

Once Upon a Time

This is not a fairy tale but rather a narrative about a hunt that occurred a long time ago, August 1957. Most of those who took part have now passed on; however, their legacy resides in the Dall's sheep exhibit at the Milwaukee Public Museum.

By Don Kettelkamp

Expedition photos
courtesy of author

Animals from our hunt appear in the Dall's sheep exhibit in the Milwaukee Public Museum. Photo courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum.



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For me the adventure began in the spring of 1957 when I stopped at Meekin's Sheep Mountain Lodge to ask about sheep hunting. I had recently been assigned to the USPHS Alaska Native Service Hospital in Anchorage and would have one fall in Alaska to hunt. A Dall's sheep was high on my want list. Austin Meekin told me about the Milwaukee Public Museum hunt and offered me a horse to use for my own hunting if I would pack horses for him for a week. I had worked in the U.S. Forest Service for five sum-

mers and on a couple of those did some horse packing to look-outs. This was my opportunity to hunt sheep, though the hunt didn't turn out quite like I had envisioned it.

A museum hunt collects representative animals, samples of the flora, and views of the locale where the animals lived to create a diorama of the animals in their natural surroundings. Such a hunt is a major undertaking. This expedition was sponsored by Arthur MacArthur and Robert Tracy of Janesville, Wisconsin. They would both be hunting. The museum sent Owen Gromme, director of the museum; Walter Pelzer, taxidermist and hunter; William Schultz, photographer and artist; and Les Diedrich, flora expert.

This was a talented group — Owen Gromme would, after retirement, become a well known and outstanding wildlife artist. In those days there were no preformed molds, so Walter Pelzer had to take measurements as well as prepare the skins and skulls. Pelzer had been on numerous museum hunts and was an accomplished hunter. William Schultz took the photographs needed to model the diorama. He also painted the scenes when the light was good to get the correct colors because film did not provide accurate coloring. Les Diedrich collected the plants that would need to be reproduced in the diorama.

The camp crew consisted of Austin Meekin, owner, outfitter, and guide; Scotty Heeter, camp boss and cook; a guide whose name I don't remember; Ken Forster, camp help; and me as horse packer and later guide.

The hunt started several days before my leave, so when I arrived at Sheep Mountain Lodge there was a camp south of the Glen Highway in the Chugach Mountains on the Matanuska River below the glacier on the south side of the Glen Highway. I saddled a horse, put my personal gear in the saddlebags, tied my sleeping bag



UPPER LEFT: This was our first sighting of sheep. Two days later we took the rams just over the edge of this hill.

LEFT: Members of the hunt (from left to right) included William Schultz, artist and photographer; Walter Pelzer, taxidermist and hunter; Austin Meekin, owner, outfitter and guide; Don Kettelkamp, packer and guide; Owen Gromme, head of the Milwaukee Public Museum; Scotty Heater, camp boss and cook; kneeling is Les Diedrich, flora expert.

behind the saddle and put my rifle in the scabbard. The only problem on the way to camp was crossing the river. In the morning before the day's ice melt, the river was easy to ford. By afternoon the newly melted ice caused the river to rise sufficiently to bring water over the horse's backs, take their feet out from under them and roll rocks down the river bed. This made crossings dicey, was tough on cameras and anything else in the saddlebags. We avoided late-afternoon crossings.

Austin, MacArthur, Tracy, and Walt Pelzer had gone into the Chugach Mountains a couple of days earlier. The Chugach are some of the most beautiful, rough and foreboding mountains in Alaska. Hunting in the Chugach is very difficult. A plane was to have dropped provisions into the camp, but lost a landing gear and couldn't make the deliver.

The next morning Schultz, Diedrich, and I started to the hunters' camp (we didn't know exactly where it was) with a packhorse loaded with supplies. We made several river crossings and climbed a hill to a saddle, which led deeper into the mountains. At this point I decided to go further up the hill and have a look before the others followed.

The white packhorse would not loose trail, so I tied her lead rope to my saddle horn and led my horse. At switch-backs I let the horses blow, then untied the packhorse and led each horse separately around the switch-back. If one left the packhorse tied to the saddle on a switch-back, the horse would have to make a sharp, straight uphill climb. This situation leads to disaster, but disaster soon found us anyway.

While I was letting the horses blow, but before untying the packhorse, the packhorse shifted her unshod rear feet, lost her footing and fell downhill, taking my saddle horse with her. I was left standing with only half of two reins in my hands. Fortunately the others were safely at the bottom and not below my horses.

By the time I reached the horses, my black saddle horse was standing with the white packhorse lying between his legs. The packhorse was still alive but severely injured. I wondered what would happen to my saddle horse when I ended the packhorse's suffering with a bullet from my Colt Woodsman. Before I had to find out, the packhorse expired. My saddle horse seemed none the worst for his experience, though my .300 H&H Model 70 Winchester had a broken stock and twisted scope.

It was too late in the day to return to camp, so we unpacked the panniers and

settled in for the evening. Surprisingly, the eggs were not broken! The next morning we returned to base camp. The following day the hunting party returned without having found any rams. Austin decided to move camp to the Talkeetna Mountains north of Sheep Mountain. Though separated from the Chugach Mountains by just the Matanuska River, the Talkeetnas are much less forbidding. They have more gradual slopes, though with some areas of rock faces. This was excellent sheep country and much more huntable than the Chugach.

So far nothing had been easy on this hunt, and the move continued the pattern. We packed around the east side of Sheep Mountain and then northwest to the area of Caribou Creek. The terrain was typical

of the area with frost heaves which leave knobs of ground with depressions around each one and low brush. This is difficult horse country, but then it is difficult for all travel. Austin started the move with a small Caterpillar tractor to pull most of the camp equipment and supplies; however, the tractor broke down about half way to the camp site. We repacked the horses, and after a very long day reached our goal and made camp. So far for a week's hunting we had no sheep, and had lost one horse, one tractor and one rifle!

Early the following morning I rounded up the horses. There is nothing quite like walking through hip tall wet, cold grass first thing in the day! Austin, MacArthur and the other guide took a couple of day's supply

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of food and left to hunt around the west side of a long ridge of mountain near the west end of Sheep Mountain. Walt Pelzer, Robert Tracy and I decided to hunt to the west of camp along the back side of a series of hills. I now became a sheep guide as the other guide did not know how to packhorses.

We crossed a long but fairly low hill and dropped into a small stream bed. By this time it was near noon so we stopped to rest the horses. Tracy decided to go down stream and have a look while Walt and I stayed with the horses. A few minutes later a herd of caribou appeared from behind a curve in

the hill opposite us. One of the bulls was a magnificent animal. I told Walt I would go and get Tracy, who was now out of sight, to shoot it. Walt replied that I couldn't do that without spooking the caribou and that I should shoot the bull. He was correct in that I could not go down stream toward Tracy without spooking the caribou so I suggested he shoot it. He said he had taken good caribou before and insisted I shoot. I had a second rifle on this trip, a custom .270 with a 4X Bushnell scope. I lay down on the creek bank, aimed up hill at the caribou and shot. The bull staggered so I shot again and then a third time as he fell. Only after shooting did I find I had a half-moon cut on my right eye brow. No problem, it would heal on its own and every hunter should have such a scar sometime! I owe Walter for the caribou. He had figured out my working arrangements and that I would not get to hunt sheep on my own as this hunt was taking too long. The bull barren ground caribou was a magnificent animal.

When Tracy returned we climbed the hill behind the caribou and on a distant hillside saw the white dots of Dall's sheep. It was now late in the afternoon and we were not prepared to stay over night so we decided to go back to camp and return the next day prepared to stay for several days. On the way to base camp Tracy shot two very nice caribou bulls.

The following morning we packed for a spike camp of several days and once again headed to the west over the hills to where we had seen the sheep. A steady drizzle and low clouds made for a wet, dismal and weary ride. Late in the afternoon we stopped and setup our tent about two miles from the hillside on which we had seen the sheep. I hobbled the horses, put the saddles under cover, got out the Coleman stove and started our supper of caribou backstraps.

Walter watched me for a short time and then said, "If you don't mind I'll cook."

It is hard to do ill to backstraps but I guess I was succeeding, so Walter's offer was much appreciated.

In the morning I checked the horses and gave them some feed. We then climbed to the top of a ridge so we could view the hillside where we had seen sheep two days earlier. White dots signified that our sheep

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ABOVE: Walter Pelzer presents his Boone and Crockett Dall's sheep ram. Owen Gromme is holding the horns from the second largest ram. I am holding the antlers from my barren ground caribou. Its final score was 407-7/8 points and was entered in the Club's 8th Awards Program. **LEFT:** Austin Meekin and I are on the way out at the end of the hunt with two of the pack



were still there; however, there was no way to approach within range until the sheep moved over the edge of the hill and out of sight. A couple of hours passed before the sheep moved over the crest of the ridge. We began our stalk. As we neared the crest we could see where sheep trails led into cuts in the crest.

Walter moved into one cut to my right as I slowly and carefully moved into the next one. Suddenly I saw a full-curl ram bedded on the edge of a rock pinnacle only fifty yards in front of me. I couldn't move. I expected Robert Tracy to follow me so I waited for him to come up to take the sheep. About 10 minutes later I heard a shot from Walter and the sheep in front of me bolted and was gone. Tracy had stopped in the open meadow and sat down to rest when Walter and I went into the cuts. Walter had shot a full-curl ram that disappeared down the cliff face.

Walter and I went around the edge of the cliff so we could get down to Walter's beautiful ram. Tracy decided to wait for us up in the basin. While we were skinning and dressing the sheep, we heard Tracy shoot twice. When we returned to the top of the rim with Walter's ram, there was Tracy with two smaller rams. The museum had permits

This view of Meekin's Sheep Mountain Lodge shows Sheep Mountain behind the lodge. We hunted the mountains behind Sheep Mountain.

for immature rams, ewes and lambs so Tracy's two rams were just what was needed to complete the museum exhibit. When we arrived back at camp with the sheep, we found that the other group had taken a mature ram and the remaining animals for the diorama.

The next few days were spent preparing skins and skulls, taking photos and relaxing. Then it was time to pack for the trip out. The hunt was over but it had been successful in spite of a difficult start. The Dall's sheep exhibit is now in the Milwaukee Public Museum and is a trib-

ute to MacArthur, Tracy and the museum staff.

A pleasant bonus was that Walter Pelzer's Dall's ram and my barren ground caribou both made the 1958 edition of the Club's records book.

And yes, I did get my Dall's ram in 1957. A friend and I went hunting south of the Stony River on the west side of the Alaska Range over Labor Day weekend. We each took full-curl rams. Such was Alaska "once upon a time" in the fall of 1957. ■

