Barren Grounds

Skip Pessl

Published by Dartmouth College Press

Pessl, Skip.
Barren Grounds: The Story of the Tragic Moffatt Canoe Trip.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/32724.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/32724

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1258846
PREFACE

JULY 2, 1955: Art Moffatt spider-crawled the gunnels and settled on the stern seat of his gray, heavily laden eighteen-foot Chestnut Peterborough prospector canoe, and with Joe Lanouette, Dartmouth sophomore, in the bow, pushed off into the windy, wave-tossed waters of Black Lake, Saskatchewan, intent on leading his party of six men in three canoes on a great adventure to retrace, without native guides and without outside technical support, the nine-hundred-mile epic journey of J. B. Tyrrell, 1893. Two other canoes followed: a red one with Peter Franck, Harvard student, in the stern and George Grinnell, recently discharged from the U.S. Army; and a green one with Skip Pessl, 1955 Dartmouth graduate, in the stern and Bruce LeFavour, Dartmouth sophomore.

J. B. Tyrrell published the account of his 1893 journey down the Dubawnt drainage in the *Geographical Journal*, November 1894. The article describes the geology and general sources of the region, but also includes more personal remarks on the weather, wildlife, travel conditions, his leadership, and the spirit of the party. Selected quotations from his report are interspersed throughout this narrative where Tyrrell’s comments contrast or reinforce the Moffatt party journal entries for the same locations. Tyrrell’s travel rate also is noted in this narrative, contrasting with the Moffatt party’s much slower northward progress.

The route led northeast through a series of south-flowing lakes, swamps, and connecting streams to the height-of-land between Selwyn and Wholdaia Lakes and then down the huge north-flowing drainage of the Dubawnt River, across the legendary Dubawnt Lake (ice-covered often in late summer) to the Thelon River flowing into Baker Lake and eastward to Chesterfield Inlet and Hudson Bay.

Summer 2013: I am writing now as an eighty-year-old grandfather, reflecting on the youthful prose of the Pessl and Franck Dubawnt journals, reconciling my memories with those entries and trying to put in perspective the comments, critiques, and reviews of the Moffatt expedition that came over these many years from the wilderness canoeing
Route of the Moffatt Party by Elmer Harp Jr.
community, many in response to the publication of George Grinnell’s
account of the journey, *A Death on the Barrens*.

I think the first time I heard about a Dubawnt River canoe journey
was in the summer of 1954 on my second Albany River trip with Art.
We often talked late in the evening around the campfire embers after
the other canoers had left for their tents. He described the history of
Tyrrell’s journey from Athabasca Lake to Chesterfield Inlet and then
down the west coast of Hudson Bay to Churchill, Manitoba. Art had no
intention of making the treacherous coastal journey from Chesterfield
to Churchill, but he did suggest that if we had time after arriving at the
Baker Lake Hudson Bay Company (HBC) post, we might continue on
from Baker to Chesterfield Inlet.

A second motivation from Art was the proposal that we make a
documentary film using the vehicle of canoe travel to record the change
in flora, fauna, and physiography as we traveled from the boreal forests
of northern Saskatchewan northeastward along the Dubawnt drainage,
through a transition zone of diminishing trees and into a region of true
tundra vegetation and wildlife.

I had helped Art on previous Albany River trips to film the canoeing/
camping experience that he then used during subsequent winter months
to interest and recruit potential young canoers to join him for future
summer trips on the Albany River. During those trips, I learned a bit
about camera angles, sequenced shots, and background footage. I enjoyed
being part of the challenge to record on film at least some of what a
wilderness canoe journey was all about, and I understood that this new
and much more comprehensive film project was an exciting, demanding
priority of the Dubawnt proposal.

I accepted that priority unconditionally, without understanding or
contemplating the profound impact the photo priority would have on our
travel schedule. I doubt the other party members knew much about the
film priority or that it was a major dimension of the trip, even though Art
was very specific in his letter of January 27, 1955, to Peter Franck: “I won’t
be up on the Albany this coming summer. I feel almost certain, because we

*Che-Mun, Spring 1996.*
are planning (Skip Pessl and I) a very long and hard trip north from Lake Athabasca to the Dubawnt River, through the Barrens to Chesterfield Inlet. Nobody has made the trip but one white man and his brother in 1893. From Indian country to Eskimo country. Purpose: another film.”

Our group began the trip as an awkward collection of friends and strangers, some having canoed together, others having little or no canoeing experience, and several not even having met each other. Art and I had known each other for four years and had canoed the Albany River twice together. Previously, I made my first canoe trip with my parents on the Manistee River in northwestern Michigan as an eleven-year-old. In subsequent years, we canoed the Michipicoten River–Whitefish Lake drainage in the Algoma country of northern Ontario, the Manuan-Vermillion Rivers, and the Chibougamau-Mistassini Lakes region of southern Quebec. I grew up in the Great Lakes region of southern Michigan, sailing and racing small, one-design boats from nearly as soon as I could walk. Indeed, my nickname was given to me by a Great Lakes ship captain looking through the maternity-ward glass partition at the newborns: “Oh, look at the little skipper.” Wind, water, and weather are common elements in sailing and canoeing, and I understood the dynamics of their interactions, although not in the context of wilderness travel on powerful northern drainages.

Art and Peter Franck had canoed the Albany River once together. Joe Lanouette and Bruce LeFavour, college classmates, were young outdoorsmen but with no canoeing experience. Art had met Joe and Bruce early in the winter of 1954–55. I knew none of the party except Art and none of the party had met George Grinnell until he arrived in Stony Rapids on June 27. So we had much “getting to know” during those early days, and unfortunately some differences and tensions were never resolved.

On June 24, I wrote in my journal: “At first glance our party seems to be a good one. Pete is a little young and seems somewhat preoccupied with minor details; still he seems to be a good worker and he has canoeing experience with Art on the Albany. Joe will probably be the problem guy not in terms of personality quirks, but rather in terms of general insensitivity and unconscious selfishness. Hunger, heat, work are viewed
as personal affronts and are combated with disregard for his impact on others. But all is not gloom with the Brazilian. He’s got a good sense of humor and isn’t half bad on the harmonica. Bruce is a hesitating sincere fellow who likes to fish, wants to learn and will always pick up that last lowly job. Grinnell has not appeared as yet.”

Some of the tension and controversy that ensued as the trip progressed involved nontravel time devoted to photography, sometimes during fair weather when canoe miles could have been optimized. Art and I were almost exclusively involved in the photography, he with the 16 mm movie camera, I with the 35 mm Leica SLR. The others were involved as subjects when we had camping, river running, or hunting/fishing scenarios, but if we were off filming birds, landscapes, or other general subjects, the guys were hanging around camp wondering about or criticizing the delay in our travel departure. So I think the commitment to filming our Dubawnt journey, whether or not understood and supported by the party members, was a major factor in the negative group dynamics that arose from time to time, especially as the travel season waned and photo delays became more compromising.
More importantly, Art and I remained tragically stubborn in our commitment to film the journey, even in the face of serious and obvious deterioration of the weather. Indeed, images of storm-bound campsites with wind-driven snow piled against ragged tents and darkly huddled figures around a smoldering fire pit became a precious part of the story. He was, however, fully aware of the conflict between traveling efficiently and filming the journey. He wrote in his journal on July 31, “but all day reflected on the need to get moving to get out of here before food runs out and storms beset us, and the dilemma of how to make a film of the operation; the two are incompatible.”

A few days earlier, on July 18, he had written: “Back and neck and groin tired after yesterday’s 1½ mi. portage, but feel fine otherwise. Hope to make good time north from here, but need good weather and must make film.”

One afternoon later in the trip when Art and I were out on a photo quest alone, I asked him about our travel schedule, food supply, the weather; I told him we were very close to the bone, that we needed to get out before the country really closed down. I think he understood what
I was saying, but he replied, “Well, but what if we rush to the coast and don’t come back with anything?”

But we did gain the height-of-land by working together, gaining in fitness, skills, and confidence, understanding each other’s strengths and weaknesses and enjoying the challenges of the journey together.

After seventy-five days of glorious wilderness travel, through lakes and swamps and rivers; at campsites tortured by bugs and others blown free by exposed, windy vistas on to the unbelievable sense of infinity that the Barrens invoke; through the adrenalin rush of finding a canoe path through big waves, crashing currents, and threatening rocks; and into the long-distance mantra of paddling forever on huge lakes of mythic energy and unknown outlets, reality brought us down.

The weather grew harsh. Freezing temperatures, wind-driven snow, dwindling food supplies, and deteriorating equipment pushed us hard to travel faster and more efficiently, and ultimately we made a fatal mistake. We approached the rapids entering Marjorie Lake with caution, but without an onshore look. Standing up in our canoes as we floated toward the rapids, we saw a modest current sweeping toward a right-hand bend and drove our canoes into that initial current V.

The rest is wilderness canoeing history. Two of the three canoes capsized, losing most of the party’s food and gear to the river and dumping Art, Joe, Bruce, and Skip in the swirling, frigid waters at the bottom of the rapids and against a small island at the south shore of Marjorie Lake. Art Moffatt died that day.