

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Arctic Exploration

Waves from the turbulent waters of Lake Winnipeg broke over the sides of the weather-beaten, flat-bottomed *Colville* as a Canadian "nor'easter" shook the hull of the small freighter bound for Grand Rapids, Manitoba. The voyage across the broad upper part of the lake was unusually rough. And in the dingy, cramped quarters of the *Colville* the crew swapped stories and exclaimed in unison that their steamer was "the worst roller on the lake".

But through the night of August 26, 1892, as Frank Russell lay in his bunk, he was only partially mindful of the storm, the smell of fish, and the sickening sway of the boat, for his thoughts were floating back to the fall of 1891 when he was a Junior in the University of Iowa. It was in that year that he decided he would be a zoologist. He remembered how he had debated whether to continue as a portrait artist or to turn to the study of animal life — a subject which had in-

trigued him since he was a youth in Fort Dodge. He probably recalled also the day in the spring of 1891, when his restless nature prompted him to plan a zoological expedition to Canada in company with his close friend, Arthur G. Smith. This expedition was finally sponsored by the University and the two students were accompanied by Charles C. Nutting, professor of zoology. During the summer of 1891 the three men roamed the wilds of Manitoba collecting specimens for the University museum of natural history. It was then that Russell began to dream of exploring northern Canada.

It all began after Russell and his two companions had met Roderick Ross MacFarlane, an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company and a noted ornithologist. During conversations with the three University explorers, MacFarlane had expressed concern over the vanishing musk-ox. He said that the musk-ox was on the verge of extinction due to the "increasing activities of the Indian on the southern and the Eskimo on the northern borders" who were killing them for their hides. He urged the men to secure a "series of musk-ox" before the large animals were all gone. "His enthusiastic description of the field," wrote Russell afterward, "roused in me a strong desire to visit the Far North."

Professor Nutting wanted to develop the University museum and Frank Russell was eager to collect specimens. Having spent a summer in the field with his pupil, Nutting knew that he had the "stuff from which explorers are made" and persuaded President Charles Schaeffer and the University Regents to sponsor an expedition to the arctic region. Meager funds were raised and Russell volunteered his services. His instructions were concise: To obtain specimens of the larger arctic mammals, especially musk-ox and to "pick up everything else he could get his hands on."

Frank Russell's senior year at the University was devoted largely to a rigorous training program which he hoped would harden him for the life of a northern explorer. He stuck to his training plan as rigidly as the members of the Hawkeye football team. In addition he found time to serve as captain in the University military unit, take an active part in the Zetagathian Literary Society, and write a thesis on the "Variation of Animals in a State of Nature."

Upon his graduation in June of 1892, Russell and Smith set out for Puget Sound and British Columbia. Both men desired to collect rare specimens for their own cabinets until it was necessary for Russell to begin his northward journey. They secured marine invertebrate life from the

waters of Puget Sound and later got specimens of the mountain goat from the Rocky Mountains of central British Columbia. Their ways parted on August 15th when they reached Winnepeg. Smith bade goodbye to his friend and returned to Iowa City. Russell made arrangements to winter at the Hudson's Bay Company post near Grand Rapids at the mouth of the Saskatchewan River on Lake Winnepeg.

Boxes of clothing, guns, ammunition, food, and mounting material were dispatched to Selkirk, the head of navigation on the Red River for lake steamers. His expedition to the far north, destined to last for more than two years, began on August 24, 1892, when he boarded the *Colville*.

He arrived at the Hudson's Bay Company's station a mile and a half above Grand Rapids on August 29th. There he took possession of a small, unoccupied log cabin which was to be his home for the coming winter. The prospect was not reassuring, for the logs of the cabin were chinked with small amounts of moss, clay, and frozen mud and the cracks were all too numerous.

The day after he arrived, Russell went into the "bush" and shot twelve birds which he mounted in the afternoon. He intended to make as complete an ornithological collection as possible. He was also anxious to study the ethnology of the

Indians. Fortunately he soon discovered two or three burial places and uncovered bones of a people he presumed to be those who had occupied the region before the Crees had arrived.

Late in September he and Napasis, the best hunter around Grand Rapids, started out in a "leaky birch canoe" to hunt moose. Russell wanted experience in hunting big game in the far north. On the second day the men sighted two moose and emptied their guns. One escaped and the other, wounded in the leg, began to run. Immediately the two hunters gave chase and followed it for almost two miles over the muskeg. Russell finally overtook the animal and fired a fatal shot. His first moose!

Throughout his first winter in Canada, Russell went on many hunting expeditions with the thermometer sometimes hovering at 60° below zero. He busied himself in collecting birds, trapping animals, and preparing them to send back to the University. According to the plan this work was preparatory for the main expedition in the following summer. While at Grand Rapids he was to perfect himself in the art of managing dog teams, canoes, and snowshoes, the three means of conveyance in the north; and "to harden himself to the colder climate, that he might better endure the year of isolation in the arctic regions."

Back at the University, the students eagerly awaited letters from Frank Russell which were often printed in the *Vidette-Reporter*. His adventures were followed as closely as the athletic teams of that year. A. G. Smith, in the February 28, 1893, issue of the paper, made this comment in asking for a testimonial fund for the explorer: "When I often hear someone say 'I would enjoy such a trip', I feel like asking him whether the flaming Aurora would appear so beautiful when seen, while the mercury stands at 40° below; whether skimming over the snow upon snowshoes would seem so pleasant if after hours of this work, a supper of tea, bacon and bread, such as only an Indian squaw can make, was all that could be expected, whether three hundred and fifty miles from the post office would not detract from the beauties of nature; would the society of Indians make up for the culture of the University?"

Students and faculty alike responded to this appeal by giving \$221.96 to the testimonial fund. With this money a committee purchased a repeating rifle, a shotgun, shells, a camera and film, four suits of chamois-skin and fleece-lined underwear, books, and medicine. All this, with a check for fifty dollars, and a mending kit prepared by a group of girl students, was sent to Russell.

When he received the gifts in March, he wrote:

"I've faced the north wind every day this winter. I've been out when it was fifty-seven below zero. I've wakened in the morning with two inches of snow on my blankets; all without flinching, but boys, when you pointed that rifle at me I came down. . . . The rifle shall be kept among my 'good things'. I hope that I make such use of it along the Arctic coast as to prove myself worthy of at least some extent of the esteem of its donors."

Scarcely a day passed that he did not go out to hunt. By midwinter he was thoroughly acclimated and too busy to be lonely, being personally responsible for all eleven departments of his expedition. The hunter was "becoming more of an Indian every day," the ornithologist was "devoted to his science", the ethnologist was studying Indian customs, the entomologist had had painful experiences with sand flies, the geologist was worried about the cost of exporting specimens, the botanist wanted to spend about "fifteen hours a day" at his work, the meteorologist was keeping a record of the severe weather, the paleontologist planned frequent excursions, the secretary begrudged the time required to write notes, the cook had plenty to do, and the man that skinned the birds had "the most irksome duties of all."

On the morning of February 20, 1893, Russell left his winter quarters with a dog train which

was headed for Selkirk. He was making the three-hundred-mile trip in the dead of winter so that he might descend the Mackenzie River "by the first open water". The party reached Selkirk on the tenth day in the midst of a blinding snow-storm. Russell and the natives had suffered undue hardship from lack of food, because the dogs had eaten all the bacon, and most of them had suffered "snowshoe sickness" from the fatiguing pace they had set over the snow-covered terrain. From Selkirk, Russell went on to Winnipeg by train where he received a letter of instructions from Professor Nutting. Before departing for the far north he was directed to "proceed to Macleod, Alberta, and collect zoological and ethnological specimens until about May 1st."

The prospects in the vicinity of Fort Macleod being unpromising, he went thirty miles farther west to Pincher Creek. There, having devoted a week to hunting sheep in the rolling hills of Alberta without success, he turned to collecting birds. The result of his six weeks at Pincher Creek netted him forty bird skins, a Piegan Indian mummy, the skulls of nine mountain sheep, and mountable heads of mountain goats and mule deer.

Reaching Edmonton on April 20th, Russell purchased his equipment for the trip to the far north.

His supplies included: two hundred pounds of flour, fifty pounds of side bacon, twenty-one pounds of black tea, thirty pounds of brown sugar, and three pounds of baking powder. His entire outfit, including the provisions, ammunition, two Winchester rifles, and two shotguns weighed 750 pounds. A large portion of his food was to be given to the Indians as gratuities for services.

From Edmonton, the University explorer set out for Athabasca Landing in a horse-drawn wagon owned by the Hudson's Bay Company, and arrived in time to catch the Company's first York boat for Lake Athabasca. The river voyage was marked by narrow escapes for Russell and the ship's crew, for the stream was full of ice floes and the current was so strong that the boat nearly capsized when it struck a huge rock in the river.

Fort Chippewyan in the Athabasca District was reached on the twentieth day of the trip which covered 530 miles. In this "Land of Desolation" which Russell said had but two seasons — a snow season and a mosquito season — the explorer spent his time collecting many birds on the islands dotting Lake Athabasca. "When I attempted to collect birds", he wrote in his report, "the mosquitoes sometimes actually covered the gun barrels and concealed the sights. The mosquito helmet I was compelled to wear seriously

obstructed my vision, and they always found their way through its meshes. They have not the timid and hesitating manner that characterizes the southern mosquito, but realizing that their summer is short and naturalists are few, they waste no time but light squarely upon their bills and go to work. I have smeared coal oil, bacon grease, and other precious ointments upon my face and hands, with only temporary effect. My face and wrists were often swollen from their poisonous attacks. Sleep is impossible without a net to completely cover one."

After an uncomfortable but successful month of collecting birds around Lake Athabasca, the University explorer continued by boat down the Great Slave River to Fort Resolution and thence across the lake and up the northern arm to Fort Rae. At this settlement Russell spent ten days living at the Company post where he ate "black, tough, hair-covered caribou meat" three times a day. But the call of the far north beckoned and he decided to make a summer trip to the Barren Ground to secure more ornithological specimens, shoot caribou, and, as he said, "to get something to eat, as the unvaried diet of tasteless, leathery dried meat was growing intolerable." The Indians, however, refused to allow him to accompany them on a caribou hunt because they thought

the skins he sent home to be mounted would live forever and the herds would migrate southward to share that happy fate.

Finally, in company with Andrew, an Indian, Russell undertook a private reconnaissance up the Yellow Knife River in search of birds and caribou. During the trip the University explorer and his guide subsisted almost entirely on suckers and whitefish caught in their nets. They learned from the Dog Rib Indians, whom they met on their journey, that the caribou were out of reach. The region contained very few birds or small animals and, because the caribou hunt was futile, Russell decided to return to Fort Rae. He marked a tree on the shore of the last lake in a chain near the Yellow Knife River to commemorate "the visit of an Iowan to that desolate lake, never before visited, I believe, by a white man."

Summer passed quickly for Russell at Fort Rae. He made many trips into the forests and near-by islands to collect birds. He spent day after day shooting and trapping birds and at night, after feasting on his prey, would turn from hunter to taxidermist and preserve the skins. With the coming of fall he journeyed to Fort Resolution with the natives and inquired about expeditions of the Indians to the Barren Ground to hunt the musk-ox. After more than a year in the lonely

surroundings of northern Canada he was anxious to achieve the principal purpose of his mission.

With the first flurries of snow, the hardened explorer made arrangements to accompany the Indians of Fort Rae on their fall caribou hunt. During the three expeditions made with the Dog Ribs during the winter, Russell secured eight caribou which he prepared for the museum and also acquired a rare albino caribou skin. He traveled more than five hundred miles behind a dog sled on snowshoes for his rich reward. In December he skirted Great Slave Lake by dog team to accompany an Indian party setting out from Fort Resolution for a buffalo hunt. On the trip to Resolution the temperature ranged from 50° to 60° below zero.

"If exposed to the wind while on the march, as we were on the broad river and on the lake," reported Russell, "it was difficult to keep our faces from being frozen. At night the intense cold seemed unendurable. We never had any shelter but our blankets; it would have been impossible to have kept a fire burning all night, as the coals thrown off would have burned our blankets, and the quick-burning spruce would have required frequent renewal. Toward morning I was nearly always awakened by the bitter cold, which sometimes gave me the impression that my feet were

certainly frozen. I sometimes started the morning fire myself. Although there was little comfort in a bed, where I was literally writhing from cold, it was not pleasant to open my blanket covered with frost and snow, and search in the darkness for a strip of birch bark with which to ignite the charred sticks at our feet."

The trip to Fort Resolution to join the Chipewyan Indians on the buffalo hunt proved unsuccessful and so he returned to Fort Rae. He had spent two months, traveled 650 miles, pushed the dog sled most of the way, and "had not even seen a buffalo track" for his pains. He spent the month of February, 1894, in his lonely cabin at Rae, where his "spirits were at the lowest ebb", waiting impatiently for the Indians to begin the trek to the Barren Ground. To improve the time, he ran a trapping line during the day and wrote and sketched during the evening until the cold froze his ink and numbed his fingers.

At last, on March 5th, Russell set out with four Dog Ribs for the Indian camps which were busy preparing for the long journey to the desolate abode of the musk-ox. The tribe, led by Johnnie Cohoyla, was reluctant to take a white man to their own hunting grounds. They accepted Russell merely because they could beg from him precious bits of salt, tea, and tobacco. The weeks

dragged by and the hunters moved their camp ever northward toward the land of the musk-ox. Finally after the Easter festivities, the Indians decided the opportune time had arrived to invade the bleak desert of snow.

By dog sled the hunters and Russell traversed the plains. They depended on the numerous caribou of the country to supply them with food. After passing the Musk Ox Mountains, the party was held up for sixty hours by a fierce blizzard which made traveling impossible. On the thirteenth day of the hunting expedition, the day after the snowstorm had subsided, they caught sight of forty musk-ox. Russell's goal was now in sight! A six-mile chase ensued but only one hunter was able to reach the animals. This Indian killed four of the prized musk-ox.

Three days after the first musk-ox were seen, Russell, with the aid of field glasses, sighted a herd of fourteen on the summit of a hill. After two hours of cautious traveling the hunters neared the musk-ox and released the dogs to chase them. Russell, prepared to give chase to the animals, had taken off most of his cumbersome clothing. "We soon came upon eleven of the musk-ox standing at bay in two little clusters, hardly lowering their heads at the dogs, whose ardor had been cooled by the statue-like immobility of the noble

animals", he wrote, describing the kill. "Their robes were in prime condition, the long hair and heavy erect mane gave them an imposing appearance. To kill them was simple butchery, yet I had no choice but to fire as rapidly as possible and get my share of them, as they were all doomed anyway." He skinned the two animals the next day in the bitter cold of an arctic blizzard and prepared the skins and skulls for travel on the sled, formerly laden with firewood.

On the twenty-ninth day the hunting party returned to the camp from which they had started but found the place was deserted. It had been a very successful hunt but the hardships of *mal de racquette* (snowshoe sickness), carrying a load upon his back, and urging a weakened dog team, hauling five hundred pounds of skins and supplies over the frozen snow, were almost beyond the endurance of stouthearted Frank Russell.

In his book, *Explorations in the Far North*, Russell pictured the scene as he neared Fort Rae after the 800-mile trip: "As my weary dogs crept over the hill into Rae and dragged the load of five complete skins and heads of musk-ox in front of the door which they had left two months before, they sank down utterly worn out. I lifted them out of the harness and prepared my evening meal with slow and exhausted movements, but

sustained by a devout feeling of thankfulness that the journey had been successful."

On May 10, 1894, Russell left Fort Rae, which had been his "home" for almost a year, and traveled on snowshoes with his dog team to Fort Providence on the Mackenzie River. His farewell tribute to his faithful dogs is, by implication, a vivid portrayal of his own hardships. "With aching limbs and bleeding feet they had toiled on, their only reward being the half putrid fish of which I was often unable to give them full rations. Many a time they had been beaten into the snow when exhausted and hungry. Many a time they had been harnessed in the morning, too weak and stiff to start the heavy load, only answering the cutting whip with their piteous whine. Nadjuk, Treff, Major and Corbeau, we have hunted, eaten and slept together for the last time."

From Fort Providence, Russell traveled 600 miles down the Mackenzie River by steamer. From Fort Good Hope he proceeded 280 miles in a canoe and entered the arctic circle. The last 160 miles northward to the mouth of the Mackenzie was negotiated by canoe in company with Count de Sainville. By following the glow of the midnight sun for one hundred miles, Russell reached Herschel Island. On August 30th he boarded the arctic steam whaler *Jeanette*. After a

cruise of approximately a month around Wrangel Island the boat turned southward through Behring Sea and approached San Francisco harbor on October 27th. As the ship neared port, Russell exclaimed: "How different the green hillsides, dotted with trees, viewed through the balmy air of a perfect day, from the barren, fog-enveloped, and snow-covered mountains of the Aleutian Islands which we had passed twelve days before!" His arrival in Iowa City on November 2nd was celebrated by students and faculty.

Not only had Frank Russell acquired invaluable specimens for the University, including the almost-extinct musk-ox, but he was also the first man ever to descend the Mackenzie River to its mouth and reach civilization around Alaska.

"In my opinion", wrote Professor Nutting, "he has shown such dogged determination, cool bravery and good judgment in the pursuit of his object, as should win for him a high place among the great explorers of the far north. It must be remembered that he was alone and unaccompanied by a retinue of attendants and helpers, and that the rigid economy which he practiced necessitated his going without many things considered necessary by the Hudson's Bay men while traveling in that country."

REEVES HALL