

## The Rat Lodge Revisited

An interesting anecdote in the literature on northern exploration is given in Captain Sir George Back's *Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition to the Mouth of the Great Fish River* (1836). Those familiar with the book may recall with a smile "The Story of the Rat and Beaver" related to Back by his Dene guide, Maufelly, as the expedition was paddling down the west side of Artillery Lake in 1833, after having previously discovered Muskox Lake, the source of the Thleweechodezeth (Back River).

The eastern shore, though dimmed by a blue mist or haze, was occasionally visible, and the country began to assume a more wooded and inhabitable look. When we got to a long and rounded mound, about half a mile from the western side, I observed that both the Indians assumed a look of superstitious awe, and maintained a determined silence. I inquired the reason of this reverential demeanour; when Maufelly, after some hesitation, with a face of great seriousness, informed us, that the small island we were passing was called the Rat's Lodge, from an enormous musk rat which once inhabited it. "But what you see there," said he, pointing to a rock on the opposite shore, with a conical summit, "that is the Beaver's Lodge; and lucky shall we be if we are not visited with a gale of wind, or something worse. The chief would perhaps laugh at the story which our old men tell, and we believe, about that spot" [Back, 1836:166-167].

In the summer of 1984 I was traveling north along the west shore of Artillery Lake by canoe with Noel Drybones, my Chipewyan guide. When nearing the mouth of Timber Bay (latitude  $62^{\circ}56'13''\text{N}$ ), he pointed out to me the oddly rounded Rat Lodge (Fig. 1). Sixteen kilometres farther on we descried the imposing Beaver Lodge (Fig. 2), muttered the usual prayer for safety as required by Dene tradition, and continued on our way. I sensed that something was wrong regarding the relative positions of the lodges but could not put my finger on it until I referred to my maps. In one of them (Fig. 3) the Rat Lodge is set down as being on the west

shore of the lake at latitude  $63^{\circ}01'45''\text{N}$ , just slightly north of the Beaver Lodge, which sits at  $63^{\circ}\text{N}$  exactly.

However, there can be no doubt that the site of the Rat Lodge is at  $62^{\circ}56'13''\text{N}$  by the entrance to Timber Bay (Fig. 4), for it is there that the traveler sees the "long and rounded mound, about half a mile from the western side," as described in the narrative (Back, 1836:166). From the water it looks like a small island but it is joined to the mainland by a flat neck of land. In addition, further proof is supplied by Back's statement that "the country began to assume a more wooded and inhabitable look," which is certainly the case in the neighborhood of Timber Bay. On the west shore, where the Rat Lodge is presently believed to be, there are no features that conform to Back's description.

In the vicinity of Timber Bay, the true site of the Rat Lodge, the Beaver Lodge is completely out of sight, being 16 km

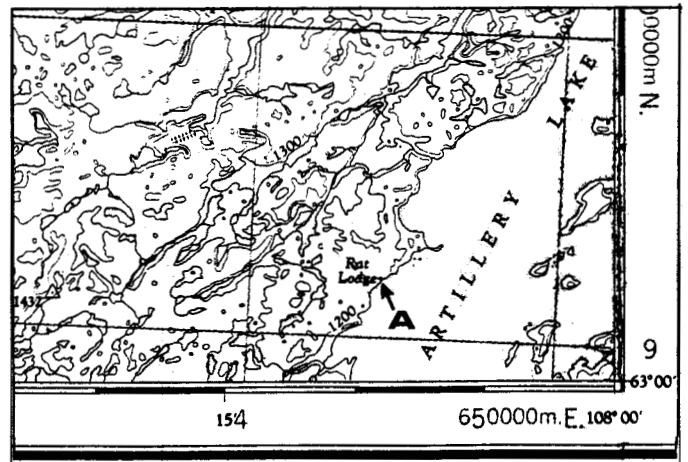


FIG. 3. Corner section of Topo. Map Series 1:250 000, Walmsley Lake,  $75^{\circ}\text{N}$ , ed. 3, DEMR (1955), showing reputed location of Rat Lodge (A).



FIG. 1. The Rat Lodge on the west side of Artillery Lake near the mouth of Timber Bay. Photo by R. Galaburri, 1984.



FIG. 2. The Beaver Lodge on the east side of Artillery Lake about 5 km southwest of Crystal Island. Photo by R. Galaburri, 1984.

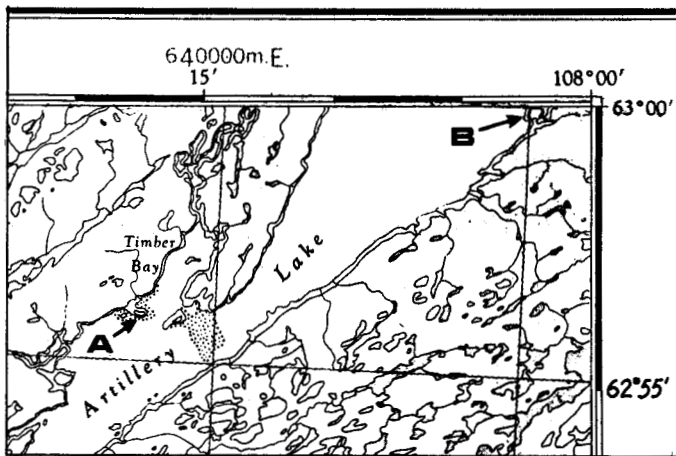


FIG. 4. Corner section of Topo. Map Series 1:250 000, Fort Reliance, 75K, ed. 1, DEMR (1964), showing true location of Rat Lodge (A) and site of Beaver Lodge (B).

to the north. Why then did Back in the above-quoted passage make it seem as though both lodges were directly opposite one another and visible to him at the same time? It may have been because it suited the presentation of the old legend. But this may not be the only reason why we find the Rat Lodge opposite the Beaver's on modern topographic maps. Another may be lurking in the folded map (Fig. 5) accompanying Back's narrative wherein the engraver has floated the name "Rat Lodge" above the place it should identify so as to make identification nearly impossible, thereby making it difficult for travelers to find the real thing.

Neither Warburton Pike nor David Hanbury mentioned the lodges in their narratives, but when James W. Tyrrell passed through Artillery Lake in 1900, he fixed the Beaver Lodge at 63°N on the east shore and put the Rat Lodge on the west shore on a spit of land at 63°02'15"N (Fig. 6), trusting in Back's narrative. E.T. Seton, who paddled up Artillery Lake in 1906, was suspiciously silent about the Rat Lodge in his book *The Arctic Prairies* (1911), though he gives an accurate sketch of the Beaver Lodge. Seton said he had "the absolute gauge of Tyrrell's maps" and simply traced Artillery Lake from the latter's surveys. Finally, the Surveys and Mapping Branch of the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources in Ottawa moved the site of the Rat Lodge down to 63°01'45"N for some as yet unexplained reason.

To recap, the Rat Lodge is not found opposite the Beaver Lodge, as shown on topographic maps. Its position is 16 km south, by the entrance to Timber Bay. The folded map in George Back's narrative does not clearly show where the lodge is situated and in the book the explorer makes it seem that both lodges are visible at the same time. From the two false Rat Lodge sites one cannot distinguish the Beaver Lodge (Artillery Lake is 6.5 km wide at the 63rd parallel), nor of course can it be seen from the true site of the Rat Lodge; but if the Beaver Lodge was also located in the latitude of Timber Bay, where the lake is only 3.2 km wide, then perhaps on a clear day one would be able to sight both lodges from the middle of the lake. This is not to suggest that the Beaver Lodge is actually so situated. Rat Lodge is distinct and Beaver Lodge is about 16 km away.

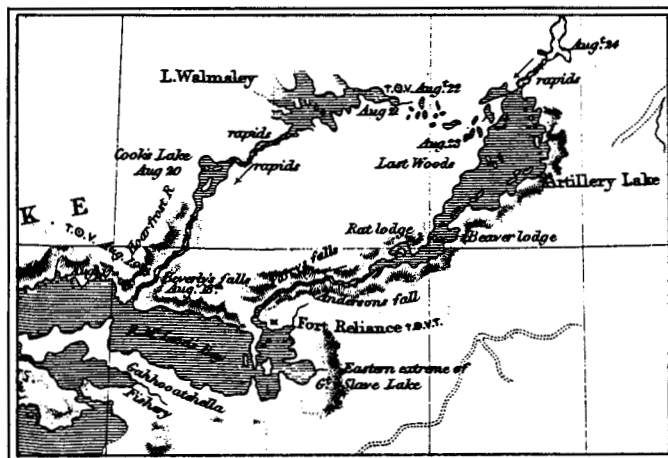


FIG. 5. Section of George Back's "Map of the Discoveries and Route of the Arctic Land Expedition in the Years 1833 & 1834" showing Artillery Lake with place-names of Rat and Beaver lodges.

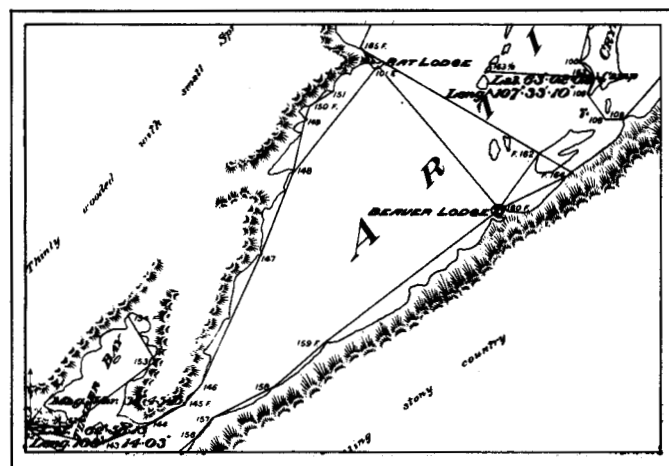


FIG. 6. Section of J.W. Tyrrell's "Map of Exploration Survey of Divide Between Great Slave Lake and Hudson Bay, District of Mackenzie and Keewatin, Dominion of Canada . . . 1900" (Sheet No. 2) showing part of Artillery Lake with place-names of Rat and Beaver lodges. Courtesy Public Archives Canada.

#### REFERENCES

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