

HARDSHIPS AND HAPPY DAYS

IN THE SUMMER OF 1926, I met William Tremblay. He was interested in doing some summer commercial fishing at Waskesiu Lake (then called Red Deer Lake). He asked me to join him and his brother George in this venture, and I was game to try commercial fishing as a summer occupation.

The Tremblay brothers built a boat and furnished the nets. I bought a Model T Ford car and converted it into a truck to haul in our outfit and to haul out our fish. After we had paid for groceries, a fishing license, gasoline for the first trip, and ice to preserve the catch, we had no money left for the license for the truck.

We decided to leave Prince Albert very early the next morning on our way to Waskesiu, so we would be less likely to meet anyone on the road with authority to stop us and enquire about our non-existent license plates. Unfortunately the road was wet and we were delayed several times because we got stuck in the mudholes caused by recent heavy rains. Just as we got underway after lunch, we met Constable Powers of the Saskatchewan Provincial Police on his way to Prince Albert from Lac La Ronge. Of course he halted us and asked us about the missing license plates.

After a few years in the bush, Hanson was adept at hunting for big game to feed all mouths at camp.

I had to do some fast thinking. I explained to the police officer that I had just bought the truck with a small down payment so I could try it out for one trip to see if it operated to my satisfaction.

He wanted to know the name of the party from whom I had obtained the truck and if I intended to complete the deal. I replied that the truck seemed to be functioning satisfactorily and I named the firm. I promised to buy a license as soon as we had unloaded at Waskesiu Lake and returned to Prince Albert. Much to my surprise, Powers let me proceed after giving me a stern warning that I comply with my promise and be sure to advise the dealer that he should have hung a dealer's license plate on the truck before releasing it to me.

My luck continued to hold out, for we arrived safely over a very sub-standard road. We caught a load of fish in short order for the return trip. Thereafter, I drove with the truck properly licensed, as evidenced by my spanking new license plates.

We occupied ourselves with summer fishing until harvest time. Then I accompanied the Tremblay brothers to Davidson, Saskatchewan, where I worked for Herb Brooks. Harvesting was always a welcome change for me because I met and worked with many different people and always made new friends. Besides, it was a sure method of obtaining a grubstake for my trapping activities in the great North Country.

After harvest I met a young man named Herman Mosher, who wanted to learn the trapping business from me. In spite of the fact I told him I had promised to trap with another man that winter, I took him with me, for I did not know whether Parker might have changed his mind. When we arrived at his homestead, however, he was ready to go. I told him there would be three of us going, to which he readily agreed, saying that with three of us he could come home occasionally in the winter.

On the day preceding the opening of the trapping season, the three of us arrived at an old trapping cabin in the area I had trapped with George Patterson. We had four dogs and a well-loaded toboggan. Then we worked long days cutting firewood, making temporary repairs to the old cabin which would house us until we could build a new one, cutting logs, training dogs, setting traps, and hunting for meat to feed ourselves and our dog team. On the second day after our arrival, I solved the meat problem by shooting a moose.

Our appetites grew with the passing days, so that one quarter of a moose seemed to be consumed in no time at all. Parker observed one day that soon the three of us would be eating a quarter of a moose a day, but of

course it could not come to that. Certainly we had all become great eaters as a result of all our outdoor activity in the growing cold of late autumn.

To start things off, we had good luck on the trapline. By the time we had completed the new cabin, we had also caught seven red foxes, one cross fox, and one fisher.

We had cached one hundred pounds of flour and fifty pounds of sugar at a place about fifteen miles south of our camp. We had left it there at the end of the cut road when our outfit was freighted in that far with a team of horses. One day Mosher and Parker decided to take the dog team to freight in these supplies to our present camp. I would stay home to chink the walls of the new cabin with sphagnum moss by pounding it in between the logs. Also, in their absence, I would move all our effects into the new cabin from the old dilapidated structure that we had been using, and which stood a stone's throw away from the new one.

In the old cabin, we had an ancient cast iron wood-burning stove, which Patterson and I had freighted from Little Bear Lake in the previous winter. It had two lids on top; the firebox was three feet in long, and it kept fire all night. Before Mosher and Parker left that morning, I had them shake out the coals from last night's fire and carry the heavy stove over to the new cabin.

As my partners left, I had been busy cutting wood and carrying in frozen moss to thaw out. After about two hours of hammering moss well into the cracks between the logs that made up the walls, I heard a shot, then several more in rapid and scattered fire. As I hurried to see what was going on, I thought it sounded like some kind of warfare. When I got out, I saw the old cabin all ablaze.

I ran over and saved my .22 rifle and my big game rifle with five cartridges in its magazine. They were standing outside, leaning against a wall. I also got the fisher pelt, skinned but not yet stretched, from where it hung on a nail in the outside wall, also a quarter of a moose left hanging there. I could see the meat grinder through the flames crackling about the open doorway. I bolted over to the new cabin, seized my axe, cut a long pole just before the roof fell in. This was the total extent of the salvage.

After the cabin had totally burned down, I realized I had no food except the piece of moose meat. Carrying only my rifle and hunting knife, which was always at my belt and therefore not in the burnt cabin, I struck off down the trail to follow my partners on the fifteen mile walk to Caribou Creek, where I knew they would be camped for the night.

When I found them, they had made camp and had a good fire going in

the gathering dusk of a day in early winter. Before they recovered from their surprise at my arrival, I asked them if they had anything to eat. They indicated that they had one bannock, half a tin of honey and a little moose meat.

“Well,” I said, “I would certainly appreciate having some of that, since the last meal I’ve had was at breakfast with you fellows, and there’s no more food at the cabin.”

Then I explained exactly what had happened. In the moving of the stove, somehow a live coal had fallen out unnoticed. Whether it fell inside or outside the cabin was not important, for that coal had smouldered in combustible material until it had burst into flame and climbed up the wall. I named the few articles I had saved, along with the few tools that I had been working with at the new cabin. Then there were those articles that Mosher and Parker had taken with them, the dogs and the toboggan and the sugar and flour at this end. All else was gone.

This loss was not welcome what with winter having just arrived. That night, as we sat around the campfire, I glanced at Parker and then at Herman Mosher. Mosher was barely out of his teens, and he was taking our loss very hard; he seemed about to burst into tears. Two big game rifles and a .22 rifle had burned; for some reason my partners had taken neither along that morning. Also gone were all our hard-earned fox furs and all our food, clothes and bedding, right down to personal articles in the cabin.

Parker had been observing the situation. He was not a man to be thwarted for any length of time by adversity. He looked at me and grinned; then he started to chuckle, and finally he was laughing.

“Mosher,” he said, “there is nothing to worry about. We are all in good health, and we have our strength. All we need to do is make different plans.”

That put Mosher in a brighter mood right away. It was great to have a guy like Parker around.

We took turns that night sleeping in the one sleeping bag. We also took turns at keeping the fire going, so that we spent a reasonably comfortable night.

The next day, Mosher and I walked back to camp, while Parker turned south with the dog team towards Torch River, where Tom Brothers had a trapping cabin. We had good fortune there, for these gentlemen loaned us a good load of groceries and some spare bedding.

Every time Parker went out that winter, to his home or to White Fox

or Nipawin, he brought in supplies, so that even with our hard luck we spent a good winter.

Fur prices were very good. A fine dark fisher pelt, for example, would bring as much as one hundred and twenty dollars.

There were only a few fisher in the country. Any time we saw their tracks, we knew they had been made by a lone animal travelling through trapping territory and that it would not return.

One day I decided to follow one when I saw its fresh tracks in the deep snow where it had cut across my trapline. It was evening when I discovered this sign, and I hit the trail early next morning. I took two traps, my .22 rifle and enough food to last for three days. I began to trail the fisher, tracking it for a long time until I saw where it had bolted as I got quite close. Spurred on by the realization that my quarry carried a hundred-dollar pelt, I tracked and trailed until darkness forced me to make camp.

I made my usual fire, about seven feet long, and built my usual type of shelter for camping out without my bedroll—a mat of spruce boughs thick enough to keep me out of the snow while I lay or sat by the fire. After I cut a supply of wood and melted snow to make coffee, I spent a fairly good night by taking naps of from one to three hours before awakening to tend the fire. Then I would have another cup of coffee and a snack before I fell asleep again, keeping up this routine until daybreak.

This was my first attempt at walking down a fisher; therefore, I did not know what to expect. I was off as soon as it was light enough to travel, and I kept to one side of its trail. For half an hour I saw no tracks; then I came upon its track again. I stayed on the trail then for three hours. When it led to the edge of an open muskeg, I saw the fisher for the first time. It was crossing the width of the muskeg now and showed up as a dark moving object against the snow. I increased my walking speed, knowing that I was getting very close. The fisher tried to throw me off the trail by following rabbit trails, so I lost valuable time searching out the tracks and allowing the fisher some time to rest. I saw it twice more that day, but it kept to the thick forest. I had been very close to it at the last sighting. Darkness overtook me again, and once more I made a lonely camp by the fire and huddled on my spruce bough bed. I was almost certain that I would get a shot at that fisher some time the next day.

I had been trailing the fisher for some three hours the next morning when I found it had entered an old fox den, a hole in the ground on a small knoll in sparsely treed country. I scraped away the deep snow and began to dig using the only method I had—using my axe to chop

at the frozen ground. I soon gave up on this activity and began to think instead. I set my two traps in the hole. Then I went into the bush and cut a birch sapling about one and one half inches in diameter and about ten feet long. I made a lunch then to see if the fisher would come out of the hole, but of course it did not. After my lunch and coffee, I pushed the birch sapling down into the hole until all ten feet had been forced into the den. Then I saw the fisher's head as it almost popped out of the hole. I stopped moving the stick and pushed the two set traps down as far as I could reach, past where I had last seen the fisher. Then I began to move the birch sapling. It was only a few moments before I heard the trap snap and the fisher came bounding out of the hole, fighting the trap clamped on its fore paw. For a moment it did not notice me, during which time I shot it through the head.

I got back to camp after midnight. I was fortunate that it was a clear night and I could use the stars as a guide as I struck out across country—a much shorter and more direct route than backtracking along the erratic trail the fisher had chosen to make for me. Had it been cloudy, I would have spent another night by the campfire, huddled against the cold.

Later that winter, that particular fisher brought us eighty dollars.

My next attempt to walk down a fisher occurred one day when Parker and I were setting snares and traps for a lynx. We had left our Springs Camp in the Narrow Hills and were working our way to the next camp about twenty-five miles away. As it began to grow dark and we were only about a mile from this camp, we noticed the fresh track of a fisher where it had crossed our trail.

That night the weather turned very cold. In the morning, I told Parker to stay in camp while I would go after the fisher. He tried to make me change my mind, but I was confident that I could play it out and shoot it or get it to go into a den. Parker, I know, did not want to see me camping out alone in the tremendous cold of a northern midwinter.

At daybreak, I went back to where I had seen the fisher track. I had donned my snowshoes, and with two traps and a light packsack containing some grub, I set out tracking my quarry. After about fifteen minutes of walking, I found the tracks leading into a hole in the ground and no tracks leading away from it. Once again I cleared away the snow and began to dig with my belt axe. The ground was so gravelly I knew I could seriously damage the axe blade, so I quit digging. I set the traps in the tunnel and went back to camp. When I told Parker I had a fisher boxed up in a hole he just looked at me and scratched his head.

We had a good lunch, took a big axe and two of our sleigh dogs, and returned to the hole. The fisher had not been caught in either trap. We had just started to dig when one of the dogs began digging at a spot about seven feet to one side of where we were at work. When I investigated, I found another hole slanting downward toward where we were working. The other dog got into the act by digging furiously at the first hole and barking with excitement. The two holes were about six feet apart. I cut a willow a bit longer than that, called off the dogs and set the two traps at the entrance of one hole. Manipulating the willow from the other end, I must have prodded the fisher, for I heard a trap snap shut as he suddenly burst from the hole on the other side. We had our fisher, a prize winner, jet black in colour.

The darker a fisher pelt, the better the price, and we realized one hundred and two dollars and fifty cents for this one. We also picked up a lynx on this trip, so it turned out to be what trappers consider a good trapline patrol.

When I attempted to walk down my third fisher that winter, I experimented to see if there was an easier way. When I found its track, I made the usual preparations. I put on my snowshoes and took along a dog to help me run down the fisher when I got close enough. By now I was confident that I could do it.

But I learned another lesson. In less than two days, the dog was unable to keep up the pace. He played out as he broke through the soft snow, while I did not sink more than three or four inches on my snowshoes. It was in the open muskeg that the dog took most of the punishment. He floundered, while I made steady progress.

That fisher hunt ended in failure. I had to strike out for our nearest trapline trail, which was less than three miles away, to find solid footing for my dog. Then I had to tie a line around his neck and lead him home, so that he would not be accidentally caught in one of our traps. We arrived at camp after dark. That was the first and last time I ever took a dog to help me track down a fisher.

Our fisher catch that winter totalled three. Mosher had caught the first when it had been trapped accidentally in a weasel set. Then there were the two I had tracked down.

Parker continued to make freighting trips that winter to bring in groceries and essential equipment. He made the last trip of the season at the end of March, some seventy miles to Joe Blair's store a little west of where the village of Love is today—it was then called Love Siding. At

that time of the year, it was a little too risky to cross the Saskatchewan River on the ice to go to nearby Nipawin, a much larger trading centre, for there was as yet no bridge there and ferry service only in summer.

Parker then left for the season, returning to his homestead some time in early April. Mosher and I planned to stay on until mid-May to trap beaver and muskrat. Although we were in rather poor muskrat country, we ended the season with ninety-seven muskrats and eleven beaver pelts.

We began to run out of flour near the end of April. With only five pounds left, we took three pounds with us when we made a side trip to McDougal Creek to trap beaver. We planned on eating this flour with the meat of the beavers and muskrats we would trap. We ranged almost to Big Sandy Lake on this particular jaunt, returning some days later to our base tent in a state of semi-starvation. We had been thinking of the bit of flour we had left there—enough for two bannocks—and of how good that would taste. Even before we reached the tent, I was aware that we had had a visitor for I could see daylight through the tent from end to end.

A bear had pulled down everything we had left hanging from the ridgepole, and our flour was scattered from the tent all the way to the riverbank. There would be no bannock for us that night, so we had to make a meal from the carcass of a beaver which we had brought with us from the trapline. The only damage to the tent was a big rip in the back where friend bear had made his exit.

Next day, we pulled up our traps and called it quits for another season. We headed for the main cabin, where a stay of two days would be required to stretch and dry our furs before we trekked on foot the seventy long miles to the Parker homestead, a trail that would lead us some distance south of Choiceland. One more beaver was our reward when we pulled up our traps, and we would rely on its meat and the two pounds of flour we had left in the main camp to see us through as food until we arrived at Parker's.

On our way to the main camp we were both carrying bulging pack-sacks. I stopped and cached all the traps, as they were just too heavy to carry. They could be picked up next season. Now we had seven miles of open muskeg to wade through. The spring thaw had melted all the snow so that we trudged along in the bog, which was brimming with icy cold water. We staggered into the camp about 4 P.M. Pancakes were going to be a great treat this evening.

As soon as I opened the door, I saw a beaver trap and a note lying on the table. "I found your trap with a beaver in it," I read. "As you told me

I could have the beaver, I have brought you the trap. I caught only one more beaver and fourteen muskrats this spring. I went upriver until I found one of your sets. As I have been on short rations, I helped myself to your flour and made one small bannock, as I see you have so little here. I hope you have more at your other camp anyway. I did not take near half the flour. I still have some smoked caribou for a few snacks along the road. Thanks for the beaver. Your friend, Eldon Lockhart.”

After I read the note I looked at the flour sack. It contained only enough to make two good-sized pancakes, so we decided to save it for our forced march. However, after looking through everything, I came up with about a cupful of pot barley. We felt very good about that. I boiled the barley until it was cooked, then dumped it into the frying pan with some moose tallow and fried some beaver meat to go with it. This description may suggest a poor meal to some, but in reality it was wonderful how good it tasted to us. When you are really hungry, anything edible tastes good. We enjoyed that meal as much as if we had been eating T-bone steak with all the trimmings plus dessert.

That night passed while we were both in a dead sleep.

When I awoke in the morning, I had a good deal of pain in my back and chest. I guessed that this condition had resulted from our wading in ice cold water all the previous day while crossing that big open muskeg. Only by leaning with my back firmly pressed against the cabin wall and drawing only half a breath could I escape the pain.

It took us three days to stretch and dry our beaver pelts. During this time, we lived on beaver meat only, still saving our bit of remaining flour for the long trek to Parker’s place. On the afternoon of the third day, we set out, carefully tucking our meagre quantity of flour, now in the form of two pancakes, into my packsack. My chest and back were still very sore, and I could not draw a full breath. This convinced me that I could not travel very fast with my packsack and load weighing sixty-five pounds, the same weight as Mosher was carrying.

We walked until midnight, having taken a rest every three or four miles. Then we hit the trail again, and it might have been 3 or 4 A.M. when we stopped and ate one half of a pancake each and washed it down with a little coffee that we had been saving for this trip. My painful condition was not improving, but we spread our bedrolls and had a good sleep in the moderate weather of spring in northern Saskatchewan.

We got underway again at about 9 A.M. As I rolled up my bedroll,

I became aware that the pain in my back was worse, but when I shouldered my packsack and eased into the shoulder straps, the weight of the pack against my back relieved the discomfort slightly.

After walking a few miles, I came upon a spruce hen sitting on a limb of a nearby spruce tree. I stopped and said to Mosher, "There's our dinner, Herman."

He shot it with the .22 rifle he was carrying. We walked on until we came to a flowing stream where we plucked and cooked that chicken. Needless to say, there were no edible parts wasted. When we left that place, we still had a few spoonfuls of moose tallow and one pancake. That was all we had remaining in the way of a food supply.

Early in the afternoon, we crossed the Torch River, where we ate the pancake, our last morsel of food, unless you count the bit of moose tallow. It was still twenty miles to the Parker farm. We followed the Fort-à-la-Corne Road all the way to Bissett Creek. Then I knew we had eight miles left to our destination. I asked Mosher how he felt.

"My legs are funny," he said. "There's almost no feeling in them."

"I'm going to cache the packsacks," I told him. "It's getting too late now for us to make it to Parker's if we carry all this weight."

I cut a big blaze on a tree, took sixty paces away from this tree and at right angles to the road, and hung the packsacks high in a spruce tree, where they could not be seen from the road.

Now our course led south-eastward through the forest. My back, released from the weight of my packsack became much more painful, and taking of a full breath was out of the question. I therefore pressed my back hard against a tree every time the pain became unbearable. These forced stops came at intervals of about fifteen minutes.

We arrived at 11 P.M. to find the Parkers abed. Parker promised right off to ride for our packs first thing in the morning to retrieve them via pony and packsaddle. He could see that we were in bad shape, both played out and I hampered by my sore back. Mrs. Parker arose from her bed and at once set about to make us a good supper, but I warned her that we had better eat lightly, for we had gradually lost our food intake and might become violently ill if we ate our fill. She then served us each a sandwich, coffee, and a glass of fresh country cow's milk. Parker, good fellow that he was, poured us a stiff drink of whiskey. For a while I felt very little pain, but when I awoke next morning I could still not breathe properly.

Parker left long before I awoke and was back with the packsacks in time for the noon meal. Meanwhile, I kept warning Mosher not to eat too

much but to increase his food intake slightly with each meal. We rested and were served well by the Parkers for the next two days.

Then it was on to Nipawin. On our way we stopped at Joe Blair's store near Love Siding where we had our fur account. Our returns awaited us there from a previous shipment, and Blair advanced us a goodly sum on the current one.

At Nipawin, Parker asked me if I thought we could eat normally, and I judged it was now safe to do so. My chest pains had also subsided somewhat. For starters, we registered at a hotel and brought up a case of beer to the room. We had two bottles of beer each to whet even more our ravenous appetites, then went to a Chinese restaurant to see what they were offering on their menu.

Our first meal was a regular T-bone steak and French fries. After I had eaten it, I felt that I could eat another. So we ordered another meal of T-bone steaks and fried mushrooms all around. The first meal had been on Parker, the second on me, so now Mosher asked if we could eat another meal. I answered that I could, but it would have to be something other than T-bone steak. I asked Parker if he was game. He must have been thinking about the short rations we had endured after the disastrous fire that had burned all our food that winter, and about our forced march on next to nothing to eat. A big eater any time, he said it all when he replied with a bit of a flourish, "Gentlemen, we are here to celebrate."

We ordered a round of pork and beans. The waitress began to walk away in disbelief, but we finally persuaded her that we were serious. I recall that I did not feel too good for a short time after eating the last order, but Parker and Mosher were enjoying everything.

My sore chest was improving. After a couple of hours and another beer we returned to the same restaurant. If the members of the staff were amazed at us tucking away three dinners at one sitting, they were absolutely dumfounded when we ordered three banana splits each.

So ended our celebration of a season of hardship, good trapping and, probably most rewarding, good fellowship. Then we parted company. Parker returned to his farm, later became a forest ranger, and then farmed again until he passed away. Mrs. Parker is still living with her son, who farms near Choiceland.

Mosher and I went to Prince Albert, where we purchased a seven-passenger Studebaker car and a taxi license. Mosher took a job at the Prince Albert Hotel, while I drove the taxi. We sold out at the end of the summer and went off to work on the gathering of the year's harvest.

When it was all gathered in, Herman Mosher decided to go home to Prince Edward Island. “I read in the Charlottetown newspaper,” he said to me, “that a fellow and his companion walked forty miles in one day. I’ll show them on the Island that I can walk clean around the damned thing in a day.”

I never heard from him again.