

IN ROCKBOUND COUNTRY

AFTER THE DEATH of my wife, my sister-in-law and my mother-in-law suggested to me that they look after my daughter, at that time three and one-half years old. There was nothing else I could do and I was very fortunate in that they provided the best kind of home for her.

I was with Saskatchewan Mining and Exploration until fall. After that I did some trenching on Big Island in Beaver Lake. During freeze-up it became most difficult to cross back and forth to the mainland to reach the cabin I occupied at that time. The ice had been too weak for safe crossing and I waited a few days for things to improve while colder temperatures thickened the ice a little more each day. One day as I was waiting on the main shore I received word that two men had walked across the ice to Big Island near its north end.

The following morning I prepared to walk across the ice carrying only my axe and a small packsack. When I got about half way across to the island I saw the ice, which was bare of snow, looking suspiciously thin and unsafe. Many years of experience in travelling over ice had put me on the alert. I decided then that I should test the ice for thickness by cutting a small hole with my axe. The first stroke of the axe blade cut right through the ice, which cracked and immediately collapsed where I stood.

I went down almost over my head but managed to grab the edge of the ice on the side from which I had approached this death-trap.

The ice on this side was thicker than on the other, a fact which no doubt saved my life. The thick ice was therefore more stable so I clung to it for a few seconds that seemed an eternity.

Luckily I had held on to the axe as I had crashed through. I slid myself carefully upward and got myself partly out of the water onto the ice shelf. I reached out as far as I could with the axe and carefully chopped a small hole in the ice. The Hudson's Bay axe that I carried had a unique head shape, with the bottom of the outer edge of the blade tapering inward to form what can be used sometimes as a hook. Using my axe head, I hooked and dragged myself forward and away from danger. I rolled myself over and over until I lay about thirty feet away from the hole, all the while hanging on to the axe. Then I arose and began to run in the direction from which I had come.

It was two miles back to the cabin and we were in winter temperatures. To keep from freezing to death I had to run all the way back. My clothing of course became frozen stiff but this created a sealing effect, which helped contain my body's heat to some extent so that I did not suffer frostbite. When I was in the shelter of my cabin I had a most difficult time taking off my parka, which felt like armour plate. When I had stoked up the stove and changed into dry clothes I sat there soaking up the heat while my outdoor clothing thawed and dripped from the nails in the wall.

I took the time to think matters over. During my years in the wilderness, I had broken through lake ice twice before but each time I had been cautious enough to carry two long poles with me. I was then able to use the poles for support when I went through, so I only went in up to my knees and had got out without trouble. On this third occasion I had been so stupid as to neglect cutting the poles. It was a good lesson for me, seeing that I was still alive to learn from it.

A few days afterwards I went to the office of Mid-West Diamond Drilling where I asked for a job as a driller's helper. They wanted to give me a job as a runner but I did not have enough know-how, I thought, to be a runner or deep driller. I worked as a helper at Beaver Lake until one of the runners got hurt and I had to take his place. That was the last time I ever worked as a helper but every winter after that I was employed as a runner by Mid-West while each summer I prospected and did part-time diamond drilling.

Near spring break-up in 1950 I met a trapper who had fallen ill and was unable to trap. He asked me to trap for him on his trapping lease at

Copper Lake, Manitoba. I accepted his offer for one-half of the fur catch. I did the trapping, and prospected at the same time. I came up with a mining claim that was later optioned with the result that my earnings were very good for that season.

After trapping I returned to Beaver Lake and went diamond drilling for Noranda Mining on some of our claims there. Until Christmas I was with Mid-West and then I drilled for Dan MacMillan, drilling contractor.

In April, 1951, MacMillan sent me to do diamond drilling at Lyonial Lake, east of Lac La Ronge. Drill, equipment, and supplies were brought in by plane. The job was completed on June 10 when a man named Hagan, one of the crew, and I left Lyonial Lake by canoe and small outboard motor and enough gasoline and groceries to last us for ten days. We portaged from lake to lake, then followed a small river to where it joined the Churchill River west of Kettle Falls. We followed the Churchill and after portaging across Frog Portage into Wood Lake we had good travelling down the lakes and into the familiar Sturgeon-weir to Beaver Lake. The whole trip had been made in six days, including one day when we had to sit out a rainstorm.

Back once more in Flin Flon I met a drilling contractor from near Birch Lake, a place about two miles east of Beaver Lake near the Manitoba border. I worked with him until August when the contract for the main road to Flin Flon was completed. After that I was prospecting for a month, then diamond drilling for Noranda Mining and Exploration until freeze-up when I continued my regular winter job with Mid-West until April 1952.

On May 20 I was on my way prospecting for wages and interest on any future mine for a mining exploration outfit. I travelled by canoe and motor, prospecting along the Sturgeon-weir River, Mirond Lake, Pelican Lake, Deschambault Lake, Ballantyne Bay, and then up the Oskikebuk River and back to Beaver Lake. This was more like a vacation for me over familiar trails and new country alike, and I even had a sponsor nowadays. There were only memories of past struggles for survival, and these memories were gradually fading....

On this journey I had staked a group of claims on the Southeast Arm of Deschambault Lake.

Now I prospected on the west side of Missi Island on Beaver Lake, where I found copper ore of some interest. A group of claims was staked there in partnership with a friend who had two mining discoveries to his credit. On these particular claims we have done a good deal of trenching over the years in order to hold them and they had been optioned to

mining companies on three different occasions. At this writing, no drilling has ever been done on these copper showings.

In the same year as we had staked these claims we also did some trenching and some line cutting until it was time to get off the lakes because of the coming freeze-up. After that I was with Mid-West until the spring break up of 1953.

That summer I went prospecting for my old boss Lew Parres on a wage and interest agreement. Then it was back to Missi Island to do some more trenching on our copper claims. When we optioned them the first time we were in great hopes that we had struck it rich but after a time they sent our claims back and there was no diamond drilling done there. We continued with the trenching and began to look for another mining company that might be interested.

In the latter part of October, just before winter set in, I went to Elbow Lake, Manitoba to prospect and stake claims for Parres, and arrived back in Flin Flon in early December.

After the Christmas holidays I returned once again to Hanson Lake. I had a native helper and we staked some claims at a place where I had found a light-assay copper showing, for Parres on interest. These claims were later optioned to a mining company who drilled several holes on the property but then left for good.

In the spring of 1954 I was drilling for Parres and that summer I prospected and staked for him again. That fall I was back with Mid-West working at my regular winter job as a deep driller.