

NO POT OF GOLD

During the summer of 1935 Jim Fairburn, Fred Vessy and I left Henney-Malone Mine for that as-yet-unnamed body of water which would become known as Hanson Lake. We had finalized our agreement with Mr. Henney to prospect this area. Full of enthusiasm that we would be the first prospectors to search this part of the wilderness for minerals, we descended Meridian Creek with two canoes and reached Beaver Lake.

Our cargo, besides the usual grubstake and equipment, included such unusual items as one case of dynamite and two jack hammers, a forge, a small anvil, a bag of coal, and a blacksmith's hammer for sharpening steel; all supplied by Henney as part of the deal. I also had a borrowed book on prospecting so that every time we picked up some mineralized rock I could check it in the book.

I was realizing my dream of long standing, a dream to prospect that part of the country, a dream that had grown ever since I had first seen it when travelling with John Johnson back in 1932.

I towed the small canoe that belonged to Fairburn and Vessy across Beaver Lake and up the Sturgeon-weir River to where it is joined by the creek that drains Hanson Lake. As we entered this watercourse we found the water level to be very low due to scanty rainfall all that summer. Arriving at shallow rapids the water ran only a few inches above the rocks, and here we found a man-made channel where someone had removed the

rocks to let his canoe pass through. Some rocks bore green paint from a canoe that had been dragged over them and we were leaving blue paint from ours. When we found fresh boot tracks on the very first portage we could tell that their owners were carrying heavy loads. We knew that when we got to the lake someone would already be there.

On reaching the main part of the lake we headed for shore to make camp at a good spot among the jack pines. After the tent was set up we made a table and two benches for our use while we stayed here for the next few days. The afternoon was spent searching the hills for mineral but on our return, and while preparing for the night, we heard two dynamite blasts. It was certain that we were not the only prospectors at work on the lake.

We knew too, that these unknown men had arrived just ahead of us and our chances of making a strike were every bit as good as theirs.

The next day we were prospecting at the north-east extremity of the lake where Fairburn and Vessy found a good-sized body of heavy mineral. There was no rust, and the rock was a stable blue-black colour.

“What kind of mineral is it?” I asked Fairburn excitedly.

“I think it has to be iron ore,” he said. “I have seen a lot of iron but this is different because there is no rust on it anywhere.”

Some time was spent looking over the find while we gathered about twenty-five pounds of samples and transported them back to camp.

That day we heard only one blast and were intending to visit our fellow prospectors on the following day. However, as we were having breakfast the next morning they arrived in sight, travelling fast in their motorized canoe. When they saw us they changed course, beached their canoe, then came up and introduced themselves as Oliver Walker and Anson Erickson, on their way to Flin Flon to have their samples assayed.

After a short conversation we offered them coffee and then the five of us sat around the table and talked.

“Have you had any luck?” I asked.

They were all smiles and in the best of humour. Walker went over to his canoe and hauled out a bag containing about a hundred pounds of samples.

“Take a look at that,” he said happily as he went back to his coffee.

Fairburn, Vessy and I gathered around the bag. Fairburn, veteran prospector that he was, examined a piece carefully, turning it over slowly while studying it from all angles.

“Galena,” Fairburn announced, “Galena—silver and lead, solid galena, the whole damned bagful!”

There were two more bags of ore in the canoe.

Walker was an old timer at the prospecting game. He told us that he had prospected in British Columbia for many years. Now he excitedly informed us he had struck it rich for the first time in his life. These men were very anxious to be on their way and we were soon waving good-bye to two very happy prospectors.

Disappointedly I told my partners that I should have prospected this lake back in 1932 and now it was too late. We paddled over to where Walker and Erickson had staked their claims and studied the trench they had blasted to obtain their samples. Then we went back and studied the blue-black ore we had found. We decided to stake some claims on our find as our new acquaintances had done on theirs.

The staking of claims began the next day. Fairburn tried to run the lines using a compass but he found it to be useless because the needle pointed in all directions. Fairburn knew then that we had iron magnetite. I read in the *Prospector's Handbook* that this ore sometimes contains gold and other rare minerals. Our hope was that we had something of good value. We resumed staking by using the sun for a guide, until six claims had been staked there.

Next we decided to ascend a small creek on the west side of this lake to prospect at two small lakes nowadays called Bad Carrot Lake and Side Lake. However, on the night before we left Hanson Lake, Fairburn had had a vivid dream that there existed a very rich copper mine on a birch and poplar covered island in Hanson Lake. When he told me about this I assured him that there was indeed such an island in this lake, in fact, this island lay alongside our course to Side Lake. When we came to the east end of the island I asked Fairburn, "Does this island look like the island of your dreams of the copper mine?"

"Well it does have birch and poplar, just as in my dream," he admitted.

I suggested that we prospect the island but Fairburn would have no part of it, stating that he put no stock in dreams. At least I got him to run the outfit slowly to the far end of the island while Vessy and I walked the shore, one on each side to do a bit of observing, but we found no mineral.

Fairburn and Vessy travelled together while prospecting while I took to the trail alone. One day as I was working near two small lakes near the north side of Side Lake and on one of my old trapline trails, I came upon a place where squirrels had been digging up something that looked like white salt. After examining this substance closely and digging up more of it I discovered that this was almost pure silica sand. With my

prospector's pick I dug several small holes and found that the silica deposit was spread over a wide area. I took a sample back to camp where, we felt (with the usual prospector's enthusiasm) that we were in on a fortune. Next day we went back and dug a hole seven feet deep, but did not find bottom in the soft white sand. By this time we were convinced that we were as well off as Walker and Erickson who had struck it rich at Hanson Lake.

Of course we staked claims on the silica sand deposit. We also staked a mineral showing nearby where we had found a high rusty hill containing iron pyrites good for six claims.

At this time we made ready to return to Flin Flon with all our samples to have them assayed. One nice day everything was loaded into the canoes and we set out on our way from Side Lake. When crossing Hanson Lake and as we passed "The Island of the Copper Mine Dream" we saw that the entire island had been staked in our absence. We stopped and I went over and read the staker's name on one of the stakes. It was Stanley Simpson of the consolidated Mining and Smelting Company. At the far end of the island we found two tents and two men having tea. We stopped in for a chat, and they turned out to be Simpson and his helper. They showed us some fine copper ore samples and took us to a trench where we looked at a very good copper showing.

Fairburn, I noticed, was doing a lot of thinking at this time, as Vessy and I were doing also as we continued on our way. I know that all three of us regretted deeply that we had not followed that dream and prospected the island covered with birch and poplar. There is no doubt that we would have made the copper find as it was right on the surface where anyone could have seen it. From a distance it looked like a great patch of rust. I had asked Simpson for a sample which he graciously provided, along with a cup of tea all around before we departed.

At the site of our first camp we now wanted a cache in which to store some of our equipment until we returned for more prospecting. In a place where four tall trees stood close together, we built a ladder eighteen feet long, then wired poles crosswise to the trees and about fifteen feet above the ground. We cut the tree tops so that the wind would not rock the trees and wear them loose from their wire bindings. Then a platform was built over the poles, the equipment placed on it, and a tarp lashed over the entire lot.

On this trip we had come too late for the galena deposit and we had

missed by a whisker the staking of the copper showing on the island. Vessy and I asked Fairburn never to pass up a dream again.

All we had to bring to Mr. Henney was magnetite iron and silica sand. Henney took the magnetite to the assay office in Flin Flon where it tested 68 per cent iron without a trace of gold. The sand had to be sent to Ottawa for a government assay, where it tested 99 4/10 per cent pure. It would be worth \$25 a ton laid down at a glass factory, but that time it would have cost that amount to get it to a railroad. Our first prospecting trip for Henney had been a dismal failure.

Simpson's fabulous copper showing fared no better. Although he had good copper ore, subsequent exploration showed the ore to be only a small deposit not worth developing. Walker and Erickson did no better either, for their fabulous galena deposit was also too small to be of any commercial value.

Still, Henney grubstaked us for another prospecting expedition. He supplied us with a new map of the region based on an aerial survey and printed by the Government of Canada. On a scale of four miles to one inch, it showed detail we had never seen before on any map, such as every bend in the rivers, minute islands and reefs, cabins, and all known portages. It proved to be a great help to us, yet somehow such detailed information blunted the excitement of exploration. The North as I knew it lost some of its enchantment for after that when I travelled I knew what to expect before I got there, especially odd when moving through unknown territory.

Much to my surprise I found that Hanson Lake, the lake in which I had been interested for years, was now on the map. Back when I had located mining claims for Government inspection at Phantom Lake with Mr. Webster, he had told me that he was compiling a new accurate map of the region and that he would name a lake for me. This was my first knowledge that he had done so and I was amazed that he had chosen at random a lake that by coincidence was of great interest to me.

Back at our base camp on Hanson Lake we worked eastward all the way to the Sturgeon-weir River. Along the river we found a great deal of mineral and staked eight claims on an area showing iron sulphide. It had all the worthless mineralization to excite the mind of a greenhorn prospector. This time he has found a fortune. Every time we drilled and blasted and looked at the nice colours of newly-broken rock, we took out the prospector's manual. Sometimes, as we compared the text to the ore

samples gathered and by studying the trench blasted out of the rock our imaginations told us that there was everything—copper, zinc, nickel, and silver—maybe even some gold! The samples looked so good that I convinced my partners that we should hurry back to Flin Flon to get everything assayed.

Our trench was sixty feet long and six feet deep when we left and began our long walk overland with our samples. We travelled east-ward for five days, prospecting as we went and carrying along with the ore samples only our food and one tarpaulin and a few mining tools. All we found were a few specks of copper. Fairburn and Vessy continued on to Flin Flon while I retraced our trail to our base camp. As it was September I asked Fairburn to pick up two or three dogs. I awaited their return at the base camp where I prospected and worked on our trench.

Fairburn and Vessy returned after nine days, leading two dogs. Our samples, alas, were only worthless mineral. Hopes were dashed again and I was beginning to realize that the life of a prospector is one of great expectations and great disappointments. The quest for a big strike followed by failure had been matched by countless other prospectors before us and future fortune hunters would experience similar ups and downs. It seemed to me at this time that one might do better just to try to find the fabled pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Even for those who did strike a rich vein, one that a mining company took an option on, very often the vein was never mined because the deposit turned out to be too small to be viable.