

A BONUS SELECTION

► People sometimes discover important things about themselves when being tested under pressure. The author of this true story is just such a person. As a young woman, she agreed to join her husband for a few months of adventure. They were to trap muskrat and other animals for fur, in Canada's Far North. But when the deep snows came, they found that they were trapped themselves.

Years later, when she was in her 60s and living comfortably in British Columbia, Olive A. Fredrickson sat down to write the amazing story of what happened in that

STARVATION WILDERNESS

by Olive A. Fredrickson

Our scow was heavy. It was an old 30-footer that we had bought at Fort Fitzgerald. But with only two grown-ups, a baby, and a pair of sled dogs on board, it rode high. The steady current of the Slave River pushed us north far faster than anyone could have walked on shore.

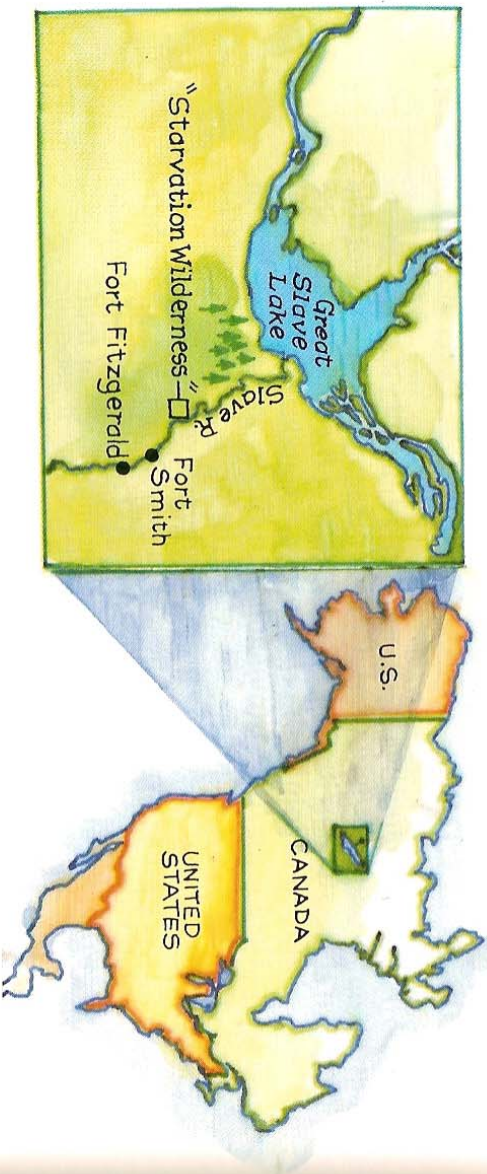
We had oars, and now and then my young husband, Walter, used them for a short distance. But there was no need for it. Mostly he just steered. We watched the early-fall scenery slip past or played with our six-month-old daughter, Olive. When

we weren't cuddling her, she slept as contented as a kitten in the small cardboard box that was her crib.

Muskrat sign was plentiful along the river. Wherever there was green grass along the shore, snow geese pastured by the hundreds. We were rarely out of hearing of their wild voices. We had come to a land of plenty, Walter and I agreed. It was a dream country for a young trapper and his wife.

The time was late August of 1922. The trip had come about when Walter met two trappers, Nels Nelson and Pete

- muskrat (MUSK rat) brown animal that lives in and near water, about two feet long; also called *marsh rat* and *rat in the selection*
- scow (SKOU) barge; tub-like boat for carrying cargo
- cuddling (KUD ling) holding and petting



Anderson, at Fort Fitzgerald. They had trapped the fall before down the Slave in Northwest Territories. They had come out before Christmas, they said, with 1,600 muskrat skins that brought \$1.50 apiece. There were lakes all over the country, they told Walter, and every one of those lakes crawled with marsh rats.

My husband was a trapper at heart, above everything else. For him stories of that kind were like wild tales of gold to other men. He gave up then and there all thought of going to Fort McMurray, where I had been looking forward to the presence of other women, a few corn-forts, and a doctor in case the baby or I needed one. The three of us, Walter decided, would spend the winter trapping on those rich fur grounds.

We bought the scow and 34 single-spring traps. We also bought 400 pounds of flour, 50 pounds of white sugar, and

four 50-pound sacks of potatoes. I remember that we paid \$12 for each of those sacks. Coal oil was \$2 a gallon at Fitzgerald. We completed our grub list with beans, rice, salt pork, oatmeal, baking powder, salt, and tea—and cornmeal for the dogs.

We loaded the scow and shoved off on August 25 for the trip down the Slave to our trapping grounds. We were in completely unfamiliar country. It was the first time either of us had been that far north. We were on our way into what Walter had been told was good fur country. He was completely happy. I'll confess that I wasn't quite so cheerful as he was about wintering with a child not yet a year old hundreds of miles from the nearest doctor.

Nels and Pete had told us to look for an old sawdust pile on the west shore of the river. We should settle down around there, they had said. We passed the saw-

- presence (PREZ uns) nearness; being there
- coal oil—kerosene, sometimes made from coal

dust pile on our fourth day of floating. We tied up the scow, let our two dogs loose for a run, got the tent up, and carried our supplies up the bank. It was close to midnight when we finished. We tied the dogs to trees and turned in.

After we had gotten to sleep, I was awakened by some animal gnawing on the salt pork we had brought into the tent. At first I thought one of the dogs had gotten loose. But as my eyes grew accustomed to the dim light in the tent I made out a large skunk.

The tent was only 9 × 12 feet. That skunk was working on the pork within three feet of my face. I shook Walter awake. We tried to drive the skunk off, but it wouldn't budge.

"I'll have to shoot it or we won't have any pork," Walter finally said. We knew it wasn't a very good idea, but we had no choice.

Shooting a skunk inside a tent is a big mistake. Whoever invented tear gas simply copied something that skunks have used for thousands of years. It wouldn't be truthful to say the air turned blue, but it certainly turned something. Our eyes started to water. We were almost blinded. We began to gag. I grabbed the baby and fumbled my way outside. After a minute or so, Walter stumbled out behind me, dragging the dead skunk. He threw it over the river-

bank. We hauled our bedding outside and spent the rest of the night in the open. We were tired enough to sleep anywhere. The next morning I told Walter that his way of saving our salt pork was no good. The pork smelled almost as bad as the tent.

Next we started work on a cabin for our winter home. We planned to live in it only until November, when the lakes would freeze and we'd have to quit trapping. So we threw it up hurriedly. It was built of small green logs. It was soon finished, and about October 1 we put our traps out.

As it happened, we stayed on in that rough cabin until spring. For one thing, there was a lot of fur, mink as well as muskrat. There was also firewood handy. The cabin stood in a thick grove of spruces, where it was sheltered from the wind.

We had torn our scow apart to make doors and windows. I suggested to Walter that he build a boat. It was a clumsy boat, for we had no way to bend the heavy boards of the scow.

The trapping looked good, but now we faced another problem. Wild meat was so scarce that we got worried. There wasn't a moose or deer track anywhere. Before winter closed in on us, we had named that belt of timber and swampy

- salt pork—fat pork cured with salt to keep fresh
- tear gas—kind of gas that burns the eyes, sometimes used to control riots
- gag (GAG) cough with a sick feeling
- belt (BELT) area; region

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lakes Starvation Wilderness. Snow came to stay on October 10. After that the whole country was white and lifeless.

Trapping was good. We were looking at our traps twice a day. We'd hike out to the lakes together. Then I'd take Olive and the dog team with a small toboggan and cover half the line. Walter would go over the other half. We'd meet at midday. On the way back to camp, he covered my end of the line and I took his.

We both trapped until the first of November. Then the lakes were frozen. The temperature had dropped too low for us to be out in the wind and cold. From December until the end of March, the temperature rarely climbed as high as 10° below zero. There were days when it went to 65° below. The wind cut like a knife. We huddled in our shack and tried to keep warm.

Spruce pitch dripped from the roof poles and matted my long curls that Walter liked so much. In desperation I finally took the scissors one day when he was out looking at fox traps and cut my hair as short as I could. He was so upset when he came home that his face turned gray.

We got through that bitter winter until February. By then we knew we'd run out of food long before June, when we had planned to catch the first steamboat coming up the Slave. We had known since October that I was pregnant. Our

second baby would be born in July. We didn't dare to wait for the boat, knowing that before the end of winter we'd have nothing to eat.

We were in no shape for the 60-mile trip out to Fort Smith. Our two dogs were old and not strong enough to pull Olive and me on the sled. The baby could ride, but I'd have to walk. We didn't have suitable clothing for cold of 40° and 50° below zero. What we lacked were fur parkas and fur-lined moccasins. But as our food dwindled, we made ready for the trip. Walter would leave Olive and me at Fort Smith and come back in time to trap again as soon as the lakes opened.

We put hot water in the water bottle, and we heated stones. We wrapped the baby in our whole bedroll of four blankets with the stones and water bottle beside her, and struck out up the Slave. The empty toboggan with Olive aboard was all our dogs could pull.

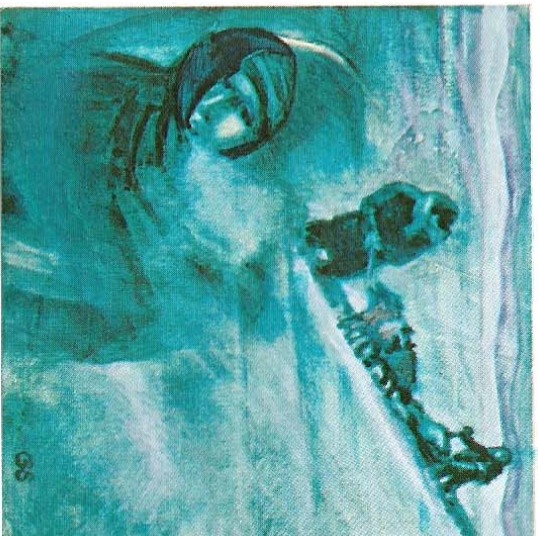
It was bitterly cold, probably around 40° below. The going was hard. We made poor time. The dogs pulled willingly enough for a while. But the heavy going was too much for them. We had traveled about 15 miles when they began to give out. They stopped frequently. More than once they lay down in the snow. Walter urged them on and pushed all he could on the toboggan handles to help them. But we both knew we weren't going to go much farther.

- toboggan (tuh BOG un) large, flat sled
- parka (PAR kuh) fur jacket with a hood
- dwindle (DWIN duh) become less and less
- bedroll (BED roh) role of blankets or other bedding

The winter days are very short there in the North. By 3:30 in the afternoon, dusk was beginning to come down. Across the river there was a little cabin with smoke curling out of the chimney. I can't remember that I was ever gladder to see a human habitation.

The cabin belonged to two young trappers. We pulled in thinking we could stay the night. But there wasn't room to walk between the stove, beds, and table. It was plain that they couldn't put us up. They told us that four miles farther up the Slave another trapper, Bert Bennett, had a comfortable cabin. We rested a little while, and started for Bennett's place with the early dark thickening over the frozen snowy wilderness. I didn't feel as if I could go 500 feet, much less four miles.

That was one of the worst hikes I've ever had. Each mile of the four seemed like 10. The dogs stopped every few yards to lie down. Walter went ahead to break trail and pull them along with a short length of rope. I pushed on the toboggan handles for a change. It was too dark for Walter to see where he was putting his snowshoes, and he must have fallen 100 times. I had pain in every inch of the legs, my back, and all through my body. I finally realized I was leaning on the toboggan handles more than I was pushing. It seemed to me that the easiest thing to do would be to walk off into the snow and lie down and sleep forever.

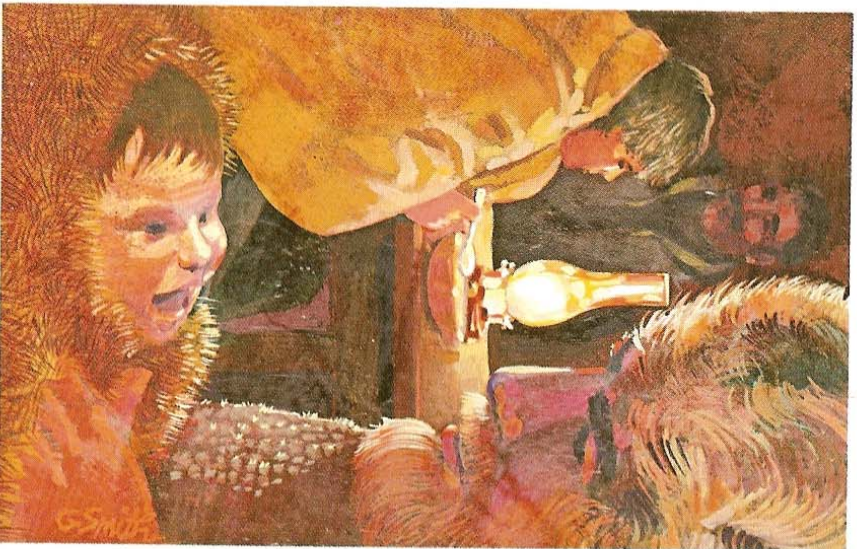


But there was Olive to think of, I reminded myself. I could hear her whimper now and then, and wondered if she was freezing. There was nothing I could do about it if she was. I didn't dare open the bedroll she was wrapped in to look at her. I just kept putting one foot ahead of the other, stumbling and staggering along, terribly cold, until I lost all track of time and place.

A shout from Walter brought me out of my stupor. "Hello, there!" he yelled. I looked ahead and could see a square of light shining out of a window. Oh, what a welcome sight!

I don't remember Bennett opening the door, or Olive and me being carried into the warmth of the cabin. The first thing I recall was Walter pulling off my coat. Then somebody set a bowl of hot soup in front of me and shook me and told me to eat.

- habitation (hab i TAY shun) a building to live in
- stupor (STOO pur) dazed or dull state; loss of feeling



In a daze I watched Bennett take off Olive's rabbit-skin coat and start to feed her. They told me afterward that I cried out, "No, don't take her coat off. She'll freeze!" But I have no memory of that. I did not even realize that we were safe and warm inside four walls. The next thing I remember, Walter was telling me to get up for breakfast.

I was too stiff and sore to make it. But he pulled me out of bed and made me move my legs and body. It's surprising how much power of recovery you have at 21. I was four months pregnant, and I had run and walked 25 miles the day be-

fore in deep snow. When Bennett looked at his thermometer that morning it was 61° below. The wonder was that the three of us had not frozen to death on the trail. We realized then that we could not make it to Fort Smith. It was dangerous and foolhardy to try. Luckily, Bennett had extra supplies that he could spare. He sold us flour and beans enough to see us through, and even lent Walter 24 good muskrat traps.

We stayed three days with Bennett. I regained my strength. At the end of the three days I was as good as new. The dogs were in better shape than when we'd begun our terrible trip up-river. We were ready to go back to our cabin and see the winter out. With muskrat at \$1.50 each, there was more good money to be made as soon as the lakes started to open. When the first boat came up the Slave, we would be waiting for it.

We started out on a clear morning with the sun shining. Wind had drifted and packed the snow solidly enough that we seldom broke through. The dogs and Walter and I all had easy going. We pulled up in front of our lonely little cabin just as it was coming full dark.

We did not see or hear a living thing except each other, the dogs, and three foxes that Walter trapped, until the end of March. It seemed as if all the game, even rabbits, had died off or left the country. Neither of us had ever seen a winter wilderness so lifeless and still.

- foolhardy (FOOL har dee) foolishly risky; much too bold

We fed the three fox carcasses to the dogs. They were starved enough to gulp them down. The beans and flour Bert Bennett had sold us were running low, and we were eating less than half of what we wanted.

Toward the first of April, we decided to start our mink and muskrat trapping, even though the lakes were still covered with three feet of ice. It wasn't so much that we wanted fur. We needed the muskrats as food for ourselves and the dogs. Things had reached a point where I hated to eat because we had almost nothing for the dogs. None of us would last much longer without meat.

We made a trip to the nearest lake where we had trapped before freeze-up. We found the shallow lake frozen solid. Not a muskrat was left. When we turned the dogs back toward camp that afternoon, Walter and I were about as worried as two people could get.

A few days after that we packed up the little food we had left. We took our tent, bedding, and traps, and went eight miles west to some bigger lakes that Walter had found earlier.

We put up the tent at the first lake. We found water under the ice, cut into muskrat houses, and caught a few muskrat. They eased the pinch of our hunger, but we were not taking enough for ourselves and the dogs.

At last Walter made the unhappy announcement that the dogs would have to

be destroyed. I realized that was kinder than letting them starve. But the idea of it almost broke my heart. It had to be done, but I cried until I was sick.

Less than a week after that the weather broke in our favor. The sun came out warm and bright. The snow started to melt, and the lakes opened up around the shores. We began trapping muskrats by the dozens. If the night was cold and ice formed, our luck fell off. Some days we took only five or six pelts, but one day we took 70. We were living on muskrat meat, and for the first time that winter we had enough to eat. I boiled it and gave Olive the broth in her bottle. She thrived on it.

When spring comes to the North it comes with a rush. Suddenly it is sunny day after day. The days are long and warm. But the short dark hours of the spring nights are often cold. It was hard to keep warm in our tent, even with a fire in the tiny stove. That stove was to cause the worst disaster of all.

We continued trapping while the snow melted and the creeks rose and became little rivers. Walter and I agreed that we'd stay camped at the lake until May 10. Then we'd hike back to our cabin. We'd go up the Slave to Bert Bennett's place in our rowboat, and there catch the first steamer of the season to Forth Smith. But things don't always go as people plan them.

- carcass (KAR kus) body of dead animal
- thrive (THRYV) grow healthy and strong

On the morning of May 2, I was in the tent baking bannock in the little stovepipe oven. I stepped outside to look for Walter and saw him coming a quarter-mile up the lake. I took Olive by the hand and walked to meet him. She was toddling all over by then. When we met, I took part of his load of fresh pelts and the three of us started back.

All of a sudden we heard ammunition exploding at a terrible rate. Then smoke and flames rolled up around the tent. Walter dropped his sack of fur and ran. I grabbed Olive and hurried after him as fast as I could. When I got to the tent my husband was dragging out charred food and burning pieces of blankets. I grabbed the things as he pulled them out and doused them in the lake.

It was all over in 10 minutes. A tent burns fast.

What we had saved would have made a very small bundle. There were two or three half-burned pieces of blanket. There were the few matches in our pockets and in a waterproof container. Walter's .22 was safe. There were four shells in it, and Walter had a box in his pocket. The rest of our ammunition was gone. Most of the rat pelts had been hanging in a tree outside the tent and were safe.

Of our food, we had about four cups of flour, wet and mixed with cinders, and a pound or so of beans. For Olive, luck-

ily, there were a few undamaged cans of milk.

With muskrat meat, that handful of supplies would have to see us through until we could reach Bennett's cabin. That meant a hard hike of 8 or 10 miles through difficult country, and then 25 miles by rowboat against the spring current of the mighty Slave. Worst of all, we knew we could not make the trip up-river until the Slave broke up. We had no idea when that would happen.

Things looked pretty grim. I was expecting a second baby in less than two months, and we knew we had a very rough time ahead. But there was no use sitting beside the ruins of our tent and worrying. The thing was to get started.

We hung our traps in trees where we would be able to find them the following fall. We ate our bannock and a good meal of muskrat we had roasted earlier, rolled Olive in the patches of bedding, and lay down under a tree to rest for a few hours. We did not dare to use a match for a fire. We had to hoard them for times of need.

When we awoke we made up our loads and were ready to start. I wrapped Olive in the blanket pieces. I'd carry her on my back. She was so thin she wasn't very heavy. I rolled one cooking pot, knives, forks, spoons, a cup, and the baby bottle in a scrap of blanket and tied it all on my back behind her. Walter's

- bannock (BAN uk) kind of flat bread
- charred (CHARD) partly burned
- douse (DOUS) soak with water
- hoard (HOHRD) store away; save

load consisted of the dry muskrat pelts, about 250 in all, our stove—it weighed only about 10 pounds—and three lengths of stovepipe.

We left the burned-out camp with me carrying all I could handle and Walter packing a load of about 110 pounds. Every creek was roaring full and was two or three times as wide as usual. Many times Walter had to make three trips through the swollen and icy creeks, one with his pack, one with Olive and my load, and a third to help me across.

It took two days of the hardest kind of travel to get back to our cabin. At the end of the first day we stopped and made a camp under a clump of spruces. We roasted a muskrat we had brought along. We went without breakfast and our noon meal the second day. But in the middle of the afternoon, I shot a small muskrat. It wasn't big enough to make a good meal for one hungry person, let alone three. But we stopped and cooked it on the spot and divided it up.

It was midnight when we trudged up to our cabin. We were tired, discouraged, and hungry. But at least we had a roof over our heads again and four walls to keep out the cold at night. We didn't mind too much going to bed without supper.

When daylight came, I got up and

scraped each empty flour sack for the little flour that remained in it. One look at the Slave that morning confirmed our worst fears. Water was running between the ice and shore. We couldn't get out on the river. We wouldn't have dared. There was no hope of following the shore up to Bennett's place either, because of the many large creeks that flowed into the river. We had no choice but to wait for the ice to go out.

The 11 days between May 10 and the time when the ice finally went out of the Slave were a nightmare of hunger and worry—mostly hunger.

Because we were so short of matches, we kept plenty of wood on hand and fed the fire. We never let it go out.

I found a roll of wire and set snares for ducks, rabbits, muskrats—anything. In all, I snared two red squirrels and a blackbird. We pulled up dead grass along the edge of the water and ate the tender yellow shoots below. One day I saw a fool hen—a spruce grouse—perched on a low branch of a tree. I hurried to rig a snare on a pole. I reached up and dropped it over her head and jerked her to the ground. That was the best meal we had all that time. For once poor little Olive got all the broth she wanted.

Hunger cramps kept us awake at

- confirm (kun FURM) prove true
- snare (SNAIR) loop or noose for catching small animals or birds
- shoot (SHOOT) first part of growing plant to appear
- grouse (GROUS) kind of wild bird, a little smaller than a chicken

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night, and when we slept we dreamed troubled dreams of food. In my own case, being seven months pregnant didn't make things any better. Right then I needed to eat for two. Each night we slept less. Each day we got weaker. The baby's whimpering for food tore us apart. Walter cursed himself over and over for bringing Olive and me down the Slave.

If we had brought a few traps back from our tent camp, we could have caught muskrats or ducks. But we'd left all the traps behind. For three days our only food was what we called spruce tea. I stripped green needles off and boiled them. We drank a few spoonfuls every couple of hours. It eased the hunger cramps and seemed to give us some strength.

Olive was no longer running around the cabin. She sat quiet and played with whatever was at hand. There was no color in her lips and cheeks. Her eyes looked hollow and dull. I can't put into

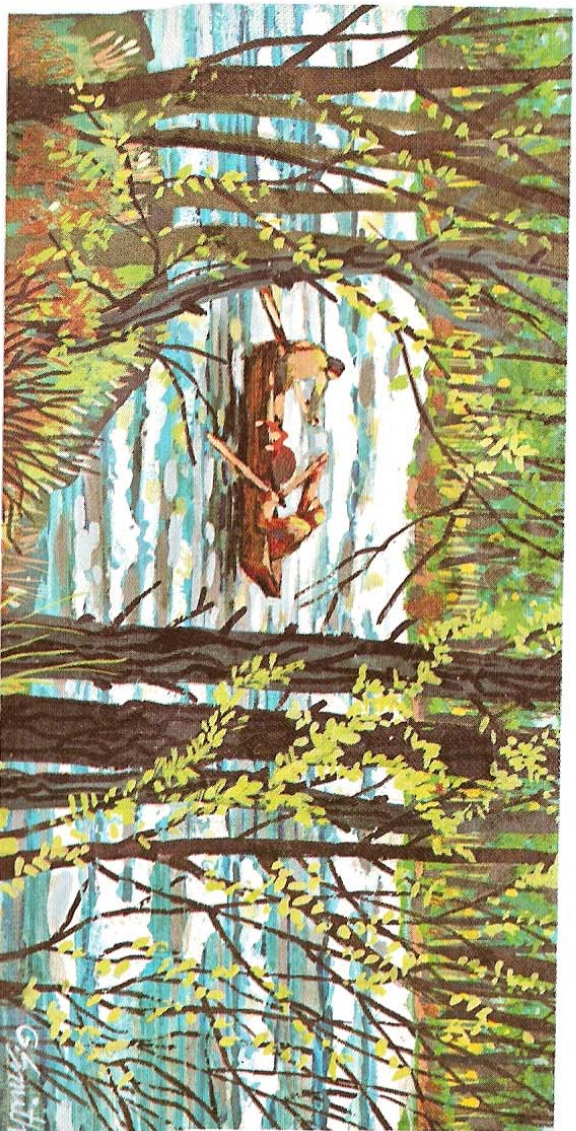
words how worried and afraid Walter and I were.

We made crude hooks by bending safety pins and tried fishing in the open water along the shore of the river, using pieces of red yarn for bait. Our catch totaled one very small jackfish. I tapped a small birch tree (they were few and far between in that area) for sap. It tasted good, but we had only half a cup to divide among the three of us.

At last, at 10 o'clock on the morning of May 21, the ice in the Slave began to move. By midnight it was gone, and the water was rolling past our door. At 3:00 in the morning of the 22nd we shoved our little boat into the river and were on our way to Bennett's.

It was dangerous to try traveling so soon after the ice went out. Chunks of ice weighing many tons kept sliding off the banks and drifting down with the current, but we had no choice.

Walter rowed, and I sat in the stern and paddled and steered us away from



floating ice. It was killing work. Our closest call came that first day. Rowing close to shore, we saw a huge block of ice come sliding off a pile 40 feet high. It crashed into the water almost alongside us. The force of it lifted our rowboat into the air and sent it flying. We wound up 150 feet out in the swiftest part of the current, right side up only because we had happened to be pointed in the right direction when the ice thundered down.

Walter and I drank spruce tea and gathered and ate grass roots. We also drank water often because it seemed to ease our hunger. We just kept rowing until we gave out. Then we'd rest, and then we'd row some more.

It took us six days to make the 23-mile trip up the Slave to Bert Bennett's cabin. They were as dreadful as any days I can remember. We pulled up to shore at his place at midnight on May 27—dirty, ragged, starving, and so burned by wind and sun that we hardly knew our own reflections when we looked in a mirror. In those six days we had eaten nothing but spruce tea, grass roots, and the inner bark of trees.

A Mr. and Mrs. King from Fort Smith were at Bennett's. They had come down on the ice in March. She gave us each half a biscuit and a couple of spoonfuls of stewed apricots, but the food was too much for our stomachs. We awakened three hours later with dreadful cramps and were miserably sick for the next 12

hours. It was four days before I was well enough to be out of bed. Mrs. King fed me a few spoonfuls of canned soup and cream every hour, and at the end of that time I felt fine. By then Walter and Olive had bounced back too.

Bennett and the Kings fixed us up with some clothing. We waited out a comfortable and happy month until the Miss Mackenzie came up the Slave on her first trip of the year. We boarded her near the end of June, and the trip to Fort Smith was lovely.

We sold our furs in Fort Smith. We had 560 muskrat pelts, 27 mink, three red foxes, four skunks, and a few weasels. The fox pelts brought \$25 each, the mink \$10. We paid off our debts and had \$1,060 left in cash. We had never had money that came harder.

Our second daughter, Vala, was born on July 18. Vala was a scrawny, blue-gray baby, weighing only 5½ pounds. For three weeks my doctor did not think either she or her mother would live. But we made it, and Vala grew to be a healthy, pretty girl.

Walter went back to his trapline in the fall, but I'd had enough of the North. It's a place of great beauty, and the winter stillness is spellbinding, but it can also be terribly cruel. I knew I would never winter in a trapper's shack with my two little girls if I could help it. I stayed behind.

- scrawny (SKRAW nee) thin and wiry
- spellbinding (SPEL bynd ing) fascinating; very interesting