

A century ago northern Ontario was largely an uncharted wilderness. Great stands of timber, particularly the much coveted red and white pine, stood untouched across that area which is now known as the territorial districts of Nipissing, Temiscaming and Sudbury.

Only a few trappers and fur traders were familiar with this vast area at that time. Towards the-latter part of the nineteenth century the loggers and early settlers made their appearance. Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century the miners followed; the era of settlement and the advance of civilization had commenced.

The Mowat family of Mowat's Landing, which is located eighteen miles west of Haileybury on the banks of the Montreal River, watched the arrival of the loggers and settlers and the building of such famous towns as Cobalt, Haileybury, New Liskeard, Silver Centre, Gowganda and Kirkland Lake.

During the period from 1954 to 1961 it was the privilege of this writer to make the acquaintance of Mr. Charles Mowat. Frequently, during the winter months, I would visit with him and listen to his tales of bygone days along the river and in the surrounding countryside. These conversations took place in the old Mowat homestead, a large two-storey house built of squared timbers. It is located at Mowat's Landing overlooking the river.

During one such conversation in the winter of 1961, 1 made a number of notes as we talked of the past. The following recalls some highlights of the life and times of "Charlie" Mowat, a Montreal River pioneer.

In 1877, Mr. James Mowat emigrated from the Orkney Islands and came to Moose Factory as an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company. Mr. Mowat's first post was at Nighthawk Lake (near Timmins) where he was in charge for a short time in the early 1880's. He then took charge of Matachewan Post (Fort Matachewan) from 1882-1896. This post was located on Matachewan Lake at the narrows about four miles north of the present Matachewan townsite.

It was here that Charles Mowat was born on March 15, 1886. In 1896 the family moved to the Hudson's Bay Company store at Fiddler's Point in Bay Cake north of Latchford. The point is now an island since the lake level was raised by a dam constructed by the Ontario Hydro, for water storage. On the first of November 1900, the family moved again. This time they moved to the present location of

the Mowat farm on the west bank of the Montreal River at Mowat's Landing. They have lived here ever since.

Charles Mowat attended school where the town of Haileybury is now located, until 1899. Mr. Mowat spoke to me of many of the local travel routes of earlier times. Portage Bay was so named as it was the point at which the portage left for the head of Lake Temiscaming. The portage then connected with the old wagon road from Haileybury to Sharpe Lake, traces of which could still be found in the 1950's I walked portions of this road while hunting grouse during my years as a Conservation Officer when I was stationed at Haileybury. The last traces of this old colonization- route have now been obliterated by the construction of the tri-town by-pass and by the regeneration of the forest.

In the late 1800's and in the 1900's early transportation between the foot of Lake Temiscaming and the newly founded town of Haileybury (C. C. Farr 1899) was by Lake steamer. Goods were portaged by wagon to Portage Bay, and the Montreal River was the access route to the posts of the north.

Mr. Charles Mowat's recollections of the wildlife situation during those years at the turn of the century, were most interesting. During his boyhood there were no deer whatsoever in the Matachewan area, although they were present but not plentiful, in the country around Mowat's Landing and Latchford. Some woodland caribou inhabited that area in the 1890's but Mr. Mowat did not recall seeing any after 1900.

In the summer months, deer were seen quite frequently near the farm at Mowat's Landing but were seldom if ever seen during the winter. It was Charlie's opinion that they migrated some miles southward to yard. He was quite emphatic in stating that the deer population had increased to its highest level immediately following settlement and logging of the area. However, their numbers never equalled that found in areas from Temagami southward.

Among other recollections concerning the wildlife of the area was the fact that beavers, were very scarce around 1900. Moose, were quite numerous although he believes that the present population is probably the highest that he can remember. (Even at 75 years of age, Mr. Mowat guided occasional parties of moose hunters in the fall). Speaking about wolves, it was his conviction that a large wolf population had a noticeable effect on deer, but had little effect on the

moose population. The moose population could be affected in the spring and summer months when some young calves are taken. However, he indicates that the wolf population at the turn of the century may have been somewhat smaller than that of today.

When Mr. Mowat was asked whether he thought the winters were more or less severe than now, he replied that looking back nearly three-quarters of a century, he thinks that the average snowfall is greater now than it used to be. Further, he believes that there is much greater temperature fluctuations to-day, with fewer and shorter periods of prolonged cold weather.

Through the years many logging companies have held limits in the vicinity of Mowat's Landing and the upper Montreal River. Charlie recalled that the earliest logging was carried out by Gillies Bros. in the Bay Lake area during the late 1900's and ended around 1906. The first cutting in the immediate vicinity of Mowat's Landing (Barr and Auld Townships) was done by the Swenson Bros. in 1905. They cut ties for the Temiscaming and Northern Ontario Railway. Also in 1905, the Empire Lumber Company commenced operations in the Mowat's Landing/ Haileybury area but they failed after a couple of years operation. From 1907-1908 J. R. Booth had a camp on Big Spring Lake (Barber Township).

During the period from 1907- 1932 J. R. Booth, Salmon Bros. and the firm of J. J. McNeil operated along the Montreal River between Mowat's Landing and Elk Lake. The son of J. J. McNeil took over the firm in 1917 and called it the Auld Lumber Company. The McNeil interests acquired Salmon's Mill and a number of located farms on the east bank of the Montreal River near Moccasin Creek and also in Cane Township near the present location of Logan's Lodge. These acquisitions gave them the timber rights on these lands.

During this period in time, J. R. Booth assembled annual drives of 500,000 logs destined for the mills at Ottawa. In 1916-17 The McLennan Lumber Company Logged along the river and had a mill at Latchford. The mill occupied the site where Gordon's Mill was located in later years. A. B. Gordon bought out McLennan's interests after the tatter's death in 1934. Commencing in 1922, Grant and Dunn operated a camp near Mowat's Landing and logged until 1941 After 1934 the company name was changed to Grant and Alderdice.

During the winter of 1927-28 Charlie ran a camp at "Charlie's Bay", a short distance up river. He continued this operation for five years. The winter of 1927-28 is remembered for its particularly deep snow. Charlie recalls that keeping trails and roads open posed quite a problem.

The most recent and longest continuous logging operation in the area commenced in 1916. It was founded by Mr. A. J. Murphy. Known first as the Conkey and Murphy Lumber Company, the name was later changed to the A. J. Murphy Lumber Company, the name which the firm bore until its dissolution in 1960. The Murphy limits were very extensive and stretched from the Montreal River far west to Lady Evelyn Lake.

Large camps operated annually for many years in the area around Lady Evelyn Lake and every spring there was a huge drive through Lady Evelyn Lake and the Montreal River to the Murphy Mill at Latchford. This mill, located on the river southeast of Latchford, was destroyed by fire on June 22, 1957. It was later rebuilt on Bay Lake a short distance north of town.

On Lady Evelyn Lake during the drive, Murphy's operated a large steel-hulled "alligator" tug, and two scows with sleeping quarters and kitchen facilities. At Mowat's Landing, a large barge was anchored. It was capable of floating a tractor-trailer loaded with provisions from the dock at the Landing to the foot of Mattawapika Falls, one mile distant. Here the truckloads of provisions drove the few hundred yards around the falls and dam to Lady Evelyn Lake.

The Mowat family was intimately connected with the Murphy Lumber Company. During the years that the Company operated in the area, Charles Mowat laid out many of their logging roads. Both of Charlie's younger brothers, Duncan and Joseph, were Murphy Company employees. In winter, a snowmobile road extended from the Mowat farm to the logging camp some 35 miles distant and a large Bombardier snowmobile made the trip daily from freeze up to break-up.

The old Mowat homestead, through the 1950's and early 1960's, was an active, hospitable and popular point of call for local hunters, trappers, lumbermen and the few tourists who came to know the 'locals' intimately. Charlie, the eldest of the Mowats, continued to reside there with his brother Joseph and Lizzie Mowat, Mrs. Rachel Fiddler (Mowat) and George MacKenzie, a well-known Montreal River

guide and lumberman. Charlie seldom guided any more. Only an occasional close friend gained the benefit of Charlie's intimate knowledge of the Montreal River and the back-country. Joe still guided frequently as did George MacKenzie, while Lizzie and Rachel kept house as they had done for so many years.

When the air was frosty and the grunt of rutting moose could be heard along the quiet stretches of the river, hunters loved to gather during the long fall nights and listen with rapt attention to Charlie Mowat as he recounted tales of bygone days.

POSTSCRIPT

Time, like the Montreal River, rolls on, and much water has flowed past the old Mowat homestead since the foregoing was written ten years ago. The old weather-beaten house with its sturdy square-timber construction still overlooks the river as it has for three-quarters of a century. Now, however, it stands empty except for a brief period in the summer when it serves as a vacation home for a younger generation of Mowats.

Jim Mowat, nephew of Charlie now residing in Matheson, Ontario, together with his sister Mrs. Williams continue to care for the house and adjacent farm. Charlie's surviving brother Duncan resides in Oshawa and vacations at Latchford in the summer months. All the former residents of the old homestead are at rest in the tiny graveyard on the little knoll behind the house. This is also the last resting place of several local Indians and settlers of the area.

Joe Mowat died in a boating accident on the Montreal River on June 14, 1965 and Charlie passed away following a heart seizure in Haileybury on December 30, 1966. George MacKenzie lost his life when his snowmobile went through the ice on the river on April 19, 1970, and during the intervening years Lizzie and Rachel have passed away.

During the past ten years much has changed. The great river drives on Lady Evelyn Lake and the Montreal River are a thing of the past. Tourists no longer gather to watch and photograph the great red and white pine logs going through the log chute at Mattawapika Falls. Many more roads now penetrate the 'back country', particularly since logging of the area west of the Montreal River was undertaken from Elk Lake some years ago.

There are now more moose hunters in the fall than in bygone years. The 'silent season' which used to follow the end of the vacation season in early September, has become a thing of the past as ever-increasing numbers of outboard motors break the stillness.

With the passing of the inhabitants of the old Mowat homestead at Mowat's Landing, an historic era came to an end. The lifestyle and outlook of that period in our history - the transition from wilderness to modern society - is now almost entirely lost. I was privileged to gain an insight into this important piece of Canadiana through the eyes of one who lived and witnessed it Charlie Mowat Montreal River Pioneer.

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