

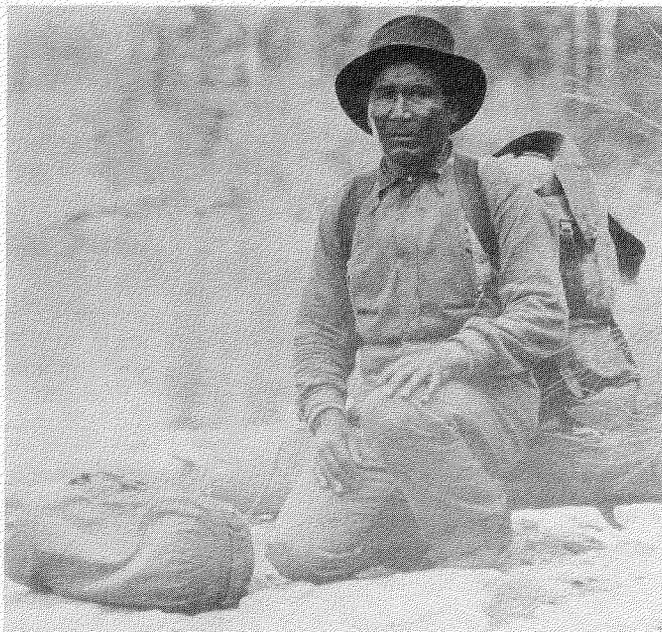
Ernest C. Oberholtzer (1884-1977)

It was a hazardous undertaking for you to go through that northern country with one Indian who knew nothing of it... and I heartily congratulate you on having made a good adventurous journey which will add materially to our knowledge of that portion of Northern Canada. (J.B. Tyrrell to E.C. Oberholtzer, 16 November 1912.)

In 1912 Ernest C. Oberholtzer and Titapeshwewitan, an Ontario Ojibwa better known as Billy Magee, made a canoe voyage of some 3200 km, during which they explored Nuelin Lake and the Thlewiaza River, N.W.T. This epic journey, more arduous and commendable than certain of the acclaimed explorations that preceded it, has remained all but unrecorded to the present day.

Oberholtzer was born in Davenport, Iowa, on 6 February 1884. At 17 he contracted rheumatic fever and was instructed by doctors to never indulge in any activity involving strain. He attended Harvard, taking his A.B. in 1907 and returning for a year's study of landscape architecture under Frederick Law Olmstead. But his one insatiable yearning was for the north woods, and he spent the summers of 1908-09 along the then still largely pristine Minnesota-Ontario border, traversing, with local Indians, "all the main canoe routes in the Rainy Lake watershed." It was there that he first canoed prodigiously and began a lifelong friendship with "the most wonderful Ojibway or any Indian I have ever known," Billy Magee, whose tribal name meant "Far-distant-echo."

1910 found Oberholtzer visiting Europe and England. He had worked briefly as a newspaperman in Iowa and also had spent the summer of 1907 composing a pamphlet on wilderness travel for the Canadian Northern Railway. The official who had given him that job now encouraged him to stay on in



Billy Magee.

England to write and lecture on the Indians and wildlife of the southern Shield. Oberholtzer did so; on one memorable occasion, as a last-minute substitute for the celebrated Central Asia explorer Sven Hedin, he recounted tales told him by Billy, illustrating his talk with lantern-slides of moose and the boundary waters canoe country. During that winter in London he read everything he could find about far northern exploration and "came across the works of J.B. Tyrrell, who was by all odds the greatest of all modern geographers." There and then, Oberholtzer decided to follow Tyrrell's 1894 route across the Barrens: "And my imagination was at work. I thought, well, there are probably other groups of those Eskimos [the Caribou Eskimos of the Kazan River] up in there. What that would mean, what a delight to be the first one ever to find them!" After serving as American Vice-Consul at Hanover, Germany, in 1911, he translated his dreams into action.

On 26 June 1912 Oberholtzer and Magee left The Pas, Manitoba, in an 18-foot Chestnut Guide Special. Their destination was Chesterfield Inlet, by way of the Kazan. Neither man had ever canoed north of Rainy Lake, and from the first Billy was unsettled by the prospect of strange Indians, far stranger Eskimos, and the treeless regions for which they were bound. He was 51 years old. Oberholtzer, 28, stood 5'6" and weighed 135 pounds. A month out from The Pas they reached Lac du Brochet, the remote HBC post and Oblate mission at the northern end of Reindeer Lake. There, as at Cumberland House and Pelican Narrows, they were warned against attempting so audacious a venture, especially since no guides were to be had. Undeterred, and with Tyrrell's map to steer by, they pushed up the Cochrane, then followed the Esker Lakes to



Oberholtzer, circa 1918.

“Theitaga” lake, today known as Kasmere Lake, just south of the 60th parallel. From here Tyrrell had gone northwest, to Kasba Lake and the Kazan. But it was now the 8th of August. Knowing of the hardships and perils Tyrrell and his men had experienced in navigating the coastline of Hudson Bay in open canoes late in the season, and realising that he and Magee could not possibly reach Chesterfield Inlet in time to get out, Oberholtzer chose instead to strike northeast, toward the Chipewyans’ mysterious “Nu-thel-tin-tu-eh,” or Sleeping Island Lake, where he hoped to find the vaguely charted Thlewiaza River and thereby make the Bay soon enough to get out ahead of winter weather. He and Magee now entered completely unknown territory, and Oberholtzer commenced time-and-compass mapping of their route. Following the river known today as the Kasmere, they entered Nueltin on 14 August. No white man had seen this enormous lake since Samuel Hearne crossed it in the winter of 1770–71.

Nueltin’s shoreline is indented with deep arms, tortuous inlets, and hundreds of blind bays; its surface, in places a maze of islands, elsewhere presents a canoeman with windswept traverses on which land drops from sight. Not until 28 August did Oberholtzer locate, at the lake’s northeastern tip, the outlet of the Thlewiaza; there he found also freshwater seals and deteriorating weather. Beset by high winds, cold, and hunger, it took the Rainy Lake men — who had not seen another human being since leaving Kasmere Lake — two weeks to follow the rapids-choked and desolate Thlewiaza to saltwater. There, at the river’s mouth, they providentially met a family of Padlemuits, with whom they sailed — not uneventfully — to Fort Churchill. A hazard-ridden passage by canoe to York Factory followed. Then came the stiff journey upriver on the Hayes to Norway House, which they reached on 19 October. Having missed the last lake steamer of the season, they had no choice but to turn south and battle wind, waves, and snow the length of Lake Winnipeg until they arrived at Gimli, where they took out on 5 November.

In our time, perhaps only the tradition-minded canoeman, one paddling and portaging a wooden canoe, sleeping under canvas, carrying the old staples of flour, black tea, and bacon, and packing his loads by tumpline, can come close to grasping the feel and achievement of an undertaking like Oberholtzer’s. Yet even such a traveller will be armed with accurate maps, is bound to find evidence of modern intrusions on the most remote of routes, and will become the target of an aerial search should he be much overdue at his destination. That Oberholtzer and Magee, complete strangers to the far North, canoed such a distance without mishap, and that the exploratory reaches of their journey were traversed without native guides, attests not only to their skills, fitness, and tenacity, but, above all, to the firmness of their friendship.

An unassuming man, Oberholtzer never published a word about his odyssey. So Tyrrell’s expectation that the American’s findings would “add materially to our knowledge of that portion of Northern Canada” came to nothing. The eloquent journal kept during the trip was lost for many years; found in an attic on Rainy Lake in 1983, it is now being prepared for publication by the present writer.



Oberholtzer at Mallard Island, Rainy Lake, late 1930s. All photos courtesy of Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation.

Ernest Oberholtzer devoted the rest of his life to the cause of conservation, indefatigably leading a decades-long campaign to preserve the Quetico-Superior country as an international wilderness. Concomitantly, he pursued his profound interest in the culture of the Ojibwas. Billy, for whom the Nueltin Lake voyage had been as much a spiritual as a physical journey, died in 1938. In 1963 Oberholtzer, still robust, returned to Nueltin by air and borrowed a boat: “With my own map made 51 years before, we had not the slightest difficulty finding our way. . . . We located the cairn and the very same tin container in which I left a note all that time ago.”

When he was a young man, keen to know their lore, Ojibwas had named Oberholtzer *Atisokan*, meaning “Legend.” Following his death in 1977, the children and grandchildren of those Indians gathered at his island home on Rainy Lake, made medicine, and placed the island under a protective and reverential spell.

FURTHER READINGS

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