nastawgan

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The only group photo taken on the trip, this one by Umiujaq's village elder, after his truck ran out of gas. From L to R: Craig Macdonald, Bill King, Herb Pohl, Tony Bird.

Clearwater Winter, 1987

Story by Herb Pohl
Photos by Herb Pohl and Tony Bird

For many canoeists winter is a period of relative dormancy, a time spent planning and organizing the next foray into the unknown. Some wait impatiently for the first chance to launch their boats into the spring freshet, but there are others who look forward with equal fervour to the coming of winter. They see the blanket of snow and ice as access to the most remote places. One of these people is Craig Macdonald. A long-time member of the Wilderness Canoe Association, he is largely responsible for introducing traditional Native ways of winter travel to a wide audience. For the converted, traditional "hot camping" is the way of gospel comfort, because *home* at the end of the travelling day is a heated cotton tent.[1]

Shortly after New Year of '87, I received a call from Craig to ask if I would be interested in joining a trip into northern Quebec. He knew the answer of course; the diffi-

culty was getting away during the academic year. By scheduling the trip to coincide with reading week the problem was solved. For me, the time leading up to our departure was unusually stress free, since preparations were limited to my personal gear. Craig, who supplied all the equipment, transportation, accommodation and arranged the air charter, had a different story to tell. His wife Doris cooked all the dinners and froze them in individual servings, and looked after lunches and breakfasts as well.

Beside myself, Craig had invited Tony Bird and Bill King, both experienced winter travellers, but none of us had ever been this far north in the winter before. As part of our pre-trip assignment Craig suggested we read *Needle to the North* by Arthur Twomey. It is an account of the 1938 Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh expedition to the Seal Lakes of northern Quebec and the Belcher Islands in Hudson Bay. Part of the expedition's route into the interior was from Richmond Gulf to Clearwater Lake in the winter of '38, and was made with the assistance of local Natives using traditional methods of travel. I suspect it provided the inspiration for Craig to attempt a trip in the opposite direction, albeit slightly farther north and at the northern limit of trees, an essential resource to provide tent poles and firewood. We didn't know it at the time, but I have since acquired a copy of the map made by George Atkinson II, which shows the Native summer route he used in 1819 to reach the Upper Seal Lakes. It was, with one minor deviation, identical to our winter route of 1987.

The day of our departure from Craig's home in Dorset had a rare quality. Morning mists partially obscured the Haliburton County landscape, the rose-coloured rays of the early sun created long soft shadows and added a mystical element to the scene, but for some it was not a time for contemplation. At Craig's driveway the focus was on loading a mountain of gear into the back of his cavernous Suburban and tying two sleds on the roof. Before long we were on our way. The mild day became even milder as we drove northwards, the sun disappeared, and by the time we stopped for the night in Amos, north of Val-d'Or, it was raining. This unexpected turn was cause for some anxiety because the one thing we were not prepared for was wet weather.

It rained most of the night, but, by the time we reached the bridge over the Rupert River the next day and stopped to take a look at the awesome rapids upstream, the temperature was thirty below. That evening the concern wasn't about rain. A full-blown blizzard was rattling Auberge Radisson, our abode for the night, and the radio airwaves were carrying a mantra of severe weather warnings with wind chills of minus 85 degrees. In the short time it took Craig to go out and plug in the block heater of the van, he froze one of his ears.

When we assembled in the heated airport hangar in Radisson[2] the next morning, sombre faces betrayed an air

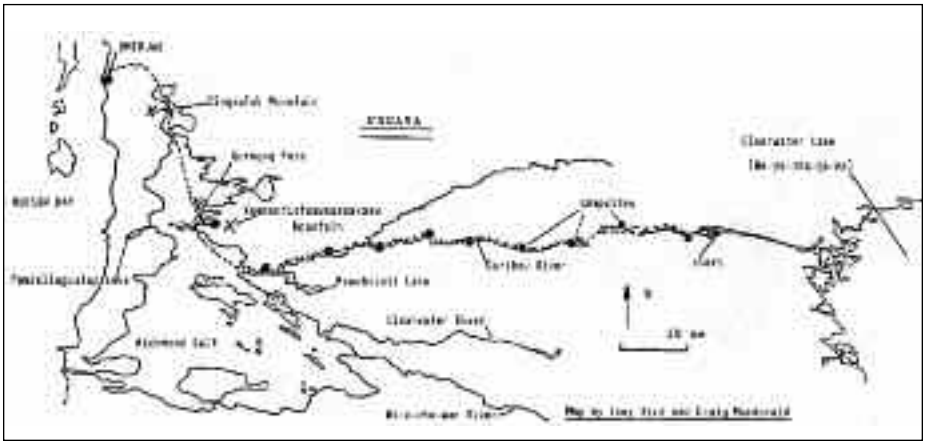
Herb perched on the bare hilltop, with long vista in the background; Herb was predominantly a solo traveller, and pictures of him in the wilderness settings are rare.

Before takeoff from Le Grande airport, after paying an inordinate amount of money to open the hangar door during deep freeze.

of apprehension. The sensible thing to do was wait for the storm to subside, but we all had a tight deadline and so the choice was to go now or abandon the trip altogether. David Peace, the pilot, was willing to give it a try and within an hour we were on our way north.

From the air, the dark boreal forest and small frozen lakes stretched endlessly, the latter frequently populated by skeins of caribou. Once past the Great Whale River great domes of wind-scoured bedrock became more prominent and trees were restricted to the sheltered lowlands. After what seemed a very long time, the high hills of the western shore of Clearwater Lake came into view. The surface of the lake was hidden under a cloud of swirling snow. The pilot, worrying about the presence of large sastrugi, or snow ridges, hidden beneath the ground drifts on the open lake, headed for the long, narrow arm of the lake, which we planned to follow on our westerly course to the Hudson Bay coast. Even here the surface had the texture of a giant washboard and the landing was correspondingly rough. Dave's only concern at this point was to get the hell out of there before the engine cooled too much in -36 F temperatures with 60 kph winds. While we tossed all our gear out of the old Otter, Dave quickly pumped some fuel from a 45-gallon drum into the plane's fuel tank, restarted the plane (to his great relief!) and ten minutes later we were alone.

Meantime, the sun appeared out of the mists and emphasized the brilliant whiteness of the land. Our highway for the next few days was a glacier-carved



First morning on the trail at the start of the trip, after camping the first night at the narrow little bay on Clearwater Lake.

trough extending more than 35 kilometres from the western shore of Clearwater Lake back toward Richmond Gulf. The shore of bedrock here and there supports a smattering of small trees that stood out darkly against the immense expanse of white but, with luck, these would be sufficient to make a frame each night for our tent and to serve as fuel wood to keep us warm. The bracing gale was all we needed to spur us on to action.

Craig Macdonald, youngest member of the crew, at the end of the trip.

Our means of transportation for our food and gear were two sleds and one toboggan. This meant that one man's job was to break trail and find the best route while the others followed in order of first sled, then the toboggan and finally the second sled. By constantly rotating positions we could recover somewhat from the onerous job of pulling the sleds. None of us had ever been out in conditions as severe as those we were facing on this journey. The main problem was that the low temperature and consequent snow-crystal conditions made pulling the sleds an exhausting enterprise. While they only carried about eighty kilograms, we could get them to start moving only with the utmost exertion and would be unable to continue for more than 50 or at most 100 metres without stopping and changing positions. Every sastrugi along the way was an insurmountable obstruction that required a detour and further slowed forward progress. After four hours of heavy hauling we stopped for the day in a sheltered bay, having covered no more than three kilometres.

Setting up camp in the evening with this travel method takes between two and three hours. Each individual is assigned to specific tasks – the cutting of tent poles, sill logs and brush for the tent floor, procurement of firewood and kindling, setting up the tent and stove, cutting a hole in the ice to get water and finally working to thaw and heat a precooked meal. It's a period of frantic activity at the end of an usually long and tiring day. Once all the chores are done everyone takes refuge inside the com-

fortable tent, basking in the stove's radiant heat, drinking in the odour of food bubbling in the pots. And the collective feeling of contentment is palpable. At bedtime all the items of clothing and boot liners that need drying are hung up on the ridge lines. Craig insists on keeping the stove going all the time; whoever wakes during the night adds a few sticks to the box as needed and thus ensures everything is dry by morning.

Our first evening wasn't quite as comfortable as described above. The main problem was the lack of good firewood. It took hours for the blocks of frozen suppers to lose their rigid form. (In future we would chop them up into little pieces to speed the thawing process.) The much more serious concern was the storm outside and the slow and sandpapery quality of the snow over which we had to haul our sleds. At the rate of advance we managed the first day, it looked as though we wouldn't get even halfway to our destination before running out of food – a sobering thought.

The morning dawned bitterly cold and the west wind blew with unabated vigour. A pale sun was partly obscured by ice crystals, which continued to fall throughout the day. At lunch-time we huddled in the shelter of a tarp held by the wind against a few sticks. The content of Craig's insulated gallon jug, filled that morning, was frozen solid and so were the sandwiches and my camera. Bill was shaking with hypothermia within a few minutes and we wasted no time getting back into harness. I shall always remember this as the coldest lunch break ever.

During the day we were constantly watching each other for signs of frostbite as we continued along our wind tunnel at a pitifully slow pace. Late in the afternoon Craig, who had a wonderful eye for such things, spied a suitable clump of trees in another sheltered cove and here we settled for the night. Despite the fact we had only covered six hard-won kilometres, the mood was upbeat. This time we had the benefit of dry standing deadwood to feed the stove, the chopped up blocks of frozen dinners were piping hot by eight o'clock and we even found time for a short stroll to look at what Craig called the "barbaric" landscape.

Last camp in the sparsely wooden area before Craig and Tony struck out in search for the village of Umiujaq; the large pile of firewood is meant to aid Bill and Herb in keeping warm until Craig and Tony returned.

By the end of the third day we had left the narrow Clearwater Lake channel behind and were now progressing through a number of small lakes. The wind had moderated somewhat, but the air continued cold and filled with ice crystals. We now had to traverse the low hills that separated these lakes, an exercise that required our combined pulling power to get the sleds to the top of each rise. The last of these traverses brought us to the headwater lake of the small stream that we planned to follow to the Caribou River and thence to Richmond Gulf. The panoramic view from the top of the last rise revealed the mere hint of a valley running in an easterly direction. Compared to the austere face of the land farther east the contours were now softer and trees, while still widely separated, were much more prevalent. Most appreciated of all was that for the first time our sleds moved a

Camp near the junction of the South and the North Branch of the Caribou River.

Using tarp as the windbreak in -40C weather (much colder with wind-chill): note that tarp is held in place only by the force of the wind and is not tied.

little easier – at least we didn't have to pull them while going downhill. Obviously we were benefiting from a subtle change in the texture of the snow, which was also reflected in an increase in the daily distance covered.

Because we had to make up distance lost at the start of the trip, our travelling days were long and our camp chores usually finished under a big moon bright enough to create sharp shadows. One evening in particular stands out in my memory. We all went out after supper for a short stroll under a canopy of stars and a full moon that illuminated and transformed the surroundings into a fairyland. It was probably the coldest night of the trip (we had no thermometer with us, but I am sure it was well below -40°C). In the absence of exertion, one quickly felt the icy chill creep into the bones and so we soon turned back toward the tent, a warm comfortable refuge.

Our nameless stream started a hesitant descent through a poorly defined valley in discrete steps. Low ledges soon gave way to waterfalls of ever increasing height and steep rapids – all of it totally encased in ice. I always felt a bit uneasy travelling down these rapids, because the sound of turbulence underfoot was at times quite audible. The thought that anyone breaking through the ice would be instantly swept under concentrated the mind and lightened the step.

For the last ten kilometres above the confluence with the Caribou River, high hills dominated the landscape. Several times it required team effort to lower the sleds past falls. At the bottom of one of them, we set up our last camp on the river at an uncharacteristically early hour. A short climb to the nearest lookout revealed an exquisite panorama. The long shadows of the late sun dramatized the wind-carved snow. Remnants of raised beaches could be seen high up on the hillsides to the north. Due west and far below stretched a wide glacier-worn valley through which the Caribou River had carved a deep, meandering course across deposits of sand and gravel.

The snow in the recessed riverbed of the Caribou was deep and soft. The job of the trail breaker, which had been by far the easiest at the beginning of the trip, was now the most onerous. There was not a breath of wind, and concern about frostbite was replaced by complaints about overheating. Our last camp on the river was just a short distance from the shore of Richmond Gulf. Despite the awesome landscape and a breathtaking display of northern lights that evening, the focus of our discussion in the tent was on how to proceed from here on.

Our target was the village of Umiujaq. Just newly established by Inuit expatriates from Great Whale River, it was not yet shown on any map. All we knew was that it was located on the shores of Hudson Bay and immediately west of Richmond Gulf. The problem was that the western shore of the Gulf is 40 kilometres long and, with the exception of three widely separated gaps, is a near vertical rock face 400 metres high. There are no trees on the western shore of the Gulf large enough to serve as tent poles and the Hudson Bay coast in this region is altogether devoid of trees. The best estimate was that it would take us three days to reach

the village. Two nights without shelter isn't a problem in good weather, but the region is known for nasty storms that could make survival an issue.

We were not prepared for this problem because Craig, in conversation with Noah Inukpuk, the mayor of Umiujaq, had been assured that we would meet people camped near the mouth of the Caribou River. All we came across were the old and indistinct traces of a snowmobile track. Later on, and quite by accident, I stumbled on a *tupek*,[3] completely buried under snow, the inside quite cosy and habitable. Presumably it was the abode of the people we expected to meet, but they must have left some time ago. For us, time was now an important element, not just because we were short of food, but we wanted to avoid the cost and ignominy of a search party looking for us if we were unduly delayed. And so Craig decided we should send out a search party of our own based on the assumption that somewhere in the neighbourhood there had to be tracks that could be followed to Umiujaq.

Early the next morning Craig and Tony set off with the toboggan that carried only the most basic outfit – tarp, sleeping bags and foam pads, axe, saw, kettle, thermos and a minimum of food. By travelling fast and light the hope was to cover more than twice the distance per day than we could cover with all our gear and thus reach our destination as quickly as possible. They could then secure someone to collect us by snowmobile. Fortunately, the fine weather of the last week continued. For a short while Bill and I watched our companions make their way towards the mouth of the river and turn north into the wide expanse of Richmond Gulf. They were heading into a long and exhausting day and an uncomfortable night. Bill and I, by contrast, faced a day of leisure and the comfort of a less-crowded tent. Because leisure quickly leads to boredom we soon set off toward the high hills behind our camp. They offered a marvellous view back upriver as well as the cliffs beyond the western shore of Richmond Gulf. Of our travelling companions there was no sign on the vast expanse of ice.

Around noon the following day the sound of motors caught our attention. Soon two snowmobiles came into view. Their Inuit occupants had been on their way to the mouth of the Caribou River when they encountered Craig and Tony. They informed us that they would spend the afternoon fishing and would pick us up later and take us to Umiujaq. When the time came we threw all our gear onto the komatiq, I took my seat behind the driver, Bill hopped on the *komatiq* and off we went. It was my first ride on a snowmobile and the experience soon convinced me that this

Eating breakfast in the comforts of the warm tent, while preparing lunch and melting water for the trail.

Beautiful photo of the camp taken during dead calm of the coldest night on the trip (-52C)

type of locomotion was not for me.

The corrugated hard-packed snow made for a brain-rattling ride that took us to the north end of the Gulf. Here, the remains of glacial deposits have created a more gradual slope towards the west such that snowmobiles can just make it to the top. The descent to Hudson Bay was a bit nerve-wracking for Bill, I suspect. Several times the *komatiq* raced alongside the snowmobile, each time the driver would allow the towing rope to run under the runners of the *komatiq* to slow it down, all this at the very edge of a steep rock face.

In Umiujaq, Mayor Noah Inukpuk showed the way to our accommodation, a large three bedroom trailer; it had every conceivable amenity, even fully stocked kitchen cupboards. It was now late afternoon and there was no sign of our companions. We hadn't seen them anywhere along the way and I was worried they would be left out for another night without food or water, but Noah assured me they were not forgotten and at dusk they arrived at the doorstep. Our host, the mayor, proved to be a very gracious individual. The next day he drove us all around town, explained the history and future plans of the community that was populated by people who wanted to get back to a more traditional way of life. Because there was no flight out, we spent the next day following our varied interests, which for me was a long hike to the edge of the escarpment overlooking Richmond Gulf. I arrived back at the trailer just as the sun disappeared behind one of the Nastapoca Islands off the Hudson Bay coast.

The next evening I found David Peace, our pilot, at the bar in Auberge Radisson busy chatting up a very pretty barmaid. "Just trying not to lose the touch," said the very married fellow, perhaps a touch defensively. "I wasn't sure I'd ever see you again, I thought it was fifty-fifty" he added.[4]

Notes

[1]Craig Macdonald, who for years has been a recreational trails specialist for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources in Algonquin Park, has spent most of his life researching and learning about winter and summer trails used by the Anishinabi people across Northern Ontario, Quebec and parts of Manitoba. In addition to producing a detailed map (published by the MNR – a description of this map and notes on how to order can be found at www.ottertooth.com). Craig has done much empirical research into travel methods and technologies. In 1982, he tested the limits of these "hot" camping techniques on the west side of James Bay with a trip from Fort Albany to Moosonee ("Tumpline Trek on James Bay Shores," in *Canadian Geographic* 102 (6), 54-59). This trip in the Richmond Gulf area was an effort to test the limits of the method in taiga country a little farther

On the ridge top, looking down and westward towards Richmond Gulf; on the clear day, like the day when this photo was taken, one can see for miles and miles – as far the curvature of the Earth will allow!.

Lunch and hydration break on the relatively warm day, feeling somewhat fatigued from heavy hauling; from L to R: Bill King, Tony Bird, Craig Macdonald.

Looking towards the south end of Richmond Gulf.

north and on the east side of Hudson Bay.

[2]Radisson is an unincorporated area that was created to house the workers who built the La Grande power project. It is located just downstream from the LG-4 power dam.

[3]*Tupek* is the term for a traditional Inuit summer dwelling and, in modern parlance, still refers to a simple canvas tent structure, of particular design-usually with one wooden pole and a door flap on the angled canvas surface, that can accommodate one or two people.

[4]On his original manuscript, Herb added the following note: "A comprehensive treatment of the subject can be found in *A Snow Walkers Companion* by Garrett and Alexandra Conover, and Craig's account of the trip can be found in *Nastawgan* vol. 14, no. 4." For anyone interested in tracking down this second account of the trip, Craig's story of striking out with Tony to find Umiujaq with only minimal equipment is very different than Herb's story of a leisurely wait during the last couple of days of the trip. For Craig and Tony, it was a very different part of the journey – during which they very nearly were mistaken by hunters as caribou-and had a couple of other hair-raising moments as well.

Craig standing next to Isaac, a friend of Robbie Tookalook, who is looking at the map; Isaac and Robbie were char fishing at the mouth of the river nearby.

Easily the warmest day on the trip (-10C), taken the last day out on the Caribou river; Herb was very impressed with fantastic terraces in the background.

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Nastawgan is an Anishinabi word meaning "the way or route"

The WILDERNESS CANOE ASSOCIATION is a non-profit organization made up of individuals interested in wilderness travel, mainly by canoe and kayak, but also including backpacking and winter trips on both skis and snowshoes. The club publishes a quarterly journal, *Nastawgan*, to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas of interest to wilderness travellers, organizes an extensive program of trips for members, runs a few basic workshops, and is involved in environmental issues relevant to wilderness canoeing.

Clearwater Story

We published two articles in this issue with permission from Dundurn Press. "Lake Nipigon " by Nancy Scott is an introduction to the superb book that has been many years in the making. Nancy will be speaking about this project at the WC Symposium in February. Thanks to Barry Penhale and Jane Gibson for bringing this wonderful book into our focus. Herb Pohl's story about the '87 winter trip to Richmond Gulf was originally published in "The Lure of Faraway Places". James Raffan, best-selling canoe author himself, edited Herb's book and reminisced about this trip in our recent conversation:

"I'm sure Herb'd be proud to have it included and to know that what he had to say is still of interest. It's quite a tale! Great to see Craig (Macdonald) in there as well. There are a couple of moments in that story that stick with me ... one was the interminable time it took to bring the Single Otter to proper manifold temperature after the start up in Whapmagoostui-Kuujuarapiq-Great Whale-Grande Baleine-Poste de la Baleine. The other was how close Bill King came to getting shot as an errant caribou when they were strung on a bivvy line trying to reach Umiujaq." In his insightful commentary, Raffan muses how Craig's account of his journey to find Umiujaq in harsh, cold weather differs from Herb's recounting of leisurely waiting out the last few days of the trip (*Nastawgan*, Winter 1987). Reminder to members that this original article, as well as all past *Nastawgan* issues, are available online on WCA website. Well worth reading!

Wilderness & Canoe Symposium 20-21st February 2015

Preparations for 30th annual WCS are well underway. Program is almost finalized and more than 300 paddlers have already registered. Event will take place at the usual location in Monarch Park Collegiate in Toronto. Volunteers required – please contact Aleks Gusev. Following is the list of confirmed presenters:

Nancy Scott – "Lake Nipigon: Where the Great Lakes Begin"
Brian Johnston – "Messages from the Subarctic: publishing notes from Tyrrell's Cairn"
James Raffan – "Circling the Midnight Sun"
Devon Ide & Anna McClean – "Our Summer in the Woods: Growing Up with Canoe Tripping"
Saqamaw Mi'sel Joe – " An Aboriginal Chief's Journey"
George Luste – "Personal Reflections on my Wilderness Paddling Journey"
Emma Brandy – "Filling the gap: A journey through autoethnography"
Jack Goering – "Retracing Franklin's Route from Yellowknife to Coppermine"
Kevin Redmont – "Newfoundland and Labrador: Abandonment & Place-based Journeys"
Conor Mihell – "L'Eau Vive: Canoeing the Great Whale River in Northern Quebec"
Jeremy Ward – "Freighter Canoes: an illustrated exploration of the iconic northern workboat"
Louise Abbot – "Nunaaluk: A Forgotten Story"
Paul Watson – "Finding Erebus"
Chris Lepard – "South Nahanni River, NWT – River of Dreams"
Rick Stronks – "Camping in Black Bear Country"
Lester Kovac & Lynette Chubb – "Ungava Crossing 2014"
Jason White – "Finding Canoe Partners in Hard Times"

Contributors' Guidelines

If you are planning to submit any material for possible publication in *Nastawgan*, you would do the editors and certainly yourself a great favour by first consulting the WCA Guidelines for Contributors to *Nastawgan*. These guidelines should be followed as much as possible by all contributors, so that the editorial team can more effectively edit your contribution to make it fit the *Nastawgan* style. The latest draft of the guidelines is available on the WCA website.

Annual General Meeting – March 7, 2015

Please hold Saturday March 7, 2015 for the WCA Annual General Meeting. We are still working on the venue and agenda, and we will provide additional information on the WCA website as we finalize details.

In addition to the business meeting we are planning an exciting activity (last year was a scavenger hunt in Pioneer Village as well as a ravine hike) and the opportunity for a social lunch.

2014 Wine & Cheese Gathering

By Luigi Salerno

As I look outside, the leaves are falling, the days are getting shorter and winter is just around the corner…it is hard to say goodbye to the paddling season! On the positive side, autumn is the season for the Annual Wine and Cheese social event for the WCA, which was held on Saturday November 15th at the Toronto Sailing and Canoe club. It was great to see so many familiar faces and to share adventurous summertime stories from 2014 while making exciting new plans for next year. Not only was the company great, but there was also an abundance of delicious food! A fine variety of cheeses and finger foods covered every square centimetre of the tables leaving just enough room for the accompanying wine. Once our bellies were full we settled in, eagerly anticipating the presentation from our own Kevin Callan, recognized and well-respected Canadian canoe enthusiast and author. His appearance was supported through the trust remembering Mike Wevrick. Kevin's presentation was about his family canoe trip to Killarney Provincial Park in Ontario. The slides were impressive, complete with topo maps, pictures and detailed trip notes. He is an extremely engaging speaker and his presentation just flew by! Following a few announcements and some goodies for the crowd, the Wine and Cheese event was already over. While gathering all of my personal belongings, I realized why I try to be present for the Wine and Cheese event every year. There is something special about coming together with kindred spirts, discussing our passion for the outdoors. It can be difficult to explain the bond we have with fellow paddlers to individuals who do not paddle. If you did not attend the Wine and Cheese I encourage you to come out next year and have a fantastic time.

Pitching the Tent

by Greg Went

On shore for the night. At last. Although the work for the day is not over by a long shot, it is a good feeling when the canoes are pulled up on shore for the last time of the day. A very good feeling. I always say a prayer of gratitude at that time. We have been kept safe for another day. The wilderness is a place where great care must always be exercised. A careless moment, a lost item of gear, a slip. Danger awaits everywhere.

The first order of business is to get the canoes unloaded and secured for the night. Then the canoe party assesses where to build the campfire. Once those two tasks are done, everyone is free to pitch their tent wherever they choose. On long river stretches where we just pull up to shore to camp, we start by searching the trees that grow close to the high water mark. Sometimes there is a hidden spot that provides shelter on all sides. Some wilderness canoeists like to camp on open flat spots close to river level. Others choose a site higher up the hillside. They say the high ground gets the first light of day and the last night of evening. Fewer mosquitoes. Better view.

Me? My preference is for as level a spot as I can find that is as close to the trees as I can find. Even if I have to stake the head end of the tent right next to a tree. It's mostly because of the wind. I fear the wind. The wind and I have had some hard battles during our wilderness canoe journeys. We have been in canyon areas where when the wind came up it blew non-stop. All day and all night. We have been camped on an open sandy beach on a lake when a bad storm arose and wind battered the tents for three whole days.

Being surrounded by trees tempers the strength of the wind. Each individual tree contributes but little to lessening the power of the wind. But with many trees adding their little, they become a formidable bulwark and wind speeds in a grove of trees drop dramatically. Pitching my tent next to the trees aligns me as their ally in the fight against the wind tearing at us all.

And as each individual tree has found out, some battles are better fought when they are not fought alone.

Lake Nipigon – Introduction

Story by Nancy Scott

courtesy of Dr. Michael Whittier

From the time I first saw Lake Nipigon, I was captivated by its vast horizons, its crystal-clear waters, its breathtaking scenery, and the fury of its storms. But, most of all, I was struck by its sheer pristine, almost primeval beauty. Its vastness and its wildness make it truly a land of mystery and grandeur. Looking out across the lake, one can surely imagine what the world was like before the arrival of humans. In fact, remarkably, there has been much more activity on Lake Nipigon in the past than there is today — a rare occurrence in today's accessible world. With its vast reaches and sparkling splendour, it was unlike any place I had ever seen before. It somehow felt familiar, as though I were coming home.

Seeing fishing boats plying the waters of Pijitawabik Bay transports one to the Inside Passage of British Columbia's Vancouver Island. The stunted balsam fir trees dripping with "old man's beard" lichens bring to mind a scene from *The Hobbit* in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. The wild swells here are those of an inland sea. Its towering cliffs and distant headlands are reminiscent of some of the landscapes in Canada's Arctic.

Every summer the old Hudson's Bay post in the lake's northwest reaches is golden with yellow *Rudbeckia* (Golden Glow) flowers that still bloom, even after having been abandoned for a hundred years. Elsewhere, the only signs that remain of a once-bustling trading settlement are the ancient graveyards. The spirit of Norval Morrisseau, the Woodland Ojibwa artist, lives on here — he was born at Sand Point Settlement in the lake's southeast reaches, and lived for a time in nearby Beardmore.

The mystique of the land is captivating. An elusive caribou slips, ghost-like and almost undetected, into the bush, a young calf at her side. Bald eagles soar above the headlands, while pelicans fish the river mouths. Full double rainbows arch over the lake after a storm. At midnight, a wildfire glows on the horizon, like a rising moon. Remarkable landforms such as Locomotive and Hat Islands, the Barn Islands, and Haystack Mountain all have simple names that so aptly capture the silhouettes of their topography.

Having spent time touring the lake by sea kayak, small motorboat, fishing tug, and charter cruiser watercraft, I have come to experience the lake in its furthest reaches, in sparkling sunshine, through treacherous storms, and by peaceful moonlight. I have seen its spectacular forest fires, wild thunderstorms, and double rainbows. And the more I have come to know the lake, the more I have come to understand that it truly is a rare, special, and fragile place.

Perhaps the lure of Nipigon Country was infused in me several years ago when I had the opportunity to live for a couple of summers on the shores of the Nipigon River, in the one-time Guide's Cabin — a humble shack that echoes back to the former glory days of the Chalet Lodge. Originally known as

courtesy of Gerry Racey

the Nipigon River Bungalow Lodge, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) executive fishing lodge was built in 1920 to service clientele arriving by train to fish the legendary waters of the Nipigon.

In addition to spending both professional and personal time on Lake Nipigon, I have spent far more time researching the lake for the government of Ontario. While there is a wealth of information available on Lake Nipigon in various forms, such as research data, reports, and planning documents, as well as a few publications on the Nipigon River, much of it is difficult to track down, and some is not particularly accessible to the general public. While there are several books available about Lake Superior and the other Great Lakes, Georgian Bay, the Muskoka lakes, Lake Winnipeg, and Lake of the Woods, there has not been a book featuring Lake Nipigon. Here was a void I felt needed to be filled, indeed an idea whose time had come.

For me, perhaps the biggest lure is that the lake remains so wild, so set apart, largely removed from today's frenetic world. As one spends time on the lake, it ever so quietly, slowly, and begrudgingly gives up the secrets of its present and its past. The remains of a voyageur's pipe from the fur-trade era lying on a lonely, distant beach caught my eye as I stepped out of my sea kayak. It was as if that unknown, nameless *coureur de bois* had just been there a few hours earlier and had accidentally dropped his pipe as he helped launch a fur-laden voyageur canoe. Although more than a century and a half has passed since that pipe was abandoned, and with so many intervening years of wild winds, waves, changing water levels, and grinding winter ice, it is a marvel that it was still there, as though it was patiently waiting to be found.

This is a land of enchantment, of raw beauty and of pristine wildness. In the pages that follow is the story of the natural and human history of Lake Nipigon: from its primordial beginnings, its geology and vegetation, wildlife and fishery, through to human settlement, industrial ventures, and measures taken to protect it well into the future. It is my hope that through these pages, you, the reader, will begin to experience the life of this exceptional lake, both in its former glory and its present splendour.

Nancy Scott has worked as a park planner with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources throughout Northern Ontario. For over twenty-five years her role has involved field reconnaissance and the preparation of management plans for such parks as Woodland Caribou, Wabakimi, Mississagi, and Killarney Provincial Parks. Her deep interest in the out-of-doors has led to a long-standing knowledge of and fascination for Lake Nipigon. An avid canoeist and kayaker, Nancy is committed to the conservation of the natural environment, with a particular passion for wilderness preservation. She lives in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

courtesy of Chrismar Mapping Services Inc

courtesy of Chrismar Mapping Services Inc.

The Second Annual Luste Lecture

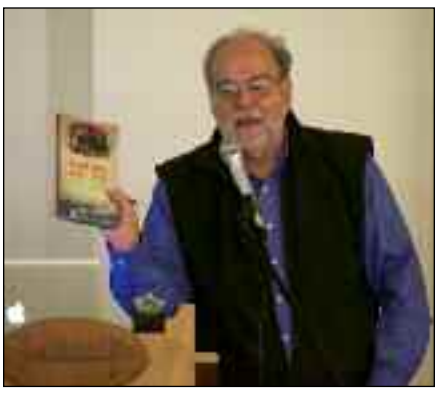
Story by Allan Jacobs
Photos by Evan Holt

Curator Jeremy Ward provided engaging and entertaining tour of the Canadian Canoe Museum's boats stored in the Collection center.

First, we were all pleased that George and Linda Luste attended this lecture, created and named in George's honour.

At the Canadian Canoe Museum on 25 October 2014, Fred "Skip" Pessl spoke on the Moffatt expedition of 1955 and its tragic outcome, namely the death of its leader.

I found the presentation to be worthy of George and his many contributions to the paddling community. After some introductory comments, Pessl said (graciously, I thought) that differences between his account **[Pessl2]** and the earlier one of George Grinnell **[Grinnell1]** would be discussed only later, and only in response to specific questions. He showed some photos, then a movie (18 minutes, perhaps a third of the surviving footage). The question and answer session that followed lasted about an hour. The many questions were answered forthrightly. Some of them touched on the delicate matter of the tragedy. Pessl was clearly moved by recalling those events of almost 60 years ago but retained his composure in difficult circumstances; I thought it a gutsy performance.



George Luste introduced Fred "Skip" Pessl and his book.

Preamble

Several questions occurred to me as I reflected on Pessl's talk and I decided to look into them.

The main documents are **[Grinnell1], [Pessl1]** and **[Pessl2]**. Both authors have spoken at the Wilderness and Canoeing Symposium (Grinnell in January, 1996; Pessl in February, 2013). The paddling community is indebted to them for their contributions to our understanding of the events. As well, I corresponded privately with Pessl. I am deeply grateful to him for his comments (he corrected, gently, one egregious blunder and several smaller ones) **[Pessl3]**. I emphasise that I am solely responsible for what follows.

As my reading progressed, I became increasingly disturbed as I learned what has been written about Moffatt. On the basis of the evidence available to me, I concluded that he has been unjustly maligned; I provide examples. I think it significant that neither Grinnell nor Pessl attack him in their writings on the tragedy; that is the province of those who were not on the trip. Those intending to write on the matter might first reflect on the maxim *There but for … go I.*

Prerequisites might be having read at least one of the Grinnell-Pessl books and having had at least one bad swim.

I expect Pessl's book to mark a turning point in our understanding of those events of so long ago. In particular it implicitly refutes some previous literature.

Background

In 1893, the Tyrrell party (Geological Survey of Canada) started at Athabasca Landing, continued to Black Lake, ascended the Chipman River, descended the Dubawnt and Thelon Rivers to Hudson Bay, and continued by other means to Winnipeg **[Tyrrell]**, a journey that few present-day paddlers would attempt, much less could complete.

The Moffatt party of 1955 set out to travel the central reach of the Tyrrell expedition, specifically Black Lake to Baker Lake.

The purpose of the trip: "But we wanted to do more than retrace Tyrrell's journey, however challenging that might be. We intended to return with professional-quality, 16 mm colour-film footage, documenting the natural history of our journey and the daily life of wilderness canoeing" **[Pessl1]**. Still photographs were also taken. Later, I address comments that these two goals were incompatible.

On 14 September, Moffatt's canoe and another overturned in rapids above Marjorie Lake on the Dubawnt; the third canoe swamped. Moffatt died of hypothermia that day; others came close to doing so.

After recovering for two days, the survivors (seriously shaken by these events, having only one tent left, with most gear wet, in cold weather) portaged the eight miles from Marjorie Lake to Aberdeen

Lake and the Thelon River (not an idea that would occur to every party in similar circumstances); on 24 September, they reached Baker Lake (where the Tyrrell party arrived on 2 September 1893).

Fortuitously, the last flight out of Baker Lake that year left a few hours later. All but Pessl took advantage of the opportunity; they were debriefed, independently, in Churchill **[Grinnell1]**. Pessl remained "behind to attend the recovery of our cache and Art" and was debriefed there. He left Baker Lake by ship on 7 October, having supervised the construction of the coffin **[Pessl2]**.

Moffatt's body (recovered in November, along with the film) was buried in Baker Lake, at the request of his widow Carol **[Pessl2]**.

Judgements

Moffatt (who of course is unable to defend himself) has been ridiculed by persons who were not there. Experts in group dynamics can perhaps tell us why. *Judge not, lest …* .

1a. "… the first men to paddle the length of the Dubawnt after Moffat's group. In contrast to Moffatt's, theirs is a story of preparation, competence, self-assurance, and success in the pioneering days of tundra-river paddling".

1b. "Those guys had no business being up there. … They were a bunch of guys who didn't know what they were doing and led by a guy with poor leadership skills. They fooled around and did a lot of crap and it finally came back to bite them. This was simply a group of novices led by someone more interested in film than travel, which squandered its time and resources and then made some tragic mistakes."

2. … "led on a poorly planned and lackadaisically executed trip by Arthur Moffatt … an excellent example of how not to conduct a canoe trip."

3a. "Moffatt … a name that, in canoe-tripping circles, became synonymous with incompetence."

3b. "… a cautionary example of what not to do."

In my view, attempts to understand the events should recognise that 1955 was very early in the history of recreational canoeing north of 60. The hazards of tripping there were incompletely understood and the maps available at the time were poor compared to those available now. Even the "Voyageurs" (a term used by Morse as well as by the press) ventured north of 60 only in 1959, as best I know. By the way, the subtitle on page 77 of **[Morse]** is "A sampling of journeys on northern rivers in the days before they were much paddled for recreation".

Today, agreement is general that the Moffatt party spent too much time on the early part of the trip and so had to push toward the end, almost certainly a major factor in the tragedy. The Mountie who interviewed Grinnell in Churchill said "So you lost your sense of reality." **[Grinnell1]** may agree (hard to tell); **[Pessl3]** does not. These days, it is suggested that paddlers exit the barrens by mid-August.

To me, the important question is not what we know **now** about September weather conditions upstream from Baker Lake. It matters instead what the Moffatt party knew at the time, or should have known.

What did they know at the time? They had only James Tyrrell's book, except for a conversation (content unrecorded) that Moffatt had with Joseph Burr Tyrrell (also on that trip, brother of James). In particular (I do not suggest that such were readily available in 1955), they had no records of weather at Baker Lake **[Pessl3]**.

What else should they have known then? I have no idea.

Weather information from Tyrrell

The Tyrrell party entered "Lady Marjorie Lake" on 22 August (Tyrrell refers to a "rough, rocky rapid" upstream from it) and Beverly Lake on 25 August. From 30 August through 1 September, they had heavy rain and a "gale". They reached Baker Lake on 2 September and Hudson Bay on 15 September.

Skip deeply engaged in the conversation with the audience.

For the reach from Marjorie to Baker, I noted no reference to weather as fierce at that experienced by the Moffatt party around 9 September.

Conditions on the Bay likely being very different from those upstream of Baker Lake, I did not record Tyrrell's weather observations for 15 September and later.

Summary: From a reading of Tyrrell, I found no reason for the Moffatt party to expect the heavy weather that they encountered before 14 September.

Dubawnt River south of Markham Lake. It portrays humanity's humble place in the larger scheme of things.

Making firewood; Skip Pessl left, Joe Lanouette.

Speculation: perhaps that experience led them to hurry up.

Previous experience

I provide the following in reference to the **Judgements** paragraph.

The sternmen.

Moffatt had paddled the Albany River (solo in 1936, with wife Carol in 1948, and on other trips) apparently six times in all, from Sioux Lookout to Fort Albany. Some of the later trips were commercial in nature. Sources: **Hodgins-Hoyle, Grinnell1** and **Pessl2**.

Pessl had paddled extensively elsewhere before his two Albany trips with Moffatt. Franck had also paddled the Albany with Moffatt. Source: **Pessl2**.

The bowmen.

LeFavour and Lanouette had no previous paddling experience **[Pessl2]**. Grinnell, who paddled in the bow of Franck's canoe, "had never been on a long-distance canoe trip" **[Grinnell1]**. His comment "I was not the least experienced canoeist, but the most experienced" looks mischievous **[Grinnell2]**.

In summary, they were hardly "a group of novices", even at the start. And they had accumulated considerable experience before the fateful descent to Marjorie Lake.

Northwest shore of Dubawnt Lake; Skip Pessl collecting heather and willows for the evening cook fire.

Early recreational paddling north of 60.

Again in reference to the **Judgements** paragraph, I initiated the CCR thread http://www.myccr.com/phpbbforum/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=43428

Readers are invited to contribute to it.

Goals, compatible or not

Kesselheim's article includes the following statement by Pessl.

"That's the other lesson I learned," says Pessl. "To be patient. If we had just been patient and confident, if we hadn't been in such a headlong rush that we didn't stop to scout the rapid, we would have been fine. It's very hard to do that, in the grip of panic, but it would have made all the difference. Art would have been with us, his life . . ." Pessl pauses. "When it comes down to it, even with everything that happened, we were so close."

To my mind, the above can be interpreted only as a statement that the two goals (retracing the journey and documenting it on film) were **compatible**. But for the error in judgement above Marjorie Lake, both goals might easily have been achieved. Quite independently, I find the suggestion (made elsewhere) that the goals were i**ncompatible** highly troubling, being as it is open to misinterpretation.

Gaps in my reading

I am dissatisfied with my effort because I was unable to access the following:

1. Moffatt's journal, either the original in the Dartmouth library, or the abridged version in 1959 *Sports Illustrated*.
2. Lanouette's 1959 comments in *Sports Illustrated.*
3. Grinnell's 1988 article in *Canoe*.

The paddling community as a whole would like to hear from the other survivors, but this is a lot to ask.

References

Grinnell1. George (James) Grinnell. *A Death on the Barrens. A true story*. Northern Books, Toronto (1996). Contains as well much personal material, plus comments by George Luste.

Grinnell2. *Canoe&Kayak*, July 2012, p 14. Pessl's reply: *Canoe&Kayak*, August 2012, p 12.

Grinnell3. *Canoe*, July 1988, p 18; perhaps *Canoe* was renamed *Canoe&Kayak*. I found a reference to this one (can't remember the context) but the Toronto Public Library did not have it.

Hodgins-Hoyle, Bruce W Hodgins and Gwyneth Hoyle. *Canoeing North into the Unknown. A record of River Travel: 1874 to 1974*. Natural Heritage / Natural History, Toronto (1994).

Kesselheim, Alan. *Canoe & Kayak,* May 2012, starting on p 46. The article is in part a review of Pessl's book. The web version http://www.canoekayak.com/canoe/57-years-ago/ omits some text.

Luste, George. "Why is the Moffatt tragedy discussed so much? Canoeists have drowned on trips in the north - after 1955 – on the Coppermine (Rocky Defile) – on the Missinaibi (Thunder House Falls), etc, but no discussion as far as I know. Why?" Private communication, November 2014. I thought this an insightful comment, worthy of inclusion here. My reply suggested, in effect, that group dynamics are responsible.

Moffatt, Arthur. An abridged version of his journal was published in *Sports Illustrated,* issues of 9 and 16 March 1959 (pp 68-76 and 80-88), together with "Joe Lanouette's account of the accident". The Toronto Public Library lists that volume as part of its collection but staff were unable to find it when I visited on 12 November. "The original, unabridged, journal resides in the Dartmouth Library." Source is **[Grinnell1]**.

Our understanding of the expedition would likely be advanced in the full journal were to become available.

Morse, Eric W. *Freshwater Saga. Memoirs of a Lifetime of Wilderness Canoeing in Canada*. University of Toronto Press (1987).

Pessl1. *The Fateful 1955 Dubawnt River Trip. Nastawgan*, Summer 2013 (Vol 70, No 2).
http://www.myccr.com/sites/default/files/storage/CCR%20pdf/Nastawgan/summer_13.pdf

Pessl2. *Barren Grounds. The story of the tragic Moffatt canoe trip*. Dartmouth College Press (2014). Most of the book is devoted to excerpts from the journals of Pessl and Franck. It contains also photographs (many in colour), an account of events following the tragedy, and an Epilogue.

Pessl3. Private communication.

Tyrrell, James W. *Through the Barren Lands: An Exploration Line of 3,200 Miles.* Geological Survey of Canada (1896). Fiches are available at the Toronto Public Library (Special Collections section, fifth floor).

Appendix A. Bugs

This and the following two appendices are intended to inform the reader of conditions in 1955.

"While within the forest we had been tormented both day and night by immense swarms of mosquitos, but now in the more open country, the black flies made it almost impossible to move about with any portions of our hands or faces uncovered". Source: **[Tyrrell],** as quoted in **[Pessl2]**.

Both **[Grinnell1]** and **[Pessl2]** mention the bugs; neither complains about them.

"… we did not have head nets …, but we did have some US Army surplus bug dope. It tended to sweat off readily and we didn't have enough for liberal use; we didn't use it very much. As a consequence we got bitten pretty badly at times. Our lymph nodes were sometimes swollen like large marbles." Source: **[Pessl3]**.

DEET became available for civilian use only in 1957 and bug shirts only in 1991, but headnets (often improvised) were used well before their use by **Morse** in 1962.

Some history regarding bug defences is provided in the following thread, to which readers are invited to contribute:

Source: *CCR thread on Historical use of defences used by paddlers against bugs.*

http://www.myccr.com/phpbbforum/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=43419

Appendix B. Floatation devices

PFDs were not available in 1955.

Life preservers/jackets, designed to keep the head of an unconscious person above water, had been available for many decades previously. But they are scarcely the thing to wear when trying to swim to shore after a dump; as well, they give a heads-up when you hit the water.

In summary, no suitable floatation device was commercially available in 1955.

Some history regarding such gear for paddlers is provided in the following thread, to which readers are invited to contribute:

Source: *CCR thread on Historical use of pfds by paddlers.*

http://www.myccr.com/phpbbforum/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=43412

Appendix C. Equipment

Two of the three tents (all from war surplus, I gather) were destroyed by wind. Pessl used a caribou hide for sleeping. He had a waterproof sailing parka, Lanouette a waterproof poncho, the others light-weight, semi-waterproof ski parkas. Sources: **[Pessl2]** and **[Pessl3].**

These days, we have "bombproof" tents (waterproof flys, bug screens, strong poles), thermarests, down sleeping bags (lightweight and warm), quick-dry clothing, dry bags, compression sacks, lightweight and almost indestructible paddles, lighter and tougher boats, freeze-dried and dehydrated food, bug shelters, bug coils, dry suits, wet suits, waterproof jackets and pants, emergency beacons, and many other items.

A personal comment

I much regret not having visited Moffatt's grave in 2003 and 2005.

Evening grub, L to R: George Grinnell, Bruce LeFavour, Joe Lanouette, Peter Franck (standing), Art Moffatt; Skip Pessl behind the camera.

On Monfwi's Trail: A Traditional Route to the Barrens

Story by John McInnes
Photos by John McInnes and Dwayne Wohlgemuth

1st rapid upstream of Mosher Lake, Wecho river.

Wilderness paddlers in most of southern Canada's popular canoeing area – Algonquin, Temagami, Quetico, Woodland Caribou, and Atikaki as examples – are almost invariably paddling routes developed over the centuries by aboriginal people and the explorers and traders who followed them. "North of 60" however, the situation is rather different. Many of the North's more popular and well-known rivers – the Nahanni and Mountain, flowing out of the Mackenzie Mountains, the Coppermine, Dubawnt, Thelon, Kazan, and Back, in the Barrens – have very limited traditions of aboriginal canoe use. Recall that when the Dene guided Hearne to the mouth of the Coppermine, they didn't paddle – they walked.

Small creek above Germaine Lake.

While most paddlers in the NWT are following trails blazed by the Royal Navy (or people looking for the Royal Navy), geologists, and adventurers, the north is not lacking in traditional aboriginal canoe routes. The canoe was as important in the forested Shield regions of the NWT as it was in southern Canada, and a network of established canoe routes was an important infrastructure component of the traditional aboriginal lifestyle.

Scenery, excitement, and recreation may be the attributes of a modern recreational canoe route, but a traditional route has one overwhelming need – a purpose. The route I will describe in this article – Monfwi's Trail – had perhaps the best of purposes: *ekwo* - caribou. It enabled people to access the caribou meat and hides on which their lifestyle depended. But before considering the trail itself, it is worth taking a moment to answer the question: who was Monfwi, and how did he get a canoe route named after him?

Monfwi, born in 1866, was by the early 20th century the leader – *k'awo*, or "boss"– of the "edge of the woods" regional group of the Tlicho (Dogrib) Dene, who traded into Ft. Rae on Marian Lake, an extension of the north arm of Great Slave Lake. In 1921, the leaders of the other Tlicho regional groups asked Monfwi to speak for them in treaty negotiations with the Canadian government. After extended negotiations, Monfwi signed Treaty 11 for the Dogrib in the late summer of 1921. During those negotiations, Monfwi drew a map illustrating

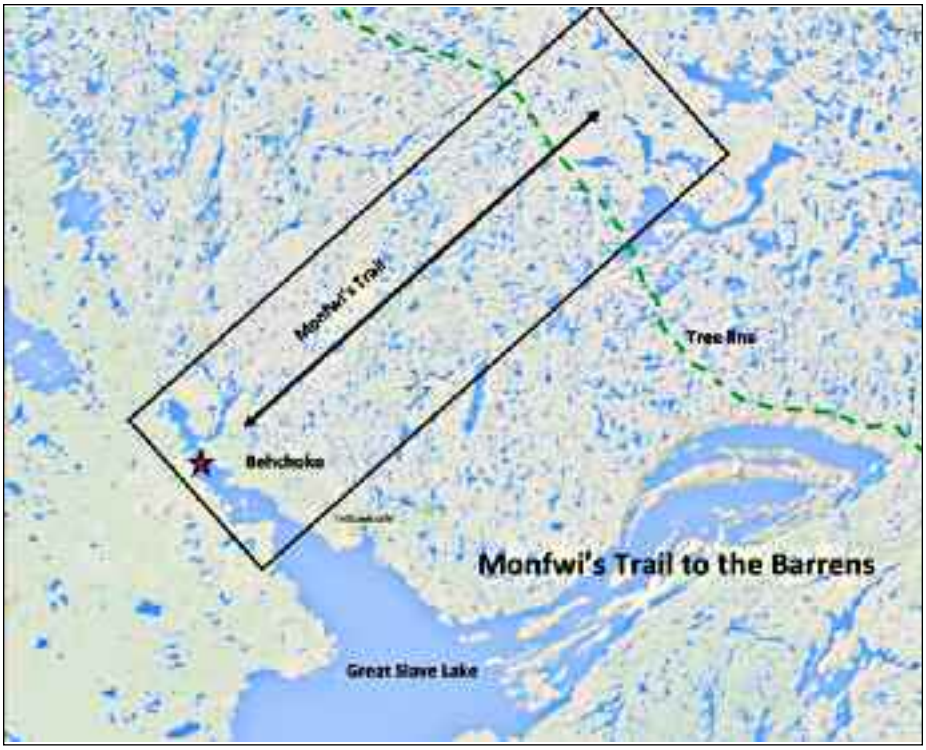
traditional Tlicho land use north of Great Slave Lake: that map became an important component of the contemporary Tlicho land claim settlement, signed in 2005. He continued as chief until his death in 1936.[1]

In describing the annual cycle of Tlicho life, prior to around 1960, June Helm wrote: "The prime excitement in August, however, is the fall caribou hunt."[2] In August, the caribou move in small bands towards the treeline northeast of Ft. Rae (later Rae-Edzo, now Behchoko) from their summer pastures on the tundra. Tlicho men gathered at Ft. Rae, divided into crews, and set out by canoe to meet the caribou at the treeline by the end of August. The timing was critical, because "only on the August skins is the hair right, 'not too thick and not too light,' for making furred caribou parkas."[3] From a successful hunt, each man would return with a bale of skins, a bale of dry meat, and perhaps some caribou marrow. The Tlicho prided themselves on being good travellers, starting early, travelling fast, trotting over the many portages, and sleeping little.

As well as Monfwi's trail (*K'witi t'so eto* in Tlicho[4]) there were other trails from Ft. Rae to treeline that were utilized for the fall hunt: the Snare River (*Deht'so gah eto*) and "small river" (*Deht'soaa K'e eto*) trails which led to Snare Lake (*Wekweeti*) and on to Winter Lake (*Bea Ti*), and the Barrenland trail (*Hoz'iideh eto*) which ascended the Emile River to treeline at Mesa Lake (*Gots'oka Ti*).

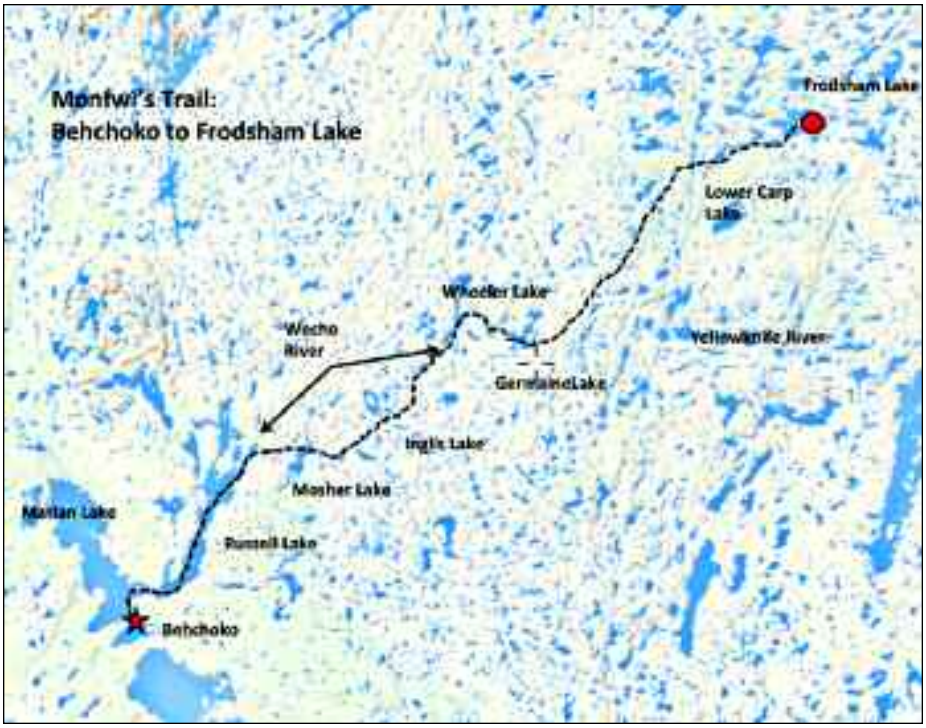
After around 1960, however, charter aircraft became the preferred transportation option for the fall caribou hunt. Flying was quicker and easier: the aircraft made finding caribou easier, and allowed fresh as well as dried meat to be brought back – an important benefit now that manufactured clothing had mostly replaced caribou skins. With this change, the old trails fell into disuse: while the major routes were still discernible through the 1980s, where fire had not obliterated them, they were well on their way to disappearing.

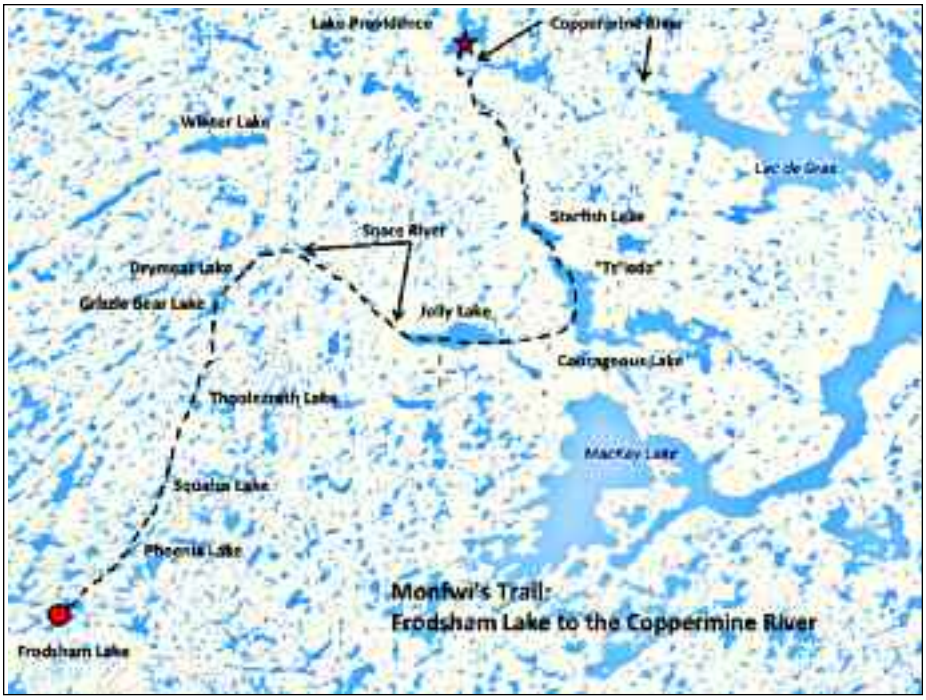
This trend was reversed in the mid-1990s. At that time the Tlicho, anxious to retain their traditions and pass them on to their youth, initiated the "Trails of Our Ancestors" program, which took Tlicho leaders, elders, and youth out to travel by



canoe on the traditional routes linking the Tlicho communities to one another and to the Barrenlands. Since the first trip in 1995, the program has become an annual one, and has covered all of the principal traditional routes in Tlicho territory. As a side benefit, the "rediscovery"of these routes has provided a great opportunity for recreational paddlers to explore some beautiful Shield country, and gain an appreciation for the hardiness and encyclopedic geographic knowledge of their Dene predecessors.

In describing Monfwi's trail, I am obviously not claiming to be its "discoverer" or even its "re-discoverer": simply a recreational paddler who enjoyed this ancient trail. I am indebted to John B. Zoe





of the Dogrib Treaty 11 Council and Tom Andrews, Territorial Archaeologist, for much of the information presented here. In fact, John B sketched the route on my maps for me on George Luste's kitchen table, after the 1999 Wilderness Canoe Symposium.

The Trail:

With both the name "Ft. Rae" and the HBC itself now gone, the modern traveller will begin his travels up the Monfwi trail from the community of Behchoko ("Big Knife Place") at the south end of Marian Lake (*?ihdaak'eti*, or "jackfish lake"), accessible by road from Yellowknife. After a short paddle, the route heads east through Russell Narrows into Russell Lake (*sahgoodawheto ti*, "bear shoulder lake"), and proceeds northeast through this large, island-studded but rather murky lake to Lajeunesse Bay and the mouth of the Wecho River (named for an important local chief, according to the NWT Gazetteer). These initial forty or so kilometres of flat water paddling are a gentle introduction to Monfwi's trail, but not really representative of the route that lies ahead.

Heading east and northeast up the Wecho, the route climbs steeply out of the shallow basin of Russell and Marian Lakes into rugged, rocky Shield country. From Lajeunesse Bay, seven portages are required before the paddler reaches Mosher Lake (*Daa'ts'iiti*), just ten kilometres upstream. More carries, one over a kilometre in length, are necessary to reach Inglis Lake. Above Inglis, the Wecho runs in part through a deep rocky valley, almost a canyon in places, where major rapids require a difficult portage through old burn. Some more recent travellers have bypassed this stretch by using an alternate route through five small lakes east of Inglis, rejoining the Wecho above this stretch.[5]

Above here, one more portage around a major rapid is made before the canoeist reaches Wheeler Lake (*Tliedli Ti*) and a welcome respite of nearly twenty kilometres of flat water paddling. On entering Wheeler, they have now covered 112 kilometres of Monfwi's trail, made somewhere between 16 and 19 portages, and gained nearly 100 metres in elevation from Russell Lake. Wheeler Lake is named for the American ethnologist, David E. Wheeler, who travelled in this area with the Tlicho just before the First World War.

From Wheeler Lake, Monfwi's trail leaves the Wecho River, continuing east up a small stream with two short portages to reach Germaine Lake, named for Wheeler's Tlicho guide. The eastern bay of Germaine does not look like a promising place from which to head northeast, with a high rock ridge guarding its shore: but the old Tlicho found a way. A portage of nearly a kilometre, steep at the start, and a second short carry take you to a small lake above Germaine's east shore. And a small steam – almost canal-like in places – draining into this lake from the north provides a route northwards.

By ascending this stream, and portaging through a series of small unnamed lakes, the canoeist reaches a final portage that takes him into Lower Carp Lake (*Dzimiti*), on the Yellowknife River. Lower Carp provides not only a reference point with a name – the first since Germaine – but another brief respite from portaging: 16 kilometres of uninterrupted paddling. The holiday is soon over, however.

From the east end of Lower Carp, Monfwi's route does not continue north on the Yellowknife River to treeline – the route followed by Franklin and Akaitcho in 1820. Rather it goes southeast via a short portage to a small lake and then up a shallow stream to Frodsham Lake – named after a type of chronometer used by surveyors in the area. From Frodsham a strenuous portage, likely just over a kilometre in length, climbs a rocky ridge and takes you to a chain of small lakes that lead north, paralleling the Yellowknife River on its east side.

On reaching Phoenix Lake, Monfwi's trail offers the paddler some easy going. The route north from Phoenix ascends a small unnamed stream through Squalus Lake and continues north to Thoolezzeth Lake (*Dodiidaeti*), named for one of Franklin's Yellowknife guides. From the south end of Phoenix to the north end of Thoolezzeth is 55 kilometres, in which distance only three short portages are required. A great beach campsite in the north end of Squalus adds to the charm of this section. Grayling fishermen should be sure to test the swift waters at Squalus' outlet.

As you paddle north in Thoolezzeth, the trees start to thin out, and you begin to anticipate the tundra ahead. The trail leaves Thoolezzeth near its north end, with perhaps the toughest portage on the route: this carry wanders over hummocky muskeg, crosses three rocky ridges, and descends through thick bush to a small unnamed lake. It's about 1.6 "straight line" kilometres on the map,

probably closer to 2 kilometres on foot, and a tiring exercise. But at its end, you've almost reached your goal: the small lake you put into is the first of a chain of three, and from the third lake an easy portage takes you into Grizzle Bear Lake, on the edge of the Barrens. Monfwi's old trail has delivered you to treeline: you have travelled about 290 kilometres from Behchoko, made between 46 and 49 portages, and gained 240 metres in elevation. "Grizzle Bear" is the name given to the lake by Franklin, whose guides had warned him about encountering barren ground grizzlies in the area: to the Tlicho it is *Diga Ti* – "Wolf Lake." Pick your favourite carnivore.

On the edge of the Barrens, Grizzle Bear Lake could be the "final destination" for caribou hunters, modern or traditional. In the fall of 1999 the Tlicho established a fly-in community hunt camp near Grizzle Bear, its location chosen first by analyzing the movements of radio-collared animals on satellite maps and then confirmed by air reconnaissance. But as archaeologist Tom Andrews noted[6], this modern technology really only paralleled traditional Tlicho knowledge of caribou movements. Visiting the camp, they quickly located two archaeological sites, containing an old tent ring, a grave, and the remnants of three birchbark canoes, as well as stone flakes indicating potentially much older use.

If Grizzle Bear is not your final destination, Monfwi's trail can lead you further into the Barrens. From the north end of Grizzle Bear a short portage leads to Drymeat Lake, and from there an obvious portage route runs northeast to the Snare River above Winter Lake. Ascending the Snare – here a series of small lakes and ponds joined by shallow, boulder-strewn stream sections – you travel southeast to a final portage over a low, boggy height of land into the open waters of Jolly Lake (*?ezoti*, or "ghost lake"). Jolly Lake lies in the headwaters of the Lockhart River, which flows east and then south, in a great arc, into the east end of Great Slave Lake near Reliance. On reaching Jolly Lake, the canoeist is now some 340 kilometres and 70 portages from their starting point in Behchoko.

From Jolly Lake, the Snake River flows eastward through some attractive

Portage out of Frodsham Lake.

sandy country into Courageous Lake. Courageous was known to the Tlicho as *?ewaanit'iiti* – "lake of a stretch of sand", doubtless for the dramatic esker which runs eastward along the lake. The area around Courageous Lake was known as good country for caribou hunting. A number of large lakes here – Courageous, MacKay Lake (*?nodiikahti*), and Lac de Gras (*?ek'ati*) among them – channelled the migrating caribou through narrow stretches of land between them (*tata*) where the Tlicho hunters would await them.

The area around the north and east arms of Courageous Lake was known as *"Ts'ieda"*. Small patches of forest were found here, making it a good area to camp for those Tlicho families who did not return to Behchoko immediately after the fall caribou hunt, but stayed through freeze-up to trap on the Barrens, returning to Behchoko by dog team for Christmas or Easter celebrations.

From Courageous, a final branch of Monfwi's trail can take you north across another height of land to the Coppermine River (*?ek'atidehti*) and the Arctic watershed. This route follows a chain of lakes from Courageous' northern tip, the first and only named lake being Starfish Lake or *Tl'okedaati* – "walking grass lake". It reaches the Coppermine just below Desteffany Lake, just above where the river bends north to flow into Lake Providence. On reaching Lake

Rapids below Wheeler Lake, Wecho River.

Providence, the canoeist is now nearly 450 kilometres from Behchoko, having made 85 – 88 portages along the way.

Travelling Monfwi's trail, even with the best of modern equipment, is a challenge for today's recreational canoeists: at least, it was for me. It generates a real admiration for the old hunters who went up (and down) it each fall. But even more, it speaks eloquently to the incredibly detailed knowledge of their territory that the old Tlicho had. The route is far from obvious, even on modern maps: its original discovery and refinement must be a story of many years and much effort.

I'd be glad to correspond with other paddlers interested in this route, or any of the other traditional routes north of Great Slave Lake

Footnotes:

1. A short biography of Monfwi can be found at: http://www.tlicho.ca/sites/default/files/monfwi.pdf
2. Helm, June, The People of Denedeh, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2000, p.64
3. Ibid., p.64
4. The Tlicho place names and terms used here have been taken, eclectically, from the sources listed in the References. Spelling is not always consistent between sources. For more information please see those sources. "Official" place names are from the Gazetteer of the Northwest Territories, also cited in the References.
5. For information about this bypass route, I am indebted to John Lee, Wendy Stephenson, and Dwayne Wohlgemuth of Yellowknife.
6. Helm, op.cit., p.71

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Print:

1. The People of Denedeh, June Helm, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2000
2. Trails of Our Ancestors, John B. Zoe, ed. Tlicho Community Services Agency, Behchoko, 2007

On Line:

1. Gazetteer of the Northwest Territories, http://www.pwnhc.ca/research/publications/gazetteer
2. "The Dog-Rib Indian and His Home," David E. Wheeler, reprinted from The Bulletin of The Geographical Society of Philadelphia, Vol. XII, No. 2, April,1914: https://openlibrary.org/books/OL25399107M/The_Dog-Rib_Indian_and_his_home
3. The main Tlicho web page: http://www.tlicho.ca
4. "The Habitat of Dogrib Traditional Territory: Place Names as Indicators of Biogeographical Knowledge" http://www.enr.gov.nt.ca/sites/default/files/wkss_dogrib_territory_place_names_2001.pdf
5. "Tlicho Use and Knowledge of ?ewaanit'iiti": http://tlicho.ca/sites/defaults/files/ewaanitiiti%2010.03.2014.pdf

Missing the River Junction: A Lethal Possibility

Story and Photos by Bob Henderson

In Canadian travel history there are a bunch of infamous wrong turns or missed junctions. The 1903 Hubbard expedition's wrong move to paddle upstream on the Susan River, rather than the Naskapi River, ultimately leading to Hubbard's death by starvation comes to mind.

Another missed junction was Mary Schaffer's horseback expedition of 1907. Her mistake – not seeing the Pobokton Pass route to her ultimate goal of Maligne Lake in Alberta. No loss of life here, rather a return the next summer with a local map from Sampson Beaver. Those are just two historical examples. I have been to the latter area exploring the nuances of what was missed and how it might have happened. The former – the classic Labrador tale – I long to experience and trust I will before too long. Wait! I long to experience the geography, NOT the hardships and the mistakes.

Another classic for the imagination is the missed river junction on the winter dog sled trip North-West Mounted Police (N.W.M.P.) between Fort McPherson and Dawson City (1910). This one involves the junction of the Little Wind River and Forrest Creek in the Peel River watershed of Yukon Territory. We travelled with canoe tripping friends last summer (2014) down the Wind River, stopping for a long lingering lunch at the Wind and Little Wind junction just downstream from the critical missed turn. This mistake lead to the death of the four N.W.M.P. men by exhaustion and starvation in February 1911, and a subsequent follow-up rescue mission. First of all, their story, and then our story.

The Dawson-Fort McPherson 764 km dog sled patrol and mail dispatch run was, by 1910, routine enough, yet it was still *the* major winter run for the men so remotely stationed in the Canadian North. Inspector Francis Fitzgerald and his guide Sam Carter were well-travelled. Fitzgerald had been stationed at Herschel island, a whaling station off the Arctic coast, from 1903-1910. He had been a part of the 1897 team ordered to survey a route from

A cold, wet summer in the Yukon meant for glorious light in the mountains.

Edmonton to the Yukon River, given the potential policing turmoil of the Klondike gold rush and the Canadian government's desire to have an all-Canadian route. My point: Fitzgerald was a much seasoned and notable presence in the North. Indeed, Fitzgerald had been honoured to be selected to travel to England for the coronation of King George V, scheduled for July 1911. Leaving Fort McPherson was the beginning of a very long trip half way across the globe.

Four men left Fort McPherson on December 21, 1910 with three dog teams. They were the first group to start this patrol here, rather than the usual starting point at Dawson City, and by all reports they were behind schedule from the outset. Temperatures were particularly harsh. Negative fifty degrees Celsius was common and on January 6th, 1911 the men recorded negative one hundred and ten degrees Celsius with wind chill factored in. On January 12, 1911, the Forrest Creek trail was missed as the men, who had successfully turned off the Wind River three days earlier, now continued up the dead end route further up the Little Wind River. In all, nine days and close to 160 km were spent off the trail while looking for the correct route. By the time they turned back to Fort McPherson (January 18, 1911) they were in survival mode. It was no longer a routine sledding run. They killed a dog that day to feed the other dogs. By January 31, Fitzgerald reports in his journal that night with an evening temperature of sixty-two degrees below zero:

"Going heavy, travelled part of the time on our old trail, but it was filled in. Skin peeling off our faces and parts of the body and lips all swollen and split. I suppose this is caused by feeding on dog meat. Everybody feeling the cold very much, for want of proper food."

Fitzgerald's diary ends February 5, 1911.

The rescue mission lead by Corporal Dempster from Dawson City followed the correct route – down the Yukon to Twelve Mile River, up river here to Blackstone River, then overland to the Hart River, then a series of creeks to the Little Wind and Wind Rivers to the Peel River and Fort McPherson. The Black–stone, Hart and Wind/Peel Rivers are all canoe tripping routes today. The historical trail also crosses the Dempster highway.

The view (mind you winter, Dec 1910) the dog sled patrol would have seen. Here they turn west for a series of creeks en route to the Yukon River.

On March 21, 1911 the rescuers of 'The Lost Patrol' found the bodies of the junior officers Kinney and Taylor on the Peel River. They had likely reached that spot on the 10th or 11th of February. Continuing by dog team a further 16 km downriver on the Peel River brought the rescuers to the bodies of Fitzgerald and Carter. They were only 32 km from Fort McPherson.

There are always explanations and unanswered questions for a trip gone wrong, both then and now. A rushed departure from Fort McPherson likely meant provisions and gear were not adequately reviewed. The party had only one gun, no snares and had commented on sub-par and light food provisions.

The rush might have reflected the anxiety Fitzgerald had about possibly missing the July coronation in England, due to delays all along an epic itinerary which would have involved Dawson City to Edmonton to Montreal to Halifax to London travel across the Atlantic.

Then again, there was quite a competition among the patrol men. Fitzgerald, in his 40's, was known to all as a "Northern Man". This might have been his last major northern patrol. Perhaps (I think likely) he wished to attempt a new record among the men for the fewest number of days on the trail. He had a reputation to measure up to. Going light and going fast might have been a misguided motivation to external forces. Since before the Gold Rush days, local guides had been hired to guide previous patrols. Not this time though. Special Constable Sam Carter was to serve as guide. He was a twenty-two year veteran of the "force" but had only been on this route once before (four years earlier and going in the opposite direction).

All these explanations for mistakes in planning and thinking are easily made today as well. It is always wise to keep stories and lessons like this wrong turn (the true definitive error here) of "The Lost Patrol" in mind as one travels today. Finally, of course, if they had swallowed their pride and turned back sooner, they would've likely survived.

Amazingly, they almost did. Thirty-two km short, but thirty-two km impossible to win.

Our story as Wind River canoe trippers is typical; pleasurable travel days with mountain views, good fishing and hiking and, in the summer of 2014, more than the average number of days under a tarp given winds and rain and even new snow on the mountain tops. Hardship: I think NOT, at least on a relative scale, not compared to the Lost Patrol by a long shot. But one might remember that these were guys who didn't wake up on a mattress with central heating in their houses for much of the year. These were guys who were accustomed to low provisions, crazy long days on the trail and "years" in the north away from family. Still, the retrieved journals from the fatal Lost Patrol tell a chilling tale which starts with the bravado of routine-like challenge and ends in a fatal death march. I always wonder about the psyche of such men in such times of duress. When in the trip did the realizations of routine adventure shifted to misadventure and then to starvation death march.

These thoughts consumed me as I told the story to my paddling chums at the Wind and Little Wind junction. The thing is, however, I thought I was at the missed junction. I had read the Lost Patrol literature (see references) several months prior to our trip's departure. In fact, the Little Wind/Forrest Creek is the true wrong turn, upriver by about sixty kilometers from where we were. I can't explain my brain freeze on that one. I can only say, I am not, or have not been, prone to such goof ups. Back on the Wind River, at our lingering river junction lunch spot, Jay Thibert and I surveyed the river junction. We had to imagine not only winter but also upriver travel. Three dog teams and smooth river ice is much slower travel than the speedy Wind River downriver current. 'These guys had lots of time to see these dominant bulging hills that are unique to this part of the river", we'd thought. I remember Jay saying, "It must have been a low level foggy day". That seemed the best explanation. We remain confused how this obvious junction could be missed even given Carter's first time going this direction.

Now we know the simple answer is, 'this wasn't the missed turn". The critical junction up the Little Wind River likely isn't so obvious. A bonehead brain freeze on my part, yet does it really matter? Here we were, still on the trail of historic dog sledding patrol run, literally and imaginatively. We were still able to feel a connection to this story that, from this junction on, would guide my idle moments in wonder.

Lower downriver on the Peel River, one can see the broad valley of Mountain Creek. This insignificant waterway of the Peel River is significant as a historic trail. Here, travellers followed a shortcut route up the Mountain Creek to "the big portage" leading to the Trail River that joins the Peel River again close to Fort McPherson. The shortcut takes a direct route and avoids rougher water on the big bend on the Peel River. It was a treat to see the grand sweep of the country that is Mountain Creek – a macro view of the route seen from the Peel River. It is worth noting that this historic route continued to be used until 1921. After the 1911 tragedy, major efforts were made to improve trail markings for the route.

I'm told there is a brand of outdoor travel tourism now known as "salvage tourism". Here, a group goes to see an area soon, or potentially soon, to be forever changed for some reason. The Wind River may be one such location if the current Yukon government has its way in reneging on land claims and a ban on mining. This gem of the Peel watershed, and all of the watershed really, is in for a long stand of environment, economy and social justice and land claim debate. I was not on the Wind River for salvage tourism inclinations (though did take part in a silent vigil outside the Yukon courthouse one day), rather one might call my fancy for the dreaded route mistake gone bad as "wrong turn tourism".

Perhaps because I've made a few … wrong turns … , or perhaps because the resultant hardships of an apparent simple error are usually so great, I remain intrigued by such places – junctions of doom and gloom you might say. When one stands at a missed junction or wrong turn, the empathy for the former travelers can seem palpable. It is eerie, gripping and strangely comic (in a macabre way). What can I say, when sitting in a canoe, on a horse or dog sled *at*, or in this case *near*, a significant junction with history, you've got to love those moments!

Hiking from the Wind River is a must.

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Where it is…

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