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“Letters Home”

by Robert S. Sproule

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Abstract

In her article, "Letters from our country's past" in the February 1, 2002, edition of the *Globe and Mail*, Charlotte Gray wrote:

Letters give us the texture of daily lives: what Canadians in different periods and different regions wore, ate or read, how they buried their dead, what they thought of themselves and others, what lies and truths they chose to tell each other...

The present memoir is in this vein. It is an attempt to recapture what it was like to be an observant, normally city-dwelling, 18- and 19-year-old engineering student on summer work in three different and remote parts of Canada (northwestern Québec, Manitoba and Ontario) during two years of the Great Depression. There is relatively little about engineering in this memoir. It is much more concerned with going places and meeting new people, gaining experience, acquiring self-confidence, living and working in environments quite different from the ones experienced in university. The company the author worked for also appears to have oscillated between financial boom and bust, giving rise to uncertainty and a little drama from time to time.

The letters have been taken from a much larger collection written by the author - and preserved originally by his Mother - covering the period from 1933 to 1950. The language, the phraseology and the humour of the originals have been preserved as much as possible. The short italicised introductions were written by the author in late 2001.

About the Working Paper Series

In June 1995 the Council of the Engineering Institute of Canada agreed that Working Papers on topics related to its history and development, to the history and development of other institutions serving the engineering profession in Canada, and to engineering generally should be published from time to time.

These Papers have limited initial distribution, but a supply is maintained by the EIC History & Archives Committee for distribution on request. They may also be published later, in whole or in part, in other vehicles, but this cannot be done without the expressed permission of the Institute. The available Papers are also listed and summarized in the History & Archives section of the EIC's website (www.eic-ici.ca). The series is presently administered by the Publications Sub-Committee of the main Committee in cooperation with the Executive Director of the Institute.

Opinions expressed in the Working papers are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily shared by the Engineering Institute of Canada or its History & Archives Committee.

The editors of this present Working Paper were Peter R. Hart and Andrew H. Wilson.

About the Author

Bob Sproule was born in September 1915. He graduated in mechanical engineering from McGill University in 1937. After graduation he took a draftsman's job in Montréal, worked his passage to Glasgow in a cattle boat, hitchhiked round Britain, and took a variety of jobs to finance his trip. In the spring of 1939 he worked his passage as an engineboy down the coast of Africa and back to Marseilles, and was in Paris when World War II started. He found work in armament production in France's largest auto plant. Returning to Canada after the fall of France, Bob took a job in Montréal but, several months later, he enlisted. During his War service he completed the Royal Canadian Air Force course in aeronautical engineering as well as the first course given by the British Ministry of Aircraft Production on jet propulsion, the field in which he spent the last two years of his RCAF service. Following the war, he studied mechanical engineering again at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, receiving his MSc degree in 1947. In 1954 he was awarded a management training course diploma by the University of Western Ontario.

From 1954 until 1971 Bob was manager of hydraulic turbine business at the Dominion Engineering Works in Montréal, which was acquired by Canadian General Electric in the 1960s. During this time the company developed machines for such world record installations as the 190,000 hp fixed blade propellor turbines for Rocky Reach in Washington State, and the Francis turbines for Churchill Falls in Canada and for Grand Coulee #3 Power House in the United States. The Grand Coulee turbines were, up to the end of 1977, the most powerful hydraulic turbines in the world. At Dominion Engineering, Bob was also responsible for introducing the techniques of value engineering, which successfully lowered costs as well as stimulating the interest of those who applied them. At this time, he was a member of the Faculty of Engineering Advisory Council at McGill, introducing value engineering seminars as a teaching aid to bring industry, faculty and students together to solve practical industrial problems. He participated in these seminars for more than 25 years.

In 1971, Bob was involved in strategic planning. Two years later, he was named manager of hydro generation systems development, remaining in this position until his retirement in May 1980. During the development of the James Bay complex, he was a member of the Board of Engineering Consultants to the James Bay Energy Corporation.

Bob was elected a member of the Engineering Institute of Canada in 1953 and served as a member of the EIC-ASME International Council and as representative of ASME on the Institute's Council. He is a past chairman of ASME's Fluids Engineering Division. He joined CSME when it was formed in 1970 and was for many years a member of its Editorial Board. He is a Fellow of both EIC and ASME, and a member of the Order of Engineers of Québec. In 1965 he was a joint recipient of the Robert Angus Medal, then awarded by the Institute. He holds more than 30 patents in the fields of hydraulic turbines and pumps.

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Robert S. Sproule...in 1935



Robert S. Sproule...much more recently

Summer 1934: Letters from Northwestern Québec

Introduction

My employer was a consulting geologist, John B. DeMille. My elder brother was at that time still called Bill by the family, although he had changed his name to Kelvin when he started at McGill. He had worked for Mr. DeMille during the summer of 1933, evidently so satisfactorily that both he and his younger brother were hired in 1934. The other student that summer was Bob Conroy, also from Montréal. He had some connections to mining promoters. He was bilingual, having an English father and a French mother.

All of my 1934 letters were from the Bell River Gold Mines' property in the Abitibi region of Québec, the closest town to which was Amos. It was a prospected property, having been staked by Alphonse Bérubé of Amos, who had sold the rights to this Montréal company. It was considered hot, being only a few miles from a property in Cadillac where rich samples had been recovered. But all our drilling and surface sampling found nothing. Later that year, it became apparent that the Cadillac samples had been salted.

A Mr. Silver is mentioned in the very first letter. He was a furrier in Montréal with a financial interest in a property we visited near Temagami to take some surface samples. I forget the name of the stenographer, also mentioned, but remember her beauty and pleasantness.

Mr. DeMille and Kel (Bill) left Bob Conroy and me with Alphonse and the drilling crew not long after we got to Amos. It was never very clear who was in charge, but somehow we knew what to do, and worked hard and effectively. When the drillers needed a water supply, Bob went to Amos and hired a man with a pump and the necessary hoses - from the fire department! Mr. DeMille visited us at least once in July and August.

The diamond drilling crew at Bell River was from Kirkland Lake. Émile Chartrand, the boss and diamond setter, had a Ford car. One day, a tire went flat going from Amos to the mine. We were preparing to change it, but Émile just set the jack at the appropriate height and told me where to put it. Then he put his back to the car, got a grip, straightened his knees and lifted the wheel clear of the road!

I do not remember leaving Amos at the end of that summer. But between the first of September and the start of my second year of engineering at McGill a month later, I went with Mr. DeMille to Kirkland Lake to survey and map some claims, and returned to Montréal in his car.

The letters that follow were addressed to my Mother and to other members of our family. In this section, for simplicity's sake, I have omitted the individual salutations. Since all of them were written from the same location (Bell River/Amos), I have also omitted the locations. The reader will see that, occasionally, I have added some recent notes in italics to round out the situations just described.

July 4, 1934:

I am having a swell time. This morning, Bill, Bob Conroy and I did part of a rough survey. This afternoon we dug trenches - just enough work to make me feel good. In a week, or about a week, Bill is going and I will be in charge. In another week I shall go somewhere and Bob Conroy will be in charge.

The gang here is OK. All good fellows. One of the diamond drillers, Jack Bury, used to be a cook, so we get good meals without the expense of a cook.

You should have seen the argument here a minute ago. Bill and Bérubé trying to get straight about the staking, mapping and recording of this property. It would have been bad enough if Bérubé could speak English. Alphonse Bérubé is the prospector, a good guy, humourous and good natured.

I am now sleeping on a mattress after spending several nights on boards. Never slept better than I did last night. Early to bed and early to rise.

There is a lad (one of the drillers, about my age, very nice fellow; just found out his name is Don - for Donat) playing a guitar. I got a mouth organ from Amos and contributed my bit. Some of them are even silly enough to ask me to sing; that's just bad taste.

It has rained every day since we got here, but it never rains more than five minutes at a time. There are lots of flies, but they don't bother much. They all mysteriously disappeared today.

We got a new stove last night. Émile Chartrand, a driller and diamond setter, big and strong, and Bob Conroy, a school boy, big and fat, took the team (the teamster was tired, I guess) and brought the mattresses, the stove and the dynamite in after dark. Bob fell in the mud. The road is so bad that, when the wagon broke several days ago, the boys made a boat which slithers well thru the mud. I started this papagraph off with the stove - well - the engine of the drill broke this afternoon, so Jack Bury came in and made pies and biscuits on the stove. You should see Don toss pancakes - his one culinary achievement.

My pay now amounts to \$10. I am keeping the payroll, so I ought to know! Bill's is over \$60. But the money hasn't come through yet. They say they have lots, but it is the first pay so there are delays. I get \$2 a day and board, Bill gets \$2.75+. (*We got the money almost a year later.*)

There are still no seats in here in the bunk-house and the floor is getting too dirty to sit on. So we spend our sitting time in bunks. I have an upper and, until last night, there were no side boards. So I slept in constant peril. I now have side boards to go with the mattress. We put a new floor in the cook-house yesterday, so it is now clean. The bunk-house is all new, so it is quite clean. Bill sends his love - he is Kel to all the boys here.

Our party coming up by train was five: Mr. DeMille, Bob Conroy, with the same job as I, the

stenographer from Mr. DeMille's office, and Mr. Silver, who joined us in North Bay. I got the upper berth because Bob is not built for climbing - it is supposed to be more comfortable anyway. Most of my memories consist of meals, in hotels and dining cars, and listening to Mr. Silver talk. He and the stenographer left us at Amos.

I just stepped outside and saw at least a dozen rabbits, as you always can at this time of the evening. They are as thick as mosquitoes.

July 23, 1934:

Lots of fun getting water here now. Breaks the monotony. Our supply of drinking water dried up, so we have to carry it from the lake about three-quarters of a mile away. Bob Conroy was the first on that detail and he found that two half buckets were about all that human arms can stand. I made a simple yoke and found that two full buckets are no problem on the human shoulders. Bob still insists on doing it his way, so two buckets are a fair day's work. When it is my turn, I have a half day to pursue other interests.

Had a swell time today working with dynamite, blasting a sump for water for the drill. One time, when we set off two charges near each other, it was very funny. Bérubé lit one and I held the fuse of the other ready for him. It sort of makes you excited to have a fuse sputtering a few feet away, so he started striking the wrong end of a match on a stone. Always cool, and not wishing to be collected, in a basket, I tell him, "L'autre bout, mon ami." He then lit the second fuse and we ran like hell, dodging mud as it fell around us. There is a law to the effect that you must not use a fuse shorter than three feet, but Alphonse saves money by using one foot (one minute). He boasts that he uses shorter fuses than anyone.

In the mail one day there was a letter addressed to Alphonse, so I handed it to him. He read it for a short time upside down, realized his error, and turned it up the right way. He studied it, then asked me to translate it because he said he could not read English. It was easy for me to translate since it was in French, as he may learn some day, but I did not tell him. This is a man of above average intelligence, I think, who will not send his two bright boys to school because they would come home thinking that they were better than the old man!

Alphonse has a handy rule for finding directions. At 7 am the sun is directly east, and at 7 pm it is directly west. I have not tried to verify that at the longitude of Amos in the time zone. There are several minutes of corrections to be made to sundial readings, depending on the date, but a few minutes is not enough to spoil the usefulness of such a rule. One day we were laying out a north-south claim line, but we argued about the starting direction, having opposite opinions on how to apply the magnetic declination correction to the compass. However, it was his line, so he won. About four o'clock I said that we were late for supper, pointing to the sun due west of our line. He showed no annoyance at being wrong. We just went back and started over again.

My admiration for Bill was augmented when I found out that, before my arrival, he had persuaded Alphonse that when one wants to spit, one spits out the door. At home he has a brass cuspidor, but usually misses it. However, he has a good wife, who keeps a clean house. Chewing tobacco, when not smoking a pipe, is a way of life among the local men. One Sunday, five locals made the trek into camp to visit. There did not seem to be much to talk about, so they sat mostly silent in the bunk-house, spitting to the right and to the left. Neither I nor anyone, and I am the second worst French-speaker, was smart enough to get them to talk. Some of them must have had something interesting to say. Who knows?

August 28, 1934:

If you see any bargains in rain coats buy one, which Bill can use until I get back with his. I may need it, as I have no coat. Mine is worn out. There was a half-inch of ice around the edges of the wash basins this morning. Mr. DeMille hopes to take me on some more properties before going home. He even hopes to take me to Chibougamou by air.

Sunday night, everyone went to the show in Amos. I went with Irene, a very attractive local lass. I had to sleep on the floor in Bérubé's house that night because the lift home failed and we couldn't get into any hotel. Tried six.

I am going to play cribbage soon, en français, with Alphonse. *(He taught me to play, and we played almost every evening. By the end of the summer we both knew every card in the pack by its back!)*

September 1, 1934:

All goes well except the pay. Today the core-splitter came in and now my job is splitting cores. Other times we are clearing lines around the boundary. Swell fun. The drill is still here and drilling.

It may be my nineteenth birthday when you get this. Please send nothing but love. I have all I need for a bare existence (including a hole in my pants). Check. Please send a suit of woollies. We get frosts and ice now whenever the sky is clear. No more swimming.

Summer 1935: Letters from Northwestern Manitoba

Introduction

Again, my employer was Mr. DeMille.

The first letter, from Flin Flon, starts with getting on a Pullman car on the train at Swan River. This

is in Manitoba, close to the Saskatchewan border and just above the fifty-second parallel. Mr. DeMille and I drove from Montréal in his new Ford. Since there was no highway north of Lake Superior to get from Ontario to Manitoba, our route was through Ottawa, North Bay, Sudbury to Sault Ste. Marie, and then through Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota to Emerson at the Canadian border, and from there to Winnipeg. Thence to Swan River, a convenient place to get a train going towards Flin Flon.

A memory of passing through Wisconsin. We stopped for lunch at a small restaurant. Mr. DeMille evidently had little experience of such eateries. He asked what the slot machine was. "You put a dime in here, pull the handle, and the money comes out here," I said. In went a dime, and out came 60 cents. "Isn't it amazing!" he said. But he was smart enough not to try again.

My memories of Winnipeg include my hobnail boots skidding on the marble floor of the Fort Garry Hotel and evidence that I still looked young. A comfortably-seated gentleman in the lobby hailed me as I passed. "Will you get me a glass of water, boy?" he asked. "No," I replied. He smiled in silence.....And I remember dandelions and no grass.

Let me add a short footnote. There is a reference in a letter that follows to Schist Lake being "a bit smaller than Tremblant." Québec's Lac Tremblant is less than eight miles long. It is the lake where I spent all my summers until I went to work. I do so again in retirement. The big ski development is at the other end of the lake. But at our end, we are still without a road or a power line - and we like it that way!

Again the individual salutations have been omitted, but the places of origin have been added.

Undated, June 1935, at the Manitoba-Saskatchewan Border:

I don't know where my news of travel left off. So I shall start from Swan River. We got on a Pullman at 10.15 pm and slept until 6.30 the next morning. We pulled into The Pas at 7.00 am, had breakfast, and got on the train again at 9.00 am. They had taken out our Pullman to send it to Churchill, I think. Our train was a mixed freight now, with one first class, one second class and one Pullman. We took the first class and continued along the Flin Flon branch of the CNR to Cranberry Portage (not pronounced as in French, but as it is spelled) where we had a swell dinner (lunch) for \$0.50 at Mrs. Robinson's. The whole town is "cafés" to feed people when the train stops. We had been on the Hudson Bay Railway, which goes to Churchill.

About 2.15 pm Central Daylight Time (we were in the Mountain time belt for a few miles last week), we got to Channing fifteen minutes early. The fastest the train went was 30 mph, timed by my watch, and we made an extra fast trip! You can see Flin Flon from Channing and walk there in 45 minutes, but the train takes an hour (because FF is up on a hill). There was a fellow with a canoe and kicker (outboard) waiting for us. He took us up to the Mandy mine where we stayed that night. We went into the property, about six miles up lake from Channing, but came out again for supper.

You should see the roads around Flin Flon! I asked a taxi driver what was the fastest he ever went. "About 15, sometimes 20," he replied. He took us from Flin Flon to Channing, going full speed to try to catch a train. The highest he hit was under 20 mph.

We went out fishing last night and Mr. DeMille caught a 12-pound jackfish and eight smaller ones, including two pickerel. Boy was it big! But the fellows say that was bad luck. You usually get jackfish between 20 and 30 pounds. I'll have to see about that. I was paddling the canoe and DeMille and another fellow were trolling. DeMille had two trolls on one line and, once, he got a fish on each at the same time, but both were little fellows (three to four pounds). A jackfish is a northern pike. I am going to study German now, so - so long!

June 19, 1935, at Mandy Mine and Schist Lake:

I am using the facilities of the office of this shut-down mine. There is complete equipment here, and everything is in perfect order. A man lives in this building as watchman, with his family.

(Later.) We were using the office last night, but now are out (in a shack) on our own property. This is a wonderful place to spend the summer, though I think we are again not going to find some gold, or even copper.

The country was all burned over, about 15 years ago I should say, and is very airy, hilly and rocky. The flies are not bad. There are two doors on this shack (a very neat and clean bedroom, parlour and sink, by the way), both open, and right now there are only about one to two dozen mosquitoes around me. They only half as bad as at Bell River.

Our part of Schist Lake is a bit smaller than Tremblant. My address is Channing, Manitoba. We use a kicker to go to Channing, from where it is a 45-minute walk, or \$1 taxi or 25 cent train ride, to Flin Flon - the rockiest and dirtiest town on the map. Lots of fun though. We were in there this morning; going again Friday.

The camp is Mr. DeMille, the cook Mr. Desjardins (pronounced "Jardine" because he got tired of telling people how to pronounce it), Les Van Coughnett, Rudy Schimky, Sten Stenholm and me. The cook is Alex to Mr. DeMille and to me. Les calls him Mr. Jardine, Sten says Yardine and Rudy uses Jardini. He speaks English better than perfectly, never uses a short word where a long one will almost do (somewhat Malaprop). I found out why when I stopped at his cabin for something he wanted. The only book is a large English dictionary.

The people at the Mandy are very nice; a son of the family works with us. The kids there are nuts about shooting things, crackshots with rifles, and have already got two birds with slingshots since I came. Two kids, about 10 and 12. Another two, about sixteen, came over here last night with guns to try for a bear that is hanging around. They have a deadfall trap set. Last year, Les killed a moose with his sheath knife - in the lake!

My work so far is walking around seeing the place, and I am going to copy a map tomorrow.

There is lots of swimming, and no work on Sunday. A radio at the Mandy. Canoes on two or three of our lakes, etc.

The flies are so bad now that it is hard to continue, but here goes. You should see the flowers; beautiful little wild roses all over the rocks, bright blue flowers, snapdragons, marsh marigolds in the marshes, and dandelions. Speaking of dandelions, Winnipeg is nothing but. The sunset lasts until 11.30 and the sunrise starts at 2.30.

June 21, 1935, on Schist Lake:

Last night we came home between 11.30 and 12.00. It was so light at midnight that we could follow the trail easily. Only a few of the bright stars were bright enough to show, but it was dark enough so that you could not see colours. The sunset was still red when I went to bed at midnight.

Am writing this in a canoe, going down the lake to Channing and thence to Flin Flon.

It begins to look as though I shall not be here for very long; we cannot find any work to do. Some fun, eh kid!

Les says that in the fall, before they go away, loons gather in bunches of as many as 40 or 50, form a circle on the water and jump up and down, yelling their heads off. It must be interesting to see. Eh, wot?

There are going to be blueberries here when the time comes. I hope I am here to enjoy them. It is a beautiful day for pictures and I forgot my camera. Woe is me! Toodleoo!

June 30, 1935, at Schist Lake:

Wednesday I spent running the big canoe with motor on Schist Lake. I took Mr. DeMille and Les down to the north end of the property so that they could prospect there. I met them again in Channing, where I picked up the mail and a case of dynamite. They came back by another way and I drove the boat back. There was a good sea on, and it was pouring rain, so it was some fun. I got oil for the boat and a packsack at the Mandy Mine and continued merrily on my way rejoicing. At the portage I loaded the dynamite in the pack and headed for home. When I started off, the pack ripped and the powder (50 pounds of it) slipped. I got halfway along the trail and had a heck of a time because the pack kept ripping and did not fit. If the case had fallen out, as I was afraid it would, all that you would have heard of me would have been a bang! *(Not actually so, but I thought so then.)* So I left it there and went for my own backpack. With it, the 50 pounds felt like a feather and I finished the last half of the mile easily. It is certainly a success.

The next day, Thursday, I chauffeured the boat for Mr. DeMille and some friends from Flin Flon - geologist Kinkle, his wife and child. It was another rough day on the lake and I had Some Fun! Every once in a while the boat would stop because of dirt in the gas.

Today is Sunday, and so is a holiday. The men have gone and we are closing the camp tomorrow, not having found a gold mine. I was paid last night - \$66 to date, minus a \$50 advance. I now have about \$40.

My work here has been canoe paddling every day, cutting a long trail one day, digging trenches two days, drilling and blasting, packing stuff and tools, and a good deal of mapping

Part of this work was helping to blast surface rock. This entailed drilling holes by hand, for the dynamite. Rudy was the expert and I was the helper. At first I held the steel while Rudy slammed it with a sledgehammer. Then he said that it was my turn to wield the sledge as he held the steel. I had to believe that his head was not in the way, though it did not look like it, but when I got a little tired I lost my confidence that I was going to hit the steel and not his hands or wrists. He insisted that I would not miss, but I insisted that his livelihood was too important to risk. So I was allowed to go back to holding the steel for a while.

The trappers here talk of "going north for the winter." I guess this is not far enough. They tell me of seeing 14 moose in one day, running into herds of caribou, catching foxes alive and keeping them until the fur is good, and finding mink in muskrat houses (the mink kill the rats, following them right into their houses). They tell me that, in the spring when the birds come back, the air seems to be full of them, singing and screaming as the case may be, and that it is almost like going into town again after being alone for five months.

The other day we saw a loon with a baby loon on its back; the other member of the family came towards us, trying to attract our attention and keep us away from the others. It is easy to catch the babies, and if you put them in the canoe and then let them go, they will follow because they like the warmth and snuggle up in your hand. The mother, in the meantime, dances around making a terrific fuss.

On Friday, as we passed a point, there was a great scrambling and several little brown things ran up on the shore. Then a mallard duck flew out. We went up on the bank and searched for about five minutes, but could find no trace of the young ones. They won't move unless you practically step on them. They tell me that game is very scarce here; we have certainly not seen such as they tell about. Pike (jackfish) are to be caught by the millions and are used for human and dog food.

At this camp - oh, by the way, I saw a bear today; a real-life black bear; a couple of hundred feet away, near the camp, and he rolled away over the hill when Mr. DeMille and Les called my attention to him.

As I was saying - at this camp all the fellows are trappers, and what they can't tell you about animals!

Mighty nice fellows too. They seem to know all the customs of all the animals very well. I deduce this from the fact that they all agree about things you would not expect anyone to know.

June 30, 1935, at Hook Lake:

We leave here tomorrow for Flin Flon and all points south and east - that is, for Fort Hope via Winnipeg.

I have often wondered what would happen if one received an infinite number of mosquito bites. I do not know yet, but my neck was very tender last night. There is one portage we cross on our way to and from work where they swarm rather heavily. When carrying a canoe, or even a pack, it is hard to kill them fast enough. I wear gloves, so my head is the only place they can get at me.

The day before yesterday we started from here at 6.20 am (Mr. DeMille, Les Van Coughnett and Rudy Schimky). We paddled a couple of miles up Hook Lake, portaged to Diamond Lake, paddled across, portaged to Manistikwan or Big Island Lake, paddled about five miles, met two prospectors from Channing and continued with them (they brought their own canoe). Portaged to Trout or Embassy Lake (a big lake where even a small wind raises big waves), paddled some four miles, portaged to Ruby Lake, paddled some two or three miles, walked to Tartan Lake, crossed it, and prepared for lunch. After lunch we walked over the property - three large shear zones with good quartz and sulphides - took several channel samples, and went back to the prospectors' camp in the canoe for supper. We left about 6.20 pm and, with a favourable wind most of the way, got home at 11.30 pm.

A thing I noticed about canoes, about which I had heard but did not believe before, was that it is harder to paddle in four feet of water than in six, and easier in sixteen than in six. The canoe seemed to drag like an old scow when we paddled across shallow lakes and to glide forward as soon as we hit deep water.

We picked up a hitch-hiker on Ruby Lake - the clerk of the Henney Maloney mine, now shut down. He told us some stories about bears in that district. We noticed a huge brown bearskin fastened to the wall of his camp. He said that one morning last week he was awakened by a bear's fist smashing through his window. The bear looked at him for a while, then went over to a tree and started to shake it, letting out a terrific roar. About this time he recovered enough to shoot it. There were marks on its neck showing that it had been fighting.

Another fellow there, who heard two bears fighting, went out to see the fun. When they saw him, they both made for him. He shot one at some distance but missed the second one and had only about 10 feet to spare when he finally dropped it.

They say the brown bears are far more daring than the blacks - a black will usually scam when shouted at, but a brown one sometimes scrams the wrong way. The black one we saw scrambled.

The country we passed through was mostly wooded, with small spruce, poplar and birch. But on a small unnamed lake there were some tremendous spruce, a good 60 feet high. This belt we were travelling in was just a narrow strip, the country around being burned over.

I took the canoe alone on one fairly long portage. It did not seem nearly as bad as it used to at Tremblant - but it was no darn fun!

Every lake has a pair of loons with one young one, although they often have two. They tell me that birds are very scarce here compared to most parts of the surrounding country, but they (that is loons, ducks, etc.) are plentiful compared to Tremblant.

We pass a bald eagle's nest about every day on the way to work.

Two boys from the Mandy Mine came in here this afternoon and caught 29 jackfish and 17 pickerel. Two of the jacks were up around twenty pounds. They had more than they could carry, so they left trailing the big ones on a string.

July 2, 1935, at Ethelbert, Manitoba:

Boy oh boy oh boy, have we got fun? Stranded on a desert island, so to speak, as it were.

To start from the beginning. At 3.30 this morning, one arose, or descended, from an upper berth. At Swan River the automobile waited. We drove to a restaurant and broke fast, finishing at 4.30 am. At 4 am the streets of Swan River were quite busy - Dominion Day had been a BIG NIGHT.

Driving through rain, after some one hundred miles to Ethelbert, we drove around a barrier in the road and continued on our merry way rejoicing. Several damp places in the road (water not over six inches deep) were passed without mishap, but eventually we came to a place where a veritable torrent rushed relentlessly across our path. A truck driver told us that there had been a cloudburst for one hour last night, added to a month of rain, and that the road was washed out in several places.

Boy, talk of mosquitoes! A different breed, it seems. People go around with bushes in their hands to beat them off. Farmers light big smudges in the evenings, and the cows and horses huddle in the smoke, which you can taste in the milk. Two bit me as I wrote that! They are the most damnable pernicious monsters that it has ever been my unhappy lot to meet. They are smaller than the northern mosquito, but they waste no time humming; they land and bite. And it hurts. They were all over the inside of the car as soon as we stopped.

We returned 13 miles to Ethelbert, hung around a bit, then drove out again. We had to build a bridge to get back to Ethelbert for lunch.

After lunch we went out again, then came back and Mr. DeMille hired a freight train to take us to

Dauphin tomorrow noon. Going out yet again, we crossed a place which we saw would soon not be crossable. There were 20 cars there, including a circus. We warned a couple of fellows and scrambled back. Going through the hole in the road, we lurched a bit, but got through. The next car to try, some time later, went in up to the roof. There is now quite a colony stranded out there, probably for at least three days. The water has not come down from the mountains yet. But we go out on the freight tomorrow. (\$19 for the car!) Thence to Winnipeg and Fort Hope (*in Ontario*).

This is a very small town. The inhabitants are all Ukrainians and mosquitoes.

Chatting with an official of a relief camp today, I learned that there are 300 men there, but Prime Minister Bennett says they are not asked to work. So they don't, though they are expected to. They get 20 cents per day, plus food and clothing.

Summer 1935: Letters from Northwestern Ontario

Introduction

Fort Hope was, and probably still is, a Hudson Bay and Revillon Frères trading post. It is still an Indian Reserve. It is on Eabamet Lake, which drains into the Albany River, at approximately 51.7 degrees of latitude and 81 degrees of longitude. It was reached (in 1935) by air in a Junkers float plane from Collins, which is on the railway west of Armstrong. Mr. DeMille left the car somewhere around the Lake of the Woods, the highway from Winnipeg not having been extended east to Collins.

The Fort Hope Consolidated Gold Mine site had been worked to the extent of a 100 foot deep shaft and 200 feet of drifts before it had been abandoned. The new exploration of the site may have been the result of better gold prices.

We were eight men. Those whose names I remember were: Dr. Bob Hallet, geologist and the boss; Bob Campbell, a Canadian who had been at an English public school but refused to go back from a Canadian holiday and found work in the mining business, and was well known to Bob Hallet; two Jimmy Morrisons, father and son, mechanics from Winnipeg; Charlie Bocca, a Hungarian labourer known to the two Bobs; and myself. I have forgotten the names of the two others, but one of them must have been the cook.

Mail came from Collins by air to the Hudson Bay post, probably on a weekly schedule, or when business for the two trading posts, or for the Indian Reserve, required a flight. We occasionally paddled the six miles to Collins to ask whether there was mail for us and to leave our (hopefully) outgoing mail. Davey Donaldson, the Hudson Bay factor, had radio contact with civilization.

Except for two letters to my brother Kel and two to my grandmother Sproule, the individual salutations have again been omitted, as have the locations, since all were at the Fort Hope camp.

July 15, 1935:

Dear Kel: All goes merry as a wedding bell. This is not a bad place. Sampling, cutting lines, trenching, playing around in the shaft, packing supplies. It rains mostly at night. Flies middling bad. Country not burned much. Not much muskeg. Not much wildlife.

The only thing I've seen was a family of spruce partridge. The mother sat on a branch not five feet away, and I could have caught her easily. A fellow said he saw a lynx last winter, which snarled and scared him out of his wits.

The thing about this camp that should interest you is that all the boys are bridge fiends. We play every night, kibitzers and all. They are all pretty fair. I am the worst player. Bring in a pack of cards with you.

We had a swell game the other day. Bailing out the shaft. We have a pump running but it is not fast enough. So we lowered the bucket and tried to dip it full of water. It would not dip, so we raised it to about 15 feet and let it drop. Boy, what a bang! We dropped it twice more from lesser distances, filling it each time, but we finally broke the chains. The first time they dumped it, they missed their shot and it all (80 gallons) came back down the shaft, and we were down there, but back a little in the manway. Some fun!

There is fair warm swimming, fair pickerel fishing, good canoeing, etc.

The first day here we went fishing with a big freight canoe and a small one. We were shooting rapids, up and down. A certain amount of fun, too.

I have to use the back of the paper because I am running low and am starting on my summer essay - "Mining Exploration and Development in the Fort Hope Area." Or mebbe I'll just make it general. But I think that a specific case is easier to work with. I have an outline written

Concerning wildlife, I left out woodchucks. They swarm, and even eat out of your hand.

It has been a great day. Spent the morning surveying and the afternoon trenching. Got some sunburn too.

July 18, 1935:

Hya? How! Fine thanks! Feeling pretty good. Best of health, good work, good food, good weather.

Weighed 139 pounds, with boots, last time at Collins, and they tell me I have gotten fat since coming here.

With this mail I am sending a letter to Kel also.

The plane which takes this out ought to bring in letters from You (*Mother*), Dad, Gran, David and Kel. Also a pay check. Which I shall send home.

I have been down to the trading post only once since getting here. We did not stop on the way in.

I have to use plenty of fly oil, and my mixture is the best there is.

I had a few raspberries today. There are going to be 1000000000's of them. Had lots after supper tonite.

The Indians like their pictures taken. One fair maiden pretended that she was too shy, but when I pretended to start taking the group without her, you should have seen her jump to it.

At the trading post it is like any general store, except that cartridges seem to be in the limelight. They sell mouth organs, and cameras and all kinds of stuff. The Hudson Bay trader told me that he sold an Indian a camera and sent the film away to be developed. Only two pictures came out and the people's heads were cut off. For some reason they charge Indians 75 cents for a frypan which they sell to us for 50 cents! (*That might have been better written as "For some reason they charge us only 50 cents...."*) Lots of canned goods, utensils, stoves, pipes, novelties, bright scarves as headdresses for squaws. The girl I photographed with papoose had a mosquito net cover for the baby carriage. She was very proud when asked to have her picture taken.

Vegetation: muskeg country just about like Bell River.

July 20, 1935:

Dear Kel: DANGER! BEWARE! I hope and pray this reaches you in time. DO NOT come here if you can help it! Suspensions of inadequate financial backing. The plane is now two days late and the most likely reason is that there is no money to pay it. It is a hell of a note. Also we have no food. That is, we have lots to eat but only pancakes and maple syrup, dried fruits and dried vegetables, and macaroni and cheese. Raspberries are ripe though. We fished yesterday and got three lousy four pound pike. Tried dynamite for pickerel and did not get a thing. We are going to buy flour and sugar at the post with the four dollars of company money left. After that, we head for the track, three of us in a canoe, and the rest...? The Indians will take you out for \$5 (Oh yeah! \$20). And I have lots of doh ray me. But damn if I want to spend it.

I have my essay half done now. We have stopped work (*because of not being fed, and possibly not*

paid!), so I have lots of time for it. And bridge, etc.

Blueberries will be ripe soon.

I have had no news for nearly a month now.

HEED MY WARNING, SONNY! Signed in blood by yours truly, the Black Thumb.

July 25, 1935:

Plane not in yet, food low...

My present Ojibway vocabulary: Megitch - thanks; Atickamik - white fish; Keegoose - fish; Ookass - pickerel; Mashamigos - speckled trout.

We had to buy fish from the Indians, so asked the Hudson Bay factor how. They fish below the rapids with nets, drive the fish into them, then fillet and smoke. Their camp reeks of the drying fish. They not only giggled, but laughed outright at my Indian speech, or at me, or at us.

I have not the faintest idea of the bursary referred to (*in a letter from my family, announcing I had been awarded one by McGill*). I did nothing to earn one, though you (*Kel*) should get one..

All mail for weeks is at Collins.

It would be swell fun to go out by the canoe route, about five days, easy. We have a canoe too. Money is the only thing I am worrying about.

There is scads of gold here. By crushing and panning you can get as much as the point of a pencil (3H, sharpened) from one handful of rock.

July 27, 1935:

Have finished essay, in a sort of a way. Am a bit short of two thousand words. How many do I need?

On Monday (July 22) afternoon, when we came back from waiting for the plane, the cook said he thought he could scrape up enough for three of us to get a bite. Since then (it is now Saturday night), we have spent \$4.75 for food for eight men (all the company funds). The first two days we had macaroni and cheese every meal. Now we have macaroni. We bought from Indians 50 cents' worth of half-smoked fish and it is so unpalatable that it is not finished yet. We also spent the money on flour and sugar, of which there is some left. We have lots of dried vegetables (taste like hay) and fruits. We can pick raspberries. Lots of rice, and maple syrup, cocoa, tea, coffee. Short on butter. I

have some rabbit snares set. No partridges or anything. *(The trading post had been left with unpaid bills by the previous mine owners, so it was embarrassing to ask for credit.)*

Last Sunday, July 21, was the last day we did any work. I have swum a bit, explored a little, fished a bit (the Indians have taken all but pike, which is all but inedible), written a bit, slept a bit and eaten a bite. *(Pike was considered dog food, but it was really fine.)* I hope that I shall go out by canoe. If no plane comes by Monday, it probably means a 100-mile canoe trip for me. I am one of the few who can handle a canoe, and some of us will have to go out to send in a plane for the others - the police plane if the company has no money. There is liable to be murder before this is finished. I am enjoying it, but some of the boys feel it badly. Boy! What a trip if it comes off! The plane trip is worse than a bore; it is sickening in that cabin. The canoe route is pretty good; takes about five days and with good weather - boy! I am afraid, though, that the plane will come in. By the time you get this, all will be well.

July 28, 1935:

This is the last day of the grub. If the plane comes not tomorrow I am off on a great trip. A plane just flew over but did not come near us. Talk about yearning in our eyes as we watched it disappear! My worry is still only money.

We paddled up to the post and back today. Learned that the plane has been laid up with a damaged float, so finances may be all right. I caught a rabbit in a snare but the wire, blasting wire, broke! We borrowed two eggs each from Davey Donaldson, the Hudson Bay man.

Hello. The plane has not come to bring news or take any out. Your letters of the sixth and ninth were wrongly addressed, so I got them via Tashota and Ombabika by Indian canoe. One even had time to go to Port Hope first. I got them last night. Three of us went down to the post in the canoe, stayed for supper, bed and breakfast, as the wind was bad last night. Also, we wanted to. We had radio, soccer, more radio, talk, accordion, bed about 1.30. Around then, the northern lights covered the entire sky, a few dark streaks showed where there were none. Not very bright, though. Davey Donaldson, the factor, says that in the winter the old Aurora Borealis comes right down and you can hear him crackle. Paddled back this morning with a tail wind, stopping to buy some fish from some Indians - some keegoose, variety atickamik. (I wrote that without looking them up, too!)

You have received no news because the plane is now one week late; has not been in since July 11. Praying it will be here tomorrow.

July 29, 1935:

Dear Granny: Thanks for all the letters addressed to Collins, which I have not yet received. I am sure that they are interesting. I might even be able to read them, or is the kettle calling the pot red, white

and blue?

Today has been a fine day. I went fishing - walk two miles of swamp to lake and troll from canoe. We caught seven pike. In case you don't know, pike is supposed to be the vilest fish living; even when dead - and in the pan. But the Indians have cleared out all the pickerel for the summer. Ookass all gone.

You will be glad to hear that we are eating hearty meals - for lunch I had toast, without butter, with raspberry jam and fresh raspberries, and cocoa without milk.

Yesterday we feasted on water added to the soup made the day before from a rabbit I snared. The rabbits are few and far between and I have wire for only two snares, so that is only the second I have caught. And was it tough? Yes.

We now call our joint the Fort Hope Isolated Gold Mines Limited. Yesterday we played eleven rubbers of bridge, one man out every fifth rubber. *(It appears there were only five bridge players. I forget who they were, but Charlie was not one. He spent his time crushing rock from the weathered vein near the shaft, and panning for gold. By the time he left he had a small pill bottle nearly full.)*

Note: Please keep and cherish the enclosed essay until I get home to type it out. This is VERY IMPORTANT.

Now it is cocoa without sugar.

July 30, 1935:

Flash. The latest bulletin from Fort Hope famine area states that it's a great life if you don't weaken. Those in the stricken district were sitting up this morning to enjoy breakfast of porridge without milk and pancakes without much syrup. Also dried apricots and coffee without milk. There has been no plane since three weeks from tomorrow, but the hardy survivors have not yet given up hope. They are, however, in such dire straits that they are now spending their own money for food. Dire straits indeed!

The first meat tasted for weeks was had yesterday when RSS (*me*), the famous big game hunter, snuck up on a groundhog. That made swell soup with dried vegetables and barley. In the evening the hunter found a rabbit in his snare. Soup today too!

It is rumoured in local circles that there will have to be at least two planes in this week, whereupon at least one of the company will depart for civilization to send aid to his companions in distress. Any plane which touches down at the Fort will be sent to pick us up.

The proposed canoe trip to Ombabika, it is believed, has been abandoned. Inasmuch as it would take

about a week before a plane could be sent in, and one is sure to be in before then anyway, it would appear that this would be swell fun, but inadvisable from a practical point of view.

August 7, 1935:

(A plane finally arrived before this letter was written, bringing supplies and mail.)

Today we have lots to eat, but the cook has quit, along with three others.

Kel: Very glad to hear about the \$180.00 *(the value of the bursary I had been awarded)*. Also the probability of being paid. DeMille arrives next plane, Saturday, day after tomorrow.

I have only a little over two weeks before I leave here.

My pack is perfect. Today I carried two bags of potatoes (ninety pounds each, two loads) and three-quarters of a case of milk plus 12 pounds of jam (one load) from the lake - two miles, mostly swamp. And that after not eating much for two weeks, but I am still in good condition as it did not tire me very much. It carries perfectly with about a hundred pounds in it.

Some fun, \$180.00!

It seems that all the hold-up has been because the company did not pay its bills. The opinion of all concerned is that someone should be hanged. Finally, a Canadian Airways plane came in yesterday, dropped lots of food and took away three men.

August 8, 1935:

August 8. Flash! Great jubilation among the four survivors of eight, and one extra. Food to eat - no cook to cook it.

See Mother's letter for news to date. Plane in, food here, pay looming. I received Granny's three (thanks) letters and could read a little of some of them. However, I am a patient man - witness the fact that I am still here - and shall decipher and enjoy them at leisure.

The hitch, of course, had been lack of money, and Mr. DeMille had been in Halifax the while.

Hastily collecting the mail and a grocery order prepared for July 22, we tried to send them off, but were a bit too late. The plane couldn't wait.

I received 22 letters, including book, Important Document, films, and enclosed letters. IMAGINE MY ECSTASY when I learned that the rumoured bursary was \$18000.00 dollars per year. Even

\$180 would be exotic. Some fun?? (*That was a joke about someone's misprint. It was \$180. Fees at McGill were \$235.*)

Was glad to hear all the news, tho I have not digested it except that someone has, or had, a toad called ALOUWISHOUS. Was somewhat disappointed in the two bunches of photographs. Please do not send newspapers. Part of the sackful of mail yesterday was every Montreal Daily Star for an indefinite period. Do not let Granny worry too much about the Very Important enclosed essay in her letter. I decided not to enclose it.

August 8, 1935:

Yesterday, about 1 pm, Bob Hallet and I were returning from the lake and were almost at the camp. It was hot and sticky and I was carrying six large, slimy pike. I had carried a large, heavy pack, to be sent out, and had paddled against a wind until the pike had been caught. We had started back, along a new trail, which should have led us to the camp. After a quarter-mile, it didn't. We started over and, as I said, had almost completed the regular two miles of swamp etc. when I thought I heard a drone. I stopped. I heard my stomach aching, emptier than it has ever been. I heard my heart beat, for I was tired. Then I heard an engine, the noise rapidly increasing until I was sure. I shouted. Bob stopped. The Junkers swept over our heads, at 120 mph (I now know), the noise reverberating in our souls 'til we nearly died of joy, or the measles or something. It circled the camp twice, then headed for the lake. After a short consultation, "Someone has to go to meet him." "Yes, but it doesn't have to be me." Bob started off at a run to meet it, and I continued stolidly on my way.

Arriving at the camp, I deposited the fish in the sink and ate my lunch - a piece of dried toast. The boys were already packing and I went and did likewise, also collected Bob Hallet's stuff.

We hardly dreamed it was anything but "Get out" (and I did not relish the idea, because I needed a job and my back pay) but waited for word, sending off those who were quitting irrespective of the news. After a long while, one of the fellows came back, with another Bob (Campbell, who had gone out sick weeks before and whose pack I had that morning carried down) to say that the plane was bringing food, mail and pay. Great rejoicings!

August 17, 1935:

Dear Granny: In a letter which goes out on this same mail, if it ever goes out, I say I expect to decipher some of your letters. I did. They were very interesting, the best I have received. I don't know much about bass, but I could give you some lessons on catching pike.

I may be catching pike again soon, and re-setting my snares, for the plane is a week late again already. DeMille said in a letter that he would arrive August fifth or sooner. It is now the seventeenth. A telegram said a week ago today. Still no result. Our food is going low again in some

departments but it is not worrying us - much. Today was the first day of fall, or almost winter, for the north wind blew, cold and desolate, across the muskeg and the sun shone not forth. When it starts looking like this, summer is over and it is time to go back to home country.

My work is very pleasant and easy these days - some of the days. The first part of this week was so hot even walking made me pour sweat at every pore. And I was not walking. Digging in bottomless holes, or fathomless abysses, for rock that did not exist, and enjoying myself - like Hellen! I agreed with you about Kel slaving in a dirty city - counting water dripping from a pipe.

I may deliver this letter in person as I have to be home by September third, or by my birthday.

August 20, 1935:

Possibly you are rather worried? But what boots it? The cobbler of course!

Today it is raining, all day, with the maximum volume dropping per unit of time. Several inches in 24 hours, I bet. Dreary to say the least. Nay - even desolate.

It now seems quite likely that I shall deliver this in person. The plane came in on the seventh, over two weeks late. It is now over a week overdue again. As Granny says, all men are liars!

Plane just came in. I'll probably go out next, work until September first. Staying until August twenty-seventh anyway. Money assured to date, so all okey dokey. Love.

August 28, 1935:

The plane was supposed to take me to Collins yesterday but was held up by weather. Bad today too, so I don't know when I'll get out. When I do, I am going to take the train from Collins the next morning, wait that day in Armstrong, and get the fast stock train that night ("*Side Door Pullman*": *riding freight trains was illegal, but a common way of travel during the Depression*) and arrive in Capriol the next day. If it is early, I shall continue that day by rule of thumb, waiting for cars at gas stations, I guess. If late, I shall probably see Kel that evening and start the next day. Am carrying lots of money and intend to live well (*for example, I spent \$2 for bed and breakfast*). Have to be home before the third.

I have stopped working and am at the trading post waiting for a plane. Check for \$153 for work here. Paid \$66 before (*for Manitoba*). May get \$24 more.

August 29, 1935:

Fine day. Plane should be in this afternoon. Last night at Hudson Bay post listening to radio and playing bridge with the HB trader, inspector of mines, and forestry service pilot.

Now in Collins, going out soon

Editors' Note: The author, in his submission, included items that were not in the Letters Home. We have decided to end this paper with the one that describes one of his last tasks at Fort Hope.

Disposal of Old Dynamite:

(This was an interesting part of our work, though too late for a letter home - I was busy!)

There was a log cabin on the Fort Hope property, with 200 cases of dynamite. They were so old that nitroglycerine was leaking out of every case. The government had been advised of this dangerous condition. The inspector of mines turned up August 22, with an Indian helper. (Both their names are forgotten.) Only the three Bobs were left at the camp (*Hallet, Sproule and Campbell*). We were quickly organized into a working party. The idea was to take the cases out about 50 feet from the cabin, pile three cases together, attach a detonator and a long fuse, retire to a safe distance and watch the explosion. I think we exploded three piles each time. The mining inspector did the most dangerous part himself - carrying the cases out of the cabin to where the other four could transport them to the piling area. He would not let anyone else into the danger of the cabin. We were advised to handle them carefully, for fear that a jar might cause them to explode. The cases were covered with a slippery slime, which got our hands filthy.

After the first blasts, we had convenient holes in the muskeg to put the next sets of three cases. Before long we all had splitting headaches, which anyone familiar with the effects of nitroglycerine could have predicted. Lowering a 50 pound case into the hole was hard work. My headache was so bad that I just let a case roll softly to the bottom of the hole. I was working with the helper, who watched it roll, knowing that his last moment had arrived. I did not believe it, having had some childhood experience with single sticks of dynamite found in a lumber camp, but he rightly had faith in his boss's word. You notice that I was right!

Luckily, it was my turn to be cook, and it was nearly mealtime, so I left the hard workers. There was a woodchuck in the cookhouse, and my memory of our starvation days made me grab an axe and go after him. After dashing around the room for a few seconds, I nearly passed out. My heart was beating at what seemed about once a second. The woodchuck went home and I prepared the supper.

No one could sleep that night because of terrible headaches - I suppose any doctor could have predicted that.

It was now obvious that we could not get rid of the rest of the dynamite that way. In the morning we prepared a large bonfire of sticks against the wall of the cabin and put two fuses, each 200 feet long, to oil-soaked rags. Then we left in canoes for the trading post. From a few miles away we looked back, expecting to see a BIG explosion, but there were only puffs of smoke going up.

This was my last day of work, so I never went back, but I was told that the cabin and the dynamite had completely burned away.
