

J. W. ANDERSON

FUR
TRADER'S
STORY

FOREWORD BY LORD TWEEDSMUIR



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erson in travel attire

CHAPTER XVII
ALBANY

By the great tidal flats on the west coast of James Bay, on the estuary of the river of the same name, stands the historic trading post of Albany, established by H B C in 1679. It had a chequered career during the wars of the English and French for the fur trade of the Bay, and in fact was from 1697 to 1713 the only post held by the English in all that vast area. During the nineteenth century it assumed great importance as a supply depot for a vast hinterland serving such posts as Martens Falls (later Ogoki), Fort Hope and Osaburgh on the Albany River; and Cat Lake, Lac Seul and Red Lake on connecting waterways. A glance at the map will show that this inland supply route extended from James Bay to within a hundred miles of Lake Winnipeg. This gradually changed, however, first with the C.P.R. reaching Fort William in 1885 then more rapidly with the construction of the Grand Trunk Pacific (later Canadian National Railways) through Cochrane, Pagwa, Sioux Lookout and Winnipeg just prior to World War I. By the time I arrived to take charge of Albany in 1922 its glory had departed, though it was still an important fur post with two outposts, one at Ghost River a hundred miles up the Albany and the other on the coast, called Kapisko, forty miles to the north.

It was at Albany that I had a faint historical contact with the famous explorer, Dr. John Rae, the first to bring back authentic information regarding the fate of the Franklin North West Passage expedition. The elders of the Albany Indians still held the tradition of his extraordinary feat in being the only man, white or Indian, ever to walk on snowshoes from Moose Factory to Albany, a distance of eighty to

eighty-five miles on the winter trail, without a sleep. I have never read anywhere of the exact number of hours taken on this journey, though the Indians were of the opinion that it was within a twenty-four-hour period. This tradition was quite a tribute to Dr. Rae, for when I arrived to take charge of Albany post in 1922 it had been seventy-nine years since the famous explorer had been in James Bay. Everything I have read about Dr. Rae indicates that this Orcadian was an extraordinarily hardy and wiry individual, possessed of great energy and with all the qualities of leadership which led eventually to his fame as an explorer. In February, 1856, in a letter to the H B C in London, he indicated how he had trained himself in the ways of the country and of how to live off the land during the ten years he was an H B C surgeon at Moose Factory from 1833 to 1843. It was this training which enabled him to be so successful in his Arctic explorations, for he travelled light with few helpers, lived off the country and accomplished really extraordinary feats. Sunday, October 14, 1951, was a pleasant autumn day in Kirkwall the capital of the Orkney Islands when I was privileged to make a pilgrimage to the memorial to Dr. John Rae in St. Magnus Cathedral and to his burial place in the churchyard. Knowing something of how he lived off the country in the vast Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of Canada, I thought of the famous lines, for verily he was "the hunter home from the hills."

Writing in historical vein I should mention one of my predecessors, William Kelk Broughton, who was in charge of Albany from 1874 to 1889 when it was the headquarters and supply depot for a number of inland posts reaching far into the interior. This Broughton subsequently became chief factor in charge of the James Bay District with headquarters at Moose Factory and retired to England in 1901. The Albany Indians remembered Broughton as a first-class Cree linguist and one of the very few white men who could, like not a few of the Indians, eat a whole wavy at one sitting! Because of this feat he was to them a man's man!

I spent the spare moments of my first two winters at

Albany in sorting, classifying, listing and packing a tremendous collection of old records, most of which were the work of this same W. K. Broughton. No one asked me to do this, but I could see it was time these records were packed up, so they were duly shipped to district office and thence to the London archives.

Most of us are prone to think that the business difficulties of our own day are unique, but a survey of Broughton's reports and records indicated that he too had his troubles. True, they were of a different nature to those of my day, but they were nevertheless very real. As Albany was the supply depot for a number of inland posts the summer transportation season was inevitably of vital importance. Not only was it a matter of the health and well-being of the Indian voyageurs but water levels were a constantly gnawing uncertainty, tending not infrequently to be either too high or too low. Reasonable water levels therefore meant much to the success of the inland transport. An epidemic of any kind amongst the voyageurs or their families would play havoc with the freighting when so many Indians of the far interior were depending on this tenuous supply line. Another worry for Broughton was the volume of fur production. Raw fur values were considerably lower in his day, so that you had to secure really large quantities of peltries to achieve volume. And here again the health and well-being of his trappers had a tremendous bearing on the results, not to mention the vagaries of weather and the cyclical fluctuations in the population of the fur bearers. Broughton was a capable trader, and the impression gained is that in spite of his anxieties he was able to cope with his problems.

It took me several months to establish a rapport with the Crees of Albany, though once the initial difficulties were smoothed out I found them good people to deal with. By this time modernized bookkeeping systems were being introduced into the fur trade and we were using sales slips which, though available to our customers, were usually thrown away as very few of them could read. Nevertheless, when first I went to

Albany, they were constantly questioning this and that amount in their accounts, and there was continual suspicion and bickering. So, without showing resentment, I would patiently go to great pains to establish every detail and had the satisfaction in a few months of establishing complete confidence. If I said their debit or credit balance was such and such, they accepted my word. And that was a great compliment! For honesty alone is not enough—you must have reasonable efficiency as well. I have for some years maintained that there are, in general, three classes of people in business: the fools, the knaves and the efficient. The fools mean well but they have their business so muddled up they do not know where they stand and neither do their customers. The knaves on the other hand have no intention of doing honest business, and although they may think they are fooling their customers they very seldom do. And then there are the efficient with whom, by inference, I would like to be classified! Efficiency in business is a wonderful challenge though, like righteousness in daily life, never quite attainable!

It was while at Albany that I took up public speaking—in Cree! Not that I was in any way proficient in the language, for I never really studied it. For me the Cree language was an instrument leading to greater business efficiency, not a matter of scholarship. Similarly it was much more efficient, when you had something to tell your customers or the entire population, to gather them together in an empty warehouse and give it to them in their own language. They were great speechmakers themselves with a fine fluent and sonorous delivery, so they liked this sort of thing. Particularly is the Ojibway tongue suited to oratory; it is a treat to listen to a good Ojibway orator even if you don't understand his language. But many are the pitfalls for anyone who would use the native tongue. This was forcefully impressed upon me when, almost immediately after arriving to take charge of Attawapiskat post in 1919, I had occasion to issue somewhat lengthy and detailed instructions to one of the natives. To my mind I was airing my best Cree, but was completely nonplussed

when he turned to me and said, in his own language, "Never mind, please speak English. I will understand you better!"

While at Albany I usually had two assistants, partly because of the volume of work but partly also for training. We operated the forty-ton sailing schooner *Fort Charles*, which carried freight from Albany (where it was delivered by steamer) to Kapisko, Attawapiskat, Opinega and Weenusk. Skipper J. W. Faries was master of the *Fort Charles* for most of this period and did a splendid job of delivering all this freight without the assistance of any motive power. During the winter he would be manager of Kapisko outpost while his brother W. R. Faries was in charge of Ghost River, both of them doing good work for H B C. During this period, too, a considerable tonnage of supplies was coming down the Albany River from the railway at Pagwa by means of scows and power tug. Revillon Frères opened up this route during World War I when they were unable to charter a ship to take their supplies from Montreal to James Bay. It was only because they owned their own ship that the H B C were able to have ocean-borne supplies into the Bay in the later years of World War I. They followed Revillon Frères on the Albany River supply route, which was eventually discontinued when the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway reached tidewater at Moosonee in 1931.

The outposts were always inspected during the winter months. Kapisko, being on the coast and only some fifty miles north, was easy to reach by dog-team in a day and a half and was usually inspected twice. Ghost River, one hundred miles up the Albany River, was five snowshoe days distant and was inspected annually in January, the coldest month of the winter. In the course of my winter inspections, inland and on the coast, I have travelled with both Protestant and Catholic missionaries and can well remember on one occasion having as my companion the Reverend P. A. Northam, then in charge of St. Paul's Anglican Mission at Albany. We had been to Ghost River and were returning to Albany when on a bitter cold afternoon we stopped for the night at the

camp of John Koosees, one of the prominent natives of the day. He was a bit of a politician too. He came out to greet us (Northam, myself and our guides) for it was taken for granted that we would stay the night under his hospitable roof. The weather, as with all peoples, provided the introductory source of conversation, and John remarked that it was a really cold day, quite the coldest of the winter. "Of course," said he, "we Indians don't mind this cold but it is really too much for you white men." This might have been so, but we noted that neither John nor his sons had stirred from the fireside that day!

Koosees had quite a large log cabin in a bluff of heavy timber on the bank of the Albany River. The old man and his wife occupied one corner, two married sons the other two corners, and we the guests had the fourth corner to ourselves. Here in due course we spread our sleeping robes on the floor for the night. But first came food, for it was late in the afternoon when we arrived. The women prepared a very fine stew of moosemeat and we provided the tea, sugar and other items of imported foods. At a suitable interval after the repast the business session would commence, during the course of which I would buy their furs, take their orders for anything special they wanted next summer, and so on. Then it was time for evening prayers in Cree in which we would all join. As would be expected after a bitter cold day on the snowshoe trail, the white men were the first to turn in for the night. How was this done in one large room with women and children around? Well, naturally you don't carry pyjamas on the winter trail and therefore slept in your underwear. So the procedure was to remove outer garments, moccasins, etc., crawl into your sleeping robe where you would remove your pants. In the morning you reversed the procedure, and as everybody else did the same there was no embarrassment.

One of the advantages of an understanding of the native language is that you can enjoy hearing what they have to say about you. For Indians, like primitive people generally, will

discuss you, your foibles and affairs in a frank and sometimes unflattering manner. On the first occasion I spent a night at the Koosees camp after taking charge of Albany post, it was inevitable that after I retired they should discuss the pros and cons of the new boss. This they did, and finally it came around to the question of my age, which at that time was twenty-nine years. People used to tell me about this time that I looked older than my years, but the Koosees sons and my guides were away too high, the consensus being from forty to fifty. Finally the old patriarch spoke up. "No, no," said he. "You are all wrong. Can't you see he is a young man? He will have many children yet." This is the same Koosees who would do most of the talking when the district manager came to inspect my post. Without batting an eye, he would tell the district manager that he and the companions of the group who were being interviewed always paid their debts. This may have been right for the others, I cannot now recollect, but it was a slight exaggeration as applied to Koosees.

There were a fair number of wolves in the Albany area, though I cannot recall that they ever caused much trouble. If they did, the Indians would wait until the deep snows of March, and with especially large snowshoes made for the occasion and designed to let them glide swiftly over the deep snows they would simply run them down. After being flushed a wolf would run at tremendous speed for the first few miles and gain great headway. But an Indian runner maintaining a good steady jog-trot would usually catch up with the exhausted wolf before sundown and shoot him in his tracks. This lack of stamina was first brought to my attention at Attawapiskat where one of the lay brothers of the Oblate Mission had a captured wolf in his dog-team—rather a dangerous proceeding to be sure. This brute would set off in great style in the morning but, big though he was, he would be more or less exhausted by noon and would be useless all afternoon.

Talk about wolves reminds me of one of my winter trips on the shores of James Bay when we passed an animal in a

trap. I asked my guide what it was and he said it was someone's dog accidentally caught in a trap.

"What is the correct thing to do?" I asked.

"Oh, we must let it out of the trap."

"Fine," said I. "But hurry, because it's mighty cold and we must keep moving to stay warm."

This animal didn't raise much objection, other than a little snapping, when I lassoed his nose with the dog whip and held him tight while my guide released his foot. I noticed he had rather a long snout for an Eskimo dog, but thought my guide should know. After all, this was his country! I shall never forget the expression of gratitude in the brute's eyes when we released him and he lay there with never a move. My guide said the animal would follow us as soon as we drove away with our team. We drove away all right but the beast didn't follow us; he made for the shoreline and the tall timbers. And when we returned to the post we had a wrathful Indian claiming damages because we had released his wolf from a trap! All in all, however, wolves seldom gave us any trouble, though they did seem to have an uncanny way of knowing when you didn't have a rifle on the sled. On such occasions they would play around with the team all day, first dashing ahead causing the team to chase them like mad; then, having secured a good lead, they would lie down to rest. Sometimes they would be ahead, sometimes to one side and sometimes behind. Then at night they would hang around the camp, though the dogs would soon warn you if they came too close. Ordinarily there was little game of any kind to shoot on the dog-team trail, and since every pound of weight counted you usually dispensed with firearms and ammunition.

Near the end of January, 1923, I made one of my infrequent dog-team trips to Moose Factory, where with my driver Tom Linklater I arrived one clear, calm and cold Sunday afternoon. After a bath (the old-fashioned portable tin bath) and a change, there was the pleasure of meeting and talking with friends, old and new, reading the mail and so forth. After dinner most of us went to evening service in St. Thomas'

