

Our Lives
Cartwright, Labrador

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You got most of your dog food in the summer. The fish that was too soft for sale you would salt in barrels. In the winter you then soaked the salt out of it for the dogs.

There were always a few seals to be taken. That was the main food for the dogs.

The jar seals are here winter and summer. That is a seal that can chew up through the ice, no matter how thick it is. The harp seals can't do that.

Then there's the ranger seal. They're here most of the year.

The square-flipper is another seal, one of the biggest. There are a dozen kinds besides the harp.

And those beggars, the grey seal, come from Sable Island. In the summer, if one of those grey seals discovers a net with a salmon in it, that's his net from then on. He will tend it more often than you do. You will very rarely get a salmon and they will tear your net to pieces.

Usually they are too damn cute to catch or shoot. Mostly it's night work with them. They tend your net in the night. You know they were there when you go and haul your net in the morning. There will be just the heads of the salmon left in the net.

They are smart enough to do that in the night.

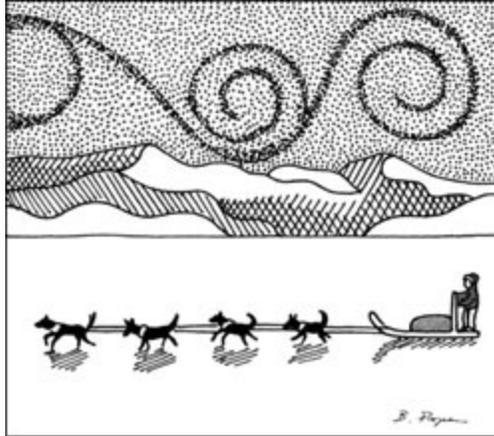
My father caught a salmon up the head of Muddy Bay. We had one of those spring balances hung up on the top of the door. The salmon reached the top of the door and his tail was just about touching the floor. He was a brute, thirty-five pounds.

Of course the old man said there were two there. The other one was bigger. He got away!
[laughing]

It is really bad lately. No one knows how many salmon we would have if not for that damn grey seal.

You might eat the first salmon you got in the spring. The salmon was your cash crop. That was where you made your money. From then on you'd be hoping for a gull to get at one that's in the net. That would spoil him for sale. You'd have him, then!

Or one that was badly cut by the twine in the net. So you take that one. Be glad of those. But you would not take the number one. That was your easiest, no, quickest way to make a few dollars.



I said easiest but it was not the easiest way. It was the quickest way, not the easiest way. You would kill yourself cleaning your nets in the warm summers. Everything grows fast, and seaweed, kelp, and slub all choked the nets. You would hammer them bloody nets day after day, hour after hour.

But it was wonderful as long as you were getting the salmon.

I don't know how it happens but you learn directions somehow. Say you went off half a day's walk in a forest one way and then made a half circle. Usually you can leave and come straight home.

There is no way you can go by anything. How does a goose do it? How does a salmon find his own river? It's something in nature, I think. No matter how thick the woods got you can do that. You might have circled for half a day but you still find home.

The northern side of the juniper trees has very few limbs if they're near an opening. Limbs always branch to the south. That's one way you can get a general direction if you can't see the sun.

On the barrens, if you remember which way the wind was blowing the last storm you had, the drifts all lined up one way. You could get a general direction like that. That's about the only way.

Other than that you've got to have a good dog team leader. There's none of them left now.

A Bear in Camp

I remember one trip up to Muddy Bay Brook. Trout were going in plentiful. I took my young fella. He was only about seven or eight years old. We went up and set our net late in the evening.

Next we set up camp. It was in the summer but it gets cold in the morning by a brook. I cut up an armful of wood and put it outside the tent door in case it got cold. Sure enough, it did.

The young fella woke up with the cold but he didn't wake me. He figured he would put a fire in the camp stove himself. He parted the flaps of the tent door and down there where my wood was there was the paw of a bear!

He fell backwards and shook me. "Dad, I saw a bear!"

He didn't say exactly where he saw it. As far as I knew it was a hundred yards across the brook. I crawled over the camp on my knees and spread the door open and stuck my bloody fool head out. I brought up about six inches from this bear's nose.



We stared at each other for several seconds. Just looking at each other. If I ever see him again I'll know that bugger, for sure.

I thought about my gun in the tent there by my sleeping bag. I was quat up on my heels, and I fell backwards and reached for it.

By the time I grabbed my gun and looked again there was no more sign of the bear. You would swear he was never there.

The Bear and the Fly Dope

While I'm on the subject of bears I'll tell you this. I got a little cabin over here across the bay. I use it for goose hunting in the fall. A couple or three years ago I was leaving the cabin for the

last time that fall. In fact it was starting to freeze up. We cleaned out most of the things we had in the cabin and brought it home again. But we left a tin or two of corned beef, odds and ends like that, on the shelf on the cabin. I also left a can of this fly spray.

The next fall we went over there. Dennis was the first one to go up to the cabin.

When he got to the door he said, "Cripes, Dad, your door is chewed open."

The corner of the door was clean gone through. This was the bear. You could see the black hair around the doorway where he squeezed through. We unlocked the door and went in.

Dennis spoke up again. "Dad! Look! Someone was in here. Not only a bear. A man was in here. It had to be. Look at the corned beef full of .22 bullet holes."

When I looked I saw that it had to be the bear chewing the damn tin. The holes on both sides were inward. It had to be a bear.

And here was this tall can of pressurized fly spray. There were five or six teeth marks clean through that. Now you can imagine what happened.

We had a stove in there and stovepipes stuck up. Every stovepipe was flattened out on the floor and soot covered everything. What a mess! The stove was battered, not usable any more. He wrecked the cabin. He must have gone wild after he bit into this can of fly dope.

I don't think he was ever touched by a fly after that!



The Coldest Day

I fell in more than once. It happened twice in one day! One day I can remember, I was really sorry for myself because it was really cold.

There were two of us, my young fella and myself. On the way down to Goose Cove Pond to go ice fishing we played it safe. The ponds were just frozen over so we went around them. On one side of the pond a brook went into another pond. We wanted to get across this brook and it was quite deep.

We chopped down a dry juniper that just reached across the brook. We also cut a couple of little poles so that we could balance ourselves. We stuck one end of the pole in the bottom of the brook and used it for balance. Anyway, my buddy went first. He got across number one.

I started behind, not as careful as I should have been. The stick broke off and down I went, right in the centre of the brook. I went right to my neck. I was the only one with the matches. The young fella didn't smoke and he had no matches with him. We couldn't stop and dry out so we turned tail for home.

On the way back we decided to cross the pond that we went around on the way in. I was damn near freezing. We gave her hell across the pond and we made it. Well, we almost made it. My buddy got up safely on the bank on the other side of the pond.

I was so mesmerized with the cold I couldn't think. I was just following his tracks. Then I heard the ice crack. When I tried to jump I just went through the ice.

That was the second time for that day. Boy oh boy!

I didn't mind that first dipping, the first time I fell through. It wasn't too bad, but that second time! My dungarees started to freeze solid.

I was lucky. We didn't have far to come, only about a mile to home.

The Woolly Parka

I had an old three-quarter length parka, an old air force job, the real thing for riding on Ski-Doo. We were over here at North River. When we camped that night it was blowing hard. My jeez it was cold. We had no thermometer to tell what the temperature was but it was way, way, down. I'd say it was twenty, twenty-five below, and with high wind.

I put my old parka down on the boughs in the tent on my side of the stove. I put my sleeping bag on top of the parka to keep warm. We put in a good fire.

We were taking turns putting the fire in. I fell asleep solid and my buddy did too. What woke me was my buddy coughing. He was coughing bad. He was going to vomit up his guts, I figured. I

looked over across and I couldn't see anything, just a greyish-white mist. Then I saw a little spark. That's my buddy, I figured, lighting a cigarette.

That little glow I saw looked about the size of a cigarette butt. That's what it looked like to me. Suddenly I came completely awake and thought, "Sure, my buddy doesn't smoke!"

It was his flashlight. He was just about passing out. The next thing, he made a bolt to get out of that tent fast. But he took the wrong end! He made for the back end. He took the tent down on top of me and the hot stove and everything else.

Boy oh boy!

I found my parka the next morning. That was what caused the bad, stinky smoke. My parka was smouldering, right from the foot to the head.

I suppose we'd have passed out there if he didn't wake up when he did.

I must have touched the stove with the edge of the parka, but it burned a foot wide, the full length.

It needed a good patch.

It was gone, spoiled completely. I missed the warmth the next day coming home in the cold.

Storms and Ships

I spent one bad time. I brought a couple of guys to Goose Bay to go to work and I was on the way back. It was a perfectly fine day. I was driving about a mile from the shore on the north side of the big bay. Sitting on the komatik I thought I was going to be over halfway home by evening.

Next I heard a low rumble, a rushing sound. I couldn't quite place it, so I turned and looked toward the land and the land was gone! I couldn't see it for snow. A sudden blizzard from the north.

I had time to turn my leader in towards the land and within five minutes I was ashore. Where we landed was right where we had set our camp on the way up to Goose Bay. The camp poles were still there and the boughs down on the snow. All I had to do was stick up my camp stove and get a bit of wood and I was ready for the night. I was glad to find that camp because it got really bad.

I fed my old dogs just a bit of frozen food that night. The next morning I woke up and I tried to sit up in my sleeping bag but I couldn't.

My tent door faced the bay and the north. That was okay when I went to bed but the wind had swung around to the northwest during the night. My camp filled up with snow and I had all that weight on my sleeping bag.

I had a look and it was too miserable to do anything. I tucked down in my sleeping bag and slept until I absolutely had to get up.

After a while I started to get a little hungry, so I decided to try to get out. I got one of my snowshoes and shovelled out my tent. There were my boots, jacket and cap and gloves, everything scattered around the floor like I left them in the night. I had to get a fire underway, dry all that out and have something to eat.

That night my dogs had no supper. All my frozen dog food was gone and I couldn't get to cook anymore. It was too damn stormy so I turned in again for the second night.

Sometime in the small hours of the morning I woke up. Everything was very still. I knew the wind was gone. I looked out across the bay. There were three separate strings of light, two hundred yards apart. They looked like ships' lights, which I knew was impossible. This was in March, way back then. There could be no boat, with four feet of ice all through the bay.

I rolled over and waited for daylight. When I looked out there were three ships all right, making their way into Goose Bay. An icebreaker and two freighters behind her.

Now I was being cut off from crossing to the south side. I could go back around to Goose but it would spoil a whole day. Then I would have to come down the other side. I didn't want to do that. Another way was to go down to Rigolet, just outside the narrows and get across in boat. But a man and his stuff and his dogs aboard a little rowboat was not something you wanted to do. Until you're forced to.

I decided to drive out to where the ships went up to see what it looked like. When I got out there the ice was broken up in pieces. There were big pieces and small, with snow drifted over the works.

I decided to give it a try. I sang out to my dogs. They went across as fast as they could hightail it and I stayed on the after part of my komatik, to keep her head up high.

I made it across and was proud enough to do it, too. I didn't want to go out to Rigolet and be put across in boat.

For some strange reason there's one legend the length of the coast, from the northern end to the southern part. Old Smokler. Everyone knows about Old Smokler. It seems like he was a dog driver. He had a wonderful team of dogs. Before a storm, if you think you hear a dog team coming, watch out, that's Smokler. Guaranteed. It might be a moonlit night but a storm was on the way.

My favourite place in Labrador is a mountain to the northwest side of the bay. Barrowbrook Mountain we call it. I don't know how high it is but it's over three thousand feet high, right over the bay.

From there I swear you can see ten thousand square miles of country, looking in every direction. You can see at least fifty miles to the south'ard there and fifty miles back to the north.

To the west you can see another fifty miles before the land gets too high, looking at the horizon. Out to sea to the east'ard, it's another fifty miles. That's a hundred miles by a hundred miles.

So on a clear day you can see ten thousand square miles.

Curlew Harbour

There was one grave out there in Curlew Harbour with twenty-nine people in it. There were two schooners wrecked there the same time but they claimed everyone got ashore. They were on the way home and had their families.

They said when they were found most of the people were down in the pit they had dug, a big pit. That was to keep warm, I suppose, and there were men there, perished, with practically nothing on. Even their oil clothes were given to the people who were down in this hole.

I suppose these men thought they were tough enough to take it, but they weren't, of course.

They claimed they buried them all there, where they were.

The Hudson Bay Company

It was interesting working for the Hudson Bay Company. That's why I went with them, as outside foreman. I handled the complete salmon deal for them. I had twelve or fifteen men going around in motorboat and collecting and packing salmon on the land and shipping it out.

That was for the fresh salmon market. When that was over we collected in salt codfish from the people all around the place. In the fall you'd ship that. Late in the fall when the freight was all in we would lay the men off.

In the winter I would be there by myself doing outside work. They had up to two hundred and fifty nets, and I'd have to mend those and hang new ones for next year. The men would be hired back on the first of May. We'd get the nets barked and the boats painted up and ready for the water.

Some of those Hudson Bay managers down for the first time used to mess up. Especially those who were too stuck-up or a little too proud to ask someone's advice.

There was one guy came down here, Earl Boone. When he landed here he was green, but he didn't mind, he'd ask advice. That was the only way to be.

Jeez, the boys used to fool him some bad. He loved to hunt. We took him one trip up the bay. We were going up for a scow load of wood. We had one of them Cape Islander boats. Earl loved to hunt, and he loved to sleep, too.

On the way up the bay he went in the cabin to lie down on the locker. He went dead to the world so we sneaked in with a piece of rope. We tied it around both his feet and tied it to the post that came down through the deck.

I gave him about a fathom slack.

I whispered to one of the boys, "Get a shotgun out and have two or three shots and start bawling about the birds."

Everyone grabbed a gun and they started to shout and bawl. "Look at the birds! Look at the birds!" They made quite the racket.

Earl came through the door, headfirst!

He just reached the doorway before his feet brought up tight.

It's a wonder we didn't kill him.

Earl did pretty damn good for himself with the Hudson Bay Company. He got to be a High Commissioner. He was from Newfoundland somewhere.