

# Sam White, Alaskan

By Sam O. White  
Photos from the Author

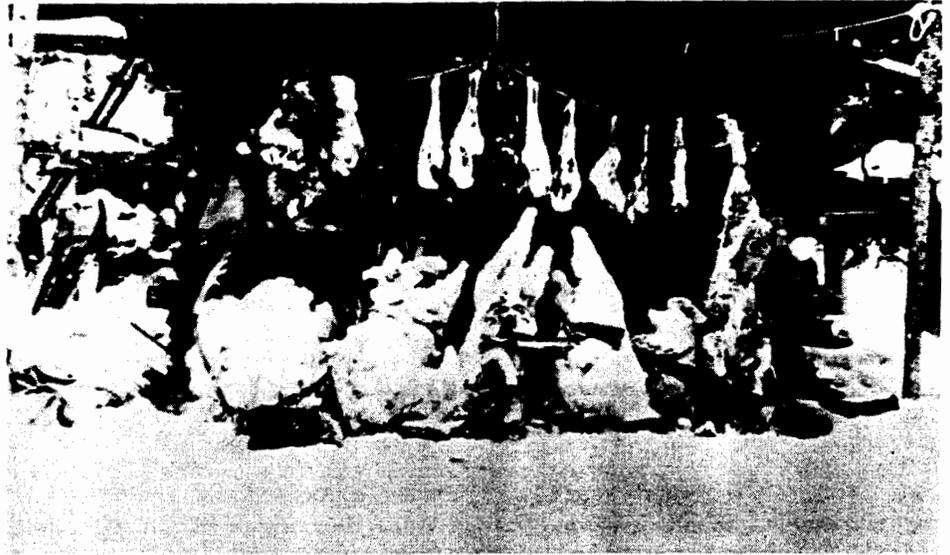
## Part VI—Chasing Violators

**W**ANTON waste of wildlife is one thing that always makes a game agent see red. Probably the worst such case I encountered during my fourteen years of patrolling the Interior for the old Alaska Game Commission had to do with a ruthless killer of mountain sheep. I still can't help but think of the beautiful valley where he lived as something of a morgue.

I'd met this man on the Wood River dog trail back in 1924 when I was working for the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. He was a German chap, rather arrogant and aggressive, who had settled on Dry Creek in the Mt. Hayes area southeast of Fairbanks. He suffered from asthma and was quite a recluse. He had one main cabin near a vein of lignite coal which he burned in his cook stove; another cabin above timberline where he could go in the summer to get away from the pollen; and a third cabin on his trap line down below in the forest. He would put three to six months alone in there, and would see his nearest neighbor, some 18 miles away, maybe only once or twice during that time.

This chap had called a few times at my office in the Federal Building at Fairbanks for the purpose of obtaining a license for trapping. I had had his place of operations on my list for several years as a must for a check-up as I had seen a guide's report that he was doing some free-wheeling with the game in that area, especially the mountain sheep. Twice in a row I'd had my plans all set to go in there, but each time I'd been diverted for duty elsewhere. Finally in late November of 1939, Wayne House, a very capable wildlife agent from McGrath, was in Fairbanks and when I told him what I had in mind, he agreed to go along with me.

I flew a tent and other equipment into a creek about eighteen miles beyond this trapper's cabin on November 30, and then returned about noon the following day with Wayne and the rest of our gear and supplies. We set up camp and crawled in early, and long before daylight on December 2 we hit the trail for Dry Creek and the man's main cabin. It was rough going through the deep snow, and we arrived at his cabin with just a little daylight left. His dogs began to bark when we were about fifty yards away, and the man came out. He was friendly, shook hands, and invited us into his cabin. But I made our position clear at once.



Some of the contraband meat we found at Dry Creek in 1939.

"We are here on business and we mean business," I told him. "Right now I want to check that load on your sled." His sled was in the yard with the harnesses still on the tow line. He went over and stood beside it.

"This sled is mine," he said, "and you can't look at it."

I followed right after him and gave him the word.

"We may be with you two or three days, and we are going to look you over real good," I said. "While we are here, we do not want any interference whatever from you. You will be treated with respect and your rights will be observed."

At that, the man actually came to attention, gave us a good salute, and said, "Yes, Sir." Then he stood aside, and from that time to the end of the trip he was exceedingly cooperative and gave us not the slightest trouble.

We inspected the load on the sled and found the heads of two cow moose. We found six big fat rams on the ground, and nine more on the roof of the cabin under canvas and snow. There were traces of many more that he had been feeding to his dogs. He had very little moose meat left, and no caribou meat at all.

He had no food other than game meat and wild berries, but in the true spirit of the North, he offered to share what he had with us. We had brought along just three days' scant rations for ourselves, but we turned over most of our grub to him as he was famished for beans and flour. We offered him a cigarette which he accepted eagerly. "I have had no tobacco for three months," he said,

"and I am a slave to tobacco." With that, we took stock of our cigarette supply, figured out a ration for the three of us on a three-day basis, and when we smoked, he smoked.

We resumed our check of his cabin and grounds at daylight, and the first thing we found was a set gun. He had an 8 mm Mauser carbine set vertically over the door to shoot down in front when the door was opened. That, of course, was for bear, but since the roof had a six-foot overhang, a man was not likely to see it when opening the door. The gun went into the contraband pile. We started digging in the yard and came up with a ewe's head and a lamb's head in addition to the fresh meat that was lying all over the place. He also had sheep's hams, sugar cured and smoked. They looked real good but we didn't try them.

About this time, Wayne called my attention to the fact that the man had not fed his dogs since we arrived. We couldn't stand by and see the dogs go hungry, so I told him to feed them on whatever he usually did, since so far as we were concerned it would make no difference in the charges. He took a big ram's carcass and cut it up and fed it to the dogs.

The next day we went up to his cabin at the head of the creek. It was in a beautiful setting with a spring of clear cold water under a bank just back of the cabin. The spring, of large volume, didn't change its temperature more than a degree or two summer or winter. I forget what its temperature was, except that it was around forty degree Fahren-

heit. Over this pool he had built an ingenious shack with racks where he said meat would keep fresh for a month in the summertime without being bothered by flies. His cache here also contained four or five cured sheep's hams.

Digging in the snow around this place we found two or three grizzly bear skulls, another ewe's head and another lamb's head. When we got around to totaling up the score, it was two caribou, two moose, and fifty-one mountain sheep, which he admitted killing between July 1 and December 1 of that year. As a matter of fact, he did a poor job of concealing a little pride in his prowess. And he said, "I earn this by killing enough wolves to save more than double that game." When I asked him if he collected the bounty on all the wolves he had killed, he replied, "Of course I do. I have to make a living." But a check of the bounty records at a later date showed that he had collected only five bounties on wolves in seven years.



A camp on the winter patrol.

Above the cabin on a low jutting ridge was a deposit where the sheep had a lick, filled with small caves which generations of sheep had pawed or eaten out of the ground. Opposite this spot was a blind, and around the blind were many empty cartridge cases, probably a bushel. It gave us the creeps to think of all that carnage.

At the upper cabin we found two more set guns, which also were confiscated. We spent the night there and then returned to the main cabin. It was a relief to get away. The place seemed to be marked with death. With fifty-one sheep we could prove, we could only wonder how many more were hidden in the snow. And the thought that this had been going on since the man settled there in 1922 was not comforting.

Back at the main cabin we selected our evidence for the court and sealed it into bags. We also took pictures. I was anxious to get the man himself into the pictures with the contraband, but I

knew that the pictures could not be used as evidence unless he was in them of his own free will. Much to our surprise as we were arranging the contraband, he asked if he could get into the pictures. We told him yes, but that they might appear against him in court. He still wanted in, however, so we kindly permitted him to pose with his own contraband meat.

The next day he willingly used his dog team to move a load to our camp eighteen miles away. Then we allowed him to proceed to Birch Lake where he could leave his dogs to be taken care of by friends. Before we left our camp, we called on one of his neighbors. This man, too, treated us with hospitality, but we found ewe sheep parts there along with more than the legal limit of rams.

With the contraband at hand, the district attorney presented the case before the U. S. Commissioner's court. There were some shocked people when the array of contraband was presented, and when the set guns were laid out as evidence, there was sort of a stunned silence. The case was disposed of quickly, and the defendant was given a stiff penalty.

The other defendant, however, elected to have a jury trial. When it came to explaining away the ewe sheep, the man put on a soul-wrenching performance. He was a dead shot, but he told the court, apparently with great effort, that he had aimed at a ram and hit the ewe. When it came to explaining away the excess bag of rams—well he was a prospector, and he was digging holes to bedrock to find gold which would be of great benefit to Alaska for sure, and

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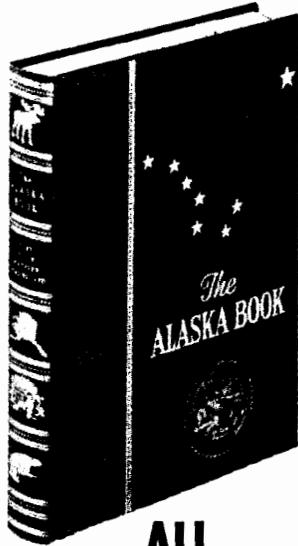
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he could not live out there and dig holes unless he could shoot all the meat he needed.

Prospectors at that time all had little halos just over their heads. In addition, the jury was composed of ex-prospectors and ex-market hunters. You could almost see them thinking, "Just take a look at that well-fed wildlife agent. He never sank a hole to bedrock, and what's more, he never will." Well, that was it. The defendant was acquitted.

To a certain extent there were no hard feelings. The defense attorney was right on the bedrock deal. I haven't sunk a hole to bedrock yet, and the chances that I ever will in the future are dim. However, it should be said that on many occasions I have been in prospectors' camps in very remote areas, and have dined with them on bacon and beans when there were moose and caribou in plain sight, and perfectly safe.

"We could not begin to use a big animal like that," they'd say. "Nine tenths of it would rot. Too much waste." Instead of eating them, they would sometimes give individual animals names, and if an animal failed to show up for a day or two, they'd be concerned for its welfare. If it did show up again, they'd rejoice.

Another trapper who was tripped up by pride in his killing ability was one we picked up on the Nation River. And this guy kept his own score.

At the time, I was on a joint patrol with "Baldy" Sutherland, a constable with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police from the Dawson barracks, and wildlife agent Clarence Rhodes, who was later to become regional director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Actually we were after a rough character, reputed to

be a poisoner, who had a cabin two miles across the border into Canadian territory.

We were traveling by dog team up the Nation River beyond where an aircraft could land when we stopped at a trapper's cabin belonging to a man named Nelson. Naturally, we called him Trapper Nelson, and he would have been a good trademark for that famous packboard. Nelson was not there, and his cabin was bare of all but the veriest necessities. On the door of his twelve-foot-high cache we found a sign, written on the back side of a label from a condensed milk can, which read: "DU NOT OPEN THIS DOR A GUN IS SET TO KIL." We opened the door with a long pole, and there wasn't any gun. But I preserved the sign and still have it today.

In the cabin we found a stack of canned milk labels on which he kept a sort of diary. We preserved those, too, for Commissioner's court. They read:

Oct. 5. UP ETTRAIN CREEK. SHOT ONE MOOSE.

Oct. 6. ON ETTRAIN CREEK. SNOW STORM.

Oct. 10. BACK TO NATION RIVER. SHOT ONE MOOSE.

Oct. 14. UP NATION RIVER. SHOT TWO BULL MOOSE.

Oct. 15. SITTING TRAPS TODAY.

Oct. 16. SIT 10 LINK SNARES TODAY.

And so forth.

Well, we took Trapper Nelson to Eagle and he settled his accounts with the law.

We caught up with the reputed poisoner just as we came around a bend onto a long straight stretch of the Nation River. He had a six-dog team, and was coming towards us fast. I stood in



"Baldy" Sutherland, a constable with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, left, and the author while on the Nation River patrol.

the trail and held up my hand, signaling for him to stop. He realized who we were, and shouted at his dogs and cracked his whip to overrun us. Having two good capable men to back me up, I stood my ground, and when it became apparent he didn't intend to stop, I swung my carbine on the dog team. I didn't figure it would be murder to blast a dog, if that was needed. It wasn't needed. He saw we meant business and put on the brakes.

We frisked him then and there, and found his poison in a sock at the foot of his sleeping bag. His language was frightful, even with no ladies around to hear it. He saved his best broadsides for me, but he didn't neglect the constable or Clarence, either.

Then he turned to the Mountie and said, "For once, you are powerless. You are in Alaska and have nothing to say."

"We are going to your cabin across the line," I told him. "Turn your team around and hold it until I tell you to go."

I could see him figuring to make a break, or at least get to his cabin first. But I got onto a bulge of ice at one side with the carbine handy, and Constable Sutherland got onto the toboggan. That brought another verbal broadside from him, but to no avail. The RCMP went with him, and when Clarence and I arrived at the cabin, they were waiting for us.

Then the man said, "You two s.o.b.'s are now in Canada, and are without authority." But Baldy calmly turned to us and said, "I have a cache and cabin to search. Would you gentlemen care to assist?" We would, and did, and found more poison.

We took the big bad boy to Dawson to face the King's court. He didn't like that. He would far rather have taken his chances in Commissioner's court at Eagle. But I heard later he was terrific with a bucksaw and that the King's woodpile really took a beating.

The native people, too, were occasionally guilty of waste, but in a different manner. I am referring to their use of caribou and moose fences to snare animals for their meat before they had adequate firearms.

I first heard of these fences on a trip to the old Chandalar native village (now Gometie). The fence there, as I remember it, was about twenty-five to thirty miles long. There was a smaller one in the vicinity of Tetlin, and a much larger one on the Kechumstuk which was a good fifty miles long. In later years, I missed these by air.

The fences utilized natural obstructions where available, with the long stretches in between built of timber. In certain places, usually near game

trails, openings were left and snares set in them. The snares were made of braided rawhide or rope or old telegraph wire, if this was available. The trouble was that the snares were not well attended. Often complete skeletons would be found in the snares. Where wire was used, it was sometimes broken and packed off ensared in the victim, leaving loose ends as a permanent threat of entanglement for other animals.

The Kechumstuk fence made a sort of semi-circle around the head of Kechumstuk flats. It snared large numbers of caribou and quite frequently, moose. Here I once found a big bull caribou in a wire snare and, although his carcass was somewhat loud, he had not been there long. He had uprooted the anchor, a dead stub about ten inches in diameter and about fifteen feet long, and had bound it to himself with a loop or two of wire around his body that sank into the hide two or three inches. He had packed this about three hundred feet from the opening in the fence, and then had become badly entangled in brush and died.

As we came to these snares, we cut them up in short pieces and then packed the pieces away, discarding them in different places so they could not be used again. The rawhide rope snares we chopped up with an ax. The wire used was obtained from the old telegraph line which connected Big Delta and Fairbanks with the U. S. Army post at Eagle. It had long since been abandoned, so we spent some time cutting this up or, if it was a long stretch, dropping the wire to the ground.

We also found many caribou skeletons with their antlers entangled in this line wire. The moose didn't seem to get caught as frequently, apparently because their antlers slope back. We did find one moose carcass snarled in the wire, however, that was a real dilly. The wire had been held off the ground with a tripod of spruce poles, with its other end grounded in blueberry bush roots and the moss. The body and antlers of the moose were encircled with strand after strand of wire, so that a small jack spruce was bound to his antlers and a dry pole bound to his body. It was a big moose with antlers just short of a sixty-nine-inch spread. But the wire bound them so tightly that the ends flew apart two or three inches when we cut the wire. It was an awful mess.

In the middle 1930's, I think, the natives discontinued the use of the fences as there was a decline in the number of Indians in the area at that time, and most of those left were armed with 30-30's or even 30-06's.

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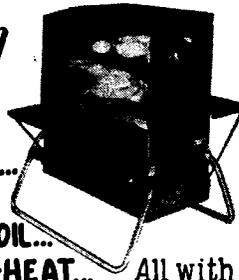
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