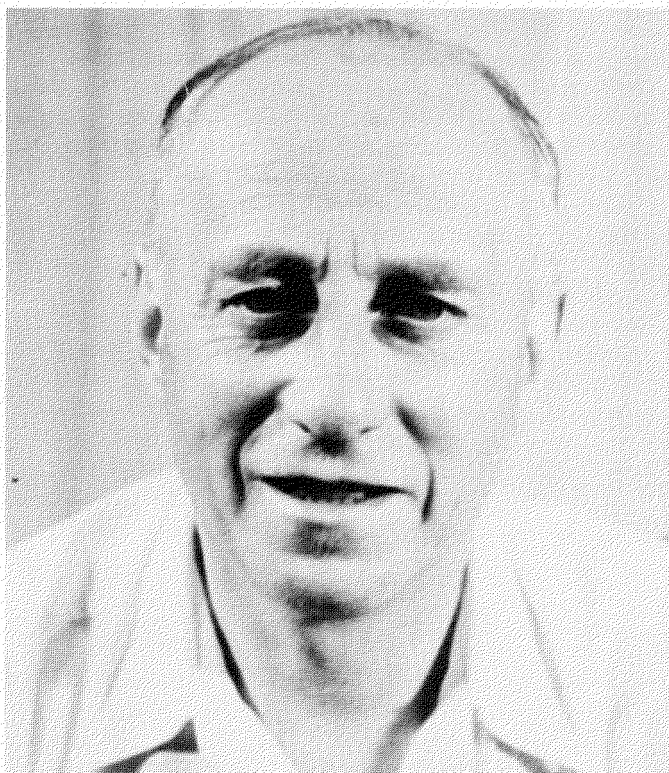


E.J. (Scotty) Gall

The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) had been in the North for centuries and continued to play a dominant role in the period following World War I. Scotty Gall, an 18-year-old growing up just outside Aberdeen, Scotland, decided there must be a greater future for him than working in a local foundry. So he applied for an apprenticeship with the HBC and came to Canada in 1923. This was the beginning of Gall's career in the North, which lasted until his retirement in 1966.

One of Gall's prized possessions is a silver box on which is inscribed:

Presented to
E.J. Gall
by the
Fur Trade Commissioner
Hudson's Bay Company
To Commemorate His Negotiation of
The North-West Passage
September 2, 1937



Navigating the Northwest Passage in 1937 was a feat still unknown to most Canadians. The more publicized trip of the *St. Roch*, the RCMP ship, in 1942, is generally regarded as the first Canadian transit through the Passage. However, Scotty Gall piloted the HBC ship *Aklavik* through the Passage in the course of dropping supplies to HBC posts in 1937. He admits his trip was not publicized because individuals with the Bay at the time did not see that it was in their interest to publicize anything in the North.

The trip of the *Aklavik* required a great deal of preparation at its home port of Cambridge Bay. The crew had to be prepared, for example, to spend the winter away from home if caught in the ice. The big drop of trading goods on this trip in late 1937

was to be at Gjoa Haven on King William Island, and then the target was to transit the Northwest Passage — Bellot Strait, on this occasion — by 1 September, before freeze-up.

After the stop at Gjoa Haven, the *Aklavik* headed up along Boothia Peninsula. Once it reached Bellot Strait, Gall remembers that "the ice was piled up on the reefs and along the shore, and the current was running pretty fast." At that point he saw an opening and "went for it!" The easterly run through the strait was successful, and the night was spent on the northeast end of the strait, at a location then known as Kennedy Harbour. They returned west through the Bellot Strait the following day, 2 September. Gall admits a certain amount of luck was involved, because their success depended largely on the nature of the ice and the accuracy of their dead reckoning. Nevertheless, the trip remains quite a tribute to their daring.

The *Aklavik* was 60 feet (20 metres) in length and drew 6 feet (2 metres) of water. It was powered by a 35 hp Fairbanks-Morse engine. While it was not a particularly good freighter, carrying only 40-45 tons of cargo, it was considered an excellent vessel for the Arctic. A few years after the 1937 trip, the *Aklavik* caught fire and sank off Cambridge Bay.

The voyage itself should be considered in context. It occurred before ships were equipped with radar. At the time, navigation was done by what Gall calls "instinct." He has an interesting philosophy about such instincts. For example, he has great admiration for the Inuit. Living for centuries in the region, they had developed an amazing ability to read the currents, tides, winds and weather. He recalls that when walking with them on land, they could detect far more than he could. Gall respected these skills and, not boasting, said that by 1937 he had developed the same instincts. His explanation was that many people in what are now the British Isles depended throughout countless eras on the same instincts. Their skills now, however, lie dormant from lack of use. In his years in the Arctic he feels that he was able to draw on these instincts and to develop them to a maximum while he was in charge of transport for the Bay.

Gall began his working years in the region checking books for many remote posts across the Arctic. At that time the mode of travel in winter was by dog team and sledge. In a season he would cover thousands of miles visiting posts. On one trip he traveled to Herschel Island, down to Fairbanks, back to Herschel, then over to Bernard Harbour at the mouth of Coronation Gulf. Obviously good dogs were worth a lot in those days, and he admired the abilities of his friend, the late L.H. Learmonth, considered to be one of the best with dogs. Learmonth also had met Gall in the Passage in 1937 on the HBC's *Nascopie*, contracted by the federal government for the Eastern Arctic Patrol.

While living in Yellowknife in 1958, Gall was appointed to the Northwest Territorial Council. At the time the council was in transition from being an appointed body to becoming an elected assembly. In 1958 there were five appointed and four elected members. In 1959 he was nominated to run in a by-election for one of the elected seats. He won that election, and in the general election in 1960 he was again nominated, winning that one by acclamation. In 1964 he was defeated in a very close race by Peter Baker.

This particular time was one of change in the North. The government in the 1950s significantly altered its policy for the



region. Between 1920 and 1950 government presence in the North was almost non-existent. Much of the public administration was carried out by individuals in the Bay, the Anglican and Roman churches and the RCMP. This low profile of the federal government began to change by 1953. Education, health care and housing policies were launched, and within a decade the government was present in abundance. The change was the product of a debate between two schools of thought. The first, for financial and other reasons, advocated that government policy should be minimized in the region, permitting the Indians and the Inuit to maintain a traditional way of life. The second school suggested that, like it or not, the North was changing, as was the lifestyle of its people. Advocates of this position argued that the residents of the region should have opportunities equal to those of all Canadians. The latter prevailed, and by 1958 permanent settlements were being constructed. This policy permitted officials to provide more extensive education and health services for remote communities.

Gall did not agree with all aspects of this policy. Having been involved in the fur trade, he felt that permanent settlements would induce changes that possibly could jeopardize the ability of hunters and trappers to market furs. Change, then, could affect the Bay as well as the welfare of the Indians and the Inuit. It could mean the decline of a source of income that gave people in the region some degree of independence. Gall's arguments failed to carry the day, and the communities became a reality, usually constructed around Bay posts or church missions.

Gall has a particular view on the role of the Hudson's Bay Company in the North. Was the presence of the Company good for the North? He observed first-hand both sides of the question. The Bay, as an institution in the North, did provide a great deal. It was a vehicle for marketing furs, providing income for native

people. And at the same time the factors in each post had a budget for relief, and the RCMP could requisition rations for destitute families. One must remember that prior to the 1950s times were often tough, especially during severe winters, when game was scarce. At the same time, the Company had a monopoly during most of those years. There was little competition for selling furs and frequently individual trappers did not feel they received a just price for their products. Gall knows there were problems but feels that for the most part the factors were honest and did the best they could for individuals in and around their posts.

Over his 43-year career in the North Gall had a variety of responsibilities. During World War II he ran a radio station at Cambridge Bay. There he turned in daily weather reports vital to tracing weather systems across the Arctic that could affect flights from Canada to Great Britain. After the war he ran a number of stores for the Bay in Yellowknife.

Scotty Gall spent the bulk of his working life in the North. Now, however, he is living in a beautiful setting in Victoria, where I visited him last summer. Over the years his accomplishments have been a part of the history of the North. One of these accomplishments, his trip through the Northwest Passage in 1937, may be one of the best kept secrets in Canada. Interestingly, that trip by a Canadian was not only noteworthy in itself, but in addition it demonstrated survival skills honed in an extreme climate. With technology what it is today, Gall may be among the last of a generation with the opportunity to acquire and use those skills.

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