

The indelible mark of a life well lived



This photograph of Wilf Gibbard was taken around 1949 by Jim Waldie, a forestry lookout for several years after Gibbard began to pack supplies to the weather station.

Submitted Image

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Wilf Gibbard, a Rossland pioneer born in Salmon Arm on May 10, 1913, passed away on July 4 after a life of full of adventures with friends, a life so rich in humorous tales that the family will soon publish his memoirs.

He and his wife Ruth, who passed away in 1996, raised a raucous household of six children who have since produced 13 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren — a healthy legacy by any standard.

Wilf was a fire lookout and then a horse packer on Old Glory, he farmed in

Happy Valley, and found a crashed plane in the woods. He had a wide circle of friends and is honoured by Gibbard's Trail at the Black Jack club.

"He was an amazing guy," said his eldest daughter, Darlene Duckworth.

"He was an honest, ethical, loving dad," said daughter Elaine Todd. "There was nothing he enjoyed more than a good joke. He would laugh until he was so red in the face we thought we'd have to pick him off the floor and rescue him."

Wilf was still shovelling his snow and tending a garden at his home at Christina Lake until quite recently. "There was no one quite like my dad," Todd said, "no one more caring. He'd walk into a room and make anyone feel comfortable, shy or not."

"He spent a lot of years on that mountain, there's a lot of stories in it," Todd said. After his last hike up Old Glory in 1982, he collected his stories into a book, *Up and Back Again: A packer's tale*. The family hope it will be available online in the fall, complete with a section on Wilf's wife Ruth, "From prairie girl to packer's wife."



Wilf and Ruth married on May 7, 1938, and the same month Wilf started work with the forest service as an Old Glory lookout man. The first year he cleared windfall, repaired tools, replaced telephone poles and lines, and all the other odd jobs that came up in addition to chores, like hauling drinking

water from a spring a mile down the mountain.

Staying up top, often with Ruth and the kids, Wilf built a swing on top of the mountain for his young daughter Darlene in the early 1940s. Perched on top, they lived in a shelter held down by cables.

"We endured many wild and wonderful storms during our summers on the mountaintop!" Wilf wrote. Once lightning struck while he was outside with wet hair. "It really dried out my hair," he wrote. "It wasn't back to normal until I had about three haircuts."

Another time he smelled something "I have never smelled before or since," and his horse Punch was extremely nervous and unable to settle down. "We never saw anything," Wilf wrote, but he wondered, "Was it a sasquatch?"

In 1941, the Met Station was put in, and after a decade as a lookout, Wilf was given the packer's contract in 1948.

Todd thought back fondly to a childhood out at the O'Brien camp every summer at the base of the Old Glory trail. "It was a wonderful life as a child," she said, although she conceded it was a lot of work for her mother, caring for six children.

"We had a cabin and packed everything in. We had cougars and bears wander through our camp — we didn't worry too much about them. We had a sawdust pile to play in, and picked huckleberries. It was a lovely place for children."

Ruth and Wilf got up at five each morning, and "Dad would get packing at 6 a.m. and be on the trail by 8. He hauled everything up to the Old Glory Met Station."

Wilf wrote about loads that included 90-gallon gas tanks, bed frames and spring mattresses, tables, chairs, desks, washing machines, chesterfields, and lumber in addition to radio transmitters and large glass-jar batteries.

"He'd get the horses started, and they'd wander up there on their own, just trucked all the way up," Todd said.

"All the Met boys would help him unload, feed him lunch, and he'd go back down. He enjoyed that life, they were probably the best years of his life."

Todd paused, then added: "I actually married one of those Met guys!"



She recalled another love story: Jim Waldie was a young man in love with a Rossland girl who sent the love-stricken lookout love letters all summer as he sat watching for fires.

"He'd come and get his load from Dad, but he'd run off and read his love letter without helping to unload," Todd said. "So, once Dad hid the letter under the horse's tail so Jim wouldn't find it until the end. Dad rolled on the ground over that one!"

One sunny day in October, 1952, Wilf was supplying the Ridge Cabin half way up Old Glory with wood. He sent the horses packing and went into the woods to hunt grouse when he caught the glint of a piece of plane.

The next day, Wilf guided RCMP to the remains of a crash that had been missing since a foggy day five years before.

His obituary says, "He loved horses, pie and apple turnovers, mountain tops, a joke, a rousing game of cards, a good huckleberry season, a fruitful garden, a cowboy song, deep snow for skiing, a bargain, working with his hands, Christmas morning, his friends, his family, and his beloved Ruthie..."

While those who knew him will miss the "twinkle in his eyes" and zest for life,

Wilf's own words tell the story:

"I'm sure I did the right thing to marry that little prairie farm girl. We have three girls and three boys. Who could ask for anything more? I have a lot to be thankful for: Good kids, best of son-in laws and daughter-in-laws, loving good-looking grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I can boast a little, can't I?"

Even though "many of his peers are long gone," Todd expects the celebration of life on Aug. 6, from 2 to 4 p.m., to fill the Christina Lake Community Hall.

"He made friends easily," she said.

In lieu of flowers, the family asked that donations be made to the Friends of the Rossland Range.

Old Glory Lookout - By Wilf Gibbard

Glory Lookout, elevation 7792

That is the place that welcomes you.

We'll make you tea, now take your time

For this is the place, where the air's sublime.

This is the country where the grizzly bear play

And mountain goats roam, night and day.

If you want fresh meat, go shoot a deer

Or if you like blue grouse better, there's lots here.

Up here we get bad storms at night

With the thunder's roar and lightning bright.

The cabin rolls and rocks, you feel it sway

And you pray for the dawn of another day.

We have a telephone and radio too.

Visitors, we have a few.

They hike up but cannot stay long,

For they're afraid of bears, when night comes on.

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