

## LADY PROSPECTOR

**A**FTER CHRISTMAS I took a trip to Prince Albert and then on to Saskatoon to visit my daughter, as I did at every opportunity. On my return to Flin Flon I went back to diamond drilling for Mid-West until July. Later that year I worked on some claims in which I had an interest.

At about the end of September I met a lady prospector who was looking for someone whom she could hire to do some drilling on her claims at Jackfish Lake in the Red Lake country of northern Manitoba, where she had a mineral deposit of nickel and copper. I owned an Exray diamond drill that could go to a depth of about 250 feet.

I agreed to drill for her if she paid all my expenses and gave me an interest in any future mine that might be developed on the property. It was October 1 before we began drilling on site. I had a helper, a chap from Wekusko, Manitoba, on the Hudson Bay Railroad.

I was almost finished the job when my diamond drill broke down. We had to canoe back to Flin Flon by way of Wekusko Lake.

We had to wait two days in Flin Flon for the drill repairs to be shipped out from Winnipeg. As it was getting late in the season I telephoned my employer to ask if she would get the groceries so we could pick them up on our return. She then instructed me to get what groceries I would need. Then she wanted to know if I could get along without a helper, an

economy measure, if she came along to assist instead. I replied that I thought I could manage.

It was October 27 and the lakes could freeze over any day. I ordered enough groceries to last the two of us for about a month in the event that we should get ice-bound at the job's end.

I returned to the drill site by plane. After letting me off the pilot headed for Wekusko Lake to pick up my employer. When she arrived she was astonished that I had brought such a large stock of groceries for the estimated three days of drilling. I told her that I was not about to take any chances on our being frozen in and then have to trek out to civilization without food. I explained that if we did get out in four days I would buy back the unused groceries, and the matter was settled.

On October 30 it became very cold with no wind at all and Jackfish Lake froze over. The next day we completed the drilling but the weather was bitterly cold with a strong north wind and driving snow. A patch of ice broke up out in the middle of the lake but a float plane could not have lit there, nor could we have walked on the ice to get to it.

To make certain that no plane could come in we walked a two mile portage to Reed Lake from Jackfish Lake, carrying the lady's luggage. But Reed Lake, when we got there, was a sheet of snow-covered ice all the way across.

That was when I gave her the bad news, "We can forget about getting out of here by plane."

I was very surprised, I must say, when she replied, "I have never seen the weather so cold and wintry at this time of year."

"Lady," I said, "I have been in the North for over thirty years and have not seen any year when the lakes did not freeze up. But I always made certain that I was prepared for it. We are prepared for it now and we are not going to starve."

I learned later that her husband and son became very worried at this time. They hired two woodsmen to pack in food for us across country, who found themselves in country of so much unfrozen bog and unsafe ice that they turned back. Next her husband tried to get a plane to drop us some food parcels to keep us alive, but as it is too dangerous to fly at this season in the North, no pilot would risk even taking off, the thin ice being unsuitable for either floats or skis. Our would-be rescuers had no idea that we were well stocked with food.

The lady and I returned to our drilling site. There I found two boards, left there when someone had repaired the old caboose at the site. From



Hanson's Exray diamond drill, which could reach down to 150 feet, was in great demand in the Flin Flon area.

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these boards I built a small sleigh and fashioned two sleigh runners. We stayed in camp for two days, waiting for the ice to thicken up enough for safe travel.

When the ice would carry us, we set out pulling the sleigh loaded with our sleeping robes and supplies and some equipment for camping out. First we descended Jackfish Creek where the ice was good, arriving at Reed Lake in about two hours. Our course was very close to the shoreline along which we travelled for three miles until it was time to stop for lunch.

It was a long hike to Reed Lake's outlet at the Grass River. We made good progress however and when darkness overtook us we were only three miles from Grass River. Luckily the weather was fine and not very cold. We camped on the shore that night in a stand of dry wood for our fire, where I built a good shelter of spruce poles and boughs, and put down a thick mattress of boughs for our sleeping robes.

On the second day our journey led us down the Grass River where the ice was most insecure, with open water to be seen from time to time. At one open section we portaged everything for at least five hundred yards. In other places we walked the bank, one pulling the sleigh while the other pushed with a long pole, to keep the sleigh on the ice and away from the bank. Two miles of such travelling brought us to rapids and more open water. We pulled the sleigh around the rapids at this portage but carried across most of the load.

We had our lunch at 1 P.M. I can say that this lady was an excellent camp cook and certainly very experienced in outdoor cooking. My job was to get the wood and find spruce boughs to stand upon so that our feet were out of the snow as we stood by the campfire.

The portage completed by 3 P.M. we were once again on good ice for a distance of two miles until we had to make another shorter portage. Then it was good travelling again for one more mile to the last portage. We completed the task of pulling everything across this portage of about four hundred yards just as darkness closed in.

I knew that it was only a mile to a trapper's cabin at Tramping Lake. I was ready to make camp but was surprised to hear the lady say that she was game to continue on to the cabin. She certainly could stand up to hardship.

For the present we had a cold lunch and a drink of Grass River water, then set out on our last mile for that day. It was very dark when we got to the cabin. We had expected to find someone living there but it was vacant. Inside there was an airtight heater and enough wood had been

cut to start a fire and get warmed up. Wherever I travelled in the North, I always carried a supply of candles. I lit three of them now to give ample light to prepare our much-needed supper. We were both very hungry after pulling our sleigh and portaging from 8 A.M. to 8 P.M.

I picked up a tin pail and told her I was going to get some water from Tramping Lake, the shore of which was only a hundred yards from the cabin. In the dark I took my axe and walked down the trail to cut a hole in the ice to dip out water. I was in for a surprise when I got there for there was no ice. Tramping Lake was wide open!

So here we were, at the end of our travel on the ice and of course we had no canoe. We were situated about twenty miles from the Snow Lake Highway, which farther on joins the road that leads to Wekusko, our destination.

When I brought in the water I told her that there was no ice on the lake. I explained that Tramping Lake is very deep and that deep lakes freeze over later than do shallow ones, even if the shallow ones are larger in size. It was November 5 and she had an appointment in Winnipeg on November 11 to meet with mine shareholders of her Jackfish Lake claims.

On November 6 we were back to freezing temperatures. New ice was forming along the lake shore as we waited for enough thickness to allow us to travel with the sleigh. On November 7 we set out.

The ice carried the sleigh for some distance but soon we had to pass weak ice by taking to the shore. The travelling was so slow and strenuous that it took us six hours to travel three and one-half miles. Finally, our course led us to a vacant tourist cabin. This winterized structure was used for hunting in the fall and for fishing during the summer.

From the shore at the widest part of Tramping Lake no ice was to be seen anywhere. To add to our woes the weather had turned milder. This prompted me to decide to leave my client in the cabin while I walked across country to reach the Snow Lake Highway by about noon the next day.

It was November 8. I kept walking northward from Tramping Lake until dark. It had snowed heavily that afternoon. As the snow melted I got quite wet. I began to look for big spruce trees for shelter and a place to make a fire. It was a very calm evening, the kind when sounds can be heard for long distances in the wilderness. As I stood there in the dark, I heard a diamond drill working, seemingly not far away.

I decided to walk straight toward the sound of the drill. Now I was travelling westward, straight away from Tramping Lake and the highway. I do not recall how many hills I climbed nor how many bogs I crossed when I got down between the hills. Down in the muskegs I lost the sound

of the drill but when I reached the top of the next hill the sound seemed to come from very close by. Walking down such steep, rocky hills is very slow going on a dark night. I used a pole about ten feet long to feel my way and to avoid falling over the precipices. I carried that pole all the way. On one muddy creek, I broke through the ice but with the pole I managed to work my way out without sinking into the morass below. I felt that I had an obligation to get help for the lady and kept going.

I arrived at the drillers' shack at midnight. I was wet all through. My parka was as soaked as if I had just pulled it out of the lake. The drilling outfit belonged to my old employers, Mid-West Drilling, but I had never seen any of this crew before. When they answered my knock on the door, I walked in looking like a wet rat. I believe they were too shocked to say anything for a minute. I asked if I could stay awhile and warm up and dry out my clothes.

One chap asked, "Are you lost?"

"No," I said quietly, "I'm not lost."

"Where did you come from?" he asked next.

"Jackfish Lake," I explained. "Do any of you know where Jackfish Lake is?"

"No, we sure don't, never heard of it," said my interrogator.

I said my hike for that day had been from near the west end of Tramping Lake.

They were preparing their midnight meal and asked me to eat with them. The main course was bacon and eggs and they indicated that they had extra food cooked. I said I had my lunch with me, but when I opened my lunch bag my sandwiches looked like they had just been fished out of a garbage can. After the smells of bacon and eggs my poor sandwiches did not appear very appetizing. I threw them out for the whiskey jacks (Canada Jays) to eat in the morning. That plate of bacon and eggs was about the best feed I can remember.

It was 4 A.M. before I got my clothes reasonably dry except for my parka, which seemed as if it would never dry out. The drillers' camp was about a mile from the drill site. They told me that I would find a spare bed there in the first tent. I stayed there that night. In the morning, the foreman stuck his head in the tent and wanted to know if I would have breakfast with the men or sleep until noon. I got up and had breakfast. I knew the cook, the foreman, and the two drillers who alternated shifts with the first two whom I had met at the drill site. This part of the crew all wanted to know how I got to the camp after midnight as there was

no road to the camp, only what we called "plain service," which means walking over unmarked ground.

There was a foot path to the next drill site at a lake four miles distant. After breakfast, I walked to this site just in time for their coffee break. Now, I had six miles left to Anderson Lake and another drill site. It was 1 P.M. before I arrived there but I was in luck as I knew the foreman who told the cook to make me a lunch. I knew most of the crew as well who all asked how I got to the country at this time of year.

Now, I was five miles from Snow Lake Mine and only one mile from the highway. During the telling of my trip to all I had met, I was getting delayed in arriving at my destination, Wekusko Lake. That afternoon I got to a store on the highway situated about three miles from Snow Lake. I was well acquainted with the store owner, who was very surprised to see me on foot. After we had a cup of coffee together, this man took me to Wekusko Lake in his truck and then to the summer resort of Tramping Lake Portage, where the river coming out of Tramping Lake was wide open.

Here I rented a canoe and outboard motor. I was hoping to get back to the lady where I had left her. There was about one hour of daylight left. It was seventeen miles to where I was going, but as I ascended the river and it got wider it was frozen over. Now breaking ice with a canoe is very hard on the canvas which convinced me to give up for that day and return to Tramping Lake Portage for the night.

That night at the Portage I stayed with Mr. Marshall, who was in charge of canoes and cabins. To pass the time, I was looking at some maps of that part of the country when I found I could get to the wide part of Tramping Lake by crossing four small lakes which by now were frozen hard enough for walking safely and only one half-mile portage to contend with. It had turned cold since I left Tramping Lake.

Mr. Marshall told me that every morning the lady's husband had called in to see if anyone was prepared to fly and take him in search of his wife. About 8:30 next morning we saw him coming driving his truck. We went out and stopped him. When he saw me he seemed very surprised.

His first words were, "Where is my wife?"

"She is only seventeen miles from where we are standing," I said.

He was all smiles and was very relieved for his worries were over. I told him that I could get her out the next day and explained that I planned to cross the four lakes by pulling a small canoe over the four small lakes to open water on Tramping Lake. I would need someone to accompany me to assist with pulling the canoe.

“There is a man at my place who will go with you,” he said.

With that we got into his truck and drove to his place. Here, after lunch, we picked up a light aluminium canoe and the man to help me pull it.

We pulled the canoe easily over the four lakes over good safe ice. By 3:30 that afternoon, we looked out from the shore of Tramping Lake over open water to see the tourist camp across the bay. When we had paddled across, the lady was certainly glad to see us. We did not stop for lunch as we wanted to get back to the portage before dark and to be off the lake before new ice formed that night.

We ate our lunch as it was getting dark at the portage: bacon, biscuits baked by the lady, and coffee made at the campfire. Off again on our way, all baggage in the canoe, we hauled the load over the portage. It took the three of us to haul it across the ground where the snow was only two inches deep. On the lake it was different—we made fast time, the two men in front pulling and the lady pushing from behind. We were at the highway by midnight. The lady’s husband was waiting for us there beside a good campfire.

At the lady’s home by about 1 A.M., we were all happy to be back. It was November 11, the day she was to have been in Winnipeg. She had to send a telegram next day from Wekusko to her mine shareholders postponing the meeting.

That night her daughter-in-law made us a wonderful home-cooked meal. We had a great celebration.

I stayed over one day, then took the train back to Flin Flon. This story has a happy ending for the claims on which we drilled were later optioned to a mining company for several thousand dollars, a fitting reward for a lady who had the drive and daring to go prospecting on her own and to arrange for and supervise the drilling.