

REINDEER LAKE TO LYNN LAKE

ONE NIGHT AS I returned to my room in Flin Flon after work I found a note. In my absence a telephone call had come in for me from the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources. I was to call their office in Prince Albert. I had no idea of the reason but when I had finished my evening meal I contacted them.

My caller advised me that he had recently returned from Reindeer Lake, where the local commercial fishermen had asked him to hire me to locate an all-weather road from Kinoosao on Reindeer Lake eastward to the new mine at Lynn Lake so that a link could be established with the railroad being built northward from Sherridon, Manitoba. Kinoosao, which at that time was called Co-op Point, was the centre of the commercial fishing industry at Reindeer Lake.

At once I began to think of the difficulty that one can encounter while travelling in this country at the onset of winter so I mentioned to my caller that this was not the best time of the year to locate a road.

“We want to start bulldozing this road as early as possible so that it can be used later this winter,” was his reply.

I asked him why they had chosen me for the job.

“You are the only man we know who can do the locating. You have the experience,” he explained.

At any other time of the year I would have been willing to take on such work; also, since I was employed, I would have to give notice to

my employer. In the end I promised to do work at the same wages I was earning with my present employer plus expenses.

The company found a man to take my place during my absence. They were very good about it, assuring me that because they needed roads in the North I would be granted a leave of absence and my job would be waiting for me on my return.

The next day I again called Natural Resources in Prince Albert, pointing out that at this time of year the only way that we could move our camp and our supplies was to pack everything on our backs, as no aircraft could land when the ice was forming on the lakes. In short, it was essential that I have a helper. They asked me if I knew of anyone locally who might prove satisfactory for this work. I would have to look for one. Then the suggestion was made that they send out a chap from Prince Albert, to which I agreed. This would save valuable time in getting the outfit together and we would be ready to leave in two days.

It was the morning of October 14 that my man Frank Timpson showed up at the Flin Flon Hotel. I was happy to get someone with experience in locating roads. Timpson said he had left Prince Albert in such a hurry that he had little chance to pick up any maps of the country where we were to work, except one drawn to the scale of twenty miles to an inch, which showed very little detail. This was unsuitable so I looked up a geologist in Flin Flon who supplied us with maps in much greater detail.

At 9 A.M. on October 15 Timpson and I left Flin Flon by plane with Parson's Airways. At Lynn Lake I purchased an aluminium canoe, tent, stove, cooking equipment, and sleeping bags. Our groceries were to be picked up at Co-op Point on Reindeer Lake. The whole outfit was so organized that it would be ready to move on very short notice.

I had the pilot fly over the country where we were to locate the new road. It was a nice sunny day and from the air the terrain looked fairly good. I was glad to see that all the larger lakes were still free of ice so that we could make a landing. Then I had the pilot circle back to a lake about thirty miles east of Co-op Point. This was McMillan Lake, where I had decided to set up our first camping place and begin to work westward to our destination of Co-op Point.

During the first three days we blazed our way too far south and were stopped at a muskeg where we could push a pole down about twelve feet before it touched the bottom. This was no crossing for a summer road so it was necessary to find a better place. I had seen this muskeg as we had flown over it and knew that it was several miles long but would have to

be crossed somewhere. About a mile north of our first crossing attempt we found a place that was only three or four feet down to solid ground, near a good growth of tamarack large enough to cut down and use to lay a corduroy road. In the centre of the crossing was a small creek with very little current, which could be very easily bridged and the approaches filled in without any problem.

After this we made good progress with our blazing. We had taken enough food for three days but our supplies had all but run out. We marked a big tree and struck out for Co-op Point, planning to blaze back to this spot on our return.

We had almost reached Co-op Point by the time darkness fell, but we could not get across a small bay to the store and had to camp overnight while listening to the dogs howling and someone chopping wood over in the village. The last of our supplies was consumed that night and we were thankful that we were warm in our robes and only a half-mile from the store.

Our breakfast next morning was coffee—all we had left. In the daylight we found a trail to the store quickly, and arrived in about an hour by going around the bay. The store manager served us a proper breakfast, and said there would be a plane coming next morning, the last one of the float season.

We had stroke of good fortune next day when the plane not only arrived but was to deliver our supplies to our base camp at McMillan Lake, enough, we estimated, to finish our entire road locating assignment. Taking the plane to our base, we unloaded everything, put it under cover, then flew back to Co-op Point. That night we bunked in a cabin with the owner Alf Olson, an old time Northerner. Next morning we began the work of locating and blazing back to the point where we had cut our last blaze, marking our way to McMillan Lake.

It was November 5 as we packed up our sleeping bags and groceries to last for four days and struck out through the bush. There was less than half an inch of snow and above zero temperatures; certainly this was going to be a late freeze-up. That day was very bright and sunny and that night in camp was warm and pleasant, in fact, very mild for November.

The second day out was mild but cloudy and after working since dawn we made camp early. The sky was overcast with low-ceilinged clouds, which meant that snow was coming, so we made a good shelter of spruce boughs. There was two inches of new snow on our bedrolls next morning, but the snowfall had stopped. It was slow slogging now, moving through

the bush and blazing spruce and jack pine trees, which are the best of snow-carriers. Every tree we blazed released a cascade of snow on our heads and shoulders because it was too warm to wear our parka hoods up. It is a peculiar fact that snow falling from trees in mild weather most often lands on the back of your bare neck.

After the noon lunch the sun was out and by 4 P.M. the snow had almost all melted from the trees. Our clothing was soaking wet when we made camp that night.

Progress was slow on the third day and another camp had to be made under the stars. Much time had been spent in locating all that day so that blazing had not progressed either. Our food had to be rationed at this time for there remained only a bit of bacon, some butter, half a loaf of bread, and some coffee. There was no need to worry for we were confident that we would arrive at our base at McMillan Lake sometime on the following day. We hung our soggy clothing by the campfire again and by 9 P.M. it was nicely dried and we were ready to roll into our robes for the night.

The morning was colder. After a necessarily light breakfast we got back to work. Due to the time lost in locating the best route for this marker to the blazed line, we did not reach our planned noon stop until almost dark.

Happy to have found the line at last, we ate our lunch of half a sandwich each. It was eight miles to the tent, clear and moonlit, the blazes easily visible as they led us to the tent by midnight.

Our groceries were found to be in good order as was everything else we had left there. No time was lost in preparing a good meal as a reward for another hard journey of packing sleeping robes, cooking equipment, axes, and dwindling groceries.

When we turned in I believe that Frank Timpson fell asleep at once. It was not long before I was dead to the world also, but before I slept I recall thinking that it was three weeks now since we had started working together, three weeks of hard going, yet I had heard not one word of complaint from him. I thought of all the men with whom I had travelled in the past and I could not recall any one of them who did not, sooner or later, find something to complain about; but not Frank Timpson.

The next day we rose late and did not resume work until noon. Working eastward, we located about four miles of roadway. McMillan Lake was at last beginning to freeze over so we hurriedly loaded everything into the canoe and paddled across the lake to the east shore. Then we portaged

everything over to a small lake but the ice on this lake was too thin for safe crossing so we set up our tent on its shore. Two days we spent locating and blazing, by which time the ice on the small lake was stronger and safe enough for travel. Frank and I re-loaded the canoe and pulled it across, one man pulling and the other balancing the canoe on its keel, which then served as a sleigh runner.

In this region it was slow going for as we worked on the road we had to take time out to portage our outfit overland in relays to keep it in reasonable distance from our work. Camp was moved at about five mile intervals.

The best road location at this time led us to the north shore of another lake where, in mild weather once more, we decided to move our camp to the east shoreline by the canoe skidding method. As we were about half way across, the ice began to crack under our feet. In the event we should break through we planned to board the canoe. In preparation we had cut two poles that we could use to break our way to better ice or to shore if necessary. In this case the canoe did not break through but we walked on the poles and our paddles as we moved the canoe, one man on each side, and thus eventually to shore and to safety. Farther to the south we could see this same lake was free of ice.

It was a very mild night. The wind, blowing from the south, had buffeted us as we moved slowly on our way across the very thin ice. It was dark and cloudy and at 8 P.M. we had reached the far shore.

We got out our candle lanterns, which are made from a four pound jam or syrup tin, and shine a beam of light the way a flashlight does. Just cut a hole in the side of a can fairly close to the bottom. The hole should be slightly smaller than the diameter of the candle. Leave the edge rough to hold the candle when it is inserted from the inside of the can. Make a wire handle by punching two nail holes, one at the bottom rim and one at the top rim so that you can insert and secure a wire. With such a light I have walked miles in the dark on lakes while facing the wind and very rarely did the wind ever blow out my candle. The bottom of the can keeps the wind from blowing in and the inside of a new can reflects a very good light.

This was our light source that night as we put up our tent in the dark, gathered fuel, and cut boughs for our "spruce feather beds."

I went down to the shore, chopped a hole in ice two inches thick, and dipped a pail of water to boil for our tea. However in the morning when I went back for water to make coffee there was no water hole, neither was

there any ice in the lake, for a thirty-mile-an-hour gale had piled it all along the shore while we slept!

This was a new experience both for Timpson and myself. Never before had we pulled a loaded canoe over the ice at night and seen open water and rolling white caps where our trail had been the night before.

The mild weather lasted only that day. In the afternoon it turned so cold that the lake froze over completely before we moved camp. Three days later we could walk safely anywhere on the lake ice.

Good luck, it seemed, was on our side as the weather turned mild again and with only two inches of snow on the ground it all made for good walking and packing our outfit. Our camp by this time was near Vanderkerckhove Lake. When it was time to move again, the packing was overland and across many small lakes on the way until we reached a creek that was still open here and there. We had to pack and skid the outfit here also but after several days we set up our camp at the north-east bay of Vanderkerckhove Lake.

There was up to five inches of ice with no snow on the ice at all. Luckily there was a good area of high level land where we were marking out the proposed road and therefore we made good progress. Two days later we encountered a river flowing out of Vanderkerckhove Lake into Goldsand Lake. We had the good fortune to find a very good crossing where the river was only fourteen feet wide. Then we were on an esker, a high gravel ridge, running generally north and south. Lynn Lake, our final destination, lay southward and to the east. This esker seemed to have been made for us and our progress was very good indeed.

Again our grocery supplies would soon have to be replenished, and we planned to walk to Lynn Lake for that purpose. One evening as we returned to the tent after work we were greeted by a visitor. He turned out to be a trapper from Brochet far to the north near Reindeer Lake's north end. He spoke English well and said that he was travelling to Lynn Lake with his three husky dogs and toboggan to sell his furs. He stayed with us that night and we decided to accompany him to town.

Our visitor said it was thirty miles to Lynn Lake. It was the end of November and the ice on the lakes was seven inches thick, and strong enough for a light plane to land, when we set out. Good time was made as we followed the dogs to Zed Lake for lunch and to Lynn Lake by 6 P.M.

We located the hotel first where we asked for a room. The hotel keeper replied that they were all filled up, and in fact there were as many as four to a room.

At that time the hotel had only eight rooms and no lobby where a man could sit down. For this luxury one would have to go to the one café in the town or to the beer parlour. Without wasting more time we went to the beer parlour for a bottle of beer apiece, then to the café for a steak after our thirty mile hike. We sat there on stools, taking our time at eating for we knew that as soon as we left the café we might have to stand on our feet all night.

Wondering where we might find a room we called in at the detachment office of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The constable in charge explained that since the railroad had just been completed into Lynn Lake from Sherridon, everything was filled up with railroad employees, salesmen, opportunists, and so on and he knew of no vacant accommodation anywhere. However, there were at present two empty cells downstairs where we could sleep as a last resort if we called back at midnight and they had not picked up any tenants in the meantime. It was 9 P.M. The constable directed us over to the movie theatre where we could kill the time until midnight.

After the movie and back in the beer parlour I had suggested to Timpson that there might be someone there that I knew. Sure enough, after ordering some beer and looking around at the customers I saw three men that I knew, all sitting around a table. As soon as I had finished my beer I lost no more time, but made a beeline for the one fellow I thought might have a solution for our problem that night. His name was Andy and he was a carpenter at the mine.

He looked at me in surprise and said, "Are you staking claims in this part of the country?"

"I am locating a road from Lynn Lake to Reindeer Lake," I explained. "Right now I need to find a place to sleep."

"I have a bunk at the Company bunkhouse. Neither one of us is that big that we can't bunk together."

"That will do for me, Andy," I said, "but I have a partner. I know a single bunk is thirty inches wide and pretty narrow for two men."

Andy stood up then and walked over to where Frank was sitting, swallowing the last of his beer. I made the introductions and then Andy led us to the mining company's bunkhouse while saying something about seeing what could be done for us. He looked up the caretaker and asked if there were any bunks not in use. The caretaker said that Frank could use one bunk that had been empty for three nights due to the absence of a mine worker. Then he found another bunk for me. Happily no one came

in to claim either bunk that night. We used the company's shower bath and had a very fine sleep.

Our trapper friend had looked up some friend in town where he had spent the night. We met him on the street next day and found that there were no fur buyers in Lynn Lake because the only store was operated by the mining company.

The next afternoon Timpson and I were very surprised to receive an invitation from the mine superintendent to visit him at his office. When we arrived there it turned out that we had become the golden-haired boys if not minor heroes. The superintendent and all the staff were interested in what we were doing and particularly if the new road we were locating would run close to Zed Lake. With its fine sandy beaches and good trout fishing, Zed Lake would make a good summer resort for mine workers. I assured them that the road would actually follow close to the east shore of Zed Lake for a few miles.

At this office we were further surprised that the news that we had looked all over town for a bed had preceded us.

The mine superintendent said that had we contacted his office our wants would have been met at once.

He told us, "If you are ever in the same predicament in this town, please let us know. You will certainly not be left to sleep in the street if we are aware of it here."

"How are you planning to return to your camp?" he asked.

"We are looking for a small plane to take us back," I began.

"How thick is the ice?" he asked.

When I assured him that it was quite safe for a light plane he said that there were no light planes in Lynn Lake at that time but we would be flown back in the company's Beaver aircraft with their compliments.

That night the hotel sent word that they had a room for us.

Our stay in Lynn Lake ended after two days. Our grocery supply had been secured and the mining company gave us new aerial maps of the Zed Lake area that saved us a good deal of work and unnecessary locating.

It was early December and the days, of course, were very short at this northern latitude. The Beaver aircraft landed us at our camp at 11 A.M., a free ride that we very much appreciated.

About two inches of snow had fallen in our absence. At about 1 P.M. we went out to do some locating and made enough progress that we decided to move our camp about three miles southward down the lake to a good site on the eastern shore. The aluminium canoe was again used as a sled

but now it was hard going, for we had to pull over scattered snowdrifts on the lake surface and the entire outfit was in the canoe. In spite of these obstacles we reached our destination by sundown, erected the tent, and cut a good supply of wood before dark.

In the morning we took our noon lunch in our packsacks and went east to an area of high hills, then walked north until we came upon our blazed line. There was good locating for us and we blazed the road from there to well south of our newest camp.

On the following day our route led us to a small lake. Then we went back all the way to Vanderkerckhove Lake via two more small lakes and then to our tent. Another day saw us moving camp again over small lakes and packing everything through thick bush. Zed Lake was getting closer. We set up camp near the road location and in two days we had blazed the line to Zed Lake—only fifteen miles from Lynn Lake.

It was only a few days before Christmas and Zed Lake would be our last camp move. Our plan was to keep on locating from here until we reached Lynn Lake. On December 20, we were beyond Little Brightsand Lake.

That night I said to Timpson, "We will leave in the morning for Lynn Lake, blazing for a while and then walk to town."

There were four inches of snow on the ground here and fair walking. That day it snowed until noon. We stopped blazing at about 2 P.M. and walked on. The last three miles to Lynn Lake were covered in darkness.

This time there was a room waiting for us in the hotel. While our 7 P.M. dinner was being served, I walked a man whom I had met long ago in my Game Guardian days. He was Frank Pakally from Livelong, Saskatchewan. Pakally told us he had shipped up crawler-type tractors and sleighs to haul fish from Reindeer Lake to Lynn Lake and was prepared to bulldoze the road we had just blazed.

Pakally next day took a Bombardier snow vehicle out to bring in our outfit from Zed Lake, but we had to contend with a great crack in the ice which ran from one shore to the other so that only part of the load could be brought in at that time. The canoe and the stove were left for the bulldozers to bring back later and shipped by rail to Flin Flon.

Frank Timpson was hired to go back to Reindeer Lake with the bulldozing outfit. I left for Flin Flon by plane on December 23, just in time for Christmas. It was nice to be back with another job finished.

While we had been locating I had not known where the road would actually be built because the road was in Manitoba even though it had been located for the Provincial Government of Saskatchewan. I am told

that it is today an all-weather road with a gravelled surface. I have not been back to see this road but I certainly had a good look at the area it passes through, so as to avoid rocky hills and floating bogs.

It had taken the two of us two months and eight days to mark out this road. In summer, our party could have done it in thirty days for then there are many more hours of daylight and we could have had our camp moved by aircraft. The season chosen for us was the very worst. We had been human pack horses as we carried and pulled our outfit from one place to another. I know that Timpson and I left a few pounds of our weight on that trail between Reindeer Lake and Lynn Lake.

When I think back I wonder how many men would take on such a job today. The two of us had located and blazed about seventy miles of road through stark wilderness with no two-way radio (or any other kind of radio), very little aircraft support or outside communication, and during the freeze-up season. We were a long way behind the times.

Good luck had been with us all the way. Not one day was lost through sickness or accident. It had been a good experience, the kind that is not available any more. Graduate engineers with technology such as helicopters do this type of work today.