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FROM POACHER TO GAME GUARDIAN

NEAR THE END OF 1920, William Arenth arrived at Candle Lake from Oxbow, Saskatchewan. Bill was new to the North. We joined in a trapping partnership located at Gull Lake, in my headquarters of the previous trapping season.

By that time, I had bought three dogs and a toboggan, so we had no problem transporting our supplies. Bill asked me what I intended to do about dog feed.

“Don’t worry, Bill,” I said, “I can get a moose any time I want one.” In my first winter at Gull Lake, I had hunted moose with little success and a great deal of difficulty. Then one day I had met a Native hunter on the trail. Over a cup of tea at the campfire, he explained to me exactly how to track moose in the snow. Thereafter I did better. Sometimes I failed, but I gradually improved to the point where I was successful in two out of three attempts.

The news of my hunting success began to spread. Many trappers and commercial fishermen came to me for a moose or a caribou, and I began to shoot moose for anyone who asked me to get moose meat. In fact,

**Hanson spent the winter of 1920/21
trapping and hunting on the north shore
of Gull Lake.**

I was spending more time hunting than trapping the season I was with Bill Arenth. Caribou and moose were very plentiful; for an experienced hunter, it was like going out into a pasture and shooting a standing steer.

Thus I became adept at hunting moose, the only big game animal I ever learned to bag consistently. One little secret I kept to myself for years was that there is little point in trying to track a moose on a calm day. Go when a stiff breeze is blowing.

Bill had bought a new ten-by-twelve foot tent with a stove and all the necessary comforts for a long stay anywhere we chose to set up camp. With our dogs to haul the outfit, we now had an early version of the mobile home, and so we moved about a fair bit that winter. I had grown tired of the White Gull cabin and wanted to look at some new country. One day we loaded everything and moved eastward down White Gull Creek a distance of some twelve miles. In 1918, a big forest fire had burned through this area, and we found a nice green stand of spruce on the creek bank, close to lots of dry, fire-killed wood. We reached this spot on the last day of 1920, and here we would establish a new comfortable home.

To get the site ready we first had to get rid of the snow, and there was a lot of snow. First we tramped down an area about fifteen feet square. Then we lit a big fire on the site. By the time all the snow had melted off, it was 2 A.M. Then we had to clean up the resulting mess of ashes, so that the site was not ready until 3:30 A.M. One thing that you learn in the bush is patience.

We had not taken time for a meal. Now we celebrated the New Year by having a hearty lunch, which we dragged out to include another smaller lunch. Then we carefully set up the new tent and installed the fine airtight heater. We had worked a double shift even by our own standards.

New Year's Day we would celebrate by sleeping in very late. The beds were prepared, the stove was banked for the night, and we fell exhausted into our sleeping robes. What was left of the night would be comfortable.

I was the first to awaken that morning. I pulled my robe off my head, and as I began to move I felt something wet. When I threw off the robe, I promptly received a face full of snow! For a few seconds I just sat there trying to remember where I was while large snowflakes were falling on my upturned face, so that I could scarcely see anything.

My wits were returning. Snow covered our beds, and the tent was hardly there—the roof completely gone, the stovepipe leaning on what was left of one tent wall, and the stove lying on its side. Sparks from the

stovepipe had ignited the new cotton canvas as we slept. The roof had burned off, but the ends of the tent were intact.

Bill was still asleep. Now I called out, "Wake up Bill, Happy New Year!"

I sat down as he pulled the covers off his face and sat bolt upright. Snow fell on his head; then he scrambled to his feet.

"My tent! My new tent," he shouted.

It was a poor beginning to the new year and a great disappointment, yet we were fortunate we had lost only the tent. We might have awakened that morning playing a harp duet.

Bill wanted to return to the old cabin but I had another idea. The weather was rather mild, so I suggested that the tent could be repaired, and we got to work. From the toboggan we removed the carriage (a six-by-twelve foot canvas tarpaulin) which we tied in place over the ridgepole to make a partial roof. We swept off our beds, set up the stove and, though there was daylight showing here and there, we were back in business. Back at the Gull Lake cabin, Bill had another, smaller canvas, and there were a number of empty flour sacks. I returned to the cabin with the dogs and brought back this material. That night the repair job was completed, but the result was not nearly as fine an abode as we had had before the fire. Later that winter Bill made a trip to Prince Albert, returning with a new twelve-by-sixteen sheet of canvas from which we effected permanent repairs to the tent.

That winter was not very profitable as far as trapping was concerned. By early April I got a bit bored and decided that a trip to the fish station at Candle Lake would be in order. Every winter a couple of cabins there were the habitation of commercial fishermen and trappers, so on a visit there one might find from two to six men who were willing to play cards or just have a friendly visit. It was also the headquarters for the area mail delivery and pick-up and a place to learn any news from "outside," as we called civilization. The isolation of the North makes people very hospitable indeed. With a group like that one can have a great visit with never a dull moment.

I was greatly surprised to find a message waiting for me. Chief Game Commissioner Andy Holmes was asking me to call at his home the next time I should be in Prince Albert. During my conversation that evening with the fellows at the fish station I mentioned the contents of this message.

The general opinion of these gentlemen was that I would be as crazy as a hoot owl to go calling on the chief game commissioner. In all probability

he had collected a fine lot of evidence about all the big game I had been killing out of season. I too felt this was probably the reason I was being called in, yet above all things I did not want to be running away from people. I decided right then to go make my call, face the music, and pay my fine. After all, Holmes's job was to apprehend law-breakers, a role I fit exactly.

I left for Prince Albert and in due course arrived at the office of Chief Game Commissioner Holmes. I was very apprehensive about the outcome of this morning's events, for there had been a general tightening of the hunting and trapping regulations. Fines had been getting larger, and I had made little money that winter.

Mr. Holmes seemed very pleased to see me. After a few words of greeting and a bit of small talk, he went directly to the reason for his request that I call. He was offering me the position of Provincial Game Guardian!

To say that I was surprised would have been a huge understatement. I was dumbfounded! When my wits returned, I mumbled something about my inexperience at such work. Holmes assured me that I had nothing to worry about, for he personally would give me that training.

All this time my conscience had been bothering me. I was thinking about all the big game I had killed out of season, and I began to squirm. Finally I blurted out, "Mr. Holmes, I have violated the game laws many times, which makes me a poor candidate for the job."

Holmes smiled kindly at me and replied, "Mr. Hanson, we have all violated the game laws. Almost everyone in the country has done so, but we are now entering a new era where we must preserve our wildlife for the future. If you are engaged in enforcing the game laws, you will train and convince yourself that you shouldn't violate them."

"Actually," he continued, "because of your illegal activities, you are probably better qualified than most candidates to thwart poachers for you understand their methods and what to look for. Besides, your woods experience makes you a natural."

We talked for a long time then. When I left, I had accepted the job and was to begin May 1, 1921.

For the new job I was to supply my own team of horses and a wagon. I was next thing to being dead broke, but somewhere in my belongings was the deed for the land in Oregon that Harry Hughes had sold to me. I wrote to him and explained my need for ready cash. Would he buy back the fifteen acres of land? Within a short time, as long as it took for both letters to be delivered, he sent his letter and cheque. He strongly urged

me to not sell the land if possible, because the West Coast Highway passed by the corner of the property. Real estate values were rising in Oregon, he wrote, and he was certain that the place would one day be worth a lot of money.

I am afraid that at the time I could not have been less interested in Oregon real estate. I was also in dire need of funds to buy my team and wagon, so I cashed the cheque and sent Hughes the land deed. Many years passed before I heard from him again. By that time he owned a profitable dairy farm at Coquille, and what were once my fifteen acres overlooking the wide Pacific Ocean had reached values to stagger the imagination.

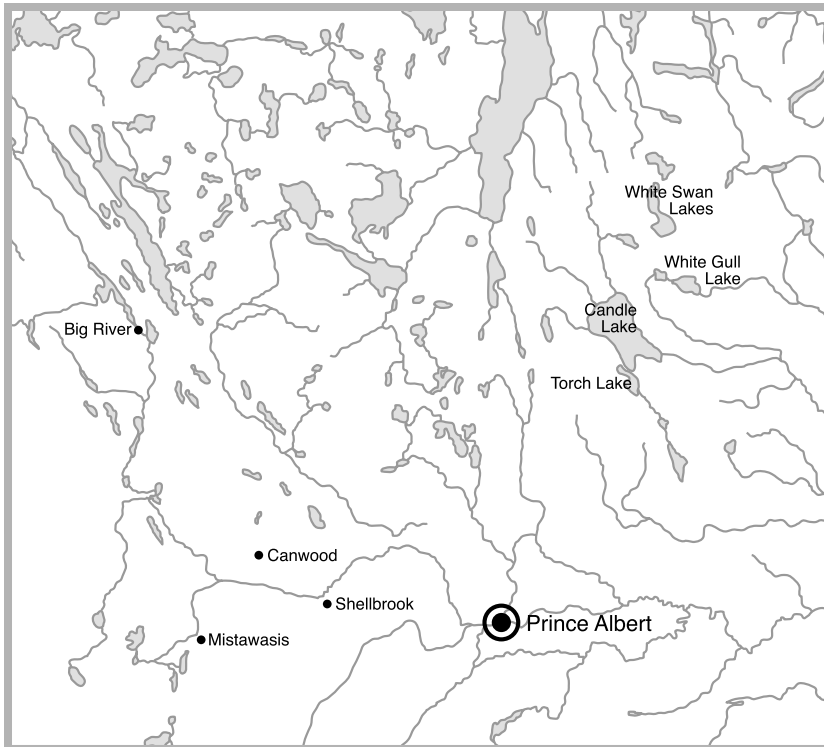
The same day that the cheque arrived, I bought a team of horses, a wagon, and two sets of harness, all for \$300. I picked up my camping outfit at Candle Lake where Bill Arenth had left it, returned to Prince Albert, and was ready to go to work by May 1.

My working area was quite large. My first assignment was to patrol with team and wagon from Prince Albert to Shellbrook, west to Mistiwas, north to Big River, and then back to Prince Albert.

I had been instructed to prosecute the big offenders, and my first priority was to catch a man who operated a country store at Stoney Lake (Delaronde Lake) near Big River. He bought big game carcasses from hunters and resold them to the locals. Meat was hard to come by for many residents, so that venison had a ready market. Any enforcement of the game laws would be a hard and painful process. Flagrant violations had been the rule for many years, and I realized that I would be disrupting a way of life. As it turned out, I was able to gather enough evidence to take the case to court. This took place in Big River on June 9, 1921. The court room was packed with local residents, and every person charged was fined from ten to two hundred dollars, depending on the extent of his misdemeanours. The storekeeper was required to pay the highest fine.

I learned quickly that enemies came easily in my line of work. By the end of my stay in Big River, I had no friends, and really I could not expect to have any, but it did bother me. In any frontier town there is apt to be a reckless, hard-drinking, and vocal element who would think nothing of running me bodily out of town—a situation similar to the popular understanding of the relationship between hillbilly moonshiner and revenue. Big River was exactly such a town at that time. I was lucky to get out of town peaceably and with a whole skin.

On my way back to Prince Albert, I stopped at Canwood and at all the



Beginning May 1, 1921, Game Guardian Hanson patrolled from Prince Albert west to Shellbrook and Mistawasis, north to Big River, then back to P.A.

lesser stations along the way. The news of the court cases had preceded me, and when I finally arrived in Prince Albert, all our staff shook my hand and congratulated me on a job well done.

These plaudits brightened my outlook considerably. I felt that I had been instrumental in demonstrating that the laws are applicable to everyone and that I was contributing to game conservation now in recompense for the violations I had perpetrated before. If we had continued without regard for our rich natural heritage, there would have been nothing left for the future. These thoughts encouraged me greatly, and I decided that I was seriously interested in my work.

Later that summer I was sent down to the prairie region. The position of Game Guardian was new in the area, and I was kept quite busy. I sold my team and wagon and bought a Model T Ford car. Then I was able to patrol by car on the roads and wagon tracks, and on horseback elsewhere. Rent for a horse and saddle was one dollar a day. The work became easier, and I was successful in obtaining a fair number of convictions.

In 1922 more men were hired to our staff. I was appointed as a Rover with no particular district, with my expenses paid by the Game Branch of the Department of Natural Resources. My territory ran from Prince Albert south to Saskatoon, then west to the Alberta boundary, north to Ile-à-la-Crosse, east to Lac La Ronge and the border of Manitoba, south to the Saskatchewan River and then westward back to Prince Albert.

I roamed this immense region using every available form of transportation: train, car, horseback or horse-drawn vehicle, dog team, skis or snowshoes, canoe in the open water season, and otherwise, just plain afoot. Aircraft were so new in the north that they were not yet available to the game guardians.

I got to know many people well, whether they were northern Natives or southern homesteaders. Many of the people became lifelong friends. I was always welcome at their homes, where the hospitality was of the highest order and a pleasant diversion from the long lonely patrols. The best food was prepared because of the company. It was rather amusing when I was served venison that had been shot out of season. Fresh meat on the table before the season is legally open must have been taken illegally. When this happened, I made a point of thanking my host and hostess for the "good beef."

I am sure some people chuckled at my departure because I was so gullible. I recall one family in particular. One night I had stopped at their home and ate ground meat mixed with mashed potatoes. This was before

the hunting season had opened. The next year I stopped at the same place again, but during the hunting season. I was served a fine moose steak. As we sat visiting after supper, the lady of the house asked me if I could distinguish by taste the various wild meats, such as venison, elk, moose and caribou, from the taste of beef.

I answered at once, "Not only can I do that, but I can tell by taste any kind of wild meat, and identify it as deer, moose, elk, caribou, or whatever it may be."

Right away I knew I had overstated my ability in this regard.

"All right then," said my hostess. "What kind of meat did we serve to you here last year?"

I reflected for a few seconds back to the ground meat I had eaten there a year ago and gave it a guess.

"Well, that meat was elk."

By the surprised look on their faces, I knew I was right. However, I neglected to tell them I had also known the elk had been taken before that year's hunting season had opened.

Hardship and oppressive poverty were rife in the whole northland at that time. Had it not been for the big game available in the area, many homesteaders would have found life there untenable. It is certain that their growing children benefited greatly from the supply of fresh meat. I could not fault these people for killing game illegally if it was for their own use, and there were many times my eyes failed to see what I was being paid to observe.

Many varied and interesting things happened to me during those early traveling days. Patrolling by dog team appealed to me, for dogs can be great company when one is otherwise alone. Sometimes I rode on the toboggan, but most times I walked ahead on snowshoes to break trail and to find the best route when travelling overland. There were many thick stands of young growth where I had to do some cutting to get the toboggan through. A good day's travel was from ten to twelve miles.

I purposely stayed clear of established trails. These wandered a good deal, as trapping and hunting trails meander through the countryside. The paths that I chose were as straight as possible, a course which led me into untravelled territory with interesting happenings and adventures along the way.

In wilderness travel the sighting of big game was the rule rather than the exception that it is today. I came upon vast winter feeding grounds of moose where the great beasts seemed only mildly surprised to see me



A good day's travel for Hanson and his dog team was from ten to twelve miles when on patrol in the winter of 1921.

pass by. Woodland caribou gave me a shy but similar reception when I crossed endless bog and muskeg country. Inquisitive deer took a step or two in my direction before they bounded off, white flags aloft. In uncut prime stands of white spruce, I travelled as in an enchanted forest from Grimm's fairy tales. Among the big boles, I was an insignificant figure threading my way through the constant gloom.

As each evening approached, I would keep an eye open for a suitable place to spend the night. I choose the spot based on the availability of dry wood for a fire and green spruce trees for my bed. It sounds rather primitive as far as living goes, but I enjoyed it all immensely. The nights were filled with the hearty perfume of balsam and wisps of smoke from the campfire. There were comforting sounds to lull me to sleep—the hooting of owls, the crackling fire, the coyotes howling from far-off hunting grounds. What a rich man I was!

I look back fondly on one particular experience. That day I was travelling on skis ahead of my dogs across country far into the wilderness. I camped overnight and continued on my way the next morning. Late in the day, I came upon a fresh ski trail that was easy to travel upon and led generally in my intended direction.

It was near dusk when I came upon a fine stand of white spruce. Tucked away to one side, I found a small log cabin. An inviting column of white smoke rose from the chimney. As there was no one about outside, I knocked on the door and, receiving no reply, I opened the door, and entered the cabin.

My nose was greeted by a strong odour coming from the direction of three large wooden casks at the far end of the cabin. On investigating, I found all the barrels to be full of fermenting mash, and a small distillery was in full production.

My job had nothing to do with the Prohibition Act, which was in force at the time—or with stills or home-brew. I chuckled to myself, unhitched the dogs, and prepared to feed them for the night.

I had just finished feeding my dogs when I saw two men enter the clearing from the opposite side from whence I had come. Two more men followed them. When they saw me, they all stopped suddenly and looked very frightened. I shouted what I thought was a friendly greeting but received no reply.

Finally I asked if I could stay for the night. Since hospitality was the rule in the North, one chap nodded his head and said yes, he thought I could. While they removed their skis, one fellow asked me if I was a trapper.

“No,” I said, but offered no further information.

Then one turned to the other and wondered aloud in Swedish who I was. He also wondered what I was doing there. Norwegian is my native language, but I understand and speak Swedish as well. While I understood him perfectly, my English was almost without any tell-tale accent, for I had not used my native tongue very much since arriving in Minnesota from Norway at an early age.

I did not indicate that I had understood what had been said but just stood there and put on my friendliest smile. They watched the dogs eat for a while, then asked me to come into the cabin. After we had sat down, I was asked if I was a forest ranger.

“No,” I replied again and once more volunteered nothing.

They looked very worried now and began to fidget uncomfortably. Then one said to another, “It is no use trying to hide anything now; it’s too late.”

I decided then that my little joke had gone far enough. In Swedish, I told them that they need not worry about me. I was a provincial game guardian and as such I had nothing to do with the Prohibition Act. I had seen evidence of their trapping activities and would have to check their licenses.

The change in that place was like walking into the daylight after wandering for a long time in the dark. They laughed and produced their trapping and hunting licenses, which I found to be in order.

Then I said, “If you happen to have a drink around this place, I would certainly enjoy it.”

One fellow ran and fetched a gallon of whiskey. Then they all had a good laugh and slapped me on the back.

My new friends wanted to know how I had discovered their hideaway, for I was the only person to have found it. They explained that they had their main cabin some two miles away, but had camouflaged this cabin by hiding it well in the bush while as a blind they had set traps along their access trails. I explained that but for my habit of cutting across country I would certainly never have found the place.

The market for their product was the loggers back in the bush who had to establish an alternative supply to avoid wandering in the desert of Prohibition.

That night we had a tremendous celebration, and the little cabin resounded with the laughter and song of some very relieved moonshiners. They persuaded me to stay over another day. My dogs were in need of some extra rest, but our little holiday ended the next morning. So ended my discovery of an illicit still, and I never ran into a whiskey cabin again.

From there I headed with some misgivings to Big River, for I had made all those enemies during the court cases on my last visit. To my astonishment, the people were friendly once again. Much to my relief, they appeared to have forgotten their hostility towards me. I was so happy finding people friendly and congenial again that I got to thinking it would be nice to leave the Department. I had been considering sending in my resignation for some time now, but I did not wish to let down Andy Holmes, who had remained my good friend. However, my chance came sooner than I expected.

At Big River, the local game guardian asked me to help him convict a fur buyer from Manitoba who was buying fur on a Manitoba license. Our man in Big River felt his witnesses would not be convincing enough for him to win the case or that no one would give evidence and the case would be dismissed. When I looked at the list of people who had sold fur to the buyer, I knew that one chap on the list would give evidence, for he was a friend of mine, though not a friend of our local man. It took me ten days to make a round trip fifteen miles beyond Green Lake to get him to come to court and testify.

I called Andy Holmes then and told him I had lost ten days but had produced a witness whose testimony had convinced the Justice of the Peace to levy a fine of twenty-five dollars. Holmes asked me to stay over for another day, as he would be coming to Big River by train the next day. So I lost one more day, and it was April and the snow was thawing.

When Holmes arrived, I realized at once that he was not pleased. "Why is it that it took the two of you game guardians to get evidence for something as minor as prosecuting a poor 'furlegger'?" he asked.

I gave him the long explanation that the witness was my friend but the local man's enemy, but he was not impressed. I was not happy about that particular visit with Andy Holmes.

The next morning I left for the Turtleford patrol, which led from Big River north and west to Green Lake, to Livelong, missing Meadow Lake by going thirty miles to the south, on to Turtleford and then to St. Walburg. I had the names of four persons from whom I was to get evidence of some game law infractions and to have them convicted.

When I got to Livelong, I mailed in my resignation, which would be effective at the end of May. It was then April 10, and the ground was partly bare. I was glad that I would be through with convictions, and could turn my life in another direction and see new places. The same patrols had grown wearisome.

I went to work, produced the evidence for the court cases and sent in my report on the matter. Andy Holmes was present at the trials, and we got our convictions. In the four years I had spent with the Department, I had had fifty-five cases where the accused were found guilty.

After the trials, Holmes and I had a good talk. He didn't want to accept my resignation. Instead he offered me a thirty-day holiday with pay to give me an opportunity to think things over. Paid holidays were very rare in those times, and I knew the offer was generous. My mind, however, was made up, and at last he accepted my resignation. Holmes really was a fine fellow and was convinced I was ready to go when I told him I had stayed so long in the service because of our friendship.



Trappers Harry Hughes and Hanson
(right) pose as mighty hunters for
the camera.
