

ADVENTURES IN NAHANNI LAND

A protected land of unspeakable beauty

HOWARD CLIFFORD

ADVENTURES IN NAHANNI LAND

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Coincides with our 60th
Wedding Anniversary

This is one more adventure in the series of tales, our experiences, written for our grandchildren for their enjoyment now and when they are older. Although written for them a wider audience may enjoy peeking in on our adventures. It involves four trips to Nahanni land. One by kayak, one by jet-boat, one by bicycle, and one by car

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PART ONE

FIRST VISIT

I don't have to tell you that your Grandma (Jean) and I love wilderness. I have been thinking about this. It is not always easy to separate the draw that wilderness has for us apart from the connections these places have to people. I recall my childhood Sunday school teacher asking what places we would like to see if we were to visit Israel. I listed three places. Mount Sinai where Moses received the ten commandments, the River Jordan in the wilderness where Jesus was baptized, and Mount of Olives where Peter cut off the ear of a Roman soldier in defence of Jesus. (I thought this was a terribly brave act.) Neither Mount Sinai nor the Mount of Olives compares with the mountains in Alberta nor would the River Jordan compare with the wild rivers of Canada. In these instances the people associated with these "wilderness" places were the main draw.

When I was ten years of age I would have loved to visit Sherwood Forest - home to Robin Hood and his merry men. I had a mental picture of Robin Hood, Little John, Friar Tuck, Will Scarlet and Maid Marian as well as the magnificent Sherwood Park. Today, as an adult, I would take the time to see Sherwood Forest if I was visiting nearby. However it would fall short of meeting the expectations I had formed as a child. It is far too small - nothing like it once was. In 1907 the protected Sherwood Forest doubled in size to 1054 acres. This is smaller than cliffLAND, our family protected nature reserve.

As a child I wanted to visit the cave where Tom Sawyer got lost. Actually when I was in college a classmate and I went there the day before the season opening. We met a college student who would be leading public tours once it opened and he offered to take us on a private tour to parts of the cave not open to the public. It was exciting. He led us into an area where the low ceiling forced us to crawl on our knees. One knee was on a narrow ledge and the other on an opposite ledge and in between was a deep chasm. We could hear running water deep below us. Then the ledges became farther apart and my friend and I began to think it was going to become too wide to straddle. Finally to our relief it narrowed and we came to a spot where we could stand.

It did live up to how I imagined the cave when I read about the young Tom Sawyer and Becky being lost in the cave. However many years later Grandma and I took the traditional tour of this cave. Enjoyable? Yes. But it was a far cry from the excitement I experienced 40 years previously.

In these two instances, Sherwood Forest and Tom Sawyer's cave, it was the association these heroes of mine had with these "wild" places that took precedence.

This is not to imply wilderness in and of itself does not have an awesome attraction. At age

fourteen I was so excited about going to Jasper National Park I barely slept a wink the night before. Your Grandma and I have been on many hikes and river trips that took us into beautiful wilderness areas. Such trips were a joy. What I am saying is that the most magnificent wilderness places are made even more special to us when they have become associated in our minds with great human stories.

Over the years I have become more appreciative of the role literature plays in creating associations of human legends with their wilderness settings. These associations add immense value to our experiences.

As I outgrew Robin Hood and Tom Sawyer, other books drew me into deeper identity with my own country. The story of Silver Chief, Dog of the North written by Jack O'Brien was one such book. The exciting story of a part husky and part wolf forming a bonding relationship to a Mountie helped me to fall in love with Northern Canada. The Call of the Wild and White Fang by Jack London drew me even further into the lore of the north. I suspect that the human mind is constructed to take special notice of stories involving creatures of nature, such as a dog or wolf or a person, playing out their adventure within the beckoning landscape of wilderness.

Your Grandma loved the story of Heidi - an orphan child raised by her grandfather in the wilderness of the Swiss Mountains. I am sure the mystique of the mountain wilderness setting enriched its appeal to Grandma who read this book over and over again..

Stories of the Klondike Gold Rush inflamed my imagination and I knew someday I must visit these places - the Chilkoot trail, the Yukon River, other remote northern rivers, and the touted Dawson City. Grandma and I eventually visited these places. But that is a tale for another time.

It is hard to know how many people felt compelled to visit these northern places as a result of the powerful stories told in these books. It is no exaggeration to suggest there were thousands.

Not quite as monumental as the stories of the Klondike, but monumental still, were stories about the mysterious Nahanni Country. Many stories were circulated but one book stimulated the imagination as no other. "The Dangerous River" by RM Patterson. His writings caused thousands of people to visit the Nahanni country, if only in their imagination. Hundreds more, including myself and therefore indirectly your Grandma, were influenced by Patterson to undertake this adventure.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The first time I recall hearing about the Nahanni was through the stories shared by Cliff Taylor in the early 1950's when I was in my early teens. I since learned there were articles about the Nahanni carried in the newspapers prior to this and it is possible I may have already picked up bits and drabs of information.

Cliff Taylor was an officer in the Canadian Air Force serving as a social worker. He was also a

lay minister in our church. He was a good story teller and I sat spellbound as he talked about the Nahanni.

Cliff described Nahanni lands as basically an unexplored spot in the North West Territories made inaccessible by deep canyons, high waterfalls, whirlpools and by huge boat devouring rapids. But these obstacles paled into insignificance compared to the other dangers facing those who dared to enter this kingdom. A kingdom? Yes. It was home to an Indian tribe of unknown origin led by a white Chieftess. They were said to be head-hunters and their fierce warrior reputation struck such fear into the hearts of neighbouring native groups that few dared venture into their territory.

It gets worse! Many natives were convinced it was a ghost ridden, haunted place. Evil spirits abounded. A few that ventured close to the Nahanni heartland reported being terror struck by the terrible unearthly wailing and screeching of demonic proportions that confronted them and by an awful putrid stench far worse than the smell of rotting eggs or rotting flesh.

So who would risk such a terrible fate that awaited anyone venturing into this kingdom? No one. No one except those who had become mad, irrational and blinded by the lure of gold. The twentieth century had barely dawned when two brothers went up the Nahanni River in search of gold. They did not return. Finally, as risky as it was, a family member and a couple of others felt compelled to search for them. They found the dead bodies of the two brothers lying side by side. It was a stomach-turning sickening sight. Their heads had been severed and who ever did this grisly murder must have taken their heads with them. Like most stories, the details of the murders differed according to who told the story but the one thing they all agreed upon was that their heads had been cut off and no signs of the skulls had ever been located.

This spot became known as the Headless Valley. Later it was named Deadmen Valley.

Another fearless soul went far up the Nahanni in search of gold. The story goes that he spotted a native person going down the Nahanni River and gave him a letter to be delivered to his friend. The letter stated he had found gold and asked his friend to join him as soon as possible. The friend did so only to find his murdered body and his cabin burned to the ground. These stories started the legend, believed by many to be true, that somewhere in this wilderness exists a lost rich gold mine.

There were others who dared to take on the Nahanni challenge - some never to be seen again.

What more would a person need to hear before concluding that this place is a place as no other? Well Clifford Taylor dropped an even bigger bombshell. Hidden away in the Nahanni country was a Garden of Eden. Right here in the Canadian North a lush tropical paradise! Balmy temperatures producing fruit and vegetables all year long. There were even claims that pre-historic animals, long thought to be extinct, could be found there along side of a stone age people

living a pristine life that the rest of Canada could only dream about.

How could this be? I mean it was in the early 1950's when Cliff told us about this mysterious place. How could the Government be blind to its existence? The explanation was simple, if ingenuous. The tropical weather shrouded the valley with mist and clouds that hid it from ariel view. A plane could not fly too low or it would crash into the canyon walls or mountain peaks. This was a paradise perpetually hidden from prying eyes from below and from above.

Now was this really true? Was any of it partially true? Cliff Taylor said we were about to find out. He heard the army was about to send troops into the Nahanni on an exploratory mission.

Wow! I almost wished I was old enough to enlist and be part of this great adventure. Time went by and I heard no more about the Nahanni and it slipped away from my consciousness. That is until years later I came across the book I mentioned earlier. The Dangerous River by RM Patterson. What a tale! What an adventure! Although his book was not published until 1954 it detailed his experiences years earlier when he travelled the Nahanni country in 1927 and again in 1928-29. He had kept a detailed diary so was not relying on memory alone. As far as I know this was the earliest experiences on the Nahanni River that found its way into a book format. It was a spellbinder.

By the time Patterson's book was published some of the myths had been shown to be just that - myths. What actually happened to some who were "murdered" or disappeared is still debated and remains a mystery. However everyone agrees that the title chosen by Patterson "The Dangerous River" has stood the test of time. He and his partner Gordon Matthews almost joined the company of many before them who had perished on the Nahanni. They came within a whisker of doing so.

Remember I said that Patterson was the reason I and Grandma visited the Nahanni Country. Well its true. His book inflamed my imagination but it was his other writings that gave me the courage to try. I'll get to that soon.

The journeys into Nahanni Country remain among the highlights of my wilderness experiences. There were four journeys. The first by kayak with Bill Calder in 1968. The second was with Bill Calder, Carl and Hans Lindemann, and Grandma in 1969 by jet boat., The third was in 1992 by bicycle (the first cyclists to do so). The fourth was with Grandma by automobile in 2010.

However for you to understand the meaning and special place the Nahanni Country holds in my heart I need to paint the story within a landscape, physically and socially. Remember I alluded to the special appeal that comes from visiting wonderful wilderness areas that have a connection with people you admire? One example was when Grandma and I paddled into a remote lake to the very spot that Grey Owl looked after his orphaned beavers (there were no roads in). The combination of remote wilderness with the realization that Grey Owl and Anahareo had looked

out on the same landscape virtually as it is today made our experience extra special. The same applies for Grandma and my experience following the footsteps of my favourite conservationist, John Muir. To see the beauty of the places he described and had poured out his soul to save for future generations added unspeakable dimensions to the experience.

In a sense all wilderness journeys are spiritual - some we recognize as such more so than others. No question but that the Nahanni River, in its own right, is very special - in my mind unsurpassed by any other in North America. However the special lure of the Nahanni to me was framed by Patterson's writings. It was more than the river. His story was situated in a narrow time period beginning in the 1920's. He introduced us to real people and provided authentic glimpses into their lives woven masterfully into his adventures on the Nahanni River. Through his writings you felt you knew the river and were intimate with the people who had been drawn to this place. Most importantly the majority of the people he brought into our lives through his written story lived during our lifetime. Most were still alive during our journey - remarkably we were privileged to meet and visit with some of them. Some later corresponded with us.

Bill and I missed meeting Albert Faille, who you will hear more about when I detail our experience, by less than a hour. From conversations with those who called Albert Faille a friend, he seemed in my mind to be our friend too. Through the writings of Patterson and conversations with those we met on our trip, some individuals who passed away years before our visit seemed like past relatives or friends whose lives had been unveiled to us much like happens when our family shares with us the lives of relatives deceased before our birth. Such is the power of literature.

Along the way, and as appropriate, I will briefly introduce you to the lives of people who were a vital part of Patterson's story with the hope this enriches your enjoyment. So look for names like Gordon Matthew, Fenley Hunter, Jack Laflair, Poole Field, Dick and Vera Turner, Gus and Mary Kraus, Micky Kraus, Bill Epler and Joe Mulholland.

Keep in mind that my first journey into the Nahanni Land was in 1968 and Grandma and I ventured deeper into the Nahanni Lands in 1969. Since that time I have read every book coming to my attention on the Nahanni. It is strange but I have also felt an affinity to those who wrote about the Nahanni after our 1968 experiences such as Ranulph Fiennes, Joanne Moore, Pat & Rosemarie Keough, and Neil Hartling. I don't know if others have similar feelings but I feel a certain fraternity to those having experiences on the Nahanni.

As I share our journey with you I will also share some of the thoughts and experiences of these other travellers when they add to our story or help to deepen your awareness of the Nahanni. Perhaps these snippets, which are listed at the end of the book, will entice you to read their books as well.

So in a sense I am writing about something for which I can't find a label. It is about a special

community of people but not in the sense you ordinarily define a community. Some never met each other and some may not have heard of the other.

Some have lived in the Nahanni Country for decades, some like Patterson and Matthews have over-wintered there, some like Hunter or Fiennes only spent a few weeks or less in the country, and one (Pierre Berton) just a few hours. How is this a community?

There is one common thread. Each one was deeply impacted by the Nahanni River.

Except for one over night canoe trip in 1958 I didn't get into canoeing until 1963-4. Grandma and I had a couple of close calls. Close enough to make me realize I lacked the experience and skills to tackle the Nahanni Country with all the challenges described in "The Dangerous River". However he wrote an article in the Beaver Magazine entitled "Liard River Voyage". I came across this article in the mid-sixties which had been published in the Spring 1955 edition. Patterson detailed taking his cousin by canoe in 1954 from Fort Nelson, B.C. to the Nahanni Butte, where the Nahanni flows into the Liard, and then on to Fort Simpson where the Liard joins the mighty Mackenzie River. I read the article and began to tease myself about the possibility of doing this trip. The more seriously I entertained this thought, the more I reread the article, each time apprehensively looking for any thing I might have missed that could spell disaster for someone with my limited experience.

One thing bothered me. Grandma and I had canoed a number of rivers in Alberta but I was not certain that these corresponded to truly remote northern rivers. I wondered if the rapids he described would resemble rapids I had experienced or were they much worse. From his description I felt that the Fort Nelson River was within my ability. The Liard River was another story. He stated that the mighty Liard was wide and fast with a current of about 8 knots an hour and one had to be careful about log jams.

This awakened my anxiety. You see Grandma and I came close to losing our lives on the Saskatchewan River in the Rocky Mountains when we got caught broadside in "sweepers" that capsized us. Being sucked into log jams is a frightening prospect.

Most worrisome was Patterson's description of the Beaver Dam Rapids where the whole river cascades over a limestone ledge and where boats have capsized and lives lost.

If not for this set of rapids, I was reasonably sure that I would decide to take the trip. I had read Charles Camsell's book, "Son of the North" and I think it was in that book he described spending lazy summers, fully relaxed days floating on the Liard. That was reassuring but didn't address the hazards presented by the rapids. Patterson and his cousin had gotten a lift from Dick Turner by motor boat through these rapids which is a different experience from being in a canoe.

I read that an experimental farm was located at Fort Simpson and decided to write them to see if

they could provide additional information about these rapids. A very nice letter was received and the writer was enthusiastic about the trip. Apparently he had made the trip by canoe and considered it a highlight in his life. He added a precautionary warning when it came to the “Beaver Dam Rapids” stating that a canoeist lost his life there last summer. Not wanting to discourage us he said he believed that if we stuck to the right side we would be able to sneak through. The general tone of his letter was supportive of the trip.

The last few river trips Grandma and I had taken was with either a double folding Klepper kayak or a double Folbot. We favoured these over a canoe and I reasoned that if a canoe could make it through on the right side that we would have an edge with the kayak.

Grandma had been my partner on every previous wilderness trips but we now had a son approaching two years of age. Grandma and I felt he was too young to leave with a sitter. “Besides,” she joked, “we can’t risk him losing both parents, can we?” She was only half joking. I too harboured anxieties about the hazards that might be faced and as much as I would have loved to take her on this adventure, I was reluctant to urge her to come.

Let me insert here what I mean by the Nahanni Country. It is quite arbitrary on my part but includes Fort Nelson to the west, Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie River to the East and of course the Nahanni River itself. This largely covers the area in which the people introduced by the writings of RM Patterson were known to roam. On a periphery area I include the Peace and Athabasca Rivers because a number of the people associated with the Nahanni during the 1920's and early 1930's came by these river routes. I do not otherwise think of them as part of the Nahanni Country.

Still, only half believing I might do the trip, I started talking to various friends. Bill Calder, a friend several years younger than myself, said he would love to go. Bill was not only younger than me but also physically fitter. I hoped this would make up for the fact he had never been in a kayak before nor had he taken any wilderness trips. We went over all the information we had on the river(s) and the potential dangers.. We both put on a brave face and said “Let’s do it!”

When word got out, Beth Johnstone, who attended the same church that Bill and I did, gave us welcomed encouragement. She was now up in years but as a young person had worked as a cook on one of the barges that went from Fort Nelson to Fort Liard. She provided first hand information about the rivers but had never seen the Beaver Dam rapids that were closer to Fort Simpson. She advised us to be careful when we entered the Liard River as it was much faster than the Fort Nelson River. She remembered the Liard River causing a lot of turbulence and suggested entering the Liard at an angle so as not to be caught broad-side by the Liard current.

The main concern with the Fort Nelson River was getting hung up on sandbars and she recalled having to wait for hours and even days before they were able to continue. This should not be a problem for a kayak.

Bill and I were encouraged by her enthusiasm. Her eyes literally lit up as she recalled these adventures and wistfully said “Oh how I wish I was young enough to join you. There is something about the North that you can never get out of your system.”

Finally the day arrived. We had commandeered two friends, Daryl Carson and Carl Linneman, to drive Bill and I to Fort Nelson and then drive my vehicle back to Edmonton. Once Bill and I reached Fort Simpson by kayak we would fly out of Fort Simpson to Edmonton.

It was a long but picturesque drive taking us through Dawson Creek (Gateway to the North) and over the great Peace River to Ft. St. John and on to Ft Nelson. A trip not quite 700 miles (1100 km) one way. In those days over half of the distance was on a dusty, gravelled highway.

A winding eight mile trail took us down to the shore of the Fort Nelson River. Yes it was remote, no buildings in sight. Putting on a brave face I said: “Doesn’t look too bad, does it?” We both smiled, loaded the kayak and said good bye to our two friends.

I took a moment to look down the river. What a road-less wilderness! How intimidating to think that once we started there was no turning back. There is not a single road between here and Fort Simpson, a distance of about 350 miles (560 km). This is a vast wilderness unspoiled by loggers, miners, or hydro-electric dams. What we will see is very close to what the first Europeans saw when they arrived on the scene. The major difference is “kickers” on the boats and the introduction of bush-pilots, helicopters and commercial air travel to Fort Simpson. Otherwise the landscape is largely unchanged. Certainly what Bill and I will see would be almost identical to that experienced by Raymond Patterson when he travelled this country in 1927-28.

It was Sunday. I looked at my watch. It read 9:30 am. Our river adventure began. We had just nicely got underway when we noticed we were not alone. There on the shoreline was a Barge. We were pleased they waved us over. They were very interested in our planned journey and we were interested in obtaining any information they might have about river conditions.

The pilot warned of very fast water around the next bend. The current was slow so I thought I might have spoken prematurely when I had said “This doesn’t look too bad does it?” I tried to read Bill’s face to see how he was taking the news. Then the barge pilot added we would face a number of waterfalls. Bill and I smiled at each other for we knew he was pulling our leg. The pilot, recognizing that we knew he was kidding, broke into laughter.

It was a nice day for paddling and Bill was quickly able to pick up the basics of the kayak stroke. Soon we were into a natural relaxed rhythm. After an hour or so we alternated between paddling and drifting. The current was similar to the Saskatchewan River near Edmonton and we were grateful that the river was not too fast while we were getting used to each other and to

negotiating the minor obstacles we faced. One of the things I like about the folding kayak is that the heavy canvas/rubber type composition of the skin moulds itself with the water and you can feel the shifting currents and swells underneath you. You feel one with the river as if you are a natural part of the river. In fact one of the hazards is that you can become so relaxed while drifting that you can doze off. This is not a problem unless both do so at the same time.

One of the tricks Jean and I developed on previous wilderness trips was to place our sleeping bags into a plastic garbage bag in such a way as to provide a seat and backrest. This leaves extra storage room for other items and once settled in around your body provides great comfort. We have spent many wonderful hours taking turns stretching our legs out and our heads laid on the back part of the sleeping bag, being mesmerized by the floating clouds above and their reflections in the water. A glorious way to spend an hour or two. When you do this you have to experiment with how you distribute your weight or the kayak can start turning in circles. On a nice wide river where obstacles can be seen from a good distance, this too is enjoyable. Usually one person can see what is coming up at any one time.

At one pm we came to where the Snake River flows into the Fort Nelson River from the right. Spotting a grassy clearing we stopped for lunch. This spot was established as a settlement to serve the Indians in the early 1800's when the first European trappers and prospectors came into the country. Here they traded with the natives but eventually a smallpox epidemic killed many of the inhabitants and others died of starvation. The settlement was abandoned and there was little if any signs remaining that would reveal its previous but brief existence.

Back on the river and about a half hour downstream we saw a native campsite and stopped to say hello and shared a cup of tea with him. I regret that my diary did not contain more detailed information about this visit. I vaguely recall that he was hunting and was from Fort Liard. I have since learned the importance of keeping a more complete diary. At the time one thinks the experience is embedded in consciousness forever. It is true that certain parts of this trip seem as clear and fresh in my mind as if it was only yesterday. There is a certain hold that wilderness has on you that becomes unshakably embedded in memory. This becomes reinforced by the fact that one finds themselves reliving the trip again and again. However, unfortunately, some details become vague or forgotten altogether and you berate yourself for not having had the vision to take the time to commit to paper each detail.

Shortly after the trip I wrote diary notes while details were still fresh in my mind. I am grateful that I did so. About forty years after the river journey I wrote a lengthy article about the trip and found the notes I had originally written brought back details that I would have otherwise forgotten. At that time I got in touch with Bill and shared the rough draft of the article and asked him to make any corrections or additions to the material. Bill reminded me that on this trip we used heavy plastic garment bags with zippers. He stated: "I remember being so impressed at how dry they kept the bags and how comfy they were in our "cockpit" type arrangement - it was at least as comfortable as any lounging chair you might find at the beach or

in your back yard.”

He also stated : “The other thing that left quite an impression was the Coco-cola cooler filled with steaks and dry ice. As I recall I think we cooked steaks over the fire almost every night except for the odd rainy night and I believe that the steaks would have been good for the entire trip if the lid on the cooler had not got bent part way through the trip and we lost the dry ice prematurely and ended up discarding the last couple of steaks.”

Bill also vividly remembered one night taking a steak off the fire and finding it too hot for his bare hand dropped it on the sand bar. He was so famished at the time that he rinsed it off in the river and ate it anyway.

Although I only dimly recalled the episode with the steak, soon as Bill mentioned the garment bag and the coke cooler, I remembered them as though it was yesterday. It is interesting to note the different things one remembers that the other forgets until it is mentioned by the other. Bill remembered us wearing rubber rain jackets. Jean and I had two of these pull over, fairly tight fitting jackets that were used for whitewater and were also excellent for rain protection.

As I write this updated version to share with you, it is now almost 50 years since Bill and I took this journey. I am grateful to have the original article to draw on for the details of the trip.

Henry David Thoreau was fortunate to have met Emerson, the great philosopher of nature, when Thoreau was still a young man. He advised Thoreau to keep a daily journal and he did so. Best piece of advice a young man could have received. Therefore I have no hesitation advising you to do the same.

At 2:30 pm we noticed the barge catching up to us. They waved us over and we tied the kayak to the barge and climbed aboard. Trudy and Jean offered us coffee and we spent perhaps a half hour or so in pleasant conversation. Then suddenly the barge grounded on a sandbar. They told us this happens from time to time and it would take considerable time to work their way off. I recalled Beth Johnson saying she had similar experiences when she was on the Ft. Nelson River decades ago.

We bid them goodbye and climbed back into the kayak. An hour paddle brought us to an island where we noticed a campsite. We pulled in and found two men who worked for a forestry company. Their motor had conked out and they were stranded waiting for rescue from someone they had radioed.

Around five o'clock we started looking for a suitable campsite for the night. Bill pointed to a possible spot and as we got closer it appeared to have everything we would need. Picking our way through the rocks we almost reached the shoreline when a bear suddenly walked into the spot we had chosen. Prudently we decided to look for another spot. Again we sighted a good

spot and again another bear walked out.

Fifteen minutes or so later we tried to land at another promising site but the shore was muddy. As we climbed out we sank deep into mud that sucked at our legs and we wondered if it was quicksand. It looked like it was going to be difficult to make shore so we moved on once more. For the next two hours we paddled with no suitable campsite in sight. Nevertheless as we paddled into the evening hours we saw a number of geese and some beavers. It was a magical evening. Eventually we came to a bluff where we camped for the night. We estimated that we had gone about 50 miles (80 km) on the Fort Nelson River leaving another 60 miles (100 km) to the junction of the Liard.

Monday - On the river by 9 am. Very picturesque country. Somewhat overcast and it began to rain on and off but never hard. The current of the river slowed considerably and we had to paddle to make any time. We had planned to make the Liard River junction by the afternoon but that was when the current was running faster and now we wondered if it would not be a full two days before hitting the Liard. Who would have thought given all our, or at least my concern, about handling the northern rivers that we would be wishing for more current. We saw no one on the river but saw a couple of planes overhead. Otherwise civilization seemed very far removed.

Eventually we sighted an old cabin and stopped to investigate. It was in a state of ruin and we wondered who had once occupied it and what stories that person could have told. Outside the cabin was a raspberry patch that was likely a product of the time when the cabin owner had cleared his living space.

As we paddled we noticed another bear on the shoreline who seemed oblivious to our presence as we drifted by and a couple of hours later we sighted a second bear which having heard our voices scrambled hurriedly up the bank and into the woods. This is more bears that I have ever seen in the wild within a two day period.

We were pleased to see numerous streams entering the Fort Nelson River to provide good drinking water. Monday evening found us pitching our tent on a sand bank, still short of the Liard junction. The aroma of good coffee added an extra touch to the evening. Looking at our map we thought we were somewhere between 10 and 15 miles from the Liard Junction. I fell asleep thinking about the Liard and all the tales I had read and wondering how we would make out on the much larger and swifter river.

Tuesday morning found us again on the river by 8 am and within an hour we saw another bear. Certainly is bear country. A little after nine am brought us to the site of the old Nelson Forks settlement. It is situated on a shelving bank about 20 feet high and as we searched the area we found a few old rusted implements which were the only evidence of its previous existence. There is a narrow inlet that we figured lead to the original site.

R. C. Patterson had come back from his first foray into the Nahanni River by way of Fort Liard to Nelson Forks on his way to Fort Nelson. He had left Fort Liard on September 7, 1927 and reached Nelson Forks on the 11th. He states that he camped across the river from the post. The next day he cleaned himself up and delivered mail to the Post and in return was treated to a lunch of moose meat, fresh bread, and honey by the HBC. This was only 40 years ago and now there was barely a trace of this trading post. It may well be true that this area has less visitors now than when it attracted trappers and prospectors to the outpost. I know I felt very much in solitude as I stood there trying to imagine life here 40 years ago.

Shortly after 10 am we could see where the Fort Nelson River was entering the mighty Liard River. We approached it cautiously and I steered the kayak near the left bank so that I could gradually merge into the Liard, having been previously been warned not to get caught broadside.

I was obviously being more cautious than needed but I didn't want to take any chances until I could see the river for myself. The Liard River is no Fort Nelson River! The current was fast and full of boils and swirling currents. The current caught our kayak and immediately felt the power and impulses of the river as if it had a life of its own. The kayak was pulled this way and that but responded well. The river is fast and wide, dotted with numerous islands. We could see lots of log jams and initially gave them wide birth until we became more comfortable with our ability to keep the kayak on track and our ability to read the currents.

Actually we ended up stopping for lunch on one of the stable log jams up against an island. Some of these large trees were piled high upon the banks of the island and one could only imagine the awesome power of the spring flood.

As we continued down the Liard we stopped at some nice looking cabins but no one was home. Mid afternoon we came across the first humans we had seen since Sunday. A young teenage Native with his younger brother were in a small river boat. We drifted with them for about 20 minutes. They told us that they were hunting for bears and asked if we had seen any. We told them that we had not seen any on the Liard but had back on the Fort Nelson River. We didn't mention how many we had seen as we were ambivalent about hunting. If they were hunting out of need, which they may well have been, it is one thing, but I at least, and I suspect Bill as well, was not interested in sport hunting. As we drifted together they took time out to bail water from their leaking boat. We observed there were no life-jackets.

Later Bill and I expressed amusement at the difference in perspective between them and us. We would have been uncomfortable taking a leaking boat without life jackets on this river. Although in these wide fast flowing northern rivers one might well perish in the cold water in spite of having a life-jacket. Nevertheless I would rather be wearing a life jacket in the event of a capsized even if it only offered a false sense of security. We smiled as we recalled how the two brothers paid close attention to our kayak and expressed doubt as to its adequacy in rapids. They would certainly not trade boats with us nor we with them.

Ten minutes after taking our departure from the native youths we came across a cleared campsite and pulled in. The men worked for an oil company and offered us coffee and cake. They told us that we had come about 40 miles from the junction of the Ft. Nelson River and had about 45 miles to go to Fort Liard.

Back into the kayaks and as evening was drawing on Bill suggested we stop on an island, seen in the distance, to camp for the night. It was a pleasant spot but had no immediate dead fire wood. We sat up the tent and then walked about a half mile searching for suitable wood and finally dragged back a dead tree which we turned into a nice fire. It rained a little during the night and our sleeping bags were a little wet.

Wednesday morning we woke to a heavy mist on the River. It provided a sort of eerie, other worldly, primeval appearance and was so thick we couldn't see across the river.

We were on the river by 9:30 am and had gone less than 10 miles when we came across another oil camp. They told us that we were 9 miles from Fort Liard. The river still fast. We made the 9 miles in about 45 minutes arriving at Ft. Liard at 11 am. On the water front were a few well maintained buildings including a Catholic church, RCMP office, a Hudson Bay Post, and a infirmary.

Fort Liard was founded in 1805 by the North West Company and originally was called Fort aux Liards. Liard is an old french term referring to the grey-green poplar leaves. Poplars are very plentiful in this area.

It is a place of historic interest. It was in existence long before Ft. Nelson. Of course Ft Nelson today is much larger and better known due to being on the Alaska Highway. Fort Liard is situated in the past, a charming place without roads. Travel is by river. Helicopters, in addition to outboard motors, are the only noticeable intrusion of modern transportation.

The two oil camps we passed were signs that this doorway to the past might soon meet the fate of so many other wilderness communities. It saddens me to think we are losing these precious links to the past but both Bill and I are pleased we are privileged to see it as it existed on our trip.

From all appearances the town was still asleep. I suppose this was because darkness settles much later in the day than it does in Edmonton resulting in people staying up later. This is just an assumption and I never asked anyone if this was true. We knocked on the RCMP office and woke up the officer. In those days you never registered your trip with the RCMP before leaving and he was not expecting us. Having been woken from sleep I suspect he was relieved that we were not reporting an emergency - why else would anyone knock on his door so early?

He invited us inside for a cup of coffee. After chatting about our trip he asked how long we

planned to stay in Fort Liard. We explained we were on a reasonably tight schedule having made flight arrangements from Fort Simpson to Edmonton and hadn't planned to stay for more than a couple of hours.

Given that information he said he had a request to make. He told us about a tragic accident that occurred yesterday. A helicopter crashed in the river and all on board had drowned. One man had not been recovered and he asked if we would keep an eye open for his body. Bill and I looked at each other. I suspect we both were thinking the same thing - what would we do if we found him? Our kayak was loaded to the gills.

When I asked the RCMP officer he said we should try to drag him to shore and make some kind of marker or sign that searchers could see from the river. He then told us that there was a government cabin at Flett Rapids we would use tonight. He estimated the river to be running at about 8 or 9 miles an hour and we should make good time. This was an unexpected offer and much appreciated.

We asked when the Hudson Bay store opened. He grinned and said it was not quite the same here as in Edmonton. Just knock on his door. We did so and found him asleep too but he didn't seem to mind. After purchasing chocolate bars - its amazing how much you crave something like chocolate after being on the river a few days - he allowed us to use their radio-telephone to let Jean know we had made it this far safely and received assurance that everything was fine back home.

Bill and I took a stroll along the river bank and saw a person outside the Catholic rectory. It was the priest and he beckoned us over. He asked us where we were from and where we were going and seemed genuinely interested in our adventure. I asked him if he knew Dick Turner. "Oh yes. I know most of the people in the area. There are not that many." He stated that the Turners had been running a trading post at Nahanni Butte for a number of years and also knew the natives that lived there and traded at the store. I mentioned we had read stories about the Turners and were hoping to meet them. "You will be welcome."

I took him to be French Canadian due to his accent. He talked a little about the native community and it was obvious he had deep affection for them and for the northern life style.

This turned out to be one of those times I wished, in hindsight, that we had accepted his invitation to have tea and a visit. Both Bill and I were anxious to get back on the river in order to arrive at the Government cabin before dark. The prospect of staying in a cabin instead of putting up and taking down a tent was very appealing.

The priest had given us his name but neither I nor Bill were able to recall it. I later learned it was Father Mary. He had come to Fort Liard in 1955 and stayed there until 1986.

I also learned that he was well loved and respected and took to the land as if he had been born there. He travelled as far as Trout Lake and Nahanni Butte by snowshoe and by boat to minister to his parishioners. Parishioners recalled him stopping by their cabins to visit and to have prayer.

Years later I came across his name in the record of the Justice Berger Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry. In his testimony he spoke passionately for better understanding between the native and white communities. He thought some of the difficulties experienced between the two communities arose out of very different cultural perspectives. Father Mary, speaking from his experience with his native parishioners, said the natives accepted the ways of nature and was compliant with its rules. As an illustration he said that when a native killed a moose this was a happy day for him. His friends would come and they would share a great feast. They enjoyed the moment. It was not their way to interrupt the pleasure of the moment with thoughts or worries about what might happen tomorrow. In contrast his white parishioners, even when good fortune struck, would still worry about what might happen down the road. "Will I lose my job or will my wife become sick?"

If a native asked a white person if he could borrow something, the first thing to come to the white person's mind is that he might need it tomorrow. This response is confusing to the native who is thinking that his request is about today, not about "what if" tomorrow. The native interprets this response as selfish while the white person considers it wise and prudent to plan ahead.

I suspect that Father Mary's testimony was a rather unique presentation intended to bring understanding of the different approaches and thought processes that emerged from cultural differences. A refreshing contribution.

Many years later while reading Neil Hartling 'Nahanni River of Gold...River of Dreams' the name of Father Mary popped up again. I stopped reading his book midstream to share with Grandma the amusing story told by Neil. Father Mary had dogs. One winter day he went outside and found one of the dogs had pooped in the frying pan that served as a dog food bowl. The waste was frozen solid so Father Mary took the frying pan inside so that he could clean it once it had thawed.

A parishioner came by to visit and noticed the frying pan with its contents. "Father" said the concerned visitor "Do you have enough food to eat?"

Grandma and I had a good chuckle. These are true stories of the north - not likely to be found elsewhere. I also learned that Father Mary knew the Nahanni River well and in fact on one expedition felt grateful that he escaped a brush with death.

I find a good lesson in all of this. If only Bill and I had realized the stories Father Mary could

have shared, the insights gathered over decades serving this isolated community, we would have made the time to visit. A day or two with him would have been so rewarding.

I recently read that Father Mary left Fort Liard due to failing health and eventually returned to France. He was not French Canadian after all. He had been born in Paris and died in 2003. As I read about his death I felt a sadness. It wasn't just the normal feeling of sadness when a well-known character or pioneer passes away. The feeling of remorse arose from the fact we had been offered the opportunity to visit with this remarkable person and to learn more about his experiences in the north but passed it up - a missed opportunity.

Leaving the Fort at 11:45 am the river continued fast and wide with many inlets and snyes as it made widening loops through the northern forest. Adding to the feel of being in true wilderness, a large bear lumbered along the gravelled sandy bank. I wondered how many others lurked just out of sight in the forest as we paddled or drifted past. A very fast stream entered the Liard and it became the spot for our lunch break.

Late afternoon and still no sign of the cabin. At about 6 pm we were becoming weary and not at all sure where we were or how far it was to the cabin. We did not want to navigate the rapids in poor light although we had not heard any account of them being particularly dangerous. We discussed whether we should stop for the night. Our sleeping bags were wet and we had looked forward to drying them out in the cabin. The decision was taken to go on for another hour or so.

Soon we were into some rolling swells and some whitewater. We kept our eyes open for rocks and other hidden obstacles. Shortly after 7 pm we spotted the cabin and docked at 7:30 am. A very welcome sight. The government cabin was neat and in good shape and offered a splendid view of the river. Soon a cheery fire was roaring in the stove and we hung a line to dry our sleeping-bags, tent and other gear that were wet or damp.

Although tired, we enjoyed our supper as only those who have been exercising in clean wilderness air can. The accumulation of long days on the river, a good meal, and a hot fire brought us quickly into a sound sleep. Alas it did not last. Bill was sleeping with his arms folded behind his neck and was rudely awoken by a mouse nibbling or sniffing at his outstretched fingers

We had not thought about mice and now hoped they had not got into our food. Emptying our pack-sack we discovered that mice had got to our bread stored near the bottom of our pack. Arrangements were made to secure the food and we fell back into a sound sleep. At 2 am I was awakened by the sound of high winds and it occurred to me that I had better pull the kayak to higher ground so it wouldn't be smashed by wind driven waves against the rocks.

I asked Bill for the flashlight and got an unusual response "I can't find it but it's okay. There is enough depth anyway!" Bill was now sitting up and wide eyed. He had been in the midst of a

frightening dream where we somehow were floating in a fast current through a cave and he was feeling with his paddle to check the depth of water. Now both of us awake we went outside and pulled the kayak up on shore and went back to sleep.

Thursday - a relaxing breakfast enjoying the convenience of the cabin. We figured we were half way to Nahanni Butte, the mouth of the Nahanni River, where we planned to camp. It should be an easy day paddle and upon arrival there should still be a few day light hours to do a little exploring. We were also looking forward to meeting the Turners, well known early pioneers in the Nahanni country.

Although we had no trouble docking the kayak last night, we found it a little difficult to get into the kayak because of the rocks. Once again on our way and in excellent spirits. The river seemed to meander back and forth but we could see the high 5000 foot. bell-shaped dome mountain that dominated the landscape. It could only be the famous Nahanni Butte. What we thought would be a short day paddle turned out to be the opposite. The current had slackened and was almost like a lake.

After a long day of paddling we arrived at the junction of the Nahanni River at 9:15 pm and could see lights about a mile upstream on the Nahanni.. Racing against time we arrived about 10 pm hoping the Turners would still be up and that it might not be too late for a short visit.

We pulled ashore under the watchful eyes of a number of natives. It turned out that this was not the Turners residence but a Federal Government Residential School. A native person told us that we had passed the Turners near the mouth of the Nahanni. Well we had at least put our kayak into the Nahanni River waters and headed back towards the Turners. It would be too late to have a visit but we hoped to catch them before they retired for the night to let them know we were camping in the area and hoped to have a visit before we left tomorrow.

We got to their home and the lights were still on. Just as we approached the door the lights went out. We looked at each other and decided to knock. Mrs. Turner (Vera) with a big black shepherd type dog by her side opened the door. I apologized for the late call and explained our situation. She gave us a pleasant smile and insisted we come in for a cup of coffee and tarts.

Vera had a very attentive audience as she related stories of her life going back over the past 35 years she had lived in the Nahanni country. There were many challenges, hardships, and dangers that she and her husband Dick had faced in this remote and demanding country. Vera Turner married Dick Turner on August 19, 1933 at Hay River Post. They had corresponded for five years previous to Dick's proposal. She accepted and they arranged to meet at Hay River for the ceremony and then on to her new home in Nahanni Country.

Dick and his brother Stan had come into the country during the summer of 1930 and remained ever since. This was just one year later than Raymond Patterson of "The Dangerous River" fame

had visited the area. Patterson had come for one summer in 1927 and returned with Matthews to spend a summer and a winter 1928-9. Dick and Stan had planned to stay a year as well but remained and became closely associated with the early pioneering years (from a non-native perspective) of the Nahanni country.

Vera tried in vain to turn the conversation to us. We provided the basics about our backgrounds and responded to her questions about our journey but every time we could we steered the conversation back to her experiences. We were spellbound.

Let me step out of this visit with Vera for a moment to tell you that Grandma and I were to hear more details about the Turners experiences when we visited with them in 1969. More information was gleamed years later from reading Dick Turner's books. For anyone interested in the Nahanni, Dick's two books, "The Nahanni" and "Wings of the North" are must reads. I place them right up with Patterson's "Dangerous River".

Although I am not in anyway suggesting that our lives can be compared to that of the Turners, there are some commonalities. The Turners were born in Alberta as was Grandma and myself. Vera was born on a farm near the Saskatchewan border as was I. Dick was also born on a farm. As a young child, Dick and his brother Stan loved to head to the neighbouring hills to explore what seemed to them at the time as wild bush country. So did I. Dick, as a child loved stories by Jack London about the north country as did I.

I earlier mentioned that I first heard stories about the Nahanni from Clifford Taylor when I was in my early teens and Dick heard about the dangers of the Nahanni from his math instructor who was a mining engineer and who spent his summers up north.

Dick met Vera when he was 16 years of age and felt they were destined to be married. Grandma was 15 when I met her and within a year or so we both felt we had found our soul mates. Dick married Vera when he was 22 and I married Grandma two months short of my 22nd birthday. The Turners exchanged wedding vows on August 19th while we exchanged ours on Aug 22nd.

Dick and Vera's situation was more dramatic than ours. She travelled a long distance to meet Dick at Hay River, where they were married, and then travelled by small boat powered by a 3 hp kicker hundreds of miles, camping each night on the river, until they reached his home on the Liard River. He stated he only had \$5 to his name.

Grandma and I can't quite match that but I had been accepted at the University of Denver at the time of our marriage. We had only enough money to carry us a month, if Grandma didn't find work. We left within a week travelling by car to a strange city 1300 miles away, camping along the way. The Turners, although very young when they married, remained married the rest of their lives. Grandma and I appear poised to do the same.

The Turners home and belongings, if not their lives, were threatened by huge floods and by the 1942 fire that has been reputed to have been the worst fire in North American's history. It was a flood that led the Turners to move to their current location at Nahanni Butte.

We too have been cut off from civilization by floods and by one of the worst ice storms recorded in Eastern Canada. Fortunately our home in the wilderness has not faced a major fire - it is always in the back of our minds. We are surrounded by forest and there is only one trail out. We are very conscious of the great fire that swept down the Ottawa Valley coming ever so close to taking Ottawa in its path. Fortunately Flower Station was spared - just outside the large strath it took. Grandma and I vividly remember a river trip on the Athabasca River where we got caught in a huge forest fire. The fire was on both sides of the river and we feared for our safety.

So we find it easy to imagine how frightening it must have been for them. The Turners described the fire was accompanied by big winds causing 6 foot waves on the river - spruce trees igniting sounding like thunder.

Some of Turner's neighbours have also taken on legendary status. Some of the old-timers in Flower Station, although not on par with some of the Nahanni residents, also have strange and remarkable stories to tell..

The Turner's oldest son, Don, has remained in Nahanni Country and started the Nahanni Butte Outfitters. Our eldest son, Chad, has started Wilderness Rhythms.

When Dick and his brother Stan arrived at Fort Liard on August 17, 1930 they were invited by the RCMP for dinner. Bill and I were invited by the RCMP officer in for coffee.

The Turners experienced ups and downs living in this remote wilderness setting. I am writing this now when I am in my eightieth year and your Grandma and I have lived over 35 years in the bush near Flower Station. We too have had ups and downs. Some hardships and some wonderful experiences. Over the years the Turners had some close calls but I think it is safe to say that Jean and I have had close calls as well. As Vera shared her stories it was obvious in her eyes that she felt the challenges had made her stronger, gave her a feeling of self-reliance. She would not have traded her life in the Nahanni country for a life in the city. I think Grandma and I feel the same way about Flower Station..

In his book, "Nahanni", Dick states "For my part I was definitely escaping from an uncomfortable city environment of the Great Depression years." Grandma and I were not fleeing the city life but felt drawn by the power or attraction of nature.

I don't recall having these thoughts when Bill and I visited almost 50 years ago with Vera. These thoughts come from perspective and reflections over the years. I now turn back from the interruption or insertions of my thoughts to the actual visit.

Early in the visit Vera told us that we had just missed meeting Dick Turner and Albert Faille - they had left to go up the Nahanni. This was doubly disappointing. Mr. Turner has been a trapper, has operated Trading Posts, been a River Transporter, and a pilot. Renowned through the area, a true adventurer and pioneer who we would have loved to have met.

Albert Faille is likely the best known of the early pioneers. He gained a world wide reputation through Patterson's book, "The Dangerous River". His name more than any other is connected with the Nahanni River. His life is an almost unbelievable tale. He was raised by cruel foster parents. He rebelled and ran away when he was 8 years of age. That is your age Sienna - and Toby this means he was four years younger than you are. I know that when I was eight this would have been a terrifying prospect. Oh I recall, as probably most kids, entertaining the idea of running away for a day or two. Albert was sneaking off with no intent of ever coming back.

He snuck onto freight cars taking him further and further away. He slept in barns or any spot that provided some protection and took on errands or odd jobs that adults would pay him to do. Albert ended up in northern Minnesota and at the age of ten he came across an old shack in the woods. One story states that he was offered shelter by a hobo who taught him trapping skills and how to be at home in the bush.. He didn't have much, if any schooling, but over the years became recognized by true woodsmen as one of the best they had met. His knowledge of nature, outdoor survival, trapping skills, and especially his ability to tackle the most dangerous rivers by canoe was unsurpassed.

He came to Nahanni country in 1927 and by good fortune for all concerned met up with Raymond Patterson when they both were headed to the Nahanni River. Patterson credited him with being the most expert canoeist he had ever met. Faille mentored the inexperienced Patterson and without his help probably would not have made it up the Nahanni. If this had been the case the "Dangerous River" would not have been written and many, including myself, that were so enchanted by his book, would not have ventured into this country. Faille would have remained in obscurity.

Such is the happy coincidences of fate. Patterson, along with Faille, become the first known white men to see the now famous Virginia Falls. It is possible that of the handful of the 1898 Gold Rush prospectors who tried to reach the gold fields of the Yukon by the Liard-Nahanni Rivers, one or two might have seen the falls. Therefore if Faille and Patterson were not the first white persons to do so they were certainly the first to bring back a photo of the now famed Virginia Falls.

Faille was called Red Pant by natives as he always wore scarlet red heavy wool trousers. One other thing he was known for, besides the red trousers, was as a friendly but incessant talker. Never the moody silent type we sometimes associate with cabin fever.

Faille spent many winters and even more summers exploring the Nahanni Country. It was said that he travelled into remote mountain passes where no white person is known to have gone. To the end of his life he was convinced that the Nahanni and or its tributaries held treasures of gold. At the time of our visit he was about 80 years of age and still making trips up the Nahanni! What a life! One person described him as “being as tough as a wolverine, maybe a little tougher.”

One time Albert took a bad fall on the ice when he was trapping far up the Nahanni River and so aggravated a previous injury to his back that he barely made it back to his cabin. Barely able to move and unable to leave the cabin for three weeks, he got scurvy, which loosened his teeth. Imagine his grit when he felt forced to pull his teeth with a pair of pliers.

Albert had many other close calls and there were times when he was given up for dead by his friends. There are very few people who suffered a mishap on the Nahanni River and were able to walk out. To even attempt to walk out, given the ruggedness of the canyons and the general landscape, was considered to be suicidal. Such was his skills he did it on more than one occasion!

As stated Patterson’s glowing description of Albert brought him worldwide attention and this was only solidified by the 1961 film on Faille’s annual pilgrimage up the Nahanni to Virginia Falls. At the foot of the Falls he had to take his boat apart and carry the long heavy boards up a steep trail to the top of the Falls where he rebuilt it. Albert also had to portage an outboard motor, gasoline, and enough supplies to do him a month. Remember these Falls are twice as high as Niagara Falls. Just imagine! This would have been a challenge for a 20 year old - he was in his early 70’s. Inconceivable!

Turning back to our visit with Vera she told us that she used to worry about Albert going on these annual treks up the Nahanni at such an advanced age. However one time he responded by saying: “Can you think of a more beautiful place than the Nahanni to lay down these old bones?”

No she couldn’t and she no longer tried to persuade him otherwise.

Time flew by and conscious of the late hour we thanked her for her hospitality and reaffirmed how privileged we felt to have met her. We bought a couple of chocolate bars, pop, and a can of beans from her and she gave us permission to sleep on their property.

It was a beautiful clear evening - no hint of rain. We decided, rather than putting up our tent, to sleep on the Turner’s floating boat dock which was about 6 ft wide. Bill tied a rope around his waist to the dock just in case he rolled over in his sleep. Once during the night I turned over in my sleep and felt my one leg going over side but checked myself in time so I met no harm.

Friday morning we were off, as planned, to a fairly early start. We had made much poorer time yesterday than expected due to the slackening current and we have been told that the stretch of

river known as the Long Reach started about 25 miles below the junction of the Nahanni River and lasted for 20 miles and was without evidence of current. Given that we had a deadline by which we had to reach Ft. Simpson we felt we could not tarry. The problem of having to work for a living and having short vacation time is that one can not take the time to drink in the country as one would like. It would have been great to spend a little more time at Fort Liard and at Nahanni Butte and getting to know those who have spent most of their lives here. We would have liked to have done some hiking as well. The top of the Butte must provide an outstanding view of the surrounding landscape.

Mrs. Turner had loaned us a flashlight and we left it at her door. We were away by 8 am and the river was very slow. We could not make any noticeable headway except by paddling. The country was starkly beautiful. Very wide and so peaceful, so remote. In some ways I felt I had entered the magic world of imagination. This couldn't be more like how I envisioned Canada a couple of centuries ago - unspoiled, unpolluted, not stripped of its forests, no fear of mercury in the water, no constant buzz of highway traffic, no humans to be seen. Beautiful to behold.

About one o'clock a cabin came into view and we stopped. A native woman with three very young children was at home. She told us that her husband had been gone for two weeks and she didn't know when he would be back. We asked what she did for food and she said she lived by trapping rabbits and fishing. Both Bill and I were concerned for her welfare and wondered how she could possibly provide for her children in this manner.

However she seemed completely unconcerned about her situation and asked if we were going to go through the rapids. When we said that we were, she asked if she could take a look at our boat. She walked with us to the river bank and it was her turn to be come alarmed. "Oh no! Not in that boat! I went through them once in a big boat and I would never do it again!"

I don't think she believed us when we tried to reassure her that the kayak was quite good in rapids. It is strange how she felt comfortable in her situation which alarmed us while she was equally alarmed at what we were proposing. I must admit her comments heightened my apprehension about the rapids and I suspect they increased Bill's anxiety as well.

As we were getting back into the kayak she told us of an airstrip we would see a few miles down-stream. After a relatively short paddle we saw the airstrip and a campsite. However it was deserted but since we were stopped we decided to have our lunch.

A rain squall hit and it rained most of the remainder of our day on the river. Fortunately it stopped just prior to our making camp at a site we guessed to be about 10 miles upstream of Birch River. We erected our tent quickly and put our gear inside as we anticipated more rain. Luckily we did as the rain came quickly and we were forced to eat a meal of ham and beans plus canned fruit for desert in our tent.

An hour or two later the sky cleared turning into another beautiful evening. As we sat around the fire we talked about the remoteness of our trip and how lucky we were to be here. Our discussion turned to the visit we had with Vera Turner. If we had arrived ten minutes later, with the lights turned off, we would not have knocked on her door. We were discovering that people seemed to go to bed late and sleep in. We agreed that this was likely a summer thing given how long it remained light. When we arrived at Nahanni Butte there were a couple of very young children still up. Therefore, wanting to be on the river early, we would have missed the opportunity to visit. To this day I treasure the memory of this visit.

Of course we were disappointed that we had missed Dick Turner and Albert Faille. We wondered if we had got there earlier if there would have been any possibility we could have hitched a ride up the Nahanni with them. Not likely they would have had room and we didn't learn how long they would be gone. What a dream that would have been! Imagine seeing the Nahanni in the company of these two legendary figures of the north! Priceless! I know I would have taken out a loan to pay for our passage.

Our discussion turned to what we would face tomorrow. This would be the day we hit the Beaver Dam Rapids. As we retired to our tent I lay awake for some time with a few minor knots in my stomach. I hoped I haven't got Bill and myself into something we would regret or even worse that our families would regret

I thought again of the canoeist that had drowned there last summer and also the difficulty that Dick Turner and Raymond Patterson experienced in these rapids. Patterson also mentioned that a Coal Company's boat coming back from the Mackenzie River had nearly capsized at Beaver Dam Rapids and the canoe they were towing swamped and their clothes got washed away. Well better get some sleep. "Pleasant dreams, Bill."

Saturday we were on the river at our usual time and got to Birch River by 10 am. We now were within two or three hours of the Beaver Dam Rapids. As mentioned previously the rapids flow over a limestone ledge on the river bottom and extends from one shore to the other. Over this ledge the water cascades and then curls back in a monstrous wave that resembles a beaver dam.

At noon we heard the distinct roar of white water and, as advised, we stayed to the right. The current was speeding up and the waves were a couple of feet high. Then some water came over the bow and into the kayak but the kayak retained its stability and danced through the waves. I noted to myself that we probably could have avoided taking in water but I had wanted to avoid some rocks and went through the bigger waves to our left. As far as we could see across the river was a stretch of white water. This must be the Beaver Dam Rapids. However the waves were now getting bigger and we took in some more water.

We thought we had gone through the Beaver Dam Rapids and yet here we were facing even larger waves. If what we had gone through was not the Beaver Dam but were rapids leading up

to them which others had not considered worthy of mentioning, we might be in serious trouble. We continued to take in a little water but as the kayak crested over one standing wave, I was able to see the end of the rapids downstream. I let out a sigh of relief. We had gone over the Beaver Dam after all! I turned the kayak into the deeper waves and we had an enjoyable time riding the remainder of the rapids. Again I was impressed with the stability of the kayak. Bill agreed with me that if we had a spray cover over the kayak, which was not possible because of all the gear, we could have gone down through the middle. Maybe - maybe not! Things look different closer up.

We stopped about 2 pm and built a big fire to dry out our bags, which were protected by the garment bags covers and not too wet. However as explained earlier, Bill remembered it a bit differently than was recorded in my notes. He had dropped his steak into the sand but was so famished he washed it off in the river and devoured it.

Then back on the river. I developed a bit of a headache and my stomach became a little unsettled. We reached the big island before the airport and camped on the left side. We put up the tent, arranged the sleeping bags and completed the other camp tasks. I still was not feeling well and began to have uncontrolled shivers. I ran up and down the beach to warm up and then got into my sleeping bag. Bill opened a can of fruit but I didn't feel like having anything. We had of course had a large dinner late in the afternoon. I was in bed by 8 pm and got a good night sleep. In the middle of the night the wind picked up so I pulled the kayak up to safer ground.

Sunday morning I was feeling well again. I wondered if the steak perhaps had been a bit off but it hadn't affected Bill. It may have been a case of nerves. I had pre-rapid jitters and then experienced the relief that comes from having successfully put the rapids behind us.

Bill and I took turns standing on a large rock to load the kayak that was sitting in deep water. This made it much easier to launch without dragging the kayak over gravel and stones to launch. The current was still fairly good for the first hour and then became very slow. Got to Fort Simpson shortly after noon and shook hands in celebration of a successful trip - a trip to be treasured for a life-time. Then we headed to Kidd's Hotel for a cup of coffee.

We checked the plane schedule and learned that the planes leave every Tuesday and Saturday. The hotel was full but we were told that someone was leaving today and if we came back later we could have a room.

Bill and I walked down to the Experimental Farm. At the Farm we met Dick Thomas who had responded to my letter and encouraged us to take the trip. He invited us in for dinner. He had made the same trip and was very proud of the feat. He wanted to compare experiences and offered us every hospitality. He showed us around the farm and said we could sleep above the shed.

We had a great visit with the Thomas's and a great supper. We wanted to make arrangements to ship the kayak back to Edmonton but the person in charge of transport was not going to be back for a few days. Mr. Thomas kindly offered to look after it for us.

Bill and I wandered around Ft. Simpson and met a teacher who told of banging up his boat at the Beaver Dam Rapids. He was impressed that we had run them without mishap.

We slept in the loft above the shed and spent a comfortable night. Mr. Thomas insisted we have breakfast with them. We spent most of Monday looking around Simpson. Fort Simpson is situated high on a point overlooking a tremendous sweep of the Liard and Mackenzie Rivers. At the confluence of the two rivers, the Mackenzie River is over a mile wide and runs all the way to the arctic ocean. I had no idea at this time that 24 years later would find me canoeing from Fort Simpson to Arctic Red River - about 800 miles (1200 km) on the Mackenzie River.

Alexander Mackenzie was the first white person to travel the Mackenzie River and had camped on a low-lying island at the junction of the Liard and Mackenzie that we could see from the bank. I suspect it looked much the same then as it does now.

In 1804 the Fort of the Forks was established by the North West Company. In 1821 the Forks became a Hudson's Bay Company Post and later was named Fort Simpson in honour of George Simpson who was head of the Northern Department of the Company. Certainly a place of memories. I felt privileged to visit it.

Mr. Thomas invited us back for supper and we spent the evening talking about the Nahanni country. He too desired to make the trip up the Nahanni. We discussed different possibilities and he was inclined to think that a good rubber boat should make it. He thought a Jet boat would be ideal but too expensive to buy and to maintain.

So ended my first truly northern river trip. I treasure its memory to this day.

PART TWO

TRIP TO THE NAHANNI

AUGUST 1969

(Map and pictures at end)

I was now hooked on the North. The trip from Ft. Nelson to Ft. Simpson was extremely satisfying. How many places are left where you can put your canoe or kayak into a river with the knowledge there are no roads out for the next 350 miles? In fact at the end of our river trip there were still no roads out. To get back to Edmonton one must fly out of Ft. Simpson. A truly remote wilderness trip.

I was home less than a week when Irv Kuch came by anxious to learn how we had made out. Irv is a taxidermist and also a wilderness guide who takes clients, usually hunters and fishermen, by pack horses into the Alberta mountains. I told him how much Bill and I had enjoyed the trip and that both of us would really like to explore the Nahanni River itself. Sadly, though, I could see no way of doing this.

An amused smile crossed his face. He paused and then said “ Maybe it is possible.” He too had heard a lot about the Nahanni River and wanted to see it for himself. He then told me of his plan to add a jet boat to his guiding business. The plan was to buy a 24 foot aluminum “Smokercraft” boat along with a Berkley Jet. A mechanic friend had agreed to find a good used automobile motor and put the package together. Irv was sure his friend would do the same for me and argued that this was much cheaper than buying a new jet boat. “With two boats, we could go together to the Nahanni next summer.”

My head began to spin. He was offering a chance to fulfill a dream that I had considered impossible. Yet it still involved a lot of money that I didn't have. Irv plainly seen he had peaked my interest and intuitively knew that finances were holding me back. As if an afterthought, he said: “You know once you took the trip, you could recoup most, if not all, of your money by selling it. These boats are in great demand. In fact I think you would make money.”

Grandma was skeptical. After much back and forth discussion she reluctantly agreed. She loved wilderness trips and the Nahanni would be a trip of a lifetime. The fact that Irv would be going too had been a big plus in helping her make the decision. Grandma had also been concerned about having to take out a loan to build the jet boat. I think the argument that cinched the deal for Grandma was Irv's reassurance that we could easily recoup our money when we sold the boat and that he would help us sell it.

I next talked to Bill who enthusiastically jumped at the opportunity. A short time later Carl Lindemann, who had driven us up to Fort Nelson for the Liard trip, indicated he would like to come as well.

Our excitement was growing. Irv's friend came across the exact motor he wanted for the boat. It was a Ford motor with hardly any miles on it. A fire had demolished the car but not reached the motor itself. This would be for Irv's boat but he was sure he would find a motor for me as well.

At the height of my exhilaration, there was bad news. Circumstances had changed for Irv and he wouldn't be able to go on the trip. To me, this was not just bad news, it was devastating. I had counted on Irv because of his previous experience with jet boats and his mechanical ability. Furthermore there was the extra security of having a second boat along in case some major breakdown took place.

Years later I read a book by D.H. Koester. He planned a Nahanni River trip with his best friend and mentor. At the last moment his friend couldn't come. Like me, the news left him devastated. More about that later.

Irv sensed my deep disappointment - actually it must have been written all over my face. He urged me to take the trip without him. He argued that I knew how to read rivers and that was the most important skill to have for such a trip.

“The only ones I have known who have suffered mishaps are those who were not adept at reading river conditions. Just take a couple of weekend trips to get used to the boat. You will find it very reliable and easy to operate.”

I wasn't convinced. It was true that having completed the Liard River trip and successfully navigated the Beaver Dam Rapids gave me confidence. It was also true, having talked with Vera Turner and others, that perhaps the Nahanni River was not as dangerous or impossible for me to handle as I had been led to believe when I read Patterson's book. When Patterson and Faille explored the River they didn't have much information at hand. We had the advantage that the river has been mapped and the major hazards are known. Nevertheless it was a very remote river with substantial challenges. Nothing to be taken lightly. My main fear was mechanical breakdown. If only I was mechanically knowledgeable I would not have hesitated. No, I don't think I can risk it.

Perhaps I could put it off for a year and hope that Irv would be in a position to come. However Irv's financial situation had changed and he didn't think he would be in a position to do so in the foreseeable future.

I was convinced the trip was off but decided before making a final decision to have a serious talk with Bill Calder to see if he felt confident to handle the mechanical components of the trip.

Before I had the opportunity to talk with Bill, Carl dropped by. Before I could tell him the trip would likely be scrubbed he stated that the Nahanni held a deep attraction for his father, and

wondered if he could come as well. His father (Hans) being a farmer was a general handyman comfortable with tools, motors, and other equipment required to run a farm. This seemed just what the doctor ordered. How drastically one's emotions can change in a second.

However things seldom go as smoothly as planned. I suspect that Irv's friend, no longer under the deadline pressure of completing two boats, didn't feel the same sense of urgency. There always seemed to be something to add to our anxiety. First there were unexpected delays in getting needed parts. While waiting for the parts he naturally turned his hand to his other responsibilities that had to be completed before returning to the boat. There was continuous slippage in the dates we expected completion of the boat.

To our horror we suddenly realized there we were to depart in a couple of weeks and the boat was still not ready. Everyone involved pitched in with a final ditch effort and one week before departure the jet boat was finally ready for a short test on the Saskatchewan River. We held our breath. If any thing was wrong, we had run out of time.

The Jet boat was launched into the Saskatchewan River. Hans had come to Edmonton from his farm for the test. Carl was there as well. We all climbed aboard and Irv started it up, waited for the motor to warm up, and then headed upstream. Everyone strained their ears to hear any ominous sounds. After several miles with Irv putting the boat through several maneuvers, finally turned with a big smile and gave us the thumbs up! Cheers all around!. Irv's verdict: "It works like a charm." Irv handed the controls over to me and said: "Give it a try Skipper." No problems. It handled like a dream.

THE TRIP

I think Carl's interest had been stimulated by stories by Bill and myself about last year's trip. Hans told me that ever since reading about the Nahanni he had wanted to see it. When Bill and I were on the Liard trip, we talked frequently about the Nahanni. Of all the rivers we could have listed, the Nahanni held by far the greatest fascination for us. To Bill and myself, the jet boat simply provided the means to go up the powerful current of the Nahanni to get to Virginia Falls.

This was in itself a dream. Bill and I chatted several times during our pre-trip planning. I never was a fan of motorboats for wilderness travel. A canoe or kayak was the true entry into wilderness. The double kayak (Folbot) had won Bill's respect on the Liard trip. He raised an interesting question:

"What would you think about taking the kayak? It folds and could be taken in the jet boat. Once we get to the Falls you and I could kayak back to the Butte. It should be safe. Hans would captain the jet boat and serve as a safety net in the event of a capsized."

I jumped at the idea. This would be perfect. I knew that Hans would love the idea too. He had already chided me by asking if I planned to have all the fun as he would like to try his hand at captaining the boat. To Bill and I, this would constitute the highlight of the trip!

The question was whether we had room. The jet boat, compared to a kayak, seemed like a cargo ship. In a kayak the supplies had to fit snugly inside the kayak or strapped on the back deck. Nevertheless we had to plan carefully. Camping equipment, gear, food, and five people. More problematic was the question of gas. We really wouldn't know until we placed the 45 gallon gas barrels in the boat and that would not be determined until we purchased them in Fort Nelson.

However we had a backup plan. If there was no room in the jet boat for the kayak we could tow it behind.

We assumed the jet-boat would be relatively easy on gas going with the current but much harder going upstream, especially going up the Nahanni and then the return trip up the Liard. I had arranged for gas to be available at Fort Liard and at the Nahanni Butte. We thought we could leave some gas at the Hot Springs and thereby be a little lighter on the upper Nahanni.

Finally the day of departure! Attached to the Toyota Land Cruiser was a trailer designed for the jet boat. Food and other supplies were stored inside the jet boat and covered with a tarp. Five passengers in the Toyota was a bit tight considering we would be jammed in there for the seven hundred mile (1120 km) drive from Edmonton to Fort Nelson.

It is a scenic, if dusty ride. Neither Jean nor Hans had been this far north. I must admit that our minds were less on the wonderful vistas that opened up from time to time than on wanting to get to Fort Nelson. We all hoped that we would get there without a flat tire. If ever there was a road hard on tires this was it. More worrisome was mechanical breakdown. The winding gravel road between Fort St. John and Fort Nelson was no place to have car trouble.

There it is! Fort Nelson. Not even a flat tire. We filled the Toyota and bought and filled up several 45 gallon barrels of gas that we arranged to be taken down to the launch site. We had a bite to eat. Now all that was left for this part of the trip was to navigate eight rough miles of a trail down to the river.

We managed to back the trailer carrying the jet boat into the Ft. Nelson River without incident and began the laborious task of loading the gear aboard. Most difficult of all was the loading of the 45 gallon barrels of gas. By the time all was done there was surprisingly little room left in the 24 foot boat. Certainly no room for the kayak. We tethered it on a long rope to be towed behind us.

A flick of the key and the motor sprang into life. Hans, who was at the stern looking after the motor, gave me the thumbs up. The steering wheel and throttle is located at the front of the boat.

I turned the boat into the current. Within a few minutes Bill frantically waved to get our attention. The water being thrown back behind the jet boat was swamping the kayak.

The jet boat was loaded to capacity so there was no room to put the kayak aboard. Bill and I looked at each other in despair. No solution was forthcoming so we slowed to a crawl looking for a place to hide the kayak to be retrieved on our way back. What a disappointment!

A deep grassy spot on the left side of the river seemed like a good spot to hide the kayak and yet was a spot we would easily recognize on our way back. The kayak was being set into place when we noticed a couple of natives going by in a canoe on the far side of the river. As they paddled by we could see them looking our way but at the time we gave it no further thought.

Irv in his quick instructions to me said it was important to give sufficient throttle to make the boat plane near the surface. This required less depth and also provided better fuel consumption. When we did this on the trial run on the Saskatchewan the boat was unloaded and it was easy to keep it planed.

Now we found that with the extra weight of the barrels of gas it took much more power to plane. The extra power negatively effected gas consumption. As the miles went by, we anxiously watched as the gas levels dropped. I fretted to myself. If we were burning much more gas than anticipated going downstream how much more gas would it burn ascending the powerful Nahanni?

There was another problem as well. The Fort Nelson River was a brownish silty colour making it difficult to judge the depth of the water.. This was especially true at higher speed. Although keeping the boat as high on the surface of the water as possible allowed us to skim over some sandbars when we grounded at speed we were really grounded.

To make matters worse, once stranded and given the murkiness of the water, one person had to wade ahead trying to find the deeper paths and everyone else pushing and heaving. Once off the sandbars where the boat had room to float, someone had to reach down under the boat to unplug the sand from the intake grates. Oh the advantage of the kayak!

On one of these bars, I think it was Bill, had his sunglasses fall into the water. Although less than a foot deep he was unable to find them. Fortunately we got a little better in seeing telltale, but very faint signs, and limited our major groundings to three.

I guess there was some satisfaction, although not much, from the knowledge that others suffered similar fates on the Ft Nelson River. Beth Johnson told us their barge got stuck several times when she was a cook on the barge decades ago. The barge that Bill and I met last year on the Liard got stuck as well. Dick Turner, when he purchased a boat to open a transport service, got grounded three times on the Ft. Nelson River when he was bringing it back from Ft. Nelson. I

had hoped that the shallow draft of the jet boat would have avoided these incidences. I am sure it avoided many but not all.

During the planning stages I estimated we would make Ft. Liard in one day. This assumption was based on averaging about 20 miles an hour with arrival time of about 5 or 6 pm. The grounding on sandbars dictated otherwise. Instead we stopped for the night at the old site of the Nelson Forks Post, a few miles shy of the junction of the Nelson and Liard Rivers.

Wow this is not great!. It had taken Bill and I two days to travel this distance by kayak. Certainly expected to be making more than twice the time with a jet boat. Actually we could have easily gone on for another hour or two as night time in this part of the country is delayed in the summer. However I knew the Liard is swift and campsites not as easy to access.

I actually liked the idea of sleeping at this historic spot - in my mind's eye drifting back to what I imagined it to be like decades ago when the Fort was a major trading place.

We were weary from the effort expended from freeing the jet boat from the sandbars but busied ourselves putting up our respective tents, gathering firewood, and routine camp tasks. Grandma celebrated our first evening on the river by barbecuing t-bone steaks, potatoes baked just right in aluminum foil, and all the trimmings. Each accepted her offerings with praise.

Of course Solena, you are too young but the rest of you, Tessa, Toby, and Sienna have experienced Grandma's cooking for yourselves. You know what I am talking about. Now imagine this feast on the banks of a beautiful northern river. The aroma of steaks and coffee in a true wilderness setting is magical.

I always thought of my mother, your great grandmother, as being the greatest cook you could meet. But I have to say your grandma is the greatest. This is said without any sense of disloyalty to your great grandmother but as the highest compliment possible.

Dishes washed, all things in ready for a night's sleep, your grandma and I sat on a drift log near the embers of the dying fire. We spoke of our son, not quite two years of age, picturing him in the caring embrace of his grandparents. It would be nice to have him with us. There is nothing on the Fort Nelson River to prevent it. The Liard and especially the Nahanni makes such thoughts unthinkable.

I wish I had the words of a poet to describe this spot and other like spots along the Liard River. There is a sort of melancholy beauty, a lovely loneliness that settles over the land. Imagine spending the evening about 180 km downstream from Fort Nelson and about 150 km downstream to Fort Liard.

The junction of the Liard River is only a few miles downstream from our campsite. If you

turned upstream on the Liard you would come to treacherous canyons and rapids that few have dared to try. The names tell you everything you need to know - "Hells Gate" Rapids of the Drowned". Where could you be more isolated? Not even if you went back 50 or 100 years. There is less human traffic here now than when the fur traders came to the trading post. Patterson saw more people on the river when he came by in 1929 on his way to Fort Nelson. How privileged we are!

This spot does not have anything specific that focuses your attention. No rapids, no canyons, no waterfalls, no scenic outcrops, but nevertheless hauntingly beautiful. The river wide. The river reaching up to meet the sky and the sky comes down to earth - melting into one. The few clouds reflected in the river. A twilight zone, subdued, vast in scope, calming peacefulness. Subdued and understated in the sense of no riotous colours of maple trees but the relaxing, appealing greenish, yellowishness of poplars. A subdued crimson muted sunset peaking through clouds reflected in the water. Still, no wind. However a mild chill comes at nightfall.

Grandma and I notice the others have gone to their tents. In a few days it will be our tenth anniversary. I could think of no place I would rather be. I squeezed her hand, gave her an affectionate kiss, and hand in hand walked to our tent.

Last evening I thought the aroma of steaks and coffee could not be beaten. This morning the smell of bacon and coffee matched and perhaps surpassed the olfactory delight. Bacon, eggs, pancakes, coffee - we were in heaven.

On each of our wilderness trips the plan has been the same. A large breakfast and a large supper. Lunch was prepared from materials at hand to have a lunch at any spot we wanted a break.

A mist over the river gave a mystique to our setting but it would shortly burn off. Another nice day. One obvious difference between jet boating and canoeing is the cool breeze felt as the jet boat picked up speed. Shortly we joined the Liard River and were finally free of the worry about getting stuck on sandbars. A few minutes later, I beckoned Hans to come forward. With a broad smile he took over the wheel.

The Liard is a swift, wide river with numerous islands. The choice of channels is not always clear cut. I had been on the river last year and also from previous wilderness kayak trips had learned to read rivers fairly well. Hans expression soon became quite serious and began asking where I thought the best route lay. A few minutes later he handed control back to me and said "I compliment you. It is much harder to read the river than it looks from the back of the boat!"

In terms of channels it is not so much that islands cause navigation problems. It is the drift-piles formed from logs carried down by the spring runoff piled on top of each other. They can create a significant hazard to anyone who sees the danger too late and gets drawn into them. I am aware of these hazards but not overly concerned as both Grandma and myself are used to looking far

enough ahead to see any obstacle that requires corrective action.

I figured that with a powerboat the hazard is reduced. You are higher up than in a kayak and can see further down river and have the power to change directions quicker in a fast current. What didn't enter my mind, but should have, was what would happen if the motor conked out. Then you would be much safer in a kayak.

This challenge was brought to my attention a few years later by Ranulph Fiennes in his book "The Headless Valley". The book was published in 1973 four years after our trip but their trip took place in 1971 - just two years later than ours. A captain in the British military led a party of three men of the Royal Scots Grey plus a film crew and a Yorkshire police constable in three inflatable, motorized boats, that from the photos look similar to Zodiac boats, to take them on a great adventure up the Nahanni River.

You will read later that he not only was a fellow traveler on the Nahanni River but would have another interesting connection to our trip. Fiennes has led a fascinating, adventurous life. He is 7 years younger than me, born in England. Stories abound about his unique character. While taking training in the Special Air Services (SAS) - an elite British Fighting Unit - he and a fellow officer caught a piglet and covered it in tank grease and released it into a crowded ballroom. One is left to their imagination as to the havoc this prank caused.

More serious was the action he took when he was offended by a dam built by 20th Century Fox in the making of the film, Doctor Dolittle. He felt it was an eyesore, an offence to the prettiest Village in England. He attempted to blow it up. For this he was dismissed from the SAS and returned to the Royal Scots Greys. The last two years of his service found him seconded to the army of the Sultan of Oman to fight against a communist insurgency. He led several raids deep into rebel held territory and for his bravery was decorated by the Sultanate.

At the time Grandma and I were on the Liard River he was leading a expedition up the White Nile and a year later on Norway's Jostedalbreen Glacier. He married his childhood sweetheart Virginia Pepper in September 1970. Virginia (Ginnie) took on the background research to assist him fulfill one of his desires to travel remote parts of Canada. She came across Patterson's book, "Dangerous River". He writes: "Patterson's book decided me. To go all the way to Western Canada prepared for river travel and not to visit the Nahanni, examine the Headless Valley with all its legends or see the fabulous waterfall would be criminal."

Here again - Patterson's influence.

It was on this part of the Liard River, where we are, that they almost met their Waterloo. One of the motors failed and the boat was inescapably being taken by the fast current towards a logjam. Desperately, but to no avail, they tried to miss it. Crashing into the logjam they seemed for a moment to be held by a large branch - the only thing preventing them from being sucked under.

They felt sharp branches whipping across their bodies and then the bow disappeared underwater, under churning debris. One branch knocked a person off but he managed to get on top of the logs. It seemed hopeless. What a way to die! Then miraculously, after many attempts to start the motor, it caught and he shoved it into reverse. Once free they were able, with much difficulty and maneuvering, to rescue the man from the quaking, dancing logs.

I have on a few occasions, used a small outboard motor, and know they can let you down. Our inboard car motor seemed to be functioning so flawlessly I had not been any more concerned than if I was driving a car down a highway. I am glad I hadn't read his book at this point - just one more worry to interrupt the enjoyment of the trip.

Fiennes will be mentioned from time to time when his story seems relevant to ours. At this point, so not to be too disjointed, I will tell you that he went on to world class adventures. Grandma and I had wonderful adventures of our own following our journey into Nahanni Country but his exploits are in another class altogether.

By 1984 he was named by Guinness Book of World Records as the world's greatest living explorer. He was the first person to reach the North and South Poles by surface means. When he was sixty-five years of age he climbed Mount Everest.

If you read some of his arctic travels you realize his life was one of drama and high adventure that few if any can match. With tongue in cheek I draw your attention to the fact that Fiennes respected the dreaded reputation of the Nahanni River sufficiently to take individuals with military backgrounds and left Ginny, his wife, back on shore to provide the logistics and backup for the trip. This was not the case with us - Grandma was there every step of the way. Thumbs up to her, wouldn't you say?

Mid morning Fort Liard came into view - a hamlet spread out along the river for perhaps three quarters of a mile. Having been here last year, it felt a bit like homecoming to Bill and myself.

As mentioned, I had arranged for gas to be available at Fort Liard and also for barrels to be available at Nahanni Butte. The plan was to leave a few barrels at Fort Liard to be picked up on our way back to Fort Nelson. We would take a few barrels to get us to Nahanni Butte. We had the same plan for Nahanni Butte. We would leave enough to get us back to Fort Liard and take enough to get us to Virginia Falls and back to the Butte.

A lot of planning and a lot of guesswork. It was now time to see how close our predictions had been. We knew we had burned more gas than anticipated so thought we better take a few more barrels than originally planned to be on the safe side. We were one day behind schedule but this didn't worry me as it had been caused by getting stuck on sandbars. There were no sandbars ahead.

Nevertheless it was one less day available to us to spend on the Nahanni so we didn't want to linger. We pushed off into the fast current and started towards Nahanni Butte.

I noticed Bill had been a little quiet and now noticed he was huddled down in the boat to keep out of the wind. I hoped he was okay as I knew he had a tendency towards tonsillitis.

I beckoned Hans over and pointed to how little free board we had due to the weight of the extra barrels of gas. We watched anxiously to see just how close the water level came up on the sides as I gave the boat more throttle.

It looked awfully precarious. There would be no problem between here and the Nahanni Butte but the Nahanni rapids was an entirely different matter. As I look back to this moment I realize I couldn't have been thinking. The obvious solution was to drop off the extra gas at Nahanni Butte to lighten the load.

I don't know why I hadn't thought of this and instead we decided to return to Ft. Liard and remove a couple of the barrels. Sometimes things in life unexpectedly work out for the better. Back at Ft Liard we took on the onerous task of removing the heavy barrels. Bill said he was going to the infirmary to see if they could give him something for his developing sore throat.

The removal of a couple gas barrels helped considerably but the boat still seemed to be riding lower in the water than we liked. Neither Hans nor myself felt comfortable with removing more barrels as we didn't want to be caught short. We had heard that the RCMP officer was familiar with the Nahanni and sought him out for his opinion. He examined the boat carefully and ventured that we probably could make it but suggested we may want to play it safe and build the sides up with available lumber at Fort Liard.

Hans experiences on the farm proved invaluable. We provided as much assistance as we could but he undertook the leadership. I am sure that neither I nor Carl could have done this on our own.

In the meantime bad news came from the infirmary. Their verdict was that Bill was not fit for travel nor would he be for a few days. He was directed to stay in the infirmary for treatment. I suspected that the groundings on sandbars where all of us were forced to get into the cold river to push and pull the boat was responsible for his condition. In fact he was the one who took on the task of going under the boat to remove clogged sand from the grill intake.

No one wanted to see the Nahanni more than Bill. It was a shared dream. I felt sick at heart and kicked myself for having got ourselves hung up on the sandbars. I never really got a chance to talk to Bill about this at the time.

A few years ago when I was writing a much shorter version of this trip I contacted him and asked

for any recollections and thoughts he had about the trip. Among other things he mentioned his illness. When I brought up the subject of spending time in the cold water while stuck on the sandbars, he agreed that this may have contributed to his health problems. However he thought that the main reason he became so ill was:

“I remember being thirsty and drank from brackish dead water near shore instead of out in the faster current. As soon as I had done it I realized that it was a foolish thing to do. Also I over exposed myself to the sun on the water leading to a pretty good sunburn which probably didn’t help my immune system.”

I guess we will never know what or what combination of things accounted for his illness but I know I felt guilty about my possible role in it. Bill went on to make an important observation that made me feel better. I had seen he was not feeling well but didn’t know that he was actually feeling deathly ill and had kept this to himself as he wanted so badly to go. With the bravado of youth and the hope he would begin to feel better he just hunkered down in the boat to let rest and time heal him. However he began to feel even worse. Knowing if his situation continued to deteriorate it would be difficult to get medical help and as he listened to our discussion about the lack of free board he hoped we would return to Fort Liard. He felt relieved at our decision and took it as a sign of God watching over him.

We each took turns visiting him in his sick bed expressing our condolences. He told us that once he was feeling better he would try to hitch a ride with any pilot that might have room and then make his way back to Edmonton. We wished him speedy recovery and assured him that if he was unsuccessful in getting a lift out we would pick him up on our return.

Soon after leaving Fort Liard for the second time, the motor coughed and sputtered. Hans quickly saw that the filter installed on the hose was full of water. He quickly placed the hose in another barrel. This did the trick. The motor was soon purring along. This happened a couple of times and each time we anxiously looked back at Hans as he made the switch.

By now it was too late to make Nahanni Butte for the night so I suggested we stay at Flett Rapids in the same small government cabin that Bill and I had stayed on our kayak trip to Fort Simpson. Soon I spotted the cabin and eased the boat in through the various rocky obstacles. We were glad to have a cabin for the night instead of going to the effort of setting up and taking down tents.

It was August and the nights got surprisingly cold. In the middle of the night I noticed Hans making his way over to Carl who was sound asleep. He bent over and asked him if he was alright. Carl said he was. “You are not cold?” “No, why?” “It’s okay, it is just me, I have poor circulation.”

I whispered to Jean. “Are you cold?” She wasn’t and I asked her if she would mind giving one of our bags to Hans and we share the remaining one. She agreed. The extra bag seemed to help

Hans and although Jean and I slept a little cooler than we would have liked, we were fine. Hans was older than us and now seeing the difficulty he had with circulation I hoped he too would not become ill.

Grandma once again rustled up a hearty breakfast. Full stomachs put us in good spirits as we launched into the river. Before long Nahanni Butte loomed into sight. This small community gets its name from the dome shaped mountain behind it. This picturesque mountain is estimated to be 5000 ft high and can be seen from miles away.

Originally there was an independent trading post called South Nahanni which existed at the Butte until the late 1930's. Gus Kraus and Jack LaFair changed its name to Nahanni Butte to avoid confusion with a post called the North Nahanni at the mouth of the North Nahanni River.

It was at LaFair's post that Albert Faille and Raymond Patterson, whose book, "Dangerous River", had inspired our trip, stayed over night when they were making their way up the Nahanni in 1927.

Jack LaFlair was born not too far from us - Ogdensburg, New York across the river from Prescott, Ontario. Jack was a few months younger than you Tessa (15 years old) when he got in an argument with his father and ran away from home. He went to Wyoming where he worked on ranches and eventually drove a head of horses into Canada. Roaming the wilds of Canada in search for gold he finally took root at the mouth of the Nahanni around 1914 and built a trading post. Jack was one of the real life characters introduced in Patterson's book and well known by the Turners. Neighbours recall him sitting at the junction of the Nahanni and Liard River playing his violin. I can imagine the sound of the violin in this remote wilderness setting. Something I think you can imagine your father, Barrie, doing something like this if he was in a wilderness setting. Your uncle Chad has done so but with a flute not a violin.

In the Fall of 1950 he was chopping wood and took a break to have a cigarette. He sat down on a log and suffered a heart attack. His name will continue to be associated with the Nahanni Country.

The first thing we did upon arrival at Nahanni Butte was to check to make sure our gas supply was in storage. Relieved to find that it was we exchanged our empty ones for full ones. We also planned to drop off a couple of barrels at the Hot Springs. This would lighten our load as we continued on to Virginia Falls.

We expect to start up the Nahanni in the morning. In the meantime we hoped to find Dick Turner at home. I knocked on their door and reintroduced myself to Vera. She remembered our visit last summer and warmly invited us into their home. I introduced Grandma, Hans, and Carl. I was delighted to see that Dick was home as well.

Vera especially welcomed the opportunity to visit with another woman. She and Grandma hit it off immediately and this as much as anything resulted in a longer and a very pleasant visit. In fact she insisted we stay for supper. To this day we talk about how delicious it was. Both Grandma and I have repeated many times that we had never tried any meat that tasted as good as the mountain sheep she served.

The Turners are an amazing family. When I read stories about such pioneers, I unconsciously assume they were born to the life with all the skills and knowledge needed to survive in such a remote and rugged country. It seems like a remarkable discovery to find that they are not that different from ordinary folks.

Dick had come into the Nahanni country in 1930 at the beginning of the Great Depression with his brother Stan. Dick was only 19 years of age at the time. They had planned to trap for a year but ended up staying. They had no specific plans as to where they would spend the trapping season. It is easy to forget how young Canada is. The major rivers that had become highways for the fur trade were reasonably well known. Yet many parts of the surrounding land and various major tributaries had yet to be adequately mapped. Rivers, such as the Nahanni, was simply depicted as a nondescript line going off into the unknown. It was only a couple of years before Dick's arrival that Patterson and Faille were the first documented white men to see Virginia Falls. Patterson and Faille knew little about what might lie ahead of them when they began their ascent.

Obviously Stan and Dick had planned their trip to the best of their ability but it must have been intimidating when there was so little information available. They took encouragement from reports that this part of the country was rich in game and a person would have no trouble living off the land.

Even their actual destination was vague at best. Perhaps they would ascend the Liard River from Fort Simpson and trap in B.C or the Yukon. They must have been taken back when the first thing they heard upon their arrival in Fort Simpson was they would be facing a formidable rapid just sixteen miles up the Liard River. This was the treacherous Beaver Dam Rapids. No one had warned them about this. When they reached Fort Liard they learned they had underestimated the amount of supplies needed to sustain them over the winter. This news along with the warning about the difficulties the upper Liard River posed caused them to come up with a new plan. They would take jobs as available locally. The furthest thing from their minds was that this change of plans would lead to spending the rest of their lives in the Nahanni country.

I told you about their courtship earlier when Bill and I visited last year. It takes a very special person to agree to move to such an isolated remote wilderness to start married life. They lived in a small cabin on the stretch of the Liard River known as the Long Reach and then ran a trading post for 10 years at Netla just upstream from Nahanni Butte. During this period two children were born - one in 1945 and the other in 1948.

Dick is a wonderful story teller and held us under his spell as he told of their lives in Nahanni Country. I think Dick is an excellent reader of people and he quickly realized how thrilled we were to be in his home and to hear his stories firsthand. Eventually our conversation turned to Albert Faille, whose name is synonymous with the Nahanni River. At the time of our visit the Turners had known Albert for almost 40 years.. Since moving to Nahanni Butte he saw Faille even more frequently as he would stop in on his way up the Nahanni and again on his return home to Fort Simpson.

I provided you with details about Faille's life at the point Bill and I visited Vera last year so will not repeat the things Dick discussed that have already been shared with you.

Dick continues to marvel at the number of times Albert survived being dumped in The Nahanni River and made it to shore. I will share a couple of these stories later on.

We wished we had a week to listen to Dick. His life as a trapper, barge runner, trading post operator, and a pilot in this remote part of Canada marks him as one of Canada's true pioneers. It was such a treasured honour to meet the Turners.

As we said our good byes, and as further of evidence of their kindness, Vera thrust a warm sweater into Grandma's hands.

“The evenings and mornings can get quite cold. You will be glad you have it. Keep it for the whole trip and just mail it back when you get home.”

I will now introduce you to another significant pioneer revealed in the mosaic of fascinating characters in Patterson's book - Poole Field. He knew Jack LaFlair, Albert Faille, R.M. Patterson, Dick Turner and the Kraus's. All of their lives were interwoven and shared many experiences together. They are all part of the mystery and intrigue of the Nahanni country.

Poole was associated with some of the stories that were foundational to the legendary Nahanni mystique. Putting ourselves in his shoes we can imagine the excitement he felt leaving Manitoba at the age of nineteen to travel to B.C. to join the North West Mounted Police. What a dream fulfilled. The blood of many young people would have been stirred at the prospect of accepting this opportunity - the opportunity to go into the wilds of the Canadian North. This was 1898, the beginning of the Great Gold Rush.

Within two years he took his discharge. I wonder why? Certainly not because the North was not to his liking. Perhaps he didn't like the restrictions and discipline imposed upon him. Perhaps he envied the freedom experienced by the prospectors and the trappers who scoured and searched out the secret wild places in search of an illusive dream. A dream they probably couldn't put a finger on but when called upon to give an answer relied on the old chestnut - “Search for gold”.

Deep down they sensed it was not gold. It was freedom, answerable to no man, immersion in pristine wilderness. This was the true gold to which their souls hungered. A feeling of escaping the entrapment of civilization - renewing their touchstone with an ancient fellowship.

Having drank from the waters of the North he could never return to urban life. Without knowing the details of the paths he took during the next twelve years, it is known that he was familiar with the north. He trapped, hunted, prospected and traded.. He set up trading posts at the junction of the Ross and Pelly rivers, operated trading posts in Whitehorse on the Yukon River, and at Nahanni Butte. He travelled the Mackenzie River, lived in Dawson City and bushwhacked ancient aboriginal trails, and likely set foot where no white person had gone before.

He was gregarious and liked. Equally at home in white and aboriginal communities. He spoke Cree and Slavey fluently. Some of the men associated with the Nahanni were renowned for their backwoods skills and for their ability to survive alone in challenging wilderness settings. Dick Turner knew them. He witnessed their skills firsthand, including the amazing Albert Faille and Gus Kause. Dick was no slouch himself. So when he said Poole was the best, one has to listen. The Indians he associated with paid tribute to his skills.. Another person who spoke highly of Poole was Fenley Hunter. I will introduce you to him in more detail later. Fenley Hunter travelled up the Nahanni in 1928, the same year that Patterson and Mathew went up. Fenley met Poole Field in Fort Simpson at the start of his trip and had long visits with him when he got back to Fort Simpson. Concerning Poole he said:

“The best man in all this country” and “I talked much with Poole Field who is the most interesting Northern man I have ever met.”

High praise indeed.

Because Grandma and I have taken long trips on the Yukon River and on the remote Pelly River, it is easier for us to envision his life. We loved these adventures. It is almost certain that we saw fewer humans on ours trips than would have been the case for Poole Field as by the time we took our trip the gold rush was long over. These memories we treasure forever. They involve tales yet to be shared with you in perhaps another book.

In 1905 Poole, with a small group of native friends, travelled overland through rugged wilderness to reach the Nahanni River and went downstream until he reached Nahanni Butte. Shortly afterwards he began trading there.

Do you remember Clifford Taylor telling me, when I was a teenager, about the grisly finding of two brothers beheaded at Deadman’s Valley? Well the two brothers had disappeared around the time, likely a short time before, Poole arrived on the scene. Details differ a little in terms of what people remembered but most agreed that in 1907 Poole was part of the search party who found the decapitated bodies.

Remember Poole had been a member of the North West Mounted Police. I wonder if he thought this might be a case of murder? How else would their heads be missing, never to be found? Then to add to their suspicion they found a written note on a split sled runner: “We have found a fine prospect.”

Let me digress for a moment. Of course the Nahanni community debated among themselves - did they find gold and were murdered for it? The mystery continued to be debated for decades. Some began to speculate that other amazing stories, seemingly unrelated to the mysteries of the Nahanni, might be related to the murders of the McLeod brothers. It is what today you would call “conspiracy theories”. It is the way legends grow and don’t suffer easy deaths.

Let me tell you a remarkable story that led to a conspiracy theory speculating a relationship to one famous murderer to the Nahanni mysteries. I hope you find it interesting and not simply a distraction from our story. It is about one of the most famous manhunts in Canadian history. It took place in 1931. The name of the murderer was Albert Johnson or was he hiding behind an assumed name? He was labelled “The Mad Trapper” by the media . It may be a case that Donald Trump would have called “fake” news. In the media’s frenzy for sensationalism they got it wrong. Everyone directly involved in the case saw him as intelligent, having indomitable endurance, being resilient, resourceful, calm and collected, and having the ability to pull off feats that even the aboriginal trackers thought impossible.

The police were aided by aboriginal trackers and dog teams. This was the first time in Canadian history where radio was used and where a bush pilot aided in the hunt. The famous “Wop” May provided air search and transported needed food and other supplies to the hunters. The mad trapper had to carry everything - could not start a fire to warm himself when the weather plummeted to 50 or more below as the smoke would be a give away to his position. He couldn’t shoot an animal for food as the shot would be heard miles away. Instead he had to snare squirrels. Can you imagine the disadvantage of not being able to be out on the open lakes or rivers where the going was easier because at any moment the bush plane might appear from over a hill and spot you. Trappers in the area, who best knew the rugged territory, offered their assistance in the manhunt.

All involved in the manhunt had begrudging admiration for his tricks. He often backtracked on his own trail for miles and at an appropriate spot jump off the trail and from a hidden vantage point watched his pursuers go past following his tracks. He was known to get into the midst of a caribou herd where he could take off the cumbersome snowshoes and crunch low to not be spotted from the air and walked fast. Any footprints he made was immediately obliterated by the caribou.

The whole world followed the chase hour by hour due to the radio commentary. Terrified wives of trappers fled their remote cabins in case the killer, who had already killed a police officer,

might try to take refuge in their cabin and hold them ransom or worse.

What a bizarre, incredulous chase over unbelievably harsh, rugged country in bone-chilling temperatures. He came so close, against all odds, to escaping the posse. Johnson, the Mad Trapper, undertook an almost miraculous climb over a mountain divide that no one, including the aboriginal trackers, believed possible at that time of year. What a fate of ill-fortune for him.

First because he made his own snowshoes, it left its own peculiar or distinct print. Secondly an aboriginal person came across his track miles from the nearest settlement and reported it to the authorities. What is the odds of this happening? What appeared as a sure get-a-way turned into a wild shootout where he was killed.

Now how could this remarkable story get tied into the unsolved Nahanni mystery. Dick North was a popular author of books about the north including his book about the Mad Trapper. People, including the police and Dick North himself, were curious as to the real identity of Albert Johnson. Curious about his history.

He was known to have travelled close, if not actually in the Nahanni Country. Dick North usually researched his topics well - that is one of the things that made his writings popular. The more he delved into the Johnson story the more North thought it possible that Johnson was involved in the mysterious deaths in the Nahanni country. There were many other unexplained disappearances besides that of the McLeod brothers.

Could Johnson be a serial killer responsible for these legendary bizarre disappearances and deaths of those entering the Nahanni. By this time everyone realized the Nahanni Indians were no longer living there and were not under suspicion. Johnson had demonstrated to the world his uncanny, almost supernatural skills to survive under most extreme wilderness conditions. The Nahanni - large - empty of people would be just the place to meet his need to be separate from humans. If any one could survive the challenges of the Nahanni it would be him. With his skills it would be simple to stalk and kill those who dared enter his domain.

Consider this too. Johnson was said to have a fetish about gold teeth. When he was killed he had in his possession, of all things, two gold dental bridges, that didn't belong to him. It had to be a fetish. Why else would he take gold bridges from the mouth of others. Certainly not with their permission. His fetish for gold teeth makes him a natural candidate. If he was after gold filling he would not want to leave a calling card. Removing the heads and taking them back to his lair or camouflaged, hidden shelter was the perfect set-up to carefully extract the gold fillings.

Did the McLeod brothers have gold fillings? That is the thousand dollar question. Remember this was during the gold rush fever. Dentists had already, from previous gold rushes, found gold to be a popular dental filling. I have not come across any evidence that anyone bothered to

inquire. It would not be top on their list of questions. Don't forget the McLeod brothers were not the only ones to be found minus their heads in the Nahanni. Now for argument sake, if one or more had gold fillings and the others did not, it would make sense to take their heads in every case. Otherwise one might put two and two together if only those with a gold filling had their heads removed. Likewise if only the gold fillings were taken it becomes obviously someone killed or came across them after their death.

North's theory makes for entertaining reading. The bottom line - it is speculation - unlikely at best. It remains a mystery today - both the identity of the Mad Trapper and what actually happened to the McLeod brothers.

Dick Turner, Gus Kraus, and others concluded it was wild animals (bears) that carted the heads away. I have read many instances of dead bodies being found in the woods. Some believed to have been killed by bears. Yet, except for the Nahanni, I don't recall stories of headless corpses. What do you think?

Poole Field had been a member of the North West Mounted Police and he was one of the party that found the bodies. What did he think? I don't know if he ever ventured an opinion. However Poole was involved in another gruesome finding - yes another headless corpse.

I have not found many details about Poole's life in the north. There are gaps in the time lines. To make matters worse the little written material I came across seems muddled in terms of dates and details. It would make a fascinating tale if some author researched his life, especially if the author found additional primary sources to write his story. I for one would buy it.

It seems he left the Nahanni Butte the same year he found the McLeod bodies and returned to the Ross and Pelly River. It also appears he was an advocate for an overland route to the Yukon by way of the Nahanni and it may be he went back and forth before settling at Nahanni Butte. In 1908 he married a native woman, Kitty Tom, and started a family. In 1912 his friend Billy Atkinson had married Mary Lafferty and she worked at Poole's trading post.

In 1916 a terrible tragedy. A flue epidemic swept the area and took the lives of Poole's wife, Kitty Tom, and one of their two daughters. One report states that Mary Lafferty, previously married to Atkinson, now is married to Poole. Sounds like an interesting soap opera story but terribly muddled in terms of time lines.

With this in mind and not wanting to confuse you with too many details I get to the chase. Martin Jorgenson spent a couple of years looking for gold on the Nahanni. The last person to see him alive was a native returning home on the Nahanni River. Martin gave him a letter that he delivered to Poole's wife. The note was short but oh so intriguing.

“I have found good stuff come to the Nahanni as soon as you can.”

What more was to be said? This was not a rumour. It was from the horse's mouth. Unfortunately Jorgenson's partner came looking for him and found his burnt cabin but no sign of Jorgenson. Perhaps assuming Jorgenson had moved on to another site, a strange assumption given there was a loaded rifle and revolver left behind, he didn't report it to the police.

When Poole arrived on the scene he found the burnt cabin and investigated more closely. He found an ax about 50 yards from the cabin. Nearby was a gun and the body. Like in the case of the McLeod brothers, there was a body but no head. Remember Poole was an ex-policeman. Looking the scene over carefully he concluded that Jorgenson was ambushed. He believed that an invader was in the cabin and waited to kill him as he rounded some spruce trees. The cabin, he believed was robbed and set on fire.

In 1916 Corporal Churchill came to investigate the case. He exhumed the body for examination but was forced to close the case because the disturbance of evidence made it impossible to know what actually happened.

This case on top of the McLeod brothers combined to create the legends of the Nahanni. Poole was as close as anyone, perhaps more so than anyone else, an early witness to the events.

Poole was a first hand witness to a couple of other strange events. In 1921 Poole and his wife, along with May Lafferty, a relative of Mary, were hunting. May had been acting strangely for some time. When they were not paying attention May wandered off. She was not to be found. This was strange in that Poole was such a great outdoorsman you would think he was capable of following her tracks. He enlisted the help of a nearby native group camping nearby who were expert trackers and together with Poole tried to locate her.

Tracks, that would never be noticed by the untrained eye, were picked up from time to time. She led them through difficult territory. The mosquitoes were terrible. Up and down steep cliffs - places no one would ever think she could go. The trail grew cold and then would be picked up again. Imagine day after day and never catching up to her. Never a glimpse of her. Finally after nine days they were forced to give up. Eventually they named a creek after her, just short of Deadmans Valley, where they had tracked her - May Creek.

During the winter of 1922 Poole and three others were overwintering across from the Hot Springs on the Nahanni. Two other trappers had a nearby cabin. One trapper, John O'Brian, on January 27th told his partner that he was going to check his trap line and he would be back in eight to ten days. When he didn't show up two of Poole's party volunteered to look for him. They found him in a sitting position - completely frozen.

During these years Poole operated a trading post in competition with Jack LaFlair. Although competitors there was no animosity between them. However there was one interesting customer

that patronized Poole's trading post. It was Yukon Fisher - an outlaw. He came in periodically to buy shells and always paid with coarse gold nuggets.

It would be interesting to know what type of relationship would evolve, under normal conditions, when an outlaw deals with an ex-policeman. We will never know. Yukon Fisher disappeared. His bones were eventually found in 1927 on the same creek where the McLeod's bodies were found. What is it about that creek?

I am not sure when Poole left the Nahanni Butte. He was there in 1936 and likely left soon after. The last years of his life was spent living in that most famous town of the North - Dawson City. What a place - what a setting - what a history! Grandma and I have visited Dawson City by kayak, bicycle, and by car. Grandma, I and Pepi have stood at the top of the Midnight Dome overlooking Dawson City and the magnificent Yukon River. What memories! It is a tale for another time.

Poole became stricken with cancer and went to Vancouver for treatment. The treatment was unsuccessful and he was honoured by the police at his burial site. If you look up Poole Field (Nahanni) on the internet you can see his burial on YouTube. I found it interesting. What would this man who had spent 50 years in the north want written on his tombstone. I doubt he chose the exact wording. I suspect it represented the thoughts of his friends and how they saw him.

It reads POOLE FIELD 1880 TO 1949 - LORD OF NAHANNI -

It doesn't seem to me he would have referred to himself this way. However I have no doubt the NAHANNI held his heart as no other spot.

His name deservedly is a critical component of the Nahanni story.

TACKLING THE DREADED SPLITS

The next morning we headed up the Nahanni - the dreaded Splits. I vividly recall Patterson's description of this stretch of fast flowing water that broke into almost indiscernible channels. He described the Splits as being a couple of miles across and hearing "the thudding lash of sweepers - trees that have been undercut by the floods into the river, but which still cling with their roots to the bank, lashing and beating at the water which drives through their branches."

He added: "It is easy to imagine the maze of islands in between. Through this network of waterways I worked the canoe all that day, backing down out of impracticable channels to seek for some way around, sometimes crossing the heads of the side chutes and sometimes being swept down them."

Patterson's description brought back memories when Grandma and I were capsized by sweepers in the Rocky Mountains on the Saskatchewan River. I realized that the Nahanni Splits would be many times worse than those on the Saskatchewan that almost cost us our lives.

I now had a few hundred miles under my belt with the jet boat but this would be the hardest test to date - putting whatever river reading skills I had to their supreme test.

Fortunately the first stretch of the Nahanni is slow for no sooner had we got underway than the motor conked out. We began drifting downstream and Hans worked quickly on the problem. Once again it was bad gas. The gas in the barrels we got from the Nahanni Butte had even more water in it than did the ones from Ft. Liard. At the Turners I had mentioned the problem with the gas we had received in Ft. Liard and he had replied that this was one of the elementary precautions a person had to look out for in river travel and even more so for aircraft. He added that a number of accidents had occurred when due diligence had not been taken. Hans had nodded his head in agreement. Having spent all of my life in Edmonton, this kind of problem had been outside the scope of my experience.

A few pages ago I mentioned I would return to the adventures of Ranulph Fiennes. You learned that they ran into a life-threatening experience on the Liard River when their motor conked out and they were dragged into a drift pile. Well here at Nahanni Butte they experienced the same problem we faced. Apparently even the British military had not been prepared for the problem of water in the gas.

A long but interesting quote from his book is as follows:

“One of the 45-gallon drums was from the little government store at the Butte and we found it to contain one third water and two thirds petrol. The storeman was unrepentant and said it was the suppliers' fault, not his.

If a mere droplet of water reached the petrol intake of a motor, it would stop and quite possibly lead to a capsized. Brian Doke told us that many riverboat pilots had been drowned through using watered-down petrol and bush pilots had crashed because of similarly treated Avgas fuel.

Father Mary had also warned us of this danger and given us his black floppy felt hat. 'Always filter your gas through my hat,' he said gravely, 'or you will regret it. First wet the hat well in the river, then pour away. You will be surprised how much water remain in my hat when the gas goes through.'”

So I guess things have not changed in terms of quality control. Hans was getting to be an old hand at making the necessary corrections. Although we had a filter, there was just too much

water in the gas and as far as I could tell overwhelmed the filter. Hans, as I recall, did try some pre-filtering as well.

I felt sort of strange, knowing we were at last headed up the Nahanni. After all the dreaming about this river, it hardly seemed possible that we were here. In 1927 when Faille and Patterson became the first Caucasians to ascend the river, the official maps showed only a jotted line heading off into a large space of white paper. That was only about four decades ago. Its hard to believe that this magnificent river, with its current world wide reputation, had not then even been mapped.

As mentioned it was fairly easy going at first. It is slow meandering, almost going in oxbowl circles for 20 km and then comes the Splits. Having had problems with the gas, although that seemed under control and behind us, the gas problem was still in my head and only served to heightened my anxiety as we entered the Splits, a thirty mile stretch of water.

Patterson proved to be right in that the water literally splits into myriad of channels and I could understand why he as well as others have written about the difficulty of picking the right channels. Some times even the main channels were very narrow and had more than their share of sweepers. There were times when I would see a large sweeper that from a distance seemed to bridge the channel. Each time we managed to get past these obstacles we fortunately found larger opening to another channel. Not only was it challenging to navigate but in the back of my mind was the worry that water in the fuel might bring us to a disastrous stop. With no power comes no control. The current would take us backward and would sooner or later, likely sooner, crash us into either the sweepers or the log jams.

Although my mind was fully focused on picking the right channels, once through the Splits, I couldn't help but think of Patterson and Faille trying this back in 1928. Faille tried towing Patterson with his three and a half horse motor. When they got to the infamous Splits they found it too hard going. So they parted company and each managed as best they could, leap-frogging past each other as they made their way through the Splits. Patterson in his canoe told of having to jump out in waist deep water fighting the current, trying to keep from being swept off his feet in some of the bad spots. A canoe perhaps. Could I do this with a heavily loaded jet-boat. No way would I be able to hold it against the current. Didn't even want to think about it.

On his second trip in 1928 with his partner Gordon Mathew he brought along a small outboard motor to help in the fast water. He too ran into motor problems. I don't recall him blaming bad gas. I think it was more that motors were less reliable back then. I couldn't help but smile as I recalled one incident where the motor failed him at a point in the Splits where he needed it most.

He jumped out to hold the canoe and his supplies. He still got swept back downstream before getting it under control. They finally were forced to abandoned the engine and cache a 1000 lbs of gear up a tree. In his understandable anger and frustration he blurted out:

“The devil take me if ever I fool with an engine again in a wild country.” “So we shall travel as the Lord intended men to travel in the north west - pole, tracking & paddle.”

Fenley Hunter, who I said I would tell you about later on, agreed with Patterson. He said they had a hard time in the splits and he concluded that the continuous series of islands, sloughs, channels, and fast water made the river unfit for gas boats.

Our jet boat was doing well and with no further gas problems we began to relax and enjoy the scenery. Soon the Hot Springs came into sight along with the cabin belonging to Gus and Mary Kraus.

The odour of sulphur was noticeable. The British military man, Ranulph Fiennes, stated that when they got close to the Hot Springs he claimed he could smell the sulphur pools from five miles away if the wind was right.

This seems like an exaggeration. However I know if the wind is right smells travel a long distance. Chad and I once smelled the smoke from a forest fire and ran worriedly up the hill behind our house to see where it was coming from. It turned out it was from a forest fire a great distance away in Quebec. Fenley Hunter said he could smell the sulphur about a mile before he arrived at the hot springs.

Because Gus Kraus had long been associated with the hot springs it was said he was known by the Dene as “Stinking Water Man.” I wonder if the early tales of the Nahanni Country, including being a place of evil spirits accompanied by evil smells, might have had its origin from the sulphuric odours.

When John Colter, the first white person to explore what is now known as Yellowstone National Park, brought back tales of geysers, steam erupting from the interior of the earth accompanied by the smell of sulphur, he was ridiculed by statements such as “Colter’s hades.” Who knows how myths get started?

We had come about 68 km from the Nahanni Butte. Wow - over a third of the way to the Falls.

We were hoping the Krauses were home. It seems strange to actually be meeting pioneers of the North Country. I had read so much about people like the Turners, Albert Faille, Gus and Mary Kraus that it seemed like really stepping back into the pages of history. Not only were these people still alive but living in conditions much the same as they did decades ago.

They have lived at this beautiful oasis since 1940. He was born in Chicago in 1898 and came north to the Peace River country in 1917 and then to the Nahanni region in 1934. Gus, along with Albert Faille and Dick Turner, know this country as well as any one. Gus has spent his

lifetime prospecting and trapping in this vast wilderness. Mary is a Dene born near Fort Liard in 1912. They met when Gus was fighting a forest fire near Nahanni Butte. She is a skilled hunter, trapper and able to skin and butcher meat equal to anyone. She often travelled at his side. They adopted a native boy, Mickey.

This was a great spot for anyone craving remoteness yet habitable. Game was plentiful, the long summer hours, the warming influence of the hot springs extended the growing season. The native community was said to have visited this spot for centuries to take advantage of the relaxing and healing powers of the hot springs. We were told that the temperature was a little over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. What more could a weary traveller with sore muscles ask for? Many of the trees had been cut for fires leaving meadows that attracted moose and bear.

It was Mickey, seventeen years of age, who was waiting as we docked. He invited us into their home. Mary welcomed and offered us a cup of tea. I was hoping to meet Gus as well and asked about him. Disappointing news! He was in hospital at Ft. Simpson. Just a few days ago Gus, Mary and Mickey were returning from Fort Simpson with their next winter's supply of food and goods. A Canadian military group had been doing exercises on the Nahanni and as they were coming down the river they capsized. Gus came to their rescue and possibly saved their lives. However in doing so Gus swamped his own boat. As they were going overboard, Gus threw a blanket to Mary to help her stay afloat. Somehow Mickey managed to stay with the swamped, but still upright boat, and bailed it out sufficiently to allow him to rescue his parents.

Unfortunately Gus developed pneumonia as a result of the dunking in the cold water and was recovering in Ft. Simpson. In rescuing the soldiers they lost all of their supplies. It was with considerable consternation that I learned the military were unwilling to reimburse them for their loss.

We had a very nice visit with Mary and Micky and were getting ready to embark when another boat appeared. We exchanged greetings. If I recall correctly he was an off-duty RCMP or police officer who was taking a niece, who had never been on the Nahanni before, to see Virginia Falls. So they and our party would be the only two boats on the river. This was even more deserted than when Patterson and Mathew went up river in 1928. Of course the Kraus's didn't build their home at the Hot Springs until a decade later.

As I took another panoramic view my mind turned back to Raymond Patterson. Following his 1927 adventure into the Nahanni country, he returned with his good friend Gordon Matthews in 1928 to spend a year trapping and searching for gold. Patterson wanted to have Gordon come with him on his first trip to the Nahanni but he had recently married and wasn't available.

On July 3, 1928 they reached the Hot Springs. They had planned to make a base camp on the Flat River which is about 100 miles from Nahanni Butte. However with the difficulties getting through the Splits and the problem with the outboard motor, it took them much longer than

anticipated to reach the hot springs. Concluding it would not be possible to make the Flat River in time to prepare a winter base camp they decided to winter at Deadmen's Valley. After taking time out for a relaxing bath in the springs, they made a cache at the Hot Springs so they could travel lighter as they tried to get through the First Canyon and on to Deadmen's Valley. This would be very near the spot we were now standing.

Dick Turner told us that George's Riffles, which lay just ahead, were very bad at high water. Mickey now advised that the river was running a bit high so we should be careful. Of course it would not be anything like during the spring flooding when waves became much higher and grinding logs and debris whipping through the canyon were constant hazards. Patterson in his book had stated that the water through the first canyon was the strongest on the Nahanni River between Nahanni Butte and the Flat River which is about 20 miles from Virginia Falls.

When I had planned the trip the three places of greatest concern was the Splits, the First Canyon and the Figure Eight Rapids just downstream from Virginia Falls. We had come through the hallowing Splits without great difficulty. I now felt the normal jitters I usually experience before approaching unknown rapids.

George's Riffles would be the first serious set of rapids to test the jet boat since the boat railing had been added. Having heard of so many who had experienced trouble in these rapids we were anxious to get through them and on to Deadmen's Valley. There was a cabin at Deadmen's Valley where we planned to stay for the night.

The river was very fast but the jet-boat didn't seem stressed by the demands. I could now see the whitecaps ahead. The river was indeed higher than usual for this time of year. Gaining entrance into the canyon we came face to face with a small island. The main current goes to the left, if you are looking upstream, and there is a small channel to the right which is usually very low.

However it was now full and contained much less white water than the main channel. I made an instant decision to try this channel thinking the jet boat, not having a outboard motor hanging below the surface, should be able to pass through.

We just got past the down stream head of the island when I felt a little bump but nothing serious. Then suddenly the motor roared - there was no power - we started to drift backwards. This was extremely dangerous because we would be swept into the canyon wall and capsized. Everyone sprung into action. I jumped into thigh deep current but was able to keep my balance and with the help of Carl pulled the boat to shore.

No one knew what had gone wrong or what damage there might be to the boat. The motor seemed fine but with the boat in the water we couldn't make a close inspection. The laborious task of taking everything from the boat, including the 45 gallon barrels of gas, was time-consuming. It had to be done if we were to have any hope of getting the boat on shore for

inspection. Having completed this task, it was still a struggle to get the boat safely on shore.

Now we had to find a way to raise the stern of the jet boat to allow us to examine the grill that housed the propellers..

It was amazing how quickly it was becoming dark. We were in what is called the First Canyon. The limestone canyon walls reach a height of over 3500 feet above the river. Imagine a canyon higher than the Grand Canyon and perhaps a quarter mile or so across. These walls block off the sun except when it is almost overhead. What a difference. Having been used to the long summer hours of light we were now forced to drop everything to make a camp for the night. Carl gathered firewood so Jean could prepare supper and Hans and I set up a lean-to shelter.

The creeping shadows of darkness made for interesting speculation. There seemed to be indents or eye-like sockets on the canyon walls. We wondered if any of these could be caves. Later we learned that this area has significant caves, including the quite famous Grotte Valerie.

Vera had been right. Nights get chilly - especially in the canyon. Sitting around the evening fire trying to keep warm, Jean was looking quite miserable. This was unusual for Jean as she is not the type to cave into pressure or to become depressed. I made my way over to her side to see what was wrong and she said she was in agony over an abscessed tooth. She asked me to get some stones that could be heated in the fire and used as makeshift heating pads. Jean put in a very bad night but fortunately by morning the pain was not as bad.. She still had episodes where the tooth acted up but at least it wasn't causing constant pain.

I also spent an anxious night. We didn't know what was wrong with the boat nor did it appear that the prospects of being able to fix it, even if we found out what was wrong, were very good. Even if rescued, how would we get the boat repaired. Where is the nearest garage? Fort Simpson or more likely Fort Nelson hundreds of miles away. This was decades before the credit card era. Our bank account was low to non-existent. There was no way we could afford a jet boat but took a loan with the expectation we could resell it without suffering a loss. Who would buy it in the Nahanni Country - even at a fire sale price? What a nightmare!

In the morning as firewood was being gathered a sobering find added to our worries. Fresh large - very large - bear tracks. We scratched our heads wondering how on earth a bear could reach this tiny island surrounded by high canyon walls and swift rapids. We knew, without saying a word, that this was much too small an island to be shared with a bear. However given the size of the island we were sure he must have left as mysteriously as he had come during the night. Although there was always the possibility he had holed up in some brush.

The mood at breakfast was solemn. There was no way off the island without a boat. On top of this we now had evidence that a bear visited during the night and us without a gun. Carl was later to confess to me that he was sure we were going to die there. Jean's abscessed tooth was

the icing on the cake. No wonder the gloomy atmosphere.

Hans, as we were finishing a second cup of coffee, asked why I had decided to go ahead with the trip when we had so little time to learn the ways of jet boating. This question would likely never have been raised if we had not continued to get in trouble - stuck on sandbars, gas problems, and now this. It was a good question. I explained that when we planned the trip we expected the boat to have been finished by early summer and would have taken at least one weekend trip as well as day trips. The date for departure was as late as we could possibly make it. Carl's vacation time and Bill's start of the university year would not allow a later date. I had almost cancelled the trip but when I found out Hans, with his mechanical abilities, was willing to join the trip, I had not wanted to disappoint everyone by pulling the plug on the trip.

This brought a laugh from Hans. He said:

“We are all here because we wanted to see the Nahanni but are also here for different reasons we have not spoken about. You didn't postpone the trip because you did not want to disappoint Carl and Bill and I decided to go along because I was worried about the dangers of the river and Carl's safety.”

He made a good point. To be honest I don't know what my decision would have been if Hans had not asked to come. As mentioned before, not knowing that Hans was coming on board, I had planned to have a serious talk with Bill. If he expressed some comfort with mechanical matters and a real desire to proceed, I suspect I would have agreed to do so.

If I had a couple of trial trips under my belt it might have made all the difference. For one thing I would not have tried to keep the heavily laden boat high in the water but would have proceeded much more slowly downstream which would have significantly reduced the gas consumption and likely avoided becoming so firmly stuck on the sandbars. Learning that the automobile motor was more than a match for the strong current I would have proceeded upstream at a slower pace. That would have avoided having to make the split moment decision that took me up the wrong side of the island. However that didn't happen and here we are. All this is speculation.

I am jarred back into the here and now. To make matters worse, I remember the exact date. It was August 22, 1969. Our 10th wedding anniversary. Under different circumstances this would have been very romantic. An island in a beautiful Grand Canyon type location - on a pristine, wild, remote river.

Jean was forced to grin when she realized the irony of the situation. I had deliberately led her to the opposite side of the island and when we were alone I kissed her and whispered “Happy Anniversary”. We laughed. We both said we loved each other and then had to turn to the task at hand. I offered a silent prayer: “Lord don't let this be our last anniversary.”

As I glanced upward at the towering canyon walls, craning my neck to do so, the grandeur and the immensity of the place was inescapable. At the time, I didn't realize it but this was a moment of truth - a moment of authentic nature experience. Who has not looked out on spectacular natural scenes where your breath was taken away? This was different - much different. This was truly humbling - existential. Yes the beauty and the majesty of the place registered- subliminally. What really registered was our smallness - nature so overpowering - so in control. This canyon here thousands of years before us and would be here thousands of years after us. Whatever our fate - insignificant in this domain.

I suspect when a person gets swept up in a flash flood or other forces of nature and their life flashes before them, the beauty of the place is not what grabs their attention. Our anxiety, our fears, our sense of powerlessness, superseded any aesthetic sense.

I poured water on the embers and got to the task at hand. I don't recall the details but Hans thought of some way we could hoist the boat up on its side. Having done this, we still had no idea what was wrong. Hans was trying to think the process through when I, the least mechanical of the group, noticed a stone lodged in the propeller. I brought this to Hans attention and he looked at me with somewhat of an amazed look on his face. Of all people to discover what had gone wrong, I would have been the last person that he, or for that matter myself, would have guessed to have done so. The stone had broken a couple of cross members of the grill and lodged inside the propeller making it impossible for the boat to be powered by the motor.

Hans set himself to the task of taking a piece of metal and heating it over a fire so that it could be bent into a shape to substitute for the broken cross member. Unfortunately there was only one suitable piece of metal which meant there was still a gap due to the missing second cross member. The opening was small and I doubted any stone small enough to get through would be able to jam the propeller. I knew I would not be foolish enough to venture full speed into such shallow water with its accompanying golf size and bigger stones again.

We managed to maneuver the boat back down the current and around the point of the island and up the main channel. I started the motor and the propeller worked. Everyone lent a hand to reload the boat. None of us relished the thought of spending another night on the island where the bear might visit again and perhaps this time with more serious intentions.

As we broke camp, Hans wrote a short note about our experience and put it in a bottle which he placed in a hollow of a tree.

A major problem remained. A cold motor would certainly stall against the fast current and large waves. The gear arrangement on the jet boat had no neutral spot. You either went ahead or went in reverse. It would be much easier if there was a neutral gear so we could remain stationary while warming up the motor. There was at most a couple hundred feet near the shoreline where the water was deep enough for the boat to float. At both ends of this stretch of water were rocks.

Once we felt ready and reached the obstacles we would be forced to turn into the haystack waves and fierce current. Once in the main current there would be no turning back. If the motor stalled it spelled almost certain disaster. The water races through this main channel and the full force of the Nahanni deflects off the cliff wall and rebounds into the left bank.

We tied a rope to both ends of the boat. Carl and Jean stayed on shore each holding one of the ropes to prevent the boat from straying into the fast water. Hans was in the back of the boat attending the motor and I up front with the throttle and steering mechanisms. Several minutes were taken as I put the boat into forward and slowly made my way forward as far as I dared without hitting the rocks and then into reverse. Back and forth until we were comfortable that the motor was warmed up.

I backed the boat as far as I could before the final launch and Jean and Carl jumped aboard.. We held our collective breath as I gained the speed required to burst through into the rapids - the moment of no return. Just as I was about to turn for broke, a sudden ominous feeling came over me and I knew something was wrong. I yelled; “No!” and swung back towards shore. Carl jumped – landed on shore with the rope in hand. He yanked on the rope and fell backward. It was one of those moments you would have liked to have on camera, There was a priceless look on his face of surprise and shock as he held the rope that was no longer attached to the boat. Nevertheless in all the excitement we managed to beach the boat.

I was now in the untenable and unenviable position of trying to explain my actions. I have had similar experiences before where I somehow seemed to know something to be true but not according to any rational standards. Many years later I read the writings of John Muir who became my favourite naturalist. He spent years in the wilderness and on different occasions had premonitions and other experiences that he described as an unseen but felt presence, perhaps a guardian angel, or perhaps an inward mystical experience. Although he was reluctant to discuss these experiences in public, he had full confidence in their validity. He never took these “intuitions” to be any more infallible than his other senses which he knew could also on occasion deceive him. Nevertheless he trusted them sufficiently that he rarely failed to act upon them.

It is sometimes awkward, if not embarrassing, to try to explain this to a person who has not had similar experiences. I simply said I felt confident that something was wrong and made the decision I did. Neither Jean or Carl said anything. Hans was quite angry - convinced I had lost my nerve. Of course I had to concede to myself that he may have been right. All external evidence pointed to this. I had not felt anything physically wrong with the boat and Hans said he was next to the motor and heard nothing amiss. Yet I now felt this unexplainable but peaceful spirit within me as if assuring myself that I was not mistaken.

It was getting dusk and Hans agreed it was too late to try again as the light conditions were deteriorating. No one was happy to have to spend another night on the island. I am not sure any one spent a good night. Between keeping an ear open for any sound in the dark that might be

evidence of a bear making its way to us and worrying about getting off the island made getting to sleep a bit of a challenge.

The next morning Jean cooked breakfast and we were getting set to start the forward/backward procedure to warm up the motor. Hans didn't say anything to me but I could almost sense his glare of don't you dare chicken out this time. I certainly couldn't blame him as I would have felt the same thing if the positions had been reversed. Then suddenly a word from him that lifted my spirits. Hans simply said: "You were right, Howard. There is water in the filter."

He got the water out of the filter and filtered some gas into a barrel. We laughed nervously as we doubled checked that the rope Carl would be holding was securely tied to the boat. Then we painstakingly went through the procedures of warming up the motor. Once the motor seemed ready Jean and Carl jumped aboard.

Again hearts were in our mouth as I gave full throttle and turned into the big waves. The boat bounced in the waves but made good forward progress. The canyon is said to be about 14 miles long but it didn't seem to take as long as I expected to exit the canyon. The jet boat, if nothing else, is fast. Our spirits much improved. Following our exit from the canyon and the rapids, our eyes feasted on the complete change of scenery. The valley opened up and the Nahanni took on a peaceful glow of a wilderness lake. We were on the water for sometime keeping an eye open for the cabin. Then we came to another canyon that was beautiful in its own right and continued on. It soon became obvious to me that we were well past Deadmen's Valley and had missed the cabin.

I thought we must be close to Pulpit Rock and was tempted to keep on going. However I knew that the others were still shaken from the canyon experience and it was not fair to keep going when I knew we were well past the cabin. I slowed the boat and looked back at Hans. He came forward and asked if I thought we had missed the cabin. When I nodded in the affirmative he said he felt we had as well and we should turn back.

I personally think we could have made it to the Falls by keeping to deeper water where there would be little chance to suck up a stone large enough to block the propeller. However prudence dictated otherwise and I knew everyone else wanted to head back to Deadmen's Valley.

We all felt grateful to be off the island. Others much more experienced than us had ran into difficulties in the canyon.. For example Jonas Lafferty, a well known guide, and an expert canoeist once tipped there with a canoe loaded with furs returning down the Nahanni.

In the 1940's a well known and respected Dene, Ted Trendell along with Fred Sibbeston, had been prospecting for gold and silver and had a near mishap at George's Riffle.

I previously mentioned that Albert Faille had close calls on the Nahanni and that I would talk

more about them at the appropriate time. Well this is the appropriate time. Dick Turner told us as we visited with him at the mouth of the Nahanni that everyone had thought Faille had met his Waterloo in the First Canyon. Someone had found his upside down boat in the Splits and the search for him led to one of his last campsites, perhaps on the same island we had been marooned. The search party found a note written by Faille with charcoal on birch bark. It said he had swamped, lost everything and was going to try to walk out. He would have had to climb about 4000 feet to get out of the canyon before he could start back. I wouldn't have wanted to try this and I am less than half his age. Once accomplishing this he still faced terribly difficult terrain. How in the world could he do that?

The note was about 8 days old. It seemed certain he had perished. It seemed hopeless but Dick felt he had to do whatever he could. He arranged for a helicopter to take him over the river, At the brink of giving up, and by luck, they spotted him and was able to land the helicopter nearby on a sandy section.

He told Dick that a gust of wind had thrown his boat against a rocky shore and one of his two kickers stopped. He swung the boat out into the river but the boat went sideways into the rocks again and his other kicker stopped. The boat then slammed into a bolder and Faille was thrown into the water. Somehow he managed to gain the beach.

Later I read an account by Dave Wolfe who said Faille had told him he had flipped his boat in the rapids and surfaced under the over turned boat. He hung on until his feet touched bottom and he had to let go and made it to shore. The details are different but not inconsistent with Dick's recollection.

He then watched helplessly as his boat - his lifeline to safety - drifted out of sight, No provisions but fortunately he had three matches dry enough to light a fire. The fire was the difference between life and death. He was bone-chilled, soaked. The cold Nahanni waters sapped his strength. Without being able to get warm and dry out his wet clothes he wouldn't have made the night. We could appreciate that having experienced two cold nights in the canyon ourselves.

Dick asked him "But how did you keep warm the following nights with no matches." He said he dug a hole as deep as he could with a stick under a big tree each night and then covered himself with moss and then pulled his jacket over his head. By doing so he managed to get a little sleep and gain a little strength to face another day. Perhaps 10 days or more without food. Amazing - against all odds.

On another occasion in 1961, while being filmed on his trip to Virginia Falls, his outfit wallowed and filled with water in George's riffle at the top of the First Canyon and floated submerged downstream until the other two boats caught it and towed it to shore. This last experience took place two years after our experience of being marooned on the island.. Wow the tales this First Canyon could tell!

The earliest account I have come across of individuals prior to Albert Faille being forced to endure the struggle of bypassing the First Canyon was in 1931 when a party of three, which included Jack Mulholland, ran out of food. Their dire straights forced them to eat their dogs in order to survive.

Much later in life I read a book written by All Lewis in 1997 when he was 81 years old. Like me, he was writing about his experiences on the Nahanni long after the fact. I enjoyed his book. You may too. I will share with you his experience in the First Canyon or at least his arduous walk around it.

Al was from Edmonton, just like Grandma and me. His homestead neighbour was Harry Vandaele, seven years older than Al. Al considered Harry to be his idol. In 1934 Harry and a friend, Milt Campbell, decided to seek gold on the Nahanni. Like myself and Bill they canoed from Fort Nelson to the Nahanni Butte. From Nahanni Butte they took their canoe with an outboard motor and went up the Nahanni to the Flat River and returned in the Fall. They did this the next year as well but in 1936 they decided to take Harry's brother, Joe, along and try their luck at panning for gold on the Liard River. Both Harry and Milt stayed on while Joe went back to the farm in Alberta.

It was Joe - this was during the Great Depression - that told Al that labourers were paid very well at Fort Simpson and other spots along the Mackenzie River. Al had always had a desire to travel down the Mackenzie River and the news about well paying jobs helped make his decision.

With very little money, during an extreme cold spell in January, he hopped a freight train. He planned to get to Fort Nelson, wait for Spring break up and seek passage down the river to Fort Simpson - the same route Bill and I took. Stopping off at Dawson Creek he got a hotel for the night and received a telegram from his brother stating that Harry's partner Milt could not join him at Rabbit Kettle River - way up the Nahanni - to trap and prospect for the winter. If Al returned to Edmonton his brother could arrange for him to be flown in by a well-known bush-pilot to work with his childhood idol. He did so and had a great adventure facing many hardships. The problem that faced them the following Spring was the bush pilot could not take them out. They would have to build a raft and float down this dangerous river. First to the top of Virginia Falls and then build another raft below the Falls.

Needless to say they had some hairy moments. Then disaster struck when least expected. Not paying proper attention the raft, about 15 miles upstream from Deadmen's Valley, was hit broadside by a wave that flipped the raft. The raft was built with logs and on top of the logs they had built a platform to tie things down and to seat themselves. Al, who was 22 years of age, somehow managed to grab a high log on the raft, as had Harry, and both found themselves sitting on top of the overturned raft. Somehow they both had a paddle but how do you control a heavy upside down raft barrelling down a fast river? A very perilous situation. An island approached

and they tried desperately to see if they could breach the raft onshore.

Fortunately they had entered a backwater area with a slack current. Their lives were still at stake. They had to retrieve the gear tied to the platform which was upside down in the water. If the gear had come loose they were as good as dead. Waist deep in water, they dove underneath to unloosen anything they could reach. The water numbingly cold. Finally this task completed they somehow were able to upright the raft.

Harry estimated they were about 15 to 20 miles from Deadmen's Valley. This must have been near where we turned around to return to the valley. The river was much worse then. The Spring flood was upon them carrying large trees and debris - the current increasing in ferocity.

Harry said there was an old trail that led to a lookout where you could see the feared First Canyon. They made the climb and stared in disbelief at the size of the rapids and the driftwood banging into the walls and into each other. Harry was of two minds. He said the climb out and around the First Canyon, carrying whatever gear necessary for survival, would be a killer. The mosquitoes would be murderously intolerable. He said he would rather drown than be eaten alive. Al thought that going through the canyon was suicidal but didn't want to argue with his childhood idol and would comply with whatever decision he made. As he looked down at the rapids he blurted out:

"My God how did you and Milt get through that hell hole? You did it four times!" Harry softly replied: "Not the same river now."

Alone with their thoughts - finally Harry said: "I won't ask you to do it. It's a bad place down by that island. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Guess it is best to portage but I can promise you it will not be a picnic."

A picnic it wasn't! It took them to the depths of their endurance and patience. When they finally, days later, got back to the river, downstream from the canyon, they still had to build another raft and face the Splits.

Probably no one, outside of Faille, can fully appreciate what they endured.

In 1974, five years after our trip, D.H. Koester also had a harrowing experience in the First Canyon. He too didn't write his book until 40 years after the fact. Perhaps there is something about these types of experiences that one feels takes time to put into perspective before one writes about it. John Muir, my favourite naturalist, was once asked to write a book and he said when he no longer had the strength to climb trees and tall mountains - once nature had time to work into the sinews of his soul, then is the time to write.

Koester, like Grandma and myself, was from Edmonton. He too had his passions inflamed by

reading Patterson's book. He lived in an old house covered by magnificent lilacs. This brings back memories. Lilacs were a common sight in the yards of Edmontonians. Just thinking about them almost brings back the pleasant odours. It is one of Grandma's favourite shrubs.

He twigged my memory with his account of a rafting trip down the Pembina River, not too far from Edmonton. It had not been a well planned trip. He did a quick estimate of the distance from a bridge to their campground. He figure 10 miles - not more than 3 or 4 hours. Due to the meandering of the river nightfall overtook them. No sleeping or camping gear - not a pleasant night.

Grandma and I made a similar mistake. We planned an easy week-end kayak camping trip down this same river. My father was to pick us up at a bridge. The countryside was picturesque. The first evening found us at a pleasant spot to make a camp. Following one of Grandma's delicious camp meals, we sat around the fire, taking in the night stars, completely content. We hadn't a clue as to how far we had gone. Going by the hours spent on the river we speculated that three or four hours of leisurely paddling the next day would get us to the meeting place. Noon came and went. Our map was of no help - just squiggly lines of a constant meandering river. It was getting late afternoon. We had arranged for my father to pick us up around 7 pm. We had suggested 7 pm as this would allow for a final camp meal at the pull out.

Finally a house on a ridge came into view. A lady answered our knock and informed us we were less than two-thirds the way. She allowed us to use her telephone to call my father. The lady gave directions to him. I was a little embarrassed at my miscalculations. I am usually fairly good at estimating distance and time. Her husband came home and was surprised to see visitors by the way of the river. A pleasant visit.

Koester had planned the Nahanni trip for months. At the very last moment his good friend sadly announced he would not be able to come. Koester was devastated. He had dreamed of this trip for so long. This reminded me of my experience when Irv Kuch, who was also having a jet boat built, informed me he wouldn't be able to come. I too had been very disappointed. Koester's family, not knowing what had transpired, could see the dejection written all over his face. When he said the trip was off Mark, his adopted son, only twelve years of age, begged to let him replace his friend.

Of course his first reaction was that the request was too ridiculous to even consider. During the next couple of days his stepson continued to pressure him. Apparently he was comfortable outdoors, comfortable with canoes, and was athletic. Frankly I was surprised that Koester finally agreed he could come.

I too am known as a bit of dare devil and have never been seen as a risk averse person. I have taken Chad through rapids and on remote rivers when he was young as well. However I can't imagine myself taking him or Barrie at the age of twelve on a Nahanni trip unless perhaps it was

a guided expedition such as they now run on the Nahanni.

Perhaps, because Nahanni had become a National Park in 1972, and he had heard of a number of others who safely navigated the river, he may not have been seen it to be as dangerous as it was once seen.

They took a different route to get to the Nahanni. They drove by the way of Peace River and then up to Fort Simpson. This highway didn't exist when we went into the Nahanni Country but years later Grandma and I drove this remote highway too.

Koester and his stepson flew by bush pilot from Fort Simpson to above the Virginia Falls. The plan was to make it from there by canoe to Nahanni Butte. This is an amazing adventure well worth the read. I only share their story that took place in the First Canyon as this is more relevant to our adventure. He had miscalculated how close they were to the canyon and had not taken the precautions he usually did of making sure everything was tied down and to have his makeshift spray cover at the ready. To his horror the canyon rapids were suddenly staring him in the face. Somehow they got through some bad water and got to the point where we had been stranded.

Suddenly there was a grinding sound beneath the canoe and they found themselves stuck on a massive rock just inches under the water. Tried as he would it stayed stuck. The canoe was twisting sideways - it looked like doomsday. With nothing to lose he stepped out on the rock to lessen the weight. Still stuck. He noticed an indentation in the canyon wall that could provide room for one person to be sheltered for the night. He motioned Mark to step on the rock and hop and skip over to the indentation. Bravely with the dexterity of youth he made it. Koester had to stay with the canoe. Without a canoe there would be no hope. The canoe was taking in water and the gear that he had so thoughtlessly neglected to tie down was spilling out. The canoe finally loosened itself off the boulder and Koester hung desperately onto the rope.

No way! He was yanked into the water and dragged through the remaining rapids. Finally he was able to climb unto a small sand bar and then, only because his life was dependent on it, dove back into the river, swimming madly to catch a sand beach on the shore across the river from Mark.

Wet and freezing he went as far as he could into the entrance to the canyon. He got just far enough to see that Mark was still perched where he left him and signalled him to prepare to spend the night. He didn't think he himself would survive the night with wet clothing and no sleeping gear. He walked back and forth trying to keep warm. Then suddenly he thought his eyes were playing tricks. The trees on the island seemed to be moving and thrashing about. It was an agitated bear. A huge bear who it appeared had come to the island in search for food and now in an angry mood was reeking havoc on the trees. How could he have gotten to the island - huge canyon walls, huge rapids in a strong current?

When we were stranded on the island we too had seen large bear prints and had wondered the same thing. Koester said the bear started to move down the island toward him. If the bear smelled him and if he could manage the current what hope would Koester have in fending off this hungry giant bear. Suddenly the bear was out of sight. Koester didn't have a clue as to where he went.

I was very interested in this part of his story. Patterson had said there were tons of bears in Deadmen's Valley but none in the canyon. He suggested this was because there would be no way a bear could access it. Yet we too had seen evidence that the island is visited by bears, at least one. Years later Neil Hartling, who guides and runs river trips down the Nahanni, wrote of going by a ledge in the canyon and happened to look up and saw a big bear laying there with a Dall Sheep carcass. The bear was as startled to see Neil as Neil was to see him.

So in this instance Patterson was proven wrong.

The only hope that Koester had were fishermen they had seen shortly before he and Mark had entered the canyon. He didn't know which way they were heading. He did know that he couldn't survive more than a night or two in these conditions. At times he swore he heard a motor boat coming but no motor boat would be on the river at night. It was wind making strange noises due to the shape of the canyon walls. He slept fitfully. Then, perhaps delirious, he heard a voice in his head warning him to get close to the shore so as not to miss the fishermen.

He had given up hope when suddenly out of the mist it looked like a boat coming through the canyon. It was the fisherman. Saved at last! He jumped up and down waving them over. They kept going - focused on reading the river. One moment his spirit soared only to plummet into despair. The one last faint hope removed. One of the four men was sitting at the stern looking upstream. Suddenly he jumped up and shook one of the men at the bow. The boat slowed and turned. They picked him up and then rescued Mark. It turned out the man who spotted him was a deaf mute. So ended another tale from the First Canyon.

Patterson related how he had come within an inch of losing his life in the canyon. At the time I read his story it didn't seem relevant to our trip.. We were tackling the river in the summer while he was referring to an event that took place in winter. His partner, Gordon Mathew, left the cabin in Deadmen's Valley on Christmas eve to go by dog team to Fort Simpson to get mail and additional supplies. The date he was expected back came and went. Patterson became increasingly concerned. He had stayed behind to look after the traps.

Now he was down to starvation supplies and could put it off no longer. He spent the first night on an island in the First Canyon. Using a lean-to and keeping a fire going all night he spent a relatively comfortable night. What a lonely winter spot! I thought back to the two nights we spent there, feeling the chill of the evening, and hearing the sounds of rapids and fast water.

Patterson was facing blowing snow and cold - cold - cold temperatures. Even the large bear that visited our campsite would be holed up hibernating somewhere in the wilds of this country. Not a bird to be heard. In all seasons the wind noises are unique in the canyon but how different the orchestra between summer and winter.

The next morning found him snowshoeing down the river with just essential gear and what little food he had in his backpack. Still heavy enough. At least he wasn't facing a cruel headwind. He continued to use the back of his ax to test the ice. He carried a light spruce pole in case he fell through. The pole might bridge the hole to help him get out. Even if it did, it would likely be game over. Soon he saw mist rising across the canyon - a sure sign of open water. Oh no! A small patch of open water running clear across the river - canyon wall to canyon wall. So near the end of the canyon and yet so far! As he got closer he saw an ice bridge about twenty feet out from the wall that crossed the open water - a distance of about 60 feet. The bridge itself narrowed to about 10 or 12 feet wide.

Wow! What a choice. There was no way to climb the canyon walls. He could backtrack and take the route that Faille and Lewis had taken previously. You recall how terribly difficult that route was even in summer. Patterson had never taken that route but he knew the country well and he would not have underestimated the difficulty - perhaps the impossibility of trying to escape that way.

There was no way of knowing how much weight the bridge could support. He cut a rock loose from the snow and skipped it across the ice. At least it made it. He didn't dare carry the weight of his pack sack across as any extra weight could spell disaster. Yet he absolutely needed the gear to survive. He took his 80 foot length of rope and tied one end to his pack sack and coiled the rope and moved as quickly as possible across the ice bridge letting out the line as he went. Somewhere near the halfway point he heard a crack.

His heart in his mouth. No choice had to keep going. As he took the final step off the ice bridge you can imagine the sigh of relief. He turned around and slowly pulled in the rope dragging the pack sack across the 60 foot expanse. He had to be so careful. If it slid to the side and into the water he might as well have went in with it. There would be no way to survive the 40 and 50 below temperatures. He made it and as he put the trackline into his pack sack he heard a snapping sound. He looked back and saw the middle of the bridge sag into the river. Almost in slow motion the whole mass of ice that had formed the bridge silently submerging into the Nahanni River. How close was that!

Ranulph Fiennes who I introduced to you on two or three occasions and teased you with the suggestion that he was connected to our trip in a very interesting and unexpected way. I only learned about this connection when I read his book `The Headless Valley`. I came to the part where they landed on the same island we did. Imagine my surprise when I read the following quote:

“When a riverboat, already heavily laden, fills with water, it becomes impossible to steer in such wild water as George’s Riffle: it will turn sideways to the flow and overturn if the helmsman loses control even briefly. Great was our relief then when the old boat lurched drunkenly through and chugged up to join us. **That night camped on an island above the Riffle, Joe found a message in a bottle which told how a group of Americans in a 24-foot jet-powered boat had smashed against a rock in George’s and somehow survived their shipwreck to camp on the island. What later befell them was not chronicled by the bottled message.**” (Bold added)

I am sure many other unrecorded incidents took place in the First Canyon as well. We never thought ours would find its way into the public record and add to the Nahanni mystery.

As a matter of fact I have within the last week learned of another adventure that took place in this canyon. I was looking on a website relating to the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS). I noticed a photo of Neil Hartling who I referred to earlier. He was looking down on George’s Riffle and was quoted as saying that a jet boat, float plane, and several canoeists have ran into difficulty there. I wondered if perhaps he had read Fiennes book “ Headless Valley” that mentioned finding our note or if somehow he had learned about our adventure from another source.

I emailed him and received a very nice reply. The following is part of his reply:

“Very cool to hear of your experience in First Canyon. I believe the jet boat scenario I was referring to was 15 to 20 years ago. It was a Parks Canada boat and staff. The boat swamped and then sank, disappearing for good. The crew swam to shore (all wearing PFD’s and were retrieved by helicopter after being “overdue”.”

He said he would check to see if he could get more details the next time he was in Fort Simpson and let me know.

Wow! We had been worried about not having sufficient free board but it never occurred to me that the boat would sink.

Anyway let me now return to our adventure. Before interrupting our story to tell you some of the tales witnessed by the First Canyon, I described how we went a considerable way up the Nahanni River, through the second canyon and perhaps close to Pulpit Rock when we turned around. We took our time, actually enjoying the scenery, but mainly searching for sight of the cabin we had missed on our way up.

Jean and I spotted it about the same time and pulled ashore. In short time we had the food, cooking pots and pans and related items along with our sleeping gear into the cabin.

Delighted to have safely got off the island, relieved the boat was working well, and to be in a cabin at Deadmen Valley. Hans, likely sensing, my disappointment that we wouldn't reach Virginia Falls, confided that he had not really expected to get this far and was delighted to do so.

The four of us walked outside and took in the vista. How different - wide open, spacious compared to the canyon. I stared across the river and the expanse of Prairie Creek with rivulets of water fanning out over a gravel base. I thought of Patterson and Matthew going across with snowshoes inspecting their traplines

Before returning to the cabin, Carl took a photo of Grandma and myself standing beside a wooden post with the written sign "Deadmen's Valley"

Jean took out a roast given to us by Dick and Vera Turner and cooked up a wonderful supper. After supper I took out a small tape recorder. I had told no one that I had hidden the recorder in my gear bag. Before embarking on the trip I had asked Linda and Gwyn Helker, who were young organists at our church, to record one of my favourite hymns called "Oh My People"

It has a haunting melody. I looked out the cabin window over the river and to the creek bed and valley across the river. The scenery was beguiling. Truly this was wilderness at its primeval best. To me such a moment is spiritual in nature. It speaks to the deepest recesses of the soul. I turned on the tape recorder and felt spellbound. The music resonated with the environment. All the near disasters and difficulties and disappointments experienced on this trip melted into the background. This moment was worth it all. Hans came over and softly said: "That is beautiful!"

I am sure - doubly sure- that this was the first and only time this hymn was played on the Nahanni. Jean joined me at the window and put her arm around my waist. I felt tears rising up.

The rest of the evening was spent quietly - each deep in our own thoughts.

Here Patterson and Matthews built their cabin in 1928 and spent the Fall scouting out their trap-lines for the winter and doing whatever prospecting they could. Their cabin has disappeared into the river but would have been nearby. Their experiences here were foundational for his great wilderness book and was what had set my mind afire with the desire to see this country for myself.

It seemed surreal - hard to believe we were actually at Deadmen's Valley - the focal point of the Nahanni legends. Right near this cabin, 63 years ago the bodies of Frank and Willie McLeod were found, headless.

Does the name Pierre Berton mean anything to you? He was a household word around the time we made this trip into the Nahanni. He was one of the star panellist on the popular tv show

“Front Page Challenge”. I was later to read a number of his popular books depicting the history of Canada and stories of the North. Many years later I read his book “The Mysterious North”. In this book he wrote about his trip in 1947 in cold January by bush plane into Deadmen’s Valley.

This was at the time when all the stories and legends of the Nahanni were circulating. His editor had commissioned him to fly into this Headless Valley to get the “facts”. In so doing he almost lost his life. His pilot flew slowly along this 10 mile valley looking for a place to land. A likely spot appeared and was about to land when he got spooked and immediately hit the throttle and became airborne. What had happened was just as he was about to touch down he saw what appeared to be the shadow of his plane below. Fortunately he realized this was not possible because the sun was not shining. There could be no shadow. It could mean only one thing. He was seeing water running a few inches under the thin ice. Wow! A few seconds later and they could have joined the ranks of those who perished in the Nahanni County.

They found another place to land not far from two crumbling cabins which had been built by the McLeod brothers. They took a picture of a banner they had brought with them that said:

THE VANCOUVER SUN - FIRST INTO HEADLESS VALLEY.

Obviously not true as there were the crumbling cabins to speak otherwise. Patterson’s book was yet to be published so they would not have known about his trip in 1927.

Although Berton’s book was first published in 1956 it was after our trip that I came across it. As I read his account I was drawn to his description of an unusual experience. As he stood on the bank he writes:

“Slowly, as if from nowhere, a low moaning sound inserted itself into our consciousness. It increased until it became an eerie, chilling drone that rose in pitch and echoed across the valley. It was some moments before we realized that this banshee wailing was the wind, funnelling down the natural wind tunnels of the canyons and bursting out into the valley’s bowl, like air pumped through an organ pipe. Frank Henderson’s quoted remark came back to me: The weird, continual wailing of the wind is something I won’t soon forget.”

Perhaps these strange wind patterns might have contributed to tales that were part of Indian stories about the devil howling in the mountains.

Patterson was asked if he had seen any signs that Klondikers had passed this way during the gold rush days. He had. In a snye behind his cabin were remains of cabins that he and Gordon estimated to be about 30 years old. This would place them around 1898 the height of the Yukon Gold Rush. They felt something terrible had happened to them.

Have you ever had a spooky feeling around a certain place. A place that seems haunted. As a child, there was an old abandoned building on top of a ravine near where I lived. My friends and I were sure it was haunted and would egg each other on to venture inside as day turned into dusk. We gave ourselves some frights when we heard creaks and groans or a wind slamming a door shut.

Well Patterson was not superstitious. He spoke, not disparaging of natives, who believed in evil spirits, but in a manner which made it clear he didn't share their beliefs. He never spoke of such things in his writings and didn't seem to harbour any misgivings about living a year near where the McLeod brothers were found. Yet somehow and uncharacteristic of Patterson he said he could never go by these cabins without having cold shivers. He could feel every hair stand on end when he passed by in the evening on snowshoes.

In 1934 Dick Turner was to take his first trip up the Nahanni River with Ole and Bill Epler on their way to look for gold in the creeks. This took place four years after Dick had settled on the Liard River and he was looking forward to actually going up the river and seeing for himself some of the famed landscapes and the sites where the mysterious events took place that had become legendary.

The three of them camped in Deadmen Valley. Not far from where we were. Sitting around a campfire they began to share stories about these Nahanni legends and speculated about what actually took place. This conversation remained vivid in Dick's mind. He never dreamed that one of the three of them would become part of the ongoing mysteries of the Nahanni. Bill Epler, just two years later was to disappear somewhere in the Nahanni Country never to be heard from again. This disappearance took place the same year of my birth - 1937. So to me these were not ancient tales. This was the same Epler that Patterson in 1928 had visited in his cabin on the Liard River not too far from Nahanni Butte.

So many stories. Here we were. I never, and I don't think Grandma, Carl, or Hans felt anything spooky about the place in spite of all the mysterious tales. It didn't seem to bother Albert Faille either as it was said this was one of Albert Faille's favourite camping sites on his numerous solo trips into the Nahanni Country.

I told you earlier I would introduce you more fully to Fenley Hunter. Fenley was born in Indianapolis, Indiana but lived much of his life in Long Island, New York. He loved wilderness and liked nothing better than the challenge of going to remote places few had gone before. He had heard about the tremendous unnamed water fall on the Nahanni River. Fenley planned a very adventurous and daunting wilderness journey. He would start by canoe on the Peace River in Alberta. Grandma and I have kayaked on the Peace River as well. Fenley was to take this waterway until it joined the Mackenzie River. He planned to go down the length of the Mackenzie River. I have done this as well.

Then he planned to go down the Porcupine River to Fort Yukon, Alaska. I have never canoed the Porcupine, although it had been a dream of mine to do so. However I did go downstream by kayak through Dawson City on the Yukon River to Fort Yukon, Alaska. Fenley then went upstream to Dawson City. So I was familiar with much of the remote landscape he covered. For him to do this in one season is remarkable. Few can make such a claim. Jammed into this demanding schedule he wanted to take a 5 week side trip to see the Falls on the Nahanni. This was the same year, 1928 when Patterson and Mathews were on the Nahanni. Fenley and two companions visited with Patterson and Mathews at Deadmen's Valley.

Fenley had an extra reason for going. Yes he was thrilled with the prospect of being perhaps the first white person to get to the Falls. He also had something else in mind. You see he had a 16 year old daughter and he wanted to do something extraordinarily special for her. A gift like no other. He knew these Falls were supposed to be stupendous but were unnamed. His plan was to measure the Falls, take pictures and name the Falls after his daughter. That is how Virginia Falls got its name. Wow!!

Niagara Falls are better known but I personally would rather have these Falls on the Nahanni named after me than the Niagara Falls any day. However it wouldn't be right. So many have far closer historical associations with these Falls. This is one of the criticism that is laid against the name today. Some think it ought to be renamed.

Nevertheless, without getting into the pros and cons of renaming the Falls, it is evidence of a particular love a father had for his daughter and for this magnificent area. This story reminds me of what Grandma and I wanted to do for you. You know how much we love cliffLAND and when each of you were born - so special to us - we wanted to name a spot after each of you. So as you know a wonderful trail with pink lady slippers was named Tessa Trail. A bog, which is very rare in this part of the country, was named Toby Bog. One of our favourite ponds was named Sienna Pond. Now that Solena has joined us, Grandma and myself are trying to decide what special spot should take on her name.

UPDATE - Toby and Sienna and I visited a nice ridge to see if this might be a spot to honour Solena. Both Toby and Sienna enthusiastically declared this to be forever called "Solena Ridge. The date July 17, 2017.

Upon Fenley's return from Virginia Falls he spent a few days at the Patterson and Mathews cabin at Deadmen's Valley. During that time they managed to bag three mountain sheep to fill up their larder and gave one to Mathews.

In overall numbers not many have passed this way. But what a colorful lot they were and what stories they have to tell. It, for me, is an experience like no other. I have visited a number of places which were the setting for stories that enchanted and enriched my fantasy life. Included are the caves on the Mississippi that were the setting for Tom Sawyers adventures, Dawson City,

the site of the Gold Rush, and many others that I won't take time to list. Each of these places had a certain connection to the original story but a distant one. All the original actors were gone and even the setting has been modified. But here the landscape is unchanged. Patterson, Mathews, Faille or Fenley - even the McLeod brothers - could stand here and the only changes they would note would be the natural ones made by natural forces. They would know exactly where they were. Time unchanged. It is a privilege being here.

What is extra unusual and special is that the wildness, the unspoiled beauty remains. Ranulph Fiennes, the British military expedition that found our note in the First Canyon, also stayed at this cabin a year or two after us. They found a gaping hole in the roof caused by a 60 foot pine that had crashed down in a gale. As evidence of how special this place is and the type of affection this place invokes, this expedition took time out from a tight schedule to remove the tree and repair the roof.

Although we didn't get to see the rest of the Nahanni River, some have described Deadmen Valley as the most beautiful spot on the river. I am sure the Falls are spectacular but for simple beauty this spot would be hard to match. The First Canyon where we were marooned has been described as not only the deepest canyon of the Nahanni but the most spectacular spot on the Nahanni.

Another great breakfast - we loaded up and started back towards the Hot Springs. We had not gotten far when once again the motor stalled due to water in the gas line. This was corrected and soon we could see the rapids. The river had dropped a little and at this level it is painfully obvious that the channel to the left, which was to our right coming up, is too shallow. We are now into the rapids and the boat is handling splendidly. I could kick myself for not taking the main channel on our way up as it is clear the boat would have done fine. Going downstream the river looks very different.

I took special note of the rapids. The powerful force of the Nahanni hits this narrow but deep canyon and provides large standing waves. There are places where the waves seem somewhat unpredictable and then appears to rush up against the cliff wall and is thrust off into the left bank. It was this latter fact that made us so leery of what would happen if the Jet boat stalled when we tried to get off the island. Without power we would not have been able to avoid being thrown against the cliff with likely disastrous consequences.

I paid attention to this part of the river not only because of the mishap we had there but because Bill Calder and I had originally planned to kayak down from the Falls. I am confident that he and I would have made it through without incident. A thrilling ride - Yes. However the Folbot has seen me safely through rapids that I judge to be at least equal to these. In fact, due to the chance of hitting rocks going through the Beaver Dam Rapids on the Liard, I would just as soon shoot the rapids in the First Canyon.

Although we were able to take in something of the remarkable and stark beauty of the canyon, our minds had been tasked between two things. While trying to appreciate the canyon, we were so conscious of the fact our motor might stall at the worst possible point in the canyon and having to give almost undivided attention to reading the waters, the esthetics took second place. But believe me it is spectacular.

Grandma and I have hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon in Arizona and camped a couple of nights in the canyon. It too was magnificent! The stars at night as seen from the bottom of the Grand Canyon is breathtaking. However in this First Canyon, having perceived our lives to be in peril when marooned in the canyon, sharing a small island with a large bear, surrounded by large rapids, towering cliffs and seeing no way out, all came together to provide an encounter with nature that seemed so ancient, so pristine, so overpowering that it transcended the experience in the Grand Canyon by a different order of magnitude.

I know it is easy for you to conclude that living in the city would cause us to exaggerate our experience in the canyon. However others before and after us offer similar testimony. When Albert Faille and Raymond Patterson saw the canyon for the first time, Faille uttered:

“My God who’d have thought it would be like this.”

Patterson stated:

“Passage through the Lower Canyon was the sort of thing that comes to a man perhaps once in a lifetime, if he’s lucky. The scenery is the finest on the Nahanni.”

Fenley Hunter who saw the canyon the same summer that Patterson and Mathews came through in 1928 stated:

“I have never seen anything its equal. I have to crane my neck to see sky...I have tried to get some pictures but they will never do the place justice.”

One of the nicest descriptions came many years after our visit by Neil Hartling, expert guide and owner of the Nahanni River Adventures & Canadian River Expeditions who wrote:

“Camping in the depths of the canyon is a humbling experience.It is sacrilegious to do anything but float through First Canyon. This—the inner sanctum of the Nahanni—must be savoured; you are compelled to reverently regard the visual splendour that unfolds at every turn.”

Upon arrival at the Hot Springs we were delighted to learn that Gus had returned from hospital. They invited us into their home. A memorable visit. In this isolated spot, there were not many woman visitors and Mary and Jean enjoyed each others company. Mary gave Jean a beautiful

birch-bark basket she had made and autographed it for her. Some 48 years later it is still treasured in our household.

We had many questions for Gus and he seemed more than willing to share tales of the Nahanni. Included in his stories was the adventure of a German couple who almost lost their lives on the Nahanni. They were in a double kayak and tipped in the rapids below the Falls. He managed to get to shore but Gus stated he would have surely died as he would not have been able to walk out through the rugged terrain facing him. Fortunately his wife stayed with the kayak and kept hold of the paddles. Consequently they were able to continue on albeit in a frightened state.

Our talk turned to Raymond Patterson. Gus had arrived in 1933 so hadn't known Patterson at the time he and Faille became perhaps the first white people to reach the Falls in 1927. However Patterson returned with a Film Crew in 1950 by powered boat and picked up Gus and Mary to continue up river. The one thing that had not impressed Gus was the way Patterson handled the food situation. Apparently Patterson dished out each person's portion. The portion didn't meet Gus's requirements and he and Mary went off into the bush and shot a small game (I can't recall if he said it was a rabbit or a grouse) and cooked it up for themselves.

I asked Gus how in the world Patterson make it upstream in a canoe through the First Canyon. He stated he had often wondered about that himself and had asked Patterson. Patterson said that the river had changed. This is no doubt true as there have been reports of changes from time to time as a result of natural episodes.

We asked about the Hot Springs and Micky volunteered to show them to us. The strong smell of sulphur assaulted our senses but not unpleasantly. The water is 102 degree Fahrenheit and apparently the water does not freeze even in winter. Gus told us that vegetables did very well here and although they didn't remain in the ground throughout the winter there was one winter where they did harvest parsnips.

Indigenous people had been coming to this place for generations and by cutting trees for firewood created a meadow which became a haven for wildlife. Mickey led us back to the meadow area with the hope we might see moose which often visited. We were not in luck this time but did enjoy the walk.

These hot springs as well as others in the Nahanni country gave rise to the legends of a lush tropical valley related to me as a teenager by Clifford Taylor. At that time I never dreamed that one day I would be standing at their edges.

We bid our gracious hosts good bye. I still have a letter Mickey wrote us the following year. He also sent a couple of small kayak carvings as a gift to Chad, our three year old son.

It is hard to believe that the very next year, 1970, the Kraus's would have a famous visitor who

was on the verge of making a historic decision. It was Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. The Nahanni country was under pressure from timber, mining, oil, and hydro interests.

You will recall Bill Calder and I on our kayak trip of 1968 had stopped in to have coffee and visit briefly with a couple of oil workers at their campsites. They were small and didn't significantly affect the wilderness feel of our trip. However it was evidence of what might lay ahead as the insidious, steady pressure to find and exploit natural resources continued.. Bill and I had both expressed the sentiment that we were glad we came this way while it was still largely in its natural state. I don't think either of us held out much hope that the pristine areas left would resist the greed and power of the resource industries.

Neither Bill nor I had been aware of just how much pressure the area was under. Just a few weeks before Grandma and I, along with Bill, Carl and Hans took our Nahanni trip, there were field surveys being done to estimate potential dam sites. Among the sites considered was the Lafferty Creek area, just below where we became marooned, Deadmen Valley and even Virginia Falls.

Can you imagine! How close we came to selling our heritage for a "pot of porridge". One of the last pristine, true wilderness areas on the globe, a place the world would later judge as worthy of being a UNESCO's World Heritage Site - squandered. What an unpardonable sin to rob our children in such a way. Sacrilege - I can't think of any other word for it.

This was the reason for Trudeau's visit. He wanted to see for himself what all the fuss was about. Thank God he was a politician that appreciated the outdoors. Of course I am not privy to what information he possessed nor what influences may have effected him. He was known to be good friends with Bill Mason, the film maker, artist, canoeist, and influential conservationist. Some suggest that Trudeau and Mason must have shared their canoeing experiences and Mason would have been sure to vividly and passionately talk about the Nahanni - his all time favorite river.

Mason, years after our visit, stayed in the same cabin we did at Deadmen Valley. He wrote in the Log Book that has been placed in the cabin since our visit:

"Still the greatest canoe trip in the world."

He wrote this in August, 1985 - 16 years to the month after our stay.

I cannot factually claim to be his friend, having met him only once. But there are many I claim as friends when I got to know them through their books and films. To me he is a friend. I recall in his books that he tells of fellow campers being critical of his fairly large "Baker Tent" where the front flap makes an outdoor parlour before being closed for the night. He believed in living outdoors not camping outdoors. He usually had the last laugh when fellow campers left their

cramped crawl in tents to join Bill for an evening campfire chat.

Chad and Tania used a baker tent for years on their wilderness trips. A trivia fact - Mason is known for his red canoe but he also had a Grumman aluminum canoe. This was my first canoe and the one that Grandma and I capsized in on the North Saskatchewan River in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta. We had taken a number of wilderness trips in this canoe. We have abiding affection for it.

I, along with many others having no direct association with Mason, felt a deep sense of loss when he prematurely died at the age of 59 due to terminal cancer. What does a person do when they have just months to live? The choice appeared to be to perhaps prolong his life for a short time by subjecting his body to additional cancer treatments or do what he loved one last time. He chose to take his family and a few friends on the Nahanni River. What more can be said than this about the spiritual pull of the Nahanni?

Both his daughter Becky and his son Paul continued in his footsteps - both artists, canoeists, and conservationists. I recall her reciting poetry in a canoe at an event that Chad attended as well.

Whatever influence he may have had on Trudeau, the Prime Minister's journey on the Nahanni sealed it. He directed his Minister of the Environment, Jean Chretien, to take the necessary steps to protect the Nahanni!

I saw a photo in the Edmonton Journal of Gus Kraus with Trudeau at his cabin at the Hot Springs. As I recall Gus was not pleased to learn he, Mary, and Mickey would have to leave. I can feel for them. I am not sure what decision would be taken in such a case today. That family was part of the Nahanni - a part of the legend. If it was me I would have granted the Kraus family life long tenure and hired to be an official greeter, monitor, and interpreter. What a tourist attraction - marrying human heritage with natural heritage. In this case they were wonderfully intertwined. Nature is very resilient and what ever minor footprint they may have had if allowed to live in their cabin would be negligible. Fortunately, for them, they moved to the beautiful remote mountain lake - Little Doctor Lake - east of the Hot Springs and some 60 miles west of Fort Simpson.

There they built a cabin and spent happy years in a remote but most beautiful place - a place that Gus considered one of the most beautiful in the world. Between 1971, when forced to leave the Hot Springs on the Nahanni River, and 1989 they sat and talked with hundreds of fly-in visitors. I am sure many of these visitors were as thrilled as we were to meet this family.

Gus passed away in December of 1992 at the age of 94. Family and friends fulfilled his wishes by flying into Little Doctor Lake to bury his ashes. He wanted his ashes mixed with wild flowers he personally selected and scattered in this place. How fitting. It was said to be an idyllic day - certainly an idyllic resting place. There is a moving photo in the News/North paper

of Mary sitting there in a pensive mood reflecting on their long life together.

Ted Grant, owner of Simpson Air, built the Nahanni Mountain Lodge at the Little Doctor Lake and is accessible by float planes to visitors today.

Chretien was successful and the Nahanni in 1972 was set apart to be included in the National Park system. In 1976 it formally became a national park and was significantly expanded in 2007. In fact it increased some six or sevenfold and is about as large as Vancouver Island. However this is not a true comparison in that in 2013, 765,000 people lived on Vancouver Island. Both beautiful but for true wilderness the Nahanni is unmatched. For this I am also grateful to Prime Minister Harper who was in office when this expansion took place.

Actually Trudeau touched our personal lives in another way as well. His government, in response to recommendations in the Royal Commission on the Status of Woman Report 1970, created a National Consultant on Day Care position and a Day Care Information Centre to be located in the Department of Health and Welfare Canada. I was approached by the Department to apply for this position. I initially said no but after further discussions accepted.

I have no idea how our lives might have unfolded if I had stuck to my original decision but one thing is certain and that is our family would not be involved in preserving a wonderful wilderness area in Lanark Highlands. So indirectly Grandma and myself can thank Trudeau for creating the circumstances that led to cliffLAND - The happiest time in our lives.

However in regards to Canadians born and unborn I count his saving the Nahanni from the fate most remote special areas experience to be one of his greatest, if not greatest, contributions. In my mind the greatest. It will, like cliffLAND, always be there. It is unlikely, at this stage of life that Grandma and myself will visit the Nahanni one more time. Never say never - but knowing it is there - wild and free - is priceless.

As I mentioned several times, I castigated myself for making that foolish decision to try the shallow side of the island in the First Canyon. I have no reason to believe that we would not have otherwise made it to Virginia Falls. We would certainly have revelled in the beauty and felt abiding satisfaction in having done so.

It is now 48 years later. I think I have changed my mind- changed in a way that at the time would have been unthinkable to me. Yes the Falls calls. However we got about two-thirds the way from the Nahanni Butte to the Falls and from everything I have read and been told, we saw the most fantastic part of the river. The first Canyon - Superb, August, Primeval. Deadmen Valley a place of vastness, beauty, unspoiled and a place of legends unmatched.

I can't dispel the growing understanding that evolved over the decades - when you confront wilderness at an elemental level - your life in its hands - awesome power, feeling your humbling

insignificance - your soul is touched spiritually beyond words. Hardship and struggle binds the experience with what it means to be fully human - takes you to your limits - through the valley of fear.

Fenley Hunter said he had the hardest days ever going through the First Canyon. After all was done he said

“The Nahanni is a grand, unknown country and I love it.”

He added:

“If there is gold here it would not be worth coming for. A great adventure is worth more than gold any day.”

Poole Field - a life of adventures in the north but none more difficult than on the Nahanni - his friends caught the essence of his first love by writing on his tombstone:

“LORD OF THE NAHANNI”

Pierre Berton who came within inches of crashing into the Nahanni River and although he only stayed for a few hours said:

The Nahanni changed my life.”

Koester said his experience in the First Canyon took him deeper into his limits than he thought possible and saw his adopted 12 year old son become a man in front of his eyes.

Raymond Patterson at one point felt the place was damnable - bringing him to his limits - ended up saying:

“Yet a treasure was ours in the end: memories of a care-free life and an utter and absolute freedom, which the years cannot dim nor the present age provide.”

Al Lewis taken beyond his limits trying to hike up and around the First Canyon described his experience this way:

“I sounded forth with a string of freshly-created epithets that would have astounded even the likes of Webster, citing the South Nahanni country as the most god forsaken piece of real estate this side of Mars.”

However this was not his final judgment. Forty-seven years later at the age of 70 he saw an ad about a guided trip down the Nahanni. The guide was Paul Mason, son of Bill Mason. (Small

world isn't it.) They got to a spot where he could gaze across the river. He was sure that over there was where he and his old pal had their traplines. The other members of the trip had been sensitive enough to know he needed some alone time.

He remembered the bitter cold and the hardships. As memories flooded back he wished his friend could be there with him. It was not possible. He had died years ago. With the flood of memories so came the tears. These elemental confrontations with nature sear the soul.

I suspect that if I could go back and stand with Jean at our campsite on the island in the First Canyon where I had offered a silent prayer that our 10th anniversary would not be our last, tears would come as well. It is strangely a sacred memory. Although I berated myself for my navigation misjudgment I now think it was for the best.

We headed back down though the Splits without incident and picked up our gas supply at the Butte.

The Turners had asked us to drop by on our return and we were delighted to do so. I sheepishly told them about our misadventure in the First Canyon and how I decided to try the right channel to avoid the larger rapids not knowing if the raised sides on the Jet boat would handle the waves.

He smiled - he understood the mistakes of a neophyte - non-judgmental.

As in our previous visit our conversation turned to life in the Nahanni country. During this visit he discussed some of the hardships of a life of a trapper and a trader. I was particularly interested in his views about the role of predators, especially wolves. At this time in my life I had not lived in a wilderness setting and most of the limited knowledge I had came from books. One of the recent books I had read was *Never Cry Wolf* by Farley Mowat. I was a fan. It was obvious that Dick was less so.

When I look back at this conversation from a 50 year vantage point I am amused. Frankly at the time I was taken back by his views. You see I had taken Mowat's writings as a detailed account reflecting his actual experience. I was not beneficiary to his later admission about nature writing:

“Never let facts get in the way of a good story.”

or

“There are larger truths than the facts”

or

“I will take any liberty I want with the facts so long
as I don't trespass on the truth

I am still a loyal fan of Mowat but now perhaps in a more sophisticated way. He was a great

writer and opened the eyes of many to the folly of wanting to wipe out the top predators - not seeing their critical importance in the ecosystem. No one can doubt his genuine affection for nature and the need for conservation. He punctuated his life long passion for nature with his donation of a valuable 200 acre coastal property as “Forever Wild” to the Nova Scotia Nature Trust.

Dick was right. Wolves not only cull the weak, the infirm, and the aged but also take healthy animals. Dick was inclined to disbelieve the claims that wolves never attack human beings. Although he acknowledged he did not know of any documented cases where a human had been killed by wolves, he did know of several attacks. His own brother Stan had been treed by wolves and Albert Faille, who previously didn't believe wolves would attack, found himself stalked by a pack and believed that if he had not shot a couple of them, they would have continued the attack. Apparently Gus Kraus on one occasion when he didn't have his rifle had also been treed.

At the time I, without voicing dissent, inwardly dismissed his arguments. I now note that Dick never argued that wolves were an ever present danger to humans but simply against the idea they were benign. I have come to this view as well. No species, including humans, are simply saint or sinner.

Since our visit with Dick I have spent many nights sleeping out in wolf country and have never been bothered. I constantly see their tracks, hear their nightly chorus, found their kill sites and have discovered their dens. On the various occasions when I have observed them hunting or at play, I counted it a privilege to watch unnoticed.

One minor exception took place a few miles from our wilderness home when Grandma and I were hiking with Pepi, our fearless Chihuahua, and with our daughter-in-law's dog, Mukwa, a middle sized mixed breed from Nunavut. Suddenly the loudest and fiercest sounding racket I have ever heard assaulted our ears. The pack could not have been more than a hundred or so yards from us. Mukwa's tail went immediately between her legs and the heckles on Pepi's neck stood straight up. I immediately grabbed Pepi into my arms as I feared he would rush into the fray. I had no such fear for Mukwa who cowered behind us.

The wolves were obviously in the thrust of a frenzied kill and sounded as close to demons out of hell as you could imagine. I suggested to Jean that I would like to sneak around the turn in the trail to get a look. She gave a defiant: “No way!” and demanded we retrace our steps as quickly as possible. I was going to try to talk her into at least staying put while I took a look. However when I saw real fear in her eyes and knowing she was not a person to lose composure easily, I reluctantly agreed to retreat. I had no personal fear of being attacked but did harbor some concern about Pepi breaking loose. I have seen him take after a bear and also after moose. Not a smart thing for a Chihuahua to do. To run into a pack of wolves at a kill site would be even less smart.

In none of my encounters with wolves have I carried a gun nor felt the need for one.

Considering the millions of contacts humans have had with wolves in the wilderness, statistically one must conclude they have little propensity to attack humans. Having said this I am aware of a case where a woman employee in a private sanctuary in Ontario was killed by wolves when she tripped and fell into their enclosure. There have been cases of attacks in Algonquin Park as well.

So as I look back to our 1969 conversation with Dick Turner I appreciate his point of view more than I did then. He was right to not take literally everything Mowat wrote. I believe Mowat himself would not want anyone to take from his writings that wolves or any other wild species is anything other than being wild. They are not pets.

I recall the story of my favourite naturalist, John Muir, when he and Gifford Pinchot were in the Grand Canyon and Muir stopped Pinchot from killing a tarantula. He stated:

“They have as much right to be here as you do.”

This was a profound truth. He didn't say that tarantulas had more rights than man. Nor did he suggest making friends with it or attempt to cuddle it. It was a deep respect for his fellow members of the tree of life.

The point I would leave with you, not only to consider but to ponder is that Nature is a unity - a whole. There is a unity and wholeness to human life as well. Do not think of your intellectual life and your emotional life and your spiritual life as three separate solitudes. Each of us have a tendency to give ascendancy to one or the other in pursuit of truth and understanding. Music and art can inform and put us in touch with mysteries deeper than science can comprehend. Strive for integration - there are many roads to understanding - each important.

That is why I stated that I am still a fan of Mowat. Sometimes a myth that is not based on fact can reveal profound truth while some facts add little to understanding. Names attached to telephone numbers can be factual but tells you little about the person. A listing of facts can be just as boring and just as nonproductive as reading a telephone book.

A authentic and breathtaking experience legitimately registers truth and understanding. Aldo Leopold left us with a legacy of observations and insights. Perhaps the least scientific but likely the most powerful message was his account of approaching the wolf they had shot just in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. It registered - it provided the insight that he and humankind need an ethical relationship between themselves and nature.

Not scientific - perhaps mystical- but who argues the underlying truth!

If I want detailed facts about wolves I turn to John and Mary Theberge and similar researchers

who methodically studied wolves. Their approach is needed and is different from the role of story tellers such as Farley Mowat. Mowat's type of writing is sometimes referred to as creative nonfiction. Some of the stories may not have happened exactly as stated but in his mind revealed the truth.

Let me give you an example. I am sure you have heard the story of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree. Well scholars say it didn't happen. However the point of the story was to reveal the character of Washington - a truthful person.

Who knows how many stories in Shakespearean writings are factual but it is hard to deny the truths they depict about the human condition. In the same way people's imagination and fascination with nature has been stirred by Mowat's writings. Whatever factual errors or stories that didn't take place as they were actually written does not distract from the truths he presented.

It is not a matter of choosing one version of representing the truth over another. When governments make decisions about culling the wolf population they obviously need to be informed by solid scientific information. But governments are also assaulted by powerful anti-wolf rhetoric.

Now consider this. Mowat's books have been published in 52 languages and sold over seventeen million copies. How many have read the scientific literature? The difference is that the story teller, the creative nonfiction writers bridges the solitude between our intellectual and emotional lives.

The two are needed and I suggest that the power of the Mowat type story tellers brings legions of support that scientists never can and should be seen as allies. One more example. I enjoy the writings of R.D. Lawrence who spent years observing wolves and writing about them. He did so as a naturalist not as a scientist - although the two are not exclusive. Lawrence made many observations that resonated with me but they are anecdotal. He concludes that wolves have a heightened capacity to read intent. I personally believe that many species do. Perhaps this is why people observe: "Why is it I see so many animals when I don't have my gun?"

Lawrence noticed at his rehab wolf compound that wolves reacted differently to visitors who were emotionally troubled. He also told of his daughter coming from England and she went down to the compound before he had a chance to introduce her to the wolves. He was amazed how quickly they took to her as if she had been a long time friend. He was inclined to believe the wolves were able to sense she was related to him. This may not have occurred to him except for his previous observations of wolves in the wild. On one occasion he witnessed two different packs coming across each other where their territories overlapped. The one pack charged and the other waited with bared fangs. Then suddenly the attacking pack stopped and sniffed. They became excited and became to frolic and play. Lawrence speculated that the other pack was the result of a wolf leaving the original pack and forming his own. They seemed to sense kinship.

Now I don't know if this is true but it does provide fodder for thought. Yes he made many observations I found interesting. Having read many of his books and knowing his passion for the wild and his affection for wolves I was riveted by what happened during the final days of his life. Bedridden. His wife knowing the end was near took out a recording of a wolf chorus and played it. She couldn't think of anything that would bring him more joy than this. These were the last sounds he heard. How fitting. It is powerful stories like this that lift the human spirit.

Now that I have regressed with my discussion of the wolf question, I certainly consider our visit with Dick and Vera to be a highlight in our visit to the Nahanni country. We said our fond good byes. I stood for a moment outside their cabin and looked across the Liard River. Then I turned and looked at the Nahanni Butte. What a beautiful setting for a wilderness home!

Now we turned our attention to heading up the Liard River to Fort Liard. Although I was appreciative of the wilderness and the power of this place I also felt an undercurrent of anxiety. First was the concern that the bad gas problem might reappear at any moment and equally concerning was not knowing the fate of Bill Calder.

Once we reached Fort Liard we made immediate inquiries and learned that Bill had been offered an airlift out. Apparently he spent a couple of days in Fort Liard when a small plane brought in a teacher and Bill was able to get a ride out. I was glad to learn he had regained his health but would have liked to see him and to have him accompany us back.

I think it is safe to say that each of us was now anxious to get back. Enough adventure for now.

I was surprised how much I had learned about piloting a jet boat in such a short time. The river was not as high as when we started the trip, so I wondered how we would make it up the Nelson given that we had grounded on two or three occasions coming down. However I was now better at handling the jetboat and we made our way, carefully at times, to Fort Nelson without a single grounding. However before reaching Fort Nelson there was yet one more disappointment. The kayak that we had hid on the way down had been taken.

This was disappointing beyond the monetary value of the kayak. A kayak is like an extension of yourself. It has taken you into remote places. Each time you look at it, it is like looking at an old friend - a friend that calls back many treasured memories. To this day I don't hold a grudge towards whoever took it but would have gladly paid a reward to recover it.

Soon after discovering our loss, we pulled into the boat launching spot. Here we found another surprise. When I went to unlock the Toyota Land Cruiser, the lock had been tampered with and there was some minor damage. Fortunately the Toyota was made of strong stuff and the would be thieves had been unable to break in. Again this was a bit of a shock. The year was 1969 and we had never experienced this kind of behaviour in Edmonton. We didn't even lock our doors at

night and sometimes not even when we were away for the day. Certainly I didn't expect vandalism or theft to take place in a small remote area of the country.

If the vehicle had been stolen I am not sure what we would have done. No place to be stranded with a large 24 foot Jet boat.

Fortunately we didn't have to face this possibility and all's well that ends well. So ended a very eventful trip that none of us will forget. I have on different occasions referred to it as the "Trip to Hell." However time changed my perspective.

I regret that Bill had not been able to continue. But as he says if we had not returned to Fort Liard and his illness remained untreated, what would have happened marooned on the Island. We will never know but sometimes the stars are aligned for the best.

Bill and I were to do another great wilderness trip the following year, taking us past the arctic circle to Fort Yukon, Alaska on the Yukon River.

Jean admits to being ambivalent about the Nahanni trip:

. "It was wild country and beautiful and I enjoyed meeting the Turners and Kraus's. However it was very stressful"

She and I continued to do wilderness trips into wild and beautiful country.

On a positive note, I am glad that we did the trip when we did. We were able to meet so many of the living characters that were associated with the River. This was such a narrow window of opportunity. The River unregulated, wild, not encroached by man's debilitating and depleting influence. I am grateful to Trudeau for preserving it from the exploitative reach of industry but I am also glad that we did the trip before it gained Park Status. There is something more primeval and fulfilling about being stranded in the First Canyon when you know, that like those who went before, you are pretty much on your own as there are no park rangers to come looking for you when you haven't reported in.

Most of the wilderness trips I have taken I would be pleased to relive again. This I count as one of the most memorable highlights of my life that I treasure because of the River I saw, the time I did it, and the pioneers that I met. Even the stressful events are memorable and to be treasured, but I have no desire to relive the stressful components.

Soon after returning home I sold the jet boat. It is a wonderful craft for those wishing to adventure many miles upstream into wilderness country. However, even if I became comfortable with the mechanical requirements to take the boat into wild areas, it still is an intrusion into the silence of wilderness and cannot in my mind compete with a kayak or canoe to experience

wilderness solitude. I feel the same way about all-terrain vehicles. They have their role but do not compare with back-packing, canoeing, or even entering wilderness on horseback.

Nahanni River MAP



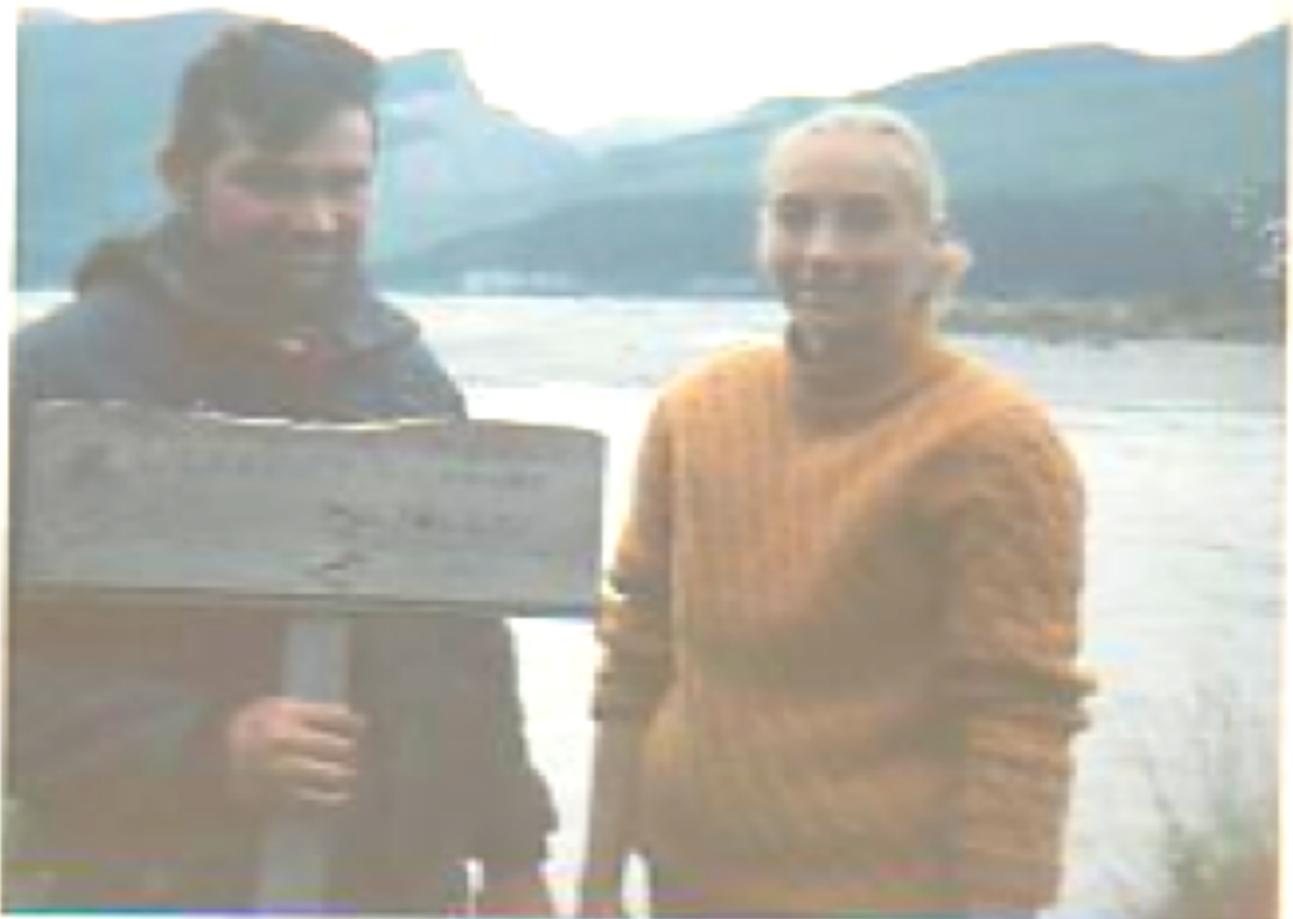
Campsite on island First Canyon



Cabin Deadmens Valley Howard and Jean outside



Sign Deadmen's Valleu Howard and Jean.



Carl examining bear tracks



PART THREE

RETURN TO THE LIARD - NAHANNI COUNTRY

Bike Trip 1992

(Map at end)

This was my first return to the Liard - Nahanni country since 1969. I had on three different occasions, since 1969, driven through Fort Nelson on my way to explore other northern rivers. Each time I couldn't help but think of the 1968 and the 1969 trips.

This latest visit was not by river but by bicycle. It was a component of my 1992 cross-country bicycle trip that took me into the remote parts of Canada from sea to sea to sea. The western and northern part of the bicycle journey is described in my book "On the Road for Quality Child Care - A Vision Quest" of which the Fort Nelson to Fort Simpson part of the trip is found in chapter 6. Although revised, it has served as the base for this part of the book.

I was 55 years of age and Jean and I lived in a beautiful wilderness area an hour and a half drive from Ottawa. I knew once I retired I was going to devote the remaining years to protecting wilderness and people's connection to nature.

It was at this juncture that a government directive came down stating that employees were no longer able to carry over unused vacation time. I had considerable time saved up plus my annual 5 week period. I mulled over how I might use this block of time. One thought, more of a fantasy, than any thing else, crossed my mind. Why not hike into remote parts of Canada with a child care message - combining both my love of child care and of wilderness. I doodled on paper the time it would take to hike into very remote communities. Obviously I didn't have near enough time. What about bicycling? What began as a joke soon took on a life of its own as various child care associations got behind the idea.

This really was a preposterous, I was not a cyclist. As a teenager I had delivered telegrams on weekends and 20 years ago, for a one year period. I biked about 10 km to work. That was the extent of my bicycling experience and I had not since spent any time on a bike. Furthermore there would be no time to get in shape. But as one experienced cyclist told me:

"Don't worry you will get in shape on the road. Just persevere for two weeks and you will be fine."

The schedule called for biking a minimum of 60 km each and every day to cross the country. The trip was to be completed over three summers. This first summer was to start from Prince Rupert, B.C, bike to the Mackenzie River, kayak to the Arctic, bike from Inuvik to Dawson City, Y.T. and then turning south with Winnipeg being the end point for 1992.

On this western and northern part of the Canadian excursion, I was accompanied by Bob Martin, a good friend and of similar age to me who, like me, had little prior experience on a bicycle. His son Tyler with his girlfriend, Shari, neither of who had undertaken any distance trips by bike, rounded out the cycling team. Bob's wife, Lorene, drove a small pick-up truck which carried our gear and provided back-up support.

We began bicycling at Prince Rupert on May 3rd and immediately was challenged by a 30 km climb to the top of the summit. Twenty-nine days later having travelled 1600 km, having crossed the B.C. Mountains, the rugged terrain of the Alaska highway, we arrived at Fort Nelson. Needless to say, by the time we reached Fort Nelson we had beaten ourselves into shape.

This far north it was still very early in the season. Just a week earlier the water in our jugs had frozen solid over night and there had been eight inches of snow just to the south of us in Grande Prairie and even more to the north. We had our own experiences of being caught in a snow blizzard that gave all of us some misery and caused at least one in our party to admit to having questions as to whether they regretted their decision to come on the trip.

We shared a laugh at a campground in Dawson Creek, B.C.. Bob had gone into the shower room and met an American who was shaving at the sink. He greeted Bob with:

“Man it's cold out there. And just think, some poor buggers are out there in tents!”

Bob responded: “I know, I'm one of them.”

We arrived in Fort Nelson drenched from a downpour and made our way to a campground. Fort Nelson was originally established as a trading post in 1805. It is near here that the Muskawa, Prophet, and Sikanni Chief Rivers meet to create the Fort Nelson River. I still find it hard to grasp the amazing things that have occurred in such a short period of time in Canada. I was six years of age when in 1942 construction on the Alaska Highway began and became the first road access to the North. I was ten years of age when this highway was open to unrestricted travel and by 1982 less than one-quarter of the highway had been paved.

Sunday May 31st and the start of the Fort Nelson to Fort Simpson cycling trip.

In planning the cross Canada Bike Trip I poured over maps wanting to include as many remote rural areas as possible. Of course each spot chosen would have to be at least on a route that would not include much back-tracking. I was surprised to see there was now a highway from Fort Nelson to Fort Simpson. It was opened to public travel in 1984 - 15 years after Jean and I made our last trip to the Nahanni country.

Ordinarily going 350 miles on an unpaved road and then having to retrace our steps would have been unthinkable. However two things won me over. The first was my love for the Nahanni

region and a real desire to see it again. The second was the thought that since this voyage was to visit remote areas of Canada with a Child Care message, why not kayak down the Mackenzie from Fort Simpson instead of backtracking? I had two inflatable kayak/canoes. Lorene would have to back track with the truck but she liked the idea of having a couple weeks off to visit with a relative in B.C. She would meet us at Arctic Red River and we would continue biking. The Mackenzie River was one of the great northern rivers that was on my bucket list.

When we started from Prince Rupert our main concern was about how we would make out in the high mountain passes, the long summit climbs, and the rugged terrain. Concern for the challenge presented by the Liard Highway was pushed to the background. Now it was front and centre. This would be the first time, except for routine highway detours, we would hit gravel. Three hundred and fifty miles of it. No question it would be slower going and likely quite tiring. How much slower and how much harder was the question.

Out of Fort Nelson we cycled 28 km to the Liard Highway turnoff and waited for Lorene to catch up with us as she had been getting some groceries. We stopped at a large grassy area that had nothing to commend itself. It was littered with bottles and cans and was obviously an out-of-the-way party spot for locals from Ft. Nelson.

Lorene showed up. Top on our minds was whether or not we were up to the challenge of cycling on gravel roads. We were not long in finding out. Due to the recent rainfall the first 5 km was just terrible. I wondered if we couldn't walk as fast. If it was 350 miles of this, I feared we wouldn't make it. Then to my relief the road got a little better. Three or so miles further along and we noticed three or four people standing by their parked all-terrain vehicles. Certainly these vehicles were what were needed on these roads.

They stared disbelievingly at the bicyclists coming towards them. As we pulled up beside them, a lady said she had noticed us the night before coming into Fort Nelson in the driving rain-storm and wondered who we were and what we were up to. She asked where we had started our trip and laughed when we said Prince Rupert.

“Not on that you didn't!”

This wasn't the first time my bike had been the butt of jokes. Actually it was a very good bike that I had picked up at a used bike shop in Stittsville, a town near Ottawa. It was a used Alex Moulton bike which is not well known in North America. What makes it seem such a ridiculous choice is that it only has 17 inch wheels. The bike shop owner/mechanic assured me it was a good bike. I tried it out and was impressed. Not really trusting the bike I had attached a more typical touring bike on Lorene's truck, thinking I would be needing it. The bike had done well so far and it had been a hit with the kids in the various day care centres we had visited along the way. I must admit it did look bizarre with its small wheels and high seat. One person had said I didn't need to worry about bear attacks because the bear would want this circus bike rather than

me.

The lady then asked where we were heading. We replied Fort Simpson. I think she was getting tired of having her leg pulled. She then said:

“Oh yeah! Then where is your gear?”

We answered that it was in the support truck which was a few miles back. Searching our faces and concluding we were serious said:

“If I had a camera I would take your picture!”

A few more miles and I had a flat tire. Tyler changed it for me. By the end of the day we reached the Fort Nelson River where we camped for the night. We had made 70 km but it was far from easy. Both Tyler and Shari were complaining of sore necks from the jarring on the rough road. This was the first time on the trip they managed to have one good thing to say about my bike. It had shocks! I figured that if the roads got no worse, we would be able to make Ft. Simpson on schedule although not be the better for wear and tear on our bodies.

Our camp was close to the bridge that crossed the Fort Nelson River. The bridge crossed the river at a point that by river would have been a little more than half way from Ft. Nelson to the junction of the Liard River. Once crossing the Ft. Nelson River, the highway goes east and does not access the river again until we reach Ft. Liard.

I walked off by myself to look down the river from the bridge. A flood of feelings came over me. It was twenty four years ago Bill Calder and I kayaked past this point. According to my diary we had camped for the night about 50 miles from Ft. Nelson so wouldn't have got this far on our first day. Likely we passed this spot around 10 am on the second day of river travel.

It would not have crossed our minds that a quarter a century later there would be a highway crossing the river and if it had it would not have been a pleasant thought. There are so very few roadless places left. Of course even on that trip we had come across a couple of small camps doing exploration work for oil companies and we knew it was just a matter of time until the energy hungry south would reach their tentacles into this solitude.

The current Liard Highway is not much of a road, hardly justifying the designation of highway - yet psychologically it seemed a major intrusion. Even on my second trip in 1969, the use of a jet boat had seemed to me to be something of a violation of wilderness. It just doesn't compare with going into the vast solitude by canoe, kayak or on foot.

But a road!!! I am sure there would not be much traffic - the country is still very isolated. Nevertheless it does damage to the wilderness psyche and I wondered how it may have changed

the remote river village of Fort Liard.

Before actually reaching this point where we were making camp, Lorene had gone ahead of us a few miles to check out the highway. On her return she reported seeing a bear. A few days ago when we were in Fort St. John, we read a story in the local newspaper reporting an incident near the beginning of the Liard Highway where a lady had stopped to take a picture of a bear. She got her picture and was returning to her car when the bear having snuck around, lunged at her. Knocking her to the ground he grabbed her in his powerful jaws and started dragging her off into the woods. Fortunately for her, two men in a pick-up came down this rarely travelled road and got a glimpse of the woman and the bear disappearing into the woods. They ran after the bear shouting and screaming. The bear finally let go of his victim. They took her to a hospital where she was recovering from fairly serious wounds.

Lorene's news brought the story forcibly back into our recollection. I knew Shari was particularly anxious about having a bear encounter. I told her that I had seen bears dozens of times in my wilderness trips and never had a problem. On our wilderness sanctuary, where I live, I have had occasional encounters with bears on my hikes. They always turned and ran. She responded nervously:

“What about that lady who was attacked on this very road?”

I stated that bears have to be treated with respect. Her trying to get close as she did to the bear to obtain a close-up picture was not the kind of thing you want to do. When you consider the hundreds of thousands of hikers and canoeists who enter each year into wilderness bear habitat and how few actual attacks there are, it is obvious that man's fears of bears are greatly exaggerated. Nevertheless I had to admit that bears, like humans, are unpredictable. What holds true in 100 cases may not for the 101st.

Shari was also concerned about wolves. An amusing incident about two days ago on the Alaska Highway brought this home. We had stopped on top of a large bluff for the night. Shari had her back to me and was bending over to erect her tent. I was perhaps 10 feet away, and for whatever reason, I gave vent to a wolf howl. It must have been a fairly decent one because she stood straight up, wide-eyed, turned to face me and fearfully said:

“Good Lord, don't tell me we have wolves to face as well!”

When she realized it was me, she punched my arm and broke into laughter with the rest of us.

She asked if there were wolves in the Liard country and I had to admit there were. I quickly added that, unlike bears, our chances of seeing them was very slim. I don't think I have seen wolves individually or in packs more than a couple of dozen times and each time I counted it a privilege to have done so. Of course hearing their howls, seeing their tracks, scat, or even kill

sites are not uncommon.

I only once received a bit of scare. A good friend, along with Jean and myself, on another kayak trip in the Yukon, investigated a cabin while Jean and I remained in the double kayak. For fun he let out a yell which startled a wolf out of a sound sleep and following a great deal of commotion flew out the door straight towards him. My friend said he almost had a heart attack on the spot as the wolf charged to within ten or so yards of him before veering off in a full run.

The few reports of wolf attacks that authorities have taken seriously were thought to be by rabid wolves or hybrids. The only case I heard of where a wolf pack killed a human was when a female staff member slipped and fell into a wolf enclosure in a wilderness refuge. There are recorded cases of researchers and others crawling into wolf dens to tag or retrieve a cub and were not attacked.

Consequently I am a member of the group who believes we don't have to worry about being attacked by wolves. Nevertheless I take exception to any statement that holds all individuals of any species to be exactly the same in temperament, behaviour, and personality traits.

I know of some trappers who spent much of their time in the wilds are suspicious of environmentalists who claim wolves never attack. When experienced woodsmen express their reservations, I think it prudent to listen. I previously discussed my visit with Dick Turner and his views on wolf attacks.

More recently, Joanne and John Moore in 1978 spent a year above the Nahanni Falls. They stated wolves came by the cabin on different occasions and seemed unafraid. Two of them actually stared in their window. The Moore's had set up a trap-door pulley system so that they could have the door locked but could open it upon return by pulling the rope. One time a wolf grabbed the outdoor rope and began to pull. John grabbed the rope from the inside to prevent the wolf gaining entrance. A tug of war took place and it took all his might before he got the rope in.

A neighbour who lives about five miles from me reported walking out of his garage and a large wolf walked passed paying him no attention. He later saw the same wolf lying on the road and didn't move until his vehicle was almost on him. He then watched the wolf walk into his neighbour's property and climb into an old dog house. He told the neighbour, who fearing rabies, shot it. The ministry took it away and found it was suffering from mange.

It is not unusual, for those who spend much time in the wilderness, to have experienced a wolf following them. In my experience they were not stalking but, being highly intelligent, were satisfying their curiosity. I recall one time hiking with Jean on our wilderness property and we had just crossed a small open meadow that had a grove of small trees surrounded by blackberry thickets. A few feet past the small grove I felt this unusual sensation of being observed. I hadn't heard, seen, or smelled anything. I glanced behind me just in time to catch sight of a small wolf

sneaking across our trail heading for safer cover. He had been observing us from the limited shelter of the small treed grove of poplar and birch. He must have had nerves of steel as he couldn't have been more than five or six feet from where we passed. Obviously not waiting in ambush but having satisfied his curiosity, he attempted to get away without being seen.

I told Shari that although we probably will come across wolf scat, tracks or other signs, I was extremely doubtful we would see one. I would be delighted if we did. It seemed increasingly obvious that we might run into bears but I thought they would make themselves scarce as well.

Just remember the prominent signs in all Parks. Don't feed the Bears! Keep a clean camp and don't take food into the tent - leave food in the truck.

During the night I was gently awakened by the sound of rain falling on the tent. There is a certain feeling that envelopes you under canvas during a rain storm. The tent shelters but yet brings you close to the elements. It is one of the most soothing experiences I know. That is of course if the tent doesn't leak and the wind doesn't blow the tent off its moorings. Also one doesn't relish the thought of packing up in the morning with a wet tent.

A bit of anxiety co-mingled with the relaxing effect of the rain. I was concerned that the rain could turn the road into a quagmire. We broke camp and as feared the road was sticky and it was hard slugging. Within an hour the sun broke through and the rain stopped. Mid-afternoon and we saw our first bear from our bikes. As soon as it saw us it turned tail and disappeared into the bush. I gave the thumbs up to Shari.

The road was very inconsistent. In places it was extremely soft and muddy and then there would be a period where it was not bad cycling. We were now on the lookout for a good campsite and tired as we were, we faced a long steep hill. It was a hard climb and feeling weary before the hill, I felt even more so by the time I reached the top. I was relieved to see an open area just off the road that spoke of a good site for the night. Tyler pulled up behind me and we turned to look back. Shari was walking this last hill. She said that she hadn't realized it was so steep and hadn't geared down in time. In the distance we saw Bob coming into view. He stopped on the hill and walked up as well.

The group was a little dispirited. Bob said he found his bike didn't handle well in the mud and loose gravel. Both he and Shari found the constant jarring hard to take. Surprisingly, in spite of awful conditions, we had come another 79 km. Shari stated that she didn't think she could continue to do 80 km a day under these road conditions and I silently fretted about the possibility that more rain might turn the road into a muddy impasse.

From the start of the trip each of us expressed concerns about having so many miles on the trip that wouldn't be paved. Now Shari expressed her additional fears of what might lay ahead.

“This Liard Highway is bad enough and a real killer when rain turns it into a sea of mud, so what will happen when we have to tackle the Dempster Highway.”

Good question. We will have to face this challenge following our kayak/canoe trip down the Mackenzie River. The Dempster is a 600 mile gravel highway which we will take from Inuvik, N.W.T. to Dawson City, Yukon. In so doing it will cross the Continental Divide three times.

I tried to lessen her anxiety by saying:

“All the pictures I have seen shows it to be well packed. We have enough on our hands now. Let’s not worry now about the Dempster.”

Following a good supper, and having aired our anxieties, a roaring campfire returned us to good spirits. The nearby drumming of a partridge entertained us and added to the wilderness effect.

Tuesday, June 2nd and we were on the road by 8:15. We had been obviously travelling on a ridge since climbing last night’s hill. Soon we came to where the hill descended in an equally long, steep fashion.. We needed to exercise some caution as loose gravel could bring about a quick spill. I was looking down focusing on the best spots to steer the bike when I noticed a shadow. I glanced up and there was an eagle flying low, just a little in front of me. It accompanied me all the way down the hill. The eagle brought back a memory near the beginning of this cross Canada bike trip when in a snow storm in B.C. I was coming down a long mountain pass and a bald headed eagle just seemed to be floating beside me. It had accompanied me almost to the bottom and then with a tip of its wing swerved away and down the valley. A native colleague at work had told me prior to the trip:

“You may not know it, but Howard you are going on a Vision Quest.”

Knowing a little about the symbolism of the Eagle to my native friend, I recalled her statement and I recalled it again now with this second Eagle and took it as a good omen.

Suddenly a road sign. It seem so incongruous - a man made artifact in the middle of no where. The sign read:

NORTH WEST TERRITORIES.

Everyone stopped and congratulated each other for making it through B.C. and into the N.W.T. Shari and Lorene were taking pictures and I looked back noticing unusual movement. It was Tyler doing a peculiar dance. He was jumping back and forth across the border line so he could say he had been in and out of the Territories a number of times.

The Highway changes numbers. Highway 77 in B.C to Highway 7 in the North West

Territories. It was a strange highway - absolutely no traffic. As much as I didn't like the idea of road encroachment into the wilderness, we did have it to ourselves. Each of us were off in our own thoughts completely oblivious to being in the middle of a highway when suddenly we were startled by a horn blast. Automatic reflexes took over and each hit for the side of the road as a car whisked past.

Bob lost control and ended up in the ditch. He half jumped and half fell off his bike. Bob has excellent agility and it certainly came in handy here. It was quite a performance. It reminded me of a cartoon with the character being thrown off by a bucking, raging bull but somehow managing to stumble off unhurt. We all burst out laughing, including the two people in the car.

Bob was a bit flustered but began laughing along with us. Just as the last thing we expected to see was a car, I am sure they were even more surprised to come across bicyclists.

About 12:40 pm we came to the turn off to Fort Liard. It was about 5 km down a long hill. Arriving in town, I saw nothing that reminded me of the Fort Liard I saw a couple of decades ago. Then the town was laid out along the river - the church, the H.B.C. Post, the Health Infirmary and the RCMP. Now everything was laid out around the road leading to the highway. No question the highway had changed the physical layout of the Fort. Since this was part of a trip for Child Care, Bob and I stopped into the Social Service Department. Before we gave our names, Jaquire Stiles said that she had been expecting us as Yellowknife had informed her about our trip.

We discussed the changes to Fort Liard and she was of the opinion that the highway had contributed to an increase in social problems.

We stopped for lunch at the restaurant and a chat with the waitress made me realize that in spite of the changes wrought by the highway, life here was still isolated. I had asked her if the road was any better from here to Ft. Simpson than it had been from Fort Nelson. She replied:

“I don't know. I have never been to either place.”

I guess when the nearest town is over 150 miles away, many locals like herself take little advantage of the road

Following lunch, I telephoned Martha Friendly, a leading Child Care advocate, who had taken on the task of helping to organize the speaking engagements. She wasn't in her office in Toronto but I did talk to her colleague, Jane Beach, who asked me to call Annette Hasty in Inuvik. Annette was in charge of festivities in Inuvik and was anxious to learn our time of arrival. I did so and told her that we were on schedule. When you have just spent two or three days on a wilderness highway and having seen only one car, the rest of the world seems so distant. However I appreciated that it was even more difficult for those planning various events when they had no

idea where we were.

Reality from the outside intruded in our wilderness sojourn in another and more jolting way. Jane warned me that there may be trouble back at my office. She had heard through the grapevine that the Department had received a newspaper press copy containing a quote by me that had disturbed Departmental officials. She had no idea what the quote was and agreed with me that everything in the media that we had seen was very positive. She was worried that the Department would try to get hold of me with instructions not to speak to the media. She suggested that I not try to get in touch with the Department until they have had chance to see a broader sampling of media coverage. This piece of information was unsettling. The Child Care community had gone to great pains to prepare a venue for me to promote child care.

It was only mid-afternoon so we decided to go on for a couple of hours. It seemed better to get that steep hill back to the highway out of the way rather than facing it in the morning. By the time we had gone another 15 km all of us were tired. However we still hadn't found a spot we could put up the tents. We went on another 10 km and came to Rabbit Creek which might serve the purpose.

We were all tired and hoped there would be room for the three tents. Including the 10 km detour into Fort Liard, we had come 96 km. This really was too far on these kinds of roads. It was surprising how quickly a large supper of potatoes and corn mash replenished our energy. Not that we felt like dancing or getting back on the bicycles but it felt pleasant sitting around the campfire and chatting. Shari asked what we would think of the idea of sleeping in a little tomorrow morning given how hard this day had been. No one objected.

The evening was made even nicer in that this campsite turned out to be better than it had first appeared. There were several spots suitable for one or two tents and each picked a site that appealed to them. I chose a spot close to the water's edge and soon fell asleep to the relaxing sound of water music. A couple of times during the night I heard splashing within a few feet of my head and assumed it was beavers doing their nocturnal duties. It may have been otters. I enjoyed listening but didn't feel like expending the energy of getting out of the cozy sleeping bag to identify my neighbours.

Although no one actually slept in, we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and had a late morning start. Around 9:30 am we were surprised to hear the noise of a motor. It kept getting closer but obviously wasn't a fast moving truck. Finally a grader came by. This should have been good news but instead of making the road better it made it worse for bicycles. Grading made the road extremely soft. Our wheels dug in to such an extent that the going was more difficult than anything we had faced before. Fortunately he was only grading one side of the road at a time. Consequently we biked on the opposite side, which while not easy, was ever so much better than on the graded side. We were not worried about riding on the wrong side of the road as we had only seen one car and now the grader during the past two days. What we were worried about

was that the grader would turn around grading the other side as well and then we would be faced with a cycling nightmare.

In about ten miles or so we saw the grader ahead of us. It was with relief that we passed it. Even so the road was inconsistent. We would go for a stretch where the road surface was reasonably hard and then abruptly change into stretches of soft spots and then into sections that had too much gravel for the bikes. We developed a cycling pattern where Bob and I would be perhaps a half mile or so ahead of Tyler and Shari. Lorene would read in camp giving us a half hour or so head start and then drive the truck to check on our progress.

Bob and I were chatting and just as I mentioned being surprised that we had not seen more wildlife, there to the side of us down in a valley stream was a large wolf with nose to ground loping away from us. By the time Tyler and Shari arrived it had disappeared from sight. So I had to admit to Shari of being pleasantly surprised, a wolf was sighted after-all. Tyler and Shari reported having seen an owl.

An hour later, again separated by about half a mile, we met the first oncoming traffic - a truck. He pulled up beside us and said he had stopped to suggest that we ride a little closer together for safety sake. He saw eight bears last evening and four already this morning. We waited for Tyler and Shari and shared the news. Immediately Tyler disappeared into the woods. I assumed it was to relieve himself but he soon returned with two long poles that he fashioned into spears. These long lances were attached to his and Shari's bikes. If a bear attacked, it would be attacking two prepared knights on their steeds! So Bear, beware!

We laughed and then a few minutes later laughed even harder. Tyler, without warning, came to a sudden stop and Shari came within a whisker of ramming the spear into his rear end. So once again man (woman) is the most dangerous animal on the road.

Our plan was to have a relatively easy day to make up for yesterday and perhaps go 60 to 70 km. About the time of having achieved this goal we were looking for a suitable site. This is more difficult than one might think, especially finding a dry spot large enough to pitch three tents. We were enjoying the beautiful view of the mountains that were just coming into sight but still no suitable campsites. I was beginning to think this would be another one of those days where a needed rest was not to be. Tyler looked at the map. He pointed out that the Blackstone River Campground looked to be about 20 km down the road. This would again make for a second long day. We were all weary but the idea of a campground was very appealing.

Being over tired brings nerves to the surface and it was obvious that all of us were becoming a little cranky. Consequently we spread out a bit on our bikes, each alone in their thoughts and each pushing their bodies a bit beyond what they would have liked. None too soon, we arrived at the park information centre and was greeted by Mike Harrison, a park officer.

Mike was very cordial but seemed surprised we had arrived on bikes. He took a genuine interest in our trip and questioned us closely about the trip. I began to wonder if there were some restrictions about the use of bikes on the highway that we had not been aware of or if we had broken some regulation about notification or some other matter.

He seemed a little skeptical about “Skooter”, the name we had given my small wheeled bike, and asked permission to take Skooter for a ride. Returning the bike, apparently satisfied that it was a road worthy, extended his hand in congratulations. It turned out that his congratulations was not simply that we had made it this far. Sheepishly, but with a good natured smile, he admitted feeling a little disappointment upon our arrival.

“To tell you the truth I have wanted for some time to bike from Fort Nelson to here. No one has done it before and naturally I would have liked to have been the first. So again Congratulations!”

We were surprised. It had never entered our minds that we would be the first cyclists to do this. We gave each other high fives!

While the others went about setting up their tents, Mike allowed me to use the radio phone to call Yellowknife to talk to Deb O’Connell, Director of Day Care for the Territorial Government, as she was lining up various community events along the Mackenzie River. Interesting as the conversation turned out to be, I will not go into details as it is not part of this monologue.

Mike and I continued to converse. He loves the outdoors and we shared thoughts about the wilderness and about interesting people who lived in the area. I was sad to learn that Dick Turner, a renowned pioneer, who Jean and I had visited at his home at Nahanni Butte in 1969, had passed away and his wife, Vera, was living somewhere in B.C.

After supper, I went for a stroll and ended up sitting on the bank of the Liard River looking up-river towards Nahanni Butte. I felt a melancholy feeling as I thought back a couple of decades ago. Those long-a-go yesterdays seemed very fresh in my mind as I vividly recalled the excitement Bill Calder and I had as we came down the Liard in kayak and stopped in at the Turners at Nahanni Butte and also the following year when Jean, Carl, Hans and myself reached their home by jet boat. My mind didn’t want to accept that those moments etched in time are no longer there. I know that the Nahanni in 1978 was dedicated by the U.N. as a world heritage site-- the first natural area on earth to receive this official designation. This is a wonderful thing, but to me the image of the Turners living at the mouth of the Nahanni River is part of the wonderful heritage and somehow it doesn’t seem the same without them being there.

With similar mixed feelings of pleasure and sadness I recalled visiting with Gus and Mary Kraus at their home at the Hot Springs on the Nahanni River. They had lived in that magical spot since 1940 and would have been there still if not for the creation of the National Park. In 1971 they

moved to Little Doctor Lake, a beautiful remote area but still situated in their beloved Nahanni country about 100 km west of Fort Simpson.

In 1972 1,840 square mile section of land was set aside in the creation of the Nahanni National Park. The Nahanni country itself is mostly uninhabited rugged landscape about the size of New Brunswick. It is bordered to the east by the Liard River and to the south and the west by the Yukon/Northwest Territory border and to the north by the Mackenzie river. A jewel of wilderness. A Canadian treasure! I wish Trudeau had made the park larger, and I hope future governments will expand the borders, but I will always be in his debt for saving what he did.

There are down sides to park status but it was the only way to prevent the relentless encroachment of those who only see the economic natural resources to be plundered for immediate gain. For these gains we lose much of the never to be recovered beauties of a wilderness setting so marvellous to the eye, so staggeringly and starkly beautiful, and which carries such soulful messages.

However in remote areas like this pioneers are also part of our rich heritage. The Kraus's were the only family living on the Nahanni River and I think it would have added to the experience of anyone venturing into the Park to visit this pioneer family. I count it as a highlight in our 1969 trip into the Nahanni. If they were allowed to remain there for their life-time, they would have been able to share first hand stories of "yesterdays" that could not be matched by park rangers or park naturalists. Of course they would not be in competition or a substitute for the rangers or naturalists but would add a valuable dimension. To me they were part of the Nahanni legend, part of its heritage.

I know that Jean and I will treasure our visit with them in our hearts forever. In my mind I still envision them as part of the Nahanni.

A few months later I read in News/North that Gus passed away on December 1, 1992, at the age of 94. A spot at the end of the beach at Little Doctor Lake was chosen to scatter his ashes. Mary still alive and in her eighties. What a wonderful life they shared. What memories!

I never met Albert Faille but feel I know him as a friend. I knew him through Patterson's books, through discussions with his friends who loved and knew him best, and through film documentaries that I have watched over and over again. Bill Calder and I just missed meeting him on our Liard River kayak trip in 1968. Certainly he is part of the spirit of the Nahanni. He died January 1, 1974 at 86 years of age in Fort Simpson.

Raymond Patterson's well known adventures on the Nahanni in 1927 and 1928-29 opened the Nahanni to the eyes of the world and his book inspired unknown number of people, including myself, to see this country for ourselves. He passed away October 20, 1983 in Victoria at the age of 84. My work often took me to Victoria and one of my regrets is that I never took the

opportunity to call upon him. At the least I should have written to let him know how I immensely enjoyed his writings and that he had inspired me to take actions leading to wonderful wilderness river trips that literally changed my life. I would have loved to have met and thanked him in person.

All of these men spent at least a part of their time searching for gold. No doubt they would have raised their glasses in celebration if they made a rich strike. I am glad they didn't. Their era was the period of the Great Depression and hordes of unemployed might have poured into the country similarly to the 1898 gold rush in the Yukon. The landscape could have been scarred, roads built, communities formed. The prospect of this priceless heritage being set aside as a National Park would have been slim. So few remaining true wilderness settings remain - what a loss mankind might have suffered if they had found gold! These men, all gone now, could not have taken their gold with them. I can't help but believe that deep in their hearts they realized that they did find real gold - the type that doesn't rust or tarnish

It is of course natural to romanticize a certain period of time. In terms of the Nahanni, to me the era of Poole Field, R.M. Patterson, Albert Faille, Dick and Vera Turner, and Gus and Mary Kraus is the time period of choice. The Nahanni country then was largely unexplored, remote, no roads and what few humans lived there were impacted by the country - not the other way around.

To this day I count myself most fortunate to have visited this country by kayak and met the majority of the these pioneers when I did. Without question the hundreds of those today who are part of guided canoe and raft trip tours down the Nahanni will thrill at the indescribable beauty of the country and have the Nahanni speak primevally to deep spots within their souls. I would love to do this myself. However for me, the best of the Nahanni country speaks to me through the mist of time almost a quarter of a century ago.

It is hard for me to get my head around the fact that up to 1966 the Dene who lived in Fort Liard and area still lived the traditional lifestyle. They spent the winters away from the settlement and on their traplines. Even in 1968 when Bill and I stopped to visit they were just beginning to add a wage economy to their traditional lifestyles.

Of course the Nahanni country is the home of the indigenous people. Their histories and their stories must be recorded. Please, whatever you take from the account of our experiences, do not for a moment think the absence of reference to their stories implies we do not consider their history as primary. Their stories must be told by those who can share them in an appropriate and accurate way - who better than one of their own.

Our account, as previously stated, was during the time period of the white pioneers from the late 1920's onward. These names will also be forever etched in the history of the Nahanni. Each of them lived during Grandma's and my lifetime.

Except for Mary Kraus, who was a Dene, none of the above had been born in the region. Like myself, when I first came down the Liard River, most were not experienced in canoeing or wilderness travel. Patterson was said to have known nothing about canoes in 1926 when he began planning to go to this region the following summer. Without the help of Faille, he likely would not have made it up the Nahanni. Likewise Dick Turner knew little or nothing about what it would take to survive in this vast wilderness area when he first ventured forth in 1930 being only 19 years of age. Three years later he married Vera who came hardly knowing what to expect from this remote and largely unknown country.

I returned to my campsite and turned in. Before daylight I was pleasantly aroused from sleep by the singing of birds. I mentioned that we had not seen much wildlife, just a couple of bears and a wolf. However what was very noticeable along the Liard highway was the loud and cherry bird singing. This morning was absolutely gorgeous. We said goodbye to Mike. He told us that he had just learned that part of the Liard highway had been washed out. We guessed it to be the soft spot where we noticed part of the road being washed away near where we passed the grader. So this should not be a problem. Mike also warned us that he received word about an ice jam on the river that could delay us a little when we started down the Mackenzie River.

Having put in two long and tiring days, a decision was made to make this a relaxed easy day. The weather was great, the road better than it had been, and everyone in great spirits. About twenty km out of the Blackstone Territorial Park I saw a black spot on the road. As we got closer the spot seemed to be moving. It was and it was coming towards us. Tyler blew his whistle and the startled bear turned on his heels and disappeared into the bush.

Another 18 km down the road we noticed a little road turning off the highway and into a small gravel or sand pit. Shari noted that we have had difficulty finding suitable camping spots and although we had not come quite as far as expected she didn't want to get into another situation where we had to go further than planned. Bob expressed his preference for going a little further. This was the first time on the trip across Canada that Bob wished to go further than what someone else was suggesting. Tyler sided with Shari saying we had agreed to a short day. Although my preference was similar to Bob's, since we were on schedule, I didn't take sides. After pitching our tents, Shari came over to me and asked if I had minded stopping so soon. I said that I didn't as we all could benefit from a rest. I added that since the road seemed to be better I would like to do about 90 km tomorrow which would leave us about 40 km to reach Fort Simpson. That schedule would get us into Fort Simpson by noon on Saturday and if Deb O'Conner, the Day Care Director for the Territories, had been successful in lining up a child care meeting, we would be there in plenty of time. This seemed like a good plan to Shari and to Tyler who had been listening to the conversation.

Shari stated that she didn't think it would be difficult to put in that kind of mileage and wondered what I thought. I agreed that it should be relatively easy but if the weather turned against us, it

would be harder. Tyler piped in:

“We have done 80 km in soft roads, rain, and a lot of hills. So it’s not a problem.”

I didn’t respond but mentally agreed. In our Child Care trip across Canada we had already come 1200 miles facing mountain passes, wind, rain, sleet, snow and no one had faltered.

The weather has been strange. I recalled a couple of weeks ago worrying about hypothermia as we shivered in a snow blizzard and would never have thought in such a short period of time, we would be feeling too hot. This is Liard country. The sun was beating down on us and there was not much shade in the gravel pit. Mosquitoes, the curse of the north woods, were starting to come out but had not reached the truly bothersome stage.

During the night I thought I heard something outside my tent and then heard a sniffing sound. My guess was that this was a bear, and although my senses were on the alert, I wasn’t too concerned. I had no food in the tent. Although I was aware of the lady being dragged off by a bear near Fort Nelson on this highway, all of my experiences with bears in the wild was that they generally left humans alone unless the human was behaving stupidly. The next morning Shari said she had heard noises during the night as well. I Looked around the tent site and saw partial bear tracks.

The weather continued warm and fair. The first 15 km went by fast. The gravel was well packed and it looked like the 90 km plan was going to be even easier than expected. Then just as suddenly the road turned into mush. The going became tougher and I began to reassess the feasibility of the 90 km objective. About 15 km of slow going and we came upon a road crew. This was the wash out that had been reported that we assumed was behind us. Fortunately we had very little delay as they were in the finishing stage of repairing it. It was great timing and the decision to have stopped early yesterday looked better and better. Much better relaxing in a campsite than waiting for road repairs.

We could have carried our bikes across the washout but there would be no way that Loreen could have gotten the truck through.

Following a mid morning break and with the road once again better for cycling, we biked at a relaxed pace. Bob and I in the lead. Every once in a while I would glance back and see that Tyler and Shari were just a few hundred feet behind. Occasionally we would lose sight of each other due to the twists and turns in the road. Lorene remained at the break-site to do a little reading before catching up with us.

We were perhaps 10 km from our last break when we heard the sound of a vehicle coming up fast behind us. It was Lorene. She told us to stay put until she got back. There was a bear incident involving Tyler and Shari. Lorene then swung the truck around to go back to them

leaving us wondering what in the world had taken place.

Soon they, along with Lorene, were back and told us of their harrowing experience. They had only been a few hundred feet behind us and stated they could still see us as we were rounding a corner. A bear stepped out immediately behind us and started towards them. They both took out their whistles and blew as hard as they could. We hadn't heard them and it had no effect on the bear which kept coming. They turned the bikes and peddled as fast as they could to reach Lorene who was still reading in the truck.

She drove the truck forward at a slow enough speed for them to keep up. The truck was crowded to overloading with gear and no room for the cyclists. They were also concerned about our situation wondering if that bear or another one might have their sight on us. The bear was still there, right in the middle of the road. Lorene honked the horn repeatedly but it showed no indication of fear or any intention of moving off the road. She drove the truck slowly forward keeping the truck between the bear and Tyler and Shari who were on the other side. They were fearful that the bear might make a sudden lunge behind the truck and over to the cyclists. The truck was almost on the bear before he reluctantly and in a cavalier fashion moved off the road. Lorene kept an eye in her rear view mirror and saw the bear back on the highway as contemptuously as ever. It was his turf. No doubt about it!

Lorene mentioned that when she left us to go back to escort Tyler and Shari, she saw another bear as well.

“So everyone stick together, I can't look after all of you if everyone is spread out!”

This seemed like a good time to take a short rest break and to allow nerves to calm down. I was about to climb back on my bike but saw something about 100 yards or so away. Yes it was moving. Yes it was a bear coming towards us. Lorene proceeded slowly with the rest of us staying close - very close - to the truck. Fortunately this bear was not as brave as the last and took off into the woods.

I have had no previous experience of bears acting like this. Of course in National Parks where people have been in the foolish habit of feeding bears and where no hunting is permitted, many park bears have lost their fear of humans. No one would be feeding bears in the Liard country. I knew from my 1968 kayak trip that the native people, and I am sure those of European descent, as well, hunted bears so they should be wary of humans. I suspect that a shortage of food made them lose their ordinary shyness around humans. Most recorded bear attacks have been connected with food and with hunger. Of course there will always be some aberrations in behaviour in any species including our own.

Around noon we came to the junction of the Mackenzie Highway that comes from Yellowknife. Close to Yellowknife it also joins a highway leading to Peace River, Alberta. This highway

didn't exist when Bill Calder and I made our kayak trip. Just one more reminder that the country is opening up and with the ongoing exploration for oil and other resources will lose much of its remote, primeval characteristics. To most this is progress -- to those of my ilk it is a tragic loss.

We decided to continue on about 20 km and look for a campsite and thereby leave about 40 km to reach Fort Simpson. The Mackenzie highway was in better shape than the Liard Highway and we could sense that this segment of our across Canada trip was coming to an end. One soon learns that in isolated country, one shouldn't assume too much. We had only gone a few kms when Lorene pulled up beside us saying the truck was acting up and seemed like it was always about to stall. Tyler took it for a test but couldn't determine the cause. He thought she may have picked up some bad gas at Fort Liard. This reminded me of the problem we had at Fort Liard and Nahanni Butte in 1969 during our jet boat trip.

We suggested she drive ahead of us so if the truck stalled, we would be behind her. About the 90 km mark which was the distance planned for today's schedule we came across a suitable clearing for a campsite.. However the truck's performance had not improved and after some discussion we thought it might be wise to go another 20 km to a campground on the Liard River where the ferry took traffic across. This would leave only 20 km for tomorrow and give us a little more time to seek mechanical help if it was more than a gas or condensation problem.

By the time we reached the Liard campground, having travelled 110 km, every one was weary. Bob, Lorene and I walked down to the ferry to check hours of operation and to look at the river. The sign said 18 km to Fort Simpson and thoughts started going through my mind. My son, Barrie, had just underwent dental surgery that required the breaking of his jaw and my thoughts were naturally with him. I really wanted to be assured that he was recovering successfully and knew my mind would not be at rest until I knew.

The ferry was returning and was now about half way across the river. I made a quick decision which I announced to the group. I would take the ferry across and bike into Fort Simpson and call home and return back to camp. They looked at me as if I was crazy but there was no time for them to talk me out of it as the ferry was docking.

It turned out to be 20 km. Two km is hardly any thing but when you are tired it makes a difference. I reached the Information Centre which ordinarily would be closed at this time of evening. However it was opened for a board meeting and I was able to telephone home. Barrie was fine but due to the swollen, wired jaw was unable to talk to me. I signed the guest book at the Information centre and climbed back on Skooter. Daylight hours are greatly extended this far north and I had no difficulty seeing the road. The only thing going through my mind was what if I had a flat tire. I had nothing with me to fix it and with my mechanical skills I might ruin the tube even if I had the tools. I did mental exercises of how long it would take to walk the bike in the event of a flat and every 5 or 6 km I docked off an hour from what would be required.

The timing was good as I only had to wait a couple of minutes for the ferry. Arriving at the other side I was greeted by Bob and Lorene who asked about Barrie. Learning that the operation was a success, Bob, referring to Tyler and Shari, said:

“They think you probably went into Fort Simpson tonight so you could claim to be the first to bike from Fort Nelson to Fort Simpson.”

I laughed and threw up my arms in a mock victory salute and yelled: “Yea!” They joined in my laughter.

Back at camp I saw that Tyler and Shari had erected my tent and had my sleeping gear arranged inside. This was very much appreciated. Counting the extra 40 km into Fort Simpson and back, I had biked a total of 150 km. This was the longest ride I had done to this point in my life and on gravel at that. I remembered talking with Grant, an experienced cyclist from Whitehorse, before the Cross Canada Trip and he had told me that in about two weeks of cycling we would be in shape and be doing 100 km a day without too much trouble. I had thought: “Yeah, Right!” Now I was beginning to realize that “century” rides might not be crazy after all.

As I laid in my tent, I was too weary to sleep. Recalling Bob’s statement that I had made the trip to Fort Simpson so I would be the first to have done so, brought a smile to my face. I thought, not too shoddy for a man in his mid fifties who started out-of-shape and who had never taken a trip on a bike further than 20 miles or so.

Then I thought of the kayak trip Bill Calder and I had done. I was only aware of three or so non-natives pre-1968 who had taken a canoe from Fort Nelson to Fort Simpson and one of those had a kicker on the canoe. Bill and I might well have been the first to have done so in a kayak. Oh well, can’t let this start getting to my head!

We were away by 10 am and reached Fort Simpson by 11:30. Lorene sought out a garage while the rest of us looked for a campsite. It turned out that a faulty fuel pump was causing the problem and a part would have to be flown in.

So ends the Fort Nelson, B.C. to Fort Simpson, N.W.T bicycle trip.

We were to continue our Cross Canada Child Care trip by leaving tomorrow by inflatable canoes on the Mackenzie River to the arctic. Jean (Grandma) was to fly from Ottawa to Fort Nelson where she would meet Lorene and drive to meet us at Arctic Red River. In the meantime Lorene will visit with her brother in B.C.

Bob and I walked into the RCMP office to let them know about our planned trip down the Mackenzie. I rang the bell and a female officer asked if I was Howard Clifford. She had been looking all over town for any sign of us as Deb O’Connell of the Territorial Government had

arranged a barbecue in our honour. It was taking place in 20 minutes. Bob and I rushed back to find the others and managed to get to the centre right on time.

A very pleasant couple of hours were spent meeting staff, parents, board members, and community people. A photographer from the Mackenzie Times took pictures.

The surprise barbecue was fortuitous on another level as well. One lady, learning about the truck problem, invited Lorene to stay at her place while the truck was being repaired and invited her to play on a fastball team on Sunday. Lorene is an excellent player.

Back at camp Bob got a nice fire going. As we sat around the fire Mr. Mercredie, the owner of the Mackenzie Times, drove up with his photographer to take more pictures. He accepted our offer of a cup of coffee but said he only had a minute. The minute turned into several as it was plain to him that we were enjoying his company. The camp fee collector came by and seeing Mr. Mercredie said:

“Is this the tourist of the week interview?” “Yes so you better not charge them.”

He didn't.

Mr. Mercredie excused himself as he still had work to do. To our surprise he returned an hour later for a longer visit. Entertained us with stories late into the night. One of his tales was about himself and his buddy. Mr. Mercredie is a very large man and his buddy even larger. They were on their way to Ottawa for a meeting with Indian and Northern Affairs. Being too large to sit comfortably in the same row, his friend moved up to the front. A little later, one of several college students came over and asked him if they were professional wrestlers. Keeping a straight face he said they were and that his friend was the famous “Arctic Crusher”. His friend was mystified as to why all these students were asking for his autograph.

We were up until midnight inflating the canoes and sorting out the gear.

I laid in my tent thinking about tomorrow and the transition from bicycle to canoe. 1200 km lay ahead of us before reaching the community of Arctic Red River.

In some ways Fort Simpson had been a disappointment. It wasn't the way I remembered it. I guess it is true that you can never go back. How different the town appeared riding in on a highway compared to approaching it by river. When Bill Calder and I came this way 25 years ago neither the highway from Yellowknife or from Ft. Nelson existed. The main part of town lined the river bank. Now the development is along the highway. The Liard and Mackenzie Rivers are still an important highway of water but not the sole monarch of its yesterdays.

While in town, Bob and I stopped by a graveyard to look at grave markings. I was hoping to

locate the resting spot of Albert Faille. Later at the Tourist Information we were told he was buried in another cemetery and there were plans to mark it as a point of interest. I wonder if Albert would have liked the “modern” version of Fort Simpson or if he too preferred the old. I like to think he would have preferred the old.

Sunday, June 7th broke to reasonable weather. At breakfast Lorene related a bad dream. She dreamt she saw us off on the river and was never to see us again. Just what we all wanted to hear!

The truck was loaded up for Lorene’s return to Fort Nelson from where she would fly to Vancouver to spend time with her brother. Jean was to fly to Fort Nelson and together they would drive to meet us at Arctic Red River.

The gear was packed into the inflatable canoes and we were ready to shove off. Said our goodbyes to Lorene and wished her a good holiday in Vancouver.

She and Bob embraced. It was a long embrace with Lorene patting him on the back. His face, stoic, without emotion, reminded me of someone heading off to war on a suicide mission. At that point it hit me. I felt a burden of responsibility. I was the only one who had river experience.

As I stated earlier the rest of the canoe, bicycle trip is described in “Bicycling and Kayaking - On the Road for Quality Child Care” The first part of the Mackenzie River could be considered as part of the Nahanni country but the Mackenzie adventures are in the above book and so is not repeated here.. I might add that the Mackenzie River was one of the rivers on my bucket list.

PART 4

FOURTH VISIT TO NAHANNI COUNTRY

It was eighteen years later that Jean and I set eyes once more on the Nahanni Country. The year was 2010 and our little Honda Fit was packed to the gears. It was to take Jean and I and our beloved Chihuahua, Pepi, from Ottawa through the North West Territories, the Yukon Territories, Alaska, B.C and back to Ottawa. Camping and hiking along the way. A marvellous trip - a tale for perhaps another time. For now only the part of the trip pertinent to the Nahanni Country is included.

We left our home, cliffLAND, May 4, 2010 and arrived at Lac La Biche May 12th to spend a couple of days at our primitive cabin on the La Biche River about 13 kilometres northwest of Plamondon, Alberta. When we lived in Edmonton we spent a number of enjoyable weekends and holidays at this fairly remote part of Alberta. From this spot you can canoe into Lac La Biche or downstream to the Athabaska River. Both R. M. Patterson and Dick Turner came into the Nahanni Country by way of the Athabaska River.

Not too far from the cabin on La Biche River the Alberta Government, since our last visit has established the La Biche River Wildland Provincial Park which takes in part of the La Biche River and the Athabaska river. The park is described by the government as a park ``that protects undisturbed native boreal forest landscape that consists of wetlands and dense forests of poplar, aspen, spruce, birch and fir. The area provides habitat for black bear, lynx, wolverine, woodland caribou, moose and beaver.`` It takes in just under 43,000 acres.

Jean and I are pleased about this protection as this spot is fondly remembered by us. The more wilderness areas set aside from development the greater the inheritance received by future generations.

Delicious supper highlighted by T-Bone steaks that Jean cooked to perfection. After supper we took a stroll along the river blessed by beautiful weather. Nice to see the river again and hear lots of birds in the woods and ducks and beavers in the river.

Spent one more day and night at the cabin. We did a bit of bushwhacking - a few wet areas and feeling of wildness. We returned by way of the Mallas's old homestead. They were an elderly kindly couple living on the river from whom we bought the 150 acre parcel of wilderness back in the late 1960's. It still brings chills to us as we recalled how close we came to losing Chad who was around three at the time.

The Mallas's were looking after a grandson about the same age of Chad and volunteered to look after Chad so Jean and I could go on our Honda Trail 90 motorcycle to a remote lake several

miles away. It was a sandy trail with a number of water crossings. Some deep enough as to require walking the bike. Beautiful sandy beach.

The Mallas's had fenced off a small area of the river next to the house. The area was shallow making for an excellent play area for the two kids. When we got back the Mallas's, their faces ashen, told of the frightening experience. They heard their grandson screaming and looked out in time to see that Chad had somehow managed to climb over the fence and was floating away in the deeper water. His life-jacket was half off his head. Mr. Mallas grabbed his rowboat and quickly retrieved him. The Mallas's were more frightened than Chad.

One can't help but think how a fickle of fate makes all the difference in the world. Imagine the difference in our lives if upon returning happily from our wilderness trek to be suddenly confronted with a tragic drowning. How many instances over a lifetime has a difference of a second or a decision to do something or not do something had life-changing ramifications? Close calls - close calls that would shake us to our roots if we had been made aware of them.

May 14th following a good breakfast we were away by 9 am. Had only gone a couple of kilometres and a bear lumbered across the road. Arrived at Peace River. Saw a campground sign advertising free firewood and free showers but also saw a Lion's Club campsite. Drove into the Lion's Club campground but when we learned there was extra charges for showers and firewood we thought we would investigate the other campground. Since we were going to be on the road for two months we were very conscious of costs. As we turned the car around a friendly volunteer came over to chat. He was an ex-RCMP. He explained that the Club used the extra revenues to support local community causes. So we stayed.

I have often seen a photo taken from a lookout where the Smokey River joined forces with the Peace River. To me it captured the majesty of this part of the country. Since the lookout was nearby we drove up to it after supper. It is a little unusual that a photo captures your imagination when you have never been there. Jean and I, while living in Edmonton, had kayaked on the Wapiti River that flows into the Smokey River and have kayaked down the Peace River from Hudson Hope, B.C to below Fort St. John. This was just before the W.A.C. Bennett dam was built that resulted in the huge Williston Lake Reservoir. In doing so it drowned the Finlay and Parsnip Rivers that fed the Peace River. It also flooded out the communal homeland of aboriginal peoples. Many blame the dam for the lowering levels of water downstream that impact the critical habitat of wildlife in the Athabaska and Peace deltas.

Remember my telling you how R.M. Patterson's "Dangerous River" and his other writings inspired our trip into Nahanni Country. Well one of his books, "Findlay's River", describing his journey through a magnificent country of dense forests and high mountains, caused me to add one more trip to my bucket list. It was not to be. The rivers were doomed by W.A.C. Bennett, sometimes referred to as Wacky Bennett, premier of B.C. I consider myself largely nonpartisan having friends in all parties and having voted at least once for all of them. My very first election

was when I lived in the riding of Ernest Manning - I trusted him with my vote. Bennet was a member of the same party - but I hold a grudge. Not personally as every person is a product of their time and experiences. But its hard to turn a blind eye to the relatively voiceless and certainly powerless native communities who had their traditional way of life - all that mattered to them - ripping out part of their soul, because society wanted a dam. Its hard to turn your back on the wildlife, our unoffensive kin, who had neither say nor justice.

But I speak from a different time, a product of different experiences. I am grateful that Jean and I made this partial journey before the dam was built. Although over 50 years have passed, and details fade, Jean and I occasionally relive the experience. I still recall the brisk tail wind at our back. We were in our double Klepper, a folding kayak. I handed our umbrella to Jean to use as a sail. The wind was so strong it immediately turned the umbrella inside out. So I took it and opened it against her back. The force of the wind against the umbrella folded it around her back lifting the front of the kayak out of the water. It was a bit wobbly, certainly precarious, but did we fly!

We have never made better time before or since. In fact we arrived about 7 hours earlier than expected and had to wait for my brother-in-law, who lived in Fort St, John, to pick us up.

I recently read that the WAC Bennett Dam now has a visitor centre and people pay for the tour of the centre. A couple of the reviews were glowing. I thought to myself, "if only they could have seen it before." I suggest picking up Patterson's book and discover at least vicariously what it once was. It painfully reminds one of warnings from experts that there is a growing nature amnesia among us. You will not and indeed cannot miss what you never knew. Perhaps you (our grandchildren) might look out over Williston Lake reservoir and think it is beautiful and perhaps be impressed at the Lordship of man who could create such a large dam. But Jean and I would see something far different. We remember how it was. We feel loss and sadness. We feel sorrow we can't share with you what we shared. It's gone.

I think of our journey into Nahanni Country. If a lot of people, indigenous, newcomers, lovers of the wild hadn't joined forces the Nahanni could have been flooded too. The water putrefied by mining toxins. A U.N. heritage site unrealized. Yes you would not miss it. You never saw it. Many of us would weep - what penance could we possibly pay if we idly stood by and watched the carnage? Thank God for this one victory that lives on!

We watched the sun begin to take its leave - slowly, almost imperceptibly, peacefully until only a pleasant glow remained in the heavens. One more thought came to mind. Remember I said that I had on my bucket list to kayak on the Finley River as a result of Patterson's book but the dam made that dream impossible? Well that is true. However his book did inspire the kayak trip from Hudson's Hope to Peace River. During his journey on the Finley River in 1949 his wife, Marigold, joined him by way of bush pilot at Finley Forks. Together they enjoyed a lovely canoe sojourn down the Finley River and into the Peace River passing Hudson's Hope where Jean and I

started our trip a dozen years or so later. They too experienced a tailwind and rigged a sail to hasten their forward prospect. The Pattersons continued on to the town of Peace River arriving on September 16th.

If we could go back in time standing at this lookout we could have seen them as small specks drifting by. If we were at the river's edge when they beached I wouldn't have known them - not even by reputation. I would be in my 12th year. However if somehow the mysteries of the universe made it possible to greet them landing there while at the same time adding over a half a century to my age I would welcome them by name. They would have stared blankly at us. I would tell them that I felt I did know them as his books had impacted my life greatly. Like all great story tellers he caused myself and many others to live vicariously his outdoor sojourns. His readers could imagine sitting around the same campfires, keeping their canoe upright through exhilarating rides through rapids, and feeling the cold blast of winter on the traplines. How little anyone knows the impact they have on others even when completely unaware of any interaction.

Yes I have an active imagination. Grandkids don't allow your imagination be stifled. The world is too mysterious, too unknown to think we touch more than outward appearances that never catches the essence of things. I am sure the world is more than even our imaginations can conceive. Henry David Thoreau marvelled at how as soon as his feet began moving his thoughts began to flow. Standing here with Jean by my side looking out over this beautiful river valley I am content. Jean could not possibly know all the thoughts and imaginary stirring inside my mind as we stand side by side nor I hers. Both of us comfortable - both glad to be here.

Returning to our tent site we noticed two more tents had been erected across the way. We exchanged greetings - three woman and a guy (all young) from Calgary, They had spent a few days in Peace River and they too were headed to Fort Simpson.

May 15th birthed a nice day. Bacon and eggs and pancakes. Oh how I love Grandma's cooking. We were away by 9 am and heading to Grimshaw, Alberta. Just before we had reached our cabin a couple of days ago on the La Biche River a warning light suddenly appeared on the dash of the Fit. It turned out the oil filter was plugged. A mechanic blew it out but suggested we get it replaced before we tackled the Fort Simpson and Fort Liard highway.

No luck at Grimshaw nor at High Level. The next Honda dealer on our planned route was Whitehorse. A long way over hundreds of miles of gravel and dirt roads. Hope for the best.

A lonely road - a certain vastness - a certain remoteness - we felt like we were heading into the North Country. Some 470 kilometres down the road and we spot a sign. The border of NWT

Jean stated:

“We are stopping aren't we?”

More of a command than a question.

“Yes. Hopefully we can get more information about the road ahead.”

It was the middle of May - quite early in the year for northern roads. We had been told at Peace River that the road might present difficulty and may even be closed in spots. Our informant said we would get the latest update at the NWT information centre

Lots of activity - lots of work being done - but the centre was not open.

Stretched our legs and we were off again. Not quite 500 kilometres remaining to Fort Simpson but we knew there were spectacular waterfalls along the route and we wanted to see them first hand. Around 4 pm arrived at Louise Falls on the Hay River. It is just downstream from the higher Alexander Falls. We hiked to Alexander Falls - perhaps 3 or 4 km. Nice invigorating scents - great views of both waterfalls. Very special powerful falls cascading over limestone. Well worth a visit.

Remember the story of DH Koester who with his 12 year old stepson almost lost their lives in the First Canyon of the Nahanni? Well they came this way in 1974 to reach the Nahanni Country. He was so impressed with Alexander Falls that he named his daughter born the following year after them.

Yes the Falls are special, forceful demonstration of nature's power. Yet there is something familiar. As I walked along the rim of the canyon and looked across the river to the high steep banks a likeness to other rivers was triggered. The Athabaska River, the Big Salmon River, the Mackenzie River and others had like scenes of high steep banks devoid of vegetation but lined by trees at the top. A sandy khaki coloured soil that defied climbing up. Periodic slides, fragile yet permanent part of the river system structure.

On our way back to Louise Falls we were surprised by the sounds of motorboats. We rushed to the viewing platform just in time to see them getting close to the foot of the falls.

Choice of campsites was ours and we picked one a bit isolated surrounded by jackpine. Jean whipped up fried potatoes, beans and pork chops.

May 16th - the weather was cooler than yesterday and looked like it might rain. Breakfast of eggs, sausage, and toast. There was an 8 km hike on the escarpment trail we hoped to do before the rain came so we took down the tent and packed the gear into the Fit. So if it did rain the tent and gear would be dry.

The trail was one of those I find enjoyable - no particularly stand out scenery - typical wilderness

- the type of walk where cares drop off - no pressing thoughts or concerns. Two hours later we arrived back relaxed but weary and a little thirsty. Following a drink of cool, refreshing water we hiked down to the Falls. It involved 42 steps (I counted) of spiral stairs plus another 80 steps that got us close to the falls. One could profitably spend hours here. Not a soul in sight. I had counted the steps because I was still a little weary from the previous hike and I knew it would be much more tiring climbing back up. After all I was now in my seventies. I glanced at Pepi (in dog years he was every bit as old as me) and he was right at my heels. He kept glancing backwards to make sure Jean was right behind. Pepi takes everything in his stride. He loves being out with us in wilderness. Most who meet Pepi are amazed a Chihuahua is such a trouper.

We took our time climbing the steep steps and then both had a shower. On the road again by noon. One hour and half later we took the turn off to Lady Evelyn Falls located about 8 kilometres from the highway. Saw a trail going down to the Falls. Having done a fair amount of hiking today we wondered if we wanted to take the time to go. The desire to see the Falls for ourselves won out over our weary bodies. After all it was not likely we would be by this way again. Glad we did. It is quite spectacular. It doesn't cascade over a number of ledges but is like a high giant spillway. Concave in shape crossing the whole river and the sides of the river thickly framed with evergreens. I estimated the falls to be about 60 feet high. Well worth the visit.

We had a quick lunch and was on our way again. Not long and Jean whispered "bear". It looked like it was hiding behind a stump perhaps in ambush but then nonchalantly shuffled unto the edge of the highway. It stopped, looked at us as if to say who is going first you or me?

The highway was traffic free and for a few miles the conditions questionable. Gravel but muddy and the Fit sank in about as low as it could without being brought to a halt. At Enterprise a troublesome sign saying that the Ferry was open but may be delays due to ice. A little further down the highway a worse sign: "No Cars on the Ferry." We had passed a weigh station a few miles back and decided to turn around and see if we could get more information. The attendant said it only meant that there might be delays due to the ice flow.

I asked him if the Liard highway was passable. He thought we should be ok if our tires still had good tread and if we took our time. Large trucks were not allowed to go as they had done damage to the road, especially in one spot.

Arriving at the Ferry at 5:15 we were told we had a 10 minute wait. Not bad. I chatted with the driver in front of me and he too thought we could get through to Fort Liard. He knew there were two bad spots but he thought they were working on them.

It was 6 pm. when we arrived at a campground. Erected our tent, put our sleeping gear inside and I turned to look at Jean. She was dragging as was I. I smiled and said:

“Should we celebrate reaching Fort Simpson by dining out?”

She wholeheartedly seconded the motion. We came across the “Sub-arctic Restaurant”. Did I say dine out. It looked like a dive. We looked for another restaurant - found one but it was closed. Turned back to the Sub-arctic and surprisingly the food was much better than the outside appearance of the restaurant would have suggested.

As nightfall descended Jean said:

“It is such a nice evening we should have an evening campfire.”

I can't think of anything that draws a person into the spirit of wilderness more than a campfire. Something absolutely mesmerizing. How soothing to the modern stressed mind. What else can capture both the mundane and the world of imagination as a campfire? I got up and poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Jean.

“A little more milk please.”

Pouring my own cup I settled down beside her. She had a blanket around her back and shoulders. It was mid May in the North Country. Still remnants of ice in the Liard River. Hot in the front but the warmth of the fire never quite offset the effects of the chill in the air on our backs.

Like the canoe, the call of a loon, the distant howl of wolves, a campfire resonates with Canadians. It is hard to take your eyes off the blending of coals colourfully dancing and shooting sparks into the night sky. Streaks of green, blue, orange, red and mauve. Cracking, spitting embers skyward. The one thing that diverts your attention from the crackling wood in a blazing campfire is the magical theatre surrounding you as the trees take on a world of fluttering shadows - shadowy figures appearing and disappearing almost as apparitions - not substance but still real.

Grey Owl wrote of an aboriginal Seer who prophesied the day was coming when campfires along Indian trails would be no more. Doesn't this conjure up a melancholy lament? Campfires a constant in our history all the way back to ancient times.

As I watch the shadowy display projected by the fire on the landscape of trees, it is so easy to feel one in time and space - a twilight zone. How many campfires over eons of time lit up the darkness in these Northern climes. I thought of the campfires that punctuated Bill and my experiences along the Liard River 41 years ago. I thought of the campfires on the Nahanni in the First Canyon where Jean and I had an unusual 10th anniversary.

I thought of the many people I introduced to you who's lives were impacted and made richer by

their experiences in the Nahanni Country. Everyone of them had been in Fort Simpson and I suspect all, except perhaps Pierre Berton, would have sat around a campfire either in Fort Simpson or on the Liard River.

All of the people I introduced you to and provided a glimpse into their history and relationship to the Nahanni were alive during my lifetime. This doesn't include William and Frank McLeod whose bodies were found in 1908 at Deadmen Valley nor Martin Jorgensen who's remains were found in 1914 or 1915. The stories of those three form the impetus for the legends that developed and surrounded the Nahanni. Nor does it likely include Bill Eppler and Joe Mulholland who disappeared in either 1936 or 1937, a few months before I was born. I say likely because their bodies were never found and rumours of the day suggested that Joe Mulholland had been seen in Vancouver.

Those I introduced to you that had left the Nahanni Country by the time we made our journey in 1968 and 1969 but who were still alive include the following: Their date of death when known is in brackets)

Jack La Flair	(1950)
Poole Field	(1949)
Al Lewis	(Not known but he would be 103 if alive)
R M Patterson	(1984)
Gordon Mathews	(1976)
Fenley Hunter	(1965)
Pierre Burton	(2004)

Those that resided in the Nahanni Country during our visit(s):

Albert Faille	(1974)
Dick Turner*	(Don't have exact date of death but believe around 1992)
Vera Turner*	(not have date but been told she has passed away)
Gus Kraus*	(1992)
Mary Kraus*	(2009)
Mickey Krause*	(likely still alive but don't know)

The asterisks appear after the names of those we met.

Those I introduced to you who's relationship to the Nahanni occurred in the years following our trip:

Bill Mason*	(1988)
Ranulph Fiennes	

DH Koester
Neil Hartling
Joanne and John Moore

* I know that Bill Mason paddled the Nahanni River on different occasions including the year of his death in 1988.

I felt a twinge of sadness intertwined by a spirit of quietude. All those connected to the Nahanni prior to our visit, including the ones we met in person, have all passed on. The one exception is Micky Kraus and I am not aware of his current situation.

As I sat around the campfire my mind went back to Grey Owl's account of the Aboriginal Seer who stood speaking to the wilderness as if to a host of past friends and ancestors. A bridge between the present and the past - an unbroken kinship. Thinking about his account I felt in this setting, alone with Jean, how easily, how naturally, I could envision each of those I mentioned to you and listed above walking over and joining us and I would have shook their hands and felt they were friends.

What a class reunion that would be! The University of the Wilderness as experienced in the Nahanni Country.

Making sure the fire was completely and safely out we retired to our tent. Thoughts of the past, the present, and what might be waiting for us as our journey continues intermingled until the sound sleep brought on by fresh wilderness air overtook me.

Monday morning packed, got gas and ready to tackle the Liard Highway. We inquired about Mr. Mercredie who had interviewed Bob and I on our bike/river trip for the Mackenzie Times. Both the campground operator and the Information Centre thought he had left Fort Simpson and that the Mackenzie Times had ceased operations.

Just two trucks ahead of us waiting to drive onto the ferry and the first in line was being beckoned forward. Once on the ferry I looked towards the Mackenzie River on our left. I thought of a statement made by Shari as we drifted past the Camsell Bend, considered by many to be one of the most beautiful areas on the Mackenzie. This was on June 9th 1992 as recorded in *Bicycling and Kayacking - On the Road for Quality Child Care*. Her statement:

“We are really lucky to be on this trip, to see a part of Canada that few people get a chance to see...especially before highways and pollution take their toll.”

The pathos of her statement was heightened by our observations the day before, on the same 1992 trip, when we had come across a clearing we assumed to be in preparation for the ferry and the proposed highway to Wrigley. The highway was planned to eventually run the length of the

Mackenzie River.

Somehow highways change little and yet changes everything. Just a narrow strip of gravel, perhaps 60 feet wide, going through remote areas. Yet emotionally when I think of a campfire along the river hundreds of miles from the nearest road I pinch myself. Where else in the world can you experience this. This equals and in my mind surpasses the roadless Amazon River. Yes so glad we did the trip in this narrow opening of time.

Actuary I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the highway has not been extended beyond Wrigley. It seems to be on hold.

I then looked upriver scanning the Liard River which Bill and I paddled down in 1968. We were literally on our own. True wilderness. Knowing that you could hike a few miles to a highway if you needed to psychologically weakens if not breaks the ties to those before us who travelled this lonely, magnificent wilderness. Years later I was pleased to read in the website of the Canadian Canoe Routes a description of the canoe trip from Fort Liard to Fort Simpson

“The Liard River between Fort Liard and Fort Simpson is a seldom paddled, but utterly fantastic route with sweeping mountain vistas, bison congregating on the sand bars and moose feeding on willows along the shore, the river is a wildlife watcher’s dream.”

I was a little surprised but delighted to hear this. I would have thought there would have been more canoe traffic. Bill and I had no choice but to go the whole distance between Fort Nelson and Fort Simpson. Now with the highway individuals, pressed for vacation time, could choose to start at Fort Nelson and end at Fort Liard or start at Fort Liard and go to Fort Simpson. Or those like Bill and I who were concerned as to what we might encounter on our maiden northern trip would have the knowledge they could terminate the trip at Fort Liard or if the descriptions of the Beaver Dam Rapids scared them off they could end it at Fort Liard or even down river past Nahanni Butte to the Blackstone Territorial Park.

It was with some apprehension we approached the turn off to the Liard highway. The muddy conditions could prove impassible for the low clearance Honda Fit. It was 11 am when we made the turn. Our first destination was the Blackstone Territorial Park some 166 km from Fort Simpson. Sure enough we hit a soft spot. I gunned the motor to keep up speed. The vehicle slowed to a turtle’s pace coming within a hair of being bogged down. It did bottom out but managed to inch itself to a place less soft. I checked underneath the carriage and didn’t notice any damage or any parts left behind.

The road called for caution but was intermittent between reasonably good roads to rough spots. At times I hit 80 km an hour and then had to slow quickly to miss a rough spot. Jean doesn’t like these kinds of roads. I don’t mind them but it is concerning when you are so far from any service.

We ate our lunch at a clearing beside the road. A half hour later found as at the Blackstone Park. I wondered if it would appear much the same as when Bob and I came by in 1992. We parked the car. The Fit was lonely as we didn't see another vehicle and we wondered if the park was open. Making our way to the visitors centre, opened the door and walked in. Shortly a friendly voice greeted us. He asked if we had signed the guest book. He added:

“You will be the first this year.”

While Jean toured the visitor centre I chatted with the young staff person. Unfortunately I failed to write his name in my diary notes. He was from Nahanni Butte and told of having spent a summer on top of the Butte on fire lookout duty. I asked him if it was a difficult climb and he didn't think we would have difficulty climbing it. He mentioned a special occasion while he was on duty. I don't remember now if it was a party involving either a community event or an anniversary but he had hustled down to be there and made it back a few hours later. It seemed like awful fast time but then he looked very fit.

Jean and I would have loved to hike to the top. Apparently it can be arranged but needs to be done in advance. It would involve someone coming with a boat to take us to the Nahanni Butte and then take us back. I image it would be quite the view. If only we had known.

He was interested in our kayak trip in 1968 and the jet boat trip in 1969. Of course, trying not to be too obviously immodest, I mentioned that Mike Harrison who was on duty in 1992 had told us we were the first cyclist to come by. (I must admit I am proud of that.) Again my notes about this stop was not as extensive as they should have been. My recollection is a little blurred but I think he mentioned that Mike had moved on and had married a girl from Yellowknife. Mike had told us about his Metis girlfriend in Yellowknife who was involved in their day care program.

We made reasonable time, avoiding or slowing down for soft spots, travelling the 115 km from Blackstone to Fort Liard. I tried to find a road that would take us to the river front. It was not difficult to find but was not at all prominent. Jean said she wouldn't have known she was in Fort Liard if based solely on her memory of the 1969 trip. I, of course, had seen the changes when I came through on the bike trip. Still small, although not as small, as when when we had come by in 1968 and 1969. Life now centred around the road through town instead of being centred along the river.

Jean loves craft shops. I purposely avoided the information centre with their crafts until I had a chance to drive down to the river - hoping to experience something that ticked my nostalgia bone or wherever these things are stored. I knew once she was let loose among the crafts I was there for the long haul. At the craft shop she went her way and I mine. After I did my quick tour I saw Jean, true to form, completely preoccupied with the offerings. So I spent a pleasant time talking to a couple of staff about life in the area. One at least had lived, perhaps still did, in Nahanni

Butte.

Finally I made my way over to Jean who was raving about a moose hair picture. Seeing how taken she was with it I asked why she didn't buy it. I was sure we could find someplace to tuck it into our overcrowded Fit.

“No - perhaps if the trip was over - but we have weeks ahead of us and I don't want to have nothing left in my pocket as we go through Yukon and Alaska. You know I want to bring gifts home for the kids and grand kids.”

Yes it was expensive - not if you count the hours that went into it and skill required. But we were pensioners.

I noticed her glancing back at it as she made her way around the other crafts. Finally I took her aside and said:

“Look, on the 50th anniversary of our engagement we spent a bundle on getting a large screen TV and kitchen cabinets. Last August, our 50th anniversary, we were saving for this trip. I hoped we would do something special this August. Let's buy this Moose Hair picture as our 51st. You said you wanted a Moose Hair craft for years and it would be special to both of us as it was made in the Nahanni Country.”

She was pulled both ways. I insisted and we both left happy as was the clerk.

I was hoping to make the informal campsite on the Fort Nelson River where Bob and I and the gang had camped in 1992. About an hour or so outside of Fort Liard we came to the B.C. Border. Wow paved road!. So we decided to go to Fort Nelson and stay in the campsite that we had stayed in 1992. I wasn't sure it would still be there but if not there was bound to be a campground nearby.

From here our 2010 journey was to continue to Dawson City, Alaska and B.C. I was planing to end our tale to you of our visits to Nahanni Country when we arrived at Fort Nelson but decided to conclude our story following one more night which we spent at the Liard Hot Springs. The upper Liard River flows to the Mackenzie River. By this justification I will close our trip there.

While in Fort Nelson Jean handed me a local brochure advising that the Liard Hot Spring Campground opened on the May Long weekend - a few days later than when we would be going by. Hopefully we would be able to walk in to enjoy or at least see the hot springs.

Surprise - the campground was open and even more surprising they had one site left. Although it was early in the day and we had planned to camp further down the road, we reminded ourselves that this was not a rush trip squeezed within vacation time. Advantages of retirement.

We were the only tenters - every other spot were taken by very expensive, large campers. Set up our tent and headed for the hot springs. How nice - how relaxing - what perfect surroundings - lay back soaking. Not a hot tub in the most luxurious spa can compare with this setting.

I got the campfire going - just large enough for cooking. Jean baked potatoes rolled in aluminum foil and buried within the hot coals. T-bone steaks. I had bought a pie, unbeknownst to Jean, when we were in Fort Nelson.

Following the delicious supper Jean said lets get the dishes done and then relax. I said:

“What! No desert?”

She answered:

“Wouldn’t that be nice. We have to wait until we get to Whitehorse.”

I walked over to the Fit and dug around to where I had hid the pie. Came back with:

“Whitehorse is too far - here.”

“Where did you get that from? “I baked it of course.”

Apple-rhubarb. Nice finish to a sumptuous wilderness meal.

We had just finished dishes - I as usual dried them. I, enjoying a coffee and Jean a cup of tea, a lady came over from the large camper and invited us to join them.. There were three couples, each couple with their huge campers were travelling together from Oregon. Jean and I couldn’t believe the luxury. In the one camper they even had two deep freezers packed to the gills. Another couple, they had made friends with, came over as well. They were from Holland.

They couldn’t believe we had come so far in the little Fit. I couldn’t help but say:

“This is luxury compared to the bicycle trip to the arctic.”

They thought I was pulling their leg until Jean confirmed it. A very pleasant evening spent. As we were going out the door one lady asked:

“Won’t you freeze in the tent? We have an extra room you are welcome to use.”

Jean thanked her for the kind offer but said we have warm sleeping bags and will be fine.

During the night we were woken by a huge noise. The wind was the worse we had experienced on the trip. Jean worried that it might be a tornado. The sides of our tee-pee shaped tent billowed in and out, completely out of control. Then the pouring rain.

Both of us wide awake. Should we head for the Fit? After fifteen minutes or so I began to relax. I am not sure about Jean. It seemed to me that the tent was holding. I suspect it was the shape of the tent. We have had other tents collapse under less serious pounding. Finally we dozed off. I woke by 5 am listening to the rain. So enjoyable except for the thought of taking it down in the rain. It seemed like the storm was fixated at this spot. No sign of moving on. Then inexplicably the rain stopped. I glanced at my watch - 6 am.

Up by 7 am and boiled water in our Kelly Kettle. This is a magnificent camp tool. It stands about 10 inches high and consists of the kettle with an inner and outer wall. The water is held between these two walls. The inner wall acts as a chimney. The heat rises through the chimney and the water boils within a couple of minutes. No firewood needed. Twigs or any combustible material. We brought 50 ounces of water to boil in two or three minutes using sheets of newspaper. Its great also if you need to purify water. Look it up on the internet and you will get a better idea of its appearance and function.

I had enough water to make each of us a cup of coffee as well as fill two mugs to cook oatmeal. A quick and satisfactory breakfast. As we were packing the tent and gear into the Fit, the lady from Oregon came over. She said she had worried about us all night and had asked her husband to go out in the storm to bring us into the camper. He wisely responded that if we ran into difficulty he knew we would head their for shelter.

She said she couldn't believe our tent withstood the storm adding "The big camper even shook at times."

Well so ends the Nahanni Country saga. We were glad that Pepi was part of the trip. He was no bother - even in the storm last night he remained calm, cool and collected. He was almost 11 years of age and no stranger to wilderness trips. A faithful companion. On this Alaskan trip he climbed mountains, hiked on glaciers, river rafted, hiked in gorgeous old grove forests, saw many bears and other wildlife. If he could write what a book it would be! We love him.

EPILOGUE

In 1972 Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau established the Nahanni National Park Reserve. It was a timid start in terms of the size of the park but absolutely critical in terms of timing. The amount of acres protected were expanded a couple of times culminating in a Bill in parliament expanding the Nahanni Park system to protect a landscape of some **35,000 square kilometers or 8,648,688 acres**. This is almost nine million acres. In doing so it became the third largest park in Canada.

It is difficult to comprehend how large this is.

Sienna I know you have some memory of our car camping trips visiting parks and wilderness areas in the United States. You visited the following parks:

Olympic National Park;
Rocky Mountain National Park;
Yellowstone National Park;
Yosemite National Park;
Canyonlands National Park;
Grand Canyon National Park;
Arches National Park;
Estes Park;
Dead Horse Point State Park;
Devils Tower National Monument.

To the best of my calculations (googling the above parks) added together have a sum total 34,304 sq km or 8,476,756 acres. Together not quite as large as the area protected by the Nahanni Park - 35,000 sq km or 8,648,688 acres

WOW!

Tessa, Toby, Sienna and Solena for additional perspective consider that Vancouver Island is 31,285 square km or 7,730.692 acres.

When I think about this I recall my emotional involvement with so many who sacrificed and fought so hard to save portions of Vancouver Island - portions with magnificent old growth forests. Young and old came. I particularly recall a grandmother being dragged off to jail for participating in a blockade to prevent old growth trees being felled. She told the judge that she had no choice.

“How could I look my grandchildren in the eye and say I didn’t try?”

These battles were hard - tears were shed. How they would have smiled through their tears to

hear that the Nahanni - slightly larger than their whole island has been saved.

I think too of the Queen Charlotte Islands and the hard fought battles by the indigenous people supported by thousands of people who valued the ancient forests and could not stand by to see them ravaged by logging companies. They too would have rejoiced at the Nahanni victory.

To help understand the size of this victory just think of taking the Queen Charlotte Islands and add to them Cape Breton Island and the whole province of P.E.I. Together they are not as large as the Nahanni.

Think of the following States: Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire and New Jersey. It is staggering to think the protected Nahanni is larger than any one of these States.

Imagine what Hawaiians would say if you told them that the Nahanni is larger in size than their whole State of Hawaii!

Now lets put this in the context of how protecting such large tracts of wilderness has become critical to the type of Canada we want. The type of Canada I hope you will support too. You see when I was your age Tessa, delivering telegrams, I could ride my bike for an hour or two and find significant blocks of wilderness. A couple hours by car and I would be fishing in any number of remote lakes where it would be unusual to see another person. This was true for most Canadians. The vast majority of Canadians lived along a narrow strip along the border of the United States. Halifax, Quebec City, Montreal, Kingston, Toronto, Windsor, Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, Winnipeg, Regina, Vancouver, Victoria.

To us the north was wonderfully uninhabitable. Muskeg, millions of lakes, ponds, rivers, rugged rocks, mountains. A land reached by rivers. I was five years of age when the Alaska highway was built. Not to gain access to the north but as a hedge to defend against Japanese invasion of Alaska. Not much of a highway - tire suicide. In my mind the Canadian wilderness extended forever and started not too far from our doorstep. I didn't need protected parks to experience wilderness. As a teenager I supported national parks because of their intrinsic beauty. Mountains, lakes and waterfalls that should remain in the public commons - available to all rich and poor alike. The term ecology meant nothing to me.

I remember in the 1960's reading articles by Blair Fraser in Maclean's magazine. I especially admired the fact that he loved wilderness and canoeing. However Roy McGregor in his 2015 wonderful book "Canoe Country: The making of Canada" helped me see Blair Fraser in a larger light. McGregor highlighted Fraser's perspective of how Canada was singularly special. Fraser characterized the States as having the ugly look of cookie cutter towns spreading all across America. In contrast Canadian cities and the bulk of it's population were found along a narrow strip bordering the States and in the rest of this huge country laid a land too hostile to be thickly settled - but spectacular wilderness. There was no doubt in his mind that this would always be

the case. This reality made Canada unique from other countries and this essence of Canada made it his preferred country in all the world.

This resonated with me. Basically, although never articulated as well or as well reasoned, this is how I had seen Canada too. Blair tragically drowned on a river trip in May of 1968 the same year that Bill Calder and I took our first trip into the Nahanni country.

The difference a few years make. Greenpeace came into existence in the early 1970's. The first Canadian anti-logging blockade took place in 1984 on Meares Island near Tofino, B.C. The Canada Blair Fraser described, a wilderness backdrop to where we lived, thousands of kilometres of wilderness, put in a canoe and be alone for hundreds of miles, the greatest country ever, none like it, singularly special was no longer. Yes the muskeg, harsh but awesome landscapes were still there but were no match for technology. Whole mountainsides stripped bare, skinned alive, grotesque clear-cuts.

Neither Fraser nor myself foresaw seismic roads fragmenting our wilderness every kilometre or so, dams that changed forever the right of wilderness to self-generate according to its wisdom, oil sands that cause health havoc downstream and pollute the waters of our rivers hundreds of miles away. No more heralded white pines standing as sentinels guarding entrance to the wild - mowed down. No place, not one, so sacred as to be beyond the reach of greed. Canada was not that singularly special country anymore.

Therefore I was surprised, even startled, when I came across evidence that wilderness continues to linger as part of our Canadian psyche, even in high places. It is related to the Nahanni story. It is there for everyone to read in the Hansard which provides a written record of what is said in the Parliament of Canada. Here, on June 17, 2009, you will find a long but heartfelt verbatim report of Jim Prentice's speech in support of expanding the Nahanni boundaries when he was Minister responsible for Parks Canada. Well worth reading in its entirety.

Don't just skim his words or treat them in a cursory way. They are stunning! I can't think of another instance where all political parties spoke so positively and uncritically of a bill that was also endorsed by the Indigenous people. In an age so used to political spin that our eyes glaze over every time a politician speaks, I felt extremely moved - almost to tears. If ever politicians spoke from the heart this has to be a shining example. Prentice captured the sentiment of Blair Fraser - perhaps even more elegantly. He spoke to an identity of Canada that speaks to my soul. I say this as speech as nonpartisan - just Canadian.

He felt that this bill represented

“a landmark conservation achievement for Canada, the greatest achievement in a generation.”

Following glowing praise for the natural beauty and ecological values of the Nahanni he continues:

“... comprise the very essence of Canada and, in fact, the very essence of what it is to be a Canadian.”

He concludes his remarks:

“This park space is central to our identity as a people, is central to our identity as a country. This is a significant achievement and a contribution to Canadians and to world conservation. It is, in effect, the Deh Cho and Canada’s gift to humanity.”
(My underling and bold for emphasis.)

In 2009 Prentice was no longer under the illusion that Canada was special because our wilderness was protected by the inhospitable landscape north of our cities. Yet he clearly expressed that the specialness of Canada, our very essence, is associated with wilderness. This specialness takes place under a different paradigm.

It offers a new blueprint. - a prophetic blueprint of our way forward consistent with our uniquely special identity as a country. Setting aside large landscapes where wilderness reigns wild and free - not a sanitized garden - but a safe zone from human abuses.

As Prentice said:

“This park space is central to our identity as a people, is central to our identity as a country...It is, in effect, the Deh Cho and Canada’s gift to humanity.”

What other country can set aside so much beauty, so much wilderness splendour - wilderness value? Nahanni larger than Belgium, larger than Turkey, larger than Israel, and larger than Wales. Powerful - No?

What a blueprint - What a vision . It is the way forward. More Nahannies. A hard battle - no question - worthwhile - no question. Within your grasp? Absolutely

But it is only part of the blueprint needed. Large protected landscapes such as the Nahanni does not place wilderness settings within an hour’s drive from where most of us live. We need wildlife corridors to protect the traditional pathways needed by wildlife. We need parks and green nature zones within neighbourhoods. We need wilderness areas protected by land trusts and other conservation authorities.

You know how much you love coming to cliffLAND. Yes sanctuaries of silence, unpolluted night skies - a place where you may see a moose, a bear, a wolf and be alone with yourself.

Places supplying a wealth of nature experiences. It is these nature experiences that caused your Grandma and myself to fall in love with nature. You can't love what you have not experienced - at least not deeply, not viscerally, not in the depths of your being

This is a grand vision. I hope the fire that Grandma and I have for nature is kindled in you. If it is it becomes the greatest legacy we can pass on. But what a challenge - what a torch we pass on. You know that John Muir is my favourite naturalists. He was utterly right when he warned that the battle for that which feeds our greed against that which feeds our souls is unending.

Don't get caught up in false dichotomies. John Muir, considered the father of national parks, and Gifford Pinchot, considered the father of modern forestry, have been pitted by some as bitter enemies. This is a false dichotomy. Both believed in sustainable development and stewardship of natural resources. In this, which was most of the time, they were allies. The gulf between them was Pinchot's contention that economic good always trumped beauty, aesthetics and spiritual values. Muir believed man needs more than bread and requires sacred places that feed their souls.

Well as much as I admire Pinchot I want you to know that Grandma and I believe we need - we absolutely need - places where nature remains in control, unfolding in power and beauty, self willed, self-generating as its wildness dictates.

If there is a truth I feel I can leave with you - an article of faith - Humans are not God. Whatever science they bring to bear - however valuable it may be - it represents the tip of the iceberg. There needs to be spaces - large spaces where nature's wisdom rules - a profound wisdom built over eons of time. I think this is the battle for Canadian identity. I think it is a vision that allows Canada to be singularly, uniquely special among the nations of the world.

Well Tessa we hope you enjoyed the tale of your grandparents adventures and our thoughts while in the Nahanni Country. Perhaps it will have even more meaning to you as the years roll by. The same for you Toby. As a twelve year old at the time we are writing this you might relate to some of the stories but we hope you will find deeper meaning in your reading of it as your life experiences unfurl. This sentiment is especially true for you Sienna and Solena.

Remember we emphasized that every wilderness sojourn is at its heart a spiritual journey. It is much more than seeing trees, flowers, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, mountains, sunsets, and abundant wildlife. Nature is a healing force and is the master teacher. The University of the Wilderness is like no other - has no equal. It is the true democratization of the learning process. There is no entrance exams, no social class, no age, no gender barriers. Wilderness accepts renowned scientists seeking to unravel the secrets of nature as it does the toddler thrilled at the sight of a butterfly - accepts all as equals.. What other class could you sign up for that promotes your

physical well-being, your emotional health, your intellectual and philosophical curiosity, cements social bonding, and grows your spiritual development?

Wilderness takes you as you are. The lessons taught are accordingly to your own interests, your own level of readiness, and at your own pace. The well from which you drink is never emptied. There is no graduation. After a lifetime well spent you are still an elementary student, a novice.

There is more. Nature is patient - the benefits unfold slowly but powerfully. The squirrel sequesters a seed, the rain and the sunlight nourishes the seedling and the seedling grows into treehood. We are but one component in nature, marvellous in our own way, but all of nature appears sentient in its own way. A mystery, a intelligence, a wisdom, a profoundness beyond our reach. So just as a planted seed is slowly nourished so is your experience in nature. The seed planted, unnoticed, unperceived quietly unfolds. The way Grandma and myself perceived the Nahanni Country in 1969 is akin to the buried seed - as the years go by the experience takes on new meaning, is seen through new lens and the end result every bit as different and as surprising as the difference between the natal embryonic seed state and its culmination to tree maturity.

So take from our experience what you can now and see if it is not true that as you have additional experiences of your own you will relate differently to our experience.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

A protected land of unspeakable beauty – larger than some provinces and states. A place where landscapes will no longer be disfigured, waterways made toxic, or air quality made impure by humans. A place so large that the voices of the land – the voices of wildlife are not silenced – where wildlife has room to spread and be true to its wildness. A place where wilderness provides succour to humans desperately needing what nature can do for their souls.

This story speaks to four separate journeys into the Nahanni country. One journey by kayak and one by jet-boat over 50 years ago – the era before a National Park, a roadless wilderness. On the third journey Howard became the first cyclist to travel the recently opened dirt highway from Fort Nelson to Fort Simpson. The fourth journey notes the changes via car, camping in a small Honda Fit – perhaps the first 'Fit to do so.

While reliving their wilderness adventures, Clifford introduces the early pioneers he and his wife Jean met, as well as others they did not, but whose lives are interwoven into the heritage of Nahanni Lands. What a heritage it is!

A gift to the Clifford grandchildren, this book will be enjoyed by a larger audience sharing a compassion for wilderness. Released as a free e-book in celebration of 60 years of marriage (August 22).

Cover photo: original source unknown

Back cover photo: Jean Clifford

