

# NINE DOG WINTER

**BRUCE T. BATCHELOR**

With more courage and energy than common sense, two young Canadians recruit nine rowdy sled dogs, and head out camping in the Yukon as temperatures plunge to Sixty Below and colder!

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BRUCE T. BATCHELOR



151 Howe Street, Victoria BC Canada V8V 4K5

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Thanks to Jill Bauer for her clever drawings of our dogs. Maps drawn by Marsha Batchelor. All other sketches and diagrams by the author. Thanks to Cor Guimond for photos on pages 126 and 349; all other photos by the author and Marsha, except as indicated. *Cover photo: our sled dog Dawson*

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## CHAPTER ONE



## WHAT TO DO ABOUT A DREAM

I was having a difficult time trying to sleep. Mosquitoes were bouncing on the tent's roof as if it was their own private trampoline. Fishing my watch out of a boot beside my sleeping bag, I checked the time: one o'clock in the morning. The sky was disgustingly daylight.

My campsite overlooked a tiny, sub-Arctic lake teeming with rowdy birds. A half-dozen species were squawking, cooing, warbling, gobbling and quacking at each other, terribly pleased to have flown all the way to the Yukon where there was certainly no lack of bugs to eat. Yet it wasn't this noisy, natural celebration of spring that was keeping me awake, it was the thought of going *dog mushing*. This weird notion was really messing with my mind.

The concept of owning sled dogs had been lurking in my subconscious over the years, slowly growing until, at this opportune moment, it had emerged as a full-fledged compulsion. All I could think about was dropping everything, rearranging my whole life, and moving off to the remotest corners of Canada's Yukon Territory to go winter camping with huskies.

Over the past two weeks, I had been on a working holiday in Whitehorse, revising a map book of the Yukon River. The first edition, which I published five years before in 1975, had sold out and the summer canoeists were clamouring for more copies. A week before, when I was redrafting some critical bends and sandbars by referring to aerial photographs, a friend had slipped a few old winter shots into the slide projector tray. There on the screen was the tiny dome-shaped cabin I once lived in near Whitehorse. The piles of canoes and firewood surrounding the building were covered with so much snow they looked like landscaped shrubbery. Smoke was rising straight up from the chimney so it had to be Minus Twenty Fahrenheit or colder when the photograph was taken. Cross-country skis were propped in a snow bank by the door; the odd-looking, orange-and-white

puppy posing in the doorway was Casey, my pet and best friend. He has always been a ham for pictures.

As I looked at that image, the hibernating dream began stirring in my head, though I wouldn't realize this until too late to stop it. The next slides were typical scenes of the Yukon Sourdough Rendezvous, the grand carnival held in the territorial capital every February. There were flour-packing contests, a beauty pageant, Gold Rush era costumes, sourdough pancake breakfasts and... sled dog races.

Dozens of teams were gathered on the river ice for the start and I could pick out a few friends' teams in the photos. Jean's was on the left, Cor's beside them, and next was Jon and his crew. I caught myself wondering why I'd never owned a pack of dogs too. The old excuses of mess, noise, time and money seemed insignificant as the romantic, snowy images glittered on the screen.

During the next few days, while I revamped the canoeists' guidebook, my dream began to assert itself. Out of the blue, I would blurt out a question about building harnessing or bending boards for a toboggan. People looked at me strangely. After all, it was May with daytime temperatures pushing into the 70s.

My plan had been to return to Vancouver Island to resume my fledgling journalist career as soon as this book was off the presses. I'd thought living in the Yukon was a long-finished chapter in my life. Since then, there had been a different story for me on the coast, with another cast of characters and a new plot. Yet here I was back in the North, lying in my tent, sleepless at the thought of spending a winter way off in the bush with my own dog team, going on camping expeditions, visiting with trappers and learning about living at Sixty Degrees Below Zero.

Perhaps all Canadians harbour genetically-transferred, idealist impulses to relive a pioneering lifestyle. If so, very few of us put these instincts into thoughts, fewer into words, and only the rare soul is compelled into action. Yet a full-fledged obsession had me clearly and completely in its grasp; I'm not sure I was really being given an option. The thought occurred to me that this might be quite dangerous – not everyone returns from his or her romantic Yukon dreams. However, the next message from my subconscious was to have faith in my luck.

Two days later, I found myself walking thirty-two miles in a thunderstorm, then sleeping under a spruce tree near the base of a mountain. Come daylight, I rolled up my soggy sleeping bag, poured water from my boots, ate an apple, and hiked up into the clouds. Following a steep ridge, I eventually climbed above the weather and could look for peaks and other landmarks. A few craggy features matched the lines on my now-mushy topographic map, so I knew this was the right mountain.



*From her fire tower high atop One Ace Mountain [on the BC-Yukon border near Watson Lake], Marsha coordinated communications with planes, fire crews and other lookout towers.*

Another half hour's scrambling brought renewed doubts, as I was near the summit and hadn't seen any sign of human habitation. Happily, the last rise revealed a small ledge, upon which were perched a white outhouse, an ecstatic floppy-eared puppy, a many-windowed hut with an impressive array of antennae wires, and – standing in the doorway – my future wife. Marsha McGillis was grinning and shaking her head in disbelief while the black-and-tan dog was sniffing my wet boots and wriggling its whole body in delight.

A forest fire tower might be an unlikely place to discuss dog mushing, but we did just that. I explained I needed a good heater to keep me warm on this winter adventure. Marsha has since said it was not really fair of me to proposition her like that: she hadn't seen a man for weeks and was susceptible to any offer.

Whether asking was ethical or not, by the time I climbed down the mountain three days later, Marsha had agreed to be my partner for the winter ahead. Her year-old puppy Tyhee would be one of the many dogs we would need.

## CHAPTER FOUR



### FINDING A CABIN AND ONE MORE DOG

**A**t Whitehorse, we were lucky to have friends who would lodge us and help find the items still on our shopping lists. Jon Rudolph and Carol Racz's cabin was a few miles out of town, and we could tie up our three mutts in the yard beside Jon's pack of sled dogs.

Old Furd, showing an impressive sense of timing, didn't break down until we reached Jon's driveway, leaving us close to help. We nursed the ailing vehicle until it could be driven back into town, but a mechanic's verdict there sounded gloomy. The chattering clutch had chewed itself to pieces. The bill would be hundreds of dollars.

"Do we invest money into a sick old beast like this," I pondered aloud, "or borrow money from somewhere and buy another one?"

"How can you say that?" Marsha scolded. "If Furd heard you he might think he isn't appreciated and break down in some awful place next time."

Faced with logic like that, I clearly had no choice but to agree to the repairs.

While the truck was undergoing surgery to transplant various internal organs, I found a phone book and placed a few calls to people I knew from previous canoe trips on the Yukon. A fisherman's summer cabin near our destination might be available for a modest rent, I learned, but it *would require a little fixing up and a good sweeping out*. We could go look it over before we decided, but should be on guard for bears: the area around the fish camp was, reportedly, *thick with the bastards*.

We were ecstatic! Although there remained, of course, the condition of the cabin to check, it had to be better than wintering in a wall tent. We immediately decided to do a reconnaissance of our future home as soon as Furd was ready. Our plans were running smoothly; the next step would be finding sled dogs. I got another handful of coins for the payphone....

Because of my dog experience, albeit limited, in the Yukon, Marsha placed me

nominally in charge of recruitment. I had my own theories about what size and breeding made a good sled dog – thoughts certainly neither original nor complete. While living in the North, I'd watched the races, listened to the bar-room discussions, read a few books on the subject, and tagged along while friends tried their hand with teams. Now, I was pumping everyone available for ideas and information about the availability of dogs, the latest racing sled developments, methods of training, care and feeding and, especially, how the old-timers ran their teams. I was trying to simplify, to demystify, to grasp the bare essentials.

Sled dogs come in a surprising variety of shapes and sizes. Originally any dog who worked well was kept, and failures were put into the dog food pot. Fighting would also weed out weaker dogs. Over the centuries, the people in each area developed their own breed of canine genetically suited for local needs and conditions. For example, the Malemute tribe's dogs were twice the size of those used by the Siberians, but each breed had its advantages. Generally, the larger dogs were used in deeper snow, hauling tougher loads, while the lighter mutts were bred for speed on the wind-packed snow over the tundra and sea ice.

In the central Yukon, the native Indians had dogs mostly as pack animals, seldom using them for draught until the period of contact with the white men. The particular strain of dogs bred in this area was subsequently lost, overwhelmed by the veritable zoo of canines that came in with the stampedes during the great Gold Rush of 1898.

Early in the 20th century, organizations in Europe and America established show standards for a few northern breeds: the Malemute, Samoyed and Siberian. Other types, such as the Esquimo, Mackenzie Husky, Greenland and Manitoba, were mentioned in journals but weren't given breed status. Unfortunately, the standards for kennel-raised dogs (colour of eyes, shape of tail and ears, and other cosmetic considerations) had little to do with actual pulling ability. With kennel owners breeding and in-breeding for appearance only, the evolutionary processes were short-circuited and the so-called pure-bred strains lost their vigour. Although in recent years some breeders had been revitalizing their registered lines by using them in races and weeding out the unfit, the winning teams rarely included any registered pure-bred dogs.

For our winter transportation, I wanted mongrels, because they were less prone to congenital defects and diseases, and often had better temperaments. We needed dogs big enough to wade through loose snow, yet not slow, meandering brutes, like St. Bernard-size dogs could be. It was important they all be about the same build too, so one pup wouldn't be forced to make two steps for a larger dog's

single stride. Lean, well-proportioned dogs, weighing from fifty to seventy-five pounds, were my ideal.

We phoned every musher in the Whitehorse area who had a telephone, but no one had extra dogs at this time of year. A couple of people suggested I try again in a few months, after the first races of the season, when a few culls would be up for grabs. We couldn't wait that long.

Our next avenue was the local dog pound. We wandered in and made the mistake of telling the attendant we were seeking homeless mutts for our dog teams.

"Are you *DOG MUSHERS*?" she asked, making it sound as if we could be child molesters.

"We want to be," I said. "Why? Does it make a difference in cost?"

"You can't have *any* dogs! It's the rules. I can't give up a dog for adoption to a dog musher."

"How come?" asked Marsha.

"It is the policy. The rules. Some dog mushers chain up their dogs to a tree and hardly feed them. *And they beat them.*"

She was making me feel bad, so I shifted the topic to her volunteer work. "You keep this place so clean and tidy. I bet the dogs like it here. What do you do if no one wants to adopt them as pets?"

"Oh," the attendant said casually, "we shoot them."

After twenty minutes of discussing the matter and assuring her I'd only been joking about being a nasty musher and that we *dearly wanted a pet or two to play with in the snow*, Marsha and I got a peek at the orphaned darlings.

Only one dog looked anything like my ideal and he was rather on the fat side. He was a shaggy black-and-white mutt, about Casey's height and length but thicker through the chest. His pointed snout and silky hair could have been from a Collie heritage, but the big bones must have been from some sturdier breed stock. There was a thick layer of body fat all over him, so I figured he would be cheap to feed for the first while, until we trimmed him down to working shape.

"We'll take this guy," I called to the lady.

"—*as a pet*," Marsha quickly added.

Five minutes, many triplicate forms and \$40 later, the new dog was in the back of Furd. We decided on the way back to Jon and Carol's to christen our newest recruit *Hinglish* because of his large boney cranium. Some French Canadians refer to English Canadians as square heads, or *les têtes carrées*, or sometimes *les maudits Hinglish*.

Hinglish whined and whimpered constantly for the first few days, clearly not used to being chained. The commands to *sit*, *lie down* and *shake a paw* were



*We rescued Hinglish from the Whitehorse pound.  
He was shaggy and cuddly in both looks and personality.*

---

familiar to him, leading us to assume he'd been a house pet before his stint at the pound. He was good-natured and friendly, though terribly frightened of the other dogs. I judged Hinglish to be between one and two years old.

Leaving the four dogs, the trailer and a mountain of equipment with our Whitehorse friends, we headed off in Furd the next morning for our reconnaissance mission into the Fort Selkirk area. With the rebuilt clutch and lightened load, the old truck

handled like a sports car, zipping along the Klondike Highway with nary a cough nor sputter. It appeared the money spent on repairs had been well invested.

The cabin we planned to examine was on Horsefall Creek, which flows into the Yukon River some six miles below the confluence with the Pelly River. We could travel in by truck from the main highway some thirty miles on a narrow side-road which ran parallel to the Pelly. From the road's end, we would have a nine-mile hike to the Horsefall fish camp.

Both highway and side-road were clear and dry, so we made good time, parking the truck just after one o'clock. By the end of this road was an old farm, established during the Gold Rush. Now operated by brothers Dick and Hugh Bradley, the Pelly River Ranch was the most northerly cattle farm in Canada. The Bradleys offered to look after the truck, but insisted on first filling us up with gallons of tea. I pumped Hugh, who made a point of knowing such local history, for the story behind the name *Horsefall*.

"Well, there weren't any horses involved," he explained with a grin, "at least, not in the name itself. There was a modest homestead on that river flat and the people's name was Hosfel or Horsfall. The creek name is a corruption of the family name. Apparently the man was an Englishman and his wife was Native Indian. From what I can find out, the wife – we can call her Mrs. Horsfall – was very highly regarded by everyone. The husband was said to be a prospector and wandered about, leaving her to raise the children mostly on her own."

Early in the century, Joe Horsfall ran a hotel and store at Fort Selkirk at the downriver end of the town. In 1910, the Horsfalls' two-year-old son set the store on fire while playing with matches, and died soon after from his burns. Not long after the tragedy, the family moved downriver to set up their small farm homestead. There were four daughters, but no other sons.

"That's so sad. Perhaps the loss of the son severely depressed the father," I said. "That might explain his wandering about in the bush after being so industrious before."

"And what's the cabin like?" asked Marsha. "Is it part of the old homestead? That might be spooky."

"The original buildings are pretty much fallen down by now," Dick spoke up from where he sat on the cot. "The cabin you'll be looking at was only built a few years back. It's not big, but that'll make it warmer for you when the weather starts pushing Sixty or Seventy Below around Christmas."

Our enthusiasm, fuelled by the caffeine in the black tea, was too much to allow more conversation. We thanked the farmers, confirmed our directions on a topo map, and hiked off along the shore.

The sky was clear and the air fresh; it was ideal weather for walking. We carried light packs, with only our sleeping bags, coats, a bit of food and a rifle. After thousands of miles of dusty driving, these moments were an exhilarating treat. It was heavenly to not be bogged down by either our tons of possessions or our menagerie of animals for one whole day. With eager steps, we fairly danced through the forest.

The trail we followed headed away from the Pelly at the end of the farm fields, branching onto the old Dawson overland stage road. About five miles farther on, we swung onto a narrow wagon trail which would take us to Horsefall. As we walked, we tried to imagine how the forest would look after the first snowfall, and especially how this trail would be for driving our dog teams.

“What if we can’t get any more dogs?” asked Marsha. “I don’t like snowmobiles.”

“We’ll find lots of dogs,” I said optimistically. “Don’t worry.”

The grade changed gradually until we were descending from the forest plateau country, the trail progressively steeper and steeper as we approached the Yukon River. High basalt rock bluffs frame the Yukon valley all along this stretch of river; our route snaked down a narrow draw carved into these cliffs by Horsefall Creek. The creek itself was a dry, rocky bed, crossing and re-crossing our path. We thought about driving charging dog teams down this wild incline.

“Should be interesting,” I commented, trying to be nonchalant.

“*Interesting*, my ass,” muttered Marsha. “We’d better build good brakes.”

At the base of the cliffs was a wedge-shaped flat, formed over the eons by the buildup of river silt onto the creek’s delta. The trees were mostly willows, many quite knurled and gnarled. Locally, these twisted hardwoods were called *diamond willow*, because of diamond-shaped splits in their bark. In patches there were some evergreens, mostly white spruce, plus a few black spruce at the margins of the swamplier ground. Wild grass was knee-high everywhere between the willows, attesting to the fertility of the soil.

We were noting the different types of animal excreta on the trail to appreciate the hiding, warm-blooded inhabitants of Horsefall flat when we spied one pile that stopped us in our tracks. A mound of bear excreta, chock full of bright red



*We were a great match at Pelly River Ranch. Dick Bradley loved to tell stories, and I loved to listen!*

berries, confirmed the resident status of at least one bruin. The pile was old, but still unnerving.

I levered a bullet into the chamber of my rifle. I'd never had any problems with bears before, partly because I stayed away from them as best I could. This flat might be too small for that tactic. We cautiously made our way along the narrow trail, forcing a little chattering conversation to announce our presence.

We found the low, shabby cabin slumped in a clearing like yesterday's soggy sandwich. It was no architectural beauty and the yard around it resembled a war zone. Underfoot everywhere were spent bullet casings and tattered shotgun shells, lending a neo-Vimy Ridge decor to the scene. Discarded gas drums and plastic oil bottle targets bloomed like weeds. The cabin door and windows were boarded over and a cart was barricaded against the door. I imagined this bunker was what Hollywood filmmakers would build for a Mad Trapper's shoot-out with the Mounties.

Once inside, we had to stoop. The ceiling was so low I could only stand erect near the ridgepole. Marsha was suddenly happy to be shorter.

"It's not so bad," she laughed. "You'll just have to sit down a lot."

Heaps of old clothing tactfully hid the furniture. An ancient outboard motor was propped up against, and leaking oil onto, a tall stack of girlie magazines. The bench beside was overflowing with the rest of the library: gun club journals, hunting magazines and police novels. Tools and spare parts were sprinkled over the floor, at least as far back into the cabin as I immediately cared to venture. The windows were covered with plywood and plank shutters, making it hard to see much more.

We effected the removal of the bear protection with an axe handle, and stowed all the shutters around back. Inside again, we could now find the cookstove, bright red with rust, and the kitchen table, buried under tottering columns of soiled dinnerware and encrusted cook pots. Petrified baked beans with a shaggy topping of blue mold remained as evidence of the last meal served, yet never eaten. Even the mice, who had ripped apart the Kool-aid packages and camped in the Aunt Jemima bag, had passed up on those beans. They had defecated everywhere else but there was a clear area all around the putrid chili.

Cautiously we poked around, gingerly peering under tables and beds, never sure what all might be living under the jumble of greasy garments and personal effects. The most pleasant surprise was a large, deep root cellar under a trapdoor in the plank flooring. The other plus was the cookstove, which appeared intact,

save for one missing firewall. We'd be able to rectify that absence by substituting a piece of scrap metal from the battlefield outside.

"What do you think?" I asked my partner when we were safely out in the sunshine.

"We could probably do everyone a favour and burn it down," Marsha grimaced, "— but we'll make it liveable."

If we wanted to live on this river flat, it was either here or in a tent. Examined from that perspective, the cabin looked much better.

"Welcome to your new home," I said with a hug.

Pacing off the wall measurements, I found the cabin to be twenty feet by sixteen feet using outside dimensions. Minus the thickness of the logs, this left less than nineteen by fifteen inside. The height was about seven feet under the ridge, but decreased to less than five feet tall along the side walls. The two windows were positioned too low to see through when I stood up, but offered a decent view toward the south and the west if one were seated.

"Now if we could clean and bleach the floor planks, so they would reflect the light from those windows, it would make this place much brighter—" Marsha was wandering about, talking to herself, already planning our attack. She and I examined every facet of the place to assess what could be moved, rebuilt, insulated, thrown out, cleaned, constructed or replaced. We needed an exhaustive list of supplies and tools for transforming this neglected hovel into a winter home.

A high priority on the *to-do list* was eviction of present occupants. We decided upon a two-fold plan: we would try to remove temptation, and deliver damnation should that fail. Our defensive supplies would consist of Marsha's collection of big glass jars, metal bread boxes and cookie tins. For an offensive capability, we put *mouse traps* on the list.

With night closing in upon us and the air chilling rapidly, we focused our attention on the cabin's two heat sources. Apart from the cookstove, there was a heater crudely welded from a 45-gallon fuel drum. These type of wood burners were called barrel stoves or *pigs* in the North and had a reputation for burning uncontrollably hot whenever the mood struck them, transforming any cabin into a sauna. A better place for a pig was in a warehouse or large garage that needed a lot of thermal output, and could use the huge firebox to advantage. For this little cabin, though, we'd have to get either a smaller heater or a full wardrobe of bathing suits.

Before lighting a fire in the drum, I had a sudden thought and rapped on the chimney pipe. A great wad of black, caked creosote fell onto my carefully arranged kindling.

“*Yikes!*” I cried, and banged again. A new rush of debris showered down from above. Tracing the flow of the pipes, it became apparent to me why there was so much creosote buildup. The smoke was compelled to rise, turn a right-angle, run slightly downhill for eight feet, pass through the log wall, then bend another 90 degrees before ending a few inches under the eaves.

Wishing we had done so before we were cold, we disassembled the chimney arrangement and emptied all the stack residue into cardboard boxes. There was enough to fill a bushel basket. I doubt we could have lit a fire without igniting all this creosote and possibly razing the cabin. We decided then and there to make a new chimney going straight up through the roof for whatever replacement heater we brought in.

Rather than fiddle any more with the big heater, we opted for lighting the cookstove. It wouldn't be able to hold a fire all night, but we had warm sleeping bags and only needed to get the immediate chill off our bones. The cookstove chimney, we noted happily, rose straight as a flagpole. Marsha banged on it and there was scarcely a trickle of soot dislodged.

Routinely examining the stove, Marsha checked the oven lever and draft controls, and then opened the oven itself. Inside was a pile of half-burnt sticks and a dozen spent matches. Someone, probably a tourist canoeing the river, had stopped here and tried to light the cookstove by making a fire in the oven!

Thanking that urbanite for the kindling, we soon had a blaze crackling in the firebox and were warming our hands over the red-hot glow of the cast-iron top. When our bodies were warmed and our spirits rejuvenated by the stove's heat, Marsha pulled out the list again and started us off on another session of *What if we do this here?* and *We'll need a thingy over there.*

An hour later, fed and snuggled deep in sleeping bags and blankets, we were still adding to the list.

## CHAPTER TEN



# COLD HANDS, WARM HEART

The last days for legally hunting moose were upon us long before we were ready to go off on a serious moose safari. There was no real toboggan, my sleeping bag kit was not yet assembled, more wood had to be cut and hauled, more dog food had to be freighted over from the farm, and countless other chores remained. This was really no time to be stalking the great brown beasts through the hills.

Nevertheless, visions of thick steaks, tender liver slices, boiled tongue, lean ground meat, chunks of hearty stew, braised ribs and roasted haunch were distracting me from the tasks at hand. I kept shells for the .30-30 in my pocket, and spent a half-hour at dawn and dusk with binoculars combing our area from a vantage point on the cliff. It would be an oddity for a moose to be down in the valley this late in the year, but I didn't want to miss an opportunity if one wanted to walk right into our kitchen.

Marsha caught me staring at the calendar with a far-away look. She knew what was on my mind.

"Look, we both can't leave this place to go off hunting. At least, not now. We don't have enough harnesses made to take all the dogs, even if we had toboggans," she said, putting her arm around my shoulder.

"I'm not sure that I could manage a moose by myself," I admitted sadly. "A dead bull could weigh two thousand pounds. If I shot one and he jumped into a lake, I'd need a come-a-long to winch the body out. Then I'd want knives, an axe, and game bags to put the organ meat into... I'd need a sleeping bag and a lantern, food for a couple of days, warm clothing, maybe a piece of canvas to sleep under, snowshoes or skis – I don't think I could carry half the stuff I'd need to do a proper job."

"Do you really need all that?"

"Let's put it this way: I don't want to shoot a moose and have all that meat go

bad or be wasted because I can't butcher it promptly and bring it all to the cabin before the wolves and the ravens find the kill.

"I've scanned everywhere close to Horsefall," I lamented. "The moose must be high in the hills, at least a full day's walk from here. That's too far to pack a thousand pounds of meat."

But Marsha had a plan.

"How about you go off for a few nights with Don?" she decided. "I'll stay and guard the fort."

Don Mark was staying at the Bradleys' farm and working as the assistant on Dick's trapline. He had promised to drop in with our mail en route to his line camp in the Black Creek area. Don had four eager mutts and a short sled for his trapline transportation. His cabin was high enough in the hills that there just might be moose in the vicinity. And he'd need help manhandling any moose he hoped to get as well.

"Let's ask him when he comes," Marsha suggested. "It would be nice to have even half a moose."

Three mornings later, on the last day of November, Don and I set out on our quest for meat. I skied ahead, with a rifle slung over my shoulder and field glasses in my anorak pocket, the two articles making it hard to develop a good stride. I resigned myself to a fast shuffle along the packed trail up the ravine. Don was to give me a half-hour head start, as we figured I'd have a better chance of sneaking up on a browsing moose than he would with his rowdy dogs.

Marsha was excited to see us go. She muttered about *things to do* and was busily drawing designs on paper and screwing up her forehead in concentration about something. I imagined she was planning what to do with our five to eight hundred pounds of moose.

We had enough rice and beans to supply our basic protein needs, so having moose would be a luxury. Moose, though, would add variety and provide better nutrition for the cold weather than vegetables and grains could. Marsha had spoken for the antlers to make into buttons. Scraps and hooves could go toward feeding the dogs. Technically, it was illegal to feed any game meat to dogs that was fit for human consumption, but the law was rather vague about personal taste. None of the game wardens we asked knew whether stomach linings, brains and all the obscure parts, like nose and testicles – which were great delicacies to some cultures – fell into human or dog food categories. We would have to let our consciences be our guide.

The raw hide would be needed to cover the curls of our toboggans, if we were

to achieve an authentic duplication of the pioneer toboggans. Applied wet, the hide would shrink and hold the curl tightly, as well as becoming a cushion for crashes.

At the turn-off from our main trail onto the path to Black Creek, I was surprised to find the route was already packed by a snowmobile. Peter Isaac, a trapper from Pelly Crossing, must have gone this way to his own trapline. Our route to Don's cabin would swing by Peter's first camp, then back up this side of Black Creek into the hills. The creek itself was the boundary between their trapping areas.

The packed trail was a godsend, saving me an immense amount of work. Instead of clomping through calf-deep snow, my skis now easily carried my weight over the corrugated snowmobile track. Consequently, I was able to enjoy a more entertaining pace, running up the rises and coasting down the drops. The effort was exhilarating and despite the nippy temperature I found myself sweating. Off came layers of clothing, which I tied around my waist, being careful to keep the rifle strap free.

Each time I stopped to add or subtract a garment, the faint tracks of mice and squirrels caught my attention. Everywhere in the bush, these smallest of warm-blooded animals had laid down networks of paths. To be able to interpret the meaning of this language of footprints must give trappers a deep satisfaction. Almost as plentiful were the signs of the Arctic hare, the shallowness of the prints showing the snowshoe effect of their oversized feet. Wherever Peter had cut a sapling to widen the trail, the bark had been completely stripped by these hungry critters. In return, they left dozens of round, brown pellets.

The tracks I was most eager to see were nowhere along this undulating route. Moose weren't venturing near this creek at all. Still, the skiing was fun so far, a relaxing change from the high-tension journeys with the dogs. Except for the creaking of bamboo poles and the swish of birch skis, the world was absolutely quiet.

Peter Isaac's camp was deep in the forest, and the yard was only a widening of the path. There was a log A-frame shelter built shoulder-high and banked over with moss and snow. At first, all one could see was a stove pipe in a mound. Peter appeared from a white canvas tent which was well camouflaged against the snowy background. Through the open tent flap, I caught a glimpse of bloody carcasses and stacks of furs.

"Oh," he said shyly, "it's you."

We'd met once, some years before at the farm, and he remembered me, which I found flattering. I followed him inside the log shelter and was almost

overwhelmed by the heat. It wouldn't take much fuel for his airtight to warm this lean-to, whatever the outside temperature.

"Want some coffee?" asked Peter, wiping out a cup with a paper towel.

"Sure. Want a cookie?" I replied, proudly pulling a bag of Marsha's home-made granola cookies from my pocket. The largest piece to survive the trip was as big as a nickel.

Peter smiled and took a pinch of crumbs. I dug in too and we soon had the bag emptied. Then we ate a few of his *Pilot* biscuits, palm-sized discs of hard tack which had travelled much better.

Don arrived at that point and the subject turned from eating to trapping. My partner on this hunt had been setting traps as he came.

"Don't worry about seeing them," he assured me. "I used lots of survey ribbon to mark the locations. It's mostly so I can find them myself – so much of this bush looks the same, I'd hate to lose all my traps after the next snowfall covers them. It would be expensive – and a bit embarrassing!"

Peter showed the rookie trapper the furs he was drying in the wall tent. Some were stretched over long, tapered planks with the skin side out while others had the fur showing. Peter demonstrated to Don how to tell when the skin side is dry enough to turn the pelt inside-out.

"It feels like this lynx here," he said touching what had once belonged to a large cat. Like most Northerners we met, Peter pronounced the word as *link* even when referring to more than one lynx. Although he had been at this camp for only a few days, Peter had already caught three lynx and had one wolf stretched out to dry as well.

"Wolf are really hard to catch, I've been told. Is that true?" I asked Peter.

"Some people have a problem, I guess," he shrugged. "I don't know what they do wrong. Everyone set traps differently."

"What about my sets?" Don asked and the veteran tactfully explained the proper way to him, giving measurements in terms of the size of a fist, the span of a hand or the thickness of two fingers. To me, who had no experience with traps, the descriptions had no context, but Don was hanging on Peter's every word. No doubt Don's fortunes this winter would depend in large measure on how well he learned these tips.

Peter offered to go ahead of us on his snowmobile to spring the trail sets and snares on the portion of his line we would be travelling, so the dogs would be safe. He also promised to help Don make a few sets when they got to the younger trapper's territory.

Peter's yellow machine came to life with a roar and he knelt on the seat. "You want to ride?" he hollered over the din.

"No, I'll be fine on my skis," I yelled, shaking my head so he could get my meaning.

Don's dogs stampeded merrily after the noisy snowmobile, their claws throwing up snow as they charged around willow clumps. As his light sled bounced across the muskeg, Don had to hang on tightly to stay aboard.

I noticed the cold air as I started, but shrugged it off as an after-effect from being inside the over-heated shelter. It usually took a while to warm up when skiing, just to get the blood circulating, so I skied hard, pushing myself to make my body heat itself. Even with my light parka on, the air felt chilly through my chest.

My legs were a bit tight, almost tired. For a short while, I caught glimpses of Don's back disappearing around corners. Then I could only hear them across the marshes when the snowmobile revved as Peter guided it around fallen trees and up the creek bank. When the motor idled, I imagined that Peter was springing his sets and explaining trappers' secrets to Don. It was getting dusky and I pulled up my hood to force a little more body heat to my fingers.

At the head of the valley was the old Dawson Stage Road, and Don's cabin was a fair ways along that.

"At least," I consoled myself, "I can't get lost on the old road."

On and on, I plodded. By now my legs felt like lead weights. It was too dark to shoot, so the burden of the rifle was doubly annoying. My shoulder felt raw where the strap had been chafing, but I tried not to think about it.

Out on the stage road I felt my second wind coming and relaxed a little. Here the trees bordering our way had been cleared in a tractor-wide swath, so the danger of face-slapping branches was minimal. Trees grow so slowly in the Yukon that only waist-high saplings had grown up in the ten years since the last mining company bulldozer travelled this road.

I stomped up another hill, and another hill, thinking each one must be the last. The cabin's location had been described to me as *just before a little creek, at the bottom of an incline*.

"This must be it," I promised myself at the foot of each hill, but Don's sled tracks didn't turn off.

The light was now fading quickly. I could barely make out the imprints at the side of the road where snowmobile tracks pulled off beside the toboggan's smooth trace. There were footprints off into the brush, but this had to be where the two men had set a trap. The vehicle trails led on.

More hills and more false hopes. My legs were complaining with each deliberate step. They were telling me this was too far to be going for my first outing on skis this winter. The old muscles were soft from inactivity.

Finally I saw a light through the trees a long way off. "That must be the cabin," I promised myself.

But then the light moved. It was the headlight on Peter's snowmobile, returning to his camp. In moments, Peter was beside me.

"How much further?" I shouted to him.

"Two more hills, then over to the side in some big spruce," he called as the engine whined impatiently. "Not much light now."

That was an understatement: it was almost black by this point.

"Well, see you," he shouted, and nodded.

"See you."

He blasted away, the headlight carving a diminishing slice out of the night as his machine sped out of sight.

Trudging on, up two of the longest hills imaginable... I had my ski poles tucked under one arm so my hands could thaw out inside my parka pockets. The work mitts and thin leather overmitts weren't holding their own against the night air.

Finally I was at the small cabin. I could hear Don talking to his dogs as he passed out their dried salmon suppers. A candle was throwing a flickering glow out the open doorway. Don stepped into this light just as I arrived.

"Thought you must have got a moose," he said cheerfully, "because it took you so long."

"I honestly haven't thought about hunting for quite a few miles," I muttered, unclipping the long skis and unslinging my rifle. "I was only thinking about the fire you'd have going to greet me."

But there was still work to be done before that comfort could happen: a new airtight had to be installed and wood chopped. My rest would have to be postponed.

Without the weight of skis, walking was a pleasure. After splitting a few blocks of wood, my circulation was pumped up again, so my hands were no longer hurting. I took a bundle of kindling inside where Don was fitting stove pipe sections through a *jack* in the roof.

"You got any ideas how to make the holes in this last section of pipe, so I can stick this damper pin through?" Don asked. "Guess we could use a nail and hammer it with the back of the axe —"

"Just stand back," I said, cocking his .22 rifle.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“This is designed to make holes, isn’t it?”

Don retreated to the far wall.

I popped a perfect pair of holes for the damper pin, aiming so the bullet would embed itself into a log behind. [Thus are stories born. Don could tell folks about the time I was so cold I shot his poor airtight when it wasn’t working.]

Later in the evening, with a feed of lentil stew in our bellies and the cabin warm enough we could take off our parkas, we sat on the rough pole bed and enjoyed a cup of tea. The taste was suspiciously like that of spruce needles, but we couldn’t see well enough to fish the culprits out of the brew. Melting snow for drinking water could have yielded worse surprises.

His curiosity killing him, Don finally took a candle outside to read the temperature off the little thermometer he had attached to the backboard of his sled.

“Twenty-Four Below Fahrenheit,” he reported, replacing the blanket hanging over the doorway. “A drop of twenty degrees from this morning.”

This was the lowest so far this winter. Though we didn’t admit it to each other, we were both somewhat thankful we hadn’t seen a moose. It would have been pretty cold butchering out in the open tonight.

In the morning, we took a different route back to Horsefall. Don stopped often to set lynx and marten traps, but I skied steadily to stay warm. The temperature had slipped another two degrees. To keep my feet warm, I’d put a pair of socks overtop of the thin cross-country boots. Another pair of socks, with holes poked out for the thumbs, made an extra layer of mitten. Even so, my fingers felt alarmingly numb by the time I was gliding down the last run onto our creek flat.

“I’ve got to do something about this,” I resolved, “or I’ll lose a finger to frostbite sometime this winter.”

The dogs had alerted Marsha of our impending arrival, so she was out in the yard to greet us. Casey was leaping in the air at the end of his chain, orchestrating the noisy welcome.

“Hi! Did you get anything?” Marsha asked the two frosty hunters. She had her hands on her hips and was looking past me, expecting to see Don’s sled piled high with meat.

“No, just cold hands!” I moaned, fumbling out of my ski bindings.

“Well, at least that part’s good,” Marsha said with a smile.

Inside the cabin, I saw what she found amusing about my predicament. Lying on the bed was a newly-sewn pair of deerskin gauntlets, and beside them were some thick duffle liners! The leather Marsha had used was the hide we’d tanned

back in Qualicum Beach. Being home-tanned, it would breathe well, like the Yukon Indians' smoke-tanned moosehide. While we were off looking for moose, Marsha was looking after her Bruce.

*See Appendix III for instructions and patterns for making gauntlets, liners and dead sweater mitts.*

When hunting didn't bring us any food for humans or dogs, the Pelly farmers came to the rescue. Dick and Hugh decided to slaughter six older cows to sell in Whitehorse. Last summer had been rather wet and cool, so there wasn't enough silage set aside to overwinter all their herd. Hence the need to cull some.

Butchering was strenuous work, so Hugh recruited me to help – I would work a few days in exchange for some meat and a case of eggs. The biggest payoff was that our dogs could have the heads, hoofs and various other parts for food.

The Bradleys had developed a fondness for these old cows, knowing their names, characters and lineage, so the actual killing was easier for me to face. Hugh explained the technique: "Mentally draw a line from the cow's left ear to the right eye, and from the right ear to the left eye. You shoot in the centre of the X, right where the lines cross."

Dick would tie a rope from the tractor to a cow's leg – in case I missed the mark and a wounded cow tried to stumble away. But we never needed this tether. One shot with the .22 and the beast would fall to its knees, then flop on its side in the snow quite dead.

Hugh would slide a large baking pan under the cow's neck, and slit the jugular vein. Blood gushed out and filled the pan, pumped by the heart's last few beats.

This blood we poured onto a plastic sheet that was draped over long parallel depressions in the snow – we'd tromped these troughs earlier with our snowpacs. When the blood froze, I had super-high-protein popsicles to take in sacks back to Horsefall. Over the winter we would chop these up and enrich the dog food.

Dick bandsawed the heads into quarters. "One of those ought to keep a husky occupied for a few weeks," he said.

When I asked about the lungs, Hugh said we could have those too, but only second-hand.

"Our chickens eat them," he explained with a grin, "and then you'll get their eggs."

## CHAPTER TWELVE



### A FIRST RIDE TO REMEMBER

**F**or the first road test of the new toboggan, I chose the trail so familiar to my four dogs. Casey, Lucky, Mutt and Loki were conscripted to pull me to the truck parked back in the farmyard to fetch yet another load of dog food.

On each previous freight trip I had tried out one of Marsha's five dogs, to get an idea of individual potential. This was neither adequate training nor sufficient exercise for her squad, and each was clearly anxious to show his or her stuff today. Leaving the dog lot, with Tyhee along with us for her trial, we were serenaded for the first half-hour by the echoing wails and indignant howling of her frustrated team-mates.

Soon we were up the long hill and into the peaceful plateau forest. Winding through the frozen swamps and meadows, the toboggan undulated over the mounds of muskeg like a snake slithering over rocks. Its flexibility on corners was somewhat unsettling to me after being accustomed to the stiffness of the shorter kid's toboggan. But most surprising was the speed of the huge vehicle: with its white synthetic base, there was virtually no friction on the packed trail. I had to be alert on the brake to save wheel dog Loki the indignity of being overtaken.

Tyhee was excited and curious at every bend. Her long nose sniffed the air and the bushes flashing by, and – more than once – she got wacked by a branch when not looking ahead. During the run, I was encouraging her to pay attention to pulling though I didn't want to spoil her enthusiasm. She had lots of spunk compared to the others who were accustomed to this route and the slow, heavily-laden return trips in the late afternoon twilight.

By the end of the day, I had made a mental list of improvements for this toboggan and its soon-to-be-built sister craft. The screws holding the backboard hinges were working loose and should be replaced by bolts with lock-washers on the nuts. The light strap hinges fastening the handlebars were too flimsy to withstand the strains when I leaned heavily to wrestle us around tight corners. Already one

hinge was bent and it would only be a matter of time before it cracked and broke. If we didn't have any heavier hinges at the cabin, I could forge metal brackets to hold these points. Exactly when I would get around to doing all these little tune-ups would, of course, depend on what else had to be done sooner. It had been a long time since I'd felt there was nothing to do. Six months ago, this life had been a romantic dream; now, in December, it was an amazing though exhausting reality.

As the familiar scenery slipped by heading back towards Horsefall, I strained my eyes for signs of moose or caribou. There were a few weeks left for Don to hunt on his trapper's extended license, and I wanted desperately to locate some meat for him to shoot. But there was not a hint of activity on this trail; we would have to go much further afield if we were to dine on game meat this winter.

When I pulled into the dog lot again, Marsha's crew kicked up a pitiful racket. Marsha herself looked rather envious as I handed over letters and passed on various bits of gossip from the farm.

"How about we go tomorrow for a run, taking all your dogs, and you can be the musher?" I suggested. "I'll help you get started. You've got to try driving the dogs sometime."

Shortly after noon the following day, we tied the toboggan's gee-line to a stout poplar and laid out five harnesses. The leader's collar was roped ahead to another tree so the crew would be held in line until all was ready. With the temperature hovering at Thirty-Eight Below, we hoped to minimize the time spent with mitts off handling metal clips. It was so cold the snow squeaked and felt like beach sand beneath our moccasins.

The dogs wouldn't cooperate. Dawson kept turning in circles and rolling over. He even did a headfirst somersault in his harness to show his exuberance. Peter – who used to be Peggy – was hooked up in front because the Hagers had said he was a leader. When I checked him out in lead on a trip to the farm, he had proven too cautious, possibly because of his fear of the bigger dogs behind him. We hoped he'd do better today with this smaller crew supporting him.

Tyhee rose up and clubbed with both paws any person or dog that passed. Her wiener-tail was swishing back and forth like an errant windshield wiper. The long nose was hard at work sniffing high and low and where it was none of her business.

Jeff tried to fight with Dawson, but we yanked them apart before they'd passed the bared fangs stage. In frustration, Jeff sank his teeth into his traces as soon as he was harnessed. Just as quickly, he felt on his ears the wrath of the fellow who'd

stitched that harness. Wide-eyed and quivering, he crouched in anticipation of more fun.

Big shaggy Hinglish, at wheel, was vibrating with excitement and jerking mightily forward, backward and sideways, eager to go, and not too choosy about direction.

I was merrily explaining my theories to Marsha as we struggled with each frantic canine, but she was far too nervous to reply. The gravity of the situation was showing on her usually gay countenance – she was biting her lower lip and her brow was furrowed in concentration. Her moment of truth was nigh.

Keeping all five mutts facing front, with all limbs in proper locations inside the traces, was like juggling boomerangs. Their energy might have been fun for us too, if it hadn't been so cold that we wanted to be mushing rather than harnessing. We had to box ears all around before they settled down enough so we could consider leaving.

It was quickly agreed I should drive them out of the yard. Marsha held Peter and ran with him for the first ten steps, then let go and stepped aside. He abruptly turned and followed her off the trail while the others piled up behind. What a mess.

After a session of untangling, we tried again and this time it worked! I had both feet on the brake to slow us down while Marsha leapt aboard. Then it was full speed ahead, snow flying, dogs sprinting for the hill, the toboggan careening off the willows lining the trail. A flow of power – very raw energy – jerked on the toboggan as the dogs scrambled around corners and surged into the straightaways. The force of acceleration left me gasping, my lungs full of frozen air.

Whenever we halted for a dog to relieve himself, Marsha would run forward and straighten out any tangles, pat their heads and point Peter in the right direction. They pulled us easily up the steepest hill – something my four dogs had never done – and we turned onto the Black Creek trail. On this level pathway the crew really picked up speed. Marsha was crouched on the toboggan in the *basket* observing all this from close to ground-level.

“Do they always go this fast?” she called over the rasping noise of the toboggan grinding over dry snow. “This is so scary. It seems like ninety miles per hour from here!”

“It would be great if they always would,” I hollered at her hood-covered ear. “I could be at the farm in under an hour.”

I was too busy steering, braking and leaning out to the side to think about being fearful. Only a few strategically-placed snow banks and tilted snowmobile ruts kept us on the trail. Huge trees slid by only inches from us. I crouched behind the



*Marsha guides her team through the birch forest up on the plateau. It was a special treat – we were out of the deep river valley and into the sunshine.*

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backboard to miss low branches that would slap the handlebars and be swung up to stomach level.

Then Peter saw a rabbit dart across the trail – and abruptly dove into a willow thicket in hot pursuit. Dawson followed, but chose a slightly different route. The rest collided with a tree and were, in turn, run over by the toboggan.

We seized this opportunity to reorganize them a bit, switching Hinglish up behind Peter. We also switched mushers.

With a casual *your turn*, I climbed into the basket and braced myself. Marsha said nothing, but I knew she was struggling to find courage to go through with the job. Here was her big chance.

“Are you ready?” she finally whispered to me.

“Yep. Let’s go before they get tangled again,” I whispered in reply.

“Okay!” she yelled. “*Let’s GO!*”

The dogs took off, running like there was no tomorrow. The toboggan was

literally flying at times. As we caromed down the tunnel of giant poplars, the sun flashed between the trees at us like a strobe light. I felt as if I was part of an early vintage movie, every movement choppy and surreal.

Displaying great bravado, we *yeehawed* like a couple of rodeo cowboys. Marsha shouted, while ducking for a low branch, that it seemed so easy, exciting and wonderful. She especially liked being up here on the higher ground where the sunshine wasn't being blocked by low hills and valley walls.

Meanwhile, my adrenaline was flowing and my heart ready to burst: the view – from dog level – was *absolutely terrifying*. The trail here was only a snowmobile's width across. We were barely missing huge trees. Monstrous cottonwoods loomed up on me, and were fended off by the handlebars. I couldn't stop myself from trying to steer from inside the basket, by leaning and dragging my hands in the snow, even though I knew how easily an arm could be broken if brushed by a tree. I told myself this again and again, but it was hard to just sit in that little cage and brace myself for the seemingly-inevitable crash.

These dogs hadn't been off their chains much for weeks so it took ages before they finally slowed to a walk. As a neurotic *basket case*, I wasn't disappointed when they did. I was so frazzled from the wild ride I wasn't even cold.

After a brief stop to sort out a rabbit-inspired tangle, we headed for home very pleased. I was hopeful we'd be able to finish in good style so as to set a positive tone for this team. We were now planning to use this squad to inspire mine into running more often. A touch of competition would do my plodders a world of good.

However the dogs only ran for a moment before they slowed again to a walk. They were no longer interested in pulling. Instead five pairs of eyes were scanning the bushes for bunnies.

At the top of the steep descent down the Horsefall Creek ravine, we switched places so I'd be steering down this tricky stretch. From a mile away and five hundred feet below us in elevation, we could plainly hear the howling of the other four dogs. The chorus leader, sounding dreadfully wronged, was unmistakably Casey. Marsha's team perked up their ears at the racket and eagerly leaned into their harnesses once again.

"Are you ready?" I whispered to Marsha.

"Are you on the brake?" she replied.

"It'll be okay," I said. "Don't worry. Just keep your arms and legs in and you can't get hurt."

I'd almost finished saying that when the dogs bolted forward and tore off

down the hill. I held white-knuckled onto the handlebars and stood fully on the brake. Like a plough, it carved a neat furrow in the trail – but we weren't slowing down.

To reassure Marsha, I yelled a few halfhearted *yeehaws* as if I were in full control of this rollercoaster ride. I crouched low and leaned way out to the side, steering like a motorcycle sidecar rider. It was exciting and I was happy to see the team running again.

Glancing back, Marsha called, "Are you on the brake? *ARE YOU ON THE BRAKE?*"

"Yes. Yes. It's okay. Keep your arms and feet in."

And we kept gaining speed—

Though the toboggan was squeaking and groaning, and the dogs' feet sounded like thunder, I was able to hear an alarming cracking noise which cut through the din like a scratch on a record. As we rounded a corner, I was leaning, using all my weight to keep up high on the inside rut, when one of the handlebars broke away from the toboggan. A split-second later, the unbraced backboard tore from its other moorings and flopped into my hands. With the strangest, dream-like sensation, I toppled backwards, tumbling and rolling, catching glimpses of sky, trees, snow – and then of the dismembered toboggan heading for a tree.

For the whole descent, Marsha had been thoroughly terrified. As trees whizzed by, she could only brace herself. She had faith in my driving, though, and thought we would make it safely to the bottom.

As the toboggan neared a sharp bend in the trail, one giant spruce was looming closer and closer. She waited for me to steer. She waited as that spruce got bigger and bigger. She was shouting, "*Bruce! TURN!*" as the crash happened.

Marsha felt the toboggan breaking under her and saw all the dogs arrested in mid-stride by the tremendous jerk, then watched them fall on their faces. She herself had been pitched sharply forward, then slammed back down by the impact. Only at that point did she glance back and realize there were neither handlebars nor backboard behind her. And no driver!

The dogs picked themselves up and started yanking on their traces. Slowly the crippled toboggan started moving again, heading off downhill. Marsha dug in her heels as brakes on either side, fighting for control.

"Whoa! *WHOA, WHOA!*" she called to the dogs who – amazingly – did stop. They halted mostly though because they were tangled. Some were turned around, some pointed ahead, all a little dazed. Marsha was saying reassuring words to them when I arrived, carrying the missing toboggan parts.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

“I fell off when everything broke apart,” I said sheepishly. “I guess those hinges weren’t strong enough to hold the handlebars.”

“Are you okay?”

“Me? Oh, I’m fine. How about you?”

“My bum aches but I think everything still works,” she said.

Around her feet, the dogs were all wagging, so they couldn’t have been too badly done by. The toboggan had one smashed board and a cracked crossbar, not to mention the missing backboard and brake. A day’s carpentry work would put that right.

We still had to get us all home. Our first plan was for me to walk and hold a rope to slow us down, while Marsha braked with her feet. But the dogs were too strong for that.

Next, Marsha walked beside Peter to hold him to a calm speed. However I couldn’t hold the other four back, and they eagerly dogpiled onto Peter. The toboggan ran over wheel dog Jeff, who was taking this all rather well, considering the number of times it had happened.

Tyhee, being the only female, wouldn’t fight so we released her to lessen the numbers. This created instant mayhem as the others sprang to life and struggled to get free. Marsha volunteered to walk two of the remaining four down the hill, leaving me to bring on the toboggan and two very upset dogs.

I waited until Marsha was out of sight before trying my descent. Jeff and Dawson were frantic to go. I held the gee-line and hauled back to keep them to a safe pace. The resistance made them pull harder.

Up ahead, Marsha was getting tugged along at an unsettling rate, so she sat down. She was dragged in that posture over a couple of rude bumps before she managed to trip up her two escorts and have a chance to reassess her position. Before she came to any conclusions though, she heard a clattering from uphill and hauled Hinglish and Peter off the trail. Then she turned to see Dawson and Jeff barrelling down on her, toboggan flapping behind and no driver – once again. I was twenty yards behind, running and shouting and holding a length of rope in my hand.

Marsha sidestepped Dawson and grabbed his traces. She wasn’t fast enough to also dodge Jeff though – the toboggan ploughed into the poor Siberian and then knocked them all over like so many bowling pins.

Now she had five very excited dogs wrapped around her. She was trying to keep them all apart though they were knotted together by their harnesses. Four of them were growling fiercely while Tyhee was right in the middle, wagging her tail and licking faces.

“It’s okay! *It’s OKAY!*” she shouted. “Calm down. *Calm DOWN!* Hey, cut that out! Be nice, *PLEASE!*”

When I finally caught up, we were able to untangle the crew without ruffling too many feathers, and averted the pending free-for-all. Since Peter and Hinglish hadn’t fought on their stroll with Marsha, we gambled and set them free to run ahead with Tyhee. Marsha walked Dawson home, although it looked the other way around. Then Jeff and I hauled the toboggan, this time with my rope more securely tied.

At last our luck came through: there were no fights in progress when we arrived at the dog lot ten minutes later. One by one we cornered the loose dogs and marched them to their chains. Hooking them seemed to take forever. It was getting fairly dark and our cold fingers were clumsy from numbness. Finally, when nine pairs of eyes were next to their proper trees, we switched off the flashlight and retreated inside, shivering from chills and exhaustion. The toboggan and harnesses could stay where they lay until morning.

We flopped on the bed and lay there for a long while without talking. When she rolled over onto her back, Marsha let out a loud *OUCH*, discovering three distinct holes in her buttocks, red and welted.

“When you’re fixing the toboggan,” she said, rubbing and wincing, “don’t forget to hacksaw off the bolt ends sticking up from the crossbars!”

I got up, stoked the airtight and then crawled back onto the bed.

There was no sign of life from the other occupant – I wasn’t sure she was still awake.

Gently I whispered, “Congratulations, Marsha! How do you like being a dog musher?”

“It’s a pain in the butt,” she muttered.

I giggled.

“It’s *NOT* funny,” she said. “This really hurts.”

There was a pause, then she started chuckling too.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



### NEIGHBOURLY VISITS OVER THIN ICE

Our calendar notes (we had to keep records or we'd lose track of the date) finally began to include the words *finished* and *done*. They shone from the checkered paper like badges of accomplishment, scripted medals for our diligence. After working at the harness-stitching business so long, I half expected a gold watch when we finally retired from cobbling with the completion of number ten, the spare collar.

Three days after that, the second oak toboggan was ready for its first trial. We might have called this a *maiden voyage*, but we were terrified of breaking through the river ice, and were rather superstitiously avoiding aquatic expressions. I'd learned so much building the first toboggan, that this foot-longer vehicle took not half the time.

To make the maximum use of the daylight hours, we set our alarm clock an hour ahead, and took turns waking long before sunrise to prepare breakfast by lamplight. Then we would eat together at the short table beside the cookstove, while watching the slow dawning of the south-eastern sky.

Natural light was at a premium. To prevent eye strain, intricate work – such as sewing – was best done near the window at noon. But these few sunny hours were also the favourite time to be outdoors, training the dogs or doing the wood and water chores. We felt torn, wanting to be everywhere at once. At times, it was frustrating: where were the quiet winter days of which we'd been warned? When would we be *bored and have nothing to do*?

Yet gradually changes were happening. Not only on the physical plane – such as darned mittens and new gauntlets – but mental differences were also emerging. Our attitudes shifted. I had always been *goal-oriented*, since as early in my childhood as I can remember. The emphasis was on passing a test, completing a school project, getting the Wolf Cub badge, winning the game, obtaining a degree; there was always a goal. Now, slowly, I was becoming more *process-oriented*.

As the weeks trickled by, the days started to flow into one another. Time began to slow down, and I was living more in the present. Instead of rushing to finish a toboggan, my energy channelled toward mastering single steps.

Before, I'd been making impossible deadlines for myself and then would race vainly against the clock. Now, a job took as long as was required for it to be done well. By concentrating on *process*, the quality of my workmanship rose, saving us the time spent re-doing or repairing mistakes. Instead of being disappointed about not meeting some arbitrary deadline, we could feel content at day's end that we had worked competently. If a harness was not quite finished, it would be tomorrow. I discovered I was really a good worker after all, and had just been a lousy estimator of the time required to do any task.

Once we felt confident every project would get done in its right time, we took time out to give each other massages, go for a ski or walk along the basalt cliffs. After preparing, building, organizing and cooking for the first excursions, Marsha decreed we needed a full *Day Off* to mentally prepare ourselves and to relax properly. This special day was a lovely moment to space out, write a few letters, read old magazine articles, philosophize with the dogs and simply play in the snow. We believed a day off before a trip might temper any gung-ho, conquer-the-wilderness feelings, so travel could be a time to appreciate each other and the environment around us. Indeed the dogs seemed to like us better after our day off!

We joked about these time-management revelations, and about discovering the reasons for a *weekend*. Happily, we had control over our lives and could declare a *Sunday* whenever it suited us. Little by little, this cabin experience was contributing to our personal growth in unexpected ways.

Frozen waters were the winter highways connecting everyone who lived and worked in the bush. The prospect of venturing away on the river ice was haunting us: we knew we'd have to conquer our fears or be quite limited in where to explore. So, early one cold January morning we mustered our courage and headed upriver toward Fort Selkirk with one toboggan and four dogs. It was slow going as we thoroughly tested every suspicious patch of ice with our long poles.

About halfway, in a cluster of islands, we came to vast open patches – as large as football fields. The swift water was roiling and steaming, churning slush and ice chunks, and looked absolutely terrifying.

“Gees, it's Twenty-Five Below. What's it going to take to freeze this river over completely?” Marsha asked.

“It doesn’t seem to follow any particular logic, does it?” I agreed. “We need to ask Danny if there is a pattern year after year.”

We found a solid route past this dangerous section and, after three-plus tense hours, let out a big sigh of relief as the dogs stepped onto a corrugated snowmobile trail. They eagerly followed this path, scampering up a steep ramp to the open townsite. From the far end of town we could hear dogs barking, and then the roar of a gas engine increasing in volume as it approached at high speed. Seconds later Danny Roberts was grinning ear-to-ear beside us.

Danny and I had become good friends during a summer I was based at Fort Selkirk working as a Parks Branch river patrolman. We’d netted salmon together and hunted beaver with my .22 rifle. At summer’s end, I gave him that gun.

“Danny, this is Marsha, my girlfriend. Did you bring the *sign-in book*?” I teased him. As caretaker of this national historic site, Danny dutifully logged every visitor’s arrival.

“Guess you’ve got lots of time to sign that book,” he laughed. “I heard you moved in at the Frenchman’s cabin at Horsefall. How many dogs you got down there?”

“Can you hear us?”

“My dogs sure can. Must be when it’s feeding time at your place that my dogs look that way and make noise. You want to have some tea? Abbie will want to see you.”

Our dogs merrily followed Danny’s machine past abandoned log cabins, schoolhouse, church, stores and shops, to his small house near the parade grounds. Behind it, five huge sled dogs were chained to dog houses, pacing aggressively back and forth. They climbed on their roofs, jumped off, hopped back up, down – bursting with energy and confusion.

“Wow. Those are tall dogs, Danny,” Marsha said. “Do they go fast?”

“Guess so,” Danny grinned. “I don’t use them so much now. I keep them in case this *yellow dog* breaks down.” He gestured at the snowmobile.

Just then, Danny’s wife Abbie stuck her head out the side door and commanded, “Quiet down!” All the dogs fell silent.

Inside, the small house was toasty warm and fairly dark, so it took a moment to get oriented after the outside cold and brightness. Abbie held court sitting on a cot, with their tiny pet dog Timmy on her lap. She relaxed quickly when Marsha sat beside her and grasped her hand. “There were so many open patches. Aren’t you scared when you travel on the ice?”

“Guess so,” Abbie said. “These days I mostly sit on the toboggan, getting towed behind that snow machine when we go into Pelly. I try not to look.”

We couldn't visit for more than a quick cup of tea because Marsha and I didn't want to take our chances finding our trail home in the dark. As we said goodbye, Abbie asked Marsha to visit again, and Danny offered to give us pointers about training our dogs.

"Come back with all your dogs and you can sleep in that tourist cabin," he said, waving goodbye. "Better bring lots of blankets. It could be cold in there 'cuz it isn't chinked for winter."

The ride back was much less nerve-racking than our outbound trip; Casey had no difficulty following our track. Perhaps he and the other pooches were thinking about getting fed at home since they trotted along nicely. We could both ride and only halted the team to get off and warm up. The temperature was dropping fast now that the sun was almost down. To get warm, there is an Inuit trick of trying to jump up and click your heels together three times before landing. Neither of us could manage more than twice, but we vowed to get better over the winter.

Two miles before Horsefall, when we stopped to get our blood circulating with more heel clicking, we could hear lonesome howling from our other five dogs. It was past their regular feeding time and they felt compelled to lament this injustice to the world. Though I couldn't pick it up, the swivelling of Casey's sharp ears indicated he was hearing responses from Danny's dogs.

A few days later, with both toboggans, a huge pile of bedding and enough food for three days, we arrived again at Fort Selkirk, setting up quarters in the tourist cabin. Wanting to avoid any problems, Danny came down to tell us about his traps.

Traps were a most serious hazard for our teams. Fur-bearing animals were being actively *harvested* in this region, so most trails had leg-hold traps along them plus the occasional snare and conibear trap. We would need to make a point of meeting the closest trappers and learning where their sets were. Most encouraged us to use their trails because the dogs' scent was thought to attract other mammals. To help people spot the traps, each set was generally flagged with dangling fluorescent survey ribbon about twenty yards away. Apparently most animals can't distinguish colours like humans can, seeing more in black, whites and gray, so the bright markers don't tip off the prey. Apart from that help in identifying the locations, it was up to us to guide the dogs past safely.

In the case of a trail set, which was a trap buried under the trail or a snare dangling over it, there was no choice: we had to stop the team and make a path around. Trail sets were the favoured method to catch lynx, whose fur was very valuable. Cubby sets, generally a leg-hold trap buried under a dusting of snow and placed in a twig corral just off the trail, were easier to avoid. For these, I could



*Danny Roberts received a small stipend from Parks Canada to be caretaker for the abandoned Fort Selkirk townsite. Many of the cabins still had cutlery and curtains, as if the inhabitants thought the move to Pelly Crossing and Minto might be temporary. [photo courtesy Klaus Ollmann and Tom Funk]*

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stop the dogs, walk ahead, and then stand between the trap and the trail while the dogs ran past. Eventually, we had the leaders trained to gallop past a cubby set and pull the rest of the team by before they smelled the fish or beaver gland bait. The command was *On by!*

Danny ran a trapline behind the town. He led us along an old roadway on his yellow machine, pointing out where the traps were. For this lesson, we had only my squad with us and were very careful to coach the dogs past each one. Marsha's team we'd left chained beside our Selkirk cabin.

After Danny had roared off back to his house and we were on our way back, we were startled to find Marsha's dog Hinglish caught by a back foot in a number four leg-hold trap. He was so frightened and in such shock that he'd not even

eaten the nearby fishhead bait. Somehow the shaggy dog had broken loose from where we'd left him, and had come after us. Curiosity had been his downfall.

We were both quite distraught because Hinglish was such a dear dog and in obvious pain whenever I moved the trap. A number four trap has formidable metal jaws that grasp the animal's leg, with a powerful spring on each side. To open the jaws, both springs have to be compressed, a procedure usually performed by cracking the trap over one knee or thigh. With Hinglish's foot in the trap, I couldn't lever it into position without hurting him.

Finally, with Marsha restraining and reassuring Hinglish, I was able to hold one spring closed with my foot while I squeezed the other with both hands. Marsha gingerly pushed the jaws apart to free Hinglish's leg.

The hide and flesh were cut to the bone on either side, but the foot still moved. The jaws had caught him high – at the ankle – and hadn't broken those big bones. If it had been lower across the toes, he'd have been crippled. He – and we – had been very lucky.

Marsha held the big, black dog on her lap for the trip back to camp. He was so exhausted from his ordeal he submitted readily to this new role as passenger and patient. At Selkirk, we dusted the wound with penicillin powder and gave him an extra helping of supper. He licked his foot for a while, then fell asleep near the heater.

Although it was clearly not his fault, Danny Roberts felt badly about Hinglish when we explained in the morning. He told us about a dog getting trapped when Danny was just a boy out alone with his father's team. The wheel dog stepped on a trail set which all the other dogs had missed. This dog was a big, vicious brute, quite terrifying to a youngster. To be able to work on the trap without the dog biting him, Danny had to hook a chain onto the dog's collar and tie it ahead taut to a tree, so the dog couldn't turn its head. Next, Danny stood on both springs and pulled up on the jaws. Then he could carefully pry the jaws apart with a stick, and the wheel dog pulled its leg free.

Both Hinglish and the dog in Danny's story healed and were able to return to work after a short layoff. We heard how one woman used C-clamps to close the springs when she had no one to help her. We liked this idea enough to include two clamps in the toboggan's tool pouch on subsequent trips.

Hinglish would not have been trapped if we had made our chains properly. The problem was with our gang chains, the long chains that could be fastened between two trees and had side chains branching off for each dog. My mistake was to make this gang chain too fancy. I'd wired clips onto each end of the side

chains so we could change their positions along the main line. We didn't realize then the clips could undo when rubbed on a taut chain. Not only was Hinglish free on this fateful afternoon, but so were Tyhee and Big Pete. Peter was a mess, his beige and white fur drenched in blood likely from a disagreement with Jeff. The result of their argument looked alarming, but the damage was fortunately only a couple of minor puncture wounds. We solved the clip problem by wiring the side chains permanently to the main chain.

From my previous time in the Yukon, I had a solid grasp of what was needed in the way of equipment for short winter camping trips, but never before had I the opportunity to fill two freight toboggans for excursions of indeterminate length. We wanted to take little unnecessary gear, but our idea was to maintain our lifestyle on these travels, as opposed to rushing desperately to some predetermined destination and back. With nine dogs to pull us, we could bring a massive payload.

Sitting in their toasty cabin, eating cookies Marsha had made, we talked at length with Danny and Abbie about the outfit they used and the routines they followed when travelling together some twenty years before. Their main trapping route had been along a string of cabins on the old Fort Selkirk-to-Donjek River trail. Their suggestions helped us modify our kit, mostly by reducing and simplifying down to basics.

We wanted to bring a tent and stove, but we planned to make brush camps too, to see how comfortable we could make ourselves under the stars. For their travel Danny and Abbie each had a dog team, varying over the years from four to six dogs per team. They had small line cabins to stay in, plus a canvas wall tent at the far end. We would have the weight of a stove and tent with us, but they had their loads of traps, carcasses and furs. Our situations would be similar – *except* they had grown up at this game and understood every step intuitively.

Abbie's heart was weak now and Danny's lungs were giving him trouble so they would be mushing no more, yet were happy others would want to emulate their old culture. Clearly our presence touched them emotionally. Fond memories were stirred up, they said, each time we brought our two teams into their yard.

"You remind us of us," Abbie said.

The tent we were packing was larger than necessary, so a nice luxury. We bought it in Vancouver at a time when we weren't sure if there would be a cabin for us to settle into or not. With the possibility looming that this purchase might become our only winter home, we thought *big*. It was nine by twelve feet with five-foot sidewalls and had a simple peaked roof. There was no floor. Made of ten-ounce canvas, it weighed about thirty pounds.

The other shelter we would have for our nights on the trail was a ten-by-fourteen-foot canvas tarpaulin. For brush camps, ropes could be tied from the grommets around the edges to trees to fashion whatever shape of lean-to the weather dictated. The excess material would be folded underneath as a floor beneath our bedding.

Our first winter camp, testing equipment before this trip, had been only a snowball's throw from our cabin. After the fashion of the Hudson's Bay Company fur traders, we spent a night outside our home *fort* to check if we had everything before we went too far afield. And – although the history books did not mention it – I bet the traders snuck back inside a warm cabin to have breakfast the next morning just as we did.

What the trial confirmed to us was that we really did need all the bedding we'd planned to take. Our philosophy was no matter how miserable the weather, how exhausting the travel, how harshly the world in general was treating us during the day, it would all be bearable as long as we knew our bedding would keep us warm. Being cold all night would sap energy, changing a holiday into a marathon of endurance. We packed one toboggan half-full of bedding. Apart from the tarp, we had seven camping foam pads and a blanket to put under us. Our immediate cocoon consisted of four sleeping bags and two flannelette sheet liners.

No two people have the same rate of body metabolism. A Yukon expression for a bed partner is *your heater*, and some people's dials must be set higher than others. Curiously, Marsha could generate plenty of heat to keep me toasty while she herself was chilly. After experimenting, we found she was all right on a stack of four pads and the blanket, while I needed only three.

I hadn't figured out what we'd use for a woodburning stove in the wall tent and Danny came to the rescue. He volunteered to make us one out of a 10-gallon fuel drum. It would be a miniature of the 45-gallon barrel pig heater, but with the top flattened for a cooking surface. He had some 6-inch stove pipe to lend us too.

"When you come back, I'll have it made," he promised. "There's plenty of old drums here – no one will miss one," he added with a conspiratorial wink.

*See Appendix IX for detail about sleeping bags, the stove Danny built for us, our grub boxes and cooking gear, repair kits and more.*

Next morning, armed with directions about the safest route, we headed out to visit Carol and Lew Johnson who had a homestead just up the Pelly a few miles.

The trip could not be direct since the waters at the confluence of the two mighty rivers were open and showing no inclination to ice over.

“It is always a bad place there,” Danny told us. “You have to go up the Yukon for a ways, then cross where it is safe. After that you go between islands and sometimes you have to go on the shore along that side of the Pelly.”

Fortunately Danny had scouted the route on his snowmobile a few days before, when he’d gone to the farm for eggs and his mail. We could follow his track.

“Some places you better check the ice,” he cautioned, “because the ice can open up where it was okay before. And some places you can be safe on a skidoo going fast, but maybe you got some trouble going with dogs.”

Danny’s advice was not helping our nerves at all.

The dogs appeared more confident than their mushers and happily pulled us some two miles upriver before the track skirted the end of a small island and struck out across a quarter-mile expanse of jumbled ice.

The trail took us into a wide channel called Slaughterhouse Slough – a rather ominous name – and through a maze of small islands. At times, we passed over gravel bars and occasionally up and across an island where Danny had chopped willows to create a trail around a dicey spot. At the river’s far bank, our Indian friend had driven up a steep ramp and onto a narrow roadway.

“This is part of the old Dawson stage road,” I told Marsha as we stopped to drink some tea from the vacuum flask. “Danny calls it the Minto Road, and says it is quite steep in sections where it climbs over the ridge between here and the Minto townsite off to the south.”

Twenty minutes later we came into a clearing near the Johnson homestead, on a high bench perhaps a hundred feet above the river level. There was a log and timber main house with generous windows to celebrate a spectacular west-facing view across to the basalt cliffs on the far side. The exposure to the south was unimpeded – an important factor during dark winter months. Lew and Carol had bought this place a few years before from John Lammers who’d operated an eco-tourism business, guiding visitors who preferred to shoot wildlife with cameras rather than with guns. There were a few outbuildings that had been bunkhouses for the guests.

Two happy part-Labrador pooches bounded up to greet us, setting our nine into an uproar of barking. Alerted by the ruckus, Lew and Carol came to collar their pets and welcome us. They invited us to stay overnight in one of the cabins, and promised tea in the main house as soon as we’d chained the dogs and unpacked.

Lew had been a top government lawyer in Alaska during the oil pipeline

boom of the 1970s. Over tea and cookies, he explained how the culture in that American state had deteriorated with the influx of 100,000 pipeline workers and fast cash. The almighty dollar instantly transformed sleepy towns and villages, showing no respect for the environment or the indigenous peoples. Alcoholism, sexually-transmitted diseases and violent crimes increased sharply. He and Carol had come to the Yukon to seek that northern spirit they'd appreciated in Alaska in years past.

The Johnsons called their homestead *Stepping Stone*. They had a large garden plot and grew much of their own food. Rows of large glass jars filled the high shelves in the kitchen, displaying dried homegrown marrow peas and beans. Even their pets got into the home-grown spirit, according to Lew: "In the fall they will wander into the garden and dig up carrots for a snack."

Carol chatted with Marsha about the challenges of aspiring to be vegetarian in a northern culture with its severe winter climate. Moose meat and salmon had fuelled the indigenous peoples for thousands of years. Could beans be expected to deliver the high protein and carbohydrate requirements for working outside all day at Forty Below?

Lew confirmed they brought their town supplies in over the Minto Road during the fall, using a four-wheel-drive truck and occasionally its winch. They'd stocked up so a winter trip by truck on that rough road wouldn't be necessary.

They hoped to venture out more on the river ice next year when their grown son was to move in with them and assemble a dog team. Lew was therefore quite intrigued to see how we'd built our toboggans.

"The key factor is the white plastic base," I told him. "It makes the toboggans almost too fast when the dogs are fresh. It can get scary."

Seeing our dogs pumped with morning enthusiasm, we wrapped chain under the toboggan bases for our departure. Casey was doing his leaping and whining routine and other dogs were yanking forward to test the lifeline's strength. When at last we'd said our goodbyes and thanks to Carol and Lew, I untied and held on tight. In seconds the trees were flashing by, as the team charged back along the Minto Road toward the Yukon River crossing.

Two hundred yards along, when the dogs had relaxed into a trot, I could brake them to a halt and wrestle the chain out from around the base.

Minutes passed, then more time. Finally Hinglish's big head came into view around a corner and Marsha's team was soon crowding around my backboard.

"Did you go back for something?" I asked. "What took so long?"

"I'm still seeing stars," Marsha grinned. "There was a tree root sticking up in

Johnsons' yard, and the brake chain caught on it. Next thing I knew I went ass-over-tea-kettle, somersaulting over the backboard into the basket of my toboggan. A bit embarrassing, to say the least."

"You okay?"

"Yep. I decided to take off the chain. We just barely made it around those hairy bends with the dogs chasing after you guys, but we're here."

Passing through Fort Selkirk, we asked Danny and Abby about a possible expedition on their old trail to the Selwyn country.

"That trail's going to be hard to find in places," he said. "Last fellow to use it was the cowboy, Larry Smith. That was many years ago. He stayed here one winter and trapped on my line. Those big dogs out back he gave me when he got new ones – smaller and faster for racing."

Larry Smith now lived at Coffee Creek, some 65 miles downstream toward Dawson City. He'd gained recognition as one of the toughest dog racers in the north, often breaking trail and setting the pace in the gruelling Iditarod race across Alaska from Anchorage to Nome.

"Could you mark your route on our topographical maps?" I asked Danny.

Danny shook his head slowly. "I never used those government maps," he said. "Maybe I could draw it on some paper. I'll try. And I could give it to you when you come to get the stove next time. You're gonna need that stove if you're going on that trail. Might be a long trip with lots of snow when you get up in the hills.

"Hope you like being a lead dog," he added with a laugh. "You maybe gonna be using your snowshoes lots to make trail in front of your dogs."

Danny had just heard reports over the CBC Radio news about a bear wandering around this winter, first sighted near Carmacks and later leaving prints at Yukon Crossing, well within cruising distance of us. So he explained his father's advice about encountering a winter bear. For insulation or some other reason – perhaps while fishing or crossing open water – the bear will immerse itself repeatedly in water and coat its fur with a thick casing of ice. A winter bear is always *mean* and very dangerous to humans. The suit of ice makes it almost bulletproof except for one place, Danny explained: under the arms where the ice wears off. So, although it was puzzling to me how to get a bear to raise its arm for a clear shot, I was glad to be packing my .30-30 with us for protection.

A winter bear had killed trapper Eddie Wilkinson when all bears should be in hibernation. Biologists and trappers disagree as to whether a bear that comes prematurely from its den can survive or not. Mounted Police accounts of the



*Though the ice might be over four feet thick where I was standing, an open patch nearby reminded us to keep checking as we headed upriver to Selkirk.*

Wilkinson death stated that the bear was very ill, and died only a short distance away without external wounds and with an empty stomach.

Back at Horsefall that evening, as we unpacked, I carefully removed the .30-30 from its holster against my toboggan's backboard. Try as I might, I couldn't shake off some eerie feelings about that gun. Such a powerful weapon projected a presence all its own, as imposing on an aware mind as a nearby sow grizzly, or a proud bull moose. Merely having the loaded weapon in my hand would alter my perceptions, drawing out emotions of the hunt and the dangers and savageness of nature, instead of the more carefree, benevolent feelings that otherwise prevailed. Strangely I was more conscious of danger to me when I was potentially dangerous to other creatures; carrying a rifle created paranoia rather than alleviating it.

A ghastly calm would fall over the dogs whenever they saw a rifle out of its case, and yet few of them had seen what damage it could really cause. Some sat and stared at me with wide eyes; others hid inside their houses. They could perceive the danger instinctively.

As I stowed this last item in the cabin, none of us could have predicted one of our party would soon be dead – killed by a bullet from that rifle.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



## THE BODY BELOW

There was a thick, ominous-looking letter from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the bundle of mail I had picked up at the farm when Danny and I had gone for his supplies. I didn't open it until the following morning, when we sat down to eat breakfast.

"Do you have a secret past?" Marsha asked with a mouthful of toast. "What are the Mounties after you for?"

"It's okay, partner. You can relax about this one," I tried to sound like Bogart in *Casablanca*. "The boys in scarlet and funny hats got their man fifty-five years ago this month. And—" I flipped to the last page of the photocopied report, "he was arrested and taken to court in Dawson City."

"Who was, and what for?"

"Do you remember me mentioning a murder that happened down near Seventeen Mile Creek? Where the body was stuffed down the root cellar?"

"Sure. I think of it each time I have to go down into our root cellar," Marsha admitted. "It gives me the creeps."

"This is the investigating policeman's report, sent to me by the RCMP Historical Section in Regina. I wrote two months ago for any information they might have about the case."

"Well, might as well tell me about it now. Your toast is already cold."

"Okay... The Mountie's name was Constable Arthur B. Thornthwaite and he was stationed in Carmacks. On the evening of February 26, 1926, he got a message from Mr. Marshall, the owner of a wood camp at Seventeen Mile, saying a woodcutter was missing from his cabin further on downriver at 27 miles below Selkirk. The missing chap was Charles Smith, an old-timer.

"Thornthwaite and a tracker he hired at Selkirk, Joe Menzies, went down to investigate. It says here he and Menzies arrived at the cabin of Harry Davis, 21 miles below Selkirk on the left limit of the Yukon River, at about 7 p.m. on March

3rd. They questioned Davis about Smith because the two had been known to visit back and forth, and to walk into Selkirk together on occasion. Smith was apparently well liked, and Davis quite the opposite.

“Davis is quoted in the report here as saying, *‘The last time I saw Smith was on the 12th of February. He came up to my cabin to have a plaster put on his back. I gave him some caribou meat, he put this in his haversack and packed it back to his cabin. I haven’t been down to Smith’s since January.’*”

“So did Davis do it?” asked Marsha, impatiently. “Did he kill Smith?”

“Wait until the end. I’ll tell you the whole story as I read this,” I scolded, knowing she was the type who reads the last page of a book first so she wouldn’t be scared at the climax.

“The Mountie and Menzies went on downriver to Charlie Smith’s cabin. There was no Smith, but his snowshoes, two rifles and watch were still in the cabin. Smith’s revolver was missing, and the water barrel and perishables were frozen.

“So Constable Thornthwaite and the trapper spent the next three days combing the area for signs of the missing man. Smith’s cabin was on an island, but he had a small trapline on the shore. The two men followed all his lines and found no fresh prints in the 50-square-mile area they searched.”

“How did they know he didn’t fall through the ice?” Marsha asked.

“Well, the report mentions that. There was only one hole in the ice, but it had been made when an Indian broke through after Smith was reported missing. And, the river wasn’t deep there because the Indian had gotten out all right.”

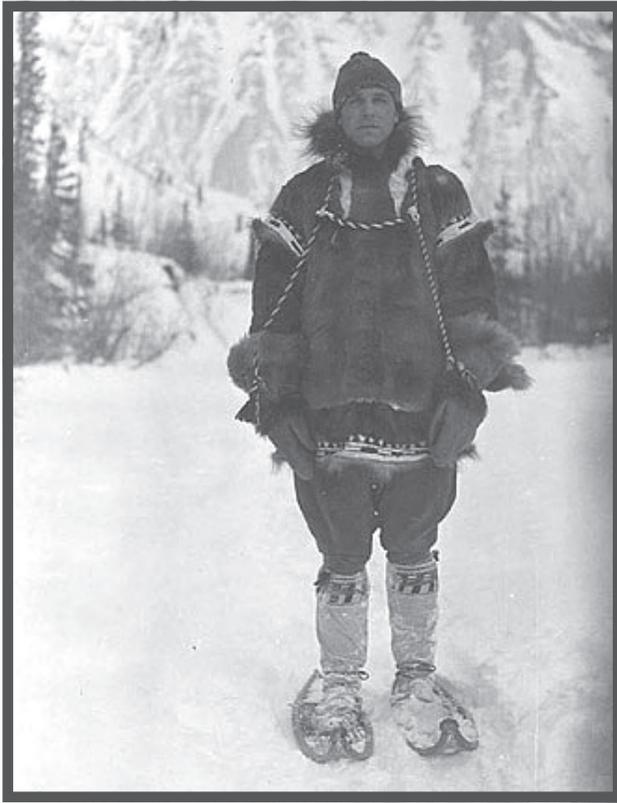
“So these investigators didn’t know much, except that he was missing and not on his trapline.”

“There was one clue they picked up on in Smith’s cabin,” I noted, feeling this had the makings of a detective thriller. “Smith’s calendar had been crossed off up to and including February Twelfth, so they knew the date he had left his cabin last.”

“He crossed off the Twelfth, so he must have left on the Thirteenth, right?” Marsha interjected. “That’s the day after Davis saw him.”

“Nope. That’s what I’d have figured, but the Mountie knew better. Thornthwaite had stayed overnight once with Charlie Smith when out on his long dog team patrols and had watched the old man carefully. Every morning, the first thing Smith did was cross off today’s date. So our clever constable knew Smith disappeared sometime between the morning of the Twelfth and that night.

“Now where was Smith on the Twelfth?”



*Constable Arthur Thornthwaite of the Mounties was determined to get his man.* [photo courtesy A.B. Thornthwaite Collection, Yukon Archives]

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“At Davis’s place, getting a plaster on his back and then walking home with some caribou meat,” said Marsha.

“Right, at least according to Davis’s story. So the two investigators mushed back upriver to pay another visit to Mr. Davis.”

At noon on March 7th, 1926, two dog teams pulled up to Davis’s log shack. Menzies walked back into the forest, as if to relieve himself. But while Constable Arthur Thornthwaite was inside seemingly interested in filing Davis’s claim for welfare rations, Menzies was really searching the area and exterior of the cabin for clues. If Davis had done Smith in, he would need to dispose of the body. There wasn’t much that could be hidden from a veteran trapper: wherever Davis had walked, Joe Menzies followed the trail like a bloodhound.

Inside, the young policeman had allowed the topic to drift back to his main

investigation. Davis repeated his story, changing a few details, adding others but sticking to the date. Davis gave this detailed description of Smith's attire on the date in question: *a dark flannel shirt, a leather belt about 1-1/2 inches wide, with a Colt Automatic attached; he wore a little dark blue toque, and Indian moccasins, and a khaki haversack, U.S. Army style.*

While Davis was talking, Thornthwaite was glancing about the cabin, trying to visualize the two men: one applying the mustard plaster, perhaps a fight. But how would Davis kill Smith? And why would he want to?

Then the constable noticed a calendar hung in the corner. He crossed the room and casually flipped the page back to February. The Twelfth was the only date *not* crossed off! What could have upset Davis's routine so he would have left that date?

Davis was now claiming he hadn't had *any* meat all winter, because he had no money to buy ammunition for his .30-30 rifle. Marshall had only recently given him some shells. This contradicted Davis's earlier statement about giving Smith some caribou meat, but Thornthwaite let it pass. He was allowing Davis time and room to hang himself. And the shifty suspect did indeed give himself away: not by what he did or said, but by what he *didn't* do – he didn't ever move.

When Thornthwaite asked permission to *make a routine check to ensure there was no hidden supply of food, and that Davis was truly destitute*, Davis agreed, but stayed himself in the very centre of the cabin throughout the search. Even when Menzies entered and the three men were crowded uncomfortably close together, Davis didn't step back. The Mountie now knew where to look for clues.

He asked Davis to step back and sit on the bed. Then he got down on his knees and began wiping away dirt and silt from where Davis had stood. In a few seconds, he found a two-inch-diameter stain on the peeled spruce pole floor. It could have been blood. Menzies soon uncovered another area that might have recently been washed and scrubbed: hardly in keeping with Davis's housekeeping standards.

"You say you've had no meat this winter?" Menzies asked.

"No, and I need food," Davis maintained.

Thornthwaite looked to his helper and asked what he'd found outside.

"Nothing amiss," Menzies reported. "No sign of a food cache – or of anything else at all."

Thornthwaite glanced down again, noticing a faint pattern in the sand, silt and ashes partially covering the pole flooring. With a finger, he traced the lines, then used a piece of kindling to scrape dirt from the crack. It was a trapdoor.

"I haven't been down in the cellar since last September!" Davis cried out.

But the Mountie was already prying up the cover. He was not looking for a food cache: he had a bigger mystery to solve.

Constable Thornthwaite was halfway down the crude ladder when Davis made his move. He grabbed for his .30-30 leaning against the wall. But Menzies had beaten Davis to the draw.

“You might be able to shoot the Mountie,” he told Davis calmly, “but I’ll make sure you die, too.” Menzies held a revolver pointed at the suspect’s chest.

Davis placed the rifle on the floor and raised his hands. “I give up. I killed Charlie Smith,” he admitted.

Thornthwaite, caught in the middle of this exchange, glanced down into the cellar and saw a man’s legs. He climbed up and formally arrested Harry Davis for the murder of Charles H. Smith. No one had any doubt about the date.

Menzies and Thornthwaite took turns guarding the prisoner so the other one could identify the body. Charlie Smith’s head had been bashed in and there was a bullet wound in his chest. A plaster was still on his back. The revolver was missing, but there was over \$400 on the body.

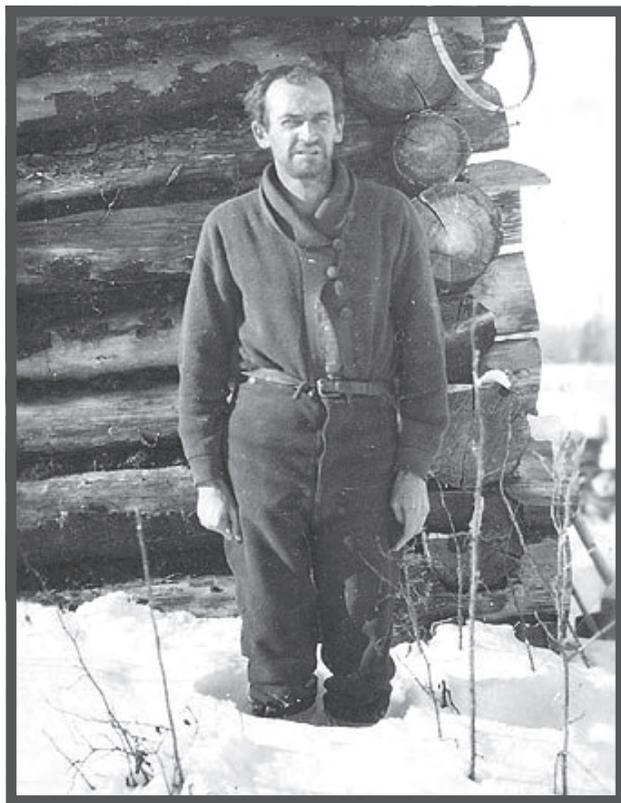
“If Davis had killed Smith for the money, why hadn’t he taken it?” Marsha wondered.

“Harry Davis made a statement which is quoted here,” I said, “claiming he had put a mustard plaster on Smith’s back, but that it was too hot and had burned Smith’s back. Davis describes the fight they had next:

*Smith said it was too hot and reached out and grabbed my rifle, which was against the wall near my bed, and hit me twice with it, across the left hip and left temple. We then had a fight, and I hit him over the head with a piece of wood, and got the rifle away from him and hit him over the head with it, and then when he was on the floor, I shot him. I was about six feet distant from Smith when I shot him. I got Smith over to the cellar and lowered him into it and washed the blood from the floor where I had shot Smith.”*

“So it was self-defence,” Marsha stated. “Except he didn’t have to shoot him, did he? Davis had already knocked him over the head and had Smith lying on the floor.”

“That would be up to a jury in Dawson City to decide. First these two sleuths had to get Davis into Fort Selkirk without him doing them in as well. Constable Thornthwaite describes the root cellar as actually being an abandoned mine shaft, so there was plenty of room for Davis to store more bodies down there. And remember, they didn’t know where Smith’s missing Colt handgun was. They had to watch him every moment, even when Davis wanted to relieve himself.



*Harry Davis was photographed after his arrest by the Mounted Police constable.* [photo courtesy A.B. Thornthwaite Collection, Yukon Archives]

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“Davis now described how for days he had felt the dead Smith’s eyes watching him from the cellar. This little gem of information must have convinced his captors Davis was quite looney. The report merely states Davis was taken to Fort Selkirk, but I’ll bet they made him walk out front where he couldn’t pull any tricks on them.”

“They would have come right past our cabin, bringing the body, too,” Marsha said, glancing out the window towards the river. “What an unpleasant thought!”

“Actually they took in the prisoner on this day, and Menzies and another fellow returned for the body on the next day. Davis was kept in a room in back of William Schofield’s general store under constant guard so he couldn’t escape or commit suicide.

“A week later, Constable Thornthwaite, accompanied by Constable J.R. Purdue from Whitehorse, escorted Davis to jail in Dawson City. This time they travelled

on the Royal Mail stage coach over the old Dawson Road, and they brought the body along for an autopsy.”

“Great,” moaned Marsha. “So this murderer and the dead body were taken in a horse-drawn sleigh along the road behind us. We’re surrounded by old ghost trails here.”

“Want to know what happened at the trial?”

“Sure.”

“Me, too. But the report ends with the prisoner being remanded for trial. We’ll have to write to the archives in Whitehorse, or visit the Dawson Museum for microfilm copies of the newspaper accounts of the trial. It may take a few weeks for a written reply.”

We cleared away the breakfast dishes and began our day’s chores. The temperature was back down below freezing, so we were thinking about camping destinations again.

“I know already where you want to go,” said Marsha.

“Well, wouldn’t a nice trip downriver be fun?” I grinned.

Marsha didn’t say anything for a moment, turning the idea over and over in her mind. Eventually, she sighed and reached for a sheet of paper to start a food list.

“Just promise me one thing, Bruce,” she said.

“Name it.”

“Promise me there won’t be another dead body.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



### GIMME A BRAKE?

Dawn came early to our camp on Volcano Mountain. We were finished our porridge, and huddling over our tea, before the shadows had fled the river valleys. The air had a bite that made the campfire that much more hospitable. One by one the dogs raised their heads, yawned and settled back to sleep. Peter had the innate talent for making every move, even yawning, a show of grace. He opened his tiny jaws wide, coiling and stretching his slender tongue, and displaying pearly rows of sharp teeth. His long-lashed eyes blinked sleepily, then he rolled over to lick himself cat-like, grooming the silky hair on his legs.

“He’s such a cutie,” Marsha whispered.

“Do you think he’ll like going back to Pelly Crossing and being Peggy again?” I asked idly.

“He’ll always be *Big Pete* to me,” she chuckled. “And he’ll have Mutt as company at the Hagers’ place. They’ll probably feed him more than we did, and work him less. He’ll love it.”

When we had the crews in their harnesses and pointed downhill, it was Peter who was the best behaved, sitting daintily, eager to go but waiting obediently. The others – frantic to get moving – were squirming and pawing at the snow. With the awesome descent facing us, we wished they were a little less enthusiastic.

“Have you got your chain brake on?” I asked Marsha.

“Two wraps near the back. Hope that’s enough.”

“We’ll see,” I smiled and gave Casey the *okay*.

Two minutes later, I was lying in a snowbank, quite sure that two wraps hadn’t been enough for my toboggan. On a sharp bend, I had overshot and driven on the wrong side of a tree. The dogs, with their four-legged traction, had kept to the trail, and been jerked to a rude halt. Now the toboggan was rolled on its side, held from tumbling into a ravine only by the wheel dog’s straps.

“Oh, what fun it is to be a musher,” I muttered, crawling back up to the trail.

Snow was melting off my face and running down my neck. I looked around for Marsha, to whom I'd addressed my last comment, and realized she hadn't come down this stretch of trail yet. I cleared my team off to the side.

Eventually, Peter's head appeared over the crest of the hill, and then Hinglish's, then Dawson's and Tyhee's. They were all pulling hard, but the toboggan wasn't moving fast. On the back, Marsha was covered in snow, and grinning gamely. She was hopping up and down on the brake and calling out *Slowly, Slowly* to the dogs. They crowded to a stop beside us, tails all a-wag and tongues dripping.

"Did you pile snow on your head to cool off, or did you wipe out, too?" I teased.

"Oh, we had a dandy crash back there," she said, flipping back her hood. "Wiped out three or four little trees, and almost knocked myself silly falling over the backboard into the basket again. I didn't realize the trail was this steep when we went up it yesterday."

"How'd you wipe out when you were going so slow down this part?"

"The clips broke on the chain brake. All I had left was the claw brake and my dogs were just a-bootin' 'er trying to catch up to you. I knew we were going to crash, it was just a matter of *when*, and into how many trees."

"You okay now?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Just bruised my dignity big time, landing on my head inside the toboggan. After that, I wrapped another chain and some rope under the base. I wasn't going to take any more chances."

I looked at her toboggan and saw all the brake loops. Her dogs looked pooped from pulling it down the hill.

"I'll wrap mine up the same," I said. "I've had enough thrills for today."

That's when I noticed my own brake chain was dangling to one side.

"You broke a clip on yours, too," Marsha pointed out. "No wonder you missed that corner."

"I thought we were going pretty fast," I admitted. "If I'd known the chain was busted, I'd have been *really* scared."

On this one part of Don's trail, three steel clips had been demolished in the space of thirty seconds. We had used the same steel G-clips for the harnesses and all the tethering chains, but hadn't had one break on us all winter. Obviously the strain on a chain brake was far more than anywhere else.

"With trails like this one, I know now why Don has spent half the winter repairing his sled," Marsha laughed.

At the lake shore, I instructed Casey to lead us around the other half of the perimeter, so we could examine the main lava flow from close up. The path of

the molten rock had been quite obvious from the summit: a strip totally bald of trees, down the mountain side extending along one edge of the lake and out onto the plateau.

“This looks like the moon’s surface,” I pointed out, standing on a tall mound of porous black rock. There was a layer of snow over all horizontal surfaces, but the vertical faces were exposed and holey as Swiss cheese.

“To me, it looks like burnt egg white,” Marsha suggested. “All black and crusty and full of bubble holes. When do you think this happened?”

“One book said thousands of years, and another mentioned volcanoes on the coast might have been active in the seventeen-hundreds. Maybe this one was stewing at the same time.”

We crawled over the strange formations while the dogs waited impatiently on the ice. The sun had climbed high, and would soon make the snow sticky, so we cut short the inspection. There were about six miles to cover on the way home.

At the Dawson Road, we noticed tracks from various pick-up trucks in the snow, and realized the entire stretch in from Pelly Crossing must be clear, and passable for light traffic.

The bulldozers and grader crews must have repaired or replaced any creek bridges on the side-road into the farm to keep their supplies rolling in. Their labour meant we could get our truck, Furd, out to the highway now if we wanted to return dogs to Pelly Crossing. The ravages of spring run-off on the road had been a nagging concern to us over the past weeks when we’d made our plans. However, as had so many other details of this winter, events were opportunely falling into place. Early April would be the right time to scout for summer jobs, sell some of our outfit, find homes for Loki and Hinglish, and perhaps check through the Dawson Museum records to find out what happened to Harry Davis at his trial. A week or so later, we could return to watch the ice break-up, and then, with Danny’s riverboat, freight out our remaining equipment and supplies. We mulled over this plan while the dogs trotted for home.

There was water running down Horsefall Creek ravine. It was merely a trickle, snaking under patches of snow and through the gravel, but clearly a harbinger of the run-off torrents to come. South-facing, exposed slopes were practically bare already, though the snowpack in the dense woods and north-facing pockets was deep and would last weeks yet.

“We’d better leave in a few days,” I joked to Marsha, “or we’ll need wheels on our toboggans.”

“Wheels, or maybe pontoons,” she replied. “I think the ground will get a lot wetter before this snow is all gone.”

We tied the dogs at their shelters, noting the dog lot looked disgustingly cluttered. The debris of five months was poking through patches of packed snow and ice. Bones from the farm's cattle lay everywhere: fragments of leg, tips of hooves, chunks of skull and jaws still sporting a few green molars. Recent stools that had been buried by sudden snowfalls had now thawed and were lending a decidedly unpleasant aroma to the yard. Small cream-coloured discs lay everywhere, at first puzzling us about their identity.

"Oh, those are *parsnips!*" Marsha exclaimed. "I *knew* they wouldn't like them."

Two months ago, when we found some of our vegetables were at the end of their storage life in the root cellar, Marsha and I had washed, sliced and bagged all the parsnips, turnips and carrots for freezing. The ends and questionable pieces had gone into that night's dog food. I had been sure the dogs wouldn't notice the bonuses in the dark, but Marsha had been as certain they wouldn't like parsnips.

"They eat in such a disgusting frenzy when it's Forty Below," I protested, "how did they pick out the parsnips?"

"Let's clean them up," Marsha decided, "before they rot and stink. The whole yard looks like a compost pile."

Together we shovelled up the maligned vegetables, the excreta and most of the bones, taking four wheelbarrow loads to our heap in the meadow. Most of the stools piled there over the winter had turned chalky-white, and had little smell.

After supper, waiting for bath water to heat, we walked to the bank and watched the sun set down the river. The channels of running water were inky-black streaks below the shiny gray columnar cliff walls. Overhead, the low hooting of a Great Horned Owl alerted us to his presence somewhere in that fiery sky. Borders of the wispy clouds reflected colours from the vanishing sun: indigo and rose, orange and royal blue. The jumble of hues seemed both unlikely and natural. Our experience over the winter had taught us the North is a mixture of the unusual and the unbelievable. We watched the exposition of light with a touch of sadness in our hearts.

"Nothing left but packing now," I sighed, putting my arm around Marsha's shoulders.

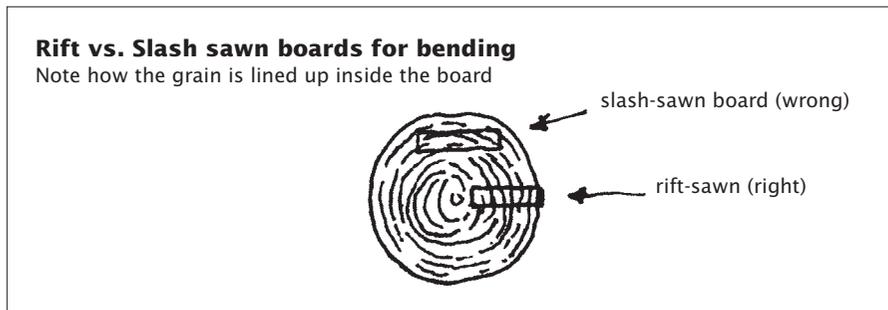
"If life's that dull," she whispered, "I'll be very surprised."

## BUILDING FREIGHT TOBOGGANS

*See also Chapter 11 for more information on making toboggans.*

**W**e procrastinated a bit when it came to making our freight toboggans. The customized children's model was still holding together and I wanted to gather my thoughts and my confidence. My first attempt at this project during the summer had been a dismal failure of splintered wood, and we had only enough materials for one more try at bending boards.

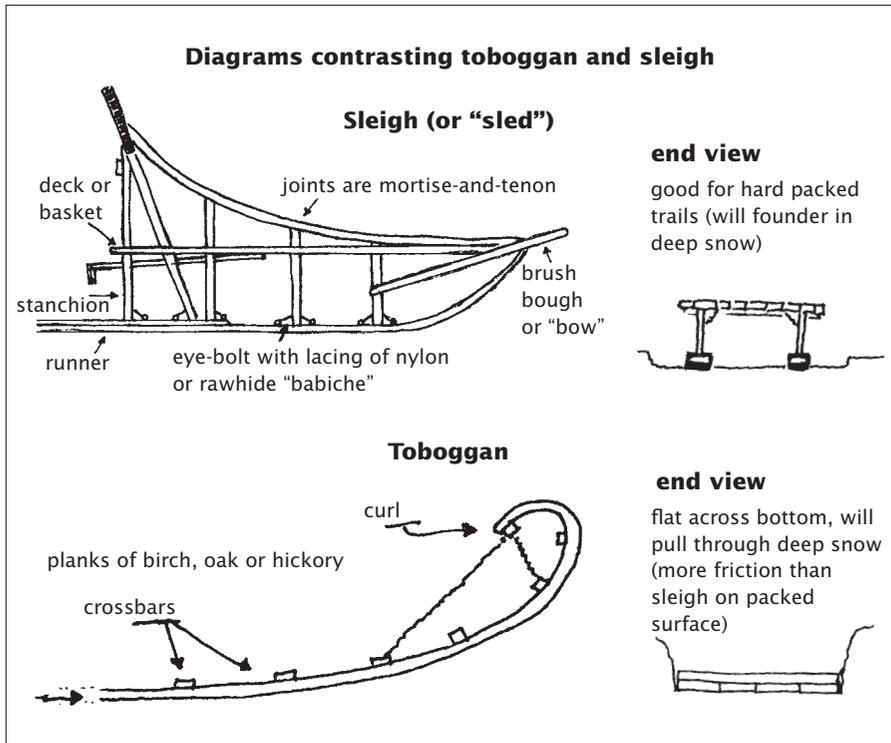
Learning about the process of bending wood had taken me into the field of shipbuilding because, although no one was making dog toboggans on Vancouver Island, every shipyard had tradesmen with experience in steam-bending ribs and planks. I jumped the gun, buying oak planks before I thoroughly understood the critical factors involved. The lumber purchased was unsuitable for bending because it was kiln-dried, wasn't clear of knots, and was sawn on the wrong angle. The



choice wood would be air-dried (or still green), straight-grained and rift-sawn.

Not only did I have poor material, but the frame I'd made to wrap the steaming planks around turned out to be too flimsy, breaking apart on the first attempt. After the frame was beefed up, the oak boards began snapping when I forced them to curl. Obviously, this approach wasn't going to work. To salvage the expensive hardwood, I ordered the remaining planks resawn into thinner and narrower strips (cut from 7/8" x 8" to be about 11/32" x 4") which I hoped would bend more easily. When we left the Island for the dusty drive northward, I was still reading and asking questions, planning my next attack on what I'd initially figured was a straightforward carpentry project.

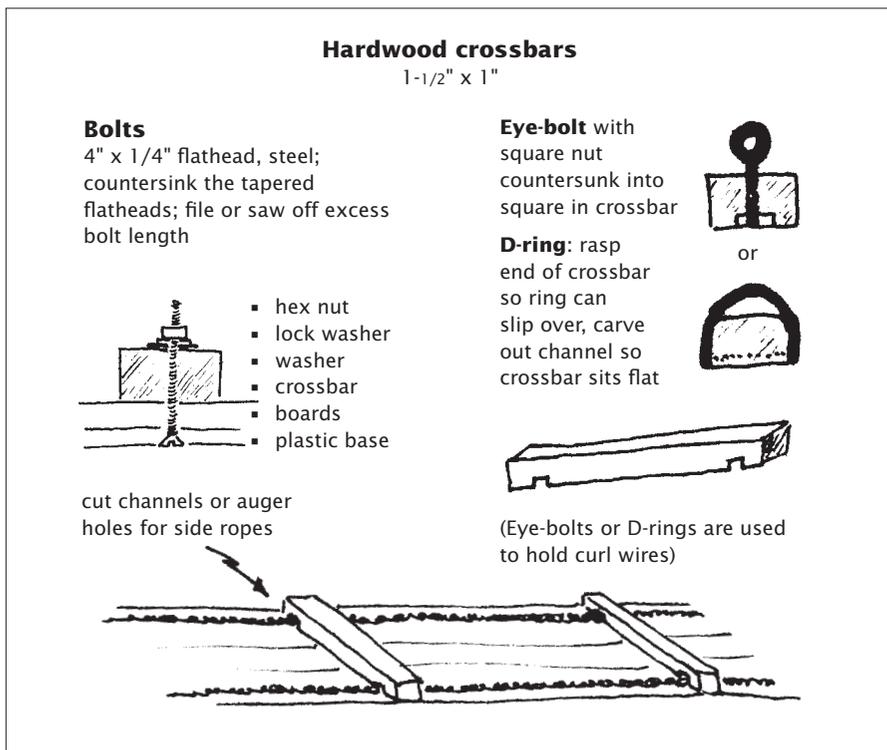
The first dog teams into the central Yukon were possibly those of the Hudson Bay Company, pulling birchwood toboggans laden with fur trade cargos. Apparently the famous *couriers-de-bois* who worked for the English company made these vehicles from local wood when no imported hardwood was available, bending the sawn or adzed planks after they had been boiled to make them supple. Joints were fastened with rawhide babiche and wooden pegs. In those early days,



the driver walked or ran, steering with a rope attached to the curl of the toboggan (called the *head rope*). The only passengers were the sick or feeble.

On hard-packed trails, a heavier load could be transported using a sleigh instead of a toboggan because the sleigh's runners would have less friction on the snow than a toboggan's broad base. Off a travelled trail, however, a sleigh would be difficult to steer and would founder in deep snow.

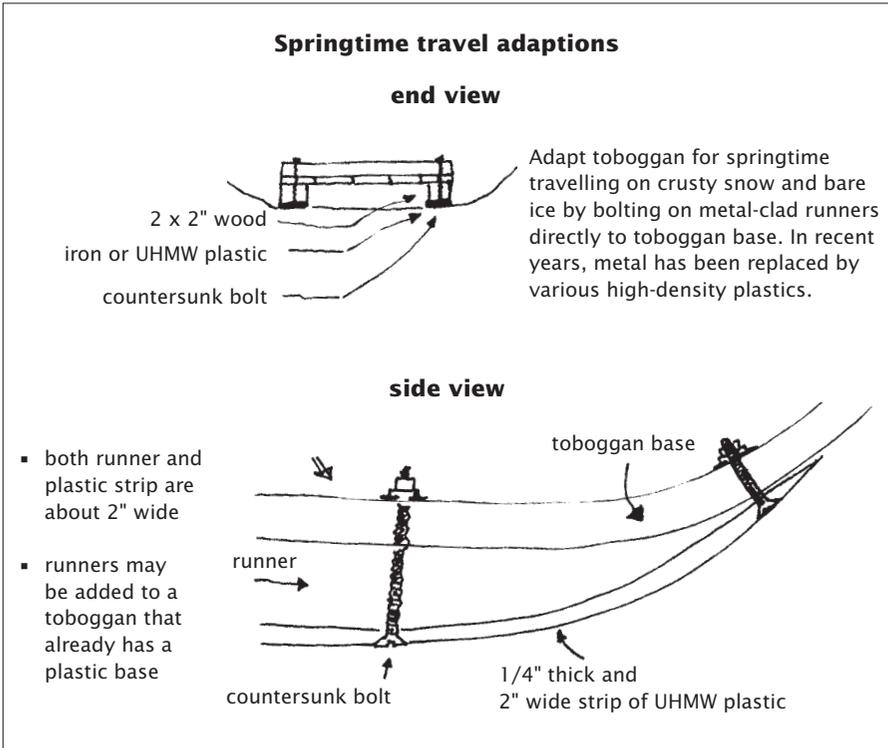
For much of the 20th century, trading posts in the Yukon carried pre-bent oak and hickory boards imported from Eastern Canada. Trappers would make a toboggan by buying boards of the required length and width, bolting on hardwood crossbars and threading through side ropes and head rope.



The old-time Yukoners' other option was to start from scratch with a birch log, cutting out planks with a rip saw. If only a slight upsweep was desired, the green wood could be bent without steaming or boiling, and left to dry over a form. For a higher, tighter curl, the wood fibres had to be loosened by being kept in boiling water or a steam box before bending.

Birch was reputed to be the fastest surface in extremely cold weather, but oak was more durable. Birch grows in the Yukon; oak had to be imported from Outside. In the spring, when crusty snow could quickly rasp away the base, iron runners were bolted onto the bottom for protection. These metal runners also pulled easier than wet wood at temperatures near the freezing mark.

Early photographs of the toboggans used by the Royal North-West Mounted Police showed neither brakes nor handlebars. The drivers could pull, steer and brake with the head rope (also called a *gee-line*) or with a pole fastened to the curl, but mostly they just plodded along ahead of the dogs on snowshoes to pack a trail. Travelling in a convoy of three or four teams on long patrols, one man might stay back to guide the toboggans around a tight spot or down a steep bank. If the going was particularly smooth, the men could sit on top of the load for a



short ride. To slow the toboggan on dangerous descents, chains or ropes would be wrapped underneath to drag in the snow. Only in the late 1920s did brakes and handlebars come into widespread popularity.

During the mid-1970s, the Teslin Indian Band in the Yukon village of Teslin opened a woodworking factory that produced hardwood toboggans as well as sturdy cedar-strip freighter canoes. Their toboggans were made of Arkansas oak, using one inch by eight inch planks steamed under pressure and bent into a high, three-quarter curl. They were very sturdy, and heavy enough to be used as cabooses behind snowmobiles, called *skibooses*. The factory sold them without uprights or attachments; it was left to the buyer to design whatever brake and handlebars he wanted. Unfortunately, the factory had been closed for a few seasons before our trip north in 1980, and Teslin toboggans had become a scarce and much-coveted item. If we could have bought two of these vehicles when we passed through Teslin, my construction project could have ended right there.

The booming hobby-sport of dog racing brought a few new options to the world of working dogs: various rigid plastics began being used in the early 1970s as bases



*Constable Arthur Thornthwaite mashes his dogs up a ramp from the river. One dog's tail is held high – an indication that husky is not pulling his hardest. [photo courtesy A.B. Thornthwaite Collection, Yukon Archives]*

*Two police patrol teams on the Yukon ice below Dawson. Note the dogs in tandem freight harnessing and the lack of backboard and handlebars on the toboggans. [photo courtesy Glenbow Museum]*



on sleigh runners. P-Tex, a product developed for downhill skis, and UHMW [Ultra High Molecular Weight] polyethylene were two of the most popular, because they are so strong and slide easily on snow. Soon, entire sleds were being made from these plastics, aluminium tubing, electrical conduit and nylon cord, with only part of the runners being wood. The reports I had received on the UHMW were so favourable that we purchased a four foot by ten foot sheet of this rigid plastic on our way through Vancouver to use as a base under the boards of our toboggans. We had instant appreciation of the slipperiness of this material when we wrestled to secure the quarter-inch thick sheet securely to the trailer.

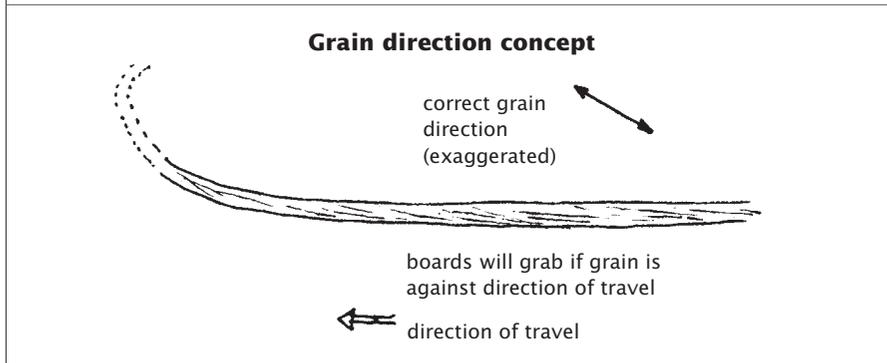
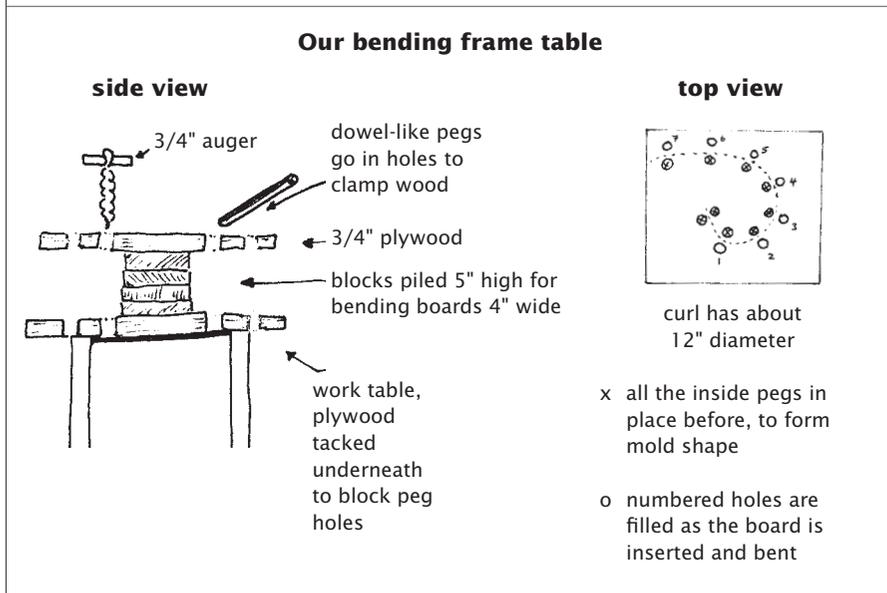
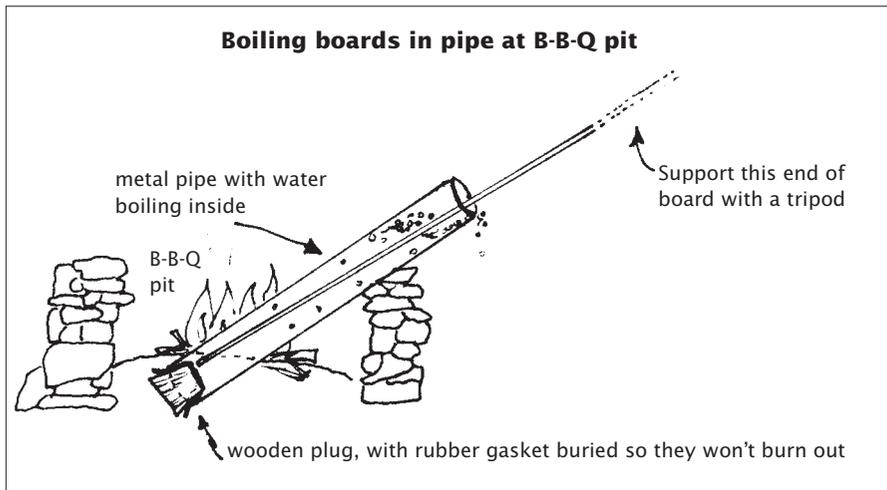
When we passed through Whitehorse, Norm Rudolph (Jon's father) had a solution to my worry about a suitable process for bending our thin oak planks when we got to Horsefall. He urged me to *boil* the wood, explaining boiling had been a preferred method of bending ships' timbers in the Maritimes for centuries. Because our oak had been kiln-dried, it was too brittle to ever bend properly with steam; boiling was the only way. Norm gave me a chest-high length of six-inch diameter iron sewer pipe. We were to plug and bury one end in the ground, pour in water, then build a fire around the pipe. This we did at the cabin and the technique proved completely successful.

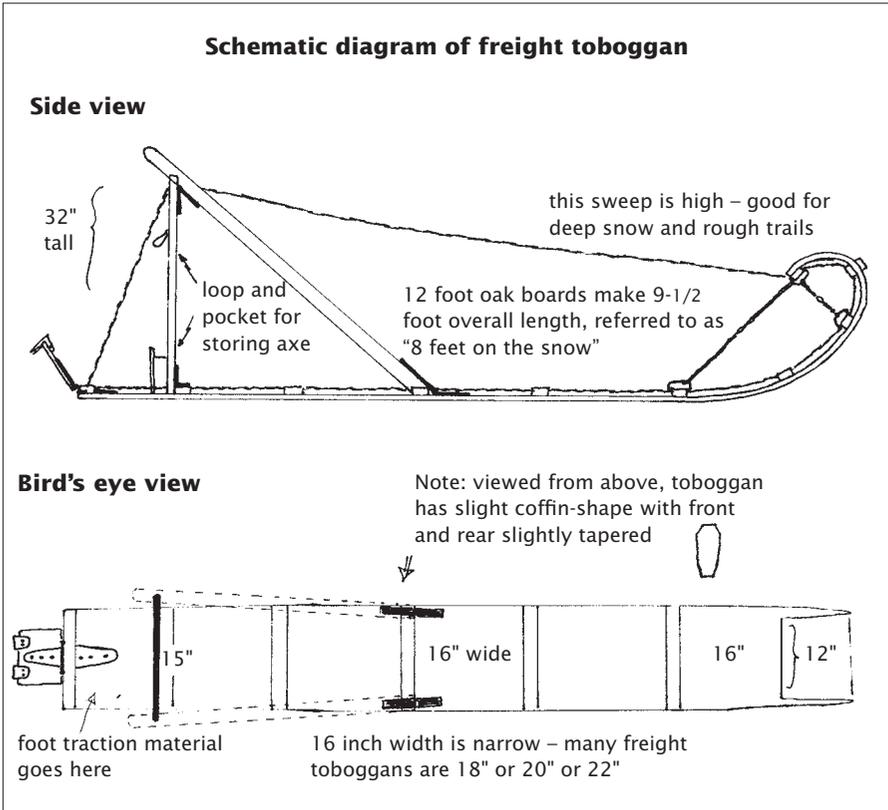
Our thin planks required thirty minutes of boiling to loosen up. At that point though, the change was amazing – the wood suddenly became limp and pliable. After I rushed the steaming board to our bending frame, Marsha would pin the end in place and then drop dowels into the holes as clamps while I walked the plank around the frame. [See diagram on following page.]

Bending the thin planks was not hard, though we needed to work quickly to have a board completely pinned before the winter air cooled it. The tighter the wood was clamped at each spot, the less chance there was of splitting or feathering. Although our results were satisfactory, the forming would have been gentler on the wood if the outside surface had been compressed with a metal or canvas strap during the bending, and if the inside of the frame had been a continuous form to distribute the strain more evenly.

Had we not planned on adding a plastic base under our toboggan boards, it would have been essential we have boards with straight grain and bend them so each one had the grain aligned so it would slide, rather than grab on the snow. Wood with scrambled grain and occasional knots, such as ours had, would never have made a good final base.

We were elated when we had our first success pegged to the bending frame





and anxiously waited for it to dry. After thirty-six hours, we removed the pins and the curled plank popped off. Then we bound it with rope to preserve the shape while the next boards were boiled and bent in turn.

Toboggans were generally between sixteen to twenty-two inches wide. Four of our boards gave us the narrower limit, well-suited for travel through the bush behind tandem (single file) dogs. Most toboggans we saw were made of three six-inch or two eight-inch boards. Twelve-foot-long boards would yield a vehicle over 9-1/2 feet in length, which was a practical size. Of this overall length, about 8-1/2 feet would be *on the snow* because the rest would be the upsweep of the curl that allows the front to ride up and over loose snow.

Before we boiled our boards, we selected which would be the outside ones and tapered them so that the resultant vehicle would be slightly coffin-shaped. The narrower curl ensured that the ends of the boards would be tucked well inside, away from snagging branches. The tail's taper made the toboggan easier to steer.

**Curl shapes**



snow

- this shape pushes snow
- on impact with tree, this shape rams and may break

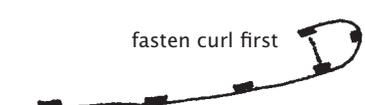


snow

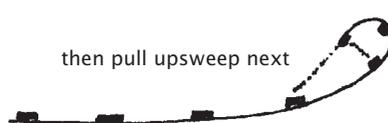
- this upsweep rides up, over bumps
- on impact, this curl will bend and absorb energy

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**Creating a high curl**



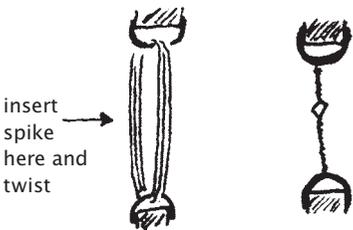
fasten curl first



then pull upsweep next

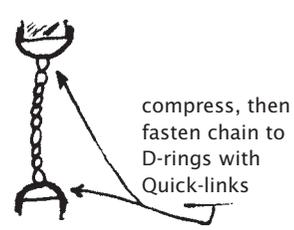
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**Wire-twisting**



insert spike here and twist

**Chain**

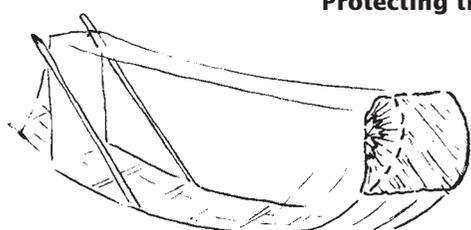


compress, then fasten chain to D-rings with Quick-links

or

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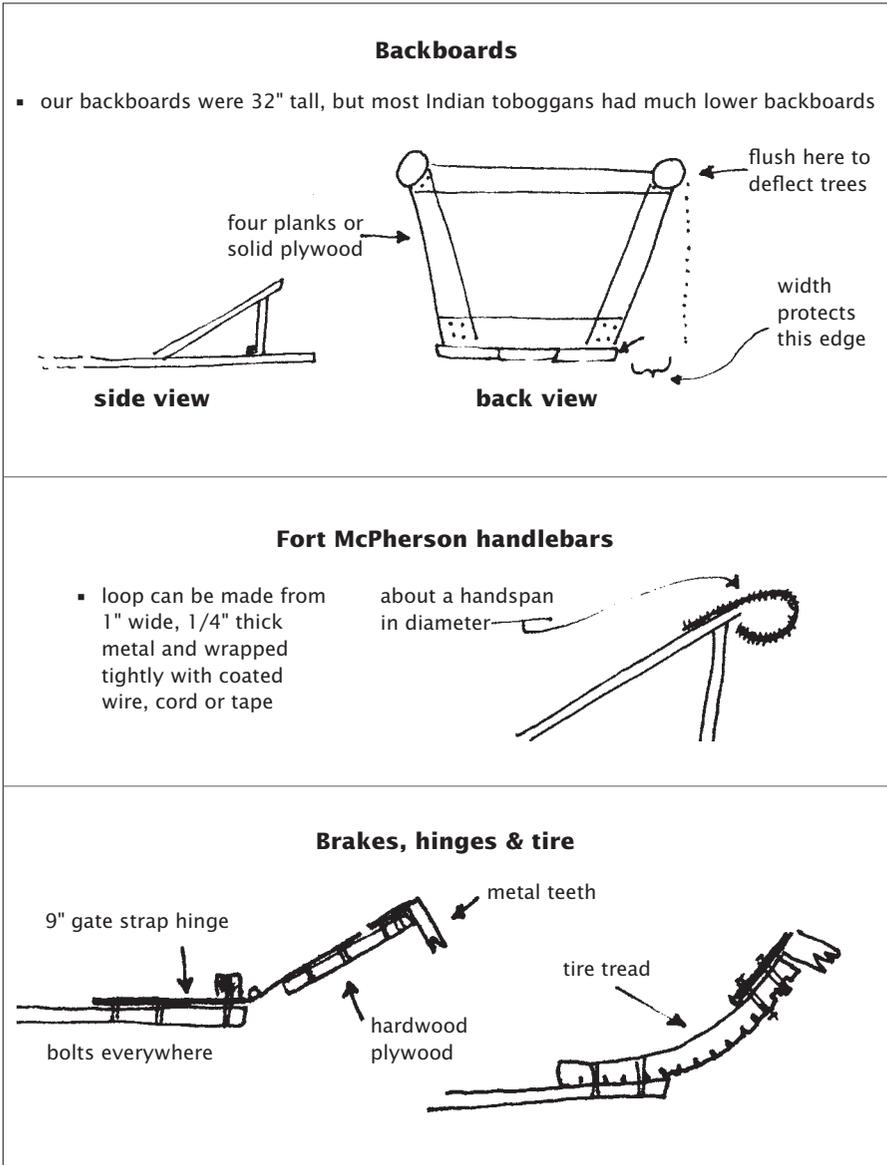
**Protecting the curl**



- curl is draped with wet rawhide and laced tightly on each side. Dried hide holds curl, cushions impact. Cargo space inside can be boxed off for tool storage or first-aid kit, etc.

The curls were bound in place at two angles, the first wire holding the curl's half-circle, and the second fixing the amount of upsweep. A fancier-looking method than using twisted wire was to use chain and link fasteners. Traditionally, the curl was draped and laced tightly with wet rawhide, but we had missed our moose this winter and had to omit this step.

When assembling the boards, crossbars and plastic base, we found it important



to have the plastic warm to ensure a tight fit. After the completed craft was taken outside into the cold, the plastic contracted more than the wood and was drawn up snugly.

The designs of handlebars and backboard varied widely on the toboggans we saw. Those at Pelly Crossing had a low, wide backboard with handlebars so low

one had to stoop to hold on. Keeping the weight low made the load more stable, which was especially important if the toboggan was to be used on occasion as a skiboose. Some of their backboards were solid plywood, like ours were, but others were made of four planks, bolted together and to a crossbar at the bottom. The resulting opening was covered with canvas, or left open for access to the load. Handlebars on the Indian models were fastened to the backboard with telegraph wire or strips of galvanized metal. At the lower ends, the handlebars were wired to a crossbar or directly to the baseboards themselves, with wire passing under the toboggan in a recessed groove. Another method – which we adopted – was to use hinges to fasten all these points. Because of the strain, the hinges had to be super sturdy ones with locked hinge pins, and with bolts used in lieu of screws.

Our handlebars were simple willow poles, but we saw a unique design from Fort McPherson that solved the problem of getting speared during sudden stops. Their handles ended in a loop of metal, wrapped with tape for a better grip.

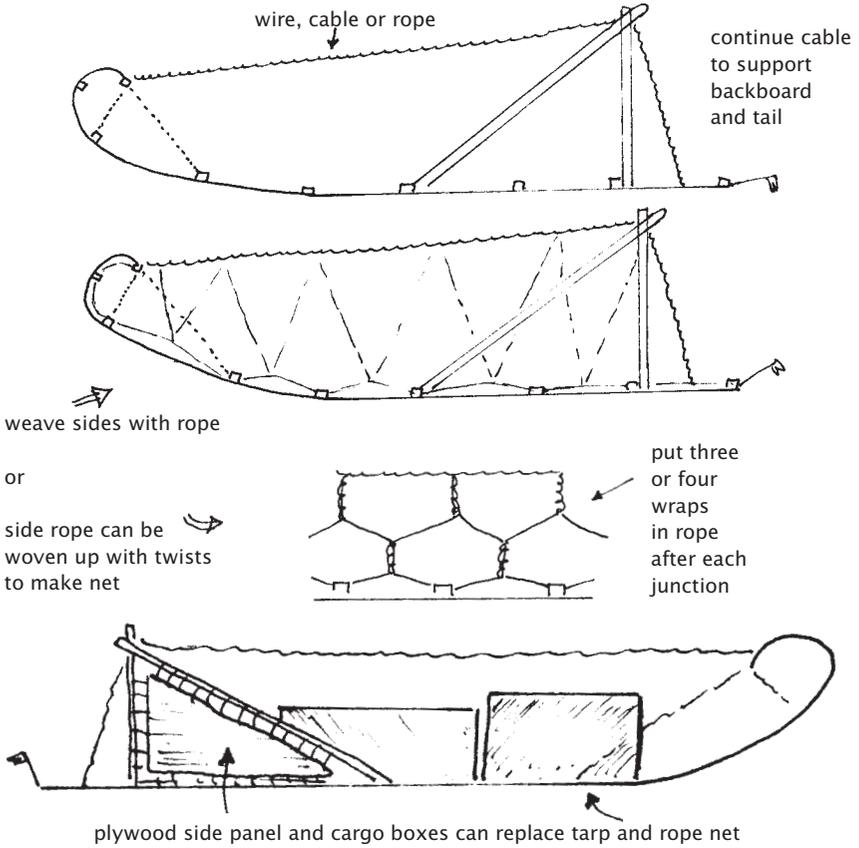
Our brakes were metal claws bolted to a square of hardwood plywood, which was in turn hinged (using a 9" strap hinge) to the tail. Don Mark used a tire tread version which was as effective until the weather became very cold and the rubber became too stiff to bend.

Losing one's footing could mean a long walk home if the dogs didn't care to stop, so we improved the traction on the area of the tail where the musher would stand. We saw old toboggans with strips of tire tread or rough matt fastened here, but we liked a macramé rope net for grip under our moccasins.

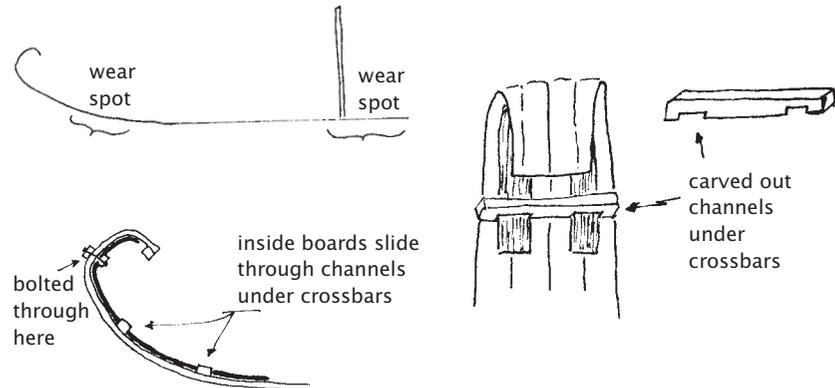
Another safety measure against losing the dogs was the trailing head rope (or lifeline, or gee-line). This was also useful for lowering a toboggan down a steep bank, or pulling it back out of the trees or a snowbank after a missed corner. Fifty feet was a practical rope length. We usually tied this rope to a tree while harnessing the dogs, to guard against premature starts.

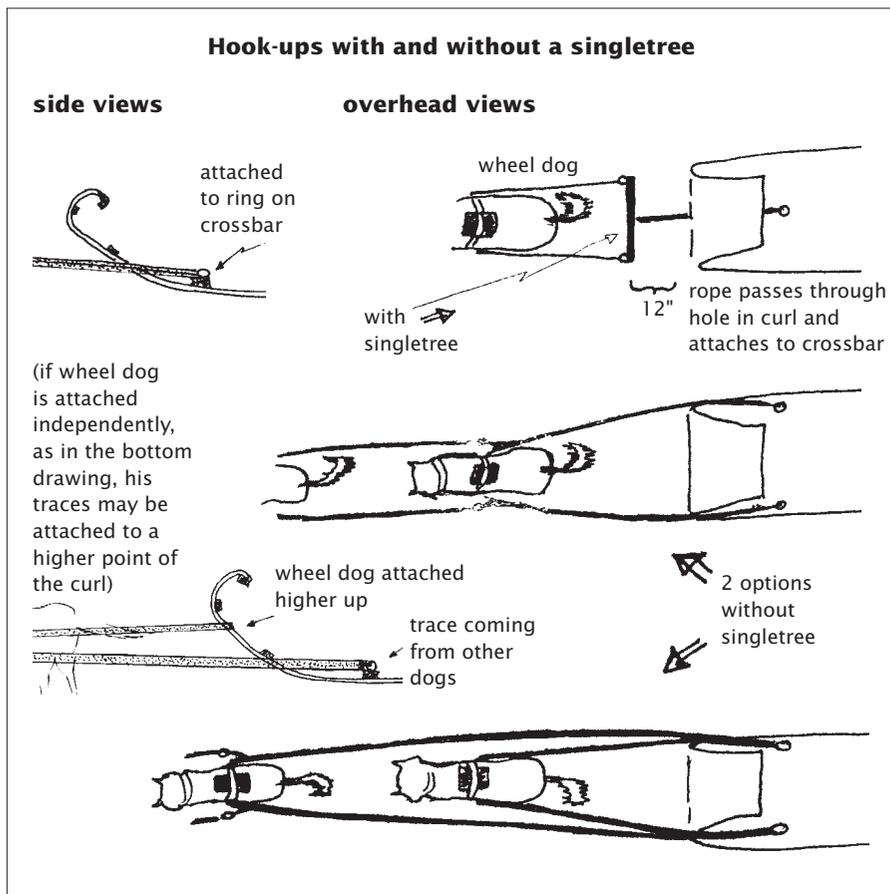
Following the Indians' pattern, we wired our curls to the top of the backboard. Then the sides were woven in with rope, tying the whole together like a suspension bridge. The toboggan could flex and snake along a trail, but each spot was supported to keep it from bending too far. A canvas or moosehide tarp laid out and fastened to both wires formed a basket into which the cargo was placed. Moosehide is much more durable than cotton canvas, but there was synthetic canvas called *polyduck* which was almost as tough as hide.

### Weaving side ropes, tarp, plywood and cargo boxes



### Stress/wear points and Marsha's leaf-spring design





Toboggans built in pre-plastic days were usually 7/8" thick, though they became thinner with use. A few trappers told us the Teslin toboggans were best after a few seasons, when the wood had *loosened* and there was more flex in the base. Checking out retired toboggans, wear was most obvious in two places: from the backboard to the tail (beneath the musher's weight), and where the upsweep starts. We reinforced our toboggans at these points to compensate for the thinness of our oak planks. By doubling the boards at these stress points we had the stiffness comparable to a well worn-in heavy toboggan. Where we strengthened the upsweep, it was important to leave in the flexibility, so we used a leaf-spring system Marsha devised after the first few crashes. The reinforcing boards were left to slide through channels in the crossbars. On impact, these inside boards absorbed and dissipated much of the shock.

The finishing touch to the complicated construction was attaching the dogs' harness-

ing to the curl. Musers seemed to be divided into many schools of thought on this matter. If the dogs were to be run in siwash harnesses off a single towline, the line was usually passed through a hole near the base of the curl, and fastened to a ring on a crossbar. The dog closest to the curl (the wheel dog) may or may not have been hooked directly to the top of the curl, depending on the musher's preference.

If the dogs were in the tandem freight harnesses we were using, there were at least three options. There could be a singletree spreader bar behind the wheel dog, from which a single rope or chain passes through a hole in the curl; or the wheel dog's traces could be extended to pass on either side of the curl, hooking onto a crossbar about where the upsweep starts; or the traces from the rest of the team could bypass the wheel dog whose traces attached independently to the curl. We tried a few different ways and didn't notice very much difference. It would have been interesting to know how the wheel dogs themselves rated the options.

Whatever hook-up was used, all mushers we spoke to agreed the wheel dog must be close to the curl to help steer. *His back leg, if extended, can almost touch the curl* was how one trapper measured the distance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



## BRUCE T. BATCHELOR

**B**ruce Batchelor came to the Yukon in 1973, planning to stay just long enough to earn money for a trip to Europe. Instead, he fell in love with the wilderness and its people, and stayed for most of the next eight years. He has written three books about his stay in the North.

Marsha McGillis, heroine of *Nine Dog Winter*, agreed to marry him in 1983. Their son Dan was born in 1992. They live in Victoria, B.C., with a white lab-husky cross named Tyhee Too in honour of the Tyhee in this story.

Bruce and Marsha own Agio Publishing House, where he edits and directs marketing, while Marsha designs the books and Dan takes photos.

*Photo above: Bruce Batchelor with dog team on the old Dawson Stage Road, beside a carved wooden milepost.*

*"A real page turner. I couldn't wait to see what was around the next bend in the trail as I raced through this delightful read. An instant classic about Canada's North as experienced by two plucky southerners."*

— David Pettigrew, filmmaker, adventurer and sourdough

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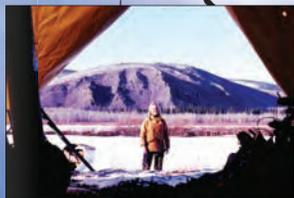
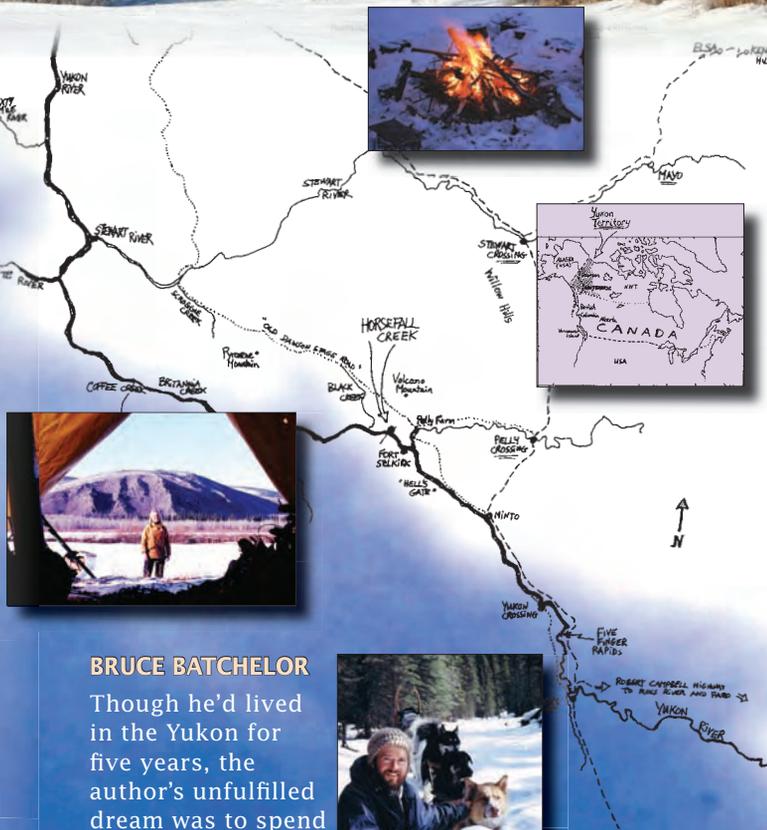
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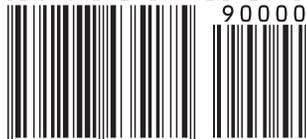
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## BRUCE BATCHELOR

Though he'd lived in the Yukon for five years, the author's unfulfilled dream was to spend a winter in a remote wilderness cabin with a woman he loved, training dog teams and making long expeditions. When he teamed up with backcountry ranger Marsha McGillis in 1980, the (mis)adventures could begin!



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