

# The Sandy McNabb Trail

*Welcome to the Sandy McNabb Trail. This easy 1.5 km hike curves through forest and wetlands to a Sheep River valley viewpoint. Benches at the viewpoint invite leisurely enjoyment of the scenic panorama.*

*Come along and explore this valley's history. Meet the generations who travelled these trails before you and discover what lured them to this rugged land. Let this brochure be your guide as you 'time travel' into the past. Numbered passages on these pages correspond to trailside markers.*

## **Stop #1 — Sandy McNabb:**

*"Are you hungry today lads . . . ?" wonders Sandy, as he cast his line into the river's swirling current. A shimmering cutthroat trout answers by instantly striking the bait. It will soon join the others in the frying pan.*

Alexander "Sandy" McNabb was a noted horse trainer when he arrived in Turner Valley during the 1913-1915 oil boom and began working for the Royalite Oil Company. This native of Scotland also loved fishing and spent many of his days off riding the rutted road west from Turner Valley to his favourite fishing hole on the Sheep River near here.

Oldtimers still recall his tireless efforts to distribute food to Royalite's unemployed during the hungry '30s. In recognition of his work as a founding member of the Turner Valley Fish and Game Club, the Association designated Sandy's old fishing spot as "Sandy McNabb's Camp".

The recreation tradition enjoyed by Sandy McNabb continues with you today at the campgrounds and on the trails of Sandy McNabb Recreation Area.

## **Stop #2 — Historic Resource Use**

*Smoke is lost to the cold mountain wind as it curls from the tents clustered on the river flat. Shadows dance on the skin walls as nomadic hunters huddle near the orange glow of their fires.*

*The hunters consider waiting for wintering bison herds to drift upvalley within hunting range. Buffalo meat would sustain them on their journey home to the western plateau. But heavy snow might soon block passage up the Sheep Valley and the mountain passes beyond. They decide to break camp tomorrow.*

Based on archeological evidence, prehistoric hunters travelled through the Sheep Valley over 7,000 years ago. Indians named

the valley's river "Eetookiap" — Sheep Creek. European explorers understood why when they discovered the plentiful bighorn sheep in its uplands. Elk and deer also fed on the lush mountain pasture, but these were not the valley's only treasures.

Settlers from the foothills saw limitless cattle range. Lumbermen saw fine timber. Coal outcroppings inspired dreams of wealth in hopeful men. By the 1890s, the valley's resources were being used: timber cut, coal mined, livestock grazed. In the 1920s, oil and gas drillers joined the exploration of the valley's riches. And like people before them, they also came to hunt, fish and camp.

## **Stop #3 — Watershed**

*Raindrops slip off leaves. Snowflakes drift silently. A stream gurgles over stone. Our world is alive with water in all its forms, alive because of it. Rivers are the lifeblood of the prairies. They begin in the Rocky Mountains and carry water to cities, croplands, and livestock. To ensure an abundant supply of river water, the source must be protected. That source is the foothills forest.*

By acting as a sponge, the watershed forest regulates river flow. Moisture falling as rain and snow collects in the deep forest carpet. It may flow directly to the river in creeks and streams or it may filter down to be stored as groundwater. When erosion gnaws into these reservoirs, groundwater escapes as springs.

In some places, the Sheep River Valley is cut into descending terraces by river erosion. Springs bubble out along the terrace edges. The steady release of groundwater, rainfall, and snowmelt by the watershed forest keeps the Sheep River flowing year round. Destruction of the forest would open the slopes to moisture loss, serious erosion and expose the downriver areas to flood, then drought conditions.

A small spring seeps from the base of this gully, trickling down to join the Sheep River. Water-loving plants cluster along its wet course. Drier areas support different tree, grass and shrub species, and together they form the protective mantle of watershed forest.

## **Stop #4 — Logging**

*Listen . . . the crack of an axe biting deep into pine heartwood . . . can you hear it? Maybe it's just a ghostly echo from the past. The time: 1890s. The place: the Sheep River Valley encampment beside the frozen river. In the pale dawn, the aroma of coffee rouses the logging camp to action. Men gather in the breakfast tent, clattering plates.*

*Outside, heavy draft horses stamp and whinny impatiently for their morning oats and hay. Then another day's work in the Lineham Lumber Company begins.*

For over twenty years, John Lineham's logging crews cut timber in the Sheep and Highwood River valleys. Trees were felled during the winter and skidded down to be stockpiled on the Sheep River ice. Spring breakup floated the logs downriver to the Company's sawmill at Okotoks. When its timber was finally logged or burned, the Sheep Valley slept away many seasons undisturbed by axe or saw. Its forests grew again.

It awoke to new lumbering activity during the 1940s. Post WW II demands for wood products brought a new generation of loggers but the revival was short-lived. Defeated by poor transportation and a market slump, logging camps on Dyson, March and Bluerock Creeks quietly shut down. A few "post and pole" operators still harvest Sheep Valley timber, but the raucous days of sawyers and sawmills are now just a memory.

### **Stop #5 — Willow Bog**

*A meadow vole scurries for cover when the dark shadow of a hawk passes over the willow bog. A twig snaps and the startled mule doe rises from her daybed hidden in the willows. A bullmoose browses in the boggy clearing, watched by a wary, waiting hunter. . .*

The time could be now, or centuries past. The age-old game of hid and seek goes on. The Sheep River Valley has always been rich in animal life. Long before modern hunters appeared, Indian tribes hunted game in the Valley.

Willow bogs like this one are important for game resources. Thriving on the moisture trapped in poorly drained depressions, bog birch and willows take root. Their thick cover shelters small rodents which, in turn, support predator populations. The bog also provides critical winter browse for moose and deer.

Up ahead, the trail winds along the ecotone or transition zone between willow bog on the right and lodgepole pine/aspens on the left. Plant species common to bog and forest mingle, providing a rich and varied habitat that hosts an equally varied wildlife population.

Look for tracks, droppings, a feather. Watch quietly. Become the silent hunter. Join generations gone by in a timeless game of hide and seek. Camera ready?

### **Stop #6 — Fire**

*The firefighter paused for a moment, resting his blistered hands. He felt like he'd been working on the fireguard for days instead of hours. He glanced up in time to dodge an ember sailing past on the scorching wind. It*

*landed downwind of his cutline, flared into life in the litter of dry grass and pine needles. He sprang forward to kill it.*

*The air was full of sparks now. An express train of fire headed straight toward him. He heard the fireboss's hoarse voice cut through the smoke. It was no use. They were getting out now while they still had a chance ...*

The big fire of 1919 was among the worst in Sheep Valley history, presumably started by accident in a railway camp near Pack Bridge. It swept down the valley and beyond the Forest Reserve, destroying everything in its path. Again in 1929, large portions of the Sheep River watershed went up in smoke.

### **Stop #5 —**

Seventy years ago, many of the forested foothills to the east were barely treed. The frequency of forest fires in the early days improved wildlife habitat by removing overmature trees and opening the way for new growth.

As forest fire detection and suppression techniques evolved from horses to helicopters, the incidence of fires has declined. Although fewer fires are good for recreation, the long term health of the forest can suffer. Controlled burning and clearing have largely replaced the role of wildfire as a forest management tool.

### **Stop #7 — Erosion**

This terrace overlooks the river's curving course 100m (300') below. It is a swift cold river, beginning on Mount Rae and descending over 1000m (3000') to its downriver union with the Highwood. This steep gradient churns the most whitewater of any Kananaskis Country river. Its rapids challenge kayakers and canoeists; its waterfalls flow and spill through a river corridor which was once blanketed by glacial ice.

Forty thousand years ago, ice flowed from the mountain ranges and completely buried this landscape. The glaciers scraped gravel and rock from the valley walls and bulldozed it eastward. When warmer climate forced the glacier's retreat, thick deposits of gravel were left behind on the hills and in the valley. Glacial meltwater churned along the old river channel and carved terraces into the valley walls.

This canyon sculpture is never finished. Fed by rainfall, snowmelt, and groundwater, the Sheep River continually changes, undercutting a cliff here, exposing a coal seam there, deepening a river ford. Whatever the changes, they will add to the rugged beauty of the Sheep River Valley.

### **Stop #8 — Grassland**

*"Keep 'em moving" ... the call floats up from the*

river flat, drifts through the swirling dust and the sound of cattle. Eyes on the action below, the old man slouches easily in his worn saddle. From his terrace viewpoint, he watches the herd at Sandy's old fishing camp being gathered for the drive across the river. The sun frames the image of horse and man against the red promise of a new day. His thoughts wander back to years gone by.

He recalls his granddad's stories about the early days of cattle ranching in the foothills. Before the turn of the century, homesteaders like his grandfather ran their herds on the foothills range nearly year-round. They didn't even put up hay. Instead they trusted chinook winds to strip the grassy meadows of winter's snow. One winter the chinooks didn't come and a herd of livestock starved, trapped by heavy snows in the place now known as Death Valley.

Things changed in his father's day. Regulations in the new Forest Reserve allowed horses to overwinter here, but cattle permits extended only from May to November.

Down below, the last of the herd splashes through the water. The man nudges his horse along the ridge trail. The Sheep River Valley is a part of his life — his heritage. It has supported the family ranch for three generations and he knows that with careful management, it will support his grandchildren.

"Coming dad?" his son calls. The old rancher's horse breaks into a jog trot.

## **Stop #9 — Coal and Oil**

In the six years since the Burn's mine opened in 1913, how many times had he guided his wagon load of coal across the treacherous slopes of the Sheep River road? A grey downpour pounded a tattoo on his hat and shrouded his view of the bend ahead. They said that the Calgary and Southern would have a rail bed laid to the mine by summer's end. He'd soon be out of a job if that was the case. Maybe it's all for the best he thought, especially on a day like today. For now at least, the steam-powered oil rigs of Turner Valley would require his load of coal.

No trains ever undertook the dangerous route. Without laying a single rail, high construction costs and declining coal markets had forced the C & S to abandon their plans. Wagons continued to haul Burn's coal until the upper Sheep Valley mines closed in 1923. Of the three other mines that worked the area, Indian Oils was the last to close in 1951.

With the Royalite discovery well announcing Turner Valley's second oil boom in 1924, oil and gas exploration had moved into the Valley. Near Sandy McNabb's camp, the Paramount 1 well

would operate from 1929-1936 and the Indian Oils Company would drill on their coal lease from 1929-1930.

Once discovered, the valley's rich fossil fuel resources inspired ambitious dreams of wealth, but its rugged terrain hindered recovery. Today, land use zoning, not transportation difficulties, control fossil fuel exploration and recovery.

## **Stop #10 — Water**

Streams weave through the green fabric of the mountain and foothills forests like ribbons of light, joining other creeks and rivers in a network of waterways. Together, they feed the eastern plains.

Just as this trail loops back to its starting point, water moves through the land in a cyclical pattern. It changes form but never loses power. It flows in rivers down the Rockies but returns to the hills as rain and snow. Whatever its form, water is a powerful influence on the environment.

Ice and riverwater sculpt the rough Sheep River Valley. Rainfall and snowmelt nourish the valley's forests. Without moisture, the valley's grazing resource could support neither wildlife nor domestic livestock. River erosion exposed the valley's resources and provided a transportation corridor into its heartland. Because it supports many other resources, water itself is the most basic natural resource in the Sheep River Valley.

The health of the eastern slopes water resource is directly linked to the health of the watershed forest. Rivers need forests to capture, store and regulate their water supply; forests need moisture to survive. Land use zoning policies safeguard the longterm health of both.

## **Last Stop — Sharing**

Natural resources have always drawn people to the Sheep River Valley. Its abundant wildlife meant food for past hunters. Ranchers brought cattle to fatten on its rich grass-lands. Entrepreneurs took timber, coal and oil out of the valley. Others like Sandy McNabb appreciated the valley as a scenic recreation area.

What brings you to the Sheep Valley? Have you come to ride or hike its trails? To photograph its wildlife and wildlands? Or simply to relax and enjoy the beauty of nature around you?

Today, as in the past, each visitor comes for a share of the valley's riches. The claims are many but so are the resources. Zoning makes sharing easier because it allows resource use and resource protection to exist side by side. Sharing today will safeguard the treasures in the Sheep River Valley so that others may enjoy and share them tomorrow.