

# END OF THE TRAIL

Lured by idealism or demons unknown, hiker Christopher McCandless found a lonely death in Alaska

COURTESY: MCCANDLESS' EMBE FAMILY



In this self-portrait retrieved from his camera after his death, the adventure-seeking McCandless looks healthy. But after desperately foraging for food for three months, he died in the bus's interior (left).

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE



**D**USK WAS FALLING WHEN BUTCH Killian called it quits after a day of moose hunting in the Alaska wilderness 100 miles southwest of Fairbanks. Rather than head home that night, Sept. 6, Killian decided to hole up in a derelict bus that had been converted into a shelter for local hunters. But as he stepped into the gloom of the bus, which was outfitted with a table and chairs and a crude stove, a sickening

smell hit him. At first he thought that a trapper had left some rotting food. Then he saw a sleeping bag with what appeared to be a lump inside. "I was even thinking of pulling on it," says Killian. "But then I thought, 'Something's not right here.'"

Killian fled on his all-terrain vehicle without looking closer. He quickly radioed police. The next day, Alaska state troopers returned to check the sleeping bag, in which

they found a badly decomposed corpse bearing no identification. Arrayed around the body were a handful of books—including Michael Crichton's *The Terminal Man*, Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Louis L'Amour's *Education of a Wandering Man*—a .22-caliber rifle with some shells, and a camera. Also on the bunk was a handwritten log (see box) tersely describing a 113-day ordeal that had ended in agonizing

starvation sometime in August. The bus, ironically, was only seven miles from a ranger station stocked with bedding and food.

Judging from the cryptic but heart-wrenching entries, the victim had done his best to hunt game and forage for berries and other edible vegetation before his strength gave out. It took more than a week, but authorities finally identified the body as that of 24-year-old Christopher "Alex" McCandless, a gifted, earnest young man who had been searching for simplicity and spiritual fulfillment in what he had hoped would be the rapturous heart of Mother Nature. He seemed also to be strangely alienated from his former life, ready to cast his fate to the whims of the wilderness. On a board in the bus he had scrawled, "... No phone. No pool. No pets. No cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. ... No longer to be poisoned by civilization, he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become Lost in the Wild."

In his quest for self-sufficiency and disdain for material comfort, McCandless was at odds with his whole background. He was reared by a prosperous family in Annandale, Va., outside Washington, D.C. His father, Walt, runs an aerospace consulting firm with the help of wife Billie and stepbrother Sam. At times, Alex seemed to bridle at bourgeois surroundings. "In college he could have had a big apartment," says sister Carine, one of seven siblings. "But he had this tiny room with a table, a chair, his computer and a mattress on the floor." An outstanding student, he graduated in 1990 from Emory University in Atlanta, where he worked on the school paper.

After graduation, McCandless packed his car and headed west to pursue the life of a wanderer. Eight days after leaving, he abandoned his car in the Arizona desert. Most telling, he also buried his valuables and burned what remained of his money. From there he set off on foot up the Pacific Coast, living with hobos, hopping trains and hitching rides. That autumn he wound up along a stretch of highway in Montana, where he was picked up by Wayne Westerberg, the owner of grain elevators around Madison, S.Dak. Always in need of workers around harvest time, We-



PAUL SCHIFFINO

**A "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord," wrote McCandless in a note found in the bus, which was recently covered by a late-summer snowfall.**

**> In April, McCandless (center) was photographed with friends Wayne Westerberg and Gail Borah. "He wasn't a bum," says Westerberg. "He was checking out life."**



COURTESY WAYNE WESTERBERG

terberg offered McCandless a job. The two hit it off, and McCandless started renting a room in Westerberg's house.

Far from being a dreamy loner, McCandless was not only charming and funny but also an exceptionally hard worker. "We got to be like one happy family," says Westerberg. "He even used to cook dinner with

me and my girlfriend. The more I knew him, the more impressed I was." For Westerberg, the only strange thing about McCandless was his evident indifference—even hostility—toward money. "Sometimes, I got the impression that he resented me when I paid him," recalls Westerberg. "He'd say, 'Now, I have to learn to live with money again.'"



Within a few months, McCandless had gotten restless and decided to push on. He headed back to Arizona, where he bought a canoe and began paddling down the lower Colorado River, with a vague plan to reach the Gulf of California. In a journal entry, McCandless recounted his adventures during the trip. After sneaking into Mexico by navigating the floodgates of a dam, he became hopelessly lost in a swamp. "... must push canoe through reeds and drag it through mud," he wrote. "All is despair!" Rescued by some Mexican duck-hunting guides, he was then nearly drowned in a harrowing storm that threatened to capsize his boat. In the months that followed, he wandered around the Mexican outback, drifted back north and wound up in Las Vegas, where he buried his knapsack outside town and lived on the streets for a few weeks in the late spring of 1991. For reasons that are unclear, during that period and after, he had not been in touch at all with his family.

What for some might have been a sobering dose of life on the road seems only to have stoked McCandless' wanderlust. He had stayed in

contact with Westerberg during his sojourn, so last January he returned to Madison for several months. Sitting around the Cabaret, a tavern in nearby Carthage, he held listeners rapt with his tales. "The stories he told about his travels just blew my mind," says Sandy Forthman, a manager of the Cabaret. "It's your loss if you never met him."

Soon McCandless announced that his next destination would be Alaska. At a going-away party thrown for him in April, McCandless delighted guests by sitting down at a piano, which he had never mentioned he could play, and rattling off inspired renditions of everything from country and western to ragtime.

Reaching Fairbanks in late April,

## A DEAD MAN'S DIARY

**MCCANDLESS KEPT A BRIEF YET MOVING**

*log of his ordeal. Excerpts follow:*

Day 2: Fall through the ice day.

Day 4: Magic bus day.

Day 9: Weakness.

Day 10: Snowed in.

Day 13: Porcupine day. . . .

Day 14: Misery.

Day 31: Move bus. Grey bird. Ash

bird. Squirrel. Gourmet duck!

Day 43: MOOSE!

Day 48: Maggots already. Smok-

ing appears ineffective. Don't

know, looks like disaster. I now

wish I had never shot the moose.

One of the greatest tragedies of my

life.

Day 68: Beaver Dam. Disaster.

Day 69: Rained in, river looks

impossible. Lonely. Scared.

Day 74: Terminal mad. Faster.

Day 78: Missed wolf. Ate potato

seeds and many berries coming.

Day 94: Woodpecker. Fog. Ex-

tremely weak. Fault of potato

seed. Much trouble just to stand

up. Starving. Great jeopardy.

Day 100: Death looms as serious

threat, too weak to walk out, have

literally become trapped in

wild—no game.

Day 101-103: [No written en-

tries, just the days listed.]

Day 104: Missed bear!

Day 105: Five squirrel. Caribou.

Day 107: Beautiful berries.

Day 108-113: [Days were marked

only with slashes.]

he sent Westerberg a slightly disturbing postcard. "Please return all mail I receive to the sender," he wrote. "It might be a very long time before I return south. If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again, I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild. Alex." Despite the ominous tone, Westerberg dismisses the notion that McCandless had any sort of death wish. "He was planning on writing a book on all of his adventures one day," he says. "He sure didn't plan to die."

For their part, authorities in Alaska are not sure what he was planning. As best they can make out, McCandless, who had only basic clothing and equipment—even his rifle was too small for such big game as bear and moose—hitched a ride out of Fairbanks to the head of what is known as the Stampede Trail. The driver who dropped him off gave him a pair of old boots to wear instead of the ordinary shoes he had on. McCandless then apparently hiked about 30 miles until he stumbled on the bus, which was just off the trail. What happened next remains a mystery. His diary speaks of falling into an icy river, but an autopsy showed no injuries. "It's pretty rich country out there," says Capt. John Myers of the Alaska state police. "And he went at a good time. There's lots of game, lots of birds, lots of things to eat." As locals point out, if McCandless had wanted to attract a search party, he could have started a fire in the forest. One possibility is that he became weakened or delirious from eating hallucinogenic mushrooms or poisonous plants.

Ultimately he could have simply tried to march out rather than waiting to die. Why he didn't is a question Wayne Westerberg has been turning over in his mind. "I'm puzzled and I'm stumped," he says. "Knowing him and how organized he was, he must have known about the ranger station. But then again, he would have probably seen that ranger station as a crutch—and he hated crutches. More than anything, he wanted to be out in nature. I think what happened was that he pushed it one step too far."

• **BILL HEWITT**

• **JOHNNY DODD** in Fairbanks