

The Cult *of* Chris McCandless



Fifteen years after an enigmatic 24-year-old walked
Into the Wild, the site of his death has become a shrine.
As Hollywood weighs in with a portrait of the young man
as a saintlike visionary, has the truth been lost? Inside the
strange life and tragic death of “Alexander Supertramp.”

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IFTEEN YEARS HAVE PASSED: 15 howling Alaska winters and 15 brief frenzied summers, and the ancient bus on the Stampede Trail still rusts in the wilderness, almost exactly as Chris McCandless left it. Twenty-two miles from the nearest road, shaded out by alder and black spruce on a moraine rise above a creek, the green and white WWII-vintage International Harvester looks surreally out of

place, like an artifact from a vanished civilization. The bus doesn't at first seem a likely time capsule of American mythology, a shrine to which people from around the world make pilgrimages and leave tributes in memory of a young man whom they see as a fallen hero. It doesn't look to be the sort of place that would inspire a best-selling book, much less a major motion picture. But that's exactly what it is.

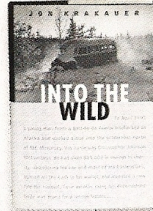
Fireweed and wild potato grow up in the wheel wells. On the side of the bus FAIRBANKS 142 is still leg-

ible in paint that has been bleached and scoured by the seasons. A few bullet holes have starred the windows; whether they were fired out of anger or boredom is unclear. Other than that, the people who have made the trek out here, out of respect or superstition, have left the site largely untouched. The vertebrae of the young moose McCandless shot lie scattered. The bones, and a smattering of feathers, add to the spooky aura of a charnel ground. Inside, near an old oil-barrel stove, McCandless's jeans are neatly folded on a shelf, knees patched with scraps of an old army blanket, seat patched with duct tape. And the bed is still there too, springs and stuffing bursting from the stained mattress, as if a wild animal's been at it. The same bed where they found his body.

It was a haunting tale, capturing the imagination of the country. September 1992, deep in the bush of the Alaskan interior northeast of Mount McKinley, in an abandoned bus on a disused mining trail, the decomposed body of a man was found by a moose hunter. The remains weighed only 67 pounds, and he had apparently died of starvation. He carried no identification, but a few rolls of undeveloped film and a cryptic journal chronicled a horrifying descent into sickness and slow death after 112 days alone in the wilderness. When the man's identity was established, the puzzle only deepened. His name was Chris McCandless, a 24-year-old honors graduate, star athlete, and beloved brother and son from a wealthy but dysfunctional East Coast family. With a head full of Jack London and Thoreau, McCandless rechristened himself "Alexander Supertramp," cut all ties with his family, gave his trust fund to charity, and embarked on a two-year odyssey that brought him to Alaska, that mystic repository of American notions of wilderness, a blank spot on the map where he could test the limits of his wits and endurance. Setting off with little more than a .22 caliber rifle and a 10-pound bag of rice, McCandless hoped to find his true self by renouncing society and living off the land. But, as Craig Medred would note in the *Anchorage Daily News*,



■ McCandless, posthum, in the Alaskan bush (opposite); the bus in which he lived for 109 days (above); Krakauer's best-selling chronicle of McCandless's odyssey.



"the Alaska wilderness is a good place to test yourself. The Alaska wilderness is a bad place to find yourself." No one ever saw McCandless alive again. Fifteen years later his story continues to resonate as a quintessentially American tale, and its hero has assumed near mythic status, blurring the lines between living memory and the creation of a legend.

When writer Jon Krakauer first heard McCandless's story, he later told a reporter, "the hair on my neck rose." Krakauer's profound empathy for his subject and obsessive research yielded *Into the Wild*, a heartbreaking portrait that has sold more than 2 million copies and become the authoritative version of the McCandless story, around which all discussions are framed. In Krakauer's telling, McCandless represents the human urge to push the limits of experience, to live a life untouched by the trappings of culture and civilization. Now that portrait has been taken up by the ultimate mythologizer: Hollywood. The film, to be released in September, was written and directed by Sean Penn and filmed on location in the many places McCandless traveled.

Woven through with the timeless themes of self-invention, risk, and our complex relationship to the natural world, the enigma of Chris McCandless is once again being debated, more vociferously than ever. Was his death a Shakespearean tragedy or a pitch-black comedy of errors? What impact has the tale and its renown had on our perception of Alaska? And perhaps most tantalizingly: Did Krakauer, and now Penn, get key parts of the story wrong?

From almost the moment he was found, the meaning of Chris McCandless's life and lonely death has been fiercely argued. The debate falls into two camps: Krakauer's visionary seeker, the tragic hero who dared to live the unmediated life he had dreamed of and died trying; or, as many Alaskans see it, the unprepared fool, a greenhorn who had fundamentally misjudged the wilderness he'd wanted so desperately to commune with. If the cult that has grown up around McCandless is any indication, we want the romantic portrait to be true: that he made a series of small mistakes that compounded in disaster. But the truth doesn't always conform to Hollywood's ideals.

BY MATTHEW POWER



■ McCandless (above left, at age eight) grew up in a wealthy suburban Virginia family. After graduating college he gave away his trust fund and traveled through the West, burning his money in Arizona (top right). He eventually hitchhiked to Alaska (right).



He peers inside the bus and shakes his head at what he sees as a greenhorn in over his head who had retreated to the only sign of civilization for miles when he realized he couldn't make it. "Tough enough to live out here without trying harder," he says. "We're hard up for heroes if that's what it takes — some guy who starved to death in a bus."

The majority of Alaskans share some version of the opinion that

McCandless was deeply out of his element. Medred, the outdoors columnist for the *Anchorage Daily News*, believes that he was suffering from schizophrenia and compares him to Timothy Treadwell, the unstable filmmaker and bear enthusiast who (along with his girlfriend) was killed and eaten by a grizzly in Katmai National Park in 2003. "McCandless didn't need the wilderness," he says. "He needed help."

Alaskans fault Krakauer for romanticizing McCandless, thereby encouraging others to model themselves after his life. Before the film has even been released, it has become common to blame Hollywood for further glamorizing a senseless tragedy. As Dermot Cole, a columnist for the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, puts it, "To sell the story, they've made it into a fable. He's been glorified in death because he was unprepared. You can't come to Alaska and do that."

Butch Killian, one of the moose hunters who discovered McCandless's body in September 1992, considered it just another day in the bush and doesn't understand why such a big deal has been made out of the story. He told me he had never read the book and had no idea that it had been a bestseller, that thousands of people had felt a deep identification with Krakauer's portrait of McCandless. "I don't know what his



THE EERIE QUIET AT THE bus, broken only by the drone of mosquitoes and the rustling of alder leaves, would be more unsettling were it not for the presence of Brent Keith, a local hunting guide who has driven me out to the bus on his six-wheeled Polaris Ranger ATV. I feel relieved to have the burly 38-year-old Alaskan here, wearing a "Team Glock" hat and carrying a 10mm on his hip to prove it, plus a satellite phone and a six-pack of Moosehead behind the seat. On the way to the bus, a two-day hike from the nearest road, we spotted enormous bear tracks, and Keith had told me about dropping a charging grizzly from 15 feet away.

To reach the spot where McCandless died we forded two rivers, the Savage and the Teklanika, the latter milky with glacial till and running so high and swift it had come up to our seats when we plowed through, nearly drowning the air intake on the Ranger. As he steered into the rushing water, Keith had shouted to me over the straining engine, "You know what the state motto of Alaska is? 'Hold my beer and watch this!'" An even fiercer torrent had prevented McCandless from hiking out when he tried to leave the bush in July of 1992.

On the way in we'd come across Kevin and Rob Mark, brothers from New Jersey, who were hiking two days back to the trailhead after staying a night at the bus. They had read Krakauer's book and wanted to see if they could make it out on foot, to gain some sense of what McCandless had endured. "It was a great adventure getting out there, but crossing the river was terrifying," Rob told me. They were both knocked down and nearly carried off in the swift icy water of the Teklanika.

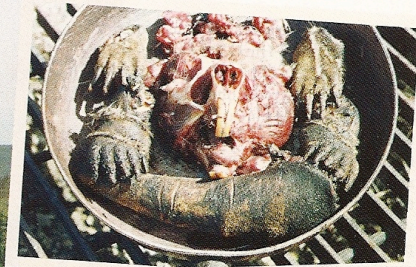
A year younger than McCandless would have been today had he lived, Keith has a distinctly Alaskan viewpoint on his death, unsentimental and unswayed by romanticism. He points to a clear pool in a stream not 50 feet from the bus, in which dozens of foot-long grayling swim against the current. "You could practically shovel those out with a spruce branch," he tells me. "And I just don't get why he didn't stay down by the Teklanika until the water got low enough to cross. Or walk upstream to where it braids out in shallow channels. Or start a signal fire on a gravel bar."

problem was, but it wasn't surviving. If he's a hero, he's a dead hero." Killian doesn't think that a visit to the site will provide many answers. "So many people have asked me to take them out there. What in the world would you want to go back there for? It's nothing but an old bus."

Old bus or no, Fairbanks 142 has become something of a reliquary, a shrine to which many have come seeking understanding: of McCandless, of the wilderness, of themselves. A memorial plaque to McCandless is screwed to the inside of the bus, bearing a message from his family that ends with the phrase "We commend his soul to the world." Inside a beat-up suitcase on a table are a half-dozen tattered notebooks. The first entries, from July 1993, in red pen on paper yellowing with age, are personal notes from his parents. They visited the site with Jon Krakauer by helicopter. Krakauer also left a note: "Chris — Your memory will live on in your admirers. —Jon"

And those admirers came: The dog-eared notebooks are filled with hundreds of entries from pilgrims who traveled the arduous 22 miles out to try to feel some connection with the McCandless spirit. They came by snowmobile, dogsled, mountain bike, and mostly by foot, usually taking two days to hike the boggy, mosquito-plagued trail and ford the freezing rivers. They came from across the U.S. and from as far as Bulgaria, Finland, and the Czech Republic. They came because there was something about the story, and about Alaska, that drew them there.

Together the entries form a chorus of voices, some questioning, some praising, all trying to write some meaning out of his story, and by extension, their own lives: *I am 20 years old and feel a kinship with Chris.... This is God's country and a beautiful place to leave this world.... We shouldn't Romanticize or canonize him.... What went on here, at this bus, transcends*



the ordinary and mundane.... Chris was completely awake to life...for the first time in many years I am crying.... Chris may have fucked up, but he fucked up brilliantly...he found the serenity of the spirit that most die without...pray for Chris's critics.... There is something about Alaska that changes you.... You go your way - I'll go your way too.



THAT LAST LINE, FROM a Leonard Cohen poem, was written by Sean Penn, when he visited the bus in August 2006.

Penn had been trying to bring Krakauer's book to the screen ever since first picking it up years ago. "The cover intrigued me so I bought it, went home, and read it straight through. Twice," says Penn. "I started trying to get the rights from then on." Ultimately he wrote the screenplay, directed, and helped produce the film himself, shepherding the movie through every step.

In an age of digital shortcuts and studio interference, Penn refused to compromise, insisting on filming in the places McCandless had been. *Into the Wild* takes place in Alaska, and it would be filmed in Alaska. It followed McCandless to locations as far-flung as the Salton Sea in the California desert and Carthage, South Dakota, where the film's production crew doubled the size of the town. "It just felt like the only way to make the movie. That's all," says Penn. "It always felt worth the sacrifice."

Alaskans often shake their heads at misrepresentations of their state in the media, and there is a fair bit of anticipatory skepticism about the movie. Dave Taleric, the mayor of Denali Borough (population 2,000, and roughly the size of Maryland), grew up in Roslyn, Washington, the stand-in for the fictional town of Cicely, Alaska, in the show *Northern Exposure*. So he wasn't surprised when Penn decided to shoot the Alaska scenes 50 miles south of where McCandless actually died, in the tiny town of Cantwell, where the landscape conformed more readily to the Hollywood vision of the Last Frontier.

"What I don't understand with all these books and movies," Taleric tells me, "is why they don't tell the stories of the people who survive. The ones who have forged a life here?"

Cantwell lies on the Alaska Railroad line just south of Denali National Park. Filming at the bus was too remote for the technical

[Handwritten notes and lists from a journal or inventory log, including items like 'SMALL DUCK', 'PORCUPINE', 'MOOSE', and 'SQUID'. The notes are dense and include various numbers and descriptions.]

■ McCandless set up camp by an abandoned bus just outside of Denali National Park (above), where he kept a daily journal and inventory log (at left is his entry from day one). On day 41 he killed and cooked a porcupine (top right and far right). His last journal entry came on day 113; whether he died of starvation or poisoning is still unclear.

demands of a movie shoot; the Alaska Range lies low and distant on the horizon. Cantwell, by contrast, is right next to the buttress of mountains that form Denali's foothills. It's a picture-perfect vision of the

Alaskan wilderness — a stark contrast from the grim, swampy, mosquito-swarmed site of McCandless's death.

It was probably an inevitable irony that, despite its best intentions, a production from the lower 48 would have some of the same difficulties in the Alaskan interior as its subject. Wayne Westerberg, a friend, the recipient of the postcard in which McCandless announced that the boy was walking "into the wild," was hired as a consultant and then as a union truck driver for the production. "There were lots of logistical problems shooting on location," says Westerberg, a former grain-elevator operator who is played by Vince Vaughn in the film. "We had to drive through four feet of water just to get between base camp and the shoot. We swamped a lot of vehicles and brought a lot back to the rental company in pieces." Then there were issues with the "wildlife": the trained grizzly stuck on the wrong side of a river who nearly needed an airlift, reindeer not moving on cue, trained wolves that didn't act wolfy enough.

Whatever the challenges, the resulting film is visually stunning, the landscapes of the American West and far north shot in epic scope and intimate detail, the soundtrack haunted by Eddie Vedder's throaty growl. The part of McCandless fell to 22-year-old Emile Hirsch. To match McCandless's sinewy, athletic build Hirsch worked out obsessively, losing 26 pounds before filming even began. During the course of production, as he paced McCandless's descent into starvation, he shed another 15, in a chilling transformation. "By the end I was down to 115 pounds," says Hirsch. "I had no energy at all. It changes everything about you: the way you think, the way you treat others, the way you are alone."

Alongside a busload of famous actors (Vaughn, William Hurt, Hal Holbrook, Catherine Keener), the real characters and haunts of the American underclass have cameos, giving the film at times a documentary feel. At every encounter in his nomadic wanderings — from soup kitchens and train yards to the vast landscapes of the Grand Canyon and the Alaska Range — we see McCandless flitting through people's lives, leaving them changed before vanishing. But whereas Krakauer showed both sides of McCandless — the hapless tenderfoot and the enlightened eternal seeker — Penn presents only the latter version. His McCandless is almost Christ-like. It is a deeply mythic take on a character who is largely a cipher. Clearly, in Sean Penn's eyes, *Into the Wild* is a story about something profound and universal in the human spirit, a longing for freedom and a pure connection to the natural world that's been lost.

"I'm not trying to romanticize him," insists Penn, who has little patience for McCandless's critics. "There are few people in Alaska who have done anything comparable to what Chris did. We're not talking about a week with another buddy and ATVs, hunting. This was 113 days, 79 of them by choice. And he did pretty damn well. Did he make mistakes? Sure. A lot of people do. But however many miles he needed to walk to become a man was up to him. So I think he did very well by any standard, including Alaskan."

FOR BOTH PENN AND KRAKAUER, THE MCCANDLESS story became an obsession. No one, save perhaps McCandless's own grieving family, tried harder to understand his journey and, especially, his strange death, than Krakauer, who saw something of himself in McCandless's youthful passion for risk and remote places. *Into the Wild* is laid out like a meticulous legal brief in defense of a human soul. There is a mountain of evidence with which Krakauer makes his arguments: interviews, journals, photographs, historical comparisons.



ATTENTION POSSIBLE VISITORS
S.O.S.
I NEED YOUR HELP
I AM INJURED, NEAR
DEATH, AND TOO WEAK
TO HIKE OUT OF HERE.
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?

■ The final photo of McCandless (top right), a self-portrait taken at the bus, from an undeveloped roll of film. The potato seeds that Jon Krakauer believed poisoned McCandless (above); scientists say the seeds are nontoxic. McCandless's famous last note (left), which moose hunters found tacked on the bus's door.

The book's Sherlock Holmes moment comes near the end. Seeking to explain why McCandless grew sick and died so suddenly, Krakauer hypothesized that he'd unintentionally poisoned himself. To supplement his fortunes shooting squirrels, porcupines, and woodpeckers, McCandless had been eating the seeds of the wild potato, a native plant whose roots have provided food for the Athabaskan people for centuries. Weakened and near death, McCandless had written "Fault of pot. seed" in his journal. The plant was not thought to be toxic, but, acting on a hunch, Krakauer sent some seeds found near the bus to the University of Alaska at Fairbanks for analysis. Initial results indicated the presence of a

RESURRECTING ALEXANDER SUPERTRAMP

SEAN PENN on the making of *Into the Wild*



■ Penn (right), on location with the film's star Emile Hirsch, spent years trying to bring *Into the Wild* to the screen.

What was it about Chris McCandless's story that resonated with you?
I can't explain it; there's just something about his story that hits people. The thing that moved me the most was the first time I went to the bus, and Chris's boots were still there. I asked his family if they wanted me to grab that stuff before they became eBay material because of the movie, but they wanted to leave things for those who needed it.
You clearly went out of your way to retrace his footsteps. Why go through the hassle?
I wouldn't necessarily call them hassles. There were challenges, like walking 10 miles through waist-deep snow to find locations, but

every time we came out of the bush, everybody — and I speak for my whole crew — everybody was hungry to get back.
When was the last time you went back?
Jon Krakauer and I were out at the bus this week, and when we crossed the river, we were nearly swept away. It was 15 years and two days after Chris tried to get out.
What was it about Alaska that called out to McCandless?
I call it nature on steroids. Have you ever seen the Northern Lights? I'd never seen them before, and we got the full red and green crossing the sky. You know what they call that? A glimpse of nature dreaming. —M.P.

toxic alkaloid, one that Krakauer made much of, claiming that perhaps "McCandless wasn't quite as reckless or incompetent as he was made out to be." It was a small but crucial mistake. As Krakauer presented it, McCandless had been poisoned by a toxin that prevented his body from absorbing nutrients, leading to his starvation.

But the book was published before the seeds' testing was completed by Dr. Thomas Clausen, the chair of the chemistry and biochemistry department at UAF. "I was hoping it was true," says Clausen, in his lab on campus. "It would have made a good story. But the scientific results worked against my biases. I tore that plant apart. There were no toxins. No alkaloids. I'd eat it myself."

Of course, this flies in the face of the McCandless that the public has embraced, and Krakauer's take has survived subsequent reprintings of the book. Now a version of his theory has made its way on-screen. In Penn's telling McCandless is poisoned by mistaking wild potato for a similar plant, wild sweet pea, though according to Clausen's research that plant is equally harmless. Brent Keith, my guide, suggests it was poisoned mushrooms, or giardiasis from drinking untreated water.

There's additional evidence McCandless needn't have wasted away. In July, a month before his death, he attempted to hike out of the bush, only to be turned away trying to cross the Teklanika. He failed to anticipate the change in water levels as the summer progressed and snowmelt increased. But as Krakauer noted — and a 9,000-word piece by Chip Brown in a February 1993 *New Yorker* made clear — had McCandless searched a bit farther downstream he would have dis-



■ The bus where McCandless died remains as it was when his body was discovered in September, 1992. The site has become a shrine for admirers. Left, the bed where a moose hunter found his body, photographed in 2007; right, his jeans, patched with an army blanket, sit on a shelf in the bus.

And what would McCandless have felt about all this? "I'm sure he's sitting up there smiling. He liked to write all those diaries," says Westerberg. "If he wouldn't have documented it there wouldn't have been a story."

McCandless clearly believed in self-mythologizing, in the power of storytelling and self-invention. Had he lived, perhaps he would have gained enough perspective to tell the story himself, rather than leaving it for others to tell. As it is, he has entered the realm of myth, and myths are shaped by those who can make use of them.

Penn, for one, doesn't feel conflicted by presenting McCandless's life on-screen, despite the mysteries. "I think the things that are most important are there," he says. "It was clear Chris made the decision to go back to the world. And he left an awful lot of clues, so you go with your gut. That's what I did." To criticize Hollywood for being Hollywood, for taking a real story and mythologizing it, is like telling a bear not to shit in the woods. It's what they do.

With a year-round population of around 200 and winter temperatures that frequently linger at 40 below, Cantwell is tucked in the shadow of the icy vastness of the Alaska Range. Everyone I met there spoke highly of the movie people. The production, which used almost every

THE MOOSE HUNTER WHO STUMBLED ACROSS MCCANDLESS'S BODY CONSIDERED IT JUST ANOTHER DAY IN THE BUSH. "IF HE'S A HERO, HE'S A DEAD HERO," HE SAYS.

covered a manual tram over the river less than a mile from where he tried to cross, a detail missing from the film. The tragic truth may be that he didn't find a way out of the bush, couldn't catch enough food to survive, and simply starved to death. But no one will ever know the truth.



WITH THE MYTHOLOGY THAT HAS GROWN UP around the story, it is easy to forget that McCandless was a real flesh-and-blood person, that those who knew him and loved him are still around. Westerberg, for example, has had his life transformed by their brief friendship. He picked McCandless up hitchhiking and gave him a job working at his grain elevator in Carthage, South Dakota. The boy told him his name was Alex, and they became good friends in the nearly two years before he left for Alaska. Westerberg was the one who helped identify the body.

I ask Westerberg if he feels as if the Alex he knew has been lost. "Well, yeah," he says. "All this shadows the original story and clouds it to a point."

available ATV in town and hired many locals, was the biggest thing to happen there since the railroad came through nearly a century ago.

Penn's production company acquired a 40s-era International Harvester bus from a junkyard in Fairbanks, identical to the one out on the Stampede Trail, and set designers modeled it into a dead ringer of Fairbanks 142. It sits now in the crowded yard outside Gordon Carlson's house in Cantwell, not looking terribly out of place amid rusted machinery and old pickup trucks.

Carlson, a barrel-chested Athabaskan who worked as a tribal liaison on the shoot, shows me around the bus. He chuckles through a handlebar mustache and offers an unburnished appraisal of McCandless: Another fool bit the dust. "We grew up here. You learn how to make a campfire when you're a kid. This, I didn't think much of it at the time. That kid's mistakes started a long time before he got here."

And what will happen to this bus?

"Not sure what we'll do with it. Make it some kind of attraction. Maybe a cappuccino stand. I know that sounds like we're profiting off someone else's story, but you do what you have to do to survive here." ☪