

## To Great Slave and Great Bear: P.G. Downes's Journal of Travels North from Ile à la Crosse in 1938 [Part IV]

Edited and Introduced by R.H. COCKBURN<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** The narrative of P.G. Downes's trip by canoe, boat, and plane from Ile à la Crosse to Great Bear and Great Slave lakes in 1938, in which he presents a detailed account of his feelings, thoughts, and experiences, as well as his observations on individual men and women, northern lore, and geographic characteristics of the region. The journal will appear as five installments in *Arctic*.

**Key words:** Ile à la Crosse, Lac La Loche, Swan Lake Portage, Clearwater River, Athabaska River, Slave River, Fort Smith, Great Slave Lake, Mackenzie River, Great Bear Lake, Eldorado, Cameron Bay, Yellowknife, Chipewyans, John Hornby, George M. Douglas, Paul "King" Beaulieu

**RÉSUMÉ.** Voici le récit du voyage par canoë, bateau et avion de P.G. Downes à partir de l'Île à la Crosse jusqu'aux Grand Lacs de l'Ours et des Esclaves en 1938, décrivant en détail ses sentiments, ses pensées et ses expériences, ainsi que ses observations sur des hommes et des femmes particuliers, le folklore du nord et les caractéristiques géographiques de la région. Ce journal paraîtra en cinq épisodes dans *Arctic*.

**Mots clés:** Île à la Crosse, lac La Loche, lac du Cygne Portage, rivière à l'Eau-Claire, rivière Athabasca, rivière des Esclaves, Fort Smith, Grand Lac des Escalves, fleuve Mackenzie, Grand Lac de l'Ours, Eldorado, baie Cameron, Yellowknife, Chipewyans, John Hornby, George M. Douglas, Paul "King" Beaulieu

Traduit pour le journal par Maurice Guibord.

### August 17th

Overcast, wind NE, very cold. We fetched the inner bay at Eldorado early this morning. Up and about. Helped Alex the cook with the dishes and then set out to see things. The surrounding country enclosing the bay is high, glaciated, sparsely timbered if at all, and extremely broken up and rugged. Eldorado is on the north side of LaBine Bay [Fig. 27]. The actual mine is not particularly impressive in appearance, red frame bunkhouses & rather small general set up. About 100-125 men employed. The main shaft is now on the 800' level. Another shaft at the "Gulch" is at the head of the bay, and in time drifting from both shafts is theoretically to connect, as it is believed the #1 vein runs between the two. I wandered about and met Parsons (G.S.C.), who is visiting, the Doctor, and eventually Mr. [E.J.] Walli, the head of the works, a surprisingly young chap & very agreeable. Average 85 to 125 tons a day mill handling. 300 M. gal. Norman oil used per annum. Shortage of fuel oil limited operations last year, but now they have adequate supply

and reserve. His story of the actual prospecting and find, briefly: LaBine was attracted to the area by [James Macintosh] Bell's [G.S.C.] report [of 1901], and the search was for silver (as suggested by Bell). Flying from Sloan River, 30 miles north, where he was prospecting, he saw the "breaks" (faulting) in the hills & decided to investigate. Came down here with dog team & canoe & spotted the find and *recognised* the pitchblende! Three main veins are receiving attention: no. 1, the main shaft; no. 2, roughly parallel; and no. 3, also roughly parallel. These dip at 73° (with varying levels off that) and follow the strike. Was introduced all around, and of course immediately forgot everyone's names. Walli told me the concentrate bags were valued at \$250-\$350 each. Later in the afternoon Larry Noble (1st cousin to Reg Noble, the hockey player) invited me up to his room. The big bunkhouse has small rooms, like a dormitory. There was quite a gathering, with Captain Bryne (the skipper of the *Great Bear*), MacPherson his chief engineer, old Jim Stuart the Purser, & many others. Scotch, Rye, Rum, and Gin were at one's choice. By the time I left, the captain was pickled. Larry, Gordon Spence, and I went over to Cameron Bay, taking Father T. & Mâlo with us. We had a terrible time with the kicker, which balked & went dead innumerable times. It was blowing from the NE and penetratingly cold. The Indians were camped on the point just before reaching the settlement — right on the bare and exposed rock. We left Turcotte & Mâlo after Larry had reeled about, embracing as many as he could. The kicker went permanently dead, but fortunately someone came along and towed us in. Cameron Bay, as it is known by everyone, or Radium City, as it once called itself, or Port Radium, as it is officially named, is a ghost "town," a relic of the radium rush. Now has 16 people. After going the rounds we ended up at the "Gardner Hotel" [Fig. 28], where we had a fine meal (eggs, bacon & spaghetti). The inhabitants are the wireless man, the HBC man, the police, & the bootlegger — old man [Martin] Gardner. We and others downed two quarts of gin and one of Scotch, and my training at school stood in in unfortunate good stead, for I



FIG. 27. LaBine Point, looking west.

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, The University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada E3B 5A3  
©The Arctic Institute of North America

remained obstinately cold sober. Larry had amassed 2300 dollars which he then lost by degrees in poker this year, so he has to stay in. He and Spence cleaned the Indians at Franklin out of all their Treaty money and even took the moccasins off the feet of some of them. Bolstad came in and we had a bit of a reunion, with lots of chat on persons in the Eastern Arctic. At last I turned in, and was sleepily surprised later when a very tall gentleman in long underwear climbed into the same bed — but was too sleepy to protest. Due to get up & away at 4 a.m. as I am to go through the mine with the mine captain, Cam Barrett, tomorrow at seven. The last muskox was killed nine years ago over toward the Coppermine. Two years ago the caribou were very plentiful here.

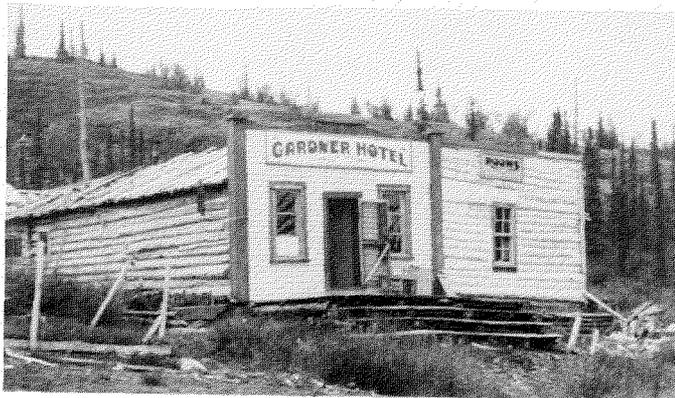


FIG. 28. The Gardner Hotel, Cameron Bay.

#### August 18th

Overcast, wind light NE. Got up at 4 a.m. and came back with some fellows to Eldorado. A very cold trip in the grey early morning. Went into bunkhouse to get warm, and talked with Nere Robert, a Frenchman from Montreal and one of the only old timers left in this part of the country. A great friend of Hornby's. He has trapped around the lake for years. Now working on the night shift. Later went to Barrett's office and outfitted to go down in the mine. This was a most interesting experience. I put on rubber boots, another coat, and a wide leather belt; to this latter is attached the metal case holding the battery for the lamp. A rubber tubing goes up the back, and the lamp is fixed to a helmet made of a bakelite material — very light. With Barrett, Murphy, Ross, & another chap, we set out.



FIG. 29. "The Robert children."

A tunnel runs in some ways & then we got in the hoist, a small metal elevator, and started down. [The visit to the underworld is described.] We came to the surface and dispersed. After this I climbed about, taking pictures and studying the shoreline to the north, which is in the paleozoics, though points of the east shore appear Precambrian. Some time later I went over to Robert's tent with some flour so that his wife might make me bannocks. We chatted at great length about the North, particularly its once famous characters. Prof. [Cornelius] Osgood who did the work on the Bear Lake Indians is a great friend of Robert's. Robert's wife is a pure Hare Indian — a fine looking woman. He has five children, bright, clean, and very attractive [Fig. 29]. He says a good trip would be the Anderson River — feasible in a summer. The Gravel is a tough trip but might be done. It was pleasant there in his tent with the children playing quietly about; they were having a fine time with a dead Whisky Jack. The story of old "King" Beaulieu of Resolution would be a fascinating one if ever untangled. The original Beaulieu was an emigré and titled gentleman who came into the Mackenzie country at a very early date and organised and dominated the Indians. He left many descendants — some Beaulieus there today. It was either he or a descendant who was Mackenzie's guide down the river. Scotty Campbell, the chap who came down the Gravel from the Yukon, married Mona, one of the Bear Lake Indian girls and local prostitute for the whole mine, today. Later back to Larry's room for chat.

#### August 19th

Rain, and more rain. Got up late to find it raining hard. The *Great Bear* came in last night with a bunch of logs; surprising, the size of them. Went over to Robert's tent to visit and get my bannocks. They kindly invited me to lunch. Delicious lake trout & herring, the latter cooked in a sort of hot cake — most wonderful tasting. Mrs. Robert (Christine) showed me some of the gloves & moccasins she is making of white caribou and mouse[?]skin for Harry Snyder; exquisite work, the most beautiful silk work I have ever seen. I had a long chat with Nere on a variety of subjects, the most interesting of which concerns the discovery of this spot. The true story of this find is one probably never to be actually revealed. I have long been aware that there was something amiss. It seemed inconceivable to me that one would stumble on the find as LaBine is supposed to have done. I had been sure some lead had gotten out. These facts bear examining. LaBine prospected Hunter Bay the year before for copper. He flew in to the point in February and staked it. Charley Sloan, an old timer (Sloan River is named for him), had sent out samples from this point which, from the government report, were copper-bearing only. [Hon. W.A.] Gordon, Minister of Mines, lived next to LaBine; and it was shortly afterward that LaBine came in. That fall, Robert, Sloan, and [Bill] Boland (a trader) passed this point in a schooner and Robert & Sloan wished to stake the point, but Boland would not stop. Later it was an Indian who traded with Boland who led LaBine here. But previous to all this is the intriguing fact that Hornby, who often camped around here, had sent in specimens from this area to the Government at Ottawa, and that it was after his death that the LaBine strike was made. Robert, who was involved in the Sloan angle, is in possession of considerable information on that side of the story, but is reluctant to reveal it. There are several possibilities: certainly it is plain that the information on this spot was definitely *known* by someone in the

government *before* the staking, and that the LaBine version of his find is to be regarded with greatest scepticism. [This matter exercised Downes for years. The simple, non-conspiratorial, and widely accepted explanation is that LaBine's reading of Macintosh Bell's G.S.C. Report led him to his El Dorado (Camsell, 1937; Finnie, 1942; Price, 1967; Peet, 1983). For what it may be worth, however, Hugh S. Spence, who had examined LaBine's first pitchblende samples for the Mines Department in the fall of 1930, and who knew Great Bear Lake well, wrote the following on 15 January 1957 to his friend George M. Douglas, who in turn sent the letter on to Downes: "Despite what has so often been said, and written, Gilbert LaBine has always disclaimed that the Geological Report on [Bell's] trip had anything to do with his own discovery of the pitchblende at LaBine Point — I rather gather he had never even read it . . . or so he says."'] Snyder is going to hunt Grizzlies with Robert this April up in the Deagle River section of the north shore. I should make every effort to contact Snyder [a New York financier], who also is collecting data on Hornby. The Richardson Bear is still to be found. Turcotte has not come over; I am not sure whether he has set out for Hottah Lake or not. I hardly think I have time to get over to Hottah and back, much as I would like to go, as ten days at least would bring me in pretty late. Mrs. R. has made me some fine bannock. There are reported to be caribou around Lac des Bois-Charlietu all summer. One year a polar bear was killed on the north shore of the lake. I believe the Anderson would be feasible enough, providing one could get some sort of transport along the coast. I am anxious to get over to Cameron Bay but have no means of transport. However, if the plane pulls in tomorrow, it will be essential to get over there. I am fed up just hanging about the mine, but find the R's a pleasant relief. A tarp with mosquito bar attached would be an excellent rig. Robert tells me there is a column erected by the Franklin expedition near the graveyard. Ran into a chap named Bud Hartman who, oddly enough, is quite familiar with my old home, Windsor Locks [Connecticut], as he worked in tobacco in the Conn. valley years ago! [Hartman ran the crusher in the Eldorado mill.]

#### August 20th

Reminiscid with Hartman and saw his admirable collection of photographs. He has spent nine years in the country, particularly around Aklavik. Told me he and [David] Irwin started from Fort Norman. He had hand sleigh, Irwin dogs. Spent several days at Franklin, then Irwin pulled ahead, only to become lost on way to the mine. Later he was lost and found on the way to Coppermine. Says Irwin had absolutely nothing to do with the *Speed* explosion, that he was working at the B.E.A.R. mine, Contact Lake, and knew nothing about it. [*The Speed*, a schooner, caught fire and exploded on Great Bear in September 1936: see Peet, 1983:92-96.] But he was frightfully dirty and had an inhuman appetite. ("Yukon Jess & the Pentage Fortune") [This cryptic note of Downes's warrants illumination. In 1935, "Yukon Jess," a woman of formidable size who had begun her enterprising sexual career during the Klondike Rush and had later run a Yukon brothel, arrived in Cameron Bay with two (much younger) *filles de joie* in tow. Seduced by poetry — "Elbonanza," "Eldorado Gold Mines" — she anticipated a profitable commerce in what she assumed was a woman-starved boom town. Alas, like many another northern adventurer, she overestimated both her opportunities and her luck. Customers

were too few, there was little money and no gold, and her acolytes — they were known as "Zip" and "Zoom" — deserted her for men with whom they escaped from Cameron Bay; shortly thereafter, Jess herself departed Great Bear and the eye of history (see Peet, 1983:112-113). Regrettably, "the Pentage Fortune" has eluded investigation.] An amusing anecdote. [Andy] Robinson, Larry's roommate, who is about to go out to be married, received a message from his affianced at Christmas over the Northern Messenger Service: "To My Dream-Boy of Eldorado." Of course everyone listens in. He has since been known to one and all as "The Dream Boy!" As one can imagine, in this outfit of tough miners no mercy was shown. A cold, bitter, miserable day. I am desperate to get out and over to Cameron Bay but have no means of getting there. Incidentally, before closing this 3rd volume of the journal: my various ailments have disappeared. Robert told me that Hornby was a marvelous cartographer; his map of the Taltson was a very accurate one. Hartman told me of most curious mountains west of Aklavik — high, precipitous, and *flat-topped*.

#### August 21st

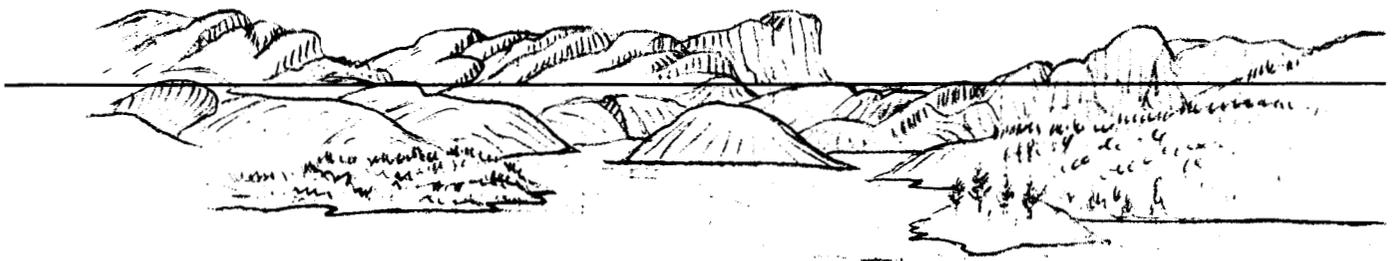
Raining, overcast, wind NE. Wandered about, making several trips to the wireless station to get data on the plane which was to have arrived yesterday. However, it is blowing so hard and is so rainy and nasty that it is doubtful whether the plane will come at all. Nothing heard about it at the radio station. I am most anxious to get over to Cameron Bay. Ran into Barrett. He was curious to know where I've been eating. It is the custom to eat with the men, but as I have my own grub supply I prefer to remain independent, and so eat bannock among the oil drums down near the shore. Mrs. Robert made me some fine bannock which I have been enjoying along with a mouse which I scared out of the bag yesterday. The weather is extraordinarily foul. In the afternoon the little schooner *Royal Flush* appeared, bringing the preacher over, and I decided to jump aboard her. She is owned by an interesting old chap, Jack Raymond, veteran of the Yukon days — married to a Yukon native & with one son, John. He had spent a good deal of time at Aklavik and knew Scotty Gall & [William "Paddy"] Gibson. He came over the divide from the Yukon via the Peel. *And* to my surprise, he is originally from Connecticut, down near my own ancestral haunts — South Norwalk! So we chatted about Long Island Sound and oysters. He has spent considerable time about the lake and had some telling observations on the natives. I have previously mentioned, perhaps, the exposed position of the native camp here on the rocky point. He tells me this is characteristic of them whenever they go on the lake. They will *not* go into the bush to camp if it is possible to stay out on an exposed point. The only explanation I can think of is the ancient fear of the Eskimos, and therefore this habit is a deeply ingrained practice which still persists. I bade au revoir to Larry and Robert but left too precipitously to do same for Barret & Mr. Walli. However, as the latter did little for me I felt under no obligation. We had a rough sea going over. I was amazed at the high size of the waves — really astounding — regular ocean rollers, very steep and enormous. The *Royal Flush* (which received its name from being won at Aklavik on just that hand) is a stout little schooner and acted like a duck. We were soon around the point and in. I went up and had a cup of tea with the Raymonds and chatted about the Yukon, and Aklavik, and the local Indians. He says he has never seen people who can stand the cold the way these can.

They rarely if ever wear skins, and the temperatures and winds on this lake are terrible. They handle nets bare-handed in the bitterest of weather. Both women & men are thinly dressed, and they are primarily fish eaters. They are inveterate gamblers, gambling anything and everything, poker being the principal game. They still have a good deal of conjuring and making medicine. He said that moose were plentiful up in back of their camp on Caribou Point. I have made several corrections on the map relative to local names and such. Later I went down to the RCMP barracks to see Bolstad, and we passed the evening very pleasantly talking of the Arctic and general northern lore. I wish I might remember all the stories that went back & forth, for there were many, and many a lurid tale. I talked about the Gravel with Sammy Campbell, who is pulling out with his new wife, Mona (Monique). He said the route was quite impracticable from this side as the Gravel is very swift — 5 to 6½ mile current all the way from the head to the mouth. He came over with dogs to the pass through a high plateau country with streams running north and south. The Gravel itself has a 350-400 mile course. Lots of game; sheep and moose. Said he never saw so many sheep in his life as back on the plateau. Unfortunately he was — as I say — pulling out, so I was unable to gain much information beyond the merest gleanings. Went into HBC store and bought a pair of stroud and mooseskin mukluks for E.G. for seven dollars. I should ask Mrs. Raymond to make me a cartridge bag, Loucheaux style. Cameron Bay may be a ghost town, but to me it is infinitely superior to the drabness of Eldorado [Fig. 30]. From

and urinated on her. An unsolved mystery of Harrison is the total disappearance of five Huskies who went inland to hunt deer and never returned, although their dogs did. The Huskies' rather nauseating habit of eating their own mucous is not unfamiliar to me, but Bolstad had the prize when he told of camping near Cape Smith and, while eating oatmeal, seeing a mother orally remove the mucous from the upper lip of her child — a horrible but quite true tale. Old Jack Raymond told me that the Five Finger Rapids on the Yukon are quite exaggerated and that one could go from Whitehorse down in a rattling canoe with no trouble at all. He says [Pete] Norberg's fur was to a large extent made by incorrect entries in the HBC's books: Norberg of course made an enormous stake one year. Raymond had the delicious story of the chap (I think at Baillie) who made a fortune on 3 frozen foxes. The only other people at the post were the missionary and his wife, and every day he would go out by a circuitous route and, coming back, would take pains to stop at the missionary's shack. Always he would have one, two, or, on occasion, three foxes. Day after day he did this, with of course comments from the missionary and/or his wife on his luck that day. Eventually, when returns were made and the District Manager came through, he personally was on the books for a very, very tidy bunch of fur, several thousand dollars' worth. He was accused of misappropriating some of the furs brought in by natives, which he stoutly denied, and he offered as witnesses the missionary and his wife. To the DM's questioning of this impeccable source there was but one answer — a perfect alibi,

E.

W.



*Cameron Bay - looking South  
Typical rugged-fractured-glaciated topography  
of the area -*

FIG. 30.

Bolstad: the Eastern Cree of the Great Whale River region go in to Fort McKenzie [on the Kaniapiskau River, Ungava] sometimes. They are tall, thin, very long-legged men. They use only hand sleighs, pulled by a cord across the front shoulders, and carry a stick like a short balancing pole as they stride along [see Twomey, 1942: photo opp. p. 47]. Their speech is high & nasal with many "swish" sounds. They have great contempt for the Eskimos, and when a young fellow named Samson (I remember him at Port Harrison, 1936), who was partly Cree & Eskimo, married one of the latter, they raided his tent, dragged her out,

innocently and convincingly offered. Concerning the trial for the murder of [RCMP Corporal William] Doak and the HBC man [Otto Binder] years ago [at Tree River on 2 April 1922], Jack tells me that as the trial went on, a tremendous racket could be heard coming from the back of the house — it was the carpenter erecting the scaffold before the eventual victim was even declared guilty. They have had some curious deaths here. One chap worked for two years and a half over at Eldorado; he was scared of water, and never in that time visited over here at Cameron Bay. Eventually he did visit [in the

summer of 1937], and as they started back, just leaving the shore, he fell overboard and was drowned — sank like a plummet. [This was Joe Anguy, a miner from Rouyn, P.Q.] Another chap was working with a tractor, making a dock for the plane to tie up to. He was scheduled to go out on the next plane, but a pole he was dragging caught & whipped back, crushing his skull. I should not forget an incident which occurred in Robert's tent. We were eating dinner, the Robert family and myself — a fine dinner of boiled lake trout. Mrs. Robert, the hostess, had what these Indians consider the most delicate part of the fish — the inside of the head. The youngest Robert, a round little girl a year or so old who can just crawl about, was seated next to her mother. Mrs. Robert carefully extracted the eyeballs of the big fish and put them on a plate for the baby. There they lay in hideous nakedness; the baby clucked with delight, and, seizing one at a time in her tiny fist, popped them with satisfied gurgles into her small mouth. It is a note to bear in mind that these Bear Lake Indians seem culturally to be basically a fish-eating people. They never go far inland and jump always from bay to bay where fish are known to be — and will not hunt meat like real moose-hunting people; it's fish, fish, fish the whole year. They of course hunt inland when the caribou are near. In a good caribou year they do quite well supplying the mine with meat. At the invitation of [RCMP Constable Don] Bliss [Fig. 31]

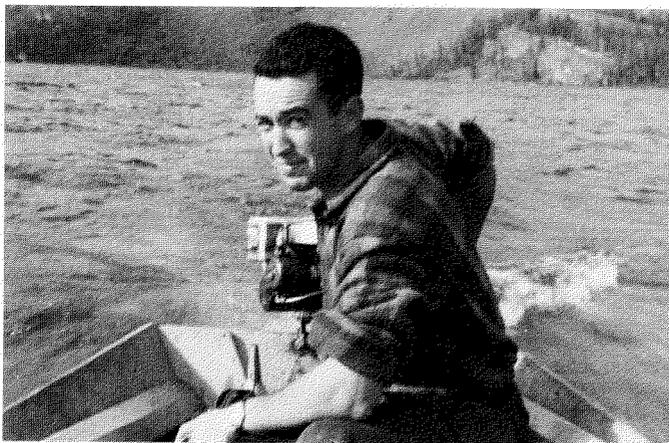


FIG. 31. RCMP Constable Don Bliss.

& Bolstad I spent the night in the lock-up. Turcotte is pulling out for Hottah Lake tomorrow morning, but I do not feel that I can rightly take the chance of going with him, much as I certainly wish to, or it would bring me in much too late: windbound & one day off means at least a week on this end, and possibly as much right through.

#### August 22nd

Clearing, alternately overcast. Turcotte pulled out in the morning for Hottah Lake. Nice to see the sun, even momentarily. Wish I might go with T., but time is too short to run risk of being held up and late. Late in afternoon the mail plane (Mackenzie Air Service) arrived. Mr. [John] Bartleman, District Manager of HBC, was aboard, along with two men for the mine and seventeen cases of whisky. I asked the pilot if they expected to be in Saturday and he affirmed that a mail plane would. He asked something about where I was from, and when I told him he exclaimed, "Oh, you're the fellow who paddled

down!" Apparently he knew of me somehow. I decided not to go out on this plane but to wait for the next one. It is pleasant here, and I have the time to put in. I am anxious to be in Milwaukee by the fourteenth of September and with good fortune should be able to make it, if I get any sort of a break at Yellowknife. In the evening we cracked a bottle of Scotch, and eventually followed that up with another quart. This all led to a very merry evening of convivial conversation. All in all a most pleasant drunk, and just the thing for my cold. I have one which I picked up, I am sure, from the Raymonds.

#### August 23rd

Overcast, warm, rain. Got up very late with bit of a head. Did not do much today. Boys went over to the mine to get the doctor, who had a prescribe for someone sick at Coppermine: he gave the directions over the radio. Don and I went to the nets; only three small trout and one grayling — or, as they call them here, "bluefish." Then went over to the island to feed the dogs. Oddly enough (and new to my acquaintance with the Precambrian), the country rock here is an ancient conglomerate, a coarse red sandstone with embedded water-rounded pebbles, some of considerable size. According to [D.F.] Kidd's report [Kidd, 1936] this rocky, rugged, broken terrain of the east side extends inland at least 50 miles. Quote: "The relief becomes somewhat less to the north and in the vicinity of Dismal Lakes; west of the Coppermine River and north of Great Bear Lake the irregular topography is replaced by regular scarped hills running west and northwest." Caribou Point itself seems low and composed of sediments. Jimmy Soldat, chief of this little band of natives, bought a child from the Huskies who came down from Coppermine last year for about \$10. Lots of ravens around here.

#### August 24th

Rain, clearing, overcast, rain, clear & cold. (Heavy frost last night.) Got up late to find it raining. In the afternoon we got in the little Police boat and headed southeast toward Bay 66, a long extension to the southeast of Echo Bay. We stopped to examine a spot where silver findings were reported but found no traces. Then we pushed on down to the extremity of the Bay where three abandoned prospector's cabins stand. Free silver has been reported on these claims, but though we searched all over the place we could find no real workings, just one pit with a few small malachite showings. I did pick up one float quartz piece with a nice bit of silver in it. The country rock was the characteristic ancient sediments — red sandstone grading to conglomerate at one extreme & very fine-grained red shale at the other. We roamed all over the place. I found the partial skull and single horn of a muskox, very old, and very large. It was much, much bigger than those that I had seen in museums or zoos. Odd that it should be away over here. The prospectors who cleared out left all kinds of stuff — axes, shovels, and a great store of impedimenta. The topography is the same — the high, fractured hills, exposing cliff faces to the east. And all the ancient red sediments tremendously glaciated, east to west. The spruce growth is heavy in the valleys & thins out to bare rock exposures on the heights. Saw a bald eagle. We boiled the kettle in an old winter campsite where I found a little pile of samples, some of them showing pitchblende. As we came back, it cleared to a

gorgeous sunset with the sun down behind the high cliff which forms the northern wall of Echo Bay. Glowing flames of clouds crowned the massive heights & the whole cliff face was shrouded in purple; high in the clear sky filmy tracings of thin clouds made an odd pattern. It was very cold. I found some fine raspberries & also wild currants & gooseberries. When we got back, some of the boys from the mine were over for their permits. "Mac" McLaughlin the accountant, some Finns, and

*the States. He said the outstanding thing was the amazing crudity of spelling.*



FIG. 32.

"Cowboy" Jack Webster [Fig. 32] — he wants me to look up a certain Chris Pottage in Boston, a tailor. Cowboy is a huge, jovial, very likeable chap; his picture is in [Edgar] Laytha's article on Eldorado [Laytha, 1938]. He has received voluminous fan mail since. Mac told me that since the Satevepost article they have received over 500 letters asking for jobs, principally from the States. He said the outstanding thing about them was the amazing crudity of spelling. Another extraordinary yet not so unusual coincidence: Don Bliss, who comes from Nova Scotia, used to go to Tabisuntac and moose hunt with Jack Wishart! That of all New Brunswick I should have visited and stayed with Jack Wishart on my trip there in 1933 is an odd coincidence. But I am beginning to become accustomed to these continent-wide mutual acquaintances. Inspector Martin, or as he is colloquially known, "Tiny," is expected in here within a few days.

August 25th

Very heavy wind and rain all night — raining this morning. We plan to go over to the B.E.A.R. Mine this afternoon.

Dominion Seal  
Dominion of Canada  
Department of Interior  
Dominion Lands Administration

To the People of the Country:

The Musk-oxen once were many in the Country, but unwise Hunters killed them because it was so easy to do so, and much meat was wasted because of all this killing. Now the Musk-oxen are few and if the unwise Hunter should continue to kill them, the Musk-oxen will be no more.

Therefore the Government commands you not to kill any more Musk-oxen so that they will live and increase and in time they will again be many and the wise Hunter will have much meat.

Ottawa 1st March 1934

H.H. Rowatt  
Commissioner,  
Northwest Territories

This extraordinary mixture of fatuous, patronising naivete is posted about in various public spots — sufficiently lofty so that no Indian can read it, sufficiently patronising so that no Indian would respect it if he could read. If by "the People" included whites, one would be insulted. This has been a miserable day of high winds and rain and we have all kept fairly close to the detachment. In the p.m. I went over to the Land Office with Ted and rummaged about. It is a monument to boom days, a great storehouse of official papers and all the vast impedimenta of a government office. Later came back, and after supper went over to the HBC to visit Mr. Bartleman, the District Manager. He proved to be a very jolly fellow — gave me a cigar. We chatted & reminisced about various mutual acquaintances. He has a tremendous district, the Mackenzie. He told me the traders from McMurray down the river had probably lost \$125,000 on debts this year owing to the poor fur year and low price on fur. He has seen a good many years of service — was boss over both [J.W.] Anderson and [R.A.] Talbot. We talked of many things, but mostly fur and the North of the fur trade. The more I see of the country the more I am convinced that its life-blood is the fur — that is, for the country & its inhabitants. Yet, and as he says, when mining, pulp, or such an industry comes into the country they are granted all kinds of concessions — yet what concession does the fur trade get? Suppose the \$125,000 debt were refused — the government would be forced to hand it out in relief. The whole problem is an extremely complex one. But even to one of my limited experience gross blunderings and governmental assinities are apparent. It was a most interesting evening. We had some good Scotch oatmeal cookies and cheese. Small note: the island where the dogs are kept was known at the first settlement of Cameron Bay as "Tin Can Island." As I came across from the store it was half-drizzle, half-snowing. Ted had some very amusing tales of Abe Broomfield (c.f. 1936 Eastern Arctic) when he was outside in 1927. For a man reputedly without testicles, Abe had some amazing exploits according to his own narration. Bartleman is a nice, mustachioed, little clear-eyed gentleman with a slight paunch and a veddy pleasing British accent. His cigars and sense of humour at short acquaintance seem excellent. He did the Providence to Good Hope part of this inspection by canoe — most admirable and commendable. The chap I met again at Resolution whom I had seen at Patchuanak and whose name I could not for the life of me recall was Rate, or Rait [W.A. Wraight]. In the Land Office were some old samples, some dandy silver, cobalt, and one beautiful grey, smoky quartz sample showing fine free gold

and marked, "Burwash, Yellowknife, 1935." [The samples would have come from Major "Lockie" Burwash: see Price, 1967.] A curious angle to Indian morality is the fact that none of the little band here would have anything to do with Monique because she was so promiscuous with the miners from Eldorado. Also, none of them would marry Lexi Tow-ya's sisters because he was cohabiting with them. But this all seems very finicky morality for these people and I am sceptical of these as causae. Ted's story about the Major's [Major D.L. McKeand] huff at the departure of the Governor of Greenland as "enough to break off diplomatic relations" was quite typical of the Major and very funny. "E.J." (E.J. Walli), the chief of the Eldorado is a curious chap. The boys call him "Brains" — or, rather, all the technical staff who live up on the hill are so classed. E.J. prides himself — according to the boys — as a great student of psychology and has a most annoying habit of looking at one for long, studied minutes without saying a word — just to see what one's reaction is. He tried it with me and I didn't like it: I dumped my underground paraphernalia down at his feet, turned my back, and walked out. What a place this is for weather! I am beginning to accept my decision on Hottah Lake, for if they are getting this weather they will be making slow progress and having a miserable time. I have seen pipits about. Must get some pictures of Don's vastly contrasting snowshoes tomorrow. [The contrast was between ordinary "bush" snowshoes and the much longer ones used in crossing lakes (Fig. 33).]

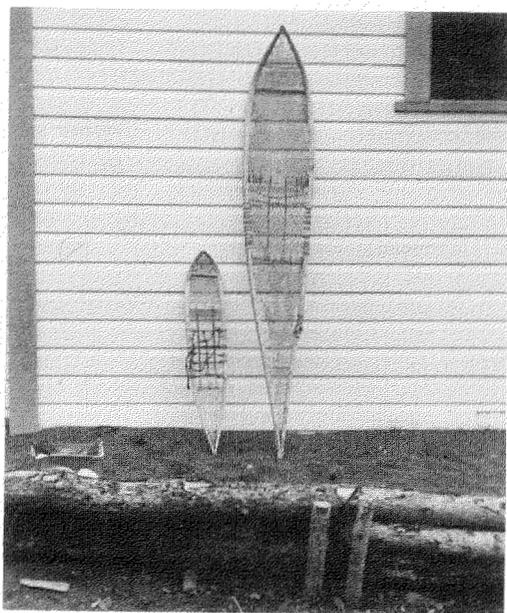


FIG. 33. "Bush and lake shoes."

#### August 26th

Cloudy, overcast, slight rain. [Downes suffered from his cold this day and did nothing of interest.]

#### August 27th

Bright & Fair! A fine, brisk, bright fall day. We all got up late and pattered about, then Don and I went to the nets, which contained herring, grayling, a whitefish, and some big trout. The herring look just like our native [New England] herring, but are slightly more silvery. Whether there are two or more distinct species of lake trout here I do not know; certain it is that

there is very distinct coloration. One type having the dark & light vermiform marking of a lake trout and white spots, while another type is silvery with practically no vermiform or spotted markings and looks almost like a salmon. After feeding the dogs we went on around Gossan Island while I trolled. They find the red and white "bass-oreno" most successful in trolling for the trout here. There has been some discussion of the size of the trout which have been caught. One fairly authenticated one weighed 47 lbs, was caught on a night line. Sixty — 65 lbs. have been claimed, and I would not doubt it. We came back expecting the plane to be in but there was no sign of it, and "Red" McLeod at the Signals told me he had heard nothing of it one way or the other. Visited with the Raymonds, who gave me a bowl of blueberries for the boys. Old Jack came to the Yukon in 1902. This is the first clear day in I don't know how long. I cannot be held up too long now without seriously jeopardising my chances of getting back [to teaching] on time. I should get to Yellowknife tomorrow at the latest and to Edmonton on the 10th, otherwise I may be set back another week beyond that. One very striking feature of the local topography is the enormous patches of oxidised magnetite and pyrites which have resulted in great, startling orange and yellowish exposures. The northeast face of Gossan Island is a case in point. I wonder if I remembered to write down Målo's account of the old time moosehunters and their marking the bottom of the hoof of a sleeping moose before killing it? The popular winter rig for the feet in this country is the stroud mukluk, a boot made of mooseskin foot & uppers of stroud, the top trimmed with fur; really a very pretty rig, as they are of variously colored stroud. They cost from \$8 to \$15. All native-manufactured stuff is expensive in this country. Gloves, \$12 minimum; caribou coats \$30, etc. A good trip would be from Rae to Lac la Martre, then on through the big lakes up to the bottom of McVicar Arm, across and on up to Good Hope Bay, and down the Hare River to Fort Good Hope. It being Saturday, quite a crowd from the mine came over, eight of them jammed into Martin Bode's little skiff. It is also the 2-weekly change of shift. Eventually they all showed up here roaring drunk and produced bottle after bottle of Scotch: incidentally, a bottle costs \$12.50 here. Everyone got noisier and jollier as the evening went on. Highlights: the blond young giant who bared a massive chest for any and all to pound; the little shaven-pated fellow dancing the Red River Jig; the startled young chemist-analyst from Notre Dame. The solemn pronouncement: "The Professor knows more about the North than anyone in this room." [Downes must have been "The Professor" — his teaching school and wearing thick glasses would have sparked such wit.] The midnight feast, and the final departure at four in the morning, with someone or other repeatedly missing, and the wailing cries and the staggering search parties, each of which would result in more being lost. How they ever got home I do not know.

#### August 28th Cameron Bay — Yellowknife, N.W.T.

Overcast. Awoke with a dull head and the noise of the plane. Up and about to investigate, and found it did not plan to pull out until after lunch; but, it being already lunch time, I had to work fast to gather my bits & wits and say adieu. I left my grub stake so as not to pay for excess weight — the grub which I had hoarded so carefully; left it in cache at the RCMP. Chatted with the Raymonds. Mrs. R. is to make me a cartridge bag. They are going to stay at Cameron Bay all winter. To the shouts of the

tiny waiting committee I went down to the shore, said au revoir to Ted and Don, Marcel Giroux, "Ceece," and clambered into the green and gold Mackenzie Airways plane with Mr. Bartleman, the only other passenger. With a roar we were out in Echo Bay — up in the air, and off to the south. The endless, indescribable world of thousands upon thousands of lakes amid bare, barren rock spread out before us. Here and there particularly luxuriant patches of sphagnum moss offered a spot of yellow amidst the sombre dark of the small spruce. The ancient sediments showed up as pink. Far to the west a blue, hazy escarpment of the paleozoics seemed higher than the endless flat terrain of the ancient Precambrian peneplain below us. I could see no marked relief or change in the topography anywhere to the north or east. On and on we went, over this endless profusion of lakes, this semi-barren expanse of rock and water. About two hours later we came down with a swoosh and pulled in to a camp of prospectors who were working some claims on the Snare River. The workings were not extensive. Then up in the air and on, to another landing at a spot called Mosher's Lake where we picked up another party. How the pilots ever manage to find these little groups scattered about as they are through this vast country, I do not know. Eventually we dropped down for the last time and taxied in to the wharf of the maddest town on the continent — Yellowknife [Fig. 34]. It is a little difficult to



FIG. 34. Yellowknife, 1938.

describe this extraordinary settlement; it is a jumble of shacks, tents, frame buildings, garbage, dogs, scows, canoes, boats, planes, and cordwood, all flung and spattered over and about a bare knob of rock. Tents, shacks and such hang & cling like flies to every cranny. It is a raw, tough collection of humanity. A



FIG. 35. "Meals \$1.00 at Yellowknife's leading restaurant."

hugh yellow unpainted hotel dominates the neat, painted HBC building — and the rough log "Wild Cat Cafe" [Fig. 35]. Poker games — the professional gamblers are in — and whisky are rampant. Faeces, all sewage, runs directly off the rock into the water, and garbage floats about the shore beneath the crazy slab catwalk around the front of the town. The drone and whine of outboard engines and planes is constant, and everywhere are men, young and old, clean-shaven, bearded, in every kind of garb, talking or just looking. Gamblers, prospectors, bums of every description, half-breeds, one or two whores. Store keepers transport men and dogs. There is certainly nothing picturesque — it is all too raw. I chatted with Don Farris at the M.A.S. building for a while and saw Paul Williamson (cf. Vol. I, Portage La Loche) at the HBC and then looked for a spot to camp. This I eventually found at the back end of town, down near the shore. I could not find any sign of my acquaintances of Waterways and Smith. Finally turned in, tired, uncomfortable, and lonely.

#### August 29th

Overcast. Wandered about, and to my surprise found the grey boat of George Skinner, Doc McColl & party and then, further surprise, found them. Chatted at some length. The whole party appears to be doing practically nothing but the odd small job. They made the trip from Smith in good time and with no particular incident. The story of the place seems something like this. Actual steady employment exists at the two mines, the Negus & the Con (Consolidated Mining & Smelting); these are absolutely filled up. They operate three or four miles below the town. The town itself is filled with odd-job hangers-on, gambling, drinking, waiting for something to turn up. When one considers that the country is staked solid in a 40-mile radius; that it costs 65¢ a mile to fly; that a license costs \$5, and that it is \$10 to register a claim — the actual prospecting, unless under organised control, is expensive. Meals are \$1.00 apiece. Everything is disproportionately high, and it costs so much to live that even with employment one is lucky to break even. No one knows how the ventures are going to turn out. Actually, not an ounce of produced gold has been shipped out of here. How much is surface, how much of a true ore body and stockwork of gold-bearing mineralised quartz there may be at depth is still quite within the range of speculation only. That no epidemic — typhoid or such — has blighted the place is a miracle. At noon I went with John Paulson over to his camp on an island across from the settlement and had lunch. I shall camp with him, and both of us are going back on the *Dease Lake* (the HBC boat), he to Big Eddy, myself to Smith. He is going to work in the sawmill there for the winter. He's been in the bush and staked 18 claims. The samples that I saw were quite fair. Poor old Doc McColl was about, feeling lower and more discouraged and out of place. Later we ran on Pat Burdick of the Kilsy Orlin [?]. He & his boy Bill are camped down near the Con. We visited there, and I wandered about the Con., which has a fine-looking outfit in progress and operation. Also I looked over the Ryan [Brothers] shaft nearby. Later we came back to the town — ran out of gas and were towed in by a fellow with a scow-load of logs. I have learned that the shifty, big-eared horse-thievish person and George [Skinner] stole over forty gallons of gas and oil and all sorts of other produce while at Smith. George seems an obliging tool for the hardbitten Jim, whose fortunes do not seem particularly good as yet. There is an extraordinary number of ravens

about. A great temperature change, much warmer, and none of the bite of the Bear Lake air. I want to get out of here and get moving. I hated to leave Great Bear Lake, but now that I am in this miserable place I should like to get south.

#### August 30th

Sat about hopefully, watching the *Dease Lake*, which we see from our camp. Tied up at the Con. docks; not moving, though she was due to pull out today. Further notes on Yellowknife. Prostitution is not on an organised footing. Two young ladies [known as "The Black Diamond" and "The Core Barrel": they had come in from Goldfields] have dignified the honorable and ancient vocation by hanging out laundry. However, some acquaintances of mine who have a tent next to the shack of one of them counted 22 callers the other evening, which would seem profitable, at \$5 a caller! It seems that most of the ravens in the North have with good opportunism congregated in these parts — what huge birds they are. The country is severely glaciated, and indeed is really one great series of reches mountannés, with the striation pretty much NE-SW or a few degrees south of that (true). I never had such a summer for strange ailments. For some time now I have had a sort of callus lump, like a corn, on the ball of my left foot, making walking most painful. There does not seem to be anything like a thorn in it. A sight of yesterday which is very ordinary was a gentleman in the post office sporting a scrubby black growth of beard and a large fur hat, knickers trailing at his ankles, and a bottle of rye almost falling out of his back pocket, who kept bawling (despite some women being present) in loud and aggrieved tones for his "g- d- f-ing mail, you c- s'er." I cannot get over the change in the feel of the air here. It was so warm I could not sleep comfortably last night; and now to sit in the sun is delightful. At Bear Lake, even with the sun shining one was struck with a constant penetrating chill. D'Arcy Arden and Jack Stevens (Hornby's partner) are both out in the bush prospecting. [Stevens is not mentioned in Whalley's *The Legend of John Hornby*.] Talked with a fellow named Staffanie [De Steffany] who traps up around Lac du Gras and in toward Back River. It is extraordinary how one's mind reaches back, and one wonders to what purpose. For instance, I slept poorly last night and had a parade of ancient friends going back to grammar school days — people like Neubauer, Earl Bryant, and Haddy Anderson and Crowley — childhood companions: how our paths have diverged since those days of 15 years or more ago. And, I suppose, how disillusioning and sad to see them all again. For one remembers them in all the bright aura of childhood days. The feeling is with me that somehow this year has been some sort of a turning point for me — for good or bad I know not, but the inexplicable hunch of that sort is there. I was badly spoiled by my stay with Don & Ted. Don was a remarkably fine cook — like Curry McArthur at Brochet [in 1937]. And I just stuffed. I find it hard now to put on any real brakes. If one wishes to develop the ability to starve, it is very disrupting to feed well for even for a short period as you have to start the process all over again.

#### August 31st

We discovered late in the afternoon that the *Dease Lake* had moved up from the Con., so we went over to the town and made inquiries as to her pulling out. With the usual vagueness, estimates ran from half an hour to twelve hours. John Paulson and I "took a taxi" — this is a veritable Venice in that there is an

active taxi business of skiffs, canoes, and kickers; went over to the Island, had supper, packed up, and rushed back. We were soaked \$2.00, chiefly because of John's stove, whose cavernous interior John packed solid with his belongings. I packed down his big knapsack and everything else — he said, "By Yeesiz, you can carry some load." After all our rush, the *Dease* [Capt. D.F. Smith] came around to the dock and began to unload her big barge. A little knot of us who had run into each other along the river gathered together for last farewells and advice: old Doc McColl the swindled, discouraged refrigerator man, George, and crooked Jim the card-sharp and ex-horse trader, and a few others — Pat Burdick & his wild son Bill were off getting wood. Well, the usual banterings, then we, John & I, climbed on the barge. The unloading was interminable but in its length very fortunate for me, for I fell into conversation with Andy Reid, the HBC manager here. A most odd chap, he has been in the Mackenzie District for many years. An extremely shy, soft-spoken, diffident little man, he had variously been at Good Hope, Simpson, some of the Liard posts, and lately of Cameron Bay. He proved to be a most interesting fellow and full of a variety of information of especial concern to me. It was my misfortune that at Yellowknife were congregated several of the men I was most anxious to see in the North, but they were all out in the bush — D'Arcy Arden, Jack Stevens, and, particularly, Hjalmar Hammar Neilson, who crossed to Chesterfield — Red Rock Lake to Rae — and a long series of extraordinary travelling feats. Andy said he was full of information on the country, animal & general natural phenomena & also routes, and is most obliging about divulging same, though expressing himself more fluently in his own Norwegian than English. He could probably be reached at Yellowknife, as he plans to stay in this winter, having turned to prospecting from fur. As an example of his prowess, he pulled out of Resolution with a couple of hundred dollars advance, and nothing was heard of him for a long time. Suddenly he appeared at Baker Lake with his fur, announcing to the considerable astonishment of the post manager [Archie Hunter] that he had a debt to settle, contracted at Resolution! A wire reassuring the Resolution manager was duly sent. [This occurred in the late winter of 1931. Neilson, Hunter remembers in a letter to the editor, "had some queer notion of bringing a blonde Norwegian girl back to the Barrens with him to — as he put it — originate a new race of blonde, blue-eyed people. All dark haired people were degenerate according to him."] Add to ancients I should not miss if given opportunity, old man [John] Firth at Good Hope — about 90 [he was then 84] and in the country for centuries [since 1871]. Married many, many years ago to a native woman and, despite the absolute isolation of the spot, maintained the solitary ritual of eating alone in the dining room while his wife & children ate Indian fashion in the kitchen *after* he had been served. Has a great knowledge of Indian lore, according to Andy. Andy told me the story of Jimmy Soldat's buying the child. Jimmy did some guiding for Stefansson around the north of Bear Lake (Horton River?). Anyway, Jimmy had apparently been talking to Mrs. [D'Arcy] Arden, who had been out to the hospital in Edmonton and had some information about orphans (there being no such thing among Indians or Huskies). That same winter Jimmy lost a child through sickness, and he came in to Andy. "You send to Edmonton for get me a baby?" "What kind, Jimmy — white baby?" "Yes — an' how much he cost, boy, to send in on plane — how much trade to buy him?" "Too much. I am afraid it would cost too much, Jimmy, to have a baby sent in by

plane." Later Jimmy went north to Lindsley Bay and some Huskies met the Bear Lake Indians there and camped with them. They were in very tough shape, as they had come all the way down from their Dismal Lakes camp and there were no caribou. Unexpectedly during the winter Jimmy showed up at Cameron Bay and came into the store and said: "How much small tent?" "Thirty dollars." "How much small stove?" "Ten dollars." "All right, I buy them!" "But what's the idea, Jimmy? — you got your outfit last fall." "I buy baby." "What?" "Sure, I buy Husky baby — for tent and stove." And that, my friends, is exactly what happened. Andy says the Good Hope Bay-Hare River-Good Hope route is feasible but to his knowledge has never been done by a white man; further, the Good Hope Indians are inclined to strike over from the upper river to the headwaters of the Anderson by a series of lakes. He does not know of the Lac la Martre route except for a few who use it to Providence. And of news-flash calibre: Bartleman was called out in a rush, as unconfirmed report has the HBC taking over the Northern Traders — the only really big opposition on the River. When Andy was at Simpson in the Lamson & Hubbard battle, the latter were taking marten at \$90 & rats at \$5! Andy likes the Liard Slaveys the best. The Liard is particularly noted for its Quill work and Providence for its dyed moosehair. There are a number of other details of information which I do not recall at the moment but shall include as they come back to me. By midnight the unloading was done, except for one three-ton, gleaming, bright, brand-new Caterpillar Tractor. The story on this shining monster illustrates admirably a very characteristic side of Yellowknife. A young, enthusiastic chap unknown to Andy bounced into the store and announced blithely he would like credit on two kegs of nails. He went on to enumerate his assets — said he had seven thousand feet of lumber and a new tractor on the way and other equally large sum investments. He rallied some friends to identify him, all of whom did so very willingly, saying he was sound financially, etc. However, they all refused to go credit for the *two kegs of nails*. Andy of course turned him down — and here was his brand-new tractor and he

without a nickel to pay the 7,000 lbs. of freight. The owner simply did not appear to claim his purchase, and after much head-scratching it was decided to take it down to the Con. and leave it on a barge rather than cart it all the way back! Shortly after midnight we slid through the Narrows under a brilliant Aurora, and Yellowknife slunk off in the darkness, with here and there a diffused light from a tent and a thin drunken caterwauling from some reveller. At the Con. we made a rather interesting maneuver illustrative of the natural resourcefulness of these skippers. Pushing a large, empty barge ahead, it was evidently impossible to swing the boat completely around to approach the wharf upstream, so we simply and literally ran into a nearby island with a precipitous rock side, and with the leverage of the bow of the barge against the island swung the stern around. Back at the Con. wharf we went through endless maneuvering — passing of cables, yells, intricacies of wire and rope hauling — to extricate one barge, get on forward of the barge we already had, and make still another fast to the shore. I shall not go into the great detail of this operation: suffice it to say, it lasted until 4:30 in the morning and I took a very active though not efficient part in the operation. The whole mess was handled by the mate (who gave orders), *one* experienced deck-hand, two youths working their way back up river, and one me. It is not the greatest of sports to man a capstan single-handed with a wire cable with the idea of warping a tug and 150-ton barge into a cliff, leaping over two wire cables on each round (of which I bet I made ten thousand). John very wisely had long ago found a quiet corner of the barge and gone to sleep. I was in hopes I might get a cup of coffee as I had been on a "little starve" for two days, but there was none forthcoming; when our maneuvers were over I eventually found a spot over on the floor of the barge and let my stomach search for my backbone until morning.

[Part V of Downes's journal will appear in Vol. 39, No. 2 (June 1986).]