

Noel Gardner

By

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On a cool dawn near Pincher Creek, Alberta, I raised my head off the pillow and heard a warning growl. Very close. Tried it again and same thing. The dog was large, part wolf, part German shepherd. How do you get out of bed to look at avalanches when a menacing alpha dog is staring you in the face? Suddenly Noel commanded: Smoky! And the game ended. Noel's wife, Glid (short for Gladys), fixed breakfast and we were off into the mountains south of Crowsnest Pass to see a drill rig and an oil camp in the runout zone of two converging avalanche paths.

In April 1965 while riding shotgun in Noel's Tucker snow cat west of Rogers Pass in the Selkirks, we climbed a mountain through large Western Red Cedars. Deep snow lay on branches high above the ground. "That snow could kill you when it fell," Noel said. Further up he pointed out a line in the trees where Glid had outskied a bear. When we arrived at Fidelity observatory with 9 feet of snow on the ground I looked for bears in the snow study plot. None. But these mountains were impressive. After looking at soaring peaks laced with avalanche paths reaching the valley floor thousands of feet below, we entered Noel's high altitude residence, walked past banks of weather recorders and radio gear, met Glid, talked avalanches. Through a large window while sipping Aquavit, I looked eastward over the snow study plot, up the Illecillewaet valley to majestic Mt. Sir Donald. My thoughts of bears faded away like snow crystals in warm air.

After dinner I noticed a conversation piece hanging on the wall behind me. It was a pair of bloodied knickers, legs akimbo. I asked what's that? Noel obliged. It happened on a summer day. Smoky, backup dog Tor, also ¼ wolf, and their avalanche forecasting master were out scouting a new observatory site above Fidelity station. Approaching a densely covered creek bed, the dogs suddenly stopped. Twenty feet away stood a grizzly sow and her cubs. A grunt was followed by a roar. The bear charged out of the brush. It would have caught him, but the dogs distracted it. Noel got up the tree ahead of the bear but it came up after him. He tried to kick it. It just went berserk. The bruin bit Noel's thigh to the bone. He hammered it on the nose with his clenched fist. And the bear retreated while the dogs nipped at its rear. A chase ensued. The bear disappeared, likely with its cubs. Smoky came back to the tree and Tor showed up barking and squealing at Fidelity station. Glid summoned help from wardens working nearby. After many hours Noel arrived at the hospital in Banff where doctors repaired the wound and administered penicillin. Gardner almost immediately had a bad drug reaction and was sick for a week but recovered and was back on skis when snows returned.

The next morning wearing skis and boots from the guest stash, I followed Noel up the ridge above Fidelity station. We dug a quick pit on a test slope, looked at slope boards and climbed higher, passing

the large starting zone of the Fidelity avalanche path. The Trans-Canada highway lay far below. Beyond and westward the ridge narrowed. At a steep section we took off our skis and climbed South Fidelity Peak. On the small summit, an anemometer held remnants of icing from a previous storm. Noel told me I was the only visitor to climb the south peak with him. The view through this section of the Selkirks was stunning. This part of the Trans-Canada Highway lay in a narrow, steep sided, deep valley. The dimensions of the avalanche problem were as daunting as any I'd seen. There were multiple starting zones in many paths. Many aspects were involved. It could be raining down low and snowing above with drifting snow in starting zones above timberline. Part of the highway was protected by avalanche sheds and retarding mounds. Paths without direct protection needed artillery control.

Noel Gardner had the right stuff for the hazard forecasting job. He knew the area intimately from the time he was a warden in 1948. Before over snow vehicles were available to him, he climbed on skis from the valley floor to high starting zones and traversed to Rogers Pass. He kept extensive records of weather, snow, and avalanches before, during, and following the construction phases of the road. He was a good observer with a passion for snow and avalanches. And he pioneered the development of the hazard forecasts there with single minded fervor. He thought about snow and avalanches every waking hour of every winter he worked there.

Following my visit the U.S.F.S. avalanche research project arranged for Noel to spend a winter in Fort Collins, CO to write up avalanche forecasting techniques developed and successfully implemented at Rogers Pass. I was privileged to work with him on this endeavor.