

*Trees had grown only a couple of feet in over 100 years in rugged sub-arctic climate*

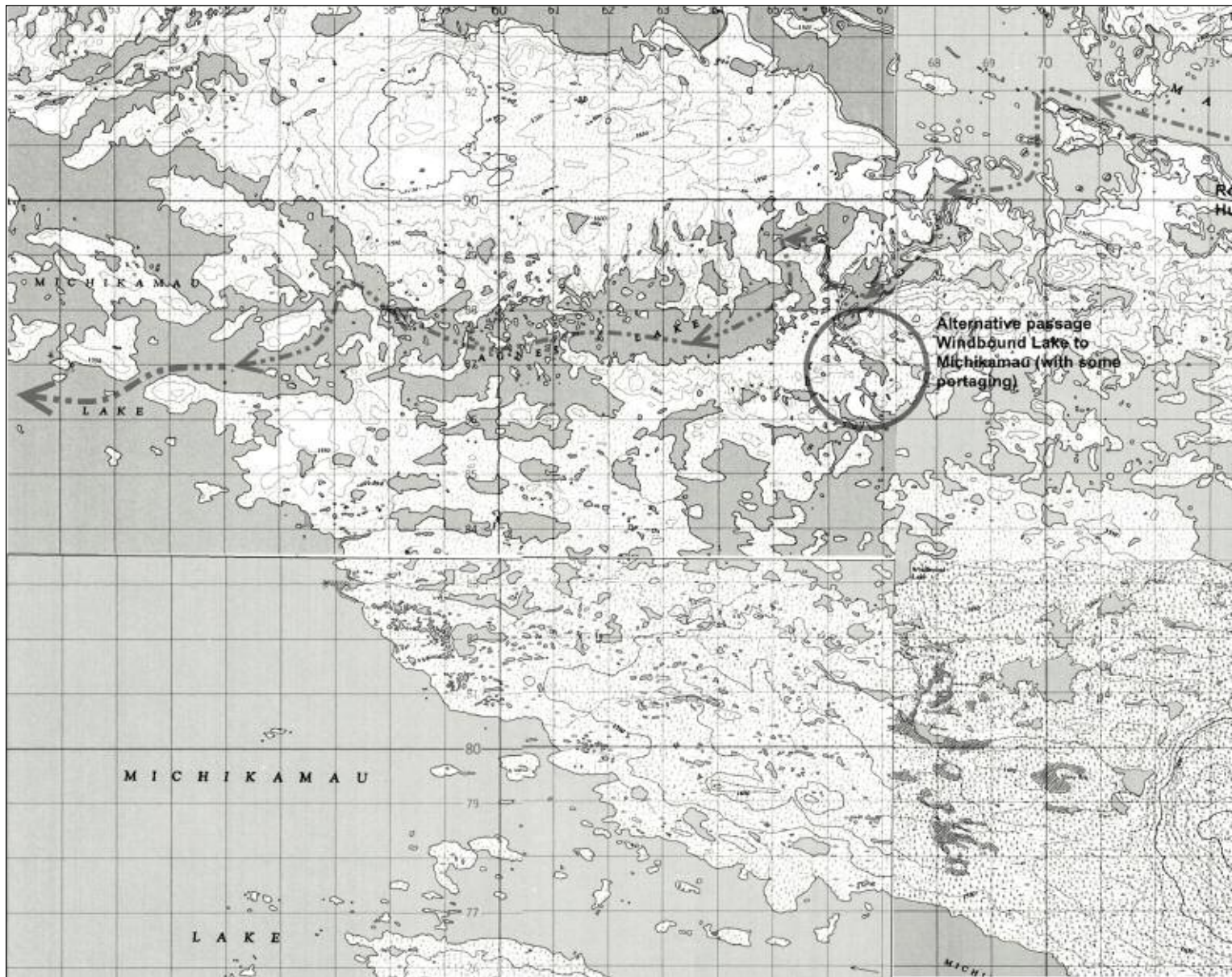
## ***Excerpt from Letters to the Granddaughter*** **The Story of Dillon Wallace of the Labrador Wild** **Story by Philip Schubert**

Dear Amy,  
The boulder with a bronze plaque on it is in a shady nook a few feet north of the Susan River where two streams join to form the Susan about 55 kilometres above Grand Lake. The travellers in

1903 christened the second of the two streams coming from the southwest as "Goose Creek." The bronze plaque was brought in by helicopter in 1975 by Rudy Mauro and your uncle, Dillon Wallace III. Rudy had long been fasci-

nated by the events of 1903, 1905, and 1913 and your grandfather's role in them, and enlisted your uncle's help in 1973 in searching by helicopter for the boulder where Leonidas Hubbard died the loneliest death imaginable.





Your grandfather returned in 1913 for the last time to Labrador, with a bronze plaque, which he and his team lost in a rapid while attempting to ascend the Beaver River. They finally reached the boulder on foot without the plaque and Dillon wrote an inscription on it in white lead paint. Rudy and your Uncle Dillon found a few letters remaining on the boulder from 1913 and thus were sure of having found the same boulder in 1973. The plaque they attached in 1975 was a duplicate of the one from 1913.

On the fifth day of my hike to the boulder in 2003, I arrived at the coordinates given to me by a helicopter pilot in 1999. I had travelled up Grand Lake from North West River, up the Naskaupi River,

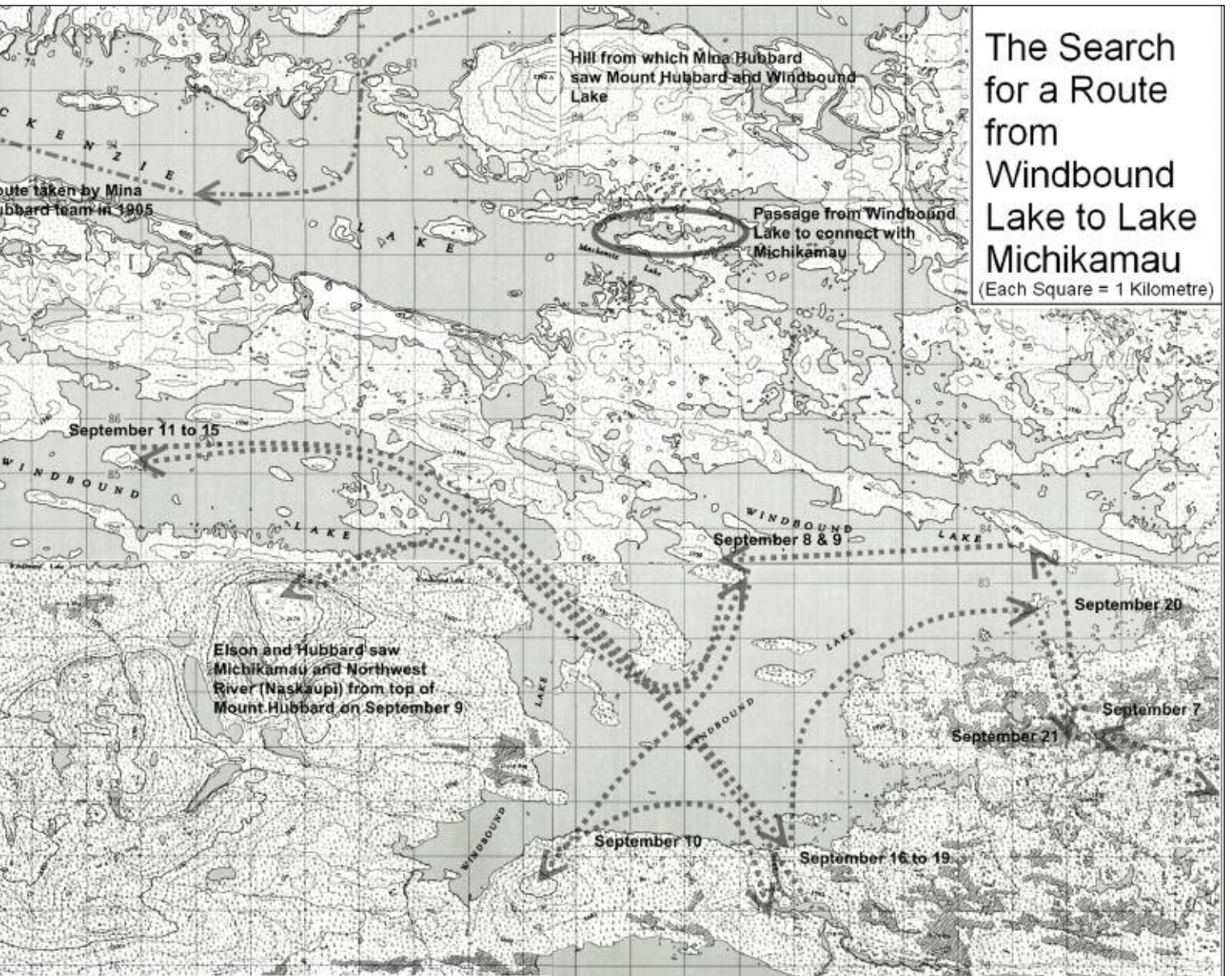
and then lined 18 kilometres up the Red Wine River. From there I climbed out of the Red Wine Valley to the highlands and hiked 23 kilometres overland. The location was immediately downstream of two streams coming together, one coming from the west and the other from the northwest. Was the one from the west Goose Creek? If so, where was the boulder with the bronze plaque, which the folks in North West River assured me was there?

I searched the area to no avail and with the sun low in the sky, set up tent in the one flat area to be found. I reviewed the back half of your grandfather's book, *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* (I had torn the book in two and only brought the second

half in order to reduce weight) as well as a photocopy of George Elson's trip notes from Mina Hubbard's book, *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*. The descriptions coincided. Hubbard's place of death must be where I was. I then consulted my topographical map and realized that if the coordinate for longitude given to me by the pilot should have included some seconds, the location would be farther west. I concluded that a trip to the Hubbard Rock by helicopter did not need to worry about seconds of longitude and with this went to sleep for the night, knowing what I would do the next morning.

Sure enough, the next morning, about 400 metres farther east, there was the





The Search for a Route from Windbound Lake to Lake Michikamau (Each Square = 1 Kilometre)

boulder with the plaque just visible through the black spruce as I walked along the north side of the Susan. A short distance farther west, two more streams joined, one from the west and the second, Goose Creek, from the southwest.

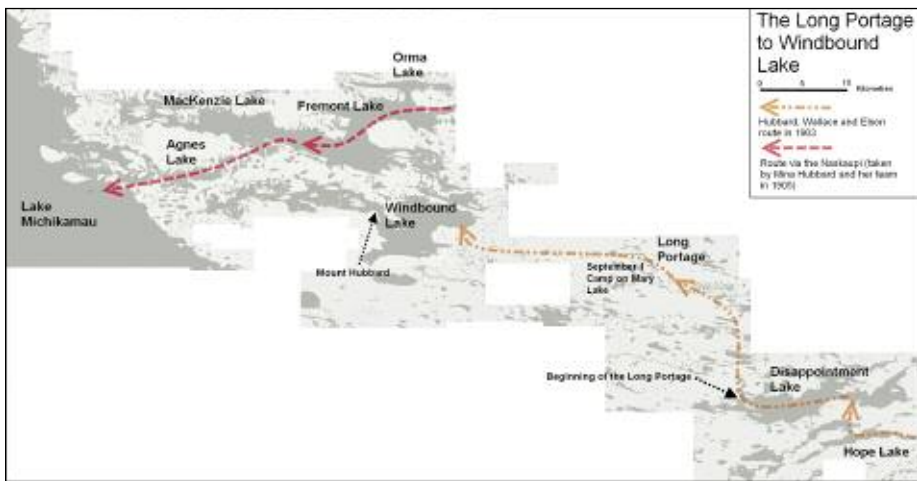
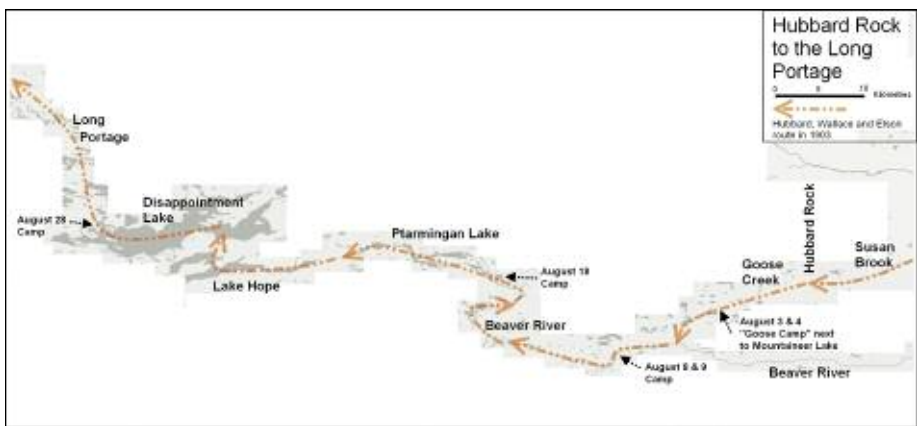
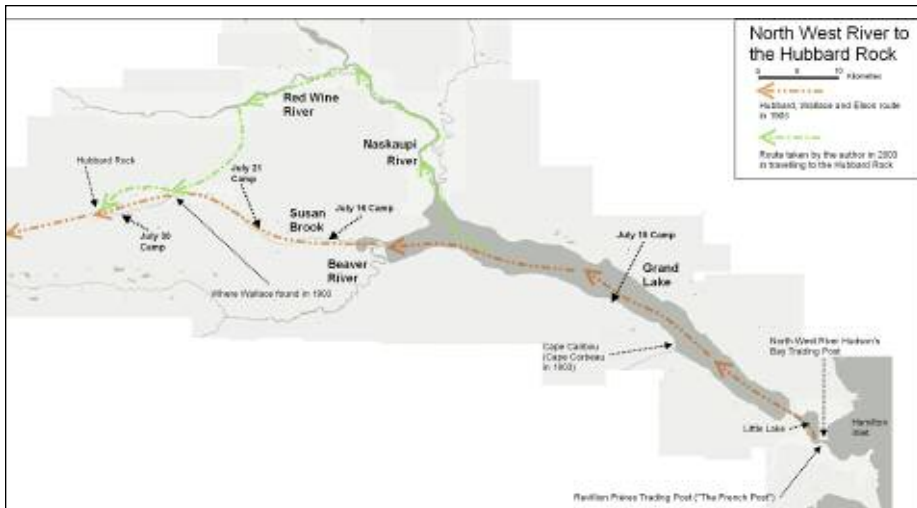
Late in October 1903, Dillon Wallace and George Elson were both “near their finish” as George describes it in his trip notes. George and Dillon had separated 20 kilometres downstream from where I was, with George continuing his hike for life in the direction of Grand Lake and Dillon staggering back in the direction of the tent and Leonidas Hubbard at the boulder. George had managed to find moldy flour under knee-deep snow which had gotten wet on the way in and been

thrown away. Dillon was returning with three kilograms of it, he and George both partially blinded from smoke from having spent a night in the pouring rain and sleet, and attempting to warm themselves with a smoldering fire.

Dillon finally arrived at the two streams, one of which he thought must be Goose Creek. No tent was to be seen however. The country looked totally different under the thick blanket of snow that had fallen since George and he had left Leonidas. Dillon finally concluded that he had probably gone too far east as there are many streams entering the Susan, and turned back downstream. He had been struggling east for five days at that point after leaving George. He was

afraid that a rescue team might have arrived at the tent and missed him as George had told him to expect a team within five days if George found trappers at the end of Grand Lake.

In fact the rescue team, which arrived after 10 days, found that Wallace had camped 200 metres downstream of the tent and had gone no higher. (In Wallace’s words “...I crossed a brook, frozen and covered with snow, that I felt must be the one near our tent...I staggered into the spruce growth and there came upon the same brook I have previously mentioned as crossing. Near its bank I made a night fire. That fire was within two hundred yards of the tent. Perhaps it is just as well that I did not know it.”) It seems that my



last camp before finding the boulder and plaque was in the same location in the one spot with enough room to lie down, me being equally convinced that one of the two streams must be Goose Creek.

Dillon, Leonidas, and George on their way in started up Goose Creek on day 16 of their trip, already concerned at the rapidity with which they were drawing on their store of food. Goose Creek received

its name thanks to their concerns being temporarily alleviated through garnering four geese in one go for their larder. The Naskaupi River and then its supposed tributary, the Northwest River, on A.P. Low's map approximately follows the direction of the Susan River and Goose Creek seemed like a logical extension. Days later, after crossing Mountaineer and Elson lakes they discovered the "Big

River" running to the west which they decided must in fact be the Northwest River leading to Lake Michikamau.

A rugged canoe trip involves a period of hardening of the participants, and Dillon and Leonidas for the first time felt themselves feeling great and ready for the challenges in front of them. Both trip journals, in particular Dillon's, comment frequently on the beauty of the landscape. Labrador, under good weather conditions, is a magnificent place to be. Dillon, even under the most dire conditions, continued to comment on superb sunrises and sunsets and the pristine beauty of the rivers, lakes, and mountains.

A short distance down the Big River, which was in fact the Beaver River, they succeeded in shooting their one and only caribou and if there was a golden stage to their trip, this was it. They had no immediate worries about food and seemed to be on a river running to Lake Michikamau. Michikamau would in turn lead them to the George River running north to Ungava Bay, with the hope of seeing the caribou migration and meeting the Naskaupi Indians along the way.

Then to their chagrin, a mountain range hove into view and it finally became clear that the Big River rose on the eastern watershed of this range. Finally, after extensive exploration, there was no choice but to portage over the range to the other side. There, to their relief, they encountered a series of lakes heading west (lakes Ptarmigan and Hope). Nevertheless, after further exploration, it was clear that the most westerly part of Lake Hope was not an arm of the huge Michikamau, and by this time they had noted a much larger lake (Lake Disappointment) a mile or so to the north, which went far more to the west than Lake Hope.

When safely back in North West River, Dillon learned that the Beaver River and Lake Hope had in fact constituted a route to Michikamau used occasionally by the Innu. The route passed via the Metchin River, which runs out of the more northerly of the two western arms of Lake Hope. The Metchin River runs southwest via a chain of lakes and then swings south to the Churchill River. The Innu would continue west to Michikamau via more lakes and short portages from



the point where the Metchin River turns south.

Dillon, Leonidas and George had portaged to Lake Disappointment from a bay of Lake Hope involving a distance of less than a mile. They could see the more northerly west arm of Lake Hope but did not see the Metchin River. Their portage was east of two rivers, which drain Lake Disappointment into Lake Hope and they only discovered these two rivers on their return trip. Dillon was therefore not surprised to discover in North West River that there was a Metchin River in turn draining Lake Hope. In his book, *Lure of the Labrador Wild*, he names the arm of Lake Hope leading to the Metchin River, as Lost Trail Lake.

An intrepid team of Americans, Troy Gipps, Jim Niedbalski, and Brad Bassi in 2003 retraced the 1903 trip up to this point but wisely chose to go down the Metchin River and then portage through a number of smaller lakes to the Smallwood Reservoir, which now covers Lake Michikamau. Here they were joined by a fourth team member, Caroline Scully, before heading east and north on the Smallwood Reservoir and continuing down the George River to Ungava Bay.

Leonidas, George, and Dillon searched the western end of Disappointment and found no outlet. It was now August 28, they had already been on the trail for 44 days and fall was definitely in the air. They were carefully husbanding their limited stores of food and were mainly living on the fish that they caught, their one caribou largely exhausted.

Most teams would have turned around at this point, but Leonidas could not bear the thought of returning to his editor seemingly empty handed, his editor a brutal man who had crossed 3,200 kilometres of arctic on foot, risking his life and the lives of those with him. Leonidas was also an incurable optimist and wedded to the ideals of his favourite poet Kipling (“a man’s game”). Dillon was not insensitive to the ideals of American manhood either and was totally loyal to the man who had befriended him at the darkest moment in his life.

George also had a highly developed sense of loyalty, which he demonstrated time and again during the course of his



*First view of Hubbard Rock by the author in 2003*

life. He, more than the rest of them, must have fully realized the huge risk they were running, but did not object when the decision was taken to beat overland in a north-westerly direction. Initially they decided to abandon their canoe, with the hope that they would be able to hike to a meeting with the Naskapi Indians and the caribou migration, re-equip, and travel by sled at freeze-up. They quickly found their route barred by lakes and ponds, and realized that they had no choice but to portage their canoe.

Thus began the Long Portage, a total

of 65 backbreaking kilometres, occasionally eased by a few lakes and ponds. Intense work like this requires that fat be an important part of a diet. Fish cannot provide this. The only possibility would have been wild fowl like geese and ducks, or caribou. It is hard to understand why they had chosen to equip themselves with two rifles and two 22 calibre pistols. A rational choice would have been a single rifle in the case they were lucky enough to come across caribou and a shotgun for wild fowl. They had discarded their stock of lard early in their struggle up the



*Plaque glued in place (plus container for messages from future visitors). Left Robert Irwin, right the author*





*River just below where they left the Beaver River in 1903*

Susan. In the absence of enough fat in the diet under these conditions, the body begins consuming flesh and muscles. I remember my first 30-day trip where I did not have an additional source of fat to add to my freeze-dried regime. I began to

wonder at my shadow, at how skinny my neck had started to seem. It began to be hard to stay warm at night, and I was having to wear more and more clothing before climbing into my sleeping bag.

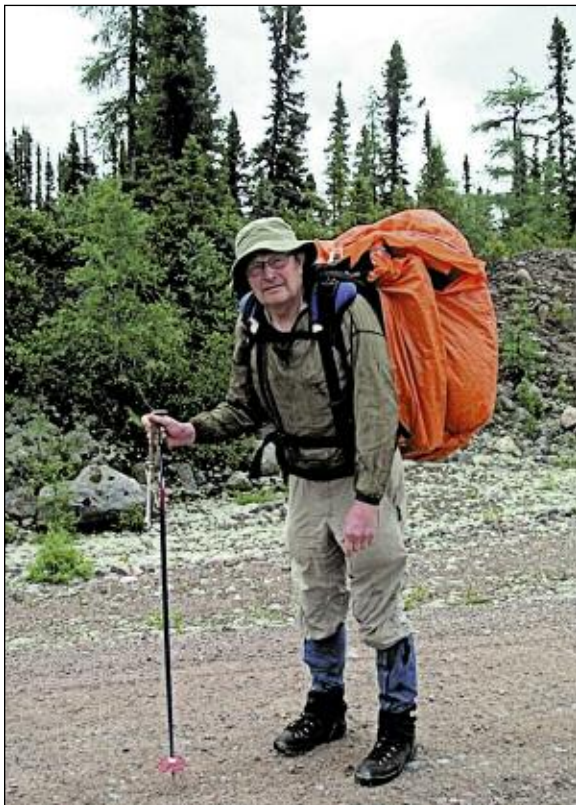
Finally on day 55 they reached the “big water” which they had spied from a small hill some days earlier. Windbound Lake was the final puzzle they were to be faced with. It is a large lake and in places is a maze of islands. It in fact connects to Mackenzie Lake through a narrow passage behind several islands. Mackenzie is part of the headwaters of the Naskaupi River coming from Lake Michikamau. It would be a challenge to find the passage, which might not have been there under low-water conditions, even with the topographical maps made of the area after World War II, without having access to today’s GPS technology. The team passed six kilometres to the south of the passage.

A second possible access might have been at the extreme western end of Windbound Lake through a series of connected ponds leading to Agnes Lake, Agnes

comprising the first stage of the headwaters of the Naskaupi River. It likely involved a few short portages or lift-overs and one had to get past another maze of islands in Windbound Lake in order to reach this passage. If they could have gotten far enough west on Windbound Lake, they might have heard the rapids north of them in the different sections of Agnes Lake. They were never closer than 11 kilometres to this area. They knew Lake Michikamau lay a few miles to the west, after Leonidas and George climbed Mount Hubbard, but could see no connection. The autumnal gales for which Labrador is infamous had arrived and for days the team could not venture out on the lake. The Naskaupi Indians had a well-justified fear of the wind on Lake Michikamau at this time of year, and would go on lengthy portages to avoid risking their lives on it.

Mackenzie and Agnes lakes are now submerged by the Smallwood Reservoir as is Lake Michikamau. The reservoir was created as part of the Churchill Falls hydroelectric project in the late 1960s. To my surprise however, Windbound Lake is still largely there, although now labled as part of the Smallwood Reservoir as it has been partially invaded by it. Robert Irwin, a fellow Hubbard and Wallace aficionado, and I explored it by canoe in 2009. We ascended the hill climbed by George and Mina Hubbard in 1905 from which they observed the mountain climbed by George and her ‘laddie,’ Leonidas, in 1903. Robert and I could only imagine her feelings as we stood there.

We did not make it to Mount Hubbard as we were scared of getting windbound by a weather system, which Robert had learned by satellite phone was on its way in. Even with topographical maps and a GPS, the navigating was tricky as we wended our way back through the maze of islands to where Robert had parked his van on the Orma Dike road. A few miles south of there, the road crosses the Long Portage traversed by the team on September 5 and 23, 1903. Robert and I were not to be denied however. In 2011 we returned and in a canoe trip lasting a week, safely crossed the big water and found our way through the maze of islands to Hubbard Mountain. We placed a



*Author leaving from Orma Dike Road for attempt down The Long Portage*

granite plaque on the summit, commemorating Leonidas' and George's only view of Lake Michikamau.

Leonidas had finally decided to turn back as of September 15, day 62. He rationalized that the caribou migration on the George River and a meeting with the Naskapi Indians, on which they had placed great hopes for restoring their store of food and equipping themselves with winter clothing, would now be over. Leonidas had also decided that he in fact had enough material for a "bully story," in spite of everything.

At this point they had two pounds of flour, 18 pounds of pea meal, less than a pint of rice and a half pound of bacon. They were blocked for several more days by wind and only made it off the lake as of September 21.

The route back retraced the route in, each man slowly being ground down as the fish started to bite less and less due to the cold. Food was limited to the odd duck and partridge and on one or two occasions, a goose. Leonidas failed more quickly than the rest, his bouts of vomiting and diarrhea becoming more and more frequent, Dillon wondering after the fact if it might have been a result of having had typhoid fever a couple of years before. In an effort to stay warm at night, they began sleeping together "spoon style," a huge compromise for adults to make, especially men.

On October 14, day 91, they exited the Big River and hiked in the direction of Goose Creek and the Susan River. At this stage it had taken all three of them to carry the canoe on portages and finally they had been reduced to dragging it. Thus the canoe was abandoned. George had suggested abandoning everything except for blankets and pistols and heading as quickly as possible for Grand Lake. By the time they reached the Susan River where Leonidas failed completely, they realized that he was absolutely right.

George's notes prepared for Mina Hubbard's *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*, as well as Wallace's book *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, say the team debated whether to stay on the Beaver or not, with George and Dillon in favour of staying on it. The trip journals by Leonidas and Dillon make no mention of this.

The trappers later told George and



*Crossing from Lake Disappointment to Lake Hope*

Dillon that if they had stayed on the Beaver instead of leaving it for the Susan, in about two days of paddling they would have emerged in front of Allan Blake's cabin, the cabin arrived at by George after his struggle out. If staying on the Beaver was ever seriously considered, the consensus today is that Leonida's decision to return to the Susan likely saved two of the three lives. Dillon likely realized this after attempting to ascend the Beaver in 1913. Very heavy rapids from the point where they left the Beaver to halfway to Grand Lake make this stretch of the Beaver non-navigable.

Having taken on some big challenges in retracing the 'saga,' including the Innu Portage bypassing the rapids on the Naskaupi River below Seal Lake, I made an attempt in 2012 to try and hike down the Long Portage to Lake Disappointment. I bought into Leonidas', Dillon's, and George's initial idea of not dragging a canoe over the portage and only had a lightweight inflatable dingy with me for any bodies of water that I could not avoid through the use of modern-day topographical maps. The terrain proved to be brutal, with leg-breaking blocks of rock strewn everywhere by the glaciers. I quickly realized that there is a huge difference between the Long Portage and the portages pioneered by the Innu over the centuries, and gave up my

attempt. The Long Portage thus remains a huge challenge waiting to be gotten over by others for the first time since 1903.

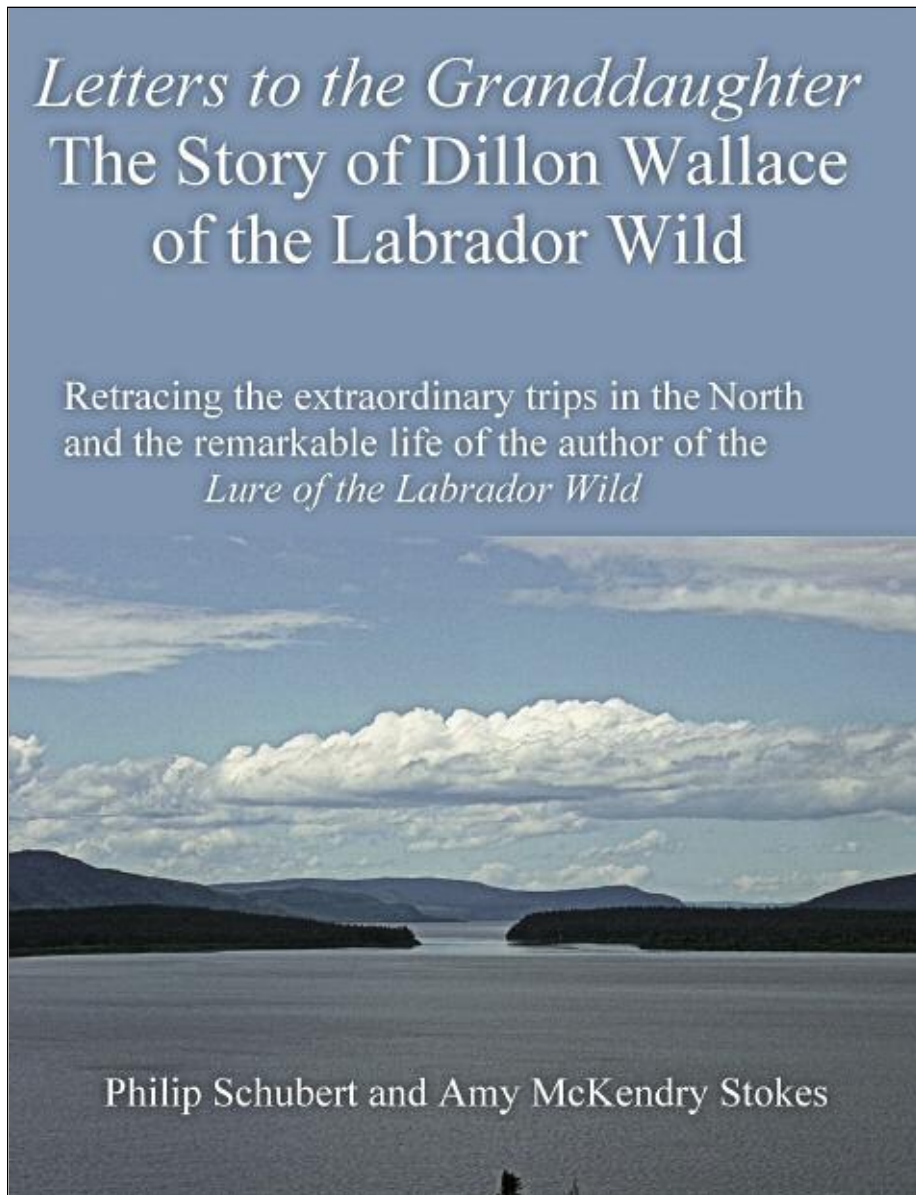
Robert Irwin and I subsequently met and flew into Lake Disappointment where we were able to explore the bay running northward leading to the start of the Long Portage. We then located the twin rivers running southward from Lake Disappointment and followed them to Lake Hope as they drain the Lake Disappointment watershed. Leonidas, Dillon, and George found these two rivers on their return journey, avoiding the overland route they had taken between the two lakes on their way in.

We photographed the hill climbed by George on August 26, 1903, when faced with the huge disappointment that the large lake immediately to the north of Lake Hope did not lead to Lake Michikamau. George could see a chain of small lakes running to the northwest to "big water," thus on August 28, they started up the Long Portage, which would seal the fate of Leonidas.

Robert and I ended our exploration at the east end of Lake Hope where we were able to locate the exact spot where Leonidas, Dillon, and George took the photograph of Lake Hope which appears in *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*.



# ***Letters to the Granddaughter*** **The Story of Dillon Wallace of the Labrador Wild** **Introduction to the excerpt by Philip Schubert**



centennial, I felt it was nevertheless my duty to remind organizers that in the interests of historical accuracy, they should not forget the man she had bested. After all, the dumpy and unsmiling Dillon Wallace was the reason that there was a centennial.

In 1903, Leonidas Hubbard, a journalist for a magazine specializing in the outdoors, identified a blank spot on the map of the world to be explored, a lot closer than the dark continent of Africa. He had married Mina Benson two years before. He recruited his best friend, Dillon Wallace, to take part in the trip to explore the blank spot, Labrador. Dillon was a lawyer and, like Leonidas, had started out in life as a farm boy with no prospects. In Dillon's case, after the bank repossessed the family farm, he had worked as grist-mill labourer, telegraph operator, and finally as a bookkeeper-stenographer, training himself as he went along. Finally, he saved enough money to complete high school and study law. Leonidas had befriended him at a dark period in Dillon's life, the lingering death of his first wife, Jennie, from tuberculosis.

Leonidas had travelled to the edge of Hudson's Bay and thus had some idea of the challenges awaiting them. Dillon had never been outside of the USA and had no apparent qualifications for such an undertaking. Leonidas may however have recognized the grit from which Dillon was made and his ability to learn and adapt quickly, good qualities for a trip in Labrador. George Elson was recruited as the third member of the team, through the Hudson's Bay Company in George's home of Missanabi, in the area of James Bay.

The trip left from North West River and turned out to be a disaster, Leonidas losing his life and Dillon nearly so, his life being saved thanks to the heroics of George. The grieving widow, Mina, asked Dillon to chronicle the story of the trip. Dillon sought the assistance of a Frank Barkley Copley, a personal and literary friend of Leonidas. Mina did not like the resulting draft. In fact it was clear she hated it. Then *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* exploded on the scene as an instant best seller. Fleming H. Revell Company would explain it thus in a message dated

The North seduces you. It tries to kill you too if it gets the chance. Having experienced the pleasure of the first, and been lucky in the case of the second, I was invited in 2005 to the 'Mina Hubbard Centennial.' The village of North West River, in the northeast part of Labrador, hosted the centennial.

Mina Hubbard is the stuff of legend; a woman wronged who obtained sweet revenge by canoeing across 1,000 kilometres of unknown Labrador in 1905 and besting the man she held responsible for

her sweet laddie's death. The picture taken by her bold and honourable chief voyageur, George Elson, of her sweeping toward him across the caribou moss, her face alive with enjoyment, is an all-time classic. Elson, of Scotch and Cree blood, and as handsome as he was honourable, had put together one of the finest canoeing teams of all time, composed of people from his world. It is clear from the expression on Mina's face that she feels very safe in his world.

Having been invited to take part in the



February 16, 1905:

"The publishers report that the Story of The Hubbard Expedition which Dillon Wallace issues under the title *THE LURE OF THE LABRADOR WILD* which appeared on the 15th, sold out to the full extent of the first edition almost a week before the book appeared, and another edition was at once necessary. Such things happen with novels sometimes, but not often with books of this nature. But that truth is stranger than fiction, and also more interesting when well told, is abundantly proven by this narrative. The author has never made any pretense at writing other than that incident to his profession as a lawyer, and disclaims any effort to do more than tell the truth about their heroic and tragic experiences."

The book closely follows the trip journals kept by Leonidas and Dillon. It is a story about taking a wrong river, turning back too late, and a race against the oncoming winter and starvation. Leonidas, likely weakened by a bout with typhoid fever months before the trip, failed faster than the others and had to be left behind in their tent while the other two went on. Dillon showed indomitable courage by heading back in the direction of the tent in snow up to his knees, with a few lumps of mouldy flour he and George located on the trail two days after leaving the tent. The average person's instincts would have been crying out to continue on down the trail with George in the direction of survival. George made it out seven days after leaving Dillon and sent back a team of trappers who found Dillon, incredibly still alive in the snow. He had been unable to find the tent. Leonidas seemingly died in his tent the same day he was left, but only after leaving a final note in his trip journal exonerating George and Dillon. Dillon's feet were frozen but he survived the onset of gangrene and fully recovered.

*The Lure of the Labrador Wild* would change Dillon's life forever and is still in print.

Mina, in the preface to her book on her extraordinary 1905 trip, *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*, said that she hopes her book "may go some way towards correcting misleading accounts of Mr. Hubbard's expedition which have appeared elsewhere." She planned the trip in secret with George Elson, after learning of Dillon's plan to go back and try to complete the original trip. She told the press that she suspected that Dillon was respon-

sible for the death of her husband and she was going to Labrador to check the facts. Her press release resulted in a permanent rupture between her and her husband's family. They knew that it had been Dillon who had overridden the advice by the practical Labradoreans to leave Leonidas' body in peace in this tent and had ensured that his body was brought back to New York City for burial.

In planning his return trip to Labrador, Dillon had wanted to include George as part of his team, to such a degree that he had taken the train to George's home at Missanabi. George begged off, saying that he was planning to get married. The shock by Dillon was great when he discovered that he and his team were on the same boat to North West River as Mina. George was with her as a member of one of the finest canoe teams ever assembled. Dillon and his team could not compare. George was very surprised and impressed, and Mina very disappointed, when Dillon and one of his two university student team members arrived at Ungava Bay, even if six weeks after Mina and her team.

George told Dillon and his team member that the rapids were the worst he had ever experienced.

Mina's trip journal reveals her thinking upon reaching Ungava Bay: "If we should get out soon I might possibly get back and get my story and some of my pictures in print before W. is even heard from and that would be the thing for me. If I am to be successful that would make it complete. Oh, if it might only come out that way. How grateful I should be, and how complete would be my victory and how completely it would make no account W's reflections." Alas for Mina, it was not to be and Dillon's *The Long Labrador Trail* appeared in 1907, a year before Mina's book. He went on to publish a total of 27 books over his lifetime. Dillon modelled many of his books on the people he had met in Labrador and the stories he had heard. Dillon was highly respected in his time, even being invited to lead an expedition in search of a missing polar explorer. Events like the centennial in 2005 have, however, tended to forget Dillon and he has been dismissed as a hack writer in recent publications on the "saga."

Mina went on to live a sad, lonely life, estranged from the Hubbards and estranged from her second husband, a British Earl who could never seem to replace her dear lost laddie. George re-

mained her one true friend, at least in spirit, as they only briefly met on two occasions after 1905. They would have made an attractive couple, and people have wondered ever since if there might not have been more than the sheer adventure and satisfaction of the trip showing in her face in that photograph taken in 1905. Despite her resentment of him, Dillon never spoke disparagingly of her, showing genuine empathy and respect for her inconsolable grief. Their loss, after all, was mutual.

I began retracing the saga in 1999 after reading *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* and little by little, have retraced about half of the 1903 trip and most of the summer portion of the 1905 trip. Five books have been written on the saga in the modern era, the two best in my opinion being *Great Heart* by James West Davidson and John Ruge in 1988, and *The Woman Who Mapped Labrador* by Roberta Buchanan, Anne Hart, and Bryan Greene in 2005.

In convincing the organisers of the Mina Hubbard Centennial to include locals playing Dillon Wallace and his team in the recreation of the departures, I was invited by them to locate surviving family members. Thanks to this I got to know his son and daughter and then finally his granddaughter, Amy McKendry, who lives in Seattle. Amy and I decided that it was time there was a biography on her grandfather and we met for a week in October 2008 to look through the extensive archives held on the saga at Memorial University in St. Johns, Newfoundland and Labrador. It has been a big job researching and writing the biography, with work on it taking place during spare moments as I continued to work as an energy specialist for the Canadian International Development Agency. A first draft has finally been completed and editing via Friesen Press is underway. The target is to have hard copy, soft copy, and e-reader versions out early in 2013.

I live in Kanata, Ontario (a part of greater Ottawa), where I'm married to Beth and have three grown children. Beth has shown great patience over the years with my heading off to Labrador and Northern Quebec each summer. My adventures and misadventures as I've retraced the saga can be seen at: [www.magma.ca/~philip18/HWSaga/](http://www.magma.ca/~philip18/HWSaga/)





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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.

## Don't give up Journalism!

Nicola, having taken on your new job at the French River Adventures, do not give up your journalism. Your Nastawgan "Mountain River" article had some of the nicest adventure writing I have ever read (my wife agrees!) Your engaging descriptions without purple hyperbole were just great. I almost feel that I don't need to paddle the Mountain since I just finished the trip with you.

Congratulations, Tony Way

## 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.

## WCA Activities

Want to view all club activities, learn more about our extensive outings program for members, or organize and post a trip? It's easy! Visit the Outings section of the WCA website:

[www.wildernesscanoe.ca](http://www.wildernesscanoe.ca)

## Deadlines

The deadline dates for submitting material for the four issues we publish each year are: the first days of February, May, August, and November. If you have questions, please contact the editor; addresses on the last page.

## EVENTS CALENDAR

**Wilderness & Canoeing Symposium** will be held on **15 and 16 February 2013** at Monarch Park.

**Annual General Meeting** will be held on **02 March 2013**. Location and details will be announced soon. Check WCA website for update.





# WCA Fall Meeting 2012

A late fall colours made this year's WCA Fall Meeting prequel, "Hiking in Algonquin Park", a stunning event of panoramic vistas, enhanced by generous culinary and photographic contributions by Fred Argue. Madawaska white-water yielded interesting lower water challenges, hugely enjoyed by Attila Barbacsy's children. They experienced the first thrills of in-your-face waves! MKC's fine dining sure was the best ever! Presentations by Dave and Dawne Robinson about paddling the Ashuapnushuan River and by William Sleeth about the Mistassibi Nord Est River in northern Quebec sent us home to dive into our maps for next year, while our pile of northern books purchased from George Luste will keep us entertained for many winter hours. Claudia Kerckhoff-Van Wijk's artistic talents wowed us with creative visions, one of which will be under our Christmas tree for a lifetime of inspiration. Our only regret was not booking the deluxe cabin



suite before the event organizers!  
Jay Neilson and Frank Knaapen

"WOW" is the word that comes to mind when I think about the WCA Fall Meeting, held at the Madawaska Kanu Centre. This was my first WCA event as a member. Everyone was so friendly and the food, accommodation and hospitality

were amazing... The slide shows were exciting, and the paddling and hiking were lots of fun! I encourage all new WCA members and people considering joining WCA to participate in this great fall rendezvous and meet new friends. I can't wait for the Wine and Cheese event in November.

Chantal Locatelli





# Report on Canadian Canoe Routes

Allan Jacobs

CCR continues to grow in content, in membership, in popularity, and, most importantly, in service to the paddling community. In the five years since the acquisition on 20 September 2007, membership has increased from 4,823 to 9,334. It is expected to exceed 10,000 members in early 2013. At 7:54 a.m. on 5 July 2012, 144 persons were online, a new record.

Highlights from 2011: 501,000 individuals made 992,000 visits; 44,000,000 hits (more than one per second) were recorded; 400 GB of data were transferred (most of it from the site).

Much credit for the success of the site is due to the behind-the-scenes efforts of the Site Administrators, Marilyn Sprissler and Barbara, and the site Moderator Neil Luckhurst. Without either of these dedicated individuals, the site would soon fail.

Marilyn continues to make major ren-

ovations to the site; as well, she keeps it up and running, often in difficult circumstances. Barbara (Assistant Site Administrator) filters out spammers seeking to enter the site, clears posts to the Gallery, etc. Barbara's primary function is to approve new forum accounts (keeping the spammers out). In addition, she helps solve the reported problems and clears posts to the Gallery. Neil has a delicate job of moderating posts in the Forum section.

CCR now offers over 5,000 Route descriptions. Coverage of Canada is mature (in the sense that there are no major gaps; it can never be complete), perhaps excessive in cases (Algonquin comes to mind). The main effort is now devoted to describing US Routes.

Without the members, though, there would be no site worth mentioning. They are highly knowledgeable and experienced, and eager to be of assistance, es-

pecially to the newcomers. It is a rare question indeed that does not get several informed responses. Members' posts have made the Forums a vast repository of information: Route Forums have 76,200 posts, General Discussion (paddling matters only) 61,400, Equipment 51,300, Environmental Issues 17,100, Winter Camping 10,600, Camper's Kitchen 9,400, Boat Design and Construction 7,500, etc. And members contribute in other ways, for example by submitting trip reports to the Forums and the Routes section.

Ed. Note: Allan Jacobs' work is very valuable indeed. Allan's been relentless in pursuing the Routes material. The WCA and CCR Communities express their utmost gratitude to everyone who contributes to the betterment of the CCR website content.

## In Memory of Jim Greenacre

By Bill Ness

Sadly, one of our long-time members, Jim Greenacre, recently passed away after a short illness at the age of 92. Jim was one of us who joined the WCA in its very early years. Our first outing with the club was a run down the Credit River organized by Jim. That was back around 1977. After the trip, Jim took the time to phone Rita and I to thank us for joining him, and to encourage us to continue to get out on club trips. That was the kind of guy Jim was. Subsequent years found us often on lakes and rivers with him, and later I joined him on the Outings Committee, where he was active for many years. When we organized our first introductory whitewater courses, Jim was on-board, and he continued to be an instructor on this very popular course well up into his 70's.

A very active outdoorsman in all seasons, he travelled the Nahanni, Thelon, Quebec and Labrador Rivers, and Ontario waterways from the Great Lakes

to James Bay. In his mid-60's, he participated in a Northern Ontario snowshoe trip across James Bay, keeping up with companions two decades his junior. That trip ended up as an article in "Canadian Geographic." Jim was everyone's ideal travelling mate. He was helpful, patient, congenial, and always pulled his weight. If your chatter got to him, he just turned down his hearing aid and tuned you out.

One of my favourite memories of Jim was a whitewater course on the French River where he was a co-instructor. There was another group at Blue Chute, where we were working the river. Jim fished out a soggy swimmer from this class, and started to explain that he needed extreme lean to the inside of the turn in crossing such a strong eddy line. The other members of his group started laughing all of a sudden - the septagenarian who they thought didn't know which end of the paddle to put in the water was demonstrating for their hot-

shot young instructor.

I last had the pleasure of paddling with Jim some 9 or 10 years ago. That would make Jim in his early 80's. We were pulling out at the end of the Moira one April afternoon. We were beat, and suggested that we all hit Tim's in Belleville. Jim gave his regrets. He had to hurry home to change. He was booked for an evening of one of his favourite off-the-water activities - ballroom dancing.

Those of us who knew Jim came to regard him as a paddling inspiration, continuing to canoe up until he was 90. When I talked to him a few months ago, he was still getting out for his daily hour walks, and dancing up a storm, though he confessed he had to chase up younger gals of late since finding ladies in his own age group who could kick up their heels with him was becoming difficult.

We'll miss you, Jim.

# FOOD FOR PADDLERS

Doug and Lisa Ashton have been hosting a Grand River outing in June for a number of years. Dave and I were able to attend this year and had a “grand” time. Since we have paddled this river many times, the highlights for us were renewing friendships, meeting members for the first time, and the pièce de résistance the post-paddle barbecue. Doug has many talents, which I knew about but I didn’t realize that included being a “hobby chef.” Even though the recipe below may not be adaptable to tripping, I thought other WCA hobby chefs would enjoy trying out this delicious appetizer, which Doug prepared for the record crowd this year. Doug would like to acknowledge Chef Neil Baxter from Rundles Restaurant in Stratford for the following recipe. He has been Doug’s culinary mentor and friend for many years. If you would like to contact Doug regarding the recipe, his email is: [doug.ashton@rogers.com](mailto:doug.ashton@rogers.com).

**Pork Satay** makes about 4 servings

## Marinade:

- 2 tablespoons oyster sauce
- 2 tablespoons light soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce
- 2 teaspoons brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons lemongrass, chopped
- 1 tablespoon white sesame seeds, roasted
- 1 clove garlic, coarsely chopped
- 1 cup coriander leaves
- 1 tablespoons chili black bean sauce
- 12 ounces boneless port butt (shoulder)

## Dipping Sauce:

- 1 cup peanuts
- 1 tablespoon red curry paste
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 & 1/2 cups coconut milk

**Marinating the Pork:** In blender, combine the first nine ingredients, blend to a puree, then transfer to a shallow container and stir in the chili black bean sauce. Slice pork across the grain into 1/8-inch-thick slices, place into the marinade, and allow to sit for one hour.

**Preparing the Dipping Sauce:** In food processor grind peanuts to a paste. Add curry paste, fish sauce, sugar, and process until mixed (about one minute). Add coconut milk, mix until smooth, and reserve. Warm the sauce just before serving and serve in a shallow bowl.

**Cooking and Serving the Satay:** Preheat grill. Thread pork slices onto skewers, leaving three inches at one end. Place skewers on hot grill and cook until charred (about one minute). Turn skewers over and char the other side (about one minute). Serve immediately with warm dipping sauce.

The next issue will feature Mango Salad with Cherry Tomatoes, Green Beans, and Tamarind, which Doug served with the Pork Satay.

*If you would like to share your favourite tripping recipes, please contact Barb Young, 12 Erindale Crescent, Brampton, Ont. L6W 1B5; [youngj-david@rogers.com](mailto:youngj-david@rogers.com).*





# Up Four Rivers and Down Four Rivers: On Dogrib trails with Dick Irwin

Story by Mike Robinson

Photos by Richard Irwin



*Large overgrown encampment at the northeast end of Mesa Lake*

In the summer of 2004, the relentless Dick Irwin proposed an extraordinary canoe trip: a loop, beginning at Edzo-Rae, one hour west of Yellowknife, and returning to the same place seven weeks later. We would begin by ascending the Snare and Emile rivers to reach the central Barrens, and then follow the Parent River downstream to the Coppermine. Big Bend, two-thirds from the river mouth, would be the exit point from the Coppermine. From there, the route would head west up the Hook River to the Sloan River and across to iconic Great Bear Lake. Finally, travelling up the Camsell River and down the Marion River closed the loop. In total, we would ascend four rivers and descend four, and cross three major and

one minor heights of land.

Dick put together a group including the extraordinary chef Tom Elliott, detail man Walter Lohaza, and myself as general-purpose canoe mule. The novelty of this route lies in piecing together several well-known rivers with a few lesser-known rivers into a loop encompassing all types of terrain and scenery. The lesser-known aspects were particular fascinating: the Emile-Parent River access to the Barrens, the Hook-Sloan route to Great Bear, and the remarkable experience of travelling with Dick Irwin.

The Emile-Snare system is ideally suited to upstream travel. Named after an early missionary, Father Emile Petitot, the river is intriguing historically [Note 1]. Most of the ascent is lake hop-

ping; almost every section of rapids can be bypassed by fortuitous alignments of lakes that cut off bends and rapids, frequently cutting short some long, serpentine stretches of river. Furthermore, most of the Dogrib portages on the lower river are still open, used mainly for snowmobile travel. With a couple of noteworthy exceptions, even the footpaths of the old trails can be followed right to the headwaters of the river. Dick has a certain knack for finding these paths. Artifacts of canoe travel such as sun-cracked rubber boots, rusted cans, and derelict rifles often verify the old trails.

In the early weeks of our trip, portages were frequent and the seven weeks worth of provisions necessitated three heavy loads each. Pausing for





*Tilley, Mike, and Tom running a rapid on the Parent River*

breath at one portage, I sat and leaned against my biggest pack, wiping flies and sweat from my face. Frustrated and not pleased with the prospect of the next trip with the canoe, I said I'd like to jettison my desserts to reduce weight. Dick, a man of notorious appetite, smiled his trademark grin, the smile of thousands of kilometres of canoe travel, and with a simple statement gave a lesson in patience in his own reticent, style: "Well, I kind of like desserts."

In the last kilometres of the Emile, the jagged hills level out and the trees thin at the height of the interior plateau, where tundra conditions prevail. The Barrens are reached by portaging the low ridge into the headwaters, Mesa Lake. After a persistent search, Dick found the long height of land portage out of Mesa to the Parent River. The faint trail, little more than a slight indentation in the tundra, rises steadily across four kilometres of hillside offering a superb view of Mesa Lake below. It, and the scattered poles of collapsed tents, are



*Adapted with permission from Kellett Communications and Northwest Territories Tourism*





*The Parent River runs through barren terrain*

the remaining evidence of the generations of families that once lived and travelled here. Although it was unnecessary, Dick and I carefully followed the original footpath, not for direction but for connection. To me this faint trail makes as powerful a statement as the Pyramids, and is likely older.

The Parent River is a fast and adventurous downstream run to the Coppermine. Narrow, bouldery rapids twisting through treeless gravel ridges typify the upper section. Creeks add flow through steep-sided, windy valleys that entice the eye and curiosity. Trees make their reappearance in the lower stretches of river where it eventually spills its paddlers into Redrock Lake. Here, Dick and I solidified our paddling partnership, scouting and running rapids. But there were countless quiet moments when the sun-sparkled water drew us through the valley, when wolves stood on eskers as we passed, and when we would stop for photos at a sandy spit dotted with the footprints of bear, moose, and wolf.

One golden moment stands out. We skidded into an eddy above a long, straight stretch of whitewater. One at a time, we stood in the canoe and scanned the 700 metres in length of the rapid with binoculars. I said we should probably scout, with little conviction, and Dick replied with his trademark, "Yeah." Then we just ran it, loving every second of the tight teamwork that carried us safely to the bottom. The Coppermine River continues in a similar vein. The current is constant, the scenery gor-

geous, and the travel fast and carefree. On a map the river literally appears as a green oasis across white tundra; on the ground this translates into a wildlife corridor. Without fail, sand beaches are peppered with large mammal tracks. The bird life was in a frenzy as we passed, as were the insects, in particular the black-fly, whose hatch coincided with our last few days on the Parent.

As Big Bend approaches, the snow-dappled hills surrounding the river press ever closer, giving the impression of the river having nowhere to go. The mouth of the Hook River, the site of our final camp on the Coppermine, is just upstream from an abrupt turn in the river where it vanishes from view behind the encroaching mountains. We turned west then. Being there in person and seeing the Hook for the first time, the notion of going up seemed utterly daft. Naturally, the only way to begin a daft undertaking is with an early start. For the first few hundred metres, where tracking and even a little paddling were possible, the river lulls with a false sense of ease. After that, it was simply wade-and-carry through chilly water still fed by meltwater from a mini glacier. The river is alternatively well defined, then braded, then re-coalesces in a steep valley. The going was slow, but in the end the 11-km distance to the headwaters took only two full days. The reward was wonderful vistas from high, barren hilltops, and pure exhilaration from at last being in the mountains we had been watching from a distance.

A few days of high-country portaging

brought us over the height of land to the banks of the Sloan River. The Sloan alternates between slow, marshy sections, and rapids dashing through rocky gorges. The marshes teem with birds and waterfowl, and most of the rapids are runnable. There are two major exceptions, both situated at steep canyons; the first occurs in the middle part of the river after Jaequir Lake. This is bypassed by a pleasant series of lakes north of the river allowing for splendid views of the tall hills and cliffs. The second is the river's final descent to Great Bear, where we followed a portage route south of the river to the lake. This bypass crosses 11 portages and 10 lakes, and the total elevation loss is over 100 metres, mostly in the last two carries. These two routes around the rapids were dubbed the Double and Quadruple Bypass, although they were never particularly arduous. The second route showed old axe marks in places suggesting that it had been followed sometime in the past by something other than caribou. Great Bear Lake is in a land overlooked by time. Most of its jagged shoreline looks as if the glaciers have just receded, or perhaps are receding still: lingering mini-glaciers still shelter in the shattered crevasses along the shore and inland. Perfectly transparent water, deceptively deep, reveals infinite colour in the submerged rocks. It defines stark, lonely beauty. For the first time on our trip we were no longer surrounded by birdcalls. There was only the occasional high-flying gull, and upon close inspection at campsites, boreal chickadees. On one breathless





*Mike tracking up the Hook River*

August morning our canoes cut through skim ice and frost was visible inside the canoe below the waterline. Nonetheless, the campsites are amongst the most desirable I have encountered. Sunsets over water horizons, sheltered beaches framed by cliffs and towering rock, tiny islands of spruce in a bedrock sea.

Time has not overlooked one place, at least, on this lake. Port Radium is a now-

closed silver, copper, and uranium mine. The grounds are somewhat manicured, crushed stone smoothed over places where pits once were. A few old buildings and some mine structures remain, but most prominent are two signs. One warns, ominously, against prolonged stays due to radiation. The other is a historical plaque outlining the history of the mine with a brief mention of the two



*Portaging along an open ridge on our ascent of the Camsell River*

atomic bombs dropped on Japan powered by Port Radium uranium [Notes 3 and 4]. Later, in a wind on the big lake, the canoes became separated amongst islands leaving Dick and I windbound apart from the others. Binoculars confirmed the safety of our companions, so Dick and I settled in for a long lunch. Dick mentioned some of his trips, including the Caniapiscaw, the Eastmain, the Naskapi, the St. Marguerite, the Churchill, the Mattagami, Lobstick Lake, and Lake Michikamau. This list only includes the places that were dammed or flooded since he travelled them [Note 5]. The Rupert and Romaine will soon be added to this list.

The trip ended for me at Gameti (Rae Lakes), headwaters of the Camsell River, instead of completing the loop. Despite good progress up the pool-and-drop Camsell, we had run overtime and as a consequence Tom and I flew out here. Another consequence had been food rationing for a couple of weeks. All I had left in abundance was brown sugar, which I consumed by the handful at rest breaks. Our last night before Gamed was a glutinous display, the group of us demolishing a multi-course meal and fighting over how to divide eleven cinnamon buns evenly amongst four people.

Quite accidentally we arrived at Gameti at the height of Treaty II celebrations. The entire Dogrib nation was gathered and the town was overflowing. As part of the festivities, a handful of elders and children had paddled some of the old routes from other towns as a means of connecting to the past. We were swept up and into the feasting, asked about the routes we travelled and the trail conditions by people who recounted journeys of their childhood when they had walked the same paths. We watched and listened to the traditional gambling games, played in teams by men to the pounding heartbeat of a skin drum. We learned the Dogrib names for Mesa, Grenville, and Parent lakes, and some old stories to add to our new ones. [Note 6]

At the head of the old portage out of Mesa, where Dick and I painstakingly sought out the pathway, there was once a peace celebration ending animosity between the Dogrib and Yellowknife bands. From the little hill where we lunched, it is said that the dance circle can still be





Dick Irwin, Mike Robinson with his Jack Russell Terrier Tilley, Tom Elliott, and Walter Lohaza

seen, just beyond the fallen tent poles, where warriors compacted the soil in a jubilant all-nighter. Every lake has a story, the storyteller concluded, leaning away from across the table, then returning to her meal. I missed the circle, but on the same hill there is an untold story: a child's tiny grave crib, grey wood prominent on the green tundra.

The final thoughts of the trip are captured in my journal. While waiting at the village dock for a chartered pick-up, I reflected:

*The season has most distinctly passed. Fireweed, sprouting when we began, is now seeding at the top, all flowers gone. Geese swirl in preparatory flocks. Change and culture shock leave me somewhat confused, as do the seeming ironies of our trip's end. There are northern children wearing sideways ball caps and Chicago Bulls jerseys, in a town without road access. Most have never been in a canoe. Sleek jets from diamond companies make frequent forays to the dusty local airstrip; we just ate all night with several hundred people after seeing no one for nearly seven*

*weeks and living on rationed food. In two days I will be thousands of kilometres away, in a city with showers and ice cream. I have spent seven weeks with a man whose canoeing career spans five decades, a career that has seen more rivers dammed than I will probably ever travel on. Change surrounds us and I am vaguely wary for the future. Yet in the people around me, with the pounding drums and stories of generations rooted to the land, there is confidence, strength, and hope. And in Dick there is inspiration from wisdom freely shared and, more importantly, an inexhaustible pleasure from the land, a sense of wonder undiminished.*

#### Notes:

1. Father Emile Petitot produced a number of writings about his travels in the Canadian northwest. Many have been translated into English.
2. George M. Douglas outlines another route from Great Bear to the Coppermine in Lands Forlorn. The Hook-Sloan connection lacks the historic connection, but it may have other

advantages. It seems to be somewhat shorter, and paddlers taking this route in reverse to our direction can enjoy both the scenery of Great Bear's McTavish arm and the bulk of the rapids on the Coppermine.

3. A recent Global news special claimed to measure radiation levels at the mine site at 4 mrem per hour. If correct, our two-hour visit represents an increase in radiation exposure for the year of nearly 3%, about the same as four diagnostic X-rays.

4. In addition to Port Radium, we passed two other abandoned mines at the mouth of the Camsell, one of which is the White Eagle silver mine, now just timbers and filled shaft, the other called the Terra Mines. Navigation markers with fading paint stand on the lower Camsell to guide big lake boats up to Terra.

5. Dick Irwin's paddling resume is long enough to require a book to do it justice. Dick also has photographs and some film footage of Churchill Falls and Lake Michikamau, possibly the last ever taken. On a related note, he de-



scribed the Naskapi, popularized by recent books on the 1905 ascent of the river by Elson and Hubbard, as one of the most powerful rivers he has ever paddled.

6. I would like to extend sincere thanks for the people at Gameti who welcomed us into their celebrations and assisted us in moving gear and making arrangements.

#### **Bare Bones Information:**

*Access:* taxi van from Yellowknife to Edzo-Rae was approximately \$100 and took one hour. *Egress:* the plane, a C-185 from Rae Lakes, was chartered through the very reliable Air Tindi for \$1000.

*Approximate time and distance breakdown:* Edzo-Rae to Redrock Lake: 21

days, 420 km; Redrock to Big Bend: five days, 250 km; Big Bend to Great Bear: eight days, 80 km (one rest day); Great Bear to Gameti: 10 days, 500 km.

## **Mike Robinson**

**By Richard Irwin**

Mike grew up in Cowan's Bay near Lindsay, Ontario. He went to Trent University and to Queen's University where he earned a PhD in Physics. He apprenticed for a year with Hugh Stewart in Wakefield, learning how to build wood-canvas canoes. Mike took a teachers training course and became a teacher at Philemon Wright High School in Gatineau. He built a canoe

shop in the backyard of his Ottawa home and gave canoe-building lessons.

In 2004, Mike joined our trip I call the Great Bear Circuit. He was the ideal partner, a strong paddler and an experienced outdoorsman with a congenial personality. Near the end of the trip at Rae Lakes, Mike and Tom chartered a plane to Yellowknife because Mike had to return to Ottawa to meet commitments. Walter and I continued on for seven days descending the Marian River to Marian Lake and the take-out at Edzo-Rae, thus completing the circuit.

Sadly on August 24, 2010 Mike died in a floatplane crash in northern Quebec. He was a devoted husband, father, and friend, an avid canoeist and passionate teacher. He is missed by all who knew him.



*Toddler imitating drummers at Rae Lakes (Gameti)*



# Thelon River: Whitefish Lake to Beverly Lake

Story and photos by Allan Jacobs



*Caribou trails on the Whitefish Lake esker*

This was my first trip to the Barrens. As long as I have my mind, I'll remember standing on that esker on Whitefish Lake, staring out over the blue, gemlike water, with the clear blue sky, with the muskox herd grazing peacefully in the distance, with the feeling that I could see almost forever, with the feeling that there were perhaps no other humans within maybe 100 kilometres.

With apologies to Sir Walter Scott:

*Breathes there the Canadian with  
soul so dead,*

*Who on seeing the barrens has not  
said,*

*"This is my own, my native land!"*

But I came to realize that it is not my home in any sense but that it lies in Canada. We were only casual visitors (Ragnar Jonsson of Nueltin Lake would have called us, scornfully and justifiably, "tourists"), spending a few weeks in what had been home for generations to a people, a people forcibly removed from their land. A way of life, hard though it was (death by starvation, in Canada, in the 1950s!), is gone forever. To the superficial eye (mine anyway),

all that remains of the people are stone structures, from the mundane to the magnificent: hunting blinds, tent rings, chipping sites, food caches, "fences" (lines of stones to guide the caribou to the killing site; some say corrals but I doubt this), way markers, the occasional fire pit, and perhaps others beyond my understanding. My memory was never much to boast about and I did not start making trip notes for several years. The few details that I have regarding rapids, portages, campsites, and so on, and more importantly my Thelon bibliography, are posted at the CCR thread

<http://myccr.com/phpbbforum/viewtopic.php?f=124&t=34668>

It was 1996. We had heard much about the Barrens, mostly at the Wilderness Canoeing Symposia (WCS), and decided that we wanted the experience. George Luste, ever helpful with advice, suggested that the Thelon is the easiest of the Barren Land rivers and so we chose it. We were a WCA group: Anne Snow, Enid Weiner, Joop Steinfort, and myself. As so many others have done and, one hopes, will do,

we started to put the trip together at the WCS that year.

Scheduled flights got us to Yellowknife. Thanks to Anne, who had routed me through Winnipeg and Rankin Inlet, I got to see a part of the country that most people flying between Toronto and Yellowknife miss, for example frozen lakes in mid-July. Our outfitter (Barren Land Bob (BB) of Chemun fame) picked us up and drove us to our B&B. A charter flight took us to the northwest end of Whitefish Lake, with a stopover in Reliance for fuel and relief. At the end of the trip, two Cessna 185 flights got us from the west end of Beverly Lake back to the Whitefish camp. We were flown back the next day to Yellowknife, from where we returned home on scheduled flights.

The bottom line: we returned to Yellowknife on the day arranged; all services were provided at the agreed price; the rental canoes were in satisfactory condition; and we were treated well during our stays at Whitefish Lake. For many people, that is enough. But all did not go well, as I describe at the end.

## Journal

After touring Yellowknife (of course we ate at the Wildcat), we flew to Whitefish Lake on July 12. We spent three nights at BB's camp on Whitefish Lake, waiting for the rest of our gear to arrive. BB and staff gave us lots of tips on the river, especially the rapids. One day we tried to paddle in the area but the wind was too strong. We visited a wolf den (no one home), saw the white spruce (we were told that new trees grow from roots, not from cones), failed in an attempt to sneak up on a muskox herd, watched a moose (yes!) through binoculars, were shown a collection of spear and arrow heads, and chatted with BB's guests. A photographer among them was after an albino muskox that BB had spotted up north, near the Ellice. Another was a writer for *Field and Stream*.

**July 14 and 17:** Eventually the rest of our gear arrived from Yellowknife. Next day (July 15), we headed out, passed the narrows, stopped for lunch by a muskox skeleton, then turned south. The wind came up and we wallowed along. We entered LaRoque Bay, crossed to the east shore and camped in a small bay, on the edge of the tundra. Next day, the river between Whitefish Lake and Lynx Lake was only fast water. Not much later, as we travelled east, a stiff wind came up. Joop spotted

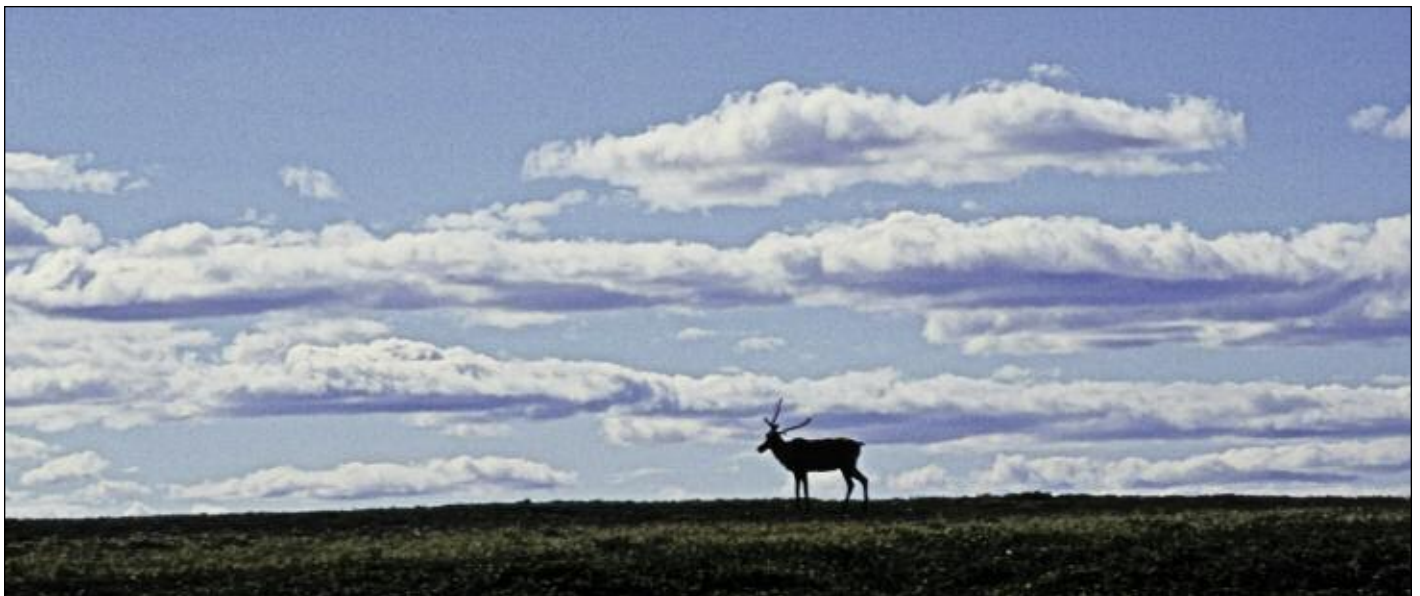
a spit off our route; we pulled in and camped in a sandy area, hilly enough to get out of the wind. We were about five kilometres from Lynx Lake Lodge. I don't know whether it was active at the time; for sure we saw no boats. We continued down Lynx Lake (I think this is where we saw our first "fence"), turned east before the cairn, and entered the river again. We pulled in and camped at a beach site on the south shore. A caribou wandered past but ignored us. On a short hike to the south, I found a magnificent stone structure, apparently of religious significance.

**July 18 to 20:** We paddled down a fast, easy stretch of water, ran some rapids and camped. More rapids the next day. We scouted one, then decided to portage it. On the scout, I came across some toilet paper that someone had left. "Hey you jerk: It's bad enough leaving such in southern Ontario; up here it doesn't decay: look at those trees at the Hornby cabin!" The stiff wind made portaging the canoes a fun job. We camped after more rapids. Next day, a lazy paddle on small open stretches was followed by a portage around Muskox Falls. The river crashes improbably into a large centre rock (why hasn't it been worn down over the years?). I was unable to control the canoe as I carried it down the steep hill so I let it go to find its own way. A few kilometres later,



after the Elk River confluence, we encountered undocumented obstacles, a few caribou swimming over to the south shore. It was perhaps on one of these days that Anne approached a muskox too closely for my taste.

**July 21 to 23:** More lazy paddling got us past the outlet of Jim Lake. The sharp turn north led to 15 kilometres of very fast water, past High Island and into the east part of what is known as Double Barrel Lake. We passed a huge sand dune and camped on the island just past the turn north. After paddling another lengthy stretch of fast water with some obstacles, we camped at a beach site. The next day saw more fast water and more obstacles. The river slows



*Tundra and caribou at third campsite*





*Anne, Joop and obstacles*

down after the Mary Frances River confluence and an unattractive stretch got us to Eyeberry Lake. We had set up the tents but saw a storm approaching and

so moved to the shelter of some bushes. It wasn't much, but better than nothing.

**July 24 to 26:** The wind was up so we stayed put for quite a while.

Eventually, we got going, exited Eyeberry, ran some rapids, and stopped after a very short day. The next day saw more rapids. After the Bear Creek con-



*From lunch stop, above canyon*





*Enid and Anne at Warden's Grove*

fluence, we paddled some open stretches. Camp was on the rocks, just upstream from the start of the canyon. The damage done by the ice floes to the rocks in the centre of the river was impressive. Next day, we paddled to the start of the portage on river left. Far off, we saw a group portaging on the right, the first people we had seen for 11 days. The portage took all day; I doubt that we used the same route twice, in either direction. I recall vividly the pitter-patter, like rain on the tent at night, of bugs blown against my bug shirt by the stiff wind. We camped at the end of the



*Graves at Hornby site*





*Muskoxen on the lower Thelon*

portage, high on the bank, about one kilometre below the Clarke River confluence.

**July 27 to 29:** That was the end of the canyon. The next day, we scouted, then ran, a major rapid. We had discussed heading up the Hanbury to look at Helen Falls, but had been told that it's a lengthy hike, and we were tired from the portage. We paddled on and camped above Warden's Grove, which we inspected the next day. The highlight there was the armoured outhouse (bears eat people poo?). We hiked up the hill but didn't get to the top. We continued downstream through The Gap, passed Grassy Island and the Cosmos 954 marker (didn't stop to inspect it, didn't even see it from the river) and entered the Thelon Oasis, a lengthy treed area in the middle of the Barrens. Camp was an ugly site on a mud bank, the only game in town for some distance. At our lunch break the next day, we saw a youth group (some wearing shorts on the barrens!) ahead of us, almost certainly the group we had seen at the canyon. We waited for them to leave the Hornby site before paddling to it. The sides of the cabin were still standing; some of the interior material had been removed to safety. The three crosses were askew; someone had tried to tie at least one together. The stumps of the trees that had been cut to build the cabin were still standing, 70 years later, testifying both

to the durability of organic material in that environment and to the fragility of the barrens. All in all, a moving experience. We continued downstream and camped up a creek on the left.

**For those not familiar with the Hornby-Christian-Adlard story:**

John Hornby (born 1880) led greenhorns Harold Adlard (born 1898) and Edgar Christian (born 1908) into the Barrens. Hornby had expected caribou to winter in a treed section of the Thelon River; they did not and all three died of starvation in 1927. Edited versions of Christian's diary were published, including the book *Unflinching: A Diary of Tragic Adventure*. The full diary and his letters to his parents were published much later. Further information, including discussion of the omitted material, will be found at

<http://www.cowboysong.com/christian/dontblame.html>

**July 30 to August 1:** Around noon the next day, we saw the other group ahead; they were being picked up to go home. We continued, lazily, and camped. The next day, we turned left after an island and struggled upstream to find a campsite with easy access to the pingo (which is not visible from the river). The next day, we hiked to the pingo (by the way, the topo map labels it incorrectly). The visit is well worth a stopover; don't miss it unless you are really rushed. We returned to the previous

night's campsite.

**August 2 to August 4:** We pulled in at Lookout Point and inspected the remains of what had been a small community, if perhaps only a seasonal one. The rocks are sinking slowly into the tundra and might not be visible in 50 years or so. I read somewhere that the Inuit paddled up the Finnie River (almost straight across from Lookout Point) to get wood; I read also that the point was the western boundary, or near it, of Inuit territory at the time. The reach near the Ursus Islands is fast, clear water; we relaxed and watched the rocks and fish skidding by beneath the boats. Camp was on river left, in a huge sand field. Next day, we passed the Ursus Islands and the Kigarvi River confluence, ran more fast water, then pulled in at the water survey cabin and camped (Enid and Anne inside, Joop and I outside). We signed the book (among others, the Japanese paddler who spoke at WCS had written a note) and looked at the tent circles and other remains (one perhaps a meat cache) of the Inuit community.

**August 5:** We scouted the rapid at Thelon Bluffs from river right; after a sneak right (one of my two favourite ways to run rapids), we ferried over to the north shore against a stiff current. We had one of those Barren Lands headwinds to fight and wanted to have a look downstream; besides, it was time

for another hike. We had a long one; a muskox not so far away ignored us. The river below us was churned up by the wind but we had no choice but to continue against it. And a light rain started. We met a couple from Montreal; they had passed us when we were camped at the water survey cabin. We struggled on but eventually gave up, pulled in and camped in the mud. Camp Misery.

**August 6:** The rain came down and the wind blew hard enough to make travel too painful to undertake. We sat it out most of the day. We went for a walk upriver, meeting the Montreal couple who were waiting for their plane to land and take them out; I learned later that other parties have been picked up here also. The plane came in despite the weather and they left. Toward evening, Joop called to me that the wind had gone down some. I crawled out of my tent, had a look and yelled "Let's go!" After a hurry-up packing job, we headed out. We continued past Hoare Point, against the wind of course, went around the next point (forgoing the portage across the peninsula), turned into the bay and made our final camp. It was one of the best sunsets ever.

**August 7:** We cleaned up and sorted out our gear. We placed the boats where we had been told to put them (open side up, weighted down with big rocks; they would be transported by zodiac up to Warden's Grove, then flown to the Whitefish camp). As is her wont, Enid went for a hike; Anne started out a few minutes later, on a different route. Enid came running back, shouting that she had run into a bear. I chased after Anne, who stopped after a while, and we returned to camp. The four of us walked around, staying close to camp though. A ground squirrel and I chatted for a while. I found a lot of driftwood near the point at the east end of the bay; I expect that it comes down the Dubawnt and is blown east.

**August 8:** We got up, put everything together and waited for our flights back. It was well into the afternoon before the Cessna 185 arrived. Joop and I had the tightest schedules so we went out on the first flight; such gentlemen. I recall a small lake that was still frozen (the pilot

explained that it froze right to the bottom) and also the polygons, the canyon (with its rapids) and other features from our trip. Anne and Enid got back, at dusk, on the second flight.

**August 9 and 10:** The flight for the four of us and our stuff came in from Yellowknife. It was a warm day though and the air was too thin for us to get off the water; we tried twice, then gave up. We pulled leftover food from our packs and waited till evening when it had cooled off some. Eventually, the pilot decided to try again, so we went out for the third time. He bounced the plane on the waves. Of course we did not have the airspeed to take off but I guess those few moments without water friction helped some. I was concerned though about damage to the struts. We got off, rather too close to land for comfort, and headed west, working our way around thunderstorms. The pilot informed us casually that he had returned to flying not long before, having spent a few months in hospital after a crash. We landed on Back Bay, with the needles on both fuel gauges pegged. Next day, my friend Jean Stewart in Yellowknife, who worked for the CBC there, invited us over to her place for a grand meal with some friends. And we ate also at restau-

rants, Anne had muskox at one of them. Then, sadly, it was time to go home.

I would make five more trips to the Barrens, the last in 2005. How I miss it now.

## Appendix

**Distance and duration:** 700 kilometres, in 23 days on the water, at a moderate pace. We had planned for 25 days on the water but lost two at the start. Given our later experiences on other Barren Land rivers, we were delayed only a little by wind. I ended up figuring on losing one day in six.

**Tip:** Travel in the north is done on what some call northern time; you are doing very well if your charter flights get you in and out on the agreed days.

**Rapids and portages:** Please note that high water may change things drastically. Whitefish Lake to the canyon: Lots of C2 and C3 rapids. One mandatory portage (at Muskox Falls) plus several that are highly advisable.

**The canyon:** Pretty well a mandatory portage. Some go right, others left. At least one party (I believe there are two such cases) tried to line down but lost a boat and spent a miserable, long time, with almost nothing in the way of supplies or shelter, waiting for someone



*Enid and Anne preparing lunch in wind break*





*Return flight: Thelon River near the canyon*

to notice that they were overdue.

**The canyon to Beverly Lake:** After a serious rapid below the Clarke confluence, lots of fast water but only one significant rapid, that at Thelon Bluffs.

**Bugs:** The worst in my experience except on the Kazan (2003). The Barren Land bugs are bad enough for a man; women who trip there are made of tougher material.

**Weather:** Clear and beautiful, except for a few days. Anne once jumped into the water in her dry suit to cool off. No snow, no hail, not once frost at night. Considerable wind though.

**People encounters:** A youth group seen three times at a distance, plus a couple seen twice (chatted with them).

**Wildlife:** One grizzly, several caribou (explicitly, no herd) and several dozen muskoxen.

**Scenery:** Many beautiful eskers above the canyon, not so good below it.

#### **Experiences with Barren Land**

**Bob: First incident:** Enid handled the finances; she had paid the full cost of the trip when requested to do so. But later she got an angry phone call from BB, demanding the balance of the payment and threatening to cancel the trip and keep our \$8,000 unless the balance was paid within hours. She explained that payment had been sent but he insisted, even more angrily, that it had not been received and he repeated the threat. Figuring that something had gone wrong, and believing the threat, she cancelled an appointment in order to courier the amount demanded. Well, it turned out that an error had been made in BB's office, that the balance had indeed been paid. BB never apologized for his behaviour, even when prompted to do so. The second cheque (voided) was returned to Enid, but she got into considerable trouble for cancelling the appointment.

**Second incident:** All went well in Yellowknife until we prepared to board the Twin Otter for the flight to Whitefish Lake. There were the four of us (with gear and food for 25 days on the river, but no canoes) plus six of BB's guests and their gear. To most people, that is too large a load for a Twin Otter; in any case, the operator left most of our gear behind. BB threw another fit, blaming us for having too much gear. So there we were at Whitefish without supplies to paddle the river; I was the only one with a tent, most of the food was still in Yellowknife, and so on. BB eventually flew back to Yellowknife and brought the rest of our stuff to Whitefish. We started downriver, two days late.

There was more remarkable behaviour but perhaps you have had enough of my grouching.

# The Biggest Moose in The World

Story by Gary Storr

Our canoe trip into the north end of Algonquin Park had been fraught with inclement weather. My brother-in-law, Ross, and I had battled high winds and been tossed by roiling seas. We'd been drenched in torrential downpours and had sat out a thunderstorm that ripped the grommets from our tarp. Then, on our next-to-last day, the skies began to clear and we washed ashore onto a long, sandy beach on North Tea Lake.

Here we experienced the most brilliant sunset imaginable. Reflected off the lake, it was surreal in its intensity. We swam in the frigid water, exercised our culinary skills one last time, then cleaned up and retired for the night. I had just begun to doze when Ross shook me awake. "Gary," he whispered urgently. "Something's pissing on the tent!"

"What?" I mumbled, half asleep.

"Something's pissing on the tent! Listen!"

Sure enough, something was urinating on the tent. We listened intently as a steady stream of liquid splattered onto the fly right above where Ross lay, his eyes wide with fear.

"What is it?" he breathed anxiously.

"I don't know."

It had a full bladder, whatever it was, because it kept peeing and peeing.

"Do you think it's a bear?" There was panic in his voice.

"Maybe a moose," I whispered. "I don't think a bear can piss that high."

I thought about it some more and said, "I've never seen a moose take a leak. It would have to raise its hind leg like a dog to hit the tent, wouldn't it? Unless, of course, it's *straddling* the tent."

Ross could stand it no longer. He leaped over to my side where we huddled together, listening...but suddenly the noise stopped. We waited with bated breath, but could hear nothing. It was out there biding its time, waiting for one of us to emerge - we knew that much. After a while we decided to scope out the situation so we slowly unzipped the door and peered into the darkness. Cautiously, we crawled out, but whatever had been there was, thankfully, gone. We examined the tent and were confounded to discover that it was dry. Nervously, we swept our flashlight beam across the campsite but all was quiet.

We crawled back in and once we were settled, something immediately resumed pissing on the tent. Ross jumped out of his sleeping bag at his wit's end, and again it stopped. Then he made a discovery. There was a large air bubble in the middle of his bed. Being unfamiliar with self-inflating mattresses, he had blown in one too many puffs of air before closing the valve. The unfortunate result? The interior fibres were slowly tearing away from the outer shell. And you can guess what a delaminating sleeping pad sounds like: the biggest moose in the world.

# Why Do You Go?

Often asked that by friends from work. Told them it's personal. Everyone has their own reasons for going. Can hardly talk about it with my wife. It's too close to the heart.

All reasons for going are OK. None are better than others. You go because you have to. Or because not going hurts too much. You go because at heart you are an adventurer and you want to see honest-to-goodness wilderness. You go because the core of what is you has been seared so deep that you cannot find happiness in any other activity or place. Tropical beaches, world famous museums, and exotic locations can't equal the happiness that you find in the wilderness. You go to capture, if just for a few moments, exactly how all life should feel. Alive.

I'm sitting here at work now. A long way from the wilderness. And I'm losing it. That vibrancy. That zest for life. That enjoyment of every moment of the day. Stuff that should be in every pore of my being.

The wilderness gives you a reservoir of strength that you can draw upon when you are back in the city. A lot like a dam built to hold winter snow melt. That water is saved to be released in the deep heat of summer when people and crops really need it. The wilderness reservoir will give you that same infusion of strength. Released when needed. When your spirits are low. When you are faced with a difficult task back in the city. When a tough decision has to be made. When work seems endless. Just like water to dry soil.

And the best is when you just get back from the wilderness. The reservoir is at storage capacity. "Full pool" is what the hydrologists call it. Hopefully the wilderness reservoir will be full enough to carry you until next year. Then you can go back and get replenished again.

Worst nightmare is wanting to go back, and none of the variables are allowing it.

"Always next year." Keep telling yourself that. On some days it might even help.

Greg Went





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