



Sunset on the Beaver River

Bruce McKee

WE ARE EARTH AND FIRE, WIND AND WATER: ONE NORTHERN SUMMER

by THOMAS J. BURNS*

I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map? — Aldo Leopold

During the summer of 1973, two canoes followed some of the historic river systems of northern Saskatchewan, fulfilling many dreams and raising many hopes for the future of the North and its people. This story is about Wilf Allan of Nova Scotia (who started it all), Tom Burns of Regina, Bruce McKee of Saskatoon, Jan Olafson of Saskatoon (who we wish had been able to make the entire trip), Allan Wickstrom of Tompkins, our dogs, Brownie and the Squeekers, and

all the people who made the trip what it was.

It was the beginning of July when our two 16-foot cedar-canvas canoes set out from Meadow Lake Provincial Park bound for Cumberland House — 630 miles and 6 weeks distant. A week of preparation on the many lakes and streams of the park had already assured us of an easy paddle through the coming miles of marsh grasses, rushes and water lilies. A light breeze came up to fill our hastily improvised sails; ducks rose out of the thick growth; terns (right and left!) circled overhead; a Great Blue Heron took to

*3424 College Ave.,
Regina, Saskatchewan.
S4T 1W4



Bruce McKee
Left to right: Jan Olofson, Tom Burns, Allan Wickstrom, Bruce McKee, Wilf Allan, with
"the Squeekers" and "Brownie" in the foreground.

the wing near our boats; marsh birds protested our intrusion but it was the pelicans that excited us — soaring, floating on invisible currents in a cloudless sky. That first night the stars were barely visible, obscured by the brightness of the moon, and the loons called out from the stilled and shining waters, answered only by distant echoes.

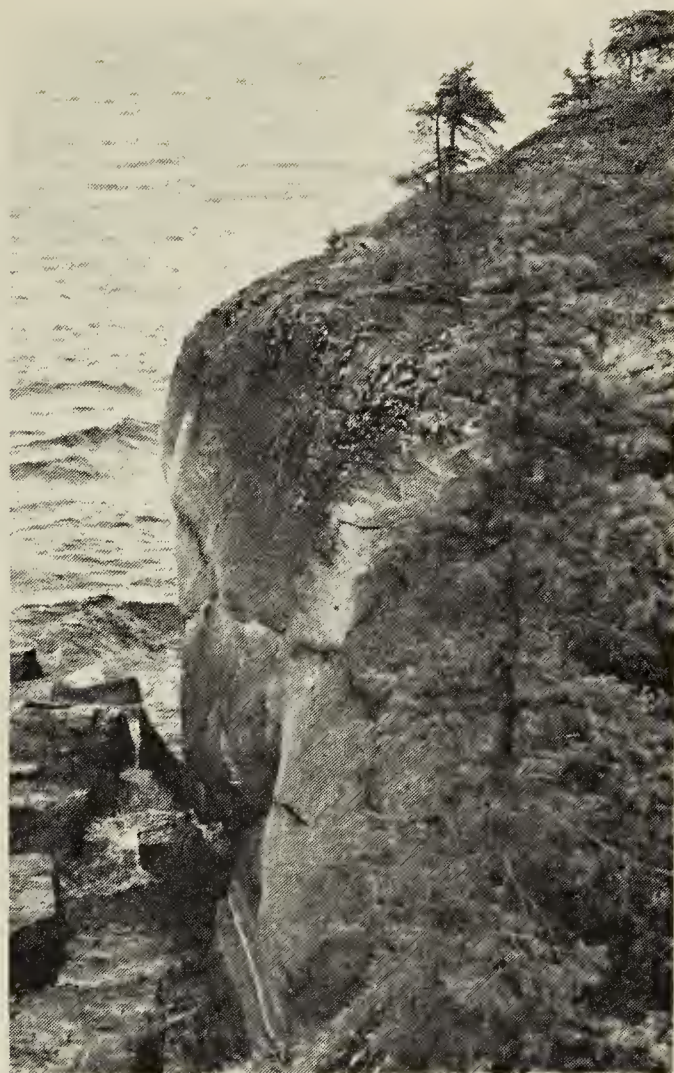
The lower Waterhen River, outside the park boundaries, alternated between fast water, where the shallow bed was strewn with quickly passing boulders, and slow meanders where the river was swallowed up in broad valleys. Periodically we came upon trappers' cabins, staring out over the river from clearings high above the banks. The land was rich: moose, deer, bear, muskrat, Golden Eagles, waterfowl and, of course, pelicans. One of

our camps was made at a long abandoned homestead; the imposing ruins of the cabin, barn and outbuildings were testimony to faded dreams of long ago in this lush and gentle wilderness. But if we were merely escaping from the reality of world crises, our success was little greater than was this homesteader's in the long run, for throughout the day we heard muffled explosions, as one possible future was rehearsed on the nearby air weapons test range.

Soon we left the Waterhen for the Beaver River where the general flood conditions all across the North became more apparent. The rapids, known to earlier voyageurs as "Grand", now appeared most unworthy of the name bearing only hints of the white horse and swift waters of other years. We saw no wildlife along the high, steep bank

f mixed softwoods, but as the river valley widened into marshlands on the following days, pelicans and every kind of waterfowl again accompanied us, past the small community of Beauval and on to Beaver River, a fishing settlement located where the river flows into Lac Ile à la Crosse. We crossed the lake, arriving at historic Ile à la Crosse to find the Co-op and the Bay closed and the annual sports day in progress. We took several days to reorganize our jumbled packs and visit Nap Johnson, an unforgettable character, who combines legendary northern hospitality with an amazing knowledge of the bush. He spent a day with us, drawing from memory maps of the rapids we would encounter up to Otter, giving us advice on paddling and snaring, or demonstrating the proper method of making trapper's bannock. He spoke of some of the problems of this northern community, which still must import fish crates and telephone poles from as far away as Cumberland, despite their attempts to obtain assistance for a sawmill to employ local labour. This was not to be the last time we would encounter realistic alternatives for community development that did not enjoy the favour of the government. Nap was busy trying to finish some of the cabins for his Alstead Lake Camp in time for fall hunting but he expressed a powerful longing to join us. Jan, unfortunately, had to return to Saskatoon, leaving us to push on. That evening, as we crossed the lake, now paddling Indian style, we passed more than 100 pelicans gathered on a rocky point beyond one of the many small islands we passed. Several took to the air, sharply silhouetted against the sinking sun.

Lac Ile à la Crosse is long and narrow; at some points the waters stretch as far as the eye can see, north and south. The winds can roll up huge waves by mid-morning and the swell does not die until late at night. The

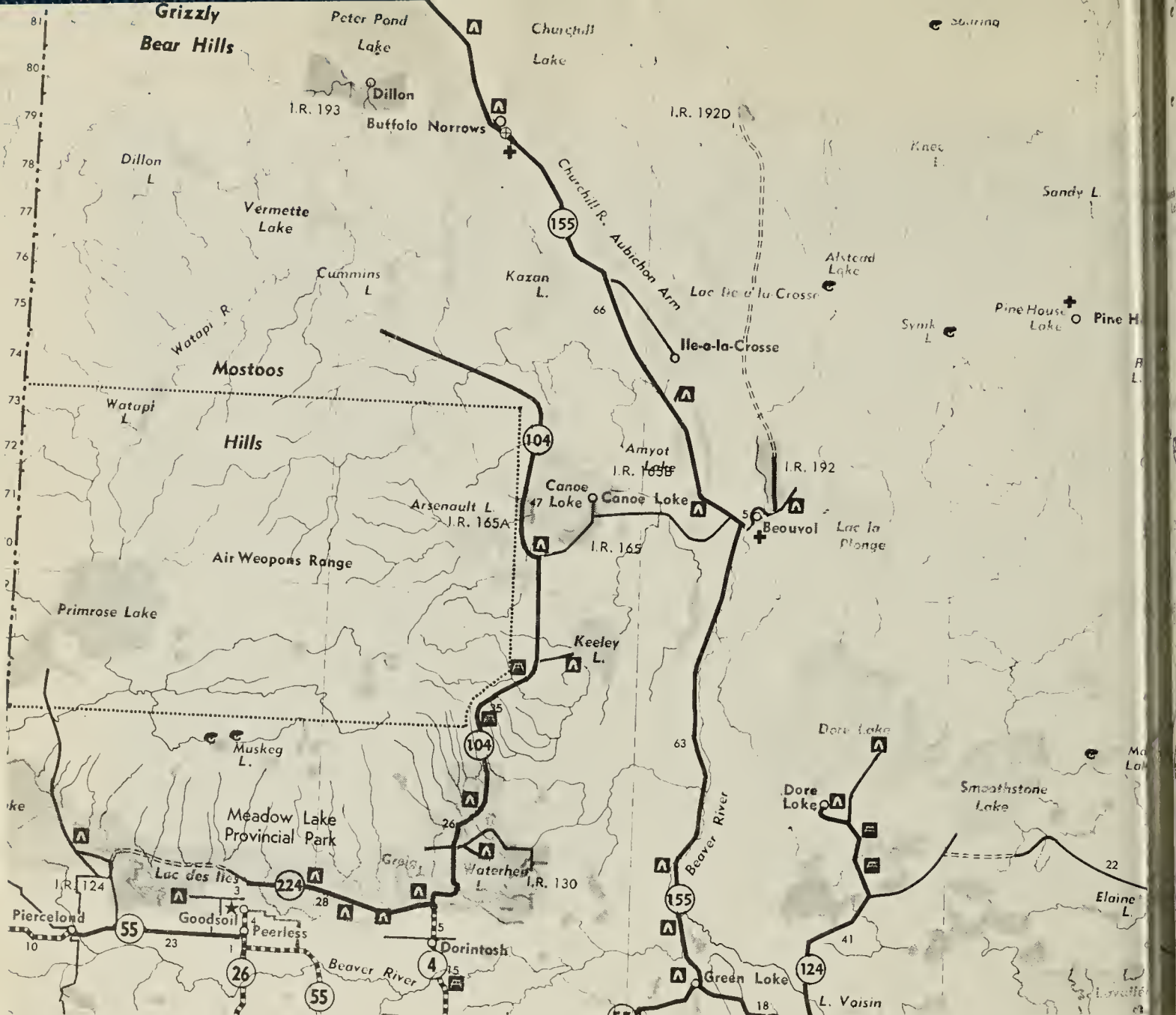


Dipper Lake

Bruce McKee

clouds are spectacular, caught between the blues of sky and lake.

We were windbound for a good part of the time but our patience was soon rewarded with a tail wind that pushed us up the lake. We sighted our first Bald Eagle of the trip perched atop a dead poplar in the evening sun — a most magnificent bird. At the north end of the lake, just past Shagenaw Rapids lay Patuanak, gateway to the Churchill and to the Canadian Shield, our last provisioning point before Missinippi. Our tents pitched beside the Hudson's Bay Post, we eagerly awaited the sunrise. In our excitement that morning we missed the outlet of Shagenaw Lake, but eventually reached Drum Rapids, after passing a cross erected to Louis Riel's sister, who had hidden here during the ill-fated uprising of 1885. This was the Churchill at last: Leaf, Deer and Dipper Rapids, each more spectacular

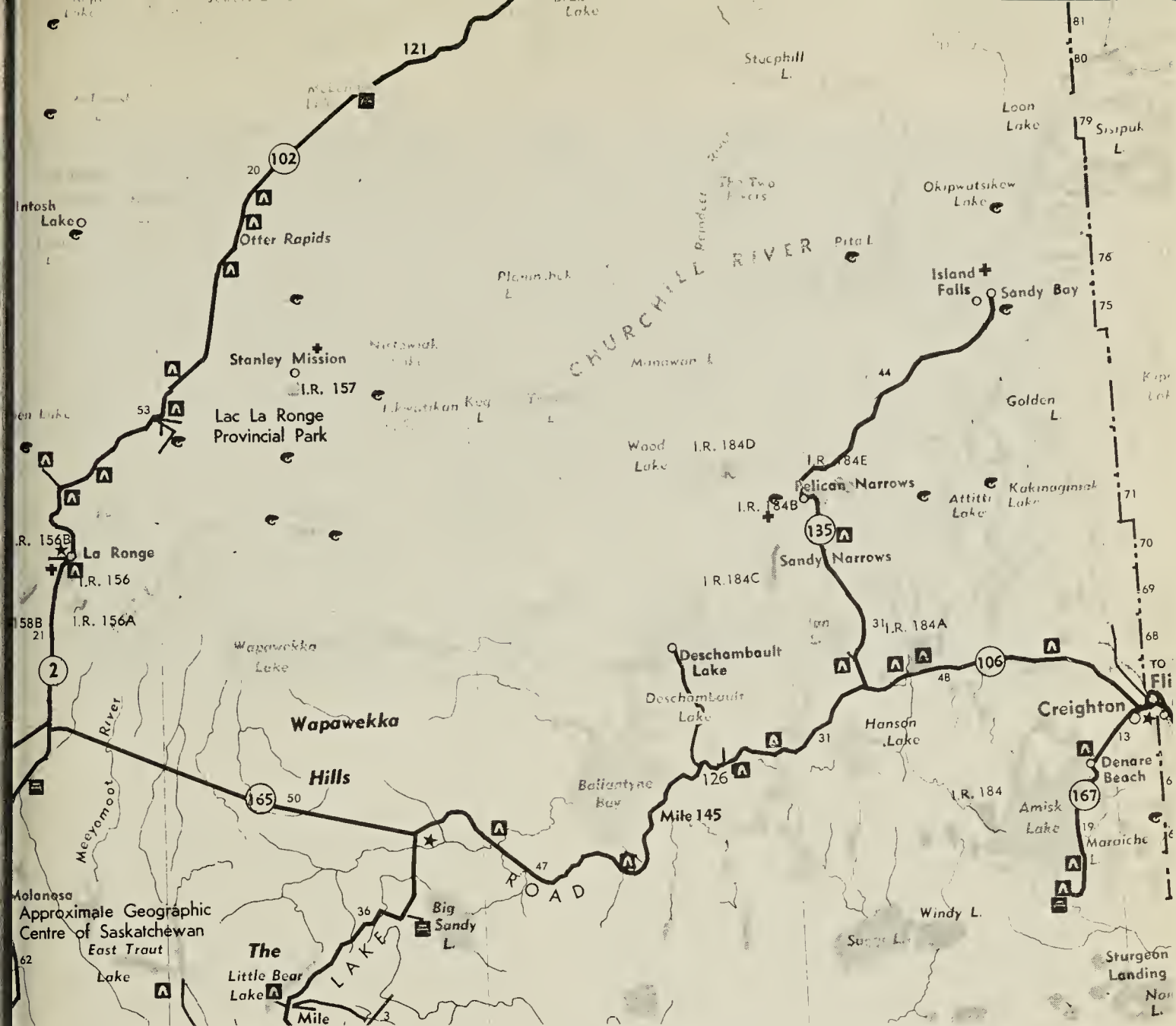


Churchill River from Peter Pond Lake to Manitoba.

than the other. But after this brief introduction, we encountered the other face of the Churchill, paddling through winding channels of calm water to Dipper Lake, camping on an island for a lazy day of exploring, picking saskatoons and blueberries, fishing and, finally, watching a fiery sunset over the distant shore. After crossing Primeau Lake on a calm day, past Primeau village where Father Moraud had built his small church overlooking the river, we attempted running Crooked Rapids but one of the canoes capsized in the unusually fast current. The better part of the day was spent drying gear, repairing a broken gunnel and surveying the rapids to try to see how we managed such foolishness. The rough-hewn pine gunnel, however, became a sort of

status symbol, serving us well for the rest of the journey. We finished the lower set of Crooked in better form and camped just above Knee Rapids where we waited to portage the gear and the damaged canoe in the morning. As we made the second trip of the portage — we always made two trips, one for the gear and one for the canoe — we narrowly missed an encounter with a bear who made off with our marmalade and detergent, hotly pursued by Squeekers, our intrepid bear dog. Again we reorganized our gear before pushing off for one of the finest days of the summer on Knee Lake.

It was calm as we set out, but soon we were pushing against the strongest winds and waves and the hardest rain of the trip. We pulled into a small



orseshoe cove at the entrance to Bentley Bay, marked by another cross directed high upon a hill that rose sharply from the lake. We brewed some hot chocolate and huddled around a large fire built under a sheltering pine as the rain finally turned to mist. We left quietly, paddling down the mirror-like surface of the bay — the sun, the clouds, the wind, the rocks, the trees, the mists, the rain and the birds left a tangle of memories. The colour was red, a touch in the sky and a bold stroke across the rocks, seen through the lifting haze, out of which gulls flew as if from a void, passing overhead and again into the mist. The cry of the loon echoed through countless foggy bays. We slept late in the gentle morning rain but put in a full day of paddling when we were

unable to find a campsite in the Haultain Marshes until we had reached Snake Rapids.

The rapids along this part of the river were sheer joy and we stopped for a mid-afternoon swim on a sandy beach overlooking Cowpack Island and the burned-over shores of Snake Lake. We lost ourselves completely in Sandfly Lake, a collection of islands and rocks strewn helter-skelter from one end to the other, a pleasant detour that taught us to put the compass ahead of our own intuition. At Needle Falls, with its glassy ribbons of black water rearing up and exploding beside our tents, we prepared for a difficult day of navigation through Black Bear Island Lake where Nap had alerted us to an Indian pictograph (mentioned in the journal of Alexander Mackenzie).

Silent Rapids marked the entry to this lake on a five-eagle day that left a swirl of memories: a granite cliff face leaping out from the calm waters, a lone jackpine standing in a clearing, island after island of dark spruce stretching off into the hazy distance and a sudden storm passing over on a southwest wind. As we passed the Foster River, for the first time the waters were crystal clear and free of algae. We had the first of our many encounters with the Keche Mookoomanuk, the long knives, the American tourists found throughout the North in relentless search for the legendary great northern — jackfish to us. By the next morning we were thoroughly drenched and a fire was out of the question as long as the rain continued. We listened to the loons calling from every corner of this tangled lake.

We shot, portaged and lined the series of rapids that followed, but spent a quiet evening of reflection at the Lake of the Dead, recalling our breathless excitement and anticipating

our coming return to “civilization” symbolized by the great steel bridge at Otter Rapids, one day and over a mile of portages away. We could obtain no information on the Devils and cautiously resigned ourselves to the long portages. We arrived at Otter that evening and camped at the bridge to await an attempt at these famous rapids by Wilf and Allan. Soon after passing the shack tents of the native guides along the shore, we were in Missinippi, washing, showering and resting. Friends were to meet us here with provisions and we passed an evening with Peter Whitehead, a local canoe outfitter, who presented us with a magnificent set of maps for the rest of the trip and related some of his many experiences in the North.

Bruce and I went into La Ronge, the new “capital of the north”, to visit friends and savour the alien and oppressive atmosphere as the forces of white progress march relentlessly ahead. Wandering through the air conditioned government offices,



Black Bear Island Lake

Bruce McKee



Portage at Nistowiak Falls

Bruce McKee

egan to see the Churchill as both a
ver and a people under sentence of
eath. We were fortunate, though, to
meet Peter Gregg, author of the DNR
canoe route guides that we had so
faithfully followed, building canoes in
his workshop.

We set off for Stanley Mission in the
rain, as an aircraft from one of the
local lodges buzzed one of our canoes
in a final gesture of the white man's
arrogance. Our trip to Stanley was
crowned with a campsite overlooking
the little white Gothic church that has
stood there since 1850. Just out of
Stanley and before Nepukituk Rapids
we again encountered pictographs on
the granite rock faces, depicting what
appeared to be reindeer and hunters.
On Drope Lake we explored an aban-
doned uranium mine, its huge diesel
engine and steam boiler hardly used,
as the forest moved in over the tailings
and against the old buildings,
reclaiming what it could. On the ad-
vice of Fred McKinnon, a Saskatoon
canoeist we met in Black Bear Island
Lake and again at Missinippi, we made
the detour to Nistowiak Falls. There
the green crystal waters of the Mon-
real River are turned into a swirling

creamy white jade, the spray tossed
high into the air and against the shiny
black granite walls spotted with
emerald green moss. Then we stopped
at Drinking Falls Lodge for the free
coffee traditionally offered canoeists
by many of the northern lodges.

We were windbound briefly by a
true prairie wind that swept over Keg
Lake and created enormous ripples
where it blew against the powerful
current of Grand Rapids at Trade
Lake. Trade Lake marked the end of
our Churchill trip, where the Portage
de Traite led into the Saskatchewan
system. We bade farewell to the Chur-
chill, pushing our canoes along the yet
unfinished marine railway, built for
the government survey crews, out
establishing bench marks and painting
bright orange survey markers all about
the area, spelling disaster for the local
guides. The remains of the old skid
trail and traces of the original portage
still could be found alongside the fresh
planking and shiny rails. At the end of
the portage, one of several families
camped here on their way to Pelican
Narrows was preparing lunch while the
baby slept in a hammock slung be-
tween two trees. This was not only the



Nome Lake

Bruce McKee

end of one part of our trip but perhaps the last time we would ever see these people in their own land.

We paddled through the shallow winding channels leading to Wood Lake and camped on a high, narrow spine of rock rising sharply from the water. A spectacular sunrise the next morning started us off down the lake where the light and shade played on the islands and the shore, revealing the reds, oranges and yellows of autumn. We kept our eyes open for the pelicans which we had missed since Black Bear Island Lake, expecting them to reappear near Pelican Narrows, but to no avail. We followed the meanders of Grassy Narrows, and pitched our tents along a low rock shelf facing the morning sun. The evening star was set in a glowing blue sky, an infinity beyond the rows of dark spruce and brightly coloured birches just across the river. We portaged the next two small rapids

before arriving at a particularly clear pictograph of a Mannigishi with his six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. We neglected to leave the traditional offering for good luck.

We shot Medicine Rapids, the last before Pelican Narrows, where we left our canoes behind to fly to Sandy Bay returning to Churchill for a visit with my brother, Peter Burns, who took us up the river in his motorized canoe — an exhilarating experience after 5 weeks of paddling! We again met Peter Gregg, preparing another book for the canoe route series, and passed an evening comparing notes on the progress of the government engineering crews. We visited the Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting dam at Island Falls and marvelled at the deserted townsite with its cement walks, fire hydrants and recreation hall. The 34 houses with their finished basements and sunny porches had sat

empty for 7 years since the dam was completed and the requests by the community to develop the site as a family resort had fallen on deaf ears. The people, who had seen the end of their fishing and trapping and later lost their jobs at the dam, were wary of the promises and claims made for hydroelectric and diversion schemes. A twilight drive brought us back to Pelican Narrows, anxious to resume our journey.

We were blown down Mirond Lake by a northwest wind to the beginning of the Sturgeon Wier River at Corville Rapids. In a minor rapid just past the next portage, the mischievous Mannigishi grasped the gunnels of my canoe and gave me a second soaking but we soon dried out under the afternoon sun. At Dog Rapids we had our revenge, avoiding the portage by slipping along a little passage through the willows. As we passed Maligne Lake and the bridge at Mile 190 of the Hanlon Lake Road, we again had a strong current and rapids reminiscent of the Churchill. Wilf and Allan shot Leaf Rapids but we all portaged Scoop, a small but spectacular fall, surrounded by spruce, set against the clear blue sky. The wildlife, conspicuously absent along the Churchill returned here: herons, hawks and pelicans, as well as the ever-present eagles. Allan even managed to call up a loon! Snake Rapids provided a high point for Wilf and Allan, who narrowly missed a huge rock in this long and difficult rapid that could have ended the brief career of Wilf's Kildonan canoe. For Bruce and myself, under the weather (and the previous night's cooking!), the portage was difficult and help with our canoe was much appreciated as was the following day of rest. On the second night of our layover we were treated to a spectacular display of lightning that sent brilliant flashes of whiteness through the stillness of the forest. Just past a small Indian burial ground overlooking the river lay Spruce

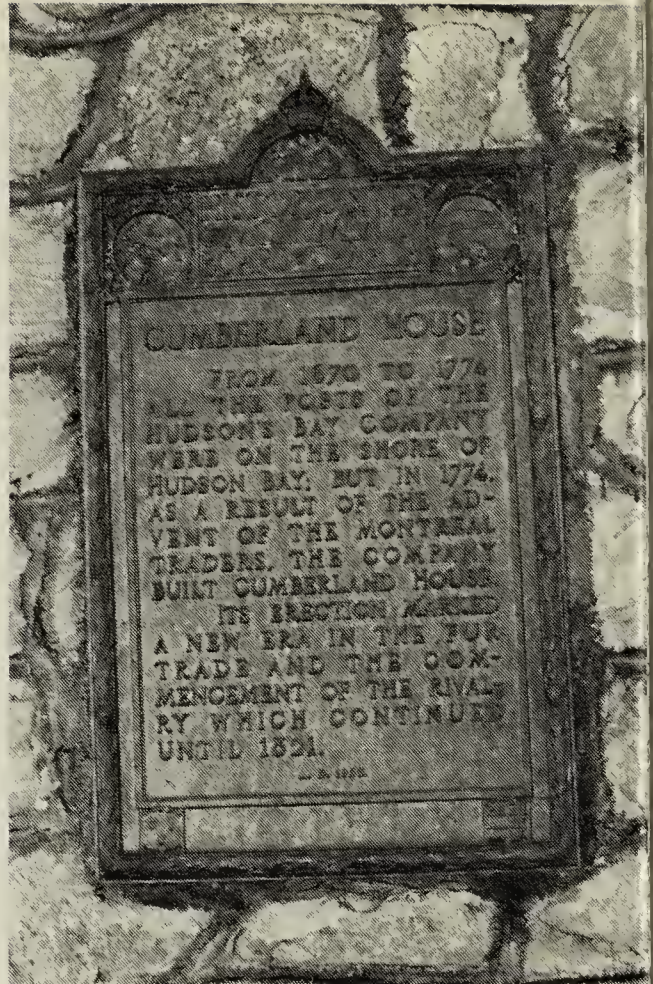
Rapids, with its pretty portage and campsite littered with dead fish, rotten garbage, cans and beer bottles.

As we crossed Amisk Lake we bade farewell to the Shield, noting the bright orange lichens covering the limestone cliffs along the shore. Then we encountered the power boats from the resorts near Flin Flon, clearly marked by the distant stacks and smoke plume on the horizon. By late afternoon we reached the DNR campsite at the end of the lake where we met Bud Holm, a Winnipeg artist, painting wildlife of the north.

This next part of the Wier was also known as the Rivière Maligne, a name that caused me some concern until I realized it has been applied by upstream travellers! Our only detailed maps for the river to Sturgeon Landing were drawn by Peter Whitehead from aerial photographs and indicated 17 sets of rapids through the 100-foot drop and 20-mile run. We shot them all, including Crooked, which brought back memories of the Churchill, both in name and difficulty, on the most exhilarating day of the entire summer, a blur of birch and poplar, rocks and bears along the shore. We took water several times and one canoe was ignominiously grounded in the middle of L'Isle Rapids. The last 2½ miles to Sturgeon along Goose Creek was literally a continuous rapid, passing in a flash and ending abruptly as we sped past the docks at Namew Lake quite unable to stop.

We were all anxious to leave this tourist trap the next morning but our attempt at crossing Namew was partially thwarted when Bruce and I turned back in the face of strong head winds. It was a North Superior day as huge waves crashed against the rocky shore but as night fell and a brilliant red moon coloured the quiet waters, we paddled toward the distant beacon across the lake and rejoined Wilf and Allan. In the morning we set off

through Whitey Narrows as waves of storm clouds passed overhead. A beaver swam just ahead of us, slapping his tail and diving whenever our canoes drifted too close for his comfort. Soon we reached Cumberland House — the island where there are many spruce trees — almost an anticlimax after one black cloud released its fury upon us as we stumbled clown-like in the rain and hail through the oozing mud flats that signalled our arrival at the Saskatchewan. The trip ended in a manner fitting the spirit in which it was taken — quietly and unceremoniously, as the sun set against a cloudy sky, burning into our memories the 6 weeks of the Great Lone Land and its people.



Bruce McKee
Historic marker at Cumberland House

Epilogue: Butler, writing in 1870, described Cumberland as unchanging, the same as it had been a century before but such is clearly no longer the case, if it ever was. The only thing that never seems to change is the grip that Western industrial society has on peripheral cultures and their lands — in Africa, in South America and even in northern Saskatchewan. We are still missionaries but now we are trying to sell our goods and services to the non-believer by destroying his sense of self-reliance. It is little wonder our society is so drawn to the wilderness experience in trying to recapture the spirit of human dignity, but so surprising that we refuse to understand why many of those who retain their dignity refuse to accept our ideals willingly. Remember that the North does not belong to us, nor to those holding legal title to the land, but to its people, who do not own the

land but only know it, and in that, know themselves.

For afterwards a man finds pleasure in his pains, when he has suffered long and wandered long. — Homer

SUGGESTED READING

- KEMP, H. S. M. 1956. *Northern trader*, Ryerson Toronto.
 MORSE, Eric W. 1971. *Fur trade canoe routes/Then and Now*, Queen's Printer, Ottawa.
 OLSON, Sigurd F. 1961. *The lonely land*, Knopf New York.

* * * * *

In wildness is the preservation of the world.
Henry David Thoreau, Walking.