THE STORY OF GREY OWL

by ALEX ZELLERMeyer*

He was an Indian. He was a half-bred. Or was he an Englishman? He was an author, a naturalist, a lecturer, a man presented to Prime Ministers and Kings. He was a drunkard, perhaps a bigamist? To most people of the past and, unfortunately, even the present, he was a question mark. A man known more by name than fact — judged more by sip than reality. Where does the truth lie?

THE EARLY YEARS. The story of Grey Owl began far from Prince Albert National Park. It started in 1888 with the birth of Archibald Stanfield Belaney in the southern English coastal town of Hastings. Decades would pass before Grey Owl would emerge.

Archie's early childhood was typical of most English school boys at the end of the 19th century. His education was looked after by the two maiden aunts who had raised him from infancy. Archie was particularly talented on the piano.

Like most schoolboys of his day, Archie lived a constant daydream of experiencing the world of the North American "Wild West". These dreams of becoming an Indian pathfinder — a hunter — were to follow him from childhood through adolescence and, eventually, to manhood.

By the age of 17, Archie was too restless to remain in Hastings with his 60 aging aunts. The thought of settling into the local office clerk's position he seemed destined to occupy encouraged his growing wanderlust. In 1905, Archie Belaney booked passage on the S.S. Canada from Liverpool, arriving in Canada in April of that year.

At the turn of the century, northern Canada was a country of wildlands, occasionally broken with mining towns, lumber camps and train stops on railroads to places of greater importance. Into this Ontario northland came Archie Belaney. At a small rail stop called Temiskaming, Archie made friends with the local Indians, trappers and guides. They were mostly of Ojibway origin, a people to whom Archie would always credit his woodland talents. It was here that over the years that Archie Belaney learned the arts of trapping and wilderness life.

In 1910 Archie married his first wife, a young Ojibway girl named Angele. The marriage was to last for only a year. Archie's restlessness, which he felt whenever he became too "settled", was a personal uneasiness which would haunt him for his entire life. However, the Ojibway customs of marriage were simple. A couple remained together for as long as they desired or parted whenever they wished. Archie was taking on more of an Indian identity with each passing year.

Little is known of Archie's life from the period 1910 to 1915. He spent one winter with his second wife, Marie Gerard. He worked with the Ontario Forestry Department near Biscotasing where he had the occasional run-in with the local constabulary. Archie was fond of "whooping-it-up".
PRIVATE BELANEY. The onset of World War I saw the first Canadian contingent fighting under their own command and colours. Listed with this Canadian Expeditionary Force was Private A. Belaney. In France, Archie was wounded and subsequently sent to England for convalescence. Back in his boyhood country, he spent over a year renewing old friendships and memories. One of these was his childhood sweetheart Ivy Holmes. In 1917 they were married.

It was here that Archie must have finally decided that a well-ordered life, especially a rigid English one, could never truly satisfy him. After months, the couple decided to dissolve the union. Archie Belaney was Canada-bound for a second time. When England saw him next it would be as the triumphant Grey Owl.

GREY OWL. Back in the Ontario north woods near Biscotosing, Archie returned to the life of a trapper and guide. It was in 1920 at an Ojibway gathering that Archibald Belaney gave up his Christian name. With his hair long and braided, clothed in buckskin, he chose the name Wa-sha-Quon-Asin, the Grey Owl. Not until his death would it emerge that he had ever been known by another name.

Now, as Grey Owl, he continued his trapping. It was circumstance that returned him in 1920 to the Temiskaming area where he met Gertrude Bernard, a young girl of Iroquois descent. Grey Owl called her Anahareo — her ancestral name. After several months of correspondence they were married.

PILGRIMS OF THE WILD. By the time Grey Owl had met Anahareo he was familiar with the value systems of the Ojibway, with their customs, and with their language. He was, for all intents and purposes, an Indian in both manner and appearance — especially in appearance. Even his blue eyes and flawless English did not lessen the impact of this tall, long-haired man in moccasins. With a single eagle feather hanging from his braided hair and a determined scowl perpetually on his face, it appeared as though he had stepped from the very pages of those books he had read long ago in England.

These early years with Anahareo changed Grey Owl from trapper to conservationist. In the overhunted trapping regions of Ontario and Quebec, Grey Owl found it in
creasingly difficult to trap for a livelihood. Since 1670, when the B.C. ship Nonsuch sailed from England to the new-found fur lands of what was to become Canada, the beaver had started a slow but steady population decline. Two hundred and fifty years later, in Grey Owl’s time, it seemed as though the last refuge for our national animal was destined to be in the Canadian nickel.

One spring, Anahareo found two orphaned beaver kittens. Their parents had been trapped, and it appeared that the fate of these kits was bleak. The young couple adopted the orphans. The couple was so moved by the intelligence and loyalty of these “beaver people,” as the Indians called them, that he became more concerned with finding measures to protect them, rather than better methods to trap them.

It was then that Grey Owl’s fortunes improved. A nature article he had submitted to an English journal, Country Life, gained immediate recognition. The publishers were only too eager to learn more about this eloquent half-breed from Canada’s backwoods who went by the name of Grey Owl. They asked for more.

At the same time, Grey Owl agreed to lecture to an audience at Métis Beach. By the end of the summer of 1927, the attention he had received convinced Grey Owl that conservation was to be his life’s work.


In 1931, Grey Owl accepted a position with the National Parks Service as a naturalist. His project — to re-establish beaver colonies in areas of the National Parks from which they had been long exterminated.

Thus, in April of 1931, Grey Owl arrived at Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba. Unfortunately, the local conditions for establishing a beaver colony didn’t meet Grey Owl’s...
requirements and a transfer was requested. It was because of this that on October 27, 1931, Grey Owl, with Anahareo and the two beavers, Rawhide and Jellyrole, arrived in Prince Albert National Park. Here, on the seldom visited shoreline of a small lake called Ajawaan, a cabin was built. Grey Owl called it "Beaver Lodge". The name was more than appropriate. Rawhide and Jellyroll had built their mud lodge against it, and after a hole had been cut for them through the lakeside wall, they completed the other half of the lodge inside the cabin itself.

It was at Ajawaan that Grey Owl emerged from relative obscurity to become the celebrated Indian author and conservationist. He wrote articles and answered requests which never seemed to end. Streams of letters from the corners of the world flowed to Ajawaan.

During this period, 1932 to 1934, Grey Owl completed his best known work, Pilgrims of the wild. It was in this book that he told the story of Anahareo and the two orphaned beaver kits. It was also here that Grey Owl attempted to express his source of inspiration — the Canadian wilderness. Pilgrims of the wild was translated into eight languages so that there were few people in the western world who had not heard of the "Beaver Lodge" of this Canadian backwoodsman.

In 1935 Grey Owl agreed to his publisher's suggestion that he go on a lecture tour — destination: England. Thus he returned to the country of his birth in beaded buckskin. Tall and stern-faced, he stood in front of more than a quarter of a million people on that tour alone. He filled and refilled theatres and still people were turned away for lack of space.

The tour was so successful that more were planned. On a subsequent lecture series in England, Grey Owl made a command appearance before King George VI and the Royal family. Afterwards, having been asked for tea with the sovereign, Grey Owl bade the king goodbye with a "Farewell brother" and a hearty slap on the back. For the former Hastings resident this must have been more than memorable occasion.

"I think the Canadians take their priceless heritage of the North rather complacently for granted. Well, they want to watch it, or they soon won't have it. The policy they are pursuing in regard to its exploitation and to a very much lesser degree, its preservation, is lamentably short-sighted."

THE PRICE OF FAME. The lengthy lecture tours, writing schedules and world publicity also took their toll. In 1936 Grey Owl and Anahareo agreed to part. Later that year he married his fifth wife, Yvonne Perrier, and completed his last book, Tales of an empty cabin.

In the autumn of 1937 Grey Owl undertook another European lecture tour. Returning to North America, he immediately started yet another lecture series in eastern Canada and the United States. The pressures of his travels, writing deadlines, and his lifestyle wore away Grey Owl's health. As he told one reporter in Ontario, on more month of this "will kill me". A month later, April 3, 1938 Grey Owl passed away in a Prince...
bert hospital after being found unconscious on the floor of "Beaver edge". He had pneumonia.

**KEY OWL EXPOSED.** The day after his death Grey Owl was exposed as an impostor. It had been only a matter of time before someone connected him with Archibald Belaney, and when it opened, no holds were barred. He had become publicly associated with fraud and scandal. People were more interested in his masquerade than his writings. The number of his wives was more important than his effort to further Canadian conservation. The pride of encouragement he gave to native peoples and their traditions was set aside for the sensationalism of his love of "whooping-it-up". And when the public was tired of the expose and his own moralizations, he became as forgotten as yesterday’s newspapers.

Yet, it is time which becomes the final judge of a person’s accomplishments, and it is time that the words and thoughts of Grey Owl have survived. His books are regaining popularity and he may yet become recognized as one of Canada’s greatest northern writers, as he was called before his death. One saner journalist wrote after Grey Owl’s death, “He was not, they say, a real Red Indian. So what?”

Regardless of what Grey Owl was not, today we may be certain of what he was. He was an exceptional author and naturalist. He was a perceptive man whose life style demanded that he cast his fortune to the wind — no matter what. He was a great Canadian. The sadness is that it has taken us so long to realize it.


SMITH, p. 25, No. 12. (Also some discrepancy in SHORT report p. 18).

SHORT, p. 19.

SMITH, p. 8.

SHORT, p. 20 and SMITH, p. 7-8.

SHORT, p. 20.

SHORT, p. 21.

SMITH, p. 12.

SHORT, p. 22.

SHORT, p. 23.

SHORT, p. 25.

SHORT, p. 28.

SHORT, p. 27.


SMITH, p. 27.

DICKSON, p. 48.

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**Books by Grey Owl**


*Tales of an Empty Cabin*, 1936, Peter Davies Ltd., London.


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**Books about Grey Owl**


*Half Breed*, Dickson, L.