

Bridge Lake's Russell Ross – part two

By Sherry Stewart



“When the war was over,” Russ continues, “my cousin Jack King and I did a lot of hunting and trapping together. Jack was in the Military Police during the war, a sergeant when he was discharged, and so he stayed in the service one more full year and was discharged in 1946.

“While he was still in the service, Jack acquired a trapline that paralleled his father’s—my Uncle Gordon’s—trapline. We spent a lot of time out there connecting the two with trails so it could be operated as one big trapline. The first year after the war Jack trapped with my uncle, who had only one good leg and one artificial leg. The following year and for another five years I trapped with Jack, and the old man didn’t trap any more.

About the only way of raising any money in the winter was trapping, so it was a mainstay. We would skin them at

night, and when it came time to sell them we took them to Pappas and Sons in Vancouver, or to Ernie Whitaker. We also had a local buyer, Percy Ogden.

Russ was very close to his cousin Rita as well. “I would say that she was probably as much or more of a sister to me than my own sister,” Russ says. “I lived with her more than I did with my own sister, because I was living with Uncle Gordon and Aunt Alice, Rita’s parents. We walked to school together, as teenagers we rode horses to dances, later we went in vehicles, that by today’s standards were absolute wrecks, and survived.”

In 1950 Russ met his future wife, Peggy, when she came to work for the Boultee’s, at Lac des Roches, to tend their five daughters and help with the housekeeping. About that time Russ was still living with his aunt and uncle, near the old Arthur Barnes farm on the north shore of Bridge Lake. Glynn and Sally Schmidt had bought the Barnes place and in the fall of 1947 they needed to go back to Washington State quite often, so they asked Russ if he would take care of their purebred herd. It was a natural next step when Russ embarked on what would be a lifelong career as a cattle rancher. He leased the Schmidt’s land, which he eventually bought.

“Peggy and I were married in Vancouver in June of 1953,” Russ says, “and they had a big dance for us here when we returned home and settled in the log house on the property.” In time their children, Ginny, Gordon, Kelly and Pat were born.

Russ described ranching then, “We



Russ and Peggy married in Vancouver in June '53



Russell Ross says of his cousin Rita King, “She was like a sister to me.”

started out with two cows and sold hay to horse loggers; the logging business was just starting at that time. So we sold hay to people with cattle and gradually expanded our own herd to the point where we couldn’t sell hay any more because we needed it for ourselves. When I first started out I thought that if I ever got to 50 cows I would be a rancher. And at our peak we had 120 calving cows, and that was still wasn’t not nearly enough without working off the place.

Ian MacInnes, author of two earlier articles on the Shertenlib family, remembers, “My last trip to Bridge Lake with my parents was in the summer of 1950, the year I graduated from high school. As far as I can remember, Russ was still living at the King’s then, but it wasn’t long after that he bought the Arthur Barnes place and our aunt (I

think Aunt Glad) gave him a bred cow to start his herd. I can't recall what he had for machinery in the beginning, but I don't think there was much. Later he had one of those little grey Ford tractors so ubiquitous after the war. I think he and Peg got married around the same time as Adele and I, and both couples started having kids. We were up for a visit in '56 and still have pictures of Peggy, Rita, and my wife Adele each with a new baby.

"Russ was working very hard then, trying to stay afloat," Ian continues. "He'd work at ranching in summer and then get a job in one of the little rubber-tired sawmills in winter. Like a lot of us, I guess, he and Peg had it pretty rough during the early years, being burned out once and getting very little help, it seemed, from the weather. I wonder how many times he had to get his winter's hay from the Peace River country? But d'you know, even in the worst of times I think Russ was happy and content doing what he did. He is a guy that was born to be a cattle rancher, and I can't imagine him doing anything else."

There were some down times to be sure. In 1963, the same day that Jack Kennedy was killed, Russ's beloved cousin Jack King was killed in a hunting accident, shot at dusk by a moose hunter that he was guiding. The family's old log house burned down in January of 1964 and construction of the present house, very close to the spot where the old house stood, was started in April of that year.

As the years went by the children grew up, barns were built and the family prospered. Children married and grandchildren were born.

Today Russ continues to live on the same land, his kitchen window still overlooking his herd and Bridge Lake. The family lost Kelly in the late nineties.



Russ and his Peggy in more recent years

Ginny and Chuck live in Fort St. James. Gordon, who lives in Bridge Lake, runs Gordon Ross Contracting and is a partner with his dad in the Alpine Simmental herd. Pat and Bob live just north of Cache Creek, have cattle, and are somewhat involved with Alpine Simmentals as well. Russ and Peggy have been married 54 years last June, and since early in 2006, Peggy has lived at Mill Site Lodge in 100 Mile House. Russ faithfully visits with her and takes her out to lunch every week. And he always makes sure that she gets to eat her favourite dessert.



Russ and Peggy's children:
(From left, back row) Gordon, Kelly
(Front row) Pat, Ginny

I asked Russ what he thinks about the current meat regulations and new record-keeping practices for the cattle industry. "Oh, the government," he says, with his tongue firmly in his cheek. "Well, they have been fixing our problems since I was a boy. I understand the current problems all right, but I don't understand why the government has made everything so darned complicated. If somebody could just explain it to me—I'm a

logical person—then I could understand.

"For example," Russ continues, "we have a new set of regulations coming down the tube now having to do with transportation and the licensing of pick-up trucks and the filling out of log books, and you name it. If I hook up my trailer to my truck and go to haul some calves to Kamloops, they want to know when I slept last, how long I have been on the road, like I was a long-haul truck driver.

"If a semi is dangerously overloaded or has an insecure load or something, if there are chunks of steel or nails falling off a truck, that driver needs to be stopped and fined. But if there's a little bit of hay blowing off on the highway for the first mile or two as I get up to speed, I don't think it's gonna kill anybody. It's a funny thing. You never see anything in the papers about all these people being killed by reckless ranchers."

So the beat goes on, and though some things change, and ranchers are having to deal with a parcel of paperwork and a pile of new rules and regulations, it's good to think of Russ sitting at his kitchen table each morning, coffee in hand, looking out that window at his grazing cattle and Bridge Lake beyond, as he has been doing just about every morning since 1953. It's good to know that some things don't change.