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“Tracking” Up the Bear River

BY WILLIS HEATH PROCTOR

Photographs by the Author

A Cross Between a Nightmare of an Erie Canal Mule and a Trip Through the Whirlpool Rapids

LAST summer I took what I had, in my Chechako mind, considered as a pleasure trip; or at least a journey in which pleasure might be combined with a little healthful exercise. Friend, beware of any pleasure or exercise or combination thereof that must be partaken of on the front end of a tracking line. Not even for two fried eggs would I again attach myself to a cordelle. That pleasure trip gradually chameleoned into a cross between a nightmare of an Erie canal mule and a trip through the Whirlpool Rapids in a birch-bark canoe.

I have hunted deer, and know that this means packing a nine pound blunderbuss about seventy miles per diem through rain, swamps, snow, etc., until you get lost, and then spending the remainder of your vacation finding your way out. I've fished for trout, and know that this includes getting up at four o'clock and fighting alders, willows, and black flies until you look like a piece of raw meat draped in ribbons, and then being pinched because the only trout in your basket measures but five and seven-eighths inches. Knowing all this, I still labored under the hallucination that tracking a York boat up Bear

River might be fun. Denny La Nauze says that “nothing is too hard for the Police”; but Bear River is no stream for tourists, and I feel it my bounden duty to warn any pleasure-seeking civilians against being lured into such a trip thinking that they are going to have the time of their young lives.

Bear River is that stream which connects Great Bear Lake with the Mackenzie River, which later flows into the Arctic Ocean. Its length is generally conceded to be in the neighborhood of one hundred miles, although I should estimate it at not less than two hundred and fifty miles up-stream, and approximately forty down. Then too, the distance varies proportionately with the draft of your boat.

To ascend the river you “track.” Tracking consists of tying yourself to one end of a long rope and your craft to the other, then fixing your eye on the next point up-stream and proceeding thence. Naturally the boat follows you if the bottom of the river isn't too near the surface of the water. In such a case you proceed into the water as far as may be necessary in order that the boat may float. Many variations may be introduced such as

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Kokolik, half Husky and half Kanaka, from Herschell Island, on his way to Hay River to go to school. Judging from his grin he has never been in school before

pushing, lifting, swimming, drowning, or sticking in the mud.

The party was what you might call mixed and consisted of three policemen, one priest, one trader, one trapper, one Eskimo with his wife and her daughter, two Indians, myself, and nine dogs. I believe the dogs enjoyed the trip. I sent my canoe ahead with the scow of freight belonging to the police party, which left several days before we did. Thus did I burn my bridges behind me, as it were.

Never again will I part from my canoe. A canoe is much more easily tracked than a York boat, and it was a craft such as the latter that we were blithely planning to track to Bear Lake in five or six days. At any rate it had once been a York boat. Of this I am positive, for I repeatedly heard the Inspector refer to it as “My York boat”; and it still retained the general lines of such a craft, being pointed at both ends.

I suppose it was a good boat all right except that it had a lot of holes and cracks in it, and what whole boards it had were so rotten that you had to wear snowshoes to keep from falling through into the water. However, the Inspector had it gone over and fixed up. There seemed to be some tar or pitch adhering to its bottom, probably from some previous overhauling when the owner still considered the boat seaworthy. With flaming birch bark the boys heated this substance until it thinned and ran enough to conceal the holes and cracks. Then they shoved the boat into the water and pronounced it water-tight. On the trip up the river, Arden spent much of his time in the water under, and on his knees, in the boat, hunting for those concealed holes and cracks with a chunk of tallow.

We finally got away from Fort Norman, Mackenzie River, N. W. Territory, one bright morning, without salt and one or two other little things, but in a cheerful frame of mind. As soon as we reached the current in Bear River, the Captain ordered a stop to get out the tracking line, tump straps, and to make tea.

The tea was a disappointment, owing to the fact that the acting cook laid out the grub on the smoky side of the fire. I unwittingly added to the discomfort by pouring water on the fire and raising a cloud of fine ashes which settled lightly on the butter. Thus ended my cheerful frame of mind. I don't remember being cheerful for some six weeks after.

When we had sharpened our teeth well on the bannock, the Captain divided us into gangs. That is he appointed Hib, my hunter, as steersman Ilavenirk, the Husky, as bowsman, and the remaining eight into two shifts to track, turn about.

When It Isn't Bad It's Worse

Thereupon began my experience in tracking a York boat up Bear River. I made numerous discoveries in the course of that first day. There are some mud banks on that river that ought to be charted. Somehow I drew the first place on the line and it became my job to detect such places first. I detected most of them about up to my waist.

There is much to break the monotony of tracking on this river. At times the channel leaves the shore and takes to the middle of the stream. At such places the trackers follow suit, and that Bear River water is cold. If it were any colder you could skate on it. Knee deep isn't bad, but when it gets up around your waist, it begins to hurt.

It is remarkable, though, how much of this one can stand. I believe no one in the party felt the effects much except the strain on the temper when some unfortunate received a ducking caused by slippery rocks. We discovered during the course of the day also that the York boat boasted a keel. Now I know I'm a landlubber, but I could never see the need of a keel on a boat that needs tracking. That keel seemed to stick on every rock in the river.

Higher up the keel wasn't so noticeable, and I imagine that when they pulled the boat out for the winter in

Dease Bay, they were sorely puzzled at finding the keel completely gone. I think you could easily trail our course up the river by bits of that keel sticking to rocks.

About seven-thirty we camped, and shortly afterwards it began to rain. I felt guilty; but no one seemed to blame me, which was a relief, for I firmly believe that if I hadn't been in the party it wouldn't have rained. Even if I had taken a tent we might have had fair weather. However the Captain had two tents, Hib and Ilavenirk each had one, and the two Indian boys had a waterproof tarpaulin, so we erected a young city on the bank and went to bed feeling very, very mouldy.

The second day the river was worse, and we made only five or six miles. Each tracking gang spent their "rest spell" mostly in the water lifting and pushing and cursing in three languages. That is to say all cursed except the Priest who was blessed with the evenest temper any man ever had. When we found ourselves on a gravel bar and talked of going around or making fire, Father would say "Never mind, we will go ahead," and then the trackers would dig in their toes, and we on the boat would lift, and Bump, Bump, Bang! the old hull would go over the bar and into deep water on the other side.

We were ready to camp early that night and did so at a point which Arden described as the only good camping place for some distance. His good camping place sloped into the river at an angle of about forty-five degrees. Now I've done some camping and slept in some queer places, but I was certainly interested to know how we were going to sleep on that side hill.

I awaited developments, and soon saw the boys digging into the bank; so I proceeded to hew myself a grave in the hill, having the presence of mind to use someone else's axe. It looked like a clear night and the mosquitoes were bad; so we stretched our mosquito bars instead of tents.

It was necessary to chain all the

dogs up at night so that they couldn't get into the boat and eat the grub. This particular night I chained mine to one of the mosquito bar stakes and retired. Not so with the dog, however. It's funny how a dog goes to bed. It is absolutely necessary for him to turn around three complete times before lying down. When he is chained to a peg this is an awkward operation and requires an intelligent beast and a calculating brain. My dog is intelligent all right, but he experienced some difficulty.

Good Advice to the Dog

I suggested to him that he revolve one and a half times and then reverse, thus completing the entire evolution without getting tangled up in the chain. He looked thoughtful and then tried it. However, when he reversed I think he stripped his gears, for he put one foot in my face and another through the top of the bar. The bar collapsed, and it was only by sharp work that I saved the whole outfit from rolling down that good camping place into the river. After rearranging the bar, I tied the dog to a nearby clump of willows.

In the night it rained as usual. Invariably when we put up the tents the night was clear, but when we slept under mosquito bars it always rained. One of the boys came to my bar and suggested that we get out a tent. However, I contended that I was then entirely wet, and moving into a tent would not protect me from the moisture I had already absorbed and I preferred to remain where I was.

I couldn't remember when I had ever been dry, and fully expected to be wet the remainder of the trip, so I was indifferent. Small torrents gushed merrily down our good camping place under and over me, and I fell asleep and dreamed I was again on the tracking line.

The next day being Sunday, we observed it by making a late start. We were beginning to be a rather dilapidated crew. One of the police had developed some interesting bunches



The Royal Northwest Mounted Police may dismount, but they are still police. Here the Bear Lake and Fort Norman patrols meet



Mission Priests' patrol from Bear Lake coming down to meet winter packet at Norman

on the soles of his feet which must have made life uninteresting for him; but being a policeman, he merely wrapped a few yards of duffle around them and said little. We lost one of the Indian boys here. He was employed by the Hudson's Bay Company at Norman, and had been sent with the party for a couple of days as a sort of a guide.

You see the "Company" once owned this river, so their men naturally know its peculiarities better than others. Anyway he said something about "steamboat wood," and putting his canoe into the water soon drifted out of sight below the next bend, which was undoubtedly the arrangement made previously with the Captain. He expected to reach Norman in two hours, a distance we had required two days to make with the York boat.

Strong for the Police

We made a start about nine-thirty, and found good tracking all day, making between fifteen and twenty miles. The Captain called a halt about four o'clock so that bannock could be baked, for we were out of bread. We camped on a broad grassy slope and the boys remembering the previous night's experience erected the tents. However, I felt certain that so long as the tents were up it wouldn't rain, and insisted on sleeping under a bar although the sky was cloudy.

Here one of the policemen did one of the things that make R. N. W. M. Policemen welcome in every shack in the North. I was feeling a little under the weather although in no way incapacitated, and perfectly able to make my own camp; but Wight, learning of it, took an axe and, leveling off a place, made my camp and stretched my bar without my knowledge. Wight was the man with feet so sore it must have been extremely painful to walk at all. Contact with men of his stamp is a privilege not frequently enjoyed.

The next day we again had our troubles working in the water and dragging the boat over gravel bars by

main strength. However, we reached George Martin's River, which is at the foot of a rapid seven miles long. We camped in a driving rain on a barren spot where there was no shelter or wood within half a mile. We pitched the tents and proceeded to dry out.

These rapids are hardly real rapids. The drop is considerable and the river is shallow, but they are nothing like the big rapids on the Athabasca River or the Slave. Four of the party loaded two canoes and went up to the head of the rapids the day we reached George Martin's River, and the following day took one more canoe load up. This lightened the load in the York boat considerably, and the third day we negotiated the rapids with it.

It was hard work, but not much worse than at other points on the river. The banks in the rapids are mainly sandstone in small rough pieces, and the wear on moccasins that day was more than on all the rest of the trip. These sandstone banks go through three or four pair of moccasins a day, and the sporting boots sold in the city last probably a day and a half.

The following day capped the climax. It was cold and cloudy, which made working in the water worse than ever because it was impossible to warm up when you came out. The river above the rapids is wider and hence shallower, and the channel is in the middle of the river, making it necessary to track in the water practically all the time.

This was the sixth day from Norman. I had planned to do the round trip within nine days, and we were less than two-thirds of the way to Bear Lake. Therefore I was somewhat relieved when about six o'clock in the evening we met a trapper on his way down to Norman to trade with me for his next winter's outfit. He agreed to wait for me at the Fort if I would be back within three days; so it was necessary to push on ahead of the York boat party with a canoe if I would see Bear Lake.

Borrowing a canoe from the Cap-

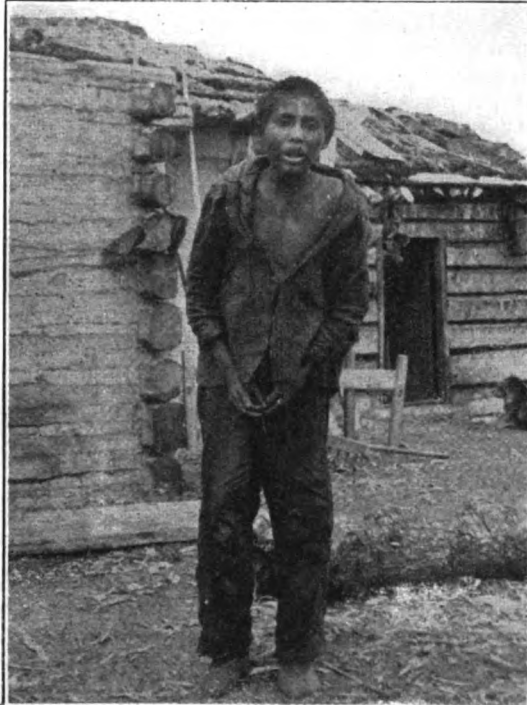
tain and taking Hib and one Indian, I started on immediately. About eight o'clock we caught up with the scow containing the police freight and my canoe. When we reached the camp some kind of a pow wow was in progress. Indians have many different kinds of pow wows, but they are all similar in that the main idea is to eat all they can hold.

Many Bear Lake Indians, hearing that the scow was *en route* in charge of “Goolay,” one of their own tribe, and that the

Bear Lake Indian and his home. The Kaiser has raised the price of clothing, am-

boat contained “le farie thlon,” and “le dee thlon,” i.e., plenty flour and plenty tea, had thrown what fish they had handy into canoes and gone forth to meet the scow. Hence the pow wow when they arrived.

I gained Goolay's attention long enough to inquire as to the present location of my canoe, as it wasn't to be seen, and that gentleman told me that it would be found some two miles farther up the river with plenty holes in it. I waxed wrathful, but Goolay worried not. It munition and nets. It affects even the Bear Lake Indians in the Arctic



Claylee and his family with their boss, B. Y. Fisherman. Taken on Bear Lake, July, 1915

was broken beyond repair, he said. They had been using it to relay freight over shallow water and had struck a stone. Thereupon he inquired into the condition of my tobacco pouch.

Goolay had been appointed captain of the scow and the position must have struck him rather heavily. So long as the scow still floated, a canoe or two broken up made little difference to him. Anxious to see the canoe, I pushed on for a distance until we reached the camp of two white trappers *en route* for Bear Lake with a schooner and some two tons of grub. They were Harry Harrison and his partner Sloane. Harrison hails from the last place he hung his hat, and Sloane originated in Kentucky, although not noticeably, for there was nothing on board in the line of liquid refreshment but tea.

These two boys were taking the schooner heavily loaded up the river without assistance except in the rapids. Ten men on the scow were making but little better time. They astonished the Indians by actually sailing upstream in places. When informed that they would never get up the river with the schooner, they merely grinned, took another chaw of "terbacker," and said, "Watch us."

The Indians did watch, and that mostly from behind, for the schooner went up the river so fast that the Indians had to work thirteen hours a day on the scow to keep up. Being as I have said, from the South, Harrison and Sloane invited us to camp and "Have a tater," which we did.

In the morning we soon reached the broken canoe, and finding only five holes in it, stopped an hour or two and made repairs. This done we arranged with two Indians to take the other canoe back to the York boat and started on. We soon caught the scow, which had passed us earlier in the day. There was a convoy of several canoes tracked by women and small boys traveling along the shore.

Among them was Grand Gooloo with his wife. He stopped us at his fire and with much grunting on his part and chattering from his wife he

removed his moccasins and duffles, exposing a foot for my inspection. He had hurt it some way and wanted medicine. I explained that I had no medicine, but the police had some and would fix up his foot at Bear Lake. His foot being sore, he was not able to track, which suited him right down to the ground, for he was then able to ride in the canoe while his "girl" did all the work.

I thought him worth photographing and did so. He evidently thought his foot interested me, for when I developed the negative I discovered he had been holding the injured member out for me to photograph. He gave us directions as to which side of the river to travel on, and we left him sitting on the bank waiting for the scow and dinner.

We worked hard that day. In thirteen hours we traveled a distance that the York boat party required six days to cover, and reached Bear Lake about ten o'clock. Across the bay from the head of the river is the site of old Fort Franklin, where Sir John Franklin's party wintered when exploring the country nearly eighty years ago. About one mile from this place is the present Indian settlement. It consists of probably fifteen or twenty houses and is known as the Bear Lake Fish Camp.

Too Much Shelter

Although we landed in the night, Claylee, fisherman for the Northern Trading Company, came forth to welcome us, and invited us to camp in his house. I accepted the invitation before seeing the house. There was nothing wrong with the building except it was hardly large enough for the eight that slept there that night. There shouldn't have been a roof on it at all to suit me under the circumstances, for the air was rather bad.

In the morning I cleared out as early as possible both to get fresh air and to escape numerous requests for tea, tobacco, etc., from a few thousand old men and squaws, who hearing that the "Mola" (Trader) had arrived, had

dropped in that they might not miss anything in the line of a free hand-out that might be going around.

Bear Lake is a great dreary stretch of water. Its size is unknown exactly, but its shore line must be much greater than that of Lake Superior, and its area nearly if not quite as large. It consists of four immense bays, each probably as large as Lake Ontario or larger. The lake is deep and the water is, like all other Northern lakes, unusually clear. One can see the bottom in a depth of thirty feet, and it is interesting to watch from a canoe trout of immense size swimming with the canoe, deep down in the water.

The lake abounds in fish. Thirty or forty pound trout are not uncommon, and large white fish abound in places. When the herring are running near the fishery, the Indians take two or three hundred from one net in a day. In fact fish is the main diet of the Bear Lake Indians.

However, the district is not an inviting one. It is cold. Bear Lake is entirely free from ice a little over one month in the year, and snow storms in August are not uncommon. When you in the States are celebrating the Fourth of July, the Bear Lake Indians are traveling on the ice with dogs. The ice breaks up between the fifteenth of July and the first of August. Then there is a month of storms and the lake freezes again.

Bear Lake seems to resent exploration, for as soon as one gets nicely started for some particular point on its shores a storm arises. The explorer is promptly blown around over some hundreds of miles and then frozen in some place where he doesn't want to be.

The country is inhabited by Slavey and Dog Rib Indians. The Dog Ribs, from Fort Rae, stay pretty well to the south side of the Lake, and the Norman and Good Hope Slaveys hunt the other three sides. However, the Slavey Bear Lake Indians have intermingled and intermarried with the Dog Ribs until the two have about the same characteristics and the less said about them the better.

The noble Red Man up here has surely taken a tumble. They are the worst beggars on the globe, and with but very few exceptions are not to be depended on in any way. As a general rule they hang around a fishery and live on fish, for what is the use of working when one can live by merely visiting the nets a couple times a day? They do, some of them, hunt deer at times.

The Indians on the south and east sides of the lake subsist mainly on deer meat, but grub is about all that interests them. When they need clothing they make babiche and dry meat to trade at the posts.

I concluded what little business took me to the lake, and we started on our return to Fort Norman the evening of the day after our arrival at the fish camp. We started paddling across the bay on calm water, but an off-shore wind rose twenty minutes after we left, and before we got across we were taking water from almost every wave. However, by hard paddling we made the other shore safely in probably something over an hour, and were soon in Bear River. Our usual rain accompanied us.

Bear River at its head is noticeable, for the current runs for several miles at something over ten miles an hour, and we shot around bend after bend in a gratifying manner. If Bear River is one of the worst rivers in the North to ascend, it is also one of the best to descend. We drifted at a great rate, and camped with Harrison and Sloane about twenty-five miles from Bear Lake.

In the morning, we started on down and in an hour or so met the York boat party. They were in the worst part of the river and going slowly, but nevertheless moving. After a stop of a half hour or so, we pushed off on the last leg of the journey. It was interesting to note the distances we had made on the way up, for we passed one of our old camps every couple of hours. We reached Norman that evening, having come down the river in about fourteen hours, a distance it took the York boat twelve or thirteen days to make going up.