

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

Edited and Introduced by R.H. COCKBURN¹

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 Esclaves, 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.

July 6th

Rain. Wind NW. Clearing late afternoon. Set out from Mosquito Camp at early hour; it of course began to rain the minute we got away. The faithful Coffee, still with no food, was untied and bidden to leave. After some time we passed the Portage La Loche: a flat meadow-bank, well scarred — an obvious portage. It occurs just above a sharp bend in the river with a high sand bank on the north side. The flat is backed by very bold, high relief. It was pouring so hard I could neither photograph nor draw it. I was most annoyed at not being able to get a picture of this spot — one of the highlights of the whole trip. I should like to see a map of this area. We must have struck far east of the portage and gone a great deal more than 12 miles. It had of course been my intention to go over the actual portage. But with these two and the canoe cached where it was, I had no say in the matter. After we stopped and boiled up, the rain abated a bit and we moved on. Rounding a bend, a huge limestone "castle" appeared, splitting the river. We crept down the north side and found the portage. Nigorri and I portaged the stuff while William ran the first rapid alone. Then we paddled across to a little island and portaged everything, including the canoe, again. This is called White Mud Rapid. After boiling past the castle-like rock, the water splits and goes around an island in the larger, left hand channel, breaking through a limestone canyon. This part of the rapid is *not* runnable even in a large canoe. About two miles further on is another rapid called Rock Portage. This one has the portage on the left, or south, side. This is a long double rapid. To run it, keep to left, or south, channel — left of a big island. This is feasible for a large canoe but poor to run in a small one. The portage is long and through a very extraordinary country. The latter part is in and out among an amazing group of eroded

limestone blocks, caves, potholes, and grotesque forms. You then come out on the flat, sandy, ancient beach — beautiful, park-like openings. We boiled up here. Lots of moose sign — one fresh track. On again to another rapid, Big Rocky Rapid, wide, gravelly, not choked or obscured by islands. The portage is on the south side. William ran this rapid by paddling over to the north side and crossing near tail of it to the middle & south side [Fig. 9]. This was the first rapid which I was able to see him running. He kneels in the middle of the tiny canoe, which bounces about like a chip. It seems impossible that rapids — and these have all been savage ones, could be run in a



FIG. 9. William, after running the rapids.

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canoe of this size and type even by one man. On the rapid preceding this, the canoe was quite wet inside, as was William. "Two wave he come in same time" was William's laconic reply. A quarter-mile further on, another rapid; portage on right (N) side. This portage is not as long as the others, which have been very long. This was run by William close to the north shore. Scarcely an 1/8 - 1/4 mile further, another rapid. This one bends around to the northwest. The portage is a very long one but a good one — dry and fairly level, 3/4 to a mile long (?) on north side. Beyond this one, the last rapid. Portage on right, or north, side. This can be run in a large canoe (16'), but William decided not to push his luck further, and portaged the canoe. These are known as Cascade Rapids. Beyond are two small shoal rapids, or riffles — and indeed, from now on these riffles are not infrequent and should be watched as to rocks, etc. At the end of this last portage we camped for the night, it now being sunset. It has cleared. There was a beautiful clear sunset and evening, with 2nd quarter moon — a lovely spot. In Rapid 5 William was knocked flat on his back when the stern of the canoe hit a rock. He must be a most adept fast water man to take this little fragment of a bark through these rapids. I regret that the canoe is not big enough so that I might go through these rapids also. Cool and clear, very few mosquitos. What a lovely river this is! The portages, as compared to those in the Reindeer River country, are long. In the Precambrian area the rapids are usually short falls or pitches over intrusive dykes — here they are long shallows over limestone (of different hardnesses? or cuestas?). I should like to see a geological map of this area. I could stay here for weeks. The thought that we shall be in at McMurray tomorrow is a wretched one. "Zet-swoizi" — "my sweetheart" in Chip. Though I earlier classed Nigorri as a rude sort, it is more due to his lack of English than anything else. He really is quite all right. Ducks and broods everywhere — mallards and mergansers particularly. [Downes concluded this entry with translations of 35 Chipewyan words and phrases.]

July 7th

Bright & fair — very hot. Last of portaging over, we set out and ran gently through some riffles. The escarpment seems to lessen in height, but then reasserts itself here and there. Toward noon passed 3 shacks and an abandoned oil derrick on south bank. Little streams coming in from north are so heavily impregnated with sulphur as to color the stream bed yellow and give off a very noxious stink of hydrogen sulphide. I drank some of the water — terrible tasting! William says that it is good medicine. It tastes bad enough for excellent medicine. Shortly after this we rounded a bend and saw several trappers' shacks. A man, a white man, was working on a boat. We stopped and chatted, and as it was noon we went up to his cabin and boiled the kettle. He had an enormous white cat as a companion. Told me of three American chaps who wintered just below here. His name Lewis Chenard (?). May see him at McMurray. Very bright and hot in the afternoon. The prospect of William and Nigorri getting jobs seems small; as is usually

the case, more men than jobs. I do hope they get something, as it is a long and arduous trip for nothing and a longer, more arduous trip back. Nigorri is a most curious fellow. He paddles bow in a relaxed and mild manner — and then every once in a while, for absolutely no reason at all, without warning he bursts into a fit of extraordinary furious paddling. Possibly an effort to keep awake. He has a bone which cracks audibly in his shoulder with each paddle stroke [see Downes, 1943, p. 93]. One striking feature has begun to appear, and that is beautiful open meadows along the bank. Just why these meadows luxuriant in grass and quite bare of trees should appear I am sure I do not know. They occasionally stretch a considerable distance back from the river. According to the trappers and William, there is a high range of hills or mountains to the north of this river known as the Muskeg Mts. Not rock but sand (possibly a large moraine). But for that, the country to the north stretches on very much the same all the way to Athabaska. We stopped to boil up as a thunderstorm threatened, and then occurred one of those unforgettable yet common incidents with Indians. A tiny baby spotted sandpiper was found under William's sweater; he let it go, but Nigorri caught it, pulled the legs off it, and threw it out into the river. They rarely miss an opportunity to kill if they can. The limestone as it now appears in exposure is crumbly, lumpy stuff — poorly bedded, very soft, seems just a step beyond a hardened clay and devoid of fossils — as far as limited observance can tell. William is quite amazed at the variety of objects which come out of my small pack: "So small — but so many dif'ren thing in it. Maybe you got a canoe in dere?" An extraordinary number of small birds flit along the banks — flycatchers, warblers, and such like. By all odds this has been the loveliest river in the North of my own limited experience. Lovely sunset, high, filmy cirrus wisps and some low, bloodied clouds. We stopped for night at a high bank on S. side at a very evident elbow in river. Someone was already camped, as a tiny birch bark hunting canoe was tied up. It was a half-breed from Portage, Jules Fontaine — pronounced "Jell Fontin." The mosquitos were thick and voracious. The camper was on his way back to Portage — no work at McMurray. He did not come out of his mosquito bar, but stayed within, chatting with William.

July 8th

Bright & fair — very hot. When we got up this morning, the other fellow had quietly packed up and left: William says he is "like a moose — always alone." Despite the hordes of mosquitos, comparatively few got through. I had a wonderful sleep. I am happy to find that despite a diet of bannock & lard and tea 3-4 and sometimes 5 times a day, and the bannock of late being fried, my digestive and eliminating organs are functioning effectively. Also my hip seems much better. Passed the mouth of the Christina River — rises some distance to south in area known as Chipewyan Prairie according to William. The Clearwater is called Desh-nēthē (Big River). Stopped at a bend in river where a large scow was on the bank. Here we "boiled up," ate almost last of everything — shaved —

washed. Heard the Waterways train — saw a plane. Some white children were playing on the river bank. We are back again to hateful civilisation. Kept on longer than I expected. At last the raw new timber buildings of Maginnis Fish Co.'s saw mill. Nigorri, who has never been "outside" in his life, is all eyes. Finally about noon we rounded the last bend into Waterways, a collection of huge barges, tiny tugs, and a few frame buildings. I paid William \$4.00 and got him some grub — quite beyond the bargain, but he really has been admirable. Just where I shall camp, I do not know. Just flop in the grass, I guess. Wandered over to see some white men who are building a boat to go to Yellowknife [Fig. 10]. Then went up to HBC.



FIG. 10. Fortune-hunters building a boat to go to Yellowknife: "The Bear" eyeing the camera.

[H.N.] Petty was sick. Saw a Mr. [R.H.] Chesshire — very abrupt and business-like — so much so that I believe I shall go by N.T. (Northern Trading Co.) whose rates are much lower. [Mail was awaiting Downes.] Everyone and everything is so far away. It is so strange here. Everyone intent on their immediate business and no time for anyone or anything else. I am trying to find a way to get down river. Any boat, craft, raft will do. Must see about flying. The letter from E.G. [the woman he was to marry in 1949] was a great lift to me. As the Crees say, a man never gets lost and always come back if he has a "nitchimos." A little perturbed about my lack of money. Though travelling in the bush, I am very happy to go without mail from anyone for months; but when one comes outside to such as this and is among white-people, if one has mail it is wonderful. Putting down such personal things as I do in these pages, I cannot but remark on this. I am "camped" under an old canoe in the bushes. As I write, I have finished a supper of bannock and tea. I have thought — not much — of the past year. To crucify oneself a little on the long portages, to be in the bush, is a salutary thing. I must change next year and tie to something. Just drifting. Maybe E.G. will be the answer. I am tremendously fond of her. If they would only really give me something at school which I had to reach to. Well, I go north somehow soon. I am coming back — and if fate somehow breaks the other way, maybe nitchimos E.G. may somehow know how much her letter meant to me.

July 9th

Rain and overcast. Slept under an old canoe last night. Wandered down to McMurray [Fig. 11]. McMurray is an admirable little settlement, a one-street affair. Interviewed Mackenzie Airways and learned of weekly service between Port Radium & Yellowknife. Rained hard. Had a long chat with a fellow from B.C. about Finlay Forks country and general B.C. territory. He is in the Forest Fire patrol. Three men for this enormous area. He was telling me about a N.Y. outfit offering him 2¢ a beetle: the quest for the mysterious Tiger Beetle. The old HBC warehouse is falling to ruin down on the banks of the river. A lovely view along the Athabaska to its junction with the Clearwater. Searched about for an old tarp but could not find one. Saw a nice loonskin bag, but too expensive. Came back and got my money sent by Mr. [Robert] Rand. An oldish chap with spectacles was very decent — much nicer than the brusque Mr. Chesshire. Mr. Petty, the boss, is ill with kidney trouble. Saw William. He is most disconsolate about lack of job. But there is no employment here. Chatted with the lads, George Skinner, McColl, and another fellow called Shorty for a while, and then wrote letters. Barges going and coming all day. Had a real meal at McMurray. Oddly enough, there is a National Monument at McMurray to "Methye Portage." The portage is not here, of course, but at Portage La Loche. We are all debating ways and means of getting down river. I am anxious to go by canoe. May buy an old one and sell it [at the end of the trip]. Would not have difficulty in getting someone to go down, but I may slip down by myself. At any event, if by Transport, I shall sleep on the barge and avoid the berth charge. Bought a tarp of canoe canvas, 12 oz. duck 6' square, for 3 dollars. Raining very hard when I turned in under the canoe & tarp. The ground becomes a most adhesive gumbo when it rains here. Lay thinking of E.G. for a long time and then went to sleep. Great fun swapping experiences with some of these men — my own small wanderings for those of B.C., Yukon, Alaska, etc. Like an Indian, I am living on bannock and tea.

July 10th

Inconsequential day.

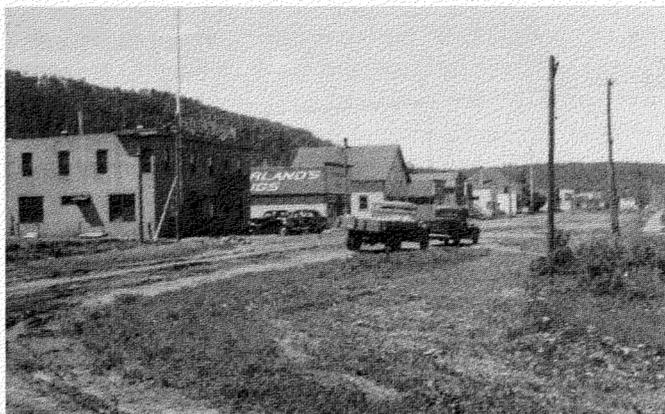


FIG. 11. Fort McMurray, 1938.

July 11th

Overcast. Spent good part of day in company of Andy Anderson, a Swedish trapper who traps 86 mi. down river. He is an obliging fellow and very clean. I have moved up to his camp ground, which is high and nice. I am going to buy a canoe and go down to Ft. Smith alone. My choice lies between two, a green one and a grey one, same price, \$25, for both. Believe I shall take the grey one — although shallower, it is in better shape. It is a narrow, tiny thing, but I believe adequate. Hugh Knox, one of the lads at the boat-building tent, wants to go down with me but I have decided to go alone. I need the experience, and if I can go down successfully in this craft I can go anywhere.

July 12th

Rain — clear at evening. Bought the grey canoe. Fixed gunwale with some aluminum strips, and got my grub-stake — 28 lbs. of flour and tea. The canoe is so light that Andy carried it down on his shoulder. It really is a wee thing. I am now trying to get paddles. Some Cree women made me up a fine batch of bannocks. Decided not to take Hugh even though he is a fine fellow: the canoe is small [13'4"], he has an inadequate grub-stake, and I want to try it alone. A busy day. Wrote a letter to E.G. and brought this diary up to date. Well, one book, one chapter, draws to a close. Athabaska — Slave — Mackenzie — Norman — Great Bear — Yellowknife are next. May the gods be kindly to the Bezcho. Cheerio, little brown mishinaigan: I speed you home and turn north. [Downes's record of his 1938 travels was kept in four brown-covered 4½" × 7¼" transit books. At this point, he is just finishing the first of these diaries and, as was his habit, is about to mail it "outside," to a close friend in Massachusetts.]

July 13th

Clear — wind westerly. Aptly enough I start the second leg of my northern wanderings in a new book. The first volume I mailed to Mr. Rand today from McMurray. Aptly too, I enter this, my first entry, from my first boil-up. This has been a day of adventure and misadventure. To begin with, I finally got a paddle from Eric and Andy, and took down the stuff to set off. The canoe, purchased yesterday, was gone! I was frantic, believing someone had stolen it, someone knowing that I was pulling out the next day. I searched along the waterfront, and had made up my mind to go to McMurray and report it to the RCMP when Andy signalled me that he had found it. It was hidden in some willows. Possibly the creature we call "The Bear" — a great black [featured] hobo — decided on a practical joke of sorts. I was relieved, and so intent on getting back that I ran head on into a 12" × 12" projecting beam from the warehouse. I was knocked to my knees but seemed to be O.K. William came around and I gave him a present — got some nice moccasins. Andy and I went down to McMurray. The little canoe, I name it now "Se-quoizi" — went very well [Fig. 12]. Andy and I had a couple of beers & I bought another paddle, and a .22 rifle — a Savage pump with a clip magazine for



FIG. 12. "Sequoizi."

\$6. Also tacks, etc. if Sequoizi needs patching. Mailed a letter to E.G. Then went to Fire Ranger and copied off a map of part of the river — too large scale to be a great deal of use. It is indicative of my state of mind when I left school that, with all of my maps, I brought not one with me of this area. So it is a double adventure — the trip alone, and no maps — to me an unknown river. I said "au revoir" to Andy and then went down to the river. It was blowing hard, and, unfamiliar with the canoe, I was timorous about starting out. Watched four planes come and go. Whittled out a stern seat & paddle handle. Late in the afternoon I pushed off. Went around a big island. The water of the Athabaska enters what is called "The Sny" and is a chalky color — quite a contrast to the Clearwater. The wind was blowing so hard that I put ashore on the island to boil up. I am writing these now. Second misadventure — I find that I have left behind all my lard, a 3 lb. pail (or else someone stole it). However, I refuse to turn back and will try and pick up some down river. If I cannot, that is just too bad, and I shall get along without bannock. I believe I shall try and move down the Athabaska a bit this evening. This is a lovely spot — just at the mouth of the Clearwater as it enters the Athabaska. Went on again, and the wind gradually dropped. I am camped now on the west side at a spot indicated on map [the map has since been lost]. Mosquitos bad, but great to be off and absolutely on my own. I am, if my guess is correct, about 16 mi. from McMurray. Something of the scenery anon. Too mosquitoey here now. Sequoizi is very delicate and must be loaded just right.

July 14th

Fair & Bright. Clouding in P.M. Got away to an early start and travelled some 30 miles or so. Passed two camps of Indians. Finally camped on a small island not far from the tar sands refinery. Mosquitos were terrific, so this entry is a day late. In two or three days I should be in good shape. Just now am very stiff and hands are sore despite gloves. I keep fairly close to the banks of the river, particularly the cut ones, as there the current is swifter. Passed Fort McKay [former HBC

post] in afternoon. It is closed up; little sign of life there. I did not stop. Most of my distance is accomplished late in the afternoon, as then the sun is not so hot and the wind goes down. The wind is perverse on this river; I tried sailing, but it was no go, for the wind backed about and turned squally. The scenery stays pretty much the same: high cutbanks of bituminous sands, sand bars, and flats. During the first part of the trip, many fine limestone exposures, the bedding being almost undulating — lovely subdued long waves or bends of anticline and syncline finally dipping below the black bituminous sands. The effect of the latter is just like the west side of Admiralty Inlet [which Downes visited aboard the *Nascopie* in 1937] on a small scale. Surprisingly little sign of fish, game, or fowl. I may be hungry if this keeps up. Tried my rifle and found that a .22 long rifle cartridge so swells up that it sticks and cannot be ejected. I might have known something was wrong with it. I am just loafing along. Much burned on the banks, but the islands have fine huge black poplars. In the morning, early, the *Northern Echo* passed. The traced map is quite useless, as when the map was made they left out all the sand bars which have since become respectable islands.

July 15th

Bright, very hot, & wind strong from west. Started out late. Crossed to some buildings which proved to be a small company which works the tar sands. The extent of these bituminous sands is tremendous. They line the bank for miles. Wind blowing so hard and I am so tired that I soon stopped for a long siesta. I bought 2 lb. of lard from the cook at the refinery. It is blistering hot, and the glare & heat take it out of you, as does bucking the wind with such a tiny canoe. Sequoizi acts well, but must be loaded just right. It pivots on a dime or a suggestion. I get the best speed and control out of her when I paddle kneeling. I believe I have about 110 mi. to go to Chipewyan. I am not killing myself, as I have lots of time. The cook was most enthusiastic about the possibilities of the tar sands. Some day, if a method is ever found to extract petroleum, etc. from them, they will supply the world. They ooze oil. I cannot account for the lack of ducks or game. Lots of weed & grass along the sand bars. I have thought much of E.G.; my thoughts turn to her constantly. The long monotony of paddling leads to long trains of thought. I should be lean and hard when I get to Fort Smith. What few people I have passed — as at the bitum. refinery — look at me rather incredulously. Very few have ever travelled this great river alone — and fewer still in a narrow 15' canoe. Well, the wind is backing to the south a bit. I must get on. I should like to make Firebag River & the Flodell Bros. camp tonight, but I believe it too far. Paddled on, and just at dusk I heard a racket along the shore, and a cow and calf moose went scrambling up the steep bank, for all the world like an old mare and colt. They stopped at the top and watched me curiously. I saw a cabin and stopped. It turned out to be the cabin of one Swan Pierson, a white trapper, an old man with a Chip consort. I came around the back of the shack and he was very surprised, as was the old woman, who was scraping a deerskin. He is paralysed on his right side but manages to get

along. We had a long chat. This was just about sundown. He told me I was twelve miles from Firebag River, sixteen from Flodell's. He was cooking up dog feed. Has been 15 years here. He had a fine potato patch. The old lady drew out an enormous black curved pipe. Eventually the wind dropped and I set out again. Had the most ridiculous duck hunt in a slough. One shot with the rifle and I had to take it apart to get the shell out of it! The chamber is simply blown or scoured out so that the shell expands and sticks. I did not get the duck though I called it in very close. I do not think the rifle shoots very straight. I saw a huge bald eagle today. Pierson — or Peder- sen? — tells me I am 16 mi. from the bituminous refinery (Fitzimmons), so I have made little progress today. But shall go on this evening. It was a gorgeous evening, with a long orange afterglow in the northwest and an orange full moon lifting like a great Japanese lantern over the spruce trees of the east shore. The mosquitos began to come out as I slipped along in the moonlight. At length, it getting too dark to see the snags properly, I drew in to the shore and camped in a nice spruce thicket. I should make a note of an interesting phenomenon I saw last night — a rainbow upside down. The arc was inverted heavenward and it was high above the horizon. I am getting faster and more adept at all those little things which mean a quick camp and comfort.

July 16th

Bright, fair — very stiff westerly. Rain in P.M. Up and on my way in a stiff head wind. Winds are perverse on this river, for they back and bounce from the islands and high banks and blow every which way. Had my first "accident." Just in front of a small cabin I ran upon some unseen submerged rocks. Unusual, as till this incident there have been no rocks in the river. The wind was blowing so hard, and there were so many waves, that I did not see any sign of rocks at all. Fortunately the head wind had so cut down my speed that no damage was apparently done, though the canoe received considerable of a bump. Shortly afterward a cabin appeared, and I found it to be the Flodell bros. camp. This is where Andy lives. I went up and was very hospitably received by the Flodells; had a good feed. Lots of chatting. In the afternoon a heavy wind and downpour of rain occurred, so I stayed on. We discovered that the rifle was totally smooth-bored and the barrel so reamed out as to admit the whole cartridge. Nothing I can do but take a ram-rod and use it to ram out the cartridge each time — a veritable muzzle loader! Six dollars to experience. They have a pair of beautiful Mannlicher 6.5s. What lovely rifles. I shall certainly sell the .348 and get one somehow. Have I noted that two winters ago the Barren Ground caribou were all through these parts? The Flodells were forestry men in Sweden and also here, around Hudson Bay Junction. They are fine chaps. Old Charlie Morse down on the Firebag must be an extraordinary chap. He is an American, 78 years old and still active enough to make his grubstake; indeed, last year he got more foxes than anyone on the River. Independent old cuss. It has been good to stop a bit from the constant paddling. This is a fine location, four miles below the Firebag on the west side.

The cabin in front of which I had the "accident" was one of Andrew's. I have been thinking how convenient it would be to have a young Indian girl to travel with in the summer. Extra power paddling, and someone to cook & fix camp. Could also learn the language. Most everyone seems to have a woman of one description or another. The great hazard and trick is to locate the right channel of the Embarras R. & get across to Chipewyan. It is impossible to find oneself on such a map as I have. A question for the naturalist: How does the porcupine copulate? An interesting point. If a man is travelling at this time of the year, his first consideration should be a good mosquito bar. Fortunately I have an excellent one. They catch a most peculiar bear in these parts. According to the boys, they run in about the same numbers as the regular black bears. They are a light, almost cream & coffee color and the fur is very soft. I have never seen any just like them. Curiously, the cubs are darker than the adults. Did I mention that Andrew, who traps back to the west in the Birch Mts. area, says the Wood Buffalo wander well down into that area. He says they trample the whole country up on occasion. The Chip name for the Firebag River is "Elthē deza" — "The river one goes to to get stones to make fire." It is so congenial here that I am loath to leave. However, I suppose I must soon. Right now (after lunch) the wind is blowing so very hard from the northwest that I am putting off travelling. It is hard for me to estimate distance travelled as you cannot keep to the current or follow the channel without swinging back and forth across the river. Therefore, you pick up the current and then the slack water. If I had a watch I might judge a little better. Actually, I am a bit worried about the delta-Athabaska Lake traverse but must get along somehow. The wind is howling this afternoon. One of the ways to recognize islands at a distance, and particularly across the river, is by the type of forest growth on them. Islands in this river are distinguished by large black poplar growth with its light green foliage. The true bank is usually sprinkled with spruce or burned areas of small growth such as birch. The spruce of the islands has, I suppose, long ago been cleaned off for fuel. The HBC steamers have been burning wood for fifty years. When [Albert] Johnson the "Mad Trapper" [of Rat River] was shot, he was first shot in the hip pocket as he was crawling up the bank, and the pocket was full of shells (.300 Savage) which exploded, tearing off half his seat. Pete Norberg is reputed to have made in \$15 thousand hunt on one occasion. [Norberg drowned canoeing the Bloody Falls rapids of the Coppermine in 1931.]

July 17th

Fair. Very stiff head wind westerly. Still staying at Flodells. Did little if anything but chat all day. Lots of joking on advantages of brown-skinned outboard motor. Puttered about fixing odds and ends. Toward evening the wind went down, and about 8:15 I started out again. It was of course still very light. I went down beyond Poplar Pt. and camped by a little rivulet. Clear, cold water as a contrast to the silty Athabaska. Lots of Indian shacks at Poplar Pt. but little sign of habitation. Mosquitos still bad and even come out on the river to harass one

while night paddling. The Flodells were most hospitable. I must send them some literature on mink raising when I get back. I cannot get over the beauty of the two Mannlichers — I must get one. [Downes did: it was stolen from his Vermont cabin in 1947.] Have I remarked that there simply are no fish in this river until they come up from the lake in the fall? Lovely evening to paddle but for the blasted mosquitos.

July 17th

Bright, fair, and hot. Up and off at an good hour. By 10:15 I reached Eleanor Creek, and at 10:30 stopped and had a cup of tea with an old-country Englishman. The sawmill is the next objective. I made considerable effort to follow the channel and seem to have picked up speed as a result, although I don't always guess correctly. I am carrying a letter for the Englishman to the sawmill. He seemed a bit bushed to me. There has been a distinct change in topography since leaving Poplar Pt. Bituminous banks & high bluffs have dropped away — banks are low and of alluvial sands & clays. There is no longer the distinct river bank but only the low cutbanks merging with the islands. Looking back, a high, distant blue line of relief can be seen to the southwest — the escarpment of the Birch Mts? [Yes.] I am writing this as I boil the kettle a few miles below the Englishman's. It has been fine and calm but now is beginning to breeze a little. Sixteen miles to the sawmill, and then the search for the Embarras River leading into Lake Athabaska. Many thoughts come and go in my head but I have not time to get them down here now. If anything should happen to me, there are only three people I care to know it — the Rands and E.G. Beginning to blow, but I shall push on for a while. No sign of spruce hens, and no ducks within range of my "muzzle-loader." Breakfast, bannock & tea; lunch — rice, bannocks and tea; supper — bannocks and tea. I believe I am a day or two out in my reckoning; however, all the days are the same in this timeless land. [The dating of Downes's entries up to and including this one has been corrected.] I resume late in the afternoon. The wind freshened and of course was a head wind. I bucked it for a long time. Its perversity is extraordinary — for instance, I have recently come around a big horse-shoe bend, almost a closed one bounded on the right hand side by a high bank of sand. The wind actually headed me all the way around the bend. Sequoizi behaved admirably in the choppy waves and ripples. When it blows real hard I just squat down in the bottom, up a bit from the stern, and drive into it. The wind has cut down my mileage, but I have done well over 30 miles at the moment. An odd thing happened just after I finished the horseshoe; I heard an outboard engine, and looking behind saw a large craft pulling down on me at a great rate. I thought it was probably the boys from Waterways who had built the grey boat, but it turned out to be a man and woman in a huge freighter canoe — looked as big as a battleship alongside Sequoizi, and bound for Yellowknife. They had a dandy Johnson 4-horse. We chatted a bit and the man asked some questions about the river which I was unable to answer. He was surprised, as he had assumed "that you live here." When I replied that I came from Boston they were a bit nonplussed.

They ran over to a sandbar, I suppose to boil the kettle or for other homely duties. Possibly the wind was too strong. Anyway, they did not invite me, so I pushed on, looking for a good spot myself, which I have since found. Saw another bald eagle. It is clouding over for a storm. The sawmill seems a longer distance than indicated, as I have as yet seen no signs of it. I am waiting for the wind to drop a bit and then will push on again. Despite the all-day going I feel strong and good. Supper — bannocks and tea. I should make a good camp tonight, for a real storm is surely on the way. I am quite beardy and nasty-looking and will of course shave before pulling in to Chipewyan. However, alone with my thoughts and Sequoizi, there is hardly any need. Wind still blowing, but after boiling kettle in front of trapper's shack I moved on. Soon ran into a gang of lumbermen who informed me that the camp — MacCallum's Saw Mill — was three miles on. Went on to it and delivered the letter. Found out it is Sunday the 17th. Started on again, as I am anxious to make the Embarras River. About 2 mi. below the sawmill I turned off to the left (west) and followed through a little slough to what I presume and hope is the Embarras. This river is a fork of the main one and carries you a bit nearer to Chipewyan. It appears (if I am on it) as a miniature of the main river; all the same characteristics in smaller scale. It was so dark and clouding up so fast I decided to make a rain camp. Camping spots, however, were not easy to find owing to the high mud cutbanks. At last it became so dark that in desperation I camped on a sandbar and put up the tarp [Fig. 13].



FIG. 13. First camp on the Embarras — delta of the Athabaska.

Someone was night-hunting for moose, as there was a shot not far from me. Chipewyan is not more than a day away. I must have done upward of 42-45 miles despite the winds today. There is quite a little settlement of shacks near the sawmill. The trappers and breeds looked at me curiously as I passed. I should note the scarcity of birch; one rarely sees even a solitary tree here. The Englishman told me he never heard of anyone catching a wolverine in these parts. Some kind of a hawk sat in the top of a spruce and yelled at me as I paddled along this dark and winding river. The great snags are ghostly at night. All along the cutbanks great tree trunks, denuded of branches and bark, thrust themselves upward and, pointing white fingers downstream, undulate in the current. Some of them have stubs of branches on the underside; they look like

the great inverted lower jaws of some monster. It must have been late when I turned in. Not so very tired. Lay and thought about things for a long time. Mosquitos thick. When paddling in close to the shore you can hear the whole forest throbbing with a sort of muffled roar of billions of insects.

July 18th

Cloudy — wind rising in forenoon to very stiff breeze. Slept late. Then, after shaking sand from everything and eating a bit of rice mixed with bannock, set out in the teeth of a head wind. This continued all day and climaxed itself with a heavy down-pour of rain. The river wound on interminably. It is not a wide one, and seemed quite dark and mysterious. Soon I began to see owls. Four great ochereous-yellow owls flapped off from the shore. I suppose they are barred owls in summer plumage; they are surprisingly yellowish. I tried to shoot one, as I know the Indians in Labrador eat them, and I wanted to try them out. On the only real shot I had the "muzzle-loader" misfired. One of the owls kept following me for miles. Very eerie. They flap out of sight, and then, rounding a bend, there is one of these pale owls right at the water's edge on an old stump or snag, peering and blinking at you. They call back and forth to each other in the most discordant manner. I had several chases after young ducks, all to no avail. The mother stays nearby, quacking, while the little ones race ahead with a tremendous splashing and then dive. My only chance was to catch one with my hands, as the "gun" is of course quite useless. I consumed a good deal of time and paddling energy in these fruitless pursuits. At last I did catch one — a young mallard. I hated to kill it, but with no fish or chickens (spruce hens) it was necessary. Anyway, I rationalised, the poor little thing which would allow itself to be caught by me was doomed to be caught by an owl or an eagle. Saw more eagles, and hawks screamed indignantly at me. There is something wild and savage about the screech of a hawk. The rain came down in buckets late in the afternoon. I squatted under the tarp after it became too bad to paddle, and at last made camp. I managed to get a fire going somehow, though everything was soaked, and at length decided to sleep here. It is a poor spot, but the best available under the circumstances. If I could place it on a map I should call it "Camp Miserable," for everything is cold, clammy, and soaking. Also, I had to wade through a foot of mud at the shore's edge. I hunted the owls barefoot and have picked up some small thorns. I believe the stiff wind and duck chases have cut down a great deal on my distance. The current is slack. The meanders are endless, and it is a little discouraging to find yourself actually going south at times. Ah, well, such is life in the wilderness. There has not been one human sign since I entered the river. It is as if one were truly the only one in a strange and grim world of snags and dark forest. I am of course now well within the delta of the Athabaska.

July 19th

Bright. Thunder showers (3) in the afternoon. Started out full of optimism as to a good day's travel. It later developed I

was about 20 mi. out in my reckoning. Note to future travellers: Do not take the Embarras River. Wound on and on and never seemed to get anywhere. At last ran into a trapper building his shack who chatted for a while. At least I am on the Embarras, but I have a long way to go yet. The current has dropped to nil. My friends the ghoulish owls continue to haunt me; an eagle also appeared. Another bunch of trappers' shacks a couple of miles further on. A queer assortment; one wild-haired gentleman, one with a very red bulbous nose, and one dark breed. They strongly advised against cutting off from the main channel to the west as I proposed. A severe thunderstorm came up, and I made a snug little rain camp. Finally I became so disgusted with my lack of progress that I set out, determined to go on to the Lake no matter what happened. Ran upon a family of Indians at dusk making camp for the night. The men advised against the westward route. Nevertheless, I took it, and before long found it dark and myself in a vast marsh, with water & grass scarcely distinguishable. I turned northeast and paddled on. Startled ducks would rise with a roar of wings in the darkness. At last the thin line of grass faded away to grey nothingness in the N.E. and I knew it was Lake Athabaska. It was useless to go on — but now the question became, what to do? There was not a tree or even a bunch of willows in sight. Finally, I pulled the canoe up on not terra firma but terra shaka and made quite a snug camp [Fig. 14]. The canoe was turned half over to protect the outfit and — partially — myself. The next problem was the mosquito bar, as the mosquitos were roaring in the grass of this morass. I tied two sides to the upturned edge of the canoe (fortunately open gunwales), stuck a paddle in upside down for another post, & finally the rifle (with cover on) barrel down for the fourth. Over everything I flung the tarp and tied it down to the posts. It was not a half bad camp, & I was snug & dry. The mosquitos roared madly all night, but only a few got in. So came to an end an exasperating day. At last I am through with that miserable, interminably twisting, river. I cannot close this day without a comment on the most extraordinary sunset I have ever seen. Just at sundown the whole sky to the south was a mass of black clouds shot full of livid burning orange streaks. I have never seen anything just like it for pure awesome wickedness. To the north the horizon was a mass of pillow & columnar great thunderheads, piled one on the other & all colored a strange sulphurous yellow. To the east, against a black sky was a lovely double rainbow. It sounds fantastic, but that is just the way it was. Nature showing all the lurid hell of its soul in mighty, awesome pride.

July 20th

Thunderstorms & high westerly winds. Up at daybreak and away. The sight which greeted me was not one to reassure a timid soul with an imagination. Everywhere as far as the eye could see stretched marsh — or rather morass. No relief; no tree broke the horizon. A faint blue line, almost a mirage, lay to the northeast — the north shore of Lake Athabaska? I paddled along a suggestion of a channel north and east, and at

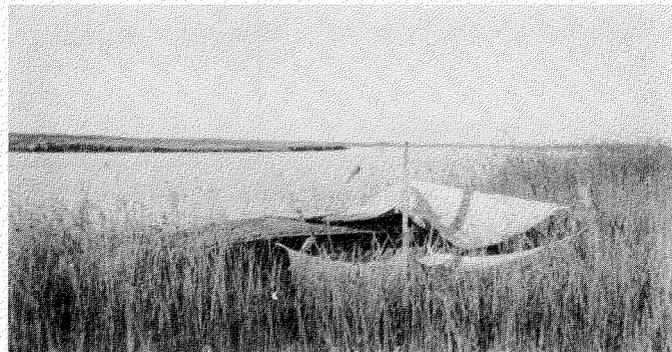


FIG. 14. Camp in the marsh, south side of Lake Athabaska.

length this gave out and the water became just a few inches deep — and was mostly grass. Finally I could no longer paddle, for the canoe, drawing as little as she does, grounded in the mud. There was nothing to do but take the line and drag it, wading through the mud. Finally, with miles of this ahead of me, but the grass becoming thinner, I saw (through the glasses) a cluster of white buildings far across the lake to the north — Fort Chipewyan! It seemed hours that I struggled on, and all the time was the fear that the wind which had begun to rise might really blow, and I would be caught in the crossing to Potato Island. Usually one waits until night to make this traverse, which is across the western end of this gigantic lake. The lake here is shallow, with few islands, and is noted for its tremendous waves. I decided I could not let another day go and would go on. Anyway, there was no place now to stop. I set out for Potato Island — or an island NW of me. How far away it looked. It was too shallow to paddle and all I could do was shove with the paddle in the mud. The wind had now become fresh, so I was forced to keep shoving on the left side. Out in the crossing the full force of the wind began to strike, but there was nothing to do but pile on. I called upon every *puagan* [Cree for “guiding spirit”] I knew to give me more strength, for I was tiring and had not eaten since the morning before. I do not know how long it was — but a long time — 7 miles in a head wind — but at last I stood on the gneissic rocks of Potato Island. I boiled the kettle, had a cigarette, and thanked the gods. Looking back, the morass which represents the south shore of the lake was invisible, so low it simply blended into the horizon of water. I pushed on around to the NE corner. Chipewyan is plainly to be seen only a couple of miles away, but the wind had become so heavy — there were rollers and whitecaps — that all I could do was run into a little cove and look at it. It is impossible to cross. Here I am — who knows for how long. I have shaved & washed up. I wish I had a picture of myself — certainly a nasty-beared ruffian. I am washing one of my two shirts & have washed the canoe, which was full of mud. I write this crouched under my little canoe, for the thunder has now begun to roar and crackle and it is pouring sheets of rain. Maybe I can get across tonight. It is annoying to see your immediate objective within such a short distance — particularly after so many weary miles — and yet not be able to even attempt to get to it. The rocks here are Precambrian; beautifully contorted red felspathic gneisses. The contrast of the Precambrian is most striking, particularly after the

monotonous flatness of the Paleozoic. Though glaciated and rounded, the north shore stands out bold and rugged. Here I have just prepared everything to set off for the shore and a black squall has come up from the north. Previously everything had come from the southwest! Such are the vagaries of the North. If I had not wasted so much time at lunch (bannock & tea) I would even now be across. Made an abortive attempt to get across, but the wind was too severe and I simply moved along the Island to a little bay. Two more thunder storms followed. I could see one nasty strip of water where the wind got a full sweep at the passage between this island and the mainland — this was mad with whitecaps and waves, making it impossible to move. I squatted between a big cleft boulder of conglomerate and let the rain pelt down on the tarp. A plane came in, and then some time later left, after two attempts to get off the water. This led me to believe that the other side might be calm. Another thunderstorm, black and angry, was coming in from the NW, but I was so fed up sitting that I decided to chance a crossing anyway and try to beat the storm in. I would not have attempted it if I had not been so fed up with sitting and seeing Chipewyan so near and yet so far. Off I started, watching alternately the waves and the black clouds. Sequoizi behaved beautifully and danced about like a chip. We had some anxious moments about half way across. I had not been able to see the true size of the waves from the shore, and the wind was freshening. However — as is obvious — I got across safely without a drop of water, other than spray from the paddle, in the canoe. There is a big wharf here; Chipewyan is a surprisingly large settlement, and after paddling into the wind for a long time, I turned in calmer water and headed for it. Some kids ran down to find out where I had come from. I tied up and went up to the HBC. The manager — a young chap — was most cordial, and, happily, he & his two clerks had just started supper. They invited me in — and here I am. So the longer leg of the canoe journey is over. I have the Slave River and two rapids to go yet before Fort Fitzgerald, where I shall attempt to sell Sequoizi, much as I should like to keep her. We had a long gabfest and discovered several mutual acquaintances. The manager has been, in his fourteen years, at Wabiscow, Fort St. John, and McPherson. D'Arcy Arden [whom Downes hoped to meet because of his association with John Hornby] is at Yellowknife. Later we had some music, with one of the clerks playing the piano, another the guitar, and the manager the violin. The latter said: "You must be pretty experienced in a canoe (!) to come across that water (the passage) in a little hunting canoe." The first rapid on the Slave is run on the east side, not too close to the bank. One fellow lost his outfit and smashed his canoe up last year trying to run the west side. And so finally to bed. It cleared off nicely as evening came on. I shall write a letter or two and then push on north again. A very poor fur year was reported here — as everywhere. The caribou were about six miles to the west of here two years ago. I have a burn about three inches long on my right forearm from a stick when I was taking the kettle off the fire. The HBC has moved within a year or so from its fine commanding location on the high ground to the west down here to the center of the settlement.

July 21st

Fair & Bright. One of the contributing causes to the bush fires seems to be a local problem which several have mentioned to me: fires from the spring beaver hunters, as they seem to break out particularly after the spring beaver hunt. Extremely hot day — so hot I felt like doing very little. Got some pictures of the place, mainly of the old post [Fig. 15]. We went in swimming late in the afternoon. Wrote up the diary, letters, etc., and eventually turned in after coffee at the "Athabaska Cafe," which is run by the omnipresent Chinaman. The Indians — there are both Cree & Chips here — are all at Quatre Fourches at present. Little here in the way of beaded wear; that sort of stuff gets more and more expensive as one goes north. For one thing, mooseskins are \$10 a hide here. Miss Squire the bird photographer is in these parts, though out in the field at present.



FIG. 15. Fort Chipewyan: the old post from the wharf of the new.

July 22nd

Fair & Bright, wind NW. Decided to pull out after lunch. Left the miserable .22 and bought a second-hand .410 single-shot. Fired this one to be sure it was O.K. Set out after the usual adieu to Bob Middleton, the manager — damn nice fellow — and Andy and John, the clerks. They have treated me most royally. I feel a little guilty about sponging off these people, but then reflect that it comes out of the Company, and certainly the odd meal or so is not too much, considering the money I have spent into their coffers. My fare should be a bit more varied with a gun which shoots. Set out about 2:30 with a stiff, fair wind which, as soon as I rounded the Dog Head and started up the channel, turned to a head wind, and so severe a one that it is at the moment impossible to travel. I am stopped 3/4 way through the channel west of the Post — leading north to the Slave. I am not sure I am on the correct one, but it runs in the general direction and I trust I can find the river somehow. It was a nice rest and relaxation at Chipewyan, though that is not a very exciting or particularly interesting spot. My slightly nerve-racking experiences of the delta and crossing left me tired and not too energetic. Well, the wind is dropping a bit — I must push on. If ever I should experience a truly fair wind for any length of time in my travels I believe I would perish from surprise. There seems to be a strong current in this channel which sets against me. This is very odd. I suppose now I shall not see a single duck or owl. Held up again by high

wind on small island, first one after leaving channel. At length went on, creeping along the shore. Left the channel, and about sundown was in the entrance to Rivière des Rochers. Current now seems to set north. Paddled on to forks where there is an exposure of red felspathic granite, then on to junction with main river (cluster of houses on west bank), and on up a short way to where I am camped. It looks like rain, so made a good camp. One or two very deceiving features of the map: the dotted part along the channel is grass & not water, at least at this time of year. [Downes was using the 1928 T.S.C. map of Lake Athabaska and Connecting Waterways.]

July 23rd

Cloudy but hot, & strong NW wind. Started out with the inevitable head wind. It kicked up such a sea that I was some time in getting across to the east bank. I was anxious to get on that side because of the rapids ahead which are run on that side. The river acts as a sort of wind tunnel, the wind being deflected by the trees of the banks. Although there is some current, the wind against it makes large waves which cut down my speed considerably. Stopped at a trapper's shack on the east side and chatted with a very Russian-looking gentleman with a bristling red moustache. He seemed vague and dubious about the rapids, and thought my canoe too small. He suggested that I stop at the big rock and look them over and then possibly portage around. He had the further encouraging words that the Demicharge Rapids down below are even worse, with great whirlpools and suction holes. When I left, he wished me good luck in the most lugubrious voice. With the thought of the acquaintance of Middleton's who nearly lost his life — and did lose his canoe and outfit in this rapid — on my mind, I crept along, making slow time against the wind. I had one busy moment in a narrow place in the river bounded by precipitous red granite rocks, for the wind kicked up a big sea and the current was fast. I was in its midst before I realised it, but Sequoizi bounced through safely. Rounding a bend with the river swinging sharply west, I came on the rapids. I could see them by kneeling in the canoe. There was lots of white water on the SW side and close in-shore on the NE. I could see what looked like a passage between these two about 1/4 of the way across from the NE bank and decided to run through this opening. I shot down through this at a great rate, and the current from the shore deflected me over toward the center, where the main body of water was rushing through and causing big whirling eddies and waves. I started paddling like hell away from this, and though the canoe was shooting along sideways I did manage to pull out and get over to quieter water. Sequoizi did not ship a droplet of water. Soon I was a mile or so below the rapids and boiled the kettle. It is here that I write. I am glad to have slipped through with safety. These were different from any I have run before, as there is a tremendous flow of heavy water which just sweeps you along. Though the run was not a graceful one, it nevertheless succeeded. Soon I shall be at the mouth of the Peace River, though as I have said, the wind is so strong I make very poor time. In the fall the boats do not use this route because of this rapid, but have to as-

cent the Peace and come down the Chenal des Quatre Fourches [to Lake Athabaska]. Here I spotted the track of a jumping deer. It is extraordinary to find them so far north. Although this is called "Rivière des Rochers" there is surprisingly little rock — just now and then, glaciated round knobs of red granite protrude from the banks on the bends of the river. It is, up to now anyway, a fine river to camp on — though mud shore, as yet no cutbanks, and camping spots are frequent. On again with the same persistent wind. At last I came to the junction of the Peace — Rivière des Rochers, the two forming what is now the Slave River. This spot is a wide open expanse and the surprise is the small mouth of the Peace — indeed scarcely noticeable unless one is on that side. I stopped at a little white & red trapper's shack on the N side, but the breed wife was not very communicative — indeed, she seemed scared to death and said her husband was not at home. In crossing from the south to north sides I had a hair-raising experience. I caught the full blast of the wind: I had not dreamed that the waves were so big and had some ticklish moments. Finally I turned down the Slave. This is a big river — often 1 or more miles across, and may I state now, a treacherous bad one. There is a tremendous flow of heavy water and many reefs, quite unmarked on the maps. Though the current is now fast in the normal river, wherever there is any constriction — reefs or narrows — there is a frightful heavy rushing flow and tremendous whirlpools. I had one frightening experience that left me a bit shaken. It was getting dark, but deciding to push on in the calm, I suddenly found myself coming among a maze of reefs, and then, before I could do a thing, shooting a heavy rapid. A whirlpool opened up beside me and was horrible — a regular whirling black hole in the water. The current is so heavy it is hard to do anything. This happened only in modified form again. And all this on a great broad river. I at last camped, not daring to risk my life again. Two of those damned owls greeted me. I shot at & I think hit one. Saw 7 grebes. I am now well on the Slave. The big hazard which haunts me is the Demicharge Rapid. The fact remains, one must always be prepared for a possible rapid or heavy pitch. The river is low, and apparently the map was made at highwater.

July 24th

Overcast. A strange phenomenon. While getting some stuff from under the canoe, I noticed the upturned side was splattered with drops of blood. I do not have any idea why or how this should be. Some of the drops were quite large, and those on the gunwale showed it to be really blood & not some stain. These were not here last night. Set out early with the inevitable strong head wind, which increased as I went on. Ducked among the islands to avoid it, and soon smelled smoke. On the big bend I saw some tents, and it was not long before I had stopped at a camp of 4 Crees and their families. Went up and chatted with them; they were: Edward Delorme and Leo, Pierre, and Amab Spirit, brothers from Chipewyan. Edward was most cordial, and I had soon settled down to a feast of ducks, venison, and tea. The wind had so increased, and it was so pleasant, that I stayed on for some hours taking pictures and



FIG. 16. The Edward Delorme family.

talking. I should have liked to stay for days, everyone was so friendly. Edward's wife made me some bannocks. The place was swarming with youngsters, and after a while everyone was very much at ease. How like wild things these people are — always moving about, then flopping down as a dog does for a moment, only to be up and prowling about. Edward has a very attractive, thin-lipped wife, very dark and very Cree-looking [Fig. 16]. We had a fine time. I must send Edward some pictures. One of the men had an HBC muzzle-loader and kindly showed me how to load it. Just enough powder to fill a small tablespoon; then about half an inch of wadding — inner bark from the red willow; then about the same amount of shot and more wadding. Each time anything is put in, it is well tamped down with the ram-rod. Then of course the percussion cap is put on. The camp was full of dogs — a very long-haired species. Edward lost a two year old girl a week or so ago. The infant mortality in this country is frightful. As he says, "They get 'bout two year old — get cramp and dead." Just why this should be I do not know. Exposure & diet I suppose. He told me the wife of the doctor at Chipewyan died also. So they have lost a good deal of faith in the doctor — for as they say, "If wife of doctor die with him right there all the time, how about us poor people 'way off in the bush." I had a very happy time here and was sorry to leave. But after an excellent repast of cocoa, bannock, and syrup I decided I would not abuse their hospitality, and pushed on again. The wind had dropped and it was smoky and overcast. My next hazard was the Demicharge Rapid. I had this on my mind all day. After discussing it with the Indians, I decided to run it on the right side (going down) and go around the island to the northeast side. Edward was most encouraging, as he said "No one drown dere for long time." However, I did not care to be the first. Just before sunset, while the sun was poised over the spruces, I came to the Demicharge. I could hear it far away. To my dismay, going around the island I found that the very low water had resulted in rapids on that side. After lingering around the edge, I decided there was nothing to do but run them and so selected the middle. There was some bad water close to both banks. I ran these and came to a little point above the Demicharge and found that the full force of the water here & the water from around the island plunged over a flat ledge in another rapid. As

it was now getting dark, I decided to run this second rapid quickly and so ran out on the current and managed to swing the canoe across it and in to the shore below. My technique seemed to have improved some, as I came through without a drop of water. It was all over so quickly that I had no time to think of anything but paddling and steering [Fig. 17]. I should like to know what route the boats take; of course, they could go right through some of the heavy riffles and water. If the water was any lower than at present I should think they might have some difficulty. Rapids call for a peculiar frame of mind. For one thing, you have to, in a way, deny the protective desires. By this I mean one would like to creep in near shore, but the best course is so often plunging out in the middle where there is the most current. Another thing: smooth water does not always mean safety, for a submerged ledge or backwater eddy may be smooth. Shallow rapids or rapids in a small river may be fun, but rapids in a great river — this one is from 1 to 3 mi. across — and in a 15' hunting canoe are not. Indians are never flippant about swift water and rapids. And there is lots of swift water in the Slave. I run rapids kneeling up straight in the canoe. I feel proud and lucky at having run this last major rapid. After the happy conclusion of the Demicharge I stopped and boiled the kettle, then moved on to a better camping place.

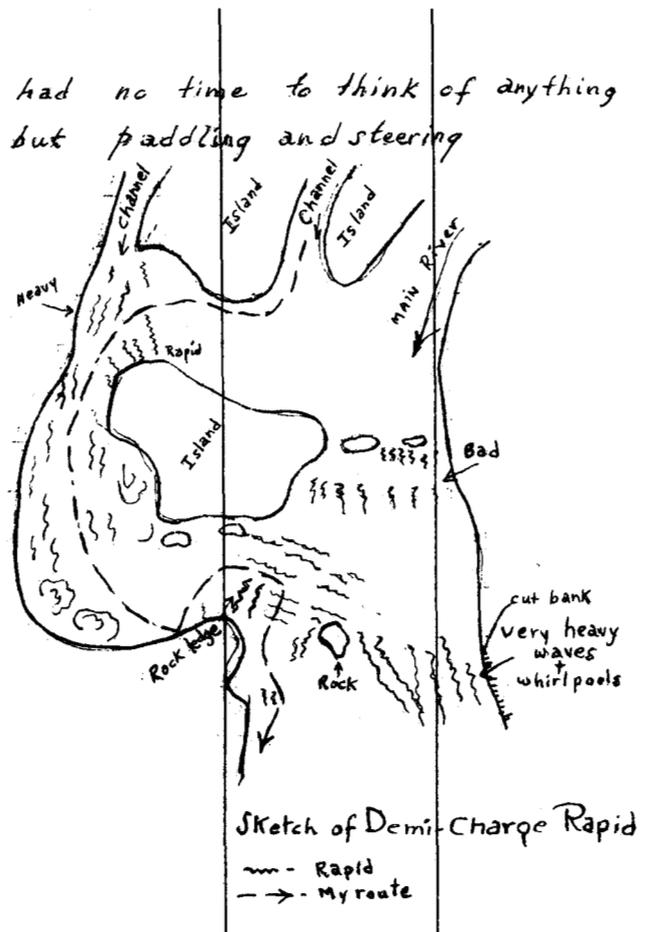


FIG. 17.

July 25th

Hazy — wind SW in a.m. Up late and spent a long time writing up the diary. Hot but hazy. Got moving along at last, but it was so hot and glassy that I did not paddle very hard. Had one fast-water place. This river is treacherous on points and bends, particularly near the shore. A most curious phenomenon often occurs where the current swings in from two directions — say, from two sides of an island: big eddies develop and swirl around, and suddenly, for no apparent reason, make the strangest thumping roar. You have to watch all the time. Passed one of the Wood Buffalo Park ranger's cabins and then went up a little creek to hunt ducks. I shot one who went over on his back, but when I went to get it, it straightened up and dived. I chased it for an hour or so. I did not wish to shoot again as this is a sanctuary. I did not get the duck. Further on, I came on to the main Wood Buffalo Park camp. Quite an establishment, with horses, hayfields, barns, etc. I talked with a long, lean gentleman at some length. He says he believes there are around 15 thousand head. The park is 20,000 sq. mi. — 200 mi. long & 100 mi. wide. About 100 come right to the hayfields by the cabins in winter. One small one on a very cold day last winter came and backed up to the door of one of the cabins so that the person inside could not get out! They kill a few for indigent Indians. I pushed on again, for I saw three islands blocking the river and knew it would likely be a bad place — and I wished to get by it before dark. According to the ranger, Fitzgerald is only 27 miles away. However, I am in no hurry. Went through islands and then boiled kettle. Found tracks of a wood buffalo along the shore. Must be one of the pair which the ranger described as being on the big island. The track is somewhat like that of a moose in size, but broader and not so pointed. The *Athabaska* passed by, a fine sight in the setting sun, with its great stern paddle wheel thrashing away. Made an early camp in a fine spot on a high knoll. A wonderful location, and the best camp I have made the whole trip. I erected the mosquito bar and turned in, although the sun had not quite gone down. I just lay there, utterly peaceful and happy. And I thought of many things, and I expect that come what may, I will rarely feel as peaceful and quietly happy as on this knoll under the poplar trees, with the red setting sun and this great river stretching far away below me. I could not but wonder if for me all this was not the best thing after all: wandering, wandering alone, a good canoe and outfit. I do not seem to be lucky when my life entangles itself with those of other people. Why this should be I do not know — maybe just fate, but nevertheless that is the way it seems to be. And I do seem happiest at this. I have not once felt the need for anyone else. The ranger told me the river is most unseasonably low, being at freeze-up level. The low mud banks are beautifully sculptured and show four distinct drops in water level — miniature terraces. And so finally to sleep, with my soul at peace and the mad squawks of Whisky Jacks as accompaniment.

July 26th

Bright & Fair, wind strong SW. Sat around all morning for

no good reason except that this is such a nice spot. Puttered about and explored a little. Evidently there was a bear around last night, as all the ant hills are freshly torn up. Lots of old sign here from former campers — Indians. Early in the afternoon, just as I was about to pull out to hunt in a little creek, it blackened in the northwest and I only had time to boil the kettle and erect a shelter before a furious thunderstorm & gale struck with great violence. It would be too bad if one were caught in a big expansion of the river or on a lake traverse in an affair like this. Almost as suddenly as it rose, it was over — leaving broken branches and roaring waves. I shall set out to hunt the creek, and will then move on down toward Fitz. I do not wish to get there too soon, as there is no boat for Norman before August and I much prefer camping in the bush to a settlement. It makes me desperately lonely to be in a settlement, but I am fine in the bush if I keep moving. Went on, but found all the creeks choked with logs and driftwood, and at this season too small for the canoe. Several craft of various sorts moving. Finally stopped to boil kettle. A tug of the Wood Buffalo Park came close to look me over. I lost my big spoon & fishing tackle — caught on the bottom, & I was in the current and could not get about in time. Just as I got the outfit in the canoe to start for Fitz. the wind, out of a clear sky, started a gale from the NW. Nothing to do but retreat around a little bend & wait. It lasted until well after sundown — unusual — and so I camped for the night.

July 27th

Cumulus clouds, wind strong W. Crawled along the shore against head wind. As I boiled the kettle I spied a boat over by Caribou Island. It was my friends from Waterways, as I could clearly see with the glasses. They did not see me, however, for they were all looking ahead. Mr. McColl was amidships & the other two were astern. I wonder why it has taken them so long? Their boat seemed to run very well. I hope I catch them — and I could if the wind would drop — as I should like to know their experiences in the fast water. If they think of me at all, I bet they wonder where I am. Well, on again, wind or no. Plugging along against the wind, I came to a set of buildings which turned out to be those of the RCAF. An old timer named Streeter was the caretaker. We had a long chat. This was six miles from Fitzgerald. Eventually I moved on, running a couple of swift water stretches, and at last around a bend, and there was Fitz. The roar of the Cassette Rapids could be plainly heard. The settlement is set on a rising curve of the river, on the west side. The red roofs of the HBC stand out very plainly. I spied the grey boat of Skinner & McColl and paddled up to it. Skinner was surprised to see me. McColl was at Smith. The small barge and power boat I saw yesterday was also here, with 5 bound for Yellowknife. We are all camped together, with Indians and breeds up in back. It was sort of a reunion for all of us who had been at Waterways. Sat around and hashed over the trip down river. I talked a lot with a breed who traps Nonacho Lake. Later went up to the HBC and acquainted the manager with my arrival and the fact that my canoe is for sale [Fig. 18]. I must find out tomorrow what is moving down



FIG. 18. Sequoizi at the end of her voyage.

river; the HBC has nothing for weeks. Turned out to be a fine clear day. The wind dropped once I was in. I have run out of bannock & jam, so arrived here most opportunely. There is considerable activity here. A few Indians and breeds about, all Chips. A great place for dogs of all sorts — all starving, of course. The Skinner-McColl bunch punched a hole in their boat at Chipewyan, otherwise they had good fortune. Had a long talk over the campfire with a breed, a German, and a Swede.

[Part III of Downes's journal will appear in Vol. 38, No. 4 (December 1985).]