its own application for hatchery fry for the Highwood's tributaries. They made their preference for native fish clear: they again asked for cutthroat, and no less than two million of them.<sup>58</sup>

The association also urged the government to appoint more guardians of their own choosing, these to serve year-round on each of the closed streams and seize fish hogs.<sup>59</sup> Although the department could not have paid for such extensive protection, it did accept the association's demand to reappoint the local hero—the paid guardian Sam Smith. Smith had been a cowhand at the Rio Alto Ranch on the Highwood River when he was assigned to the job after the Conservative Robert Borden's sweeping win in the federal elections of 1911. William Lyon Mackenzie King's Liberal victory in 1921 might have threatened Smith's reappointment. However, he was known as one of the most

effective guardians in the region. After his brief replacement earlier by a returning war vet, the High River association members met with a visiting senior Ottawa administrator, impressing on him that Smith's successor "did not act" in patrolling, did no enforcement, and allowed a good portion of anglers on Highwood waters without permits. They convinced him to keep Smith in his duties.<sup>60</sup>

There was a reason why High River anglers wanted Smith. According to Frank Watt, a good friend of Smith's, the guardian knew "no friends or favourites" when it came to the fisheries laws. Watt said that he himself had "frequently been checked up by him on my fishing trips and have had to show him my license and catch."<sup>61</sup> Angler and rancher Bert Sheppard agreed. In his memoir, Sheppard said that Smith "would pinch his own grandmother if he caught her fishing in a closed stream."<sup>62</sup> The great wilderness writer, Raymond M. Patterson at the Buffalo Head ranch in the 1930s, perfectly described Smith's ability to appear in the most unexpected places. On one occasion when Patterson accompanied his ranch hands moving cattle up to Flat Creek, reaching it before dawn's light, he saw something off to the side: "A match flared out some distance away from me and a humorous, weather-beaten face, crowned by an old-time Stetson, glowed red for a moment and then vanished again into a gloom that seemed deeper than before. That would be Sam Smith, the fishery warden of the Highwood district, a firm friend and ally, communing with his first pipe of the day."<sup>63</sup> No doubt Smith's trail skills and uncanny ability to show up just about anywhere in patrol kept him in such high esteem by members of the Highwood River Angling Protective Association.

High River's idea of tributary closure rested on a vision of the watershed dividing into "nursery" areas, where fish spawned, and fishing zones, where anglers could catch them. In those spaces the same anglers could be better scrutinized by those concerned with enforcing the regulations, an approach implying strong surveillance over closed streams as well as vigilance over the open ones. High River anglers seem to have learned of the measure from American precedents in stream closure. Here, the movement originated with the rank and file, those who had a practical, rather than an academic or scientific, understanding of the foothills streams. The idea of closing tributaries was based on a theory that trout first grew, as fingerlings, in the tiny feeder streams high up in the watersheds, near the mountains in which they hatched, before

moving into numerous small tributaries, such as Pekisko, Cataract, and Bull Creeks. These small streams sheltered young fish and, having given them enough respite to gain sufficient girth, would send them out into the larger rivers as mature trout.<sup>64</sup> These same mature trout would return to spawn from whence they came. The idea was, then, to protect the tributary “nurseries” so that plenty of fish would be available to stock major rivers such as the Bow, the Highwood, the Oldman, and the Red Deer.

Decades later, close scientific study of trout behaviour in mountain streams overturned the assumptions that supported the tributary closure movement. Cutthroat populations are composed of both migratory fluvial members and more stationary locals. The species gains some of its resilience by the varied life histories playing out within its membership, whereby some of its population moved from mainstreams into spawning grounds, while others, typically smaller in size, stayed put in tributary streams in more circumscribed territories.<sup>65</sup> Some key insights in cutthroat behaviours were first derived in the 1950s studies of fish biologist Richard Miller. He carefully studied cutthroat migration by tagging fish at Gorge Creek, in the present-day Kananaskis Park system. Miller found that, after drifting from their spawning beds and finding good feeding places on a stream, fish tended to stay put as they aged. The trout he studied over a three-year period remained, like homebodies, within twenty yards of the same place. Moreover, the trout remained stubbornly loyal to their birthplaces. When Miller moved individuals downstream or upstream from their homes, they returned to them, despite the exertion required, apparently using scent retained in their memory to do so.<sup>66</sup> As Miller explained in a 1953 assessment of permanent stream closures, still in effect in Alberta, two common observations of trout formed the basis of an erroneous idea of trout life history: “the presence of small trout in tributaries and the occasional use of tributaries by large trout for spawning purposes.”<sup>67</sup> Small fish in tributaries, however, were not all young. Some weighing 2–6 ounces could be five to seven years old, whereas “a few yards away, in the larger rivers, are trout of the same age weighing more than one pound.”<sup>68</sup> “It is impossible that these should be the parents of the trout in the tributaries,” Miller pointed out, especially since traps at the mouths of tributaries set in May “fail to intercept any significant downstream movement of trout throughout the summer.”<sup>69</sup> Though

some large river trout spawned in tributaries, the broader reality was that a lot did not and by closing a tributary, smaller cutthroat would grow up, mature and die and “contribute nothing to other parts of the drainage.”<sup>70</sup> In short, cutthroat lovingly protected as juveniles in tributaries were probably not swimming their way into larger rivers, as High River anglers had hoped.

### *The Magnificent Highwood: A River Worth Saving*

Flaws in the theory notwithstanding, the idea of stream closure quickly seized imaginations in High River. With Highwood tributaries officially closed along with the rest of tributaries in Southern Alberta—even the Red Deer River’s—until 1922, High River’s citizens might have found a similar peace. However, their sense of security soon shattered. Calgary’s appetite for the fish swimming in closed streams revived. After the 1920 season ended, a breakaway group within the SAAA joined forces with the anglers in the CAA to push for the immediate reopening of several rivers to the southwest and west of the city— Sheep, Ghost, and Kananaskis Rivers.<sup>71</sup> Nanton’s Foothills Angling Association, wanting to angle Willow Creek, felt that the SAAA’s interest in stream closures was strictly a “local one” and should not govern other parts of the province.<sup>72</sup> Pincher Creek anglers, too, complained that the 1920 tributary closure disadvantaged homesteaders needing fish for food: “outsiders” had imposed the blanket policy on them.<sup>73</sup>

With consensus breaking apart, G. S. Davidson met with the CAA in March 1921 and managed to convince its members to live with the stream closures for another year. He promised them that reopening would happen in 1922, when the order would expire.<sup>74</sup> But the CAA wanted more than to scrap the measure. Their newspaper campaign would open all streams, while continuing only for a year the closure on those in the forestry reserve. The idea was to use angler pressure on the still-open main rivers in the reserve to go after the fish the CAA passionately hated: “War will be waged against bull trout, there being no season limit on them.”<sup>75</sup>

With the Department weighing its options, the CAA’s influence rose as a clear threat to the SAAA. The CPR’s irrigation district manager, Allan Cameron, affiliated with the latter group, circulated in Calgary a petition protesting the CAA’s proposal signed by seventy-eight of the city’s most respected and experienced anglers—stalwart

conservationists like Robert Darker and other members of the SAAA who knew Alberta's streams well. Cameron sent the petition to J. G. Rutherford, a veterinarian in the federal Department of Agriculture, who forwarded it right to the desk of Ernest Lapointe, the minister of Marine and Fisheries, and Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's right-hand man and Québec lieutenant. Rutherford explained to the minister that "a lot of your old friends in Calgary are somewhat disturbed by a certain element in this neighborhood to throw all the streams open." He appealed to the minister "as a good Liberal, or as I should have said first, an old fisherman," to abide by the petition and keep streams closed.<sup>76</sup>

Talk of reopening the tributaries enraged High River residents. Anglers in that community, whose tributaries had been closed since 1919, assumed that the closure was permanent.<sup>77</sup> Frank Watt hurriedly sent a telegram to the Department of Marine and Fisheries, which he followed up with a letter to George Gibson Coote, the Member of Parliament representing the Macleod riding. He declared emphatically that the urban-based anglers of the CAA were merely "selfish and have a narrow viewpoint and representative of the various sporting goods houses."<sup>78</sup>

In his distant Ottawa office, the minister received a letter directly from the High River association decrying any CAA move to reopen Highwood streams. Its members, dedicated to "the conservation of the Cut Throat Trout" and "on the ground and in touch with the conditions year round," felt that any reopening would encourage the bull trout, since anglers fishing in newly reopened tributaries would naturally direct their pressure on "our Cut Throat, our sporting fish."<sup>79</sup> Lapointe even received a telegram from Bert Sheppard, vice-president of the angling association, who at the time was convalescing at High River Municipal Hospital. In a follow-up letter, written on hospital stationery, Sheppard informed the minister that, having "lived on this river for years," he knew "from experience what a beautiful trout stream it used to be." It was imperative that tributaries be closed "for all time," for otherwise "it will be 'good bye to our trout.'"<sup>80</sup> Cowhand Hugh Cameron, who also happened to be at the hospital the same time as Sheppard, wrote a hurried note in the same vein.<sup>81</sup>

No doubt shocked by the correspondence hitting its quiet offices in Ottawa, the fisheries department dispatched its senior officer from

Winnipeg, chief inspector George Davidson, to High River. Davidson met with the High River association. A year earlier, Davidson had met with members of the CAA, who had convinced him to pull the season opening date back to May 15—a decision he regretted. Although the department had decided to restore the June 15 opening, High River folk seemed to be the only ones still wanting tributaries to remain closed. In their meeting, the High River association's president and treasurer, with six other members attending, apparently made it "so evident" to the chief inspector that reopening tributaries would result in the cutthroat's destruction that Davidson took their side. With "each and every one" of the executive members giving their assurance that they would afford "every protection to the waters if the streams were closed," Davidson made a decision.<sup>82</sup> While the fisheries department allowed Bow River tributaries west of Calgary to be reopened, it closed the Highwood's again for the 1923 season for three years and ended up keeping them closed for the rest of the decade.<sup>83</sup>

### *Coarse Fish and other Interlopers in the Highwood's Trout Kingdom*

Tributary closures complemented natural processes perceived in mountain fish habitats. But angling associations also wanted to intervene more directly in stream environments against coarse fish competitors. The Department of Marine and Fisheries reserved for itself the right to cull. Only paid guardians could officially weed out unwanted fish from streams. In the river systems of the Eastern Slopes, these undesirables could include the native bull trout, in addition to various "coarse" varieties. However, culling could often be avoided by setting correct season dates to protect certain species while discouraging the proliferation of others. In the considered opinion of Edward E. Prince, the Dominion's fisheries commissioner, prudently planned season dates could largely accomplish the goals of stream management and culling.<sup>84</sup>

But anglers in High River wanted more direct action. Times called for it. In March 1922, the angling association's Frank Watt emphasized to the fisheries department that mountain whitefish were "overrunning our river" and conveyed the anglers' recommendation that no creel limit be placed on the fish.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, two weeks later, the High River association wrote again to report that the river, where it flowed

out of the forestry reserve, was “full of bull trout.”<sup>86</sup> Later providing a lengthy report inventorying the fish moving into the upper reaches of the Highwood, the association stated that there was “no menace” from pike in the upper portions of the river, but suckers “year by year are now seen in all the splendid trout pools as far up the river as Flat Creek,” hitting the cutthroat spawning beds “in great numbers.”<sup>87</sup> Ling (*Lota lota*) were “in all good sized pools as far as Flat Creek.” The association suggested that they should be speared out through the ice in winter. As for the mountain whitefish (grayling), it was not “an evil fish, but it is detrimental,” the report stated. “When one looks back ten or twenty years and thinks of the number of trout there were in the Highwood River a mile or so above the town it is sad to reflect that their numbers are now replaced by the grayling.”<sup>88</sup>

High River anglers, then, were seeing a growing menace of aliens, such as pike, ling, and suckers—fish that they perceived as generally haunting warmer waters—in their own backyards. Downstream from High River, to the southeast of Calgary, the Highwood flows into the Bow River, which then wends its way to the south and east, before eventually joining up with the Oldman River to form the South Saskatchewan. As rivers like the Bow flow out of the foothills into grassy areas (still relatively moist) and then onto the parched plains in the southeastern sections of the province, the sun-baked water warms to produce a different aquatic world. In southern agricultural centres like Lethbridge, warmer-water species thrived in water carried in the main streams and they invaded, along with aquatic wildlife, the myriad of irrigation ditches built to deliver moisture to dry farms.<sup>89</sup> These coarse species could travel impressive distances either to reside or spawn. Suckers, for instance, were “caught freely” in Lethbridge’s irrigation ditch in 1919, which had, according to the *Lethbridge Daily Herald*, made their way to the city via the St. Mary River.<sup>90</sup> Sometimes communities along irrigation works and main streams transplanted coarse varieties to provide fishing on the prairie where little was to be had otherwise. The fisheries department in 1923 transported suckers “and other coarse fish” from Lake Winnipegosis to some fishless prairie lakes where “only suckers and fish of that class will live,” as one newspaper reported.<sup>91</sup> For prairie fishers, pike offered sometimes the only sport in their lakes. At Newell Lake, near Brooks, good pike fishing was reported in 1919.<sup>92</sup> The pike and pickerel caught at the Chin Coulee reservoir served the needs of

anglers. However, it is noteworthy that Lethbridge anglers, dissatisfied with that type of fishing, were ready to go to great lengths to improve the sport there. They urged the fisheries department to introduce lake trout and bass at the reservoir. Since the resident coarse fish would likely predate on the newcomers, the Lethbridge Rod and Gun Club thought the only solution was to completely drain the reservoir and do a “clean sweep of the undesirable fish therein” before planting gamier fish.<sup>93</sup> So convinced that a booming tourist resort at Chin Coulee could be supported by this means, two Lethbridge businessmen took it upon themselves to send by airplane a letter to Ottawa requesting the reservoir be drained and planted with these gamier fish. They thought the novelty of sending the letter via this “experimental air flight” across Canada would “do more to attract government attention to the matter than ordinary means.”<sup>94</sup>

Farmers on the semi-arid and frequently droughty southeastern sections of the Bow were quite happy casting hooks and landing suckers, ling, and similarly coarse species. To High River anglers, that kind of fishing was fine for farmers, but for them the problem was that these coarse fish, like downstream country bumpkins, seemed to be migrating up the lower sections of the Highwood to spawn. If they were, the most probable route for these fish was close at hand. In the early 1920s, a canal east of High River was constructed to divert peak Highwood waters into the Little Bow.<sup>95</sup> According to R. T. Rodd, the Little Bow and some of its tributaries, including the nearby Mosquito Creek, were not trout streams.<sup>96</sup> They yielded an entirely different fishing experience. Mosquito Creek was so sucker-ridden that residents fished them with pitchforks in 1911.<sup>97</sup> Although High River anglers did not directly point to the Little Bow canal as their migratory point of entry to the Highwood River, R. T. Rodd, by then Alberta’s fisheries inspector, believed that it was. Ling, suckers, and pike could travel from the southern interior of the province through the Little Bow and enter the Highwood “any time they wanted.”<sup>98</sup> So direct this route seemed to Rodd that when the Department was considering in 1927 stocking perch in Silver Lake, a man-made irrigation work connecting to Mosquito Creek, Rodd saw danger that the fish would migrate into the Mosquito, then into the Little Bow to the Oldman, and, going the other way, into the Highwood.<sup>99</sup>

Whatever the origin or migratory paths of these fish, High River anglers could swear that they were invading their trout territory. In response to their many letters on the subject, R. T. Rodd wrote to the department late in 1922 that he would investigate installing a screen at the head gate of the Little Bow canal. He also asked the Highwood fisheries officer to keep an eye out for ling skulking around in the deeper pools. If found, Rodd recommended to guardian Sam Smith to perhaps, “without doing much damage to the other fish,” eliminate these unwanted fish by dynamiting the pools.<sup>100</sup>

With Ottawa apparently not attending to their complaints, High River anglers took matters into their own hands. It is impossible to know how much coarse fish they took from the river in season to improve the trout fishery. The fall-spawning bull trout, already maligned by fishers in the province and thought to have a taste for cutthroat spawn, was undoubtedly a prime target, too. The very reason why the High River association made sure that the closures they wanted in the forest reserve did not include the Highwood River itself, was that they saw angling there as an important means of removing bull trout, which otherwise would predate on their river’s preferred trout.<sup>101</sup>

The law officially stopped High River anglers from weeding bull trout from the Highwood River beyond open season. But in their waters near town, the local association took a firm stance on coarse fish. That was made clear in 1927, prior to the opening of the fishing season, when two High River youths used some sort of diabolical device to snare a wallop twelve-pound pike right in the middle of town. They proudly exhibited the three-and-a-half-foot biggie in plain view. This triumphant display left the local fisheries guardian, Sam Smith, in a quandary. Almost everyone in High River hated these fish, seen as invaders from downstream. But the regulations were clear. Smith, ordinarily unwavering in upholding the law, now found himself caught between his sense of duty and intense community pressure. He asked his overseer in Calgary, D. A. Richardson, for advice, and in the end struck a compromise: he pursued a conviction against the two, but he applied only a nominal fine and, contrary to the conventional practice in such cases, allowed the kids to keep their fish.<sup>102</sup>

But even here Smith overstepped his bounds, at least from the perspective of the town’s anglers. According to the regional fisheries manager, the High River association adopted “what can only be described

as a childish view of the case,” paying the youths’ fine, feting them as heroes, and encouraging other kids to do the same destructive work.<sup>103</sup> In a front-page story subtitled “High River Boys Penalized for Landing Trout Killer,” the *Calgary Daily Herald* reported that the boys were treated as “objects of admiration” in High River and were celebrated for doing precisely what any good citizen should do, noting as well that no one else had “tried for the other whoppers still carrying on in the Highwood,” at least not yet. The paper also reported that the angling association was officially protesting the fisheries department closing the Highwood to pike fishing while it was spending good money planting trout fry in it.<sup>104</sup>

The association’s position was made clear by its president, Alec A. Ballachey. In a letter to R. T. Rodd, he declared that “it has always been the policy of our Association to encourage as far as possible the destruction of pike in the river.” Whereas on some streams pike provided the only fishing and therefore merited some form of protection, “this surely does not apply to a stream such as the Highwood.”<sup>105</sup> As a long-time fisheries guardian and the superintendent of the hatchery program, however, R. T. Rodd knew that these Highwood protectionists, so valuable for conservation efforts in other respects, were walking a dangerous line. If regulations were changed to allow for what the association wanted—unlimited culling of pike on a trout stream in and outside the season—he replied to Ballachey, “many unscrupulous people would take advantage” of the allowance to evade the season dates on the Highwood and take pike “and any other fish they could get.”<sup>106</sup> D. A. Richardson, Rodd’s overseer in Calgary, agreed. Should an angler “assist in removing coarse fish from the lower waters of the Highwood River he has all the open season in which do so.” But no angler, Richardson said, could be permitted to do what the boys had done: using a snare device, fishing out of season, and taking a fish—even one so despised by High River folk—still protected in its spawning season.<sup>107</sup>

### *Farmers and Ranchers Fight over Tributary Closure*

At least High River anglers got what they wanted in tributary closure. However, stream closures were by no means popular as they extended farther south in the province. Townies to the south of High River saw the steady closing down of their favourite fishing grounds. At first, the

entirety of the forest reserve was closed in 1919 due to the problem of forest fires.<sup>108</sup> Then Ottawa in 1920 closed all southern tributaries, including those of Willow Creek, and in 1922, the *Blairmore Enterprise* reported, it went as far as closing the Crowsnest Forest Reserve, except the main rivers: the Oldman, Livingstone, parts of Racehorse Creek, and the Castle River.<sup>109</sup> In 1925, another order closed streams in the Crowsnest Forest Reserve.<sup>110</sup>

No wonder that Claresholm citizens felt squeezed out of their own fishery. Many of their prized streams ran through the eastern portion of the forest reserves in the Porcupine Hills. Citizens and nearby farmers had avidly fished there. In 1911, the Claresholm town paper reported on one town party making the journey to Trout Creek in 1911 to make “a very large” catch of fish.<sup>111</sup> The comic element of one such expedition on the same creek was retold dramatically in the *Claresholm Advertiser* in 1914:

*Scene—Trout Creek, near Lyndon. Dramatis Personae—Insp. Tucker, J. T. Kingsley, H. O. Haslam, O. L. Reinecke. Time—Friday about 4 p.m. Properties—Motor car, basket of refreshments, fishing poles, especially a fine, new outfit. Act I: Flies, silence. Act II: Large fish. Great excitement. Act III: Broken fish-pole. Fish escaping. Some language, jeers from mob. Mad druggist. Otherwise a fine trip and catch.*<sup>112</sup>

Porcupine Hills tributary fishing provided recreation and a relished foodstuff for Claresholm and Stavely town citizens and settlers. The Mosley family, homesteading land twenty-eight miles to the east of town, would regularly take week-long fishing trips “to the hills,” which constituted “a highlight of the summer.” Oliver Mosley remembered travelling to these streams by wagon or saddle horse until switching to auto in the age of Ford Tin Lizzies after 1914. “The streams were so full of fish,” he recounted, “you had to get behind a bush to bait your hook.”<sup>113</sup> Years later, Mrs. Gentry Ohler, whose parents (Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Nelson) settled nearby from Sweden via Montana in 1906, evoked her own homestead memories. Difficult pioneering was offset by fishing. It was the family’s “main entertainment,” Ohler said. They ice-fished on the lakes nearby, or they took visitors from prairie country for excursions to western streams, “and of course would have

a real fish feast upon returning to the house.”<sup>114</sup> Stanley Wyatt, too, recounted coming west from St. Catharines, Ontario, in 1900 to settle in the new town of Claresholm. Late in his life, he could name the Willow Creek tributaries in the Porcupine Hills. They were etched in his mind: Lyndon, Sharples, and others. Even nearer at hand, his biographers noted, “One of his greatest joys was fishing with a willow stick in the creek not far from his ranch.”<sup>115</sup>

It was alarming, then, in 1922 when Claresholm citizens buying permits found their favourite fishing grounds closed to them. The fisheries department’s choice of ranchers to supervise the closed streams did not help. Fishing, it seemed, had fallen under the control of “five or six different barons” who “patrol the streams and order the unfortunate fishermen off,” the *Lethbridge Daily Herald* reported. The town’s protective association forming in 1921 wrote to Ottawa in protest, with the Lethbridge paper agreeing that “it looks very funny” that such a few cattlemen “can domineer all the streams that Nature put in the Porcupine.”<sup>116</sup>

Closer to the situation at hand, and a friend of the ranching community, the *Macleod Times* dismissed Claresholm’s protests: was there “any wonder that owners of lands through which trout streams meander, are averse to allowing every Tom, Dick and Harry to whip the water in their quest for the elusive trout?”<sup>117</sup> The newspaper looked back to a time when Trout, Brown, and other creeks in the foothills afforded excellent sport. “When settlers began to come in they spent their week-ends along all these streams catching everything that bore a fin. Fish under a certain size were ripped off the hook and left to rot on the banks. Macleod fishermen lost their finest fishing grounds through such unsportsmanlike conduct.” With “human hogs everywhere,” the paper said, “the innocent must always suffer for their meanness.” The newspaper applauded ranchers turning away these outsiders, “giving the fish a chance to establish themselves in their old haunts.”<sup>118</sup>

A clear divide widened between distant communities in agricultural districts and their rancher counterparts in the foothills. The latter wanted tributaries closed to outsiders, but not necessarily to themselves. A rancher at Todd Creek, a Crowsnest tributary favoured by Claresholm anglers, asked the fisheries department to extend the closures in 1924, specifically to the stream on his property. The fisheries department suspected that he wanted it “to have the fishing for

himself.”<sup>119</sup> The fisheries department took it more seriously when Coleman and Bellevue angling associations fused together to lobby for the further closure of Crowsnest River tributaries outside the forest reserves in December 1925. The associations were reacting to the Alberta government’s further extension of roads in those areas.<sup>120</sup> Additional lobbying from Pincher Creek, Bellevue, Blairmore, and Fort Macleod anglers<sup>121</sup>—all from communities that had seen invasions of outsiders in the backcountry—finally forced the department’s hands. Tributary streams of the Oldman, Crowsnest and Waterton rivers both within and beyond the forest reserve were closed indefinitely as of 1927, comprising more than eighteen streams.<sup>122</sup> Lethbridge anglers, notably, continued to object to the measures.<sup>123</sup>

None of this pleased the Claresholm community. Ranchers along Willow Creek might have urged tributary closure, since they might discourage visiting anglers from camping on their properties, but town fishers needed them to remain open.<sup>124</sup> The Claresholm Fish and Game Protective Association, taking town anglers’ case to Ottawa in 1926, pointed out their difficult position: there were actually “very few streams that can be closed without cutting off all the fishing in the district.” League members estimated that there were fifteen miles of very small creeks, two to three feet wide, running through the thick willow brush to the west of them, all of which would be closed if the government followed through with its plans.<sup>125</sup>

R. T. Rodd, meeting with the group to allay their concerns finally struck on a compromise. Only two of the streams (Coal and Camp Creeks to the southwest of the community and tributaries of the Oldman River) would be included in closures to take effect in 1927.<sup>126</sup> But good portions of the Willow Creek tributaries that ran outside the forest reserve, prized by Claresholm anglers, remained open for fishing.

### *Private Interests and Stream Protection*

Suspicion that ranchers had urged closures to keep trout to themselves lingered as a problem for the fisheries department. Bragg Creek, closed in 1927, exposed just how complex sentiments behind tributary closure could be. Local ranchers and landowners identified the creek as needing closure in 1926, but the fisheries department suspected that landowners were simply annoyed by visitors coming on their properties. Closure would give them the means to exclude them. As R. T. Rodd thought,

“there may be a personal reason for these farmers wishing to have the streams closed, other than for the protection of the fish, I would therefore recommend that the matter be thoroughly investigated.”<sup>127</sup>

Rodd followed up with his own inspection of the creek and gathered the views of the local fisheries guardian, Thomas William Fullerton, and Calgary’s overseer, David Richardson. Rodd understood from these efforts that the creek needed more protection, and the department included it in their 1927 steam closures.<sup>128</sup> However, Rodd’s concerns that locals had ulterior motives were soon borne out. Guardian Fullerton, described by individuals in the area as an “exceptionally good fishery guardian,” was soon making sure that Bragg Creek’s closure was respected by everyone, locals included.<sup>129</sup> Fullerton was one of the sons of an early pioneer to the Twin Bridges area west of Calgary, T. K. Fullerton. The family then settled at Bragg Creek where Tom’s father operated a sawmill on the Elbow, floating logs downstream to Calgary. Thomas William likely learned his devotion to duty as a child. As T. K.’s granddaughters recounted, the Fullerton household was strictly Methodist. Only “the most necessary chores” were done on the day of rest. “The Bible was read and hymns sung, the children were not allowed to play games nor indulge in frivolities of any kind.”<sup>130</sup> That did not stop the Fullerton boys from sneaking away on Sundays—as we shall see, the Sunday closure was respected by some, but by no means all—“down to the river or a nearby creek and catch a big mess of fish. They did not dare take them home so they hid the fish until Monday, believing their parents knew no difference.”<sup>131</sup> As an adult, Thomas William took up land at the site of the present Bragg Creek Provincial Park. Appointed as fisheries guardian, he patrolled the Elbow River and its creeks from the forest reserve to Twin Bridges. As his daughter later recalled, “Fishermen would warn their friends to watch out for ‘the man on the white horse.’”<sup>132</sup>

After Bragg Creek and other tributaries of the Elbow closed, Fullerton suspected that one rancher was continuing to fish his creek and inviting his friends to his property and join in the fun. He arrived at the man’s ranch on the fateful day of 3 June 1928, only to find cars on the man’s property—apparently parked there by anglers. However, when Fullerton attempted to get down the creek, the landowner barred him from doing so, and when Fullerton insisted, the owner and his wife pulled him from his horse and beat him.<sup>133</sup>

The record does not offer information as to how Fullerton's assault was followed up. However, Fullerton nevertheless secured witnesses to lay charges against one of the poachers. His legal proceeding was then complicated when local residents organized a petition to have Fullerton removed from his duties and have someone else appointed "who will cooperate with the residents and property owners of the district."<sup>134</sup> In the same period, one of the witnesses to provide testimony in the case apparently "was forced to sign the petition and was warned not to appear in the coming prosecution."<sup>135</sup> Fullerton still had enough evidence to send the poacher to court, who received a \$50 fine. As for the petition, R. T. Rodd, who received it, immediately doubted its legitimacy. Many of the petitioners were friends of the landowner, including the accused poacher. "It would appear to me," Rodd said, "that these people wish to have Mr. Fullerton removed simply because he is enforcing the law and trying to stop people from fishing in Bragg Creek." He concluded that they wanted a guardian who would "cooperate with them as they stated, to the extent of allowing the property owner to fish in the stream or their friends to do so."<sup>136</sup> The department ignored the petition and kept Fullerton assigned to his duties.

### *Controlling Outsider Anglers in Local Fishing Grounds*

High River's stream closure movement reflected local concerns about outsiders descending on and depleting the Highwood's very source of life—the spawning grounds in its tributaries. Even with the area's tributaries closed, one rancher reported in 1920 that he had seen carloads of anglers regularly driving up to the north fork of Sheep River to fish that stream.<sup>137</sup> Stream closure did, however, make it easier for locals to take action to protect these important areas of the fishery. As the High River association explained in 1922, "the men living along those creeks"—that is, the ones closed—"would feel more disposed to tell a fisherman to go elsewhere than they would to examine a creel to check up on a man's catch if the creeks were open." If tributaries were reopened, the "Fish Hog will run riot," and residents would have a hard time trying to enforce the law on them all.<sup>138</sup>

The need to keep critical areas of their watershed productive and protect them from visitor incursions remained part of High River's approach to conservation. It was reinforced not only by the work of the town's angling association but also by Dave Blacklock. Blacklock,

whose family had emigrated from Scotland, was a resident of the foothills town of Black Diamond. He and his brother Adam had once hauled cartloads of coal from their leases on the Highwood over the “coal trail” that made its way from the Big Rock to Calgary, where the market for fuel was booming. The Blacklocks earned a good living from their hard work. They could make 75¢ a day, at least until mines in the town of Carbon, northeast of Calgary, began delivering coal to Calgary in higher quantities and at much lower prices. Adam had subsequently bet everything—the family property, the cattle, and the coalmine itself—on an oil slick he had found near Black Diamond, but it never amounted to much.<sup>139</sup>

By the mid-1920s, Dave Blacklock had achieved status as a conservationist. He had injured a hip in a mine accident, which impaired his mobility for life, and he later recalled how he often had to fish seated in a chair, his hip in such bad shape that he could “hear it squeak.”<sup>140</sup> Blacklock had a close rapport with the natural world in the Eastern Slopes, and he frequently heading out, despite his bad hip, on long packhorse trips to the Kananaskis Lakes. Back home, he tamed magpies and crows on his property and had a knack for raising and training fine hunting dogs. Described by the *High River Times* as the “practical authority on the life, habits, propagation and destruction of our bird and fish life,” he undoubtedly inherited some of his knowledge from his father, who had been a gamekeeper on a large Scottish preserve.<sup>141</sup>

With the persuasion of a Presbyterian preacher, Blacklock gave a series of public lectures in High River early in 1926. His talks, sponsored by the High River Fish and Game Association, focussed on what should, even in an age of automobiles, roads, and steel railway lines, be the town’s main concern: protecting the fish in the river.<sup>142</sup> The Highwood valley, Blackwood reminded his audience, constituted “one of the greatest countries in which the Lord has ever allowed a man to cast a hook.” But this land of plenty was being overrun. He cautioned his listeners to guard “your tributaries, both from cannibal fish and from the poachers.” Singling out the leading cause of the destruction of fish life in the valley, he cited the growing number of “cars bearing men and women, old and young, coming from the cities with tents, frying pans, and fishing rods, to camp and fish along those streams.” With tributaries protected and local anglers standing guard, Blacklock saw

no reason why the Highwood would then, in more rational times, and “in years to come, be the mecca for thousands of visitors.”<sup>143</sup>

Blacklock refrained from saying just who he was bemoaning as car-driving outsiders, but the angler association in High River understood most of the culprits came from Calgary. Not only had the association’s members stood guard along the river, but they conducted censuses. One by one, they had polled the point of origin of anglers on their streams, especially those using automobiles to mosey up the cow trails from High River and then bounce along the river floodplain when the roads gave out. Just about anywhere along the river, outsiders were unpacking rods from rumble seats when a good fishing spot appeared. In 1926, the association’s statistics showed it plainly: that year, 181 anglers came from High River itself, 16 from Longview, 33 from Okotoks, and no fewer than 1,968 from Calgary. On a single Sunday afternoon, the association counted three hundred cars passing the first cow gate on the Highwood. Quite apart from leaving trash strewn about and cattle gates open, outsiders were fishing the river so heavily that they were imperilling the pools of life on which High River’s citizens depended.<sup>144</sup>

The impetus behind tributary closure had grown with the evident changes in the social life of the Highwood River itself. High River residents, and the ranchers who lived along the Highwood valley, had seen outsiders using new technology to reach far into their world. The river valley was breathtaking and alluring, as townsfolk knew. It was one of their town’s greatest assets, a font of life. All the same, newcomers, especially those from Calgary, arrived in overwhelming numbers, left their mark on the landscape, and disrupted rural life. High River anglers had helped see tributary closure, initially a measure intended to apply only to the Highwood watershed, put in place in the entirety of the Eastern Slopes. However, the campaign against the measure, led by the tourist-friendly CAA, revealed how differently anglers could feel about what needed to be done to save Alberta’s streams.

In the end, this grassroots movement, at least in High River, constituted quite a selfless understanding of the natural environment. There might have been ranchers who wanted stream closures to keep the fish for themselves but, though concerns about automobile-driving urban tourists and campers had initially propelled their actions, High River anglers had closed tributaries as much to their own fishing as to that of outsiders. The remedy for overfishing that the townspeople

settled on conserved what was understood to be the town's very source of wealth—the Highwood River itself. In that respect, the anglers' imagination was shaped by the essential spirit of progressive conservation: guarding one's capital, in the form of a natural resource generated in tributary "nurseries," and consuming only the interest accrued on nature's wealth. Tributaries, if closed to angling, would provide a perpetual bounty of mature trout in the river's main stretches.

It remained to be seen, however, just how far this spirit of conservation would survive in the face of competing pressures and the lure of other forms of wealth.