

ROAD TO LEARNING

IT WAS OCTOBER of the year 1919 when I first went into northern Saskatchewan. While working in the harvest fields of the southern part of the province, I had made it known that I wanted to get as far away from civilization as possible to hunt and trap for a living. I had spent a few years on my homestead near Maple Creek and I had been in British Columbia, yet I had never found anything to my liking in the way of establishing a permanent occupation.

The news of my intentions spread among the harvest hands. Co-workers Ernest Stender of Kisbey, Saskatchewan and Harry Hughes, late of the state of Oregon, were as anxious to see the North as I was. We entered into a partnership.

We bought an outfit of traps, guns, skis, tent, folding camp stove with collapsible stovepipes, and all the other tools and supplies we would need to spend a winter in the bush, then shipped it all by rail to Prince Albert. Then we purchased one-way railroad tickets to this jumping-off place for the land of our dreams, a land of opportunity, adventure, and peace.

When our little group arrived in Prince Albert, we walked into a building called Lacroix Hardware on River Street. I was elected to enquire where we might find a Game Commissioner and was directed to see Mr. Andy Holmes, at that time Chief Game Commissioner for the Province of Saskatchewan. We found him at his residence, and thus began my long friendship with one of the finest gentlemen I have ever met.

That day was October 3, less than one month before the trapping



Hanson and his partners shipped what they needed for a winter in the bush by rail to Prince Albert, where they bought the first three trapping licenses issued in Saskatchewan.

season was to open officially. Holmes suggested that we locate ourselves at Candle Lake without delay and work our way north from there. We had been told that trappers must purchase trapping licenses. Holmes said that, starting with the current trapping season, trappers were indeed required to buy a license, which cost twenty-five cents each. He pointed out one advantage to the holder: if he failed to show up in the spring, then the authorities would have some idea where to look for him. That day we bought the first trapping licenses to be issued in Saskatchewan. Harry was issued No. 1; I had No. 2; and Ernest had No. 3, as that was the order in which we sat on the bench when we faced Holmes. I have no idea how many licenses were issued that year, but it gives me a good feeling to know that we were first in line. By the next year a trapper could be taken to court if he failed to be licensed, and the cost of the document had risen to two dollars.

Now it was urgent that we find someone to freight our supplies to Candle Lake. Back again at the helpful hardware store, we were told to look up a Mr. Van Ryswick, who was the proprietor of a confectionery on Eighty Street and First Avenue East. We were in luck, as Van Ryswick was expecting a friend from Henribourg who did commercial hauling with horses and would freight our supplies over the bush trail to Candle Lake. On October 5, this man, whose name I have forgotten, arrived with a wagon and a team of horses, and on the following day we left with him for his farm.

The next day the weather was sunny and mild—a grand autumn day. Our host spent that day preparing for our trip and invited us to go hunting to pass the time. It was also my birthday, and we would go hunting in order to celebrate it. We spent the morning in a fruitless search, but by mid-afternoon I had bagged my first deer in the North, a nice buck with a fine set of antlers and a grand birthday gift for a greenhorn big game hunter. The farmer got half of the meat, while we would take the remainder with us on our trip to Candle Lake.

As we slept that night, our beautiful weather left us. The next morning visibility was down to less than one hundred yards; it was snowing heavily and deep snow covered the ground, creating a great silence all around. We were unable to set out on our journey until October 10, the day it stopped snowing.

The wagon did not track well in the deep snow, so after the first day of travel we had only reached the village of Meath Park. All the way, we had walked alongside the wagon while the farmer drove his team. The flat steel wagon wheels collected snow and mixed it with the debris of

autumn—grass and dead leaves. It built up more and more as the wheels turned, so we had to keep knocking off the accumulation with our axes. This made it much easier for the labouring horses.

It had not been easy on us, however. We stumbled onto the one log grocery store in the dark because the village was hidden by dense poplar and spruce timber. Only a beam of light streaming from a small window told us the store was there, but we were made welcome and, after a big meal, rolled thankfully into our blankets following our heavy day on the trail.

Half a mile on our way next morning the cleaning of the wheels had to be resumed. We came to an area where the snow had settled and by that time were more than ready for our meal of fried venison, bread, jam and coffee. (When we work hard manually for long periods, an ordinary meal becomes a great banquet.) We gave the horses a good feed of hay and oats, then men and beasts enjoyed a much-needed rest.

Continuing on our way, we crossed a creek where the crossing had a base of broken corduroy. Here snow, water, and mud gave us a bad time, and but for the abilities of the farmer, who was a good horseman, we might have become hopelessly mired. It seemed as if we had travelled twenty-five miles that day, but in reality it was only half that distance.

This was our first night of camping out. The tent was set up, but we did our cooking at the campfire because the weather was so mild a stove in the tent was not required. Once again that night our slumber was deep and dreamless.

It was the day we had planned to reach Candle Lake, but we were far from our destination when we broke camp that morning. Later in the day our party had reached the south end of Torch Lake, sometimes called Little Candle Lake. Here the wagon and the horses got stuck in a muddy creek. We tried desperately to get the wagon through, but in the end we had to unload every bit of freight.

From the creek bank, we could see that the lake had frozen over. Sure enough, when we tested the ice, we found it was strong enough to permit a man to walk safely just out from the shore.

Since our teamster was running short of hay and oats for his horses, we decided to send him home. We could now easily transport our outfit on the ice by hand sleigh to Candle Lake. The teamster reasoned correctly that he would have no problems on his return trip since he would be traveling empty and light. He left us shortly, a good man who had been eager to help us.

It was early in the day, but we made a decision to set up camp, and put

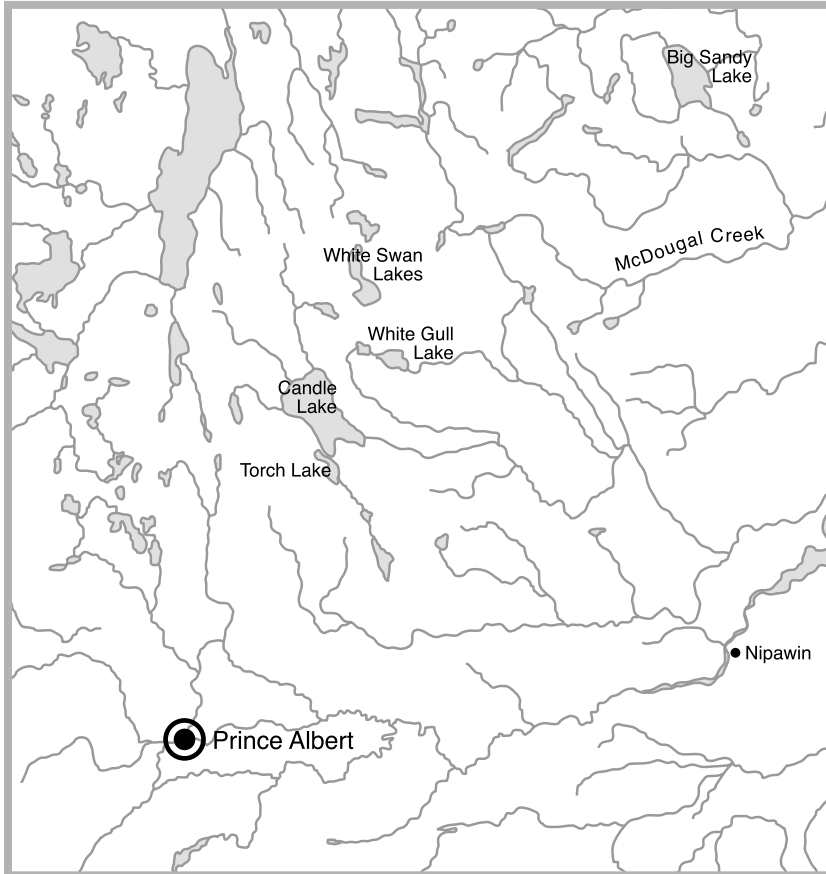
up the tent, cut a supply of wood and gathered spruce bows for our beds. Now, we thought, we were in the wild North, about seventy miles from Prince Albert. We had marked the transition zone between civilization and the wilderness by observing tracks of much big game in the snow on our way to this location, and we were now in real silence for nearly all sounds were those we made ourselves.

In the morning, Ernest and I went scouting along the shore of Torch Lake. Fortunately we had brought two pairs of skates with us, and as the lake appeared to be completely frozen over, we donned the skates and in short order reached the north end of the lake, crossed a portage of about one hundred yards long and stood looking over the wide expanse of Candle Lake for the first time. Much to our surprise and dismay, for as far as we could see down the lake there was open water with white-capped waves rolling in a fair wind and bright sunshine. Until this moment we had not known the larger and deeper lakes freeze up later than do those that are small and shallow.

It was necessary to revise our plans. While in Prince Albert we had obtained maps of the area, but they lacked detail. In fact, these showed only the larger lakes: Torch, Candle, West Candle, Gull (now White Gull Lake), and White Swan. We selected Gull Lake as the site of our winter base camp, built a sleigh, and hauled our supplies across Torch Lake and then across the portage to the shore of Candle Lake. Our plan was to wait there until the lake froze over and then move to Gull Lake.

It was October 17. While in Prince Albert I had also heard that muskrat skins were selling for up to two dollars each for prime furs. Ernest and I had counted more than one hundred muskrat houses and push-ups while travelling on Torch Lake. As no other humans seemed to be about, we decided to begin our own hunting and trapping season. Harry considered that muskrats were not worth trapping; he was interested in trapping foxes, lynx and mink. During the past several days, we had seen only one coyote track, so it seemed to me there would be no fortunes made from what is termed "long-haired fur" in this country and we had better take all the muskrats we could.

The next day we made twelve muskrat sets. Before dark we had taken seven pelts and the next day ten more; by October 20 more than sixty skins. Right from the start we took care not to open too many muskrat houses to show the evidence of our trapping activity. Our group was definitely contravening the law that said the open season was not to begin until November 1.



The three trappers walked alongside the team of horses hauling their supplies from P.A. as far as the south end of Torch Lake and used their axes to knock the snow and leaves from the wagon's wheels.

Another day Harry and I explored the east shore of Candle Lake, planning to walk overland all the way to Gull Lake. We were packing a good supply of food, including bannock, coffee, sugar, and bacon. Before leaving I had hidden all the muskrat pelts by packing them in a canvas bag and securing them with stovepipe wire high in a large spruce tree. Then I buried all the carcasses deep in a muskeg.

Ernest planned to keep half a dozen traps going, just for something to do in our absence.

Our journey begun, Harry and I were slogging along shore for some distance when suddenly we came upon a Forestry Department cabin. A man named Frank Clark, the Forest Ranger, was in camp. This of course was a great surprise to us, as we had no previous knowledge of this establishment and the fact that we were camped so close to it, to say nothing of the fact that a part of Clark's duties was to apprehend violators of the game and trapping laws!

Clark showed us true northern hospitality by preparing us a nice lunch. He gave us very helpful information by directing us where to camp for the night, at an abandoned trapper's cabin situated in a large spruce bluff where the Torch River leaves Candle Lake.

As we had dallied too long under Clark's hospitality, our journey was now a bit behind schedule. It was almost dark when we reached the river, and it looked to be quite a distance to the other side. Clark had told us that we would have to wade across; there was no sign of ice there at this time of the year. Our footwear was shoe-pacs, eighteen-inch waterproof moccasins, which we removed along with our socks, then rolled up our pantlegs and started to wade, testing the water depth as we went, with the aid of two six-foot poles.

The end of October is not wading weather in the North. We hoped that the water would be not more than hip deep, yet we found it to be not more than a few inches deep all the way across! We need not have removed our footwear to walk across dry-footed. Clark had not mentioned the water's depth and the joke was on us. However, a good foot wash in the icy water could have been considered a benefit.

The night that followed is one I will never forget. We had brought no bedding. Looking around in the dark for the abandoned cabin, we were unable to locate the structure. In fact, Harry and I could not see each other when more than six feet apart. Giving up our search and a chance for a night of shelter and warmth from the stove Clark had said it contained, we built a lean-to of spruce and built a fire about seven feet long

for light, cooking and to sleep beside. I was also able to find my way back to the river to fetch a pail of water for our coffee.

We slept with our clothes on, one on each side of the fire, turning over from time to time as the side away from the fire became cool. Harry was packing a shotgun on this trip to shoot small game for food. He also carried four shotgun shells in his hip pocket. During the night he moved too close to the fire until his pants caught on fire, smouldering slowly as he slept.

We were jolted awake by a loud explosion, like a gunshot, then another. We ran for the bush, wondering who had shot at us. It was not until we stopped to rest that we noticed Harry's shredded hip pocket, still smouldering. We retrieved two shotgun shells but his pants were wrecked. The balance of the night was spent in uneasy sleep, but Harry was ready to travel next morning, although he did not walk as briskly as he had on the previous day.

The morning light revealed that we had camped out only about seventy-five feet from the old cabin. Close by was a bush trail used by trappers travelling from Torch River to Gull Lake. How unnecessary seemed our problems of the past night!

Frank Clark had also informed us that he had made a trip to Gull Lake where he had found another deserted trapper's cabin, complete with a tin box stove. We were to turn left where the trail ended at Gull Lake and, upon reaching the only spruce covered point of land on the lake, we could find the cabin.

During our travels that day, we shot two spruce hens, and then finding a fine stand of low-bush cranberries, we filled a small sack with frozen fruit. We stopped for a very fine meal and proceeded to enjoy our feast. As the weather was beautiful, I am afraid we tarried too long again, for it was now too late to reach Gull Lake in daylight.

By the time we saw the lake it was getting dark. As the lake ice was thick enough for travel, we still thought we would have no trouble finding the cabin. This is when our difficulties began.

A short distance down the lake, we could see a spruce point in the dusk. On examination, we found that the point was only fifty feet wide and not suitable for a cabin site. From this spot, we could see another spruce point faintly in the distance. I wondered why Frank Clark had not mentioned this second point. As we neared the second point it looked more promising. Since it was wide enough to accommodate a cabin, we spent some time searching for one. By now it was very dark and clouding over, making our search more difficult. We still had not found the cabin, and I



Harry Hughes photographed Hanson (left) and Ernest Stender resting as they transported their outfit to Candle Lake themselves using hand sleighs.

was becoming somewhat annoyed. The possibility struck me that Frank Clark had perpetrated a practical joke on a couple of greenhorns and was having a good laugh at our expense.

Again, in near dark, we made out a shape that could be another point of land. We trudged over to this place, but this point also was too narrow to be a cabin site. Once more we saw a distant point and, convinced that this finally must be our destination, we struck out again. Halfway there, while testing the ice for thickness, I saw a dark spot a few feet away. Walking over to check it, I found a round flat tin can. Lighting a match, I saw it was a new can of Nabob brand coffee! It seemed strange to find something like this out here. I lit another match and found two pairs of footprints made by people wearing moccasins and going in the same direction we were. Harry lit another match, and I put my foot in one of the tracks—it fit perfectly! Slowly, we realized that we had been traveling in circles.

Harry searched his pack to see if we still had our unopened can of coffee. The seam had parted in the bottom of his packsack and, besides the missing can of coffee, we had also lost a pound of lard.

We camped that night rather uncomfortably on the narrow point, for it was too narrow to set up camp properly. With the coming of daylight, we found that this was an island rather than a point. There are three islands in Gull Lake, lying somewhat in the shape of a three-bladed propeller. After breakfast, we went looking for our missing pound of lard, for in the North one does not take lightly the loss of such an item. We found it after an hour's search. It was on the first island we had encountered the night before.

In retrospect, we felt the loss of the can of coffee and subsequently finding it was a very valuable lesson. At night, in a strange wilderness location, one should not waste time looking for strange cabins.

In daylight, we easily found the cabin on the only spruce covered point on the lake. The structure had been well-built, but most of the moss originally packed into the chinks between the logs had fallen away. We spent the next two days and night repairing the cabin until we were satisfied that we now had a very good base camp for our winter trapping activities. On the fourth day we left to find Ernest at Candle Lake.

We set off in a happy mood with no clouds on our horizon.

It was dark when we reached the forestry cabin at Candle Lake. On seeing a lighted window, we stopped in to visit with Frank Clark. In response to our knock and much to our surprise, the door was opened by

Chief Game Commissioner Andy Holmes! We were invited in and talked about Gull Lake and the deserted cabin. Since it appeared that no one had used the cabin for at least two years and that there was no food or equipment stored there, Holmes said that we had the right to move in.

While we were talking, I glanced upward and saw some newly-stretched muskrat skins hanging among the log rafters. Quite innocently, I asked my host where he had obtained these. Looking me straight in the eye, he replied, "They're your partner Ernest's skins."

In the short interval of silence that followed, my brain was working overtime. I finally said I was very surprised that my partner had begun trapping before the season opened, all the while wondering about the safety of our first catch that I had hidden in the spruce tree, obviously undiscovered since there were fewer than thirty skins in this cabin.

Holmes told us Ernest had said that he had grown lonesome in our absence and set a few traps just for something to do. Holmes said he was sorry but he would have to prosecute Ernest for trapping out of season. There were two choices; he could be tried in a court in Prince Albert or he could appear before a magistrate. Since Holmes himself was also a magistrate, we could handle it much more quickly right here. He said he would be holding court next morning if Ernest elected to appear before him.

Holmes, as before, gave us much useful information along with a good meal before we set out the six miles to our camp.

The walk was pleasant and, usually looking at things on the brighter side, I suggested to Harry as follows:

"Ernest will be rather blue, so let's cheer him up by pulling his leg. How about we play dumb and pretend we don't know a damned thing about his problem?"

Ernest was happy to see us. We noticed that he was more quiet than usual as he set about to prepare our supper, and at no time did he make any reference to furs. When I finally asked him how many muskrats he had trapped, he squirmed uncomfortably and began to tell the story.

He had been out on the trapline when Holmes had stopped in on his way from Prince Albert on official business with Frank Clark. Before he had left that morning, Ernest had hidden his pelts under the spruce bough mattress of his bed in the tent. With no reason to suspect anything and not knowing who occupied the tent, Holmes gave the place a cursory inspection, but as he turned to leave he saw several whiskey jacks darting about, interested in something on the ground. He found that these birds were picking at several freshly-skinned muskrat carcasses.

He then awaited the return of the unknown trapper and confiscated another four skins, that day's catch.

Ernest was very worried, certain that he would be handed a jail term. Harry and I tried to cheer him by saying he would probably be fined. It was mutually agreed that we all be present for Magistrate Holmes's justice in the morning.

We reluctantly struck out that morning for our date with the law, arriving at about 11 A.M. We found that there was another client ahead of us for this chap had been found trapping at a place called "the fish station." This fellow was also uneasy. The proceedings went swiftly; Holmes handed Ernest a twenty-dollar fine, payable by January 1.

Everyone was happy once more, Holmes invited us to dinner after which we shook hands and left. There were no hard feelings; we realized that Holmes was our good friend and one who was only doing his duty.

My cache of furs still hung undiscovered in the tree, so I got away with it. However, we all learned our lesson that day and others learned the same way. If you chose to trap during the closed season, you were gambling. One year you might not be caught but the next year you would be. In my experience, I found that the trapper was invariably the loser, what with fines, confiscations, fur that was less than prime, worry, and uncertainty.

Then began the task of moving our outfit to Gull Lake. We built an improved sled and loaded our effects; we were learning, for this sled pulled easily. We worked our way northward across Candle Lake on new ice, then across country through the bush to Gull Lake. We were also learning that if you go a little more slowly real progress becomes more certain.

Things went well at our new location. By Christmas, our collection of muskrat skins numbered three hundred and sixty. As the daylight hours were quite short, we worked hard and did not miss our former surroundings. The wonders of the wilderness were our entertainment; its sounds, our music. We were very fortunate in that our cabin proved to be solid and comfortable.

At this time, a travelling fur buyer offered us \$3.50 apiece for our muskrat skins. We considered this a fine price—over twelve hundred dollars in total.

Before we headed to Prince Albert to celebrate, we picked up our traps, so we had eleven more skins. We sold these in town for \$5 each; which meant our loss on the first lot was over \$500 and that we had learned another lesson.

In those days we had no marketing information and, because of our



In the spring of 1920 Hanson (left) and Stender packed their catch of 120 muskrat skins in a canvas box to keep it dry on the way to market.

isolation, little idea of prevailing market prices. We sold with much more care thereafter, as did many other trappers who had had similar experiences.

Altogether we put in a satisfactory winter—it was a pleasant existence and we made a fair amount of money, considering the purchasing power of the Canadian dollar at that time. Although we trapped the Candle and Gull Lake country, I made two trips on foot to White Swan Lake to the north.

That year I shot my one and only timber wolf in all my years in the North. I had occasion to hear them howl frequently, yet they stayed clear of men as a rule.

The month of May came all too quickly for us, and the trapping season was over. When we arrived in Prince Albert with one hundred and twenty muskrat skins, we were shocked to learn that most buyers would not quote a price, for the bottom had fallen out of the fur market. One buyer offered us twenty-five cents each—what a disappointment! I had talked to another trapper and learned that he had received an average of \$2.10. We made a mad dash for this other buyer, and our average price there was the same as quoted by our trapper friend.

A celebration immediately followed, of course.

Somewhat later I learned what had happened in the fur market. I met our buyer a week later. Three days after he bought our furs, he received a telegram from his head office instructing him to stop buying pelts. An American firm in St. Louis had tried to corner the fur market. It was a vast organization. Fur prices reached fantastic heights and muskrats went to \$5—a rise of four hundred per cent—over the price in the previous season.

Trappers, excited by the vision of fortunes to be made, headed for swamps, skinning their catch around campfires at night and jotting down mythical values in pocket notebooks. Traders were taken in, since the delays in communication from their parent firms delayed the news of the market crash for weeks, so that they paid the high prices when actually the market did not exist.

The St. Louis firm was forced into bankruptcy, and it was said a bank failed as a result. Assets of the firm were liquidated, their vast stores of fur sold to the highest bidder until this commodity became unsaleable because of the oversupply.

My partners now left to visit their homes: Ernest to Glenavon,

Saskatchewan, and Harry to Brandon, Oregon, where he wanted me as his partner to develop a dairy farm. He needed more money, so I gave him a payment of \$500 for fifteen acres of land in his home state, but I did not go to Oregon.

