Newspapers.com by Ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/37273610

MAGAZINE SECTION

The Winnipeg Evening Tribune

MAGAZINE SECTION

WINNIPEG, SATURDAY, JANUARY 24, 1931

Load Enough for Charley

By S. H. HOWARD

An old-time palisade at Moose Factory

EVERY school boy knows by the map the configuration of Hudson Bay and James Bay.

Generations of school boys have marked a dot labelled Moose Factory on their maps, and wondered what kind of a factory it was and what kind of people lived there. That dot on the map has been in place for nearly 260 years, but very few people in the world know anything more about it. The number of living Canadians who have been to Moose Factory is so few they might constitute themselves an exclusive fraternity.

Moose Factory is a big fur-trading post. Once it was a fort as well. When the old fort was still standing, the southeast bastion reached out across the grass-court one sees today, flush with the blacksmith shop.

The old fort is long since gone, but the blacksmith shop is there yet, as it has been for 100 years, a building of squared logs, white-washed outside and mellow with age and smoke within.

Coal to Newcastle

This is the shop where the Indians of the Moose river basin first saw the black stones burning in the fire of the forge. And knowing where there were similar black stones, they re-named the portage on the Abitibi "Blacksmith Rapids." Last year 60,000,000 tons of lignite coal were blocked out at Blacksmith Rapids and the immediate neighborhood—100 miles inland from Moose Factory. Yet the coal William Moore burns in the forge today comes from thousands of miles overseas.

In the dim mellow light of the low log building, lit by its little square-paned windows, with its forge and bellows, and its anvil on the worn flag-stoned area in the centre of the floor, the old Moose Factory blacksmith let his eyes gaze wistfully into the shadows, his mind busy with memories of the fur trade in the hey-day of its prime, when he, too, lived in the glory of his youthful strength.

Everywhere within that little interior were reminders of the colorful life of the fur trade — inland still in conscious sense remote from the civilization that is eating into the wilderness so rapidly from the south. Old flint lock guns, long since past repair; broken steel traps, axe heads, pieces of heavy chain, an old-fashioned copper kettle, bars of rusty iron, hammers and heavy tools, old snowshoes—the litter and accumulation of a century.

Big Birch Bark Canoes

"We could have brought coal down from Blacksmith Rapids by canoe, I suppose," said he. "We knew it was there. But it was easier to bring it from England by the ship. We got everything we wanted that way in the old days."

"And you supplied wide areas of the north from here," I suggested.

"Everything that came into the country came by way of Moose Factory one time," replied Mr. Moore. "Later the company established a distributing depot at Charlton island out in the James bay. They have deeper water there for the big ships. They lost a ship at the mouth of Moose river and so they lighter everything for the James bay posts from Charlton island now in the small schooners. We never see the tall masts of the English ships at Ships' Hole any more. And they're using steamers to bring the English goods."

"Do you remember the big birch bark canoes that used to take the supplies up the rivers and come down with the fur?" I asked.

"Remember them! Yes!" exclaimed Mr. Moore. "And travelled in them, too. We don't use them at Moose Factory now. It's nothing but canvas-covered canoes we see here now. The bark canoes are almost gone. They use them on the Quebec side, that's all—Mistassini and up that way."

Even the Indians at Moose, I noted, are using canvas canoes now. And many of them have a gasoline "kicker" in the stern.

"They used to bring all the furs from Canada down the rivers running into the James bay—before the railways came. It was a fine sight to see the fur brigades come down," recalled the old man; "a whole fleet of them, paddling their best to see who'd come first to the landing."

Breath of Old "Canada"

The old blacksmith used the word "Canada" in the sense of the day when Canada consisted of Ontario and Quebec, and Western Canada was Prince Rupert's Land. Time has gone by, with its revolutions and changes, but the consciousness of Moose Factory old-timers has not been much disturbed.

"There were some fine canoes at Moose Factory in those days," I suggested.

"Plenty of them," agreed the blacksmith. "But the best canoes came from the inland posts. They made some fine bark canoes at Abitibi. We had no birch trees big enough to make such canoes down here at Moose. We made flat scows, and York boats and schooners, but the big freight canoes came from up above. They had a master canoe-builder at Abitibi named John King. He made the finest canoes I ever saw—five fathom, five and a half, six fathom—the kind with the high carved hoods at the bow and the stern—rabiskaw canoes, they called them. Built as trim as straight and as smooth as a ship carpenter's job.

"They carried big loads on the portages sometimes, those canoemen, when they were freighting supplies—in the old days, I mean.

"Sometimes when they were racing," admitted Mr. Moore, "two hundred pounds was the regular pack for a man to carry—two hundred to two hundred and fifty. A bag of flour with a keg of sugar on top would be 250. Four men carried the big canoes on the portages. And a terrible load it was, too, on some of the rough ones."

"There's hardly a whole man to be found in the Rupert's House band — broken under the big canoes. Rupert is a very rough river. It's all falls and rapids and rough, rocky portages. They've cut a winter road to the posts above in there since the old days and do most of their freighting by a snow tractor in the winter time these last few years. It has what they call caterpillar wheels and runs by a gasoline motor engine."

Seven Bags of Flour

Later I saw this evidence of modernity at Moose Factory. They said it pulls a train of several sleigh loads around the shore ice of the bay to Rupert's House and then by a ninety-mile road through the bush to Nemiska, a H B C post tributary to Moose Factory.

"I've heard of bigger loads than 250 pounds going on a man's back," I prompted.

"I was never much for carrying a big load myself," replied Mr. Moore modestly. "Three hundred was enough for me as a general thing."

"Did you ever hear of heavier loads than that?"

"Oh, yes," replied the Moose Factory blacksmith.

Charley McCaulay, the big half-breed mate of the Hudson's Bay Company's schooner Severn, came in at this point.

"I've seen a man carry seven hundred," said Charley. "My brother-in-law, Andrew Mark, carried seven bags of flour—and I've done it myself," he added calmly.

Charley is a man of some 220 pounds, with a round barrel-like body and a powerful bull neck.

"How did you pile them on?" I asked.

I had heard legends of even heavier loads, but a 500-pound claimant—in the actual flesh—was my record to date.

"I tied three bags together on a pack strap," said Charley, "and hung them by a tump line on my back. Then I had two others piled crossways on top of them, resting partly on my shoulders, and I took one bag under each arm."

"How far did you go under that load?"

"About twenty-five yards. I felt it in my legs, that's all. But that's nothing. There was a man at Nipigon—a Scotch half-breed—carried 900 pounds." Other instances followed.

Two Broken Ankles

There was a big French-Indian at Abitibi who carried 900 pounds of shot in bags up the steps from the landing at Fort Temiscamingue. There was another man, of only medium size, who carried 900 pounds across a short portage, but when he stepped in the loose sand at the beach landing his feet turned under him and he sank under his load with two broken ankles. He was no more use on the portage the remainder of that season.

That evening after supper we gathered in the big store at the large box stove under the light of a coal oil lamp suspended from the ceiling. The walls were lined with shelves containing Indian trade goods. Racks of rifles and shot guns ranged around supporting posts. Snowshoes of all sizes hung in the dim light on the farther partition—the Cree snowshoes with the up-curving pointed toes, beautifully made, filled with caribou webbing and decorated with red wool tassels.

The talk turned on wolves.

"Are there many wolves around James bay?" I asked.

"Quite a few, but they are terrible hard to catch," said the old blacksmith. "They were more plentiful when the caribou were here."

Wolf Cleverest Animal

It was the consensus that the wolf was the cleverest animal in the country. The coast wolves were bigger than the timber wolves.

"Did you ever hear of wolves attacking a man down this way?" I asked.

"No," said Mr. Moore.

"No," said Mr. McLeod, the carpenter.

"No," said Charley McCaulay. "I've seen as many as twenty or thirty in a band," said Charley. "Bigger than husky dogs. When there are plenty of caribou there are plenty of wolves. I killed twelve wolves in one hole. Pups, they were. Knocked their heads with a stone."

"What do wolves live on?"

"Anything they can get."

"Will wolves tackle a moose?"

"Six wolves can kill a moose," affirmed Charley.

"Wolves will follow the dogs," said Mr. Moore. "That's a way they have. They're curious. They'll follow in your sleigh tracks for a long ways. But they won't give you a good shot if they think you've got a gun. If they see you take a gun from the sleigh they run into the bush. They are far wiser than foxes.

"I was travelling with a dog team along the coast to Fort George. A wolf began to follow me, keeping quite a piece back. I had a rifle on the load of the sleigh. I don't often carry a gun on a trip but I had one this time, as it happened. But I knew if I picked it up he would dodge out of sight. So I waited till I came to a point on the shore.

"As soon as I got around the point I got my gun off the sled. I let the dogs go straight on alone, and sat down at the edge of the bush a little way round the point. Soon the wolf came trotting past the end of the point following the sleigh track, and I shot him before he saw me. He measured six feet from tail to nose."

Trapping A Wolf

Another instance of outwitting the wolf was given by Charley McCaulay. A wolf was following in his snowshoe track but safely at a distance. Charley carried no rifle. He set a trap in his trail and left it there under the snow, circling around to wait for the wolf to come along and step into it.

The wolf, however, was wary. He went around the trap and continued up the trail. Charley picked up the trap and tried again a while later. This time he was careful not to use his bare hands. He looped back in his track and pushed the trap under the snow where the wolf would walk, with a pole. He walked off into the bush and waited.

This time the wolf's curiosity led him to investigate the disturbance in the snow made by the pole, and as the scent of man was weak this time, his caution failed him. He stepped on the hidden trap over which the snow had not been disturbed, and was caught. "He was a big black fellow," said Charley. "He must have weighed 150 pounds."

Charley killed him with the axe.

Dangerous Huskies

"Tell me," I said, "do husky dogs ever attack anybody?"

"You have to watch them," said Mr. McLeod.

"There was a fine team of huskies at Port Severn," related Mr. Moore. "The wife of the post-master believed in kindness to animals. She always treated the dogs kindly. One hot day in the summer she was walking across the yard at the back of the post with her sleeves rolled up.

One of the huskies stood up on his hind legs to be patted, and his claws accidently scratched her bare arm and drew blood. At the smell of it the dog went crazy. He jumped for her throat and knocked her down. In one second the whole pack was on her, tearing her to pieces. Her husband came out and drove them off with a club. She lived two days."

"The kindest way to treat a husky is with a club," remarked the half-breed mate.

Nevertheless I can testify that I saw huskies at Moose Factory living on civilized terms with the community, and apparently deserving of the kindly treatment they were receiving.

"How many miles can a dog team travel in a day?" I asked.

"It depends upon the dogs and the snow," said Mr. Moore.

"And the shodding," added Mr. McLeod.

"And the man," added Charley.

"What do you mean by shodding—the iron?"

"No. Over the iron we put a layer of muskeg mud, shaped half round, and freeze it hard," explained Mr. Moore. "Then we smooth it off with a carpenter's plane. After that we sprinkle water on it and freeze a glaze over it. This shodding is so smooth it leaves no mark on the snow. Along the coast here the wind packs the crust almost as hard as ice."

"Doesn't this shodding chip or break off?"

"Only in mild weather. We might get warm sunshine in March and April. Then this shodding is apt to melt soft and come off. So in the early spring, if the weather gets too warm in the middle of the day, we lay up for a few hours, travelling later in the evening and earlier in the morning."

"With good going in cold weather, with a team of ten dogs on the crust of the coast, I've known a team to do over 100 miles in a day. But 50 or 60 is enough."

"Do you usually hitch as many as ten dogs to a team?"

Number in a Team

"The H.B.C. teams are usually ten dogs. The Indians drive anything from two to eight. On the coast we hitch them fanned out, Eskimo style, each dog on a separate trace, the leader twenty feet ahead. In the bush we hitch them single file, because the snow is soft and deep, and they travel in the snowshoe track. The traces are made of seal or walrus hide. A raw seal hide is stronger than tanned leather. But you have to take care of it or the dogs will eat it."

"The Eskimos are great lads with the dog whip," remarked Charley. "They have a seal hide lash about 20 or 30 feet long, with an eight-inch wooden handle two and a half inches thick. The snap on the end has a terrible power. I've seen an Eskimo hit the side of a house and split a clapboard. I've seen one of them clip off a dog's ear. I've seen them take a piece of hide out. They can pick out any dog in the team they want to with the end of that whip."

"How much do you put on the sleds?"

"The load for ten dogs would average one thousand pounds."

"Yes," assented Charley, "and with good hard snow on the level ice I've seen fifteen hundred, many a time."

"Tamarac or birch or any hard wood is better than iron for sleigh runners," said McLeod. "Spruce and pine splinter. Salt water lime sticks to iron. Nothing sticks to ivory. The Eskimos make ivory shodding that doesn't leave a mark in the snow. They make it out of walrus tusks. They fit the pieces and set them to the runners with wooden pins.

"It takes patience, but the Huskies have plenty of that. They used to get along without the white man's tools, but they have planes, spoke-shaves, hammers and other such tools now."

Chief Factor Arrives

They told of a gang of Eskimos which had been hired to help build a house for the company on one of the arctic islands.

"They had never used white man's tools before hardly, but it took them no time to learn. They put up that building just as quick as a gang of white carpenters would do it, and the work was well done, too."

Mr. Moore stopped to light his pipe with a match.

"There's something we didn't have in the old days," said he, holding up the burnt end. "There were no matches in my young days. We used fire steels and flints. We made the steels in the blacksmith shop. The Indians used to make fire with a bow and drill, a dry log and some touchwood tinder.

"But an Indian hunter never stopped to make a fire in the day time. He carried a tea pail just as a man carries a dinner pail to work, up in Canada. He'd hunt all day without a mouthful of food. At night he'd make his fire in the snow, spread some brush, boil his kettle of snow water and cook some meat, or whatever he had. They generally ate the animals they caught in their traps. The Indians of the old times didn't need much to get along."

"Why didn't Indians enjoy the warmth and comfort of wearing some of the fur they caught?" I asked.

"Fur is not so good as blanket cloth and duffel," replied Mr. Moore. "It won't stand the wet so well, and it won't stand drying out. An Indian might wear a fur cap sometimes. But that's about all the fur he'll use except rabbit skins. Rabbit skins make the warmest blankets. They cut them in strips and roll these strips into ropes, with the fur out. Then they weave into these a loose kind of a netting. You can stick your fist through a rabbit skin blanket any place, but the rabbit fur closes up the spaces and holds the warmth better than anything else."

Their Law Giver

"The Indians can make themselves comfortable in winter," said Mr. McLeod. "I believe it goes harder with them in summer than in winter. They have to fight flies and mosquitoes in summer. And they are often soaked in the rain. But in cold weather they are dry anyway."

The doors opened abruptly and Mr. West, district superintendent for the Moose Factory district, entered attended by an orderly officer with a lantern over his arm. All the Hudson's Bay servants rose to their feet in respectful attention. This was the "chief factor" under the old title. And the chief factor's word was—and still is, as far as I could see—law throughout James bay.

"I want you to ring the bell tomorrow," he said to Mr. Moore after a direct glance, eye to eye, with each of us in turn.

"Yes, sur," acknowledged Mr. Moore. "I will see to that. Yes, sur. Very good, sur."

Moore's tone was that of simple, lifelong respect for authority.

Every week-day morning at 7 o'clock, eastern standard time by chronometer — as checked nowadays by radio—the Moose Factory bell in its little belfry over the carpenter shop, rings to call the H.B.C. men to their work. It rings again at noon, and again at 1 o'clock and once again at 5 p.m. It is the responsibility of the post foreman to ring that bell, and he had been sent away to Albany on a trip. Mr. Moore would now cheerfully assume the responsibility.

"Good night, all," said the district superintendent with military brevity, again looking directly at each of us in turn.

"Good night, sir," returned we all. It was the Boss.

Indians Are Law-Abiding

"I've known quite a few bosses in my time at Moose," said Mr. Moore after the door had closed. "I mind old Dave McKenzie. He was one of the roaring kind, but a kind man at heart.

"One time I was taking him out by the winter road to Temiscamingue. That's a three weeks' trip. He used to ride all day on the sleigh, wrapped up warm. And I'd break the trail on snowshoes. And at night he'd say, 'Are you tired, Willie?'

"'Yes, sur, I am,' I'd tell him.

"'Well, it's a strange thing, but I don't feel the least bit tired,' he'd say—and him riding all day on the sleigh!

"But he was a good old man, for all his swearing," said McLeod.

"Yes, and he said his prayers every night," said Mr. Moore, earnestly. "'Willie,' said he to me one night, 'you please me in nearly every way, better than any other man I've been out with. You handle the dogs well, you make good time on the road, and you are handy at making camp and cooking and all like of that. But there's one thing—'

"'And what's that?' says I.

"'Every night before I go to bed I kneel down,' he says, 'and I thank my Maker for bringing me through the day. And I think it only right,' he says, 'that you should do the same. But,' he says, 'I am sorry to see that you don't do it.'

"I thanked him," said the Moose Factory blacksmith simply, "and I did as he said. And I have done so ever since."

Bible in Cree

There's an Anglican church at Moose Factory, and Mr. Moore sometimes conducts the service there in the absence of a clergyman. The prayer book and the Bible on the altar are printed in the Cree syllabic types invented by Missionary Evans years ago, and now in general use among the Canadian tribes.

"Are the Indians here good church-goers?" I asked.

"Pretty good," said Mr. Moore. "They are mostly Church of England at Moose and the east side of the bay. The bishop used to be stationed here — the Bishop of Moosonee—but his headquarters is in Cochrane now. There's more work for him up there, I guess. He makes a trip down here and around the bay every summer, and marries any couples that may be waiting."

"Are the Indians law-abiding?"

"Mostly," said Mr. Moore.

"The company don't interfere with the Indians much so long as the law-breaking is among themselves," observed Charley. "There's more murders among the Huskies (Eskimos) than among the Indians. Harold Vdegarner, a Norwegian half-breed, was sent from Moose to Whale river as a servant for the company. He's still there. He told me he kept track of the Husky murders since 1884. There's been 47 murders among Huskies since he was there— quarrelling generally about their wives. Seems to be always getting mixed up in women's affairs, somehow or other."

"Are the Indians good to their children?" I asked.

"Yes, too good. They are apt to spoil them," said Mr. Moore.

"I was in a camp where they had a rabbit tied with a string, and the baby sat there trying to hit it with a club. Every time the baby hit it they all laughed. They have no feeling for animals that way."

At the mission I photographed the Indian farmer's son with his husky dog. The boy was a bronze cherub with coal black hair as thick and virile as that upon the neck of his dog.

"Magwetch" (thanks)," said I when I had finished.

"Magwetch," said the boy in turn to his dog. He released his grip on the husky's collar and fetched him a substantial kick in the ribs with the toe of his brass-toed mission boot. The dog apparently took his affectionate dismissal as a matter of course, so I judged the incident typical.

"It's bred into them," said Mr. Moore. "They're cruel from childhood and think nothing of it. Cruel for pleasure sometimes. They don't feel like white people about animals."

"Tell me," I said after a while, "did you ever hear of any cases of cannibalism?"

The men looked at each other in silence.

"There was a boy at Rupert's House one winter while I was there," began Mr. Moore after a thoughtful pause. "He was queer. He was the last of Peter Wabinaw's family. He was living with his aunt. One day she came to Donald McTavish, the factor, and told him she was afraid of the boy. He had been living with her for a month in the same tent with her children. But he talked so queer of what had happened to his father and mother, and his brothers, she was afraid of him. And Donald McTavish had to send him back to East Main river."

The old man paused. It was a horrible story. The caribou had failed. The family had gone to their winter trapping grounds with two weeks supply of store provisions, expecting to live on caribou all winter. But the caribou didn't come. They cached their goods and went further inland, looking for the caribou. Every night they camped hungry. At last they were starving. But they pushed on, day after day, in desperate hope of finding the migrating herds which would supply them for the winter with meat.

A Gruesome Story

"They always used to eat the animals caught in their traps," said Mr. Moore. "But they had left their traps behind at the cache to hunt caribou. They were travelling on snowshoes. They had come a long piece by now, and they had no food left at all. The caribou hadn't come down—not one. And they haven't come down from that day to this. Where they have gone nobody knows. No Indians on the east coast get caribou any more. And they used to live on them.

"Well, Wabinaw and his four boys and his woman all were starving, and the weakest of them died, until only the father and a grown son and the boy were left."

Mr. Moore looked at me very earnestly, and Mr. McLeod, the carpenter, shook his head, his eyes on the floor.

"After they had finished the ones who died, they were starving again. And the father told the two sons what to do. So they killed him, and ate him, too."

A Mind Deranged

There was a great deal more detail to this horrible story. The little boy had finally, in terror of what might happen to himself, shot his brother through the tent and ran away. He was found by an Indian family who came upon his snowshoe tracks and rescued him. But his mind was deranged when they brought him down to the post in the spring. Everyone shrank from him in horror.

"He got over it at last, and grew up to be a man," concluded Mr. Moore. "He was sent to the post at Mistassini and got married there."

"Aye," agreed Mr. McLeod, "but he is dead and gone now. He was sailing on Nemiska lake in a mid-size canoe with the company's inspector, who had his wife and two children with him—and two canoemen. A squall upset the canoe, and the eldest girl and the two canoemen were drowned. He was one of them—Peter Wabinaw's son."

"Peter Wabinaw's family are all gone," sighed Mr. Moore. "The sister at Rupert's House is dead and gone, too."

Tragedy mixes with comedy in the north country as elsewhere in the world. The old-timers at Moose Factory have seen plenty of both.

Bogus Pilot Steals Plane

Posing as a flying instructor, a well-dressed man took the son of a rich merchant to the aerodrome at Hargrave Park, Sydney, Australia, and obtained an aeroplane by means of forged credentials and a faked telephone conversation. After an unsuccessful attempt to start one of the machines, the impostor and his unwitting pupil climbed into another plane and started for Katoombia. After flying for a few miles the machine crashed, but the occupants escaped injury. The bogus pilot then proceeded calmly to hire a motor truck, telling the driver to take the wrecked machine back to the aerodrome, remarking that the flying club would pay the charges. Then he said "good-bye" to his astonished pupil and disappeared.

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.
Powered by Newspapers.com