

JAN LAKE, 1932-33

THAT SPRING WHEN we passed through Pelican Narrows, the managers of both the Hudson's Bay Company and Revillon Frères trading posts had told us that, if we would spend from June to October at Jan Lake, they would pay us two dollars a month per dog to feed about forty company dogs. I had planned to do some work on the camp and then spend the off season prospecting, so I did not give the post managers a definite answer. Now the proposition looked good to us. At least it would be a living and since there was no return on the fishing operation, we were broke. I could not endure the thought of another hand-to-mouth summer in Flin Flon.

After three days Fairburn, Vessy, Bob and I decided to close the deal for feeding the dogs even though we would have to take our pay in trade at the stores in Pelican Narrows. The traders loaded forty dogs in five freighter canoes, and with two outboard motors towing their canoes and ours, made the twenty-five miles to our camp in four hours.

At that time the term for working dogs in the North was "sleigh dogs." It was not until dog team racing became popular as a sport that racing dogs became known as "sled dogs."

With an adequate supply of small steel cable we strung a line for each dog. One end was anchored to a tree and the other end to a stake driven a short distance out from shore into the sandy bottom. Each dog's chain was snapped into a sliding ring on the cable, which permitted the dog to

exercise by running up and down the length of the cable, with access to water and to shade under the trees.

For a time the fishing was good and the dogs were well fed. After July 10, though, fishing dropped off so badly that we were using ten to twelve nets. Bob and I, who were responsible for feeding the dogs, did not have the easy time we had expected. We were kept busy washing our linen fishnets so they would not rot and then resetting them. Part of the time we fished with hook and line, trolling for large jackfish to assure enough fish to feed the dogs. This became a burden and just the opposite of the joy of sport fishing. Besides, the odour of decomposing fish in midsummer becomes oppressive. Two or three times a week we boiled fish to give the dogs a change, for there are always some dogs that do not thrive on a raw fish diet.

Another undesirable aspect of summer dog-feeding is that one is bound to his work. There can be no leaving the camp for any length of time for there are always dogs that get loose or tangled up one way or another. Only rush trips could be made to Pelican Narrows for supplies and never for more than one night away. But by September at least the fishing had improved so that it became considerably less work to feed them.

Fairburn and Vessy went prospecting in rocky country to the west of Jan Lake at a place called Poplar Lake. That summer they built a cabin to be their headquarters for trapping in the coming winter. Bob and I planned to trap out of the Jan Lake cabin.

That summer we lived on pickerel, bannock, and the corned beef "bought" at Pelican Narrows. Baking powder was used only for making bannock, our travelling ration. Since I did not like to use any more baking powder than was necessary, I also made sourdough bread and sourdough hotcakes. I shot one deer and we saved all the meat by digging a hole in a muskeg until we struck permafrost. We cut a hole in the frozen earth and lined it with moss to give us a cold storage vault. While we saw other deer swimming from island to island, they eluded us because, when fishing, we left the big game rifle at camp.

At this time we felled large birch trees and peeled off the bark to put on the roof of our cabin. We then laid poles over the bark slabs and covered the whole roof with a layer of clay. As long as I lived at Jan Lake that roof never leaked.

For another woodworking project, I bought a wrecked Gemini freighter canoe from an Indian who lived at Sandy Narrows. The canoe's planking had been badly broken, as were a number of its ribs, so the purchase price

was only \$5. Planking in a canoe is only one quarter of an inch thick. We ripped birch boards of this thickness on our sawmill to replace the damaged planking. The broken ribs were likewise replaced with sound new birch.

When the traders came back to pick up their dogs on October 5, Bob and I accompanied them to Pelican Narrows to pick up supplies. I obtained the necessary canvas and paint to finish the canoe repair job and on our return we went to work. We ended up with a fine freighter canoe.

With this craft we paddled to Flin Flon to buy sleigh dogs for use in our own winter trapping operation. In town I looked around until I located the pound. We had very little cash but I picked out two likely-looking dogs and paid one dollar apiece for them. I wanted one other dog that had just been caught but the pound keeper was adamant that I wait the regulation two days and if no owner showed up in the interval, I buy the dog at that time. I explained to him that by the time two days had elapsed we might well be frozen in and unable to return to Jan Lake by canoe. He finally compromised and sold me the dog for two dollars after a wait of one day.

We had our three dogs but no time to lose in getting underway. The Beaver Lake Road was passable at this time for nine miles out of Flin Flon as far as Loon Lake, where we had left our canoe. It was not necessary to hire a team for there was only our bedrolls and a few groceries to carry while we led our three dogs. With some scraps of meat that we had bought for a dollar to feed the dogs, we set out that night and arrived at Beaver Lake next morning.

A strong north-west wind was blowing so that we had to skirt the islands for shelter. Our big canoe was carrying a light load so that she rode the waves very well indeed and I was very happy that I had repaired it. After about twelve miles on an open stretch, we encountered great whitecaps. It was partly cloudy now and quite cold. We laid up on an island for the rest of the day, resuming our journey in the evening when the wind lessened. We made good time, but were so cold that I remarked to Bob, "It's a good thing that we must paddle so hard for that way we can keep warm. If we were using an outboard motor we would probably freeze to death."

It was a relief to get to the mouth of the Sturgeon-weir River and off the lake. There was no stopping at the settlement because other dogs were running at large that might attack ours. That night we camped at Spruce Portage where we gathered wood in the dark to make a campfire.

The dogs were on short rations as we were ourselves, having only coffee

and some bread we had bought in town—all we could afford. We did have some flour, baking powder, and bacon that originally came with us from Pelican Narrows.

In making bannock I used shortening instead of lard and bacon fat instead of butter. Usually I made very thin bannock in the frying pan or “thick pancakes” as they were sometimes called. In winter I melted the shortening and used it to mix up my batter instead of using water. Bannock made in this manner can be chewed quite easily in severely cold weather, while bannock made with water is so hard at -40° Fahrenheit that it must first be thawed out at the campfire before it can be eaten.

Next morning our immediate destination was Scoop Rapids, there to obtain fish for the dogs and for ourselves. Our only obstacle was at Snake Portage where we dragged the canoe up the rapids by wading and pushing when the canoe could not be poled through the rocks. At the top of the rapid we quickly made a fire and put dry footwear on our freezing feet. The water was very cold, with skim ice in the backwaters and grassy shallows. In the afternoon the warm sunshine returned as did a fair wind that assisted us on our way to Scoop Rapids, where we arrived before dark.

Our first task was to catch fish for our dogs, and they were more than ready to eat the whitefish that we scooped out. After a big fish-fry for ourselves, we dressed forty whitefish for future use. The only container we could muster for the dressed fish was a canvas tarp.

We camped at Scoop Rapids that night, the only place on our travels where fish could be caught with a hand net. I would have liked to take a few hundred fish with us but there were still four portages to contend with on our way to Jan Lake and we were racing against the freeze-up once again.

The trip to Pelican Narrows took us two days because great seething whitecaps on Mirond Lake, brought by a gale blowing out of the north, kept us storm bound one day at Mirond Portage.

At Pelican Narrows we got traps and trapping supplies along with enough groceries to see us well into the trapping season. Fairburn and Vessy did not go to Flin Flon at all that fall but obtained their supplies on credit from Revillon Frères Fur Company as had Bob and I. We traded groceries to the natives for potatoes. I was bothered by the fact that all these supplies were charged to our accounts against the fur we had not yet caught. In those times most people were very cautious about going into debt.

A pleasant paddle of twenty-five miles in fine weather brought us back to the Jan Lake camp to complete the dog-buying trip to Flin Flon.

The canoeing season was extended by fine warm weather. Bob and I

paddled to Deschambault Lake and brought back the dog harness and dog sleigh that I had left there two years previously.

Fairburn and Vessy were at our cabin when we returned. There was a good visit and everyone was in high spirits except for the spectre of a large debt hanging over our heads.

Bob had great plans for buying an outboard motor to power the big freighter canoe that I had repaired. I cautioned him thus, "We will be lucky if we can pay our debts this season. It would be better to wait and see if we have a surplus before we do anything like that."

One lucky day we found a great whitefish spawning ground where we kept fishing all night with one net until we had three thousand pounds of prime whitefish. We used the freighter canoe to haul our catch to the cabin in three trips. There they were dressed and hung ten to fourteen on a small pole run through a slash in the tail, so that they dried and froze to a cured state for dog food; enough for a long time.

Jan Lake froze over the first week in November. We trapped two foxes immediately. They were red foxes worth from ten to twelve dollars each. Later on, one coyote, three lynx, six mink, and four more foxes added to the original two only paid our debts because the price of furs was lower than we had expected. Again, supplies and groceries were taken against our chance of trapping more furs, now at large in the wilderness.

Bob, I said, "You can forget about buying an outboard motor. We are going to be lucky if we break even this season."

One day, a teamster by the name of White arrived at our Jan Lake Camp driving a team of greys. He had with him two fishermen, Ted Johnson and his helper. Johnson was going to fish on Deschambault Lake. They had brought a tent, an air-tight heater, and twenty nets. White turned out to be a fish buyer, and had brought a large number of fish nets for sale.

Everyone stayed in our cabin that first night. White was well known to Jim Fairburn and asked his whereabouts. I explained that Fairburn and his partner Vessy were at their trapping cabin at Poplar Lake some twenty miles from our camp. He said he would like to see Fairburn and have him go commercial fishing for him at Deschambault Lake.

I explained to White, "Fairburn and I are all through commercial fishing. We have lost money at it every time we tried it."

The next day White took Johnson and his man to Deschambault Lake. I gave him the key to my camp on Tower Island and told him he was welcome to stay there. Roderick Ballantyne showed up at this time to guide the fishermen to Tower Island.

White's venture failed miserably for the fishing was so bad that year that his men were catching only three or four fish to the net.

White did not give up easily. One day he returned from Flin Flon and came in to visit with me and enquired if I was aware of any other lake that might be good for commercial fishing. He had some maps of the Pelican Narrows district showing great detail. They had been made from aerial photographs; a kind of map I had never seen before.

This map proved my undoing for it was the bait to lure me back to commercial fishing. I had learned from the Indians that there were lots of lake trout in Mirond Lake and I told this to Mr. White. We pored over the map together that night by the light of a kerosene lamp. I saw that there were four portages from the north-east end of Jan Lake to Mirond Lake.

White was delighted. He asked me to bring all my fish nets, and he would sell me some more and we would set up a fish camp at Mirond Lake. Against my better judgement, I asked Bob if he wanted to go commercial fishing again.

"Well, trapping for fox, lynx, and coyote is about over for the season," Bob reasoned. We have enough fur to pay our debts and probably a credit by now, so let's go fishing."

The four portages were cut out in two days. I had taken a tent and fishing equipment, including two nets. After cutting test holes at a likely location in the ice of Mirond Lake and discovering a depth of sixty feet, we set the two nets as an experiment. To our knowledge this lake had never been commercially fished and was what fishermen called a "virgin lake."

Next morning, we were in for a surprise. The first net yielded twenty-two trout and the same number of whitefish. The second net had less trout but more whitefish.

When White received the news there began a scramble of activity. Ted Johnson, from Deschambault Lake, along with the Heinrich brothers who were back from the south, Gerald Bradley and the Booth brothers, Bob and I, all moved to Mirond Lake.

I picked out an island where our tents could be put up while some of us began to set nets. That day it began to snow. It was snowing heavily as we went to the main shore for firewood and it snowed hard until six inches of new snow had fallen. In the morning all trails had been filled with drifting snow. We set more nets in miserably cold windy weather.

One day we saw an aeroplane fly overhead on its way to Pelican Narrows.

The sighting of aircraft was tremendously interesting at that time, when aviation in the North was in its infancy. What interested us more was that on its return flight to Flin Flon, the plane touched down on the lake at our fishing camp. It bore the name "Arrow Airways, Flin Flon Manitoba" and the pilot was Jeff Home-Hay. He offered to freight our fish to Flin Flon. "I am hauling supplies to Pelican Narrows on a regular schedule, and we have made an agreement with Mr. White to freight out your fish as I return to Flin Flon," he informed us.

There was about four hundred pounds of trout and the same amount of whitefish on the ice ready to go. Home-Hay wanted fourteen hundred pounds and suggested he stay the night to get a full load.

To complete the load, we all started pulling nets that evening. Everything was ready by morning and Home-Hay took off, promising to return in three days for another load.

We went at the fishing with a will now, each man tending his own nets. Bob and I were doing well with our dog team and sleigh, hauling up to three hundred pounds of fish at a time. When the sleigh began to wear out I sent a note to White requesting a dog toboggan, and a sturdy oak toboggan arrived on the return flight. Our groceries were being delivered in the same fashion.

The fish catch continued to be good at Mirond Lake. It was not long before the word got around and soon four other outfits moved in and others followed later.

We all fished until March 15 when the season ended and everyone left for Flin Flon. I went out to settle with our fish buyer for our catch, while my partner Bob was flown out to the hospital at Flin Flon with pneumonia. He recovered in two weeks, but our partnership ended when he went to work as a trader for Revillon Frères.

The Booth brothers and Gerald Bradley flew out with the last load of fish but the rest of us were going to Flin Flon on foot. We made an early start with the dogs pulling our packs and bedrolls. Ted Johnson decided that he would walk at his own pace. The road was fine but when it grew dark we were still twenty miles away from our destination. Altogether we stopped three times for lunch and reached Flin Flon at about midnight.

While we expected Johnson to come in some time during the night, by morning he had not arrived. We became concerned and were considering harnessing up the dogs to go back and look for him but just before noon he walked into the Royal Hotel where we were staying.

Johnson explained how he had come to be detained. On Annabel Lake

he had come upon open holes in the lake, two of them, about two feet in diameter. These holes are formed when heavy snow falls on the lake ice. The weight of the snow forces lake water up through a crack in the ice. When the water begins to flow it will melt a hole in the ice up to three feet in diameter. In the dark Johnson had fallen into one of them, the largest one. He went down to his waist, scrambled out, and ran to the nearby woods and lit a fire with the matches still dry in the breast pocket of his jacket, as was his tobacco. He kept busy for the rest of the night, cutting wood with his belt axe, just to keep warm and dry his clothing.

Ted Johnson left shortly for Lake Winnipeg and I never saw him again.

When I settled accounts with Mr. White, I received twelve dollars in cash for two months of hard work. Had I not bought the toboggan I would have had \$28. We had been caught again by falling fish prices, and would have been much better off to have remained on the trapline. Fairburn and Vessy had done rather well trapping at Poplar Lake while we were freezing or worse at Miron Lake. I promised myself again that this was the end of commercial fishing for me, but I had promised myself something like this at the end of previous fishing seasons.

Poor Bob had been laid low by pneumonia because he was a hard worker who got overheated out on the lake and then got chilled; common conditions when fishing with nets. When I think back of the hardships and cold of camping out by the fire, I wonder why I very seldom caught even a cold.

After spending two days in Flin Flon celebrating another bad fishing season, it was time to get busy and go spring trapping. When the Heinrichs brothers of the fishing crew wanted to go trapping I agreed, the proceeds to be split three ways. Then Gerald Bradley asked to go along. He had never set a trap in his life, having recently come from his parents' home near North Battleford. The four of us arranged that the Heinrichs boys would trap the north shore of Jan Lake and the east side, along with some small lakes to the north and the east of Jan Lake, using my freighter canoe. Fairburn and Vessy, I knew, would be trapping the west shore of Jan Lake from their Poplar Lake base. Bradley and I would use my dogs to haul my small canoe to Tulabi Lake to trap on the same route as had John Johnson and I in the previous spring.

White sent a team to Jan Lake to pick up his tents and fishing gear. We rode along on the sleigh and we met the Transport Freighting outfit returning from Pelican Narrows. They had left a good trail for us. The dogs followed along with an empty sleigh. Later we ran into heavy snow

so that by the time we finally made it to the Jan Lake Camp we were tired of walking and of trying to find the trail on the ice.

We had a good rest. After a few days it turned so warm that the snow began to settle first and then the big melt began. Water pooled on the ice where deep snow had lain. Then it snowed lightly, turned cold enough to freeze the snow and water enough to carry the dogs and sleigh. I spent some days gathering my fishing gear and stowing it safely away in camp. I then took the tent, stove, and traps to Tulabi Lake, making the return trip in one day.

Bradley and I travelled to Pelican Narrows to buy groceries. Once again, we took these on credit to the fur trader against the furs we were going to catch. By now we were depending on the fur companies for our groceries, but I must say that we were treated fairly. Every time we went to Pelican Narrows, we spent a very pleasant evening playing bridge with the Revillon Frères post manager and his wife.

On Tulabi Lake the snow was melting fast. Bradley was getting experience trapping muskrats, but he did not like skinning and stretching the pelts. He turned out to be a fine companion and we enjoyed our trapping season—just the opposite of the trip I had made with Johnson a year earlier. Bradley was very good-natured. When an aeroplane passed by overhead, he declared, “Boy, I would sure like to be up there flying.” I pointed out that he was right now having the time of his life. He was sitting in the canoe listening to the ducks quacking and the loons blowing the bugle. Finding a drowned muskrat in the next trap meant another fifty cents in your pocket, until after a few weeks you will be dreaming of muskrat pelts and fifty cent pieces rolling around.

That spring we portaged from Tulabi back to Jan Lake. This proved to be rough going indeed, through a place we called The Bog. It is three hundred yards across and if a packer steps in the wrong place he will sink to his hips. We made several trips across and Bradley proved himself an able packer.

The last half of the portage was high and dry. We felt as though we were walking along a highway in comparison to the first half.

By sundown we had packed all our freight to the Jan Lake shore. From where we sat drinking coffee, we could see our cabin on the island. Somehow this cabin always seemed like home to me, as it did for the other white trappers who made it their headquarters over the years.

We had a fine arrangement whereby as we gathered here in the spring we shared what foodstuffs we had left. Those who had run out of something got it from those who had it.

For several days we just rested and visited, talking about trapping experiences and wondering just how much we would make out of our spring hunt. Bradley and I had four hundred muskrat pelts for which we expected to get \$200. One day an Indian arrived at camp and over an evening meal informed us that muskrats were selling at three pelts for a dollar at Pelican Narrows!

Then we took our furs to the Revillon Frères Fur Company in Pelican Narrows for we were under obligation to pay the debt we had incurred to grubstake the spring hunt. The manager counted our furs and offered forty cents each. Bradley and I received \$165 and Fairburn and Vessy only \$130. We all had some cash left after paying our bills, however, we would have no definite income until after the following November first when trapping season opened again.