

HJALMAR NELSON HAMAR (1894–1967)

A history of Yellowknife says of Hjalmar Nelson that “it is doubtful whether any other man, living or dead, could know more about the mysteries of the Barren Lands of Northern Canada, than this Norwegian trapper” (Horan, 1947:34). An extraordinary barren lands traveler, he covered thousands of kilometres across the Northwest Territories of Canada during five decades of living in the North and often overwintered alone. Mount Hamar is named after Hjalmar. His contemporaries included well-known early barren lands trappers and adventurers such as John Hornby, who is most famous for starving to death on the Thelon River, and Helge Ingstad, who gained public fame by co-discovering the Viking ruins at Vinland, Newfoundland, in 1960 (Ingstad and Ingstad, 1991).

Hjalmar Nilsen Hundhammer was born 14 November 1894 in Dale parish of Bruvik province, Hordaland, Norway. He was the sixth of eight children. Norway emigration records show that he and his 14-year-old sister left Bergen by ship for Rochester, Minnesota, on 17 July 1913. He was just 19 years old.

Hjalmar crossed into Canada in 1914 and became a Canadian citizen in March 1917. He was drafted into the Canadian army on 11 June 1918 and served in the First Depot Battalion, Alberta Regiment, until May 1919 as Hjalmar Nelson Hamar. He had light hair and blue eyes, and he was five and a half feet tall.

After the war, he likely worked his way north to Bella Coola, British Columbia, because a Norwegian settlement was there. Certainly he was in the Mackenzie River valley by 1920, for he describes meeting the crew that started drilling the Imperial Oil Limited Norman Wells discovery well in 1919 (Hamar, 1962.) The crew was returning south when he met them in June 1920 at Fort Smith. They did not say a word because the relief crew was still drilling the well, which did not become a gusher until 25 August 1920. Hjalmar learned too late and staked an unsuccessful oil claim on the Mackenzie River, just missing the boom that followed the discovery of the oilfield that fall.

The next firm account of Hjalmar is from Helge Ingstad, who knew him as Hjalmar Dale in Edmonton late in 1926. The two Norwegians were trapping at the edge of the barren lands east of Great Slave Lake during winter 1926–27. An account of that winter is in Ingstad’s (1992) book *The Land of Feast and Famine*, which is the name of John Hornby’s unwritten book (Stewart, 1984).

Ingstad (1992:123) said of the trappers around him that, “... it may happen that a man may open up. At such times it is a relief to talk one out. But on all other occasions a man’s past is a sealed book, respected by one and all. In the Northland a man begins a brand-new life. He is taken for exactly what is his worth, and not one of his personal affairs concerns anyone else in the world.”

Ingstad, quoted by David Pelly, referred to Hjalmar Dale (later Hjalmar Nelson) “as the man who taught him everything he needed to know in order to survive as a trapper.”

“He was a trapper, yes, but something more,” recalled Ingstad. “He was more interested in the land behind the horizon than in money. During the year I lived with him as a trapper, I learned to know Hjalmar as a man of noble character, a philosopher in his way. He was liked by everybody, not least by the Indians, for his friendly behavior and sparkling spirit. Often he traveled alone with his dogs. When he started on his journey to the Thelon, he told me he intended to stay there during the winter. The following year he would build a canoe of willows covered with canvas and paddle down to Baker Lake. I never met him again. I asked why he changed his name; his answer was that there was another Dale in the Northwest Territories. I said, “What about your reputation as a great traveler associated with your old name? His answer: “I will make a new reputation on the new name.” (Pelly, 1996:67–68)

During 1927–28, Hjalmar and Helge Ingstad overwintered east of Great Slave Lake. They and other trappers gathered at Snowdrift (now Lutsel k’e) during spring 1928 to share news of their trapping results. There was still no news of John Hornby and two others who had left for the barren lands with him in 1926. The Hornby party bodies were found on 21 July 1928 by a geological party traveling down the Thelon River, near what is now named Hornby Point. They found a cabin 30 m back from shore nestled in the trees, on a south slope. The skeletons of John Hornby, Harold Adlard, and 18-year-old Edgar Christian were there. They had starved in the cabin early in 1927. The season was too late, and the scene too grisly, for the geological party to investigate, so they left the bodies untouched. They sent news out by telegraph wire from Baker Lake on 10 August 1928.

By 1928, when Hjalmar was planning his own solo trip to the barren lands, he suspected the fate of John Hornby’s party, but by February 1929 he was certain. Early in that month, at Fort Reliance, he met W.H.B. (Billy) Hoare, who had met with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) investigating officer the week before. So Hjalmar knew the fate of Hornby’s party before he returned to the Thelon headwaters. There is no record of his visiting the tragic site, though he certainly passed it.

During summer 1929, Hjalmar was taking furs out in a willow-framed canoe covered by canvas and dog-hides. He had trapped alone that winter near the headwaters of the Thelon River at Lynx and Whitefish Lakes, 700 km upstream. He was on his way to Baker Lake, Chesterfield Inlet, Hudson Bay, 350 km downstream.

Not until 29 July 1929 did an RCMP patrol from Fort Reliance reach the Hornby cabin. The RCMP patrol buried the bodies at the door of the cabin and put up three crosses for them. Since Hjalmar was known to have been with Jack Knox at Schultz Lake on 1 August 1929, just three days after the RCMP reached the remains 400 km upstream, he must



FIG. 1. Hjalmar Nelson and his beloved dogs at a winter camp near Norman Wells, 1960–61. (Photo courtesy of Maxine Richardson.)

have already passed the site before they arrived. Christian's journal, found in the cabin stove by the RCMP, was later published as the book *Unflinching* (Christian, 1937).

After the 1928–29 trapping season, warden Billy Hoare hired Hjalmar for \$100 to help build and supply Canadian Wildlife Service cabins in the newly established Thelon Game Sanctuary (Thomson, 1990:160). He spent that fall in that activity.

Hjalmar stayed near the Thelon, trapping in the Dubawnt River barren lands, during 1930–32. During winter 1932–33, he returned to Norway for several months to visit relatives. He must have made enough money trapping to afford such a trip in those economically depressed times. Afterwards he returned to the Snowdrift area southeast of Great Bear Lake and continued trapping.

P.G. Downes paddled extensively in northern Canada from 1936 to 1947. He wrote journals and published a classic adventure book, *Sleeping Island*, in 1943 (Downes, 1943). In a 1938 journal, Downes wrote that in 1931 Hjalmar was considered, “best man in North today as lone hand.” Later Downes wrote that, “Neilson [sic] is at Great Bear, also D’Arcy Arden—both at Cameron Bay: latter made about \$20,000 on strike but blew it all in town” (Cockburn, 1986:76). Hjalmar's prospecting interests may have been encouraged by this Eldorado experience.

Perhaps Hjalmar married a woman in Idaho in 1940 and divorced; perhaps he fathered a child at Kugluktuk; but that is all unconfirmed. Perhaps he followed the urgent call to pump oil from Norman Wells to Whitehorse and refine gasoline for Fairbanks, Alaska and Watson Lake, Yukon Territory, Canada during the Canol Project. There was an urgent call for workers during that time (Barry, 1992).

It is certain that he worked at Norman Wells from 1947 to 1959 as an oilfield operator for Imperial Oil Limited. He retired at age 65 from turning valves on oil wells and transporting oil in river barges during short summers. He returned to living off the land while prospecting and trapping with his beloved dogs (Fig. 1). During winters, he was dropped by plane and picked up, by his own misdirections, during late spring or early summer, at disguised places up



FIG. 2. Hjalmar Nelson at Norman Wells, 1960–61. (Photo courtesy of Maxine Richardson.)

and down the Mackenzie Valley and around Great Bear Lake.

In August 1967, at age 72, Hjalmar set off on his last trapping and prospecting trip. His body was found in February 1968, when an RCMP patrol flew in for a pre-arranged pickup at an unnamed lake, 35 km southwest of Norman Wells. He was burnt from the waist down. His overalls had caught fire but the 22-caliber rifle shells in his chest pocket had not exploded. The Northwest Territories administrator's report says that a heart attack, peptic ulcer, or malignancy may have contributed to his death.

Hjalmar was a private person. Helge Ingstad may have been thinking of him when he wrote: “But there is one chap about whom I know absolutely nothing, for he is taciturn and careful of every word that he utters. Well, if he has something he wishes to conceal, that is his affair, not mine” (Ingstad, 1992:124).

That was in 1931. Thirty seven years later, after his death, a news article described Hjalmar as having lived an uneventful life working for Imperial Oil Limited, prospecting for gold and trapping furs during the winters, alone for months at a time (Anonymous, 1968:3). His Norman Wells friends considered him to be a secretive person, but compassionate, and an expert marksman; a trapper and prospector who did not find oil or gold (Fig. 2). They buried him in the Norman Wells cemetery with a clear view of the Mackenzie River. On his gravestone is the inscription, “Remembered by his friends of Norman Wells.” His Winchester 30-30 rifle is in the Norman Wells Historical Society Museum.

His friends climbed Hamar Mountain, 10 km south of Norman Wells, on 21 June 1970 to set a bronze plaque on a cairn in his honour. “Mount Hamar” was officially

approved in the Geographical Names of Canada database on 3 April 1981.

There is a local tradition each summer solstice to climb this peak in the Franklin Mountains to view the midnight sun. Those who reach the summit see the beauty and arch of Canada's longest river, with the Mackenzie Mountains to the west, the sun barely dipping below them. Hjalmar's memorial plaque is on the stone cairn before them. Although Hjalmar doubtless would have avoided such attention or honour, the inscription is entirely fitting:

HE LOVED THE NORTH.

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