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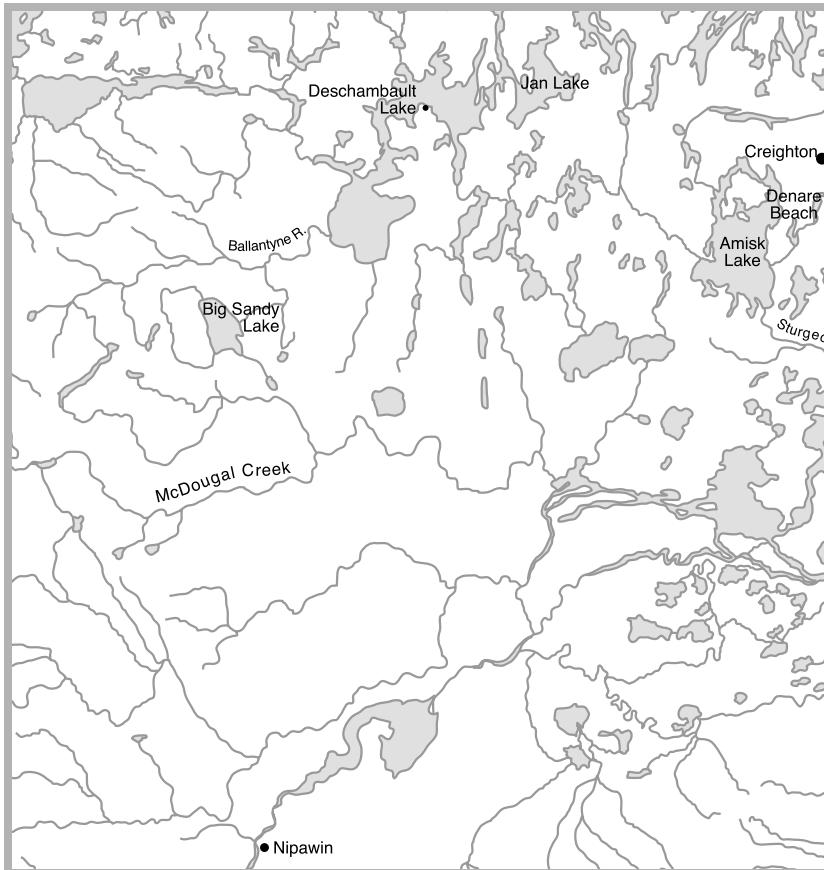
COMMERCIAL FISHERMAN

IT WAS IN THE FALL OF 1927 that I joined in a partnership to go trapping with William Osmund of Kinistino, Saskatchewan, who furnished the dog team and the toboggan. Osmund was with me until April of 1928, when he took the dogs out to civilization before the snow melt.

About that time I was joined by Kai Thorson, who worked with me during spring trapping. On May 17, Thorson and I left the main camp and walked (on full rations) all the way to Nipawin by way of Joe Blair's store to have our fur shipped out to be sold.

Although the trapping season had been a success financially, we arrived in Nipawin with one dollar between us, all the cash we had. Osmund was in Kinistino with all the money for our winter fur catch, and we had not taken an advance from Blair for our fur delivery to him. We would have to wait until the returns came back from the fur auction in Winnipeg. Thorson and I spent our cash on a telephone call to Osmund, but were told that he was away on a visit and would not be home for three or four days. No telephone existed in the place he was visiting, so for the moment we were dead broke.

Neither of us knew any of the businessmen in Nipawin, but it was essential that we find room and board and a change of clothes. Fortunately, I had no difficulty in obtaining board and room for both of us with no down payment. Now to see about the new clothing.



Before fishing commercially on these northern lakes, Hanson and crew had to clear roads through the bush to freight their supplies in and their catch out to Nipawin.

After dinner we walked down the street. Thorson turned to me, "We look more like bums than anything else," he muttered as we stopped and sized up the tattered and soiled rags we were wearing. "I don't think anyone will trust us," he added.

"Where there is a will there is a way," I recited the old platitude without much conviction, I am afraid. I stood reading the names on the store fronts until farther down the street there appeared a sign "Smith & Kent." I got up my nerve and went in. When the girl behind the counter looked at me, I asked if I might speak to the manager. She pointed to a little office in one corner of the building.

As I came to his door the manager looked up from his work. I introduced myself and gave him the facts. He gave me a very steady look for a moment before he replied, "How much credit do you need, Mr. Hanson?"

When I indicated that the amount would be under twenty dollars, he quickly rose and served me himself in the amount of seventeen dollars worth of clothing. When I came out of the store, Thorson was waiting for me, but when he saw the parcel under my arm he said, "Olaf, I just don't have the nerve to do that."

Later that day I borrowed five dollars from the keeper of the rooming house where we were staying. With this money we each got a haircut and enough beer to celebrate the end of our trapping season.

Osmund arrived sooner than we had expected—two days later, with the money. I went to Smith & Kent's store and paid my bill. The manager was mildly surprised that I was paying so soon, as I had said it would be a week. I asked him if he expected I would ever pay him, but he only shrugged and said he had not doubted my word from the beginning.

We all left for Prince Albert in Bill Osmund's car. Later that summer, Thorson and I went out to the Torch River Settlement, a district north of Love Siding. We filed on homesteads and spent the summer there clearing enough land to meet the terms of our homesteaders' obligations. Osmund, meanwhile, had gotten married to a very nice girl and quit trapping. That fall I spent the harvest season at Codette, just south of Nipawin.

After harvest I invested in five sleigh dogs. Four of them were half-husky, from the same litter. The fifth was part wolfhound, and I eventually rid myself of it, for it did not have the heart of the others and so did not work well with the team. The remaining four became the best pulling unit I ever owned. They could haul a full load all day, and I rode on the toboggan part of the time.

Kai Thorson was my partner again that fall. We headed for the same location as our previous season, our main cabin at Springs Camp. The camp was in the bush, away from any lake or river, but only about fifteen feet from an excellent fresh-water spring. From the cabin we could hear the water cascading over the small dam we had built to create a catch basin. Here one could dip a pail of clear water on any day of the year. Even in midwinter temperatures of -50 or -60°F , we could dip a full pail. Looking back to those days I realize it was that spring and its excellent water that made me return to this same location for several years. The wonderfully clear and good-tasting water was so attractive that I drank more water while I was there than at any other place I have lived. I believe it had a lot to do with keeping me in robust health.

That winter fur animals were not plentiful, so we finished the season making modest wages. Even the small gold mine I once thought I had found in walking down fishers failed me, as I tracked down only one more after that winter with Parker and Mosher. Besides, fishers had become very scarce, and the price on their pelts had dropped considerably.

In the spring we came back to our homesteads at Torch River Settlement. Our homesteads adjoined, and we helped each other build cabins. I did not quite finish mine, for in that summer of 1929 there were many bush fires, and we joined the fire-fighters.

After harvest I had a discussion with Robertson and Dainard, who were in a business partnership. They were interested in getting a bush road cut to Fishing Lakes to be able to freight out winter-caught fish. I suggested we might have better luck if we cut a road into Big Sandy Lake, a considerable distance farther north, where I knew the fishing was better but so far considered out of reach for commercial fishing. They balked at this idea, but when I explained that there were old roads leading to the region they went along with my suggestion.

It would be about one hundred miles by this road from Nipawin to Big Sandy Lake. However, there was a cut road to McDougal Creek, and from there we could follow an old Canadian Pacific survey line and a trapline that crossed a good deal of open muskeg all the way to Big Sandy Lake.

Robertson supplied the fishing outfit, which included about thirty nets, and Dainard financed the groceries. I was responsible for recruiting a crew. I took on a partner by the name of Klaus Vanema, who was a Torch River homesteader. He sank four hundred dollars into the venture. I also hired two fellows who had been harvesting with me and two experienced northern fishermen who had worked out of Big River. Alex

Chisholm, a Nipawin farmer, would freight out the fish. He also hauled up a load of supplies before freeze-up. Following the old roads, he made it almost to Big Sandy Lake with team and wagon, on a solid road base along what is known as the Narrow Hills. The Narrow Hills are in reality a giant esker that looks like a continuous abandoned railway embankment, overgrown with trees. It runs generally northward for many miles. From there, Chisholm gained access to an old road known as the Hudson Pacific Team Road, which had been cut from Prince Albert in 1916 while cutting out baselines. It ended in a swamp not far from Big Sandy Lake. Four of our men had widened and cleared this unused roadway so that Chisholm could get his team through.

Klaus Vanema and I built a camp on an island in Big Sandy Lake and cut out the road to the point Chisholm had reached earlier, to complete the road all the way to Nipawin.

It was the first time that Big Sandy Lake had been fished commercially. The fishing was so good that in the beginning we were getting an average of fifty whitefish to the net, which we set overnight. Ten days after the fishing season had opened, we had caught enough fish to recover our cash outlay, and by Christmas we were making money and paying wages to the men. We had also paid for all of our equipment. However, by now the fish catch had dropped off to ten fish per net, a fact that points up the fragility of the ecology of this region. Lakes have been fished out many times in northern waters, where fish growth is hampered by absence of enough fish food and by the long freeze-up season, with the result that sunlight is scanty and fish growth slow. At this time, fish prices had also fallen discouragingly.

I decided to cut a road to Ballantyne Bay on Deschambault Lake so that we would have an access road there for future fishing operations, and also do some fishing there to round out our activities in the present fishing season. We completed the road without much trouble because we followed on the ice of the Ballantyne River a good deal of the way. Another great help was the fact that it was late winter, and all the swamps we had to cross were solidly frozen at this time of the year.

When one of the freighters came into Big Sandy Lake to haul out the last of the fish, we had him haul our nets and outfit to Ballantyne Bay, where I had repaired an old abandoned cabin for a new headquarters. When he returned, this freighter took one load of fish out from Ballantyne Bay, as we had set out several nets and the fishing was very good.

From there we moved on to the Deschambault Lake Settlement. We

were making good catches and had two loads ready to be freighted to Nipawin when a trapper arrived from Pelican Narrows with a message for me. Robertson and Dainard had sent the following message: “Stop fishing. The bottom has fallen out of the fish market.”

We sold some of our fish to the natives for any price—they could use it for dog food—and we gave the rest away. Then we built a large wooden box and covered it with galvanized iron. In this box, we packed our fish-nets to guarantee that they would remain dry. Fish nets were woven from linen in those days and would rot if they weren’t cared for properly.

There were only three of us left when we started our long walk to the Torch River Settlement. As we moved south, I blazed a road in high country to be cut out next season for our return. The original road on the Ballantyne River and across the bogs would not be frozen hard enough for team traffic at the time we intended to return to Deschambault Lake next season.

When we arrived at our homesteads, we found that thanks to the arrival of the Great Depression there was very little work, and for the moment we were unemployed. We did manage to get on with a work crew building roads for a short time, and then we went fighting bush fires. When the harvest started in 1930, grain prices were so low that harvesters’ wages had dropped by fifty per cent. Together with a very wet fall, our financial future seemed very bleak indeed.

At that time I met Chris Walker, a farmer from Pontrilas, Saskatchewan. When I was stooking for him out in the field one day, I told him that after harvest I would be going to Deschambault Lake to do some commercial fishing. Walker wanted to do the freighting for me, and so began an association that lasted for several seasons, until I gave up commercial fishing for good in that part of Saskatchewan.

From the nearby village of Armley, Walker found an experienced fisherman named Bob Fred who was willing to join us. Fred was something of a go-getter and arranged to meet us at the fishing camp on Deschambault Lake. He hired a teamster to take him to a spot near Big Sandy Lake, then he would continue on foot. Before leaving the teamster, Fred advised him to be at Deschambault Lake by December 8 to pick up four loads of fish that he would have ready to go. I had given him the key to our box of nets so that he could start as soon the season opened.

Meanwhile I had hired my neighbour Zack Anderson to haul in some of our freight. He had a team of light horses, which I thought would have

less trouble in the soft places in the road where a heavier team might get bogged down.

A three-day snowstorm that began on October 15, 1930 had left two feet of snow covering everything and insulating the unfrozen swamps so that the frost did not penetrate to freeze things up for good travelling. It was so bad in fact that my neighbour Klaus Vanema expressed grave doubts that we could get through. I replied that we had no other choice if we wanted to make a living that winter. On this trip we were accompanied by one other member from the crew of the previous year.

By walking ahead of the team and packing down the snow with our snowshoes, we arrived at McDougal Creek in two days of travel. We built a cabin and a stable to hold four teams of horses. Here Anderson left us to return home and bring up a load of supplies and feed for his horses. Two of us went ahead now on the trail to Deschambault Lake tramping down the snow as we went, as this area is largely floating bog. Compacting the snow causes it to lose its insulating qualities so the frost can penetrate downward, thus permitting a team to travel.

We were now halfway to Ballantyne River from our McDougal Creek base. Anderson was busy freighting up supplies in relays. We worked our way steadily northward, across Mossy River, past the turn to Big Sandy Lake and down an old survey trail, where we cut out the old high stumps which signified that a horse team had never travelled here before. We crossed Herman Lake on twelve inches of ice. This lake is named for Herman Ehrlich, an old timer in the North.

On December 3, we struck Ballantyne River. I had ordered the fish haulers in by December 5, saying there would be two loads ready to go by that date.

The road I had blazed southward in the previous spring still had to be cut out, and we got at the job early the next day. When we returned after dark to the base camp we were using at the time, we found that Chris Walker had arrived with two teams. I had not expected him that early. The next day, five of us were cutting road when two passing Indians stopped by and agreed to help. With seven men cutting, we moved right along, but the heavier of the horses were still getting bogged down from time to time, and of course the freighters were getting worried.

The next night Mr. Jardine caught up to us with two more teams that belonged to Walker. Counting Anderson's horses, there were now five teams in camp and feed was getting scarce. There was not enough time

now to tramp the open bog and let it freeze overnight. In the worst places we had horses walking on makeshift corduroy.

By December 6 some of the teamsters declared that they had had enough and were ready to return home. To encourage them to stay on the job I said, "Boys, it's only about a mile to Ballantyne Bay from here."

It was a clear moonlit night, and two of us walked ahead, to locate the road. We were on a narrow ridge with solid footing. After only a few hundred feet we found that we were on the road cut from Big Sandy Lake to Ballantyne Bay in the previous winter. Our ice testing showed that the ice on the lake was from fourteen to sixteen inches thick.

Back with the teamsters I gave them the good news. We celebrated by making a belated lunch. The teamsters, heartened by the good news, cut out the balance of the road that night and drove the sleighs to the shore of Ballantyne Bay, where they arrived at 10 P.M.

We followed the shore for about five miles to Bear Point, where we had left our cook stove with a native fellow named Noah Ballantyne. He lived at this place in winter time, making it a base for his trapping operations. There was an old vacant log cabin here for our use, and while our two native road cutters, Adam Roberts and Adam Ballantyne, cut some firewood, at about 1 A.M. I got out the griddle and began to fry pancakes. We were all very hungry, so I kept making pancakes and frying bacon and set out syrup and jam, of which we had a good supply. It was near 5 A.M. by the time we all had our fill and spread our sleeping bags on the floor.

By noon on the next day, all teams were travelling on the ice. The going was fine until we reached the narrows leading from Ballantyne Bay to Deschambault Lake.

Here we encountered dangerous ice conditions. A pressure ridge several feet high that was strung out from shore to shore barred our progress. We passed the danger by trekking around it on shore and skirting this obstacle from a safe distance.

Later that afternoon, we came to yet more dangerous ice. It was so thin that we decided to head for shore and make camp while some of the men went ahead testing the ice so as not to the horses into the lake. Following close to shore, we found thicker ice, so that on December 8 we reached Deschambault Lake Settlement.

My man from Armley who had preceded us earlier in the season was to be on the lake by this time with four loads of fish ready to be hauled back. We had also sent Klaus Vanema ahead to help him. When I asked

the native people at the settlement if they had caught lots of fish, they pointed to the cabin where they were staying and to two men fishing out in the distance on the ice. They had big piles of fish, I was told.

We had a hard time getting past the settlement on account of very thin ice. The freighters declared they would not return this way with loaded sleighs. This meant that I must plan on cutting a portage around the settlement for their return trip. Finally we made it to Tower Island and our fishing camp.

Our men, Klaus Vanema and Bob Fred from Armley, were astonished to see us. As they had walked across country from Big Sandy Lake to Ballantyne River, they were walking in water in the floating bogs; therefore, they did not think it possible for the horses to get through at this time. As a result, they had been in no hurry to start fishing, had set only four nets and hadn't even bothered to fit the other nets with floats and sinkers. At present they had only one and a half loads of fish ready to go.

This was a great disappointment to the freighters, for they had only enough hay to last the horses for two days. Anderson left next morning for Bear Pont, where Noah Ballantyne had cut a large quantity of hay with a scythe for the pony he used to pull his toboggan on the trapline. He obtained enough hay to last our teams for eight or nine days. When our freighters were able to haul in supplies on their next trip from Nipawin, they were able to replace the hay.

Now everyone concentrated on fishing. In two days, Jardine's loads were sent out, and five days later Walker left with his loads. Walker would come back in two weeks, or about the end of December. Next morning we had the fifth load ready for Anderson, the last teamster to leave. Meanwhile some of the crew had built a horse barn and had cut logs for a new camp. We had done rather well.

A week later another fishing outfit pulled in. The word was getting around that there was now an open road to Deschambault Lake. We immediately made a deal with them. I loaned their teamster a load of fish to take back, while they helped us build our new camp. Then we helped them set their nets. When their teamster returned for the second load, they were all staying at our camp. They later returned our load of fish.

When Walker returned, we still had more fish than he could haul back to Nipawin.

In mid January another team arrived. Three men from Lake Lenore, Saskatchewan informed us they had come to do commercial fishing.

I looked over their outfit—one net about eight meshes deep, capable of catching only fifteen to twenty fish at one setting. They asked me where they could fish. “Anywhere on the lake,” I said.

I watched these three fellows trying to set their net, and I could see that they had never done it before. The way things were going, it would probably take them a couple of days to complete the job. After two hours they had only begun, because they were attempting to cut holes in three feet of ice and with a pole-axe, the only cutting tool they had. They had not known that, in the winter fishing business, two essentials are the ice chisel and the jigger, an instrument that threads the net under the ice and is moved as the fisherman jerks on an attached line that levers the jigger forward under the ice.

The men’s parkas were ice-covered, as they splashed up water while they were chopping at the hole. They had an eighteen-foot pole with a running line tied to one end. This was how they hoped to thread the net along, while they cut another hole every eighteen feet.

I talked to them when I could no longer stand to see what they were doing. I offered to lend them an ice chisel, four standard nets, and the use of a jigger, and I would help them get started in the morning. For these courtesies, they would haul up a load of dry wood from a nearby island both for our camp and for their tent, which they had set up beside our cabin.

They were more than willing and hauled up a second load for me before they left. At the end of the week, they pulled out for home with a half a ton of fish. They told me that they had never fished with a net before in all their lives. This episode is but one example of ill-advised and ill-equipped ventures taken on by inexperienced men in those days when cash was hard to get.

The result of our own winter fishing venture was a no-profit situation. I had hired the men on the basis that we share the proceeds after paying the expenses. Sale of the fish paid for all food, clothing, and equipment. However, there was a small balance owed to our freighter that I would have to pay.