

Albert Faille (1887-1973)

Albert Faille's life in the Canadian North was exceptional. Had his early years in Minnesota given him greater access to a formal education, he might well have achieved great fame even earlier in life. With the formal training unavailable to him, and with the firsthand experience he gained in the then-uncharted wilderness of the Mackenzie Mountains, Faille might have been a member of the Explorer's Club and might have attained public notice through writing and lecturing on northern Canadian land exploration.

Born in Duluth, Minnesota, Faille spent his early years working in lumber camps, guiding tourists on canoe trips in the lake district, and trapping fur-bearing animals in the winter months. After serving in the armed forces in World War I, he immigrated to Canada in 1927, coming directly to the South Nahanni River via the Mackenzie waterway and Fort Simpson.

Albert Faille was a simple man with no pretensions, a scanty formal education, and little knowledge of the academic world.



But he was an excellent woodsman, and having spent much of his life on inland waters, he grew remarkable in his ability to navigate fast-flowing mountain streams. An inveterate "loner" without being eccentric or irascible, he had an unerring sense of direction and would often spend the summer months exploring mountain passes and valleys.

In winter he trapped fur-bearing animals in order to pay for his supplies and equipment. Each summer in June, he came down the rivers to Fort Simpson, which at that time was an isolated trading-post at the junction of the Liard and Mackenzie rivers. He travelled by dog-team in winter; in summer, he walked overland with a pack on his back or canoed on the navigable streams. These explorations took him into areas where few, if any, white men had walked before.

Beginning in the 1950s, he appeared in three different television documentaries wherein it was suggested that his obsession was to find a lost placer gold deposit. He did indeed spend much time in that fruitless search, but those who knew him well realized that it was a deep love for the woods, the wilderness, and the fast-moving mountain streams that amounted to an obsession, rather than the search for gold itself.

Men who knew him, and who lived the same kind of life Albert Faille lived, were impressed with the quality of his character, his temperament, and his abilities. While he was neither a saint nor an exceptionally wise man, he was quietly self-assured, never allowing himself to panic and always cool in the face of danger, even in the most hazardous situations. He came near to death many times. In his later years, he sometimes used outboard motors on his travels. His mechanical aptitude in servicing these machines was amazing; he seemed, for instance, to have an intuitive understanding of magnetos.

Faille's temperament was equally impressive. He was invariably optimistic and always cheerful, a disposition that became manifest after he had spent extended periods of up to a full year totally alone in the bush. When he encountered his fellow man after these periods of isolation, his mental equilibrium, good humour, and downright sanity were noted.

His faults and shortcomings were few. He was perhaps overly sensitive to criticism, and he had an assiduous respect for those with authority, power, or great wealth. Quite understandably, he enjoyed the degree of fame that came to him in his declining years.

In retrospect, it can be seen that the contribution Albert Faille made to Canada's North was twofold. Largely as a result of press publicity he generated, public attention was drawn to the remarkably scenic areas of the South Nahanni River and its Virginia Falls. Canadian federal authorities took note, and following Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's trip into the region by airplane and river boat, the present Nahanni National Park was created.

The second part of his contribution was inadvertent and less obvious, but just as real and perhaps of a more profound importance: interest in Albert Faille and his life as a trapper, prospector, and explorer inspired several writers to record his exploits in the North. Both adults and children now know of Faille at first-hand through these accounts. The writings in turn have led to a more extensive and accurate picture of the life of a northern pioneer and have laid to rest some of the misconceptions of early life in the Canadian North.

At the age of 70, he still plied the waters of the South Nahanni River with his little wooden boat. He passed away quietly early in 1973 at the age of 86.

FURTHER READINGS

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