

## FOREST RANGER

**W**ITH THE END OF THE First World War, Canadian veterans were returning home, and one met them here and there in the North. The Canadian Government was working hard to place these men into civilian life by way of jobs, farmland and training. One such veteran whom I had met in the previous winter was Bert Vanderkracht.

My partners had visited with Bert during our travels and had shared experiences and stories. They had included my role in some of these tales and represented me as a woodsman of some ability. Actually, though I was learning a great deal, I would hardly have considered myself an experienced woodsman at that time. Still, Bert seemed interested and wanted to meet me.

In February of that year they met again, but this time I was in their company. Bert asked me about my plans for the coming summer.

“I really don’t know,” I said. “I haven’t given it much thought. Something always turns up.”

Bert wanted to stay in the North and he came up with an interesting plan. Being a war veteran he felt he could get a government job as a forest

Hanson on fire patrol with the first dog  
he purchased, photographed near the  
Fire Ranger cabin at Candle Lake.

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ranger. He admitted he knew little about the work involved but thought if we teamed up he would try to get me appointed as his assistant, and I could teach him to be a woodsman. I readily agreed because I would then be drawing regular pay for doing work I enjoyed. After Bert sent in the applications, we went our separate ways until one day I received word that our applications were accepted and we would be assigned to the Candle Lake District. I was delighted, and thus began my life as a forest ranger's assistant.

Included in the course I laid down for my friend was how to travel across country through the bush without getting lost. In this activity we did a great deal of walking; in the beginning, we were on the move four or five days a week. I tried to teach him what I knew and stressed that in the North it is essential to always be certain of the direction in which you are travelling. This is particularly important on cloudy days when the sun is hidden and other signs become obscured.

Wilderness knowledge can save your life in this harsh climate, and life can be comfortable here if you follow the rules. I felt that Bert was learning the basics of survival, and he proved to be a good student. I taught him what I knew of wilderness survival, but I still had many things to learn at that time and added to my woods education as the years went by.

During that summer I instructed Bert as follows.

"In sunshine you have of course the sun to direct you while travelling in the woods. In cloudy weather many outdoorsmen use a compass, and I strongly urge you to use one too. No one should be in the woods without one. There will be occasions when you find yourself without a compass: by forgetting it at home, because of accidental loss or breakage, or because of some other reason, such as when you become separated from your hunting partner, who has the only compass.

"Imagine it's a nice sunny day, so you separate and go in different directions. There is nothing to worry about for the sun is out. You are interested in finding game, and two or three hours pass by. Now you decide to return to camp, but when you look for the sun the sky is overcast. If it's wintertime, it may begin to rain or snow. You have no compass, for your partner has it. You decide you will have no difficulty in finding your way back to camp, and you strike off quickly in the direction you think your camp is located. After you have walked for an hour or two, you still haven't seen any of the landmarks noted on your way in. It is getting dark. You rush on instead of stopping for the night and making a fire. You panic and run. No one ever finds you again.

“I have met several men who told me that while lost in the bush they have walked all night hoping to get back to camp. The lucky ones are found, but some vanish forever.

“I was raised in bush country. I never carry a compass because I have learned to find my way without one. From the age of seven until I was sixteen, I lived in wilderness country in northern Minnesota. There is a lot of aspen or white poplar in this region. Several old woodsmen told me that I would never lose my way in cloudy weather if I studied the white poplars. ‘The south side of the bark is white and the north side is green,’ they told me.

“By the time I was sixteen years of age, I could keep my directions just by glancing at the poplars as I walked. I found this more convenient than taking out a compass and stopping to take a reading. My method meant that I did not have to stop to check on my directions.

“During the winter of 1914–1915 I had been trapping in the Cariboo district of British Columbia. There I found that spruce and jack pine were covered with moss and lichens on the north side to about one or two feet above the butt of the tree. I could now ‘read’ poplar, spruce, and jack pine, and I never had any problems finding my way while in that region.

“However, when I came to northern Saskatchewan that first winter, we had snowfall in excess of three feet. In jack pine and spruce forest I could dig down to find the moss and lichen growth, but I found this too time-consuming. I began to examine the trees more carefully, and I discovered more direction indicators. The south sides of spruce and jack pine trees I found have loose scaly bark; on the north side the scales are much tighter. Then I found that spruce and jack pine have lichens growing under the bark scales on the north sides of the trees. The bark is brighter and more glossy on the south sides. I was astonished that I hadn’t noticed these signs before. Now I was all set to forget about carrying a compass.

“Occasionally I was still out in my directions, but never enough to become lost. Every year there was news of someone who had been lost in the bush. That was when I began to examine all kinds of trees and anything growing that might have some indicators to show north and south. I wasn’t long in finding the north and south sides of all varieties of trees. Tamarack, I learned, have dull-coloured bark on the north and bright glossy scales on their south sides. Birch, one of the most difficult trees to read as a direction finder because of its white bark all around, has a few specks of lichen on the north side of old trees. Many large birch have split bark, always on the south side. These cracks are caused

by alternate thawing and freezing in warm and cold weather. There are days in March when the sun shines warmly on the south side of the trees, thaws the bark on that side only, and when the thermometer plummets in the night, the bark is refrozen and splits open. Willow and alders show glossy bark on the south sides and dull bark on the north sides.

“Never look for direction signs from trees that are standing close together in thick bush. Here the tree trunks are in perpetual shade, the boles never exposed to direct sunlight. Only trees with an open exposure to the sun will show its effects on bark colouration. Trees on the edge of any old clearing, such as on a lake shore, river bank, edge of an open muskeg or rim of an old burning will give you the signs. An open muskeg is one of the best locations because the small stunted tamaracks will give you a very good reading. There are lichens growing up from four to seven feet from the butt on the north side of each tree. Tree signs of course cannot be found in burnt stands of trees.

“During daylight travel, keep track of your direction constantly and the length of time you walk in each direction, assuming that you are carrying a watch. When it is time to return, you can judge very closely the distance and direction to your destination.

“I have been told by good woodsmen that all trees have more limbs on the south side. I will agree that many trees have more limbs on the south side, but others do not, and lots of trees have more limbs on the north side! Using this method will eventually get you lost in the woods.

“Anyone who frequently travels on foot through wooded country should practice keeping his or her direction by reading the trees in sunlight as well as in cloudy conditions. You will learn that you are determining north and south as a sixth sense without realizing you are doing so. As a beginner you will be uncertain and slow in your progress and finding your direction. But each day will find you more adept and improved.

“Let me stress again that you should carry a compass because it may one day save your life. There are places, however, where a compass will keep you travelling in all directions. In Canada’s Pre-Cambrian Shield, should you find yourself in an area of magnetic iron ore, the compass needle may point to any direction, but a lone tree will still give you a reliable direction reading.

“I have experienced all these things about direction finding. I never worry about becoming lost, and I never have been lost. Several times when I was looking for big game or fur animals and new trapping territory, I would find myself ten or fifteen miles from camp when darkness

overtook me. If the night was clear, I set out for camp using the North Star or the Big Dipper as a guide. If travelling through thick bush, I could always get a glimpse of the Little Dipper to the east, and sooner or later I would come upon one of my trails leading to camp.

“Always remember not to panic in any situation.

“When you leave your camp in the morning to travel for a day in the woods, take enough food for at least three meals and a tin tea pail with a wire bail or handle to hang it over the camp fire. Any four- or five-pound tin will do. It will be a great comfort to you to make tea or coffee if you have to camp out.

“If the weather is cloudy, I make camp early. I always carry a good supply of matches in a waterproof matchbox, as well as a belt axe and a hunting knife. Matches are most important and could mean the difference between life and death. A mid-winter camp without them means that you will have to keep running in a small circle to keep from freezing to death.

“Any time you are overtaken by darkness in cloudy weather when you are more than one mile from your camp, trail or road, stop for the night. Try to find a place where there is some dry wood, also some green spruce. Make your fire first. By its light you can cut a supply of wood and build your shelter. To make a good lean-to, look for two trees standing on level ground and eight to ten feet apart. Cut a pole two or three feet longer than the distance between the two trees. Now cut two poles eight or nine feet long; trim off all limbs except the top one on each pole, as this limb is used to hold up the cross pole against the tree on each side of the shelter. Place poles about a foot apart against the cross pole, and seal off any wind by piling spruce boughs on the slanting poles. Always build your lean-to so that the wind is blowing towards the fire and away from the lean-to so that you and the fire are in the shelter of the wind.

“Now cut a good supply of spruce boughs for your bed and to keep your feet out of the snow. Keep your fire about seven feet in length. You will find yourself reasonably comfortable and will even get a few naps of sleep in weather that is minus forty degrees Fahrenheit. It will give you a lot of satisfaction and confidence to know that you have successfully spent the night under extreme conditions and found your way to camp next morning.”

After about two months on the job, I dreamt up a challenge for Bert. I suggested that we walk from Candle Lake to Montreal Lake, a round trip of some fifty miles. His eyes lit up with interest and we prepared for this trip with enthusiasm and joy.



The whole season's fur catch, prepared and stretched, looked pretty impressive.

Our needs on the trail were becoming simpler. Our food was bannock, tea, coffee, a tin of jam, a can of butter and a few tins of pork and beans. I knew we would feel we were eating like kings.

We paddled the canoe to the west end of Candle Lake. That night we camped on the lakeshore and talked a long time in the twilight, for a fine bond of companionship had built up between us in the past weeks.

I estimated that we should reach Montreal Lake in one day of travel. I realized this was a challenge as we started off next morning. Shortly, we came upon a blazed trap-line trail, which we followed, for it led generally northward. These trails, I knew, could be very helpful when travelling in strange territory. By 1 P.M. this track became more distinct and continued to lead to the north. The training of the past weeks became evident now, for we walked at a brisk pace, covering a great deal of territory. Twice we stopped to rest and to enjoy a sustaining lunch.

At dusk we were elated to arrive at the shore of Montreal Lake. We felt a sense of some achievement. We were as yet far from our destination, the village called Montreal Lake, but felt confident of reaching our goal in due time. By way of celebration, we enjoyed the third lunch of the day, exuberant in our success.

Our search for the village led us toward the southwest as we followed the lakeshore for three hours. It was quite dark now, and we were dead tired. When we sat down to rest, we heard the barking of a dog from some distance away, a most welcome and wonderful sound, for it meant the village must be very close now. Soon we halted, as we came to the bank of a river that looked as if it could be very deep; crossing a strange river on foot in the dark is very foolhardy. We felt there must be a bridge to the village somewhere but searched in the dark to no avail.

Near the riverbank someone had been cutting hay. As we had brought no bedding, we made beds in the warm aromatic hay coils and fell into such a deep sleep that the sun was high in the sky when we awoke to see before our eyes the village we had been seeking in the dark.

We prepared an unhurried breakfast, savouring our food deliberately. I always particularly enjoyed breakfast when camping out; the food seemed to taste better and the coffee was delicious.

It was no problem to find the bridge in daylight. We followed the road to the village, a small trading centre which served the native population and the occasional white trapper or traveller.

Our first call was to the ranger station, but the Forest Ranger was away and no one could tell us when to expect his return. Next we visited with

the manager of Revillon Frères Trading Company at the trading post, a man we had met previously. Glad to see us, he invited us to stay for a few days. In those days strangers were always welcome, for with them came news of other places and other people. We rested there that day and the next night since our feet were sore from our long walk.

On the return trek to Candle Lake it was a joy to walk among the northern pines in warm sunshine. We made the trip in one long day, including the fourteen-mile canoe trip to our ranger station.

When you arrive at a goal that is difficult to attain, you always get tremendous joy from the achievement. By walking we had enjoyed the good sounds of nature, such as the glad song of birds at dawn and their soothing notes in the evening stillness. We had inhaled the good smell of decomposing leaves returning to the earth to nourish new growth.

During the entire fire season, we had only one small fire outbreak to put out, that near the community of Paddockwood, and we extinguished it in one day's work. This was in contrast to normal seasons, when prolonged hot dry weather changes the northland to a vast tinder box, when rangers and fire fighters work around the clock for long periods of time, and when situations arise where they are in real danger for their lives.

For the first time that September we heard the mating calls of the bull elk. Their bugling sounded from near and far across the hills and swampland, now in bright autumn array. I was so intrigued by the sound that I began to practice imitating it by using my voice and cupping my hands around my mouth. As elk were very plentiful that fall, I had an excellent opportunity to practice the sound. After a great deal of practice, I called one quiet evening and was immediately answered by a bull elk. After dark I listened to elk calling from several directions. When the calling ceased, I bugled and soon all the bulls were calling again.

That season I heard only two moose calls. It had not been a good season for them, and we saw little moose sign either.

This had been my first autumn in the North, and I found it to be my favourite of the seasons. The autumn colours were particularly vivid that year; poplar and birch turned bright yellow and the underbrush became a study in red, gold, russet, and beige. When these began to fade, the threadlike foliage of the tamaracks (a species of larch) splashed the swamplands with a yet more vivid yellow. It was then that I committed my life to the North.

The fire season ended on October 15, as did our jobs. The appointment

had been most valuable to me, for besides the salary and the experience, it seemed like a prolonged summer of continuous outdoor vacation.

Bert and I were at loose ends for a time but finally settled into the Gull Lake cabin for the trapping season. We did rather well financially, but Bert did not enjoy trapping, for often the animals suffered greatly due to the tortures inflicted by the leg hold trap, which was the only model available at that time.

After Christmas, Bert went commercial fishing with a chap named William Schrader at Candle Lake. This occupation did not appeal to me because it was hard and punishing work in the dead of winter.

I would resume trapping. I felt much as Bert did about the cruelties of traps, yet trapping was giving me a livelihood and providing a logical reason for being in the North, the place where I wanted to be.

