

DEAN WILSON

The Patriarch

DEAN WILSON, JR. - COPPER CENTER

As a young kid, I remember flying in a small airplane in the middle of winter from Fairbanks to Ruby to Huslia and on up the Yukon River, village to village. My Dad, Dean Wilson, was a raw furbuyer and he took his job seriously. Buying furs from all over the state and well into Canada was his job and he enjoyed playing his part in Alaska's great multi-million dollar fur industry.

When we landed, each village had a small line of people waiting to show their furs. My Dad would grade the furs meticulously and talk to the trappers individually regarding fur care and pelt damage. He praised those with high quality pelts. As a ten year old, it was fun to watch my Dad interact with the different trappers as they offered up their catch. We would bundle up the furs, compress 'em, and shove them in the back of the airplane and onto the next village we went.

That was in the 1970s. If you've been around for a while, you remember that process. Compared to these days, it's another world gone by. My Dad had a permanent buying station at the Klondike Inn in Fairbanks. Trappers came in with piles and piles of fur. Hundreds upon hundreds of pelts were offered up, purchased and thousands of dollars in cash went out the door to good hard-working trappers. A lot of memories and a lot of good conversations were had there.

I was talking with my good friend Ron Stadem recently about how he was going through college in Fairbanks back in the 1980s. He was so distracted by the people and the activities in my Dad's shop that he couldn't stay away. He enjoyed listening to people tell stories about their trapline, buying fur and just being a part of the action at the Klondike. He wasn't the only one.

The interactions were second to none:

- Stories of villagers walking long distances and coming back with their catch,
- People nearly freezing to death chasing the pelts well below -40F,
- Snow machines getting stomped by moose,
- Trapline thieves and the inevitable trapline jumpers.

Certain people needing money would stop in and ask for help. My Dad (being a softie) would 'lend' them enough money for gas or to fly back to their town, knowing he likely wouldn't ever see that money again. He would encourage them to get a trapline set out when they got home.



I remember huge frozen whole wolves getting dropped off at the Klondike to be skinned. Dad ran warm water in the bathtub and would submerge the carcasses in preparation for the peel. Weights held the wolf underwater over the course of the day, and Dad continued to check on the thawing process. That hotel room had to be deep cleaned at the end of every trapping season. Mom and Dad packed things up to head to Kenny Lake every March for the summer months.

Dad spent a lot of time dealing with issues which affected a large number of trappers: the state of Alaska, BLM, and private property. Cabin permits and building a trappers association from the ground up. He was very passionate about this one. The long conversations with his good friend Pete Buist regarding vision and insight. It seems like everything you can think about was covered and more people would show up with concerns and they were taken care of right there, or so it seemed. It was the common social courthouse for Interior trappers; a place to vent.

Those were the days of the furbuyer and the Klondike. I miss them and I wish many of you younger trappers would've been able to be a part of that experience as well.

It was a great time to be a trapper.

TED SPRAKER - SOLDOTNA

I met Dean Wilson in the fall of 1974. I was a true cheechako, having recently left everything I knew and owned in Wyoming, seeking the great Alaskan adventure. I was working for the Alaska Dept of Fish & Game in Glennallen.

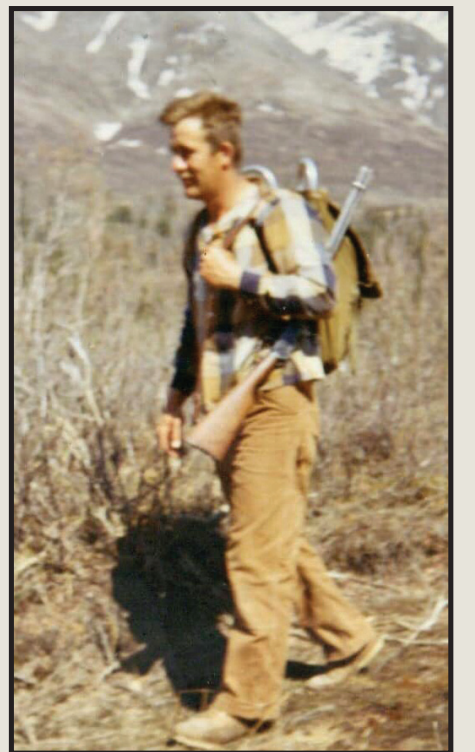
Dean called the office to ask if someone could drive out to his home on Kenny Lake Road to seal 40 wolves that he had recently purchase in Canada. I had heard about Dean's reputation as a trapper, so I eagerly offered to seal his wolves, hoping I would learn something from him.

I started trapping at a young age. Accomplished coyote trappers in Wyoming had taught me to keep my mouth closed and my ears open when I was with them on the trapline. They didn't want a lot of questions, so I learned to stand back and watch.

We hired Dean to trap wolves during the early stages of a predator control effort in the Copper River Valley. I was his assistant. I remembered the lessons I learned as a kid in Wyoming ... I just stood back and watched an expert trapper at work. I think Dean appreciated that I was watching his every move, but not bothering him with too many rookie questions. He knew what I was thinking, and answered all of my questions without me even asking.

During my career with Fish & Game, I met many trappers. Most were at least a little protective of their secret recipes for lure or their favorite sets. Dean was not that person. He was generous with the trapping knowledge he had learned the hard way. I'm sure every trapper who knew him would agree with that statement.

As I make sets today, I often wonder if I'm doing it the way that Dean would do. Dean was a mentor to a lot of people over the years, and I was lucky to be one of them.



BILL WIVODA - FAIRBANKS

Like most trappers, I met Dean Wilson by selling furs to him. I came from Minnesota, where I had experience hanging around the local furbuyer. My first impression of Dean was that he was very knowledgeable, direct to the point and very fair. From that point on, I knew that some day I wanted to buy fur in Alaska.

I started buying fur a few years before Dean retired, so I guess we were competitors. However, I found out quickly that I was no competition. Dean never had any ill will toward me. Matter of fact, we started doing business together on occasion, which was mutually productive.

After Dean got sick, he sold his inventory and customers to me. I was humbled that he trusted me to that extent. I can't describe what an honor and huge responsibility it was ... and still is. No person could come close to filling Dean's shoes.

Dean taught me to always trust your grade, and to grade everyone's fur the same way. You can't treat one person better than another. The grade is the grade ... period. You must be consistent.

Dean really knew Alaskan fur and could recognize what region a pelt came from. I remember we held several fur contests where Dean was the final judge. Two different years, he picked the best quality marten, which happened to come from his old 'line in Northway.

Dean was internationally known and respected. He was the face of the Alaskan fur trade for decades, and promoted youth involvement to make it better. His strong faith in God guided him through the good times and the bad. He leaves a void that can never be filled. I miss you, Dean.

Alaska Trapper

February 1999



Tribute to a Very Special Trapper

MARK SCHLENKER -GAKONA

I first met Dean Wilson during the winter of 1981. I had only been in Alaska a short time and my cash was running low. So, I headed to Klondike Furs to sell my meager catch. Having had dealings with a few unscrupulous furbuyers in the past, it was with some hesitation that I knocked on the door. I was greeted by a big man with a smile and a solid handshake. This was Dean.

It took me all of five minutes to know that this was a sincere and honest man, who lived and breathed trapping and fur. The money he paid me for my furs was double what I would have received from one of the major auction houses. I was both very happy and somewhat confused by this situation. After the deal was made, we sat around the old barrel stove drinking coffee and talking trapping.

The 1980s was a time of great secrecy in the trapping trade, but not so with Dean. He was more than willing to share his wealth of knowledge with me.

During our conversation, Dean began talking about a young man who was trapping on snowshoes out of a little cabin at Hogan Hill. "That's a tough way to make a living," he told me. Of course, Dean knew it was me, but he never let on. It was then I realized what had prompted his prodigious generosity when buying my fur. He wanted to support the basic lifestyle I was living. A life-long friendship was born that day, out of mutual respect and admiration.

If someone were to ask me to describe Dean Wilson in one word, that word would be "big." He was a big man in both size and status, with a big smile, big glasses, big suspenders and (most of all) a big heart.

PETE BUIST -FAIRBANKS

Like most Interior Alaska trappers of my era, I spent a lot of time hanging out at Dean's "suite" at the Klondike Inn. It was the best place EVER to talk trapping. There were always other trappers to BS with, but the Patriarch himself was the focus and the fountain of information.

Dean billed himself and the "Biggest Furbuyer in Alaska." I once asked him if this self-anointed title was a reflection of the volume of fur he bought and sold. He told me in no uncertain terms that no other furbuyer weighed as much as him.

Many years ago, Dean asked me to write up a description of the fur handling contest he was getting ready to launch. He contended that his writing skills were not up to the task. I wondered why a guy who had written a book about trapping would need my help, but he insisted. I wrote the piece and Dean used it. He presented me with an arctic fox in return.

The contest was emblematic of Dean. It may have appeared to be just good fun, but it also:

- Promoted responsible resource management,
- Sharpened the fur handling skills of the average trapper
- Generally promoted trapping.

The fact that it might have brought Dean a bit more business was just a side benefit.

DAVE BRUSS - COPPER CENTER

Dean Wilson was a trapper in his heart, much more so than being a furbuyer. All his life, Dean found great joy in helping/teaching young and new trappers. When I was still a school kid, in the 1960's, Dean taught me many things about trapping. He showed me how to split lips, turn ears and other proper fur handling techniques. Then, on several occasions, he gave me a rubbed out fox or coyote to practice on.

Dean's initial quest into the furbuyer's world started only with a desire to find better places for him and his friends to sell their furs. He soon learned that the bigger the volume of furs he had, the more options there were with the big buyers, and higher prices could be found. His final year of trapping was the winter of 1980-81, when his furbuying had grown too big for him to properly run traplines anymore.

Dean's idea of "trying to find the best prices for trappers" never left his thinking. When he offered a price on your furs, there was no dickering, because his first offer was his highest offer. He never had thoughts of trying to get your furs as cheap as possible, so he could make the most profit. As a matter of fact, there were times when he would get back from a furbuying trip, that he discovered that fur markets moved up while he was gone. Dean would then go back through the furs he had just bought, re-grade them again according to the new prices, and send trappers more money ... even after they were his furs. This happened on more than one occasion. Who ever heard of a furbuyer doing something like that? Only Dean.

Dean held fur contests, giving away new snowmachines and other prizes. He became the biggest furbuyer in the state of Alaska, not because he strived to be the savviest businessman. Rather, it was because he was a trapper at heart, and never stopped being an advocate for trappers and trapping.

JR PEDERSON -FAIRBANKS

I was lucky enough to meet Dean Wilson and his family only a couple months after moving to Alaska in 1991. For those who were not blessed to have known Dean, I can only say I never met a man I respected more than him. His advice was invaluable to me, both in trapping and in life.



THIS POSTER WAS PRODUCED BY THE ALASKA TRAPPERS ASSOCIATION TO HONOR AND COMMEMORATE THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF DEAN WILSON.