

Game Warden Centurion

(Editor's note: Jim Chizek of Lodi is a former Department of Natural Resources warden who retired in 1986 after 30 years of law enforcement work. Chizek's experiences and those of other wardens are recounted in his 1992 book, "Game Warden Centurion." Stories from that book will appear in "Wisconsin's Great Outdoors" regularly. The following story has been edited slightly from its original version for newspaper publishing purposes. "Axed," which spins a gruesome incident that happened to one of the state's most well known wardens, H.W. MacKenzie, will appear in two parts because of space constraints. Part two will be published next week.)

Axed *(First of two parts)*

By Jim Chizek

Enthusiasm filled the air early on the day before Christmas in 1922 as three wardens left Antigo knowing the corn crackers would be out looking for trout for Christmas.

A soft new snow fell, adding to the several inches already on the ground as they drove slowly east toward the White Lake area of Langlade County. Their plan was to check several spring ponds where they expected Kentucks to take trout. Langlade County is blessed with many spring-fed ponds where trout gather in December.

The talk was quiet and humorous as the old Model T Ford made its way through the narrow, rutted and snow-covered roads. Tales were exchanged of adventures with the local Kentucks, or corn crackers, who Mac was accustomed to dealing with. Snatches of hill-accented speech seasoned the discussion. Corn crackers was a common name for transplanted Kentuckians who made moonshine whiskey during Prohibition.

Mac was W.H. MacKenzie, a tall, strong, solidly built man of 35 years and the veteran of the group. Having worked on a temporary basis in the fall of 1910 under Jack Foster in the Wausau area, he had also worked near Tomah and Mather. The following spring, MacKenzie, who was a talented athlete with a zest for baseball, returned to his home in Poynette to play for Jake Beihl's Giants of Lodi, the Milwaukee Tigers (professional team) and the local Portage team.

He started his second conservation career in 1917 as a game warden serving with Johnny Mason at Janesville and later

was stationed permanently at Antigo. Warned that the area had a bad reputation, he began his job full of enthusiasm to make his mark as a warden.

Langlade County during that time was a large wilderness area largely populated by people from Kentucky and Tennessee. The people were locally known as "Kantucks," because of their highly accented speech that revealed their mountain ancestry. When speaking of themselves, Kentucky came out "Kantuck" or "Kaintuck."

Mac soon found their reputation for being quick tempered and handy with a gun or knife to be true. Violating conservation laws lended itself well to the illegal making and drinking of moonshine. Predicaments a warden could find himself in were endless.

In five years, Mac had become accustomed to the hill people's ways and he'd found ways to deal with them. Deliberately accenting his speech to sound like them, he conversed as an equal with them. A humorous man, he often mimicked the hill country speech and became proficient at using it for this purpose. Even as an older man the Kantuck inflection easily slipped into his speech, tickling one's funny bone.

Accompanied by newly appointed deputy wardens Mader and Al Robinson (later to become chief warden) Mac laid out a plan of attack. After dropping Mac off at Evergreen Spring (Town Line Lake), Robinson and Mader proceeded with their plan to check several spring ponds in the area and return to pick up Mac at a specified time.

Mac walked cautiously through the silent wilderness made even more still by the soft new snow still drifting lazily from the sky. Careful not to let his presence known, he scanned the area for signs of people walking into the spring. Although the whiteness told a story of small animals and deer feeding and even the large dog-like tracks of two timber wolves following a deer, it divulged no message of the men he would soon encounter.

Crossing a small white cedar swamp, Mac, a great lover of all types of trees, stopped to examine and smell the pungent trees. He wondered momentarily why they rarely grow around his home at Poynette and whether a program could be started to introduce them further south. The cedars thinned as he approached the partially open east side of the spring. While most water had frozen over, many springs stayed open because of the 50-degree water seeping up from the bowels of Mother Earth. These warm water areas

created an ideal gathering place for trout to spawn.

Leaving the cedar grove, Mac slowed his pace to scan the partially frozen three-acre spring. His thoughts were of Al Robinson's arrest of John Bekins for taking trout a year ago at that spring. The arrest had been made in spite of Bekins pulling a gun. Robinson had been lucky that no shots were fired when he tussled with Bekins for the gun. After being disarmed Bekins had submitted to arrest.

His thoughts snapped to the present as he rounded the last little clump of cedars and saw three people on the ice near the west shore of the spring.

Sneaking silently through the soft snow and raising his binoculars, he carefully scanned the three who were all dressed in wool stag trousers and plaid Mackinaws.

Mac recognized Pete and John Bekins and was thankful he carried the .30-30 Winchester carbine as he often did these hectic days in Langlade County, not trusting solely to the Luger nestled snugly under his arm in the shoulder holster. He had arrested Pete Bekins once for running deer with dogs on the oxbow. Pete, after being disarmed, made a grab to regain possession of the rifle. After a tussle, Mac made the arrest. On a later occasion, he had arrested him for possession of trout during the closed season and possession of a deer hide in the red coat (showing it had been taken in the spring). Pete, who had a notorious reputation around Elton where he lived, had fled the state rather than appear in court and face the charges. A warrant for his arrest had been issued.

The binoculars revealed that, as usual, the Bekins were armed. With a rifle draped nonchalantly across his arms, Pete dangled a handline into the open water while John stood guard. The third person, a young boy, walked around carrying a single-barreled shotgun.

Mac's thoughts were of how he could approach the three. If he crossed the ice, they would undoubtedly scatter and escape into the surrounding pine forest. Still pondering, Mac's decision was made for him when John pulled up his line, rolled it up, bent for the double bitted ax and led the three off the ice tracking north along the spring's edge.

Entering the pines, Mac set a shortcut to intercept near the north end of the pond. Mac, stepping unexpectedly from a clump of underbrush several feet in front of Pete, startled the three and they stopped, staring wide-eyed at him.

"Well boys, you know who I am. I'll tell you anyway. I'm a state conservation warden and, Pete, you know I've got an

arrest warrant for you."

Slipping into his Kantuck dialect, Mac stepped close to Pete, reached into the gunny sack Pete had dropped at his feet, and produced a large trout. "Jus come home, huh? Trying to get yourself some trout fish, huh?"

Mac reached for the single-barreled shotgun Pete carried, barrel forward, over his shoulder, and he continued, "You're under arrest Pete. Give me the gun."

Without a word or any warning, Pete twisted sharply to his right while maintaining his grip on the gun. With both men gripping the firearm, they wrestled for its possession, kicking up clouds of snow. Mac, fearfully aware of his unprotected back swinging toward John, was unable to stop the swing.

Glancing apprehensively over his shoulder, he saw too late the gleaming arc of light reflecting off the double-bit ax as John swung for the homerun. Striking Mac against the side of the head, the ax did not bite in, but glanced off with a tremendous thunk that brought immediate darkness to Mac as he fell prostrate in the snow.

The snow biting his face brought him to a half conscious state as he partially realized what was happening. Trying to sort out his thoughts, his dazed mind cried out to clear the fog.

He chopped me with the axe. Got to get up. They will kill me.

Realizing he still gripped the rifle, he used it as a means of partially parrying a second swing of the ax as John attempted to finish the job. The ax struck the side of his head a second time, again failing to bite through his skull and glancing off.

Lights flashed at the contact and again Mac felt blackness temporarily envelope him. Shaking his head, throwing torrents of blood into the snow, he gazed through a bloody haze as John approached, the ax held high for the fatal blow. Still desperately gripping the rifle, he again used it to fend off the impending blow only to have Pete grasp the rifle in an iron grip and attempt to wrestle it away. Sensing that losing the rifle meant the ax would descend unimpeded and death would be but seconds away, Mac cleared his mind briefly and fumbled for the hammer of the rifle. Finally, feeling the click that locked the hammer in a cocked position, he pulled the trigger.

(To be continued next week)

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Axed (Part 2, finale)

By Jim Chizek

The rifle's roar reverberated through the silent snow covered wilderness with devastating effect. The slug entered Pete's mouth and tore a large chunk of meat out. As it exited his heavily bearded cheek, Pete catapulted backward where he landed heavily on his back. Pete's blood spurted and joined Mac's blood to further stain the white surface with the crimson of life.

The rifle's kick on discharge and Pete's backward movement jarred the rifle from Mac's grasp. It flew through the air to disappear in the soft snow some 10 feet away. At the discharge, John's face, which had been close to the muzzle, took part of the concussion and noise and he dropped to his knees, losing the shotgun. Scooping snow with his hands, he frantically looked for and found it. Arising, the two Bekins and the boy walked swiftly away from the scene, leaving Mac scrambling vainly to rise. Blood cascading down his face, he dragged himself painfully to a nearby tree and grasping it, he boosted himself to a half standing position. As he wiped the blood from his eyes, his fog-filled mind attempted to fathom what had happened to him. Turning through a bloody haze his mind focused on the unbelievable specter of John raising the shotgun and aiming it directly at him.

Sudden realization that the scene was real required action. Desperately, he allowed himself to drop in the snow as the shotgun blast sent a charge of buckshot dangerously close to his falling body.

Realizing the Bekins still posed a threat, he fumbled inside his jacket and freed the Luger. Seeing the Luger surprised and frightened the Bekins who scuttled off into the pines with John directing his attention to the young boy. "Ya'all got any more shotgun shells?"

Too scared to answer because of what he had experienced, the boy remained silent and hurried away.

Blackness enveloped Mac.

Awakening with the Luger still held firmly in his hand, Mac found himself alone in the blood spattered snow. Weak and blood soaked, he tried to rise, but to no avail. It seemed his mind could not order his legs to respond. Dragging himself heavily to the nearby open water, he bathed his gory head and face and waited for his thoughts and vision to clear. Slowly his mind wiped away the blackness and allowed him to take stock of his condition.

Meanwhile, several hundred yards away, the Bekins met well out of gunshot range of Mac's Luger.

John, still boiling mad, insisted they return and finish him off.

"Pete, he maght live," he drawled. "Iffen he does, we're juss outa luck. He'll be after us 'ens. Iffen I'da had another shell ited be over naw." Looking at the boy, he said, "Give me the rafle, ah'll go back and take care o Mac."

Pete, however, bleeding profusely, had concerns of his own. In spite of efforts to control the bleeding, torrents of blood continued to stream through his fingers that covered the gaping hole in his cheek. Having no stomach for more of the matter, he muttered through the blood oozing from his mouth. "Les's jus get out o here John. A'hm sicker na pizened pup. Ma jaw aches. Lez go home. Jus got to leave the country. Hide out someres. Come on lez go."

Contritely, John agreed. "Kay Pete, but az's going to Kantuck then, cause I jus knows Mac'll be on our trail. Maybe he's bad nough off anyway and mighten dia."

The decision made, the three tracked swiftly toward their hidden vehicle. As their battered Model T Ford rounded a corner on the old woods road, they met another Ford. The three pulled up short because the road was too narrow for the cars to pass. Getting out to consider how to navigate past the other car, the Bekins were confronted by wardens Robinson and Mader. Choking back their fear, they carried on a conversation to cover their day's deeds.

Not knowing of Mac's encounter, the wardens did not closely question them. Robinson asked about the rag held over John's cheek and his blood soaked beard. Pete's reply intimated he had run into a barbed wire fence, severely tearing his face. They explained they were on their way to Antigo to have the injury treated. The conversation ended as the cars delicately passed each other and the wardens proceeded to meet Mac.

After resting, Mac tried vainly to rise. Finding he could not, he lay face down, his mind raced considering further ahead on what was necessary to get out of his fix. *Got to get help. Got to get out of the woods. Wonder if the others can find me? I know where I'm at. Should be able to get out even if I can't walk. Can't stay here too long. I'll freeze if I don't do something.*

Noticing the numbing cold entering his body made him realize he had been unconscious a considerable time. *Better to move, anything to stay warm.*

Mac's great stamina now stood him in stead as he began the tiring, tedious task of dragging himself from the woods. Knowing the ice over the spring to be thin in spots and dangerous at this time of the year, he still chose the most direct route. Time was running out for him. Dragging himself to the spring edge, he found the ice much easier to navigate than the bushy timber.

Pulling himself forward with his arms, crossing the spring brought relief as he no longer could go through the ice and had saved precious time. Tired but determined, he began making his way through the thick cedar swap. The deciduous forest beyond the cedars being more sparse made crossing much easier even though

the snow was somewhat deeper.

After hours of determined crawling and now on his "old trail" made earlier on the way in, he let out a sigh of relief at a glimpse of his old Model T. Movement nearby it had to be the other wardens since he was well beyond the time they had set to meet.

"Hey, hey guys."

His squeaking voice made him realize how dead tired he was.

The answering reply was sweet in his ears, "Yeah, that you Mac?"

"I'm hurt -- come help me."

Tired, but elated that he had made it, Mac welcomed the helping hands that carried him to the vehicle.

Quickly transported to Antigo, he was treated by the same doctor that was to treat him 19 times for violent injuries received during his tenure in Langlade County.

Soon Mac was relating his story for the record to Sheriff Edward Buchen and the local police with wardens Robinson and Mader listening intently.

At the scene, Buchen and the district attorney inspected, photographed, measured and recorded the evidence painted vividly in the snow. Recovering Mac's rifle, they found the empty cartridge and the blood from Pete when the bullet exploded in his mouth. They reconstructed the grisly picture in the blood soaked snow where Mac had fought for his life. They measured the distance as 70 feet from where John had stood and fired the deadly shotgun blast to where Mac had dropped to save his life. They concluded that had Mac not dropped, he would have taken the deadly buckshot charge waist high.

After questioning the young man now identified as the brother of John and Pete and releasing him, Buchen with Robinson and Mader descended on John Bekin's home in Elton. The search showed no signs of John or Pete.

During the several days that passed with Mac convalescing in his home, the Antigo Game and Gun Club offered a reward of \$200 for the capture of the Bekin brothers. Rumors began to circulate that Pete, still bleeding was spotted in the Three Lakes area heading north to escape. Later, word arrived he was holed up in a tarpaper shack near the Buchanan logging camp about two miles north of the Wisconsin line in Michigan.

On Dec. 28, wardens Henry Oberholtzer of Eagle River, Gwit of Rhineland and Michigan warden Woodward (Woody) Grey and sheriff Morrison of Watersmeet, Mich., held a conference at Watersmeet to develop a plan of capture.

Arriving at the logging camp, the party split into two groups to prevent the fugitive from escaping. As they approached the tarpaper shack from two sides, Pete spotted them. Grabbing a .32 Special Winchester rifle from behind his door, he sprinted through the waist deep snow, working the rifle's lever frantically to jack a shell into the chamber. Still fumbling with the rifle, he stopped, turned and pointed the rifle at the approaching wardens. When the rifle did not go off, he turned and ran helter skelter, the snow tiring him as he continued to work the lever and dig in the chamber to free the lodged shell. Although physically strong and fleet of foot, his gallant attempt was cut short as Oberholtzer steadily gained. The pace slowed to not much more than a walk and breaths wheezed as they forced themselves to the utmost through the waist-deep snow.

Realizing he was no match for the giant compact man gaining in pursuit, Pete Bekins pulled up at Oberholtzer's shouted command and raised the rifle in both hands -- a sign of surrender. Arms held high, eyes wide staring at the cocked

hammer of the steadily held carbine directed at his belly he turned. Unnerved by the sight he stumbled several steps to the rear.

"A-ah gives up. A-ahm done. Don't shoot."

Oberholtzer's calm stern voice boomed, "Drop the gun Bekins."

Tossing the rifle quickly to the side, his arms remaining high, he jabbered, "Ah's through. Don't shoot me. Ah gives up."

"Okay, Bekins, turn around and put your hands behind your back. I'm going to cuff you."

"Jus d-don't hurt mae," was the subdued reply.

Turning to comply, he dropped his arms and placed them obediently behind his back, to hear the double click, ending his flight and freedom.

The three wardens joined the other group with their prisoner. The Michigan officials escorted them across the line to an area well within Wisconsin and left.

Lodged in the Langlade County jail, Bekins listened to court testimony the following morning of Mac and Oberholtzer and admitted his part in the affair. Bound over to the municipal court, he was remanded to jail without bond until after the arraignment. In May, 1923, he was found guilty and sentenced to one year in the state prison at Waupun.

Meanwhile, the search for John Bekins continued with word from the community being he had returned to Kentucky. Uneventful months passed without a word and then in July, 1923, Kentucky officials arrested him while raiding a moonshine still. He was returned to Wisconsin.

While free on a \$5,000 bail bond, John Bekins was charged with cutting a man with a knife. The fray was between him and a still operator who hit him with a revolver in an argument over payment of a debt for moonshine whiskey. Bekins retaliated by gashing the other's head. His bondsmen withdrew their surety, and he was again incarcerated. He was sentenced to one year in the state prison in January, 1924 on combined charges.

Though able to walk soon after the encounter, Mac continued to have medical problems as a result of the head injuries. Periods of dizziness and excruciating headaches continued with little help from the medical profession. Extensive medical treatments were administered at Rochester and Chicago. Finally, taking a leave of absence, he went to California to relax for several months.

When eventually back to good health, Mac returned to work to set a shining example for the wardens of Wisconsin and all states. Mac served as chief warden from 1925 through 1934 when he became director of the Wisconsin Conservation Department. His illustrious career brought many beneficial changes to conservation law enforcement and to conservation in general.

Known as a hard taskmaster, he expected a lot from his men as chief warden and later as the department director. Wardens idolized him because of his straight forward ways and the way he backed them in times of trouble. They were proud to be known as Mac's Boys. The inscription on the Winchester rifle given him at his retirement in 1942 reads, "To Mac from your boys."

After becoming chief warden, Mac lived in his home town of Poynette near the Poynette State Game Farm, which he proudly established while director of the conservation department. A part of the old game farm is now called the MacKenzie Environmental Center in his honor. He has been installed in the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

Mac died in September of 1979 when he was honored as uniformed warden pall bearers carried him to his final resting place.

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