

Escaping off -grid



Tips  
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

At some time or another I would venture to say that everyone harbors thoughts of escaping the real world by heading to the woods. “Living off the land” is what I always hear the “off-grid-ders” chant as they leave the world behind.

As a kid, it was important to me to learn all the outdoor skills I could, so that I could move up into the mountains and escape everything I hated here in the world. My plan was to hunt, fish and trap for food, build a log cabin to live in, and make my own knives, tools and basically live a happy life free from stress.

The stresses I wished to escape, and in no particular order, included school, bossy grandparents, vegetables, school, chores, and of course, school. My grandmother once asked why my mountain plans did not include planting a seasonal garden. I had to explain to her that vegetables were one of the reasons I was leaving.

One person who sought to escape to the woods was a young man by the name of Christopher McCandless. Chris came from a family without financial woes as his father worked for NASA and his mother at Hughes Aircraft. His dissent with

the real world and family probably arose when he was away at college and found out that, even though his father was on his second marriage, he was still married to his first wife, perhaps leading somewhat of a double life or avoiding the pitfalls of alimony.

As an avid outdoorsman, McCandless completed a number of lengthy back-country trips, including a long canoe trip down the Colorado River. Somewhere during the spring of 1992, McCandless decided to hitchhike to Alaska, where he would move into the wilds, live off the land and exist happily ever after. Obviously McCandless considered himself a master backwoodsman: big mistake.

The wilderness journey to live off the land started when he was dropped off at the head of a trail known as Stampede Trail. He had along a light pack, meager supplies, and 22lr rifle with 400 rounds of ammunition, a book on edible plants and great desire to be independent. He lasted 113 days.

The Stampede Trail was snow-covered, but McCandless eventually made it 28 miles where he found an abandoned bus. This spot was west of the town of Healy, and bordered the Denali National Park. The bus played an important role in this story.

The bus was an abandoned 1946 International Harvester K-5 that was used by the Yutan Construction Company as temporary quarters for employees working on upgrades to the Stampede Trail in 1960. Prior to that, the bus served



Some visitors at the site on the Stampede Trail of the Magic Bus, where Christopher McCandless died. (Erichhalfacre/Wikimedia Commons)

Fairbanks City Transit System as Bus No. 142. The construction project was never completed, and the bus was left behind.

McCandless nicknamed the bus, “the magic bus.” While on his journey, McCandless kept a journal and took several self-portraits while living on the trail. He documented foraging for edible plants and hunted game for sustenance. His game bag included porcupines, squirrels and several game birds. Once, he shot a moose but the meat spoiled because he had no idea how to preserve the meat.

After a couple months living in the bus, McCandless decided he was ready to head back to civilization. The trail back was blocked by the swollen waters of the Teklanika River, which was running substantially higher than when he originally crossed it back a couple months earlier.

One of the many mistakes McCandless made was to not have a detailed map of the area. If he had one, he would have found out there was a hand-operated tramway across the river less than a quarter mile away. Instead, Mc-

Candless returned to the magic bus.

Once back at the bus, McCandless posted a note on the door that read: *“Attention Possible Visitors. S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out. I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless. August?”*

Days 108 through 112 in the journal contained only slash marks for entries, and no entry for 113 or thereafter.

On Sept. 6, 1992, several hunters who were seeking shelter at the magic bus found the body of McCandless. It was assumed he died of starvation a couple weeks earlier.

There is much controversy surrounding the cause of death, including possibility of ingesting poisonous plants. However, McCandless weighed around 165 pounds when he started down the Stampede Trail, and the coroner estimated his weight at death to be 67 pounds. Whether plants caused his problem or not, he obviously starved to death.

The Christopher McCandless story was first documented in the book by Jon Krakauer titled, “Into The Wild,” and later adapted into a film by Sean Penn of the same name in 2007.

Over the years, the bus became a magnet for those wishing to retrace McCandless’ steps. McCandless’ parents posted a plaque commemorating their son on the bus and left some of his personal belongings there, including his Bible. Visitors have filled several logbooks with comments, and some food and medical supplies were kept in the bus for travelers in need.

The Teklanika River that prevented McCandless from hiking out has caused problems for people who came later on pilgrimages. Two women have drowned, one in 2010 and one in 2019. State officials said there have been 15 other search and rescue missions to the bus since 2009, including one involving five Italian tourists, one with severe frostbite.

The state officials finally had enough of the dangerous search and rescue missions and ordered the bus removed. Bus 142, “the

magic bus,” was airlifted out of the wilderness on June 19, 2020, by an Alaska National Guard Chinook helicopter, along with all the mementos and contents. Officials state the bus will be displayed at a safer location.

Much can be learned about preparedness from the McCandless story. I know that I am sometimes guilty of heading into the woods unprepared but I guess I have been lucky. It is a good thing I never took off into the mountains as a kid or this story could have been mine. McCandless achieved immortality as a hero seeking freedom in an often times confusing world. He was definitely not a survival expert, but I admire his spirit.

Being a member of search and rescue for many years, I understand the problems and dangers around a bus in the wild and the unprepared pilgrims who journey there in search of something. Still and all, I am saddened by it’s removal, and a part of me wishes I could have visited the bus.

*Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.*

*For outdoors or survival related questions or comments, feel free to contact him directly at his email elkhunter77@icloud.com.*

The Gathering  
Montrose Community Prayer  
September 17-26, 2020

THURSDAY SEPT. 17 @ 7-7:30AM  
First Presbyterian Church 1840 Niagara  
Prayer Focus:  
Personal Repentance  
Personal Transformation

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 18 @ 7-7:30 AM  
Cedar Creek Church 202 S. Townsend  
Prayer Focus:  
Neighbors  
Neighborhoods

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 19 @ 7-7:30 AM  
Celebration Church 2900 Sunnyside Rd  
Prayer Focus:  
Unrest in our Nation  
Upcoming Election

MONDAY SEPTEMBER 21 @ 7-7:30 AM  
Crossroads Victory 515 S. Hillcrest  
Prayer Focus  
Impact of COVID and Our Response to it

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 22 @ 7-7:30AM  
Montrose Christian 2351 Sunnyside  
Prayer Focus:  
The Church around the world  
The Body of Christ in Montrose

WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 23 @ 7-7:30 AM  
Grace Community 16731 Woodgate  
Prayer Focus:  
Pain in our Community  
Spiritual Strongholds

THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 24 @ 7-7:30 AM  
First Church Nazarene 705 S. 12th  
Prayer Focus:  
Our enemies  
Those who oppose Jesus

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 25 @ 7-7:30 AM  
All Saints Anglican 2057 S. Townsend  
Prayer Focus:  
Schools, teachers, youth, children

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 26 @ 10 AM - NOON  
The Gathering Woodgate & Townsend

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 26 @ 9 AM -9 PM  
SIMULCAST of THE RETURN  
Church on the Hill 62985 Highway 90  
Prayer Rally from the D.C. Mall

If my people, who are called by My name,  
shall humble themselves, and pray,  
and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways;  
then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin,  
and will heal their land.  
2 Chronicles 7:14

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