

HISTORY & CULTURE

THE LAND BETWEEN

The History Behind the Hudson Bay Quest

There is a reason they call the land between Churchill, Manitoba and Arviat, Nunavut the 'barrenlands'. Only a few miles north of the Churchill, the treeline sputters and coughs to a halt and only snow and rock remains. The horizon is broken by the occasional esker or rocky ridge; defined by the shadows of endless snowdrifts, shaped sharp and hard by the north winds.

There is little traffic these days, only bombardiers or CAT trains making the trip from Churchill back north, plodding supply runs for the ever-growing number of mining exploration camps in the Kivalliq. At other times, high-powered snowmobiles dragging komatiks make the trip to Churchill to load up on 'supplies' as well. Either way, this is not a place where people spend much time, it is a means to an end rather than the end itself.

But, at one time, this 'land between' was active, dog teams criss-crossed this territory carrying a rugged breed of men who trapped and hunted and traveled here in the winters. They worked hard checking traplines, tending to their dogs and just existing.

It started through the late 1920s and into the 30s, there was a buzz around Churchill. It was to be a grand northern seaport, a window to the world but, most importantly, a place to make money.

At that time, Churchill was a true frontier town. There was even a saying, 'There ain't no law of God nor



man goes north of 53°.' Of course, as with most things, the government tried to ignore what most northerners knew.

Orderly development was to be the slogan for the 'new' town of Churchill and no 'shoestring businesses' would be allowed. There were to be permits for all people and business owners entering Churchill, growth would be controlled and sustained. Churchill would be no 'boom town', it would not 'grow up in the haphazard way of the traditional pioneer town'.

Men arrived in Churchill to work for the National Harbours Board or as labourers building the railway. Others came in as crewmen aboard Hudson's Bay Company supply schooners, such as the Fort Severn or Fort York. Carl B. Johnson walked the final miles into Churchill, the railway still not completed. Angus MacIvor, despite having all of his belongings burnt in Gillam, still negotiated his way on board the Bayline, the first non-Port employee to do so. His profession was trapping, pure and simple.

While some found Churchill to be a wasteland and left and others still took their money and returned to work the family farm, a few stayed to carve out a life as trappers in this northland.

Much of this traffic came and went from the Churchill Hudson's Bay Company Post and T. Riddoch's Post, an independent trader, both set up on the west side of the Churchill River. Riddoch would keep a list of trappers out on the land, checking their names as they came back in the spring or around Christmas. Today, the Hudson Bay Quest starts across the river from Riddoch's, the trail coming up on the west shore near where his post once stood.

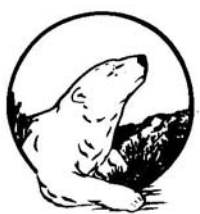
There was another Hudson's Bay Company post up at Nunalla, the halfway point between Churchill and Arviat, at that time a Roman Catholic mission. Inland from Arviat, another post at Maguse River was operated by Oscar and Palmi Sigurdson, two trappers based out of the Churchill area.

Maguse River is inland from present-day Arviat, but back in those days was the closest point to reach the Padlirmiut, the Inuit living and trapping in that area. It was a post used both by the Inuit in their traditional lands and the trappers operating along the future border of Nunavut and Manitoba. It was a bustling place in those days, with the Philip Kigusiutnak, the eldest musher competing in the Quest, grew up at Maguse River.

South from Maguse River, the next post was Nunalla. Originally established by the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1920s, its aim was to tap into the Inuit trade of arctic foxes. Throughout the winter, dog teams would visit to trade; in the summer, the Inuit would travel south by kayak while HBC supply schooners would arrive from the south. It was on the HBC ship, Fort Severn, that Ed Batstone discovered Nunalla. Each summer after that, he and his dogs would be dropped off on the last ship of the year.

Eventually, Ed would take over Nunalla and use it as a base from which to trap along the coast of Hudson Bay. He would travel this route by dogteam regularly, sometimes just coming down to Churchill for the Christmas square dance. It seems he was known as much as a good dancer as he was a hard-nosed trapper. Two checkpoints, Nunalla and Caribou River to the south, were part of Batstone trapping area.

There were a host of characters in those days. Dave Lundie kept a trapline north of Churchill, travelling by dogteam throughout this area. Coming across another trapper's sled tracks, he was known to turn his lead dog, Boublack, and follow the trail,



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sometimes for a day until he caught up with the other trapper. At that point, he would hop off his sled, stopping the other trapper just to say 'hello' and have some tea. They might spend the day together, catching up and comparing seasons, until Dave packed up and headed off into the distance.

Charles Schweder, trapping out of Nueltin Lake, recounted the trapping lifestyle in Gerry Dunning's 'When the Foxes Ran'. 'Up north, it never mattered what time of day it was, where you were or where you were going when you met someone. We lived by the rule of thumb that you stopped right there and made camp. We weren't a people to just shake hands and say bye, bye. We always pulled into the nearest bush and made camp. It didn't matter what the person was - white, Chipewyan (Dene) or Inuit. You'd enjoy an evening together, even in sign language, then part ways in the morning.'

There were others out there, Edward (Fat) Kronlund, Windy Smith, Fritz Oftedal, Charles Schweder and Mike Schweder, the Bucholtz Brothers, Gerry Kent, George Lush to name a few. John Voisey, Cliff Cochrane, Chevy Guitar and Bob Hickey trapped to the north, up in what is now Nunavut.

At Christmas, men would travel, sometimes days at a time, to come in to town for the square dance. This was a big event, accordions and violins and

people! By Christmas, the first of the fox run was over and winter settled in, temperatures too cold for good trapping, better for dancing.

In an interview with the Taiga times, Palmi Sigurdson remembered the early days, 'In the winter, we'd go across the river by dog team. There used to be good dances. The orchestra wasn't much but it was good. The trappers would come in for the dances and have a good time.'

Those who stayed out on the trapline would visit the nearest neighbour, maybe 25 miles away. They would get together to have Christmas dinner (often a caribou roast), play cards or gather around the radio.

Those still out on the land would get together too, sharing some tobacco and brandy before getting back to the line the next day. Trappers were a friendly lot but you had to take care not to overstay your welcome, you would always stop for tea or spend the night if it was late in the day, but in the morning you would head your separate ways.

There was a loose camaraderie in those days. There were no registered traplines, not really any rules at all actually, and no one there to enforce them even if there were. Still, each trapper had their 'line' and while trappers crossed another's territory at times, there was always a kind of unspoken distance. After all, you had

to be self-sufficient and when the going got tough, it was better to be on your own, knowing that you could rely on your own skills.

When blizzards hit, sometimes for three or more days at a time, you just waited them out. Some read books, others wrote in their journal and still others carved or simply caught up on little tasks. One trapper of note, Henry 'Windy' Smith, when snowed in by a blizzard, would move his camp every couple days regardless, even just a few feet. Each in their own way dealt with the weather; more importantly, fending off cabin fever.

To them, this journey was just another part of life, akin to a modern day trip to Wal-Mart in Thompson. Trappers were a rare breed. In their book, 'Churchill on Hudson Bay', the MacIvers describe the trapping lifestyle. 'In the north each day is etched separately on a man's memory. No two days bring the same combination of weather and circumstances. Always there is something new to see, experience and conquer. In this occupation, more than any other, a man is his own master. He plans and works out his own destiny.'

For a long while, this was true. The North was relatively immune from the depression. As the stock market crashed, the price for Arctic Fox stayed relatively stable, tumbling from \$50 per pelt to \$30 but as the prices for basic goods also plummeted, allowing trappers to make a decent living.

When the white fox market finally fell out and foxes were only \$5 per pelt, many of these men came in to Churchill to settle, many getting work at the Fort Churchill army base. Some came out well, others didn't. George Lush had saved about \$12,000 (the equivalent purchasing power of \$100,000 today) when he quit while Fritz Oftedal had only \$400 to show for the years. Regardless of the money, many kept to the trapping lifestyle, heading out each fall to the trapline, even if it was now as much of a habit as a living.

In 'When the Foxes Ran', Batstone sums up the draw of trapping. 'The beauty I found with trapping was that you were your own boss and if you did catch a load of fur, you never had to worry about the wages you'd make in the summer'

For some, it was a family lifestyle, like farming, a tradition handed down from their fathers. For others, it was a way to carve out a living in the depression era, a chance to get established through the simple means of hard work. Whatever the reason, for better or worse, these men experienced a freedom, of the likes, we will not see again.

-prepared by Kelsey Eliasson
Sources: 'Where the Foxes Ran' by Gerry Dunning, 'Churchill, North of 58', compiled by the Churchill Ladies' Club and 'Churchill on Hudson Bay' by Angus and Bernice MacIver.



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