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John Albrecht: Dead at 93

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John Erdman Albrecht was born December 7, 1898 as the son of a Prussian civil servant. His birthplace was on the Kurische Nerung, a long narrow peninsula located at the mouth of the Memel River where his father was in charge of the lighthouse. There, between the Memel River and the long narrow sandspit, with the Baltic Sea to the west and the Kurische Lagoon to the east, John spent his youth in an unspoiled environment of unmatched beauty. Fishing, hunting, trapping, skating and sailing were activities which the young John Albrecht enjoyed from a very young age. The fact that the lagoon was frozen during the winter months and the requirement of transportation to and from his remote lighthouse location led his father to the idea to develop the sailing on skids. In doing so he became the forerunner and acknowledged inventor of a new sport which 50 years later became widely accepted.

With the beginning of World War I and John not quite 16 years old, he experienced the first dramatic change in his life. The Imperial Russian army overran portions of East Prussia one week prior to the official declaration of war forcing the Albrecht family temporarily from their home. In 1917, not quite 17 years old, John volunteered for the Imperial German Army. For the next two years he went through the horrors of the battles for Flanders, probably the fiercest and most desperate battles between the Allies and Germany of WWI. As a machine gunner of the Schwarze Division ("Black Berets") an emergency unit, John saw continuous front line action for two years until captured by the British in 1917. During his three years as a POW he met Canadians for the first time in his life.

Released in 1920, John returned to the political and economic troubles of his fatherland. While working on his father's estates, he experienced the annexation of his home country, the Memel area, by Lithuania in 1923. Either the heavy handed Lithuanian administration or John's nationalistic feelings made it very difficult for him to remain in his home country and precipitated his emigration to Canada in 1929. The timing could not have been worse – the 'dirty thirties' were waiting for him in Saskatchewan. After a year or so as a farm hand in the Regina area, he began to trap, initially in the St. Walburg area. But soon enough John decided to move further north.

In early summer 1932, he headed north on the Beaver River with an 18 foot canoe, six young dogs and one winter's provisions. He reached the Foster River via the Churchill River. There he paddled and portaged through the Lower, Middle and Upper Foster lakes and over the continental water divide into the Geikie River. After descending this treacherous stream he reached Wollaston Lake that fall in time to build his cabin for the winter. The spot he picked for his cabin became famous 40 years later. It is located at the mouth of the Collins River and the present site of one of Saskatchewan's largest mine and mill complex, the Rabbit Lake Mine. There John trapped for the next winters and spent his summers in the Prince Albert area. During this time John gained his reputation as "the waterman," acknowledged by native and white trappers alike for his abilities of handling the freighter canoe, i.e. the use of poles in navigating rapids.

His reputation brought him in contact with an American traveller, P. G. Downes, who was looking for a guide to Brochet on Reindeer Lake in 1939. Downe's intention was to travel via Cochrane and the Kasmere Rivers to Nueltin and Windy Lake in the Northwest Territories, an area uncharted in the thirties. The adventures of this journey are (the) subject of Downe's book *Sleeping Island, The Story of One Man's Travels in the Great Barren Lands of the Canadian North* (Coward-McCann Inc., New York 1943). This book which describes John in great detail, even his mannerisms of speech, is probably John's most lasting legacy.

The epic voyage to the barren land must have wetted John's appetite for even more adventures. Wollaston Lake was not far enough north and John was after the white fox which commanded extraordinary prices in the late thirties. So he moved further north to Stony Rapids which was readily accessible via the Athabasca Lake, and started a new trapline on Selwyn Lake located on the Saskatchewan/N.W.T. border. While being quite occupied with trapping during the winter months, the life of a trapper is quite idle during the summer season. But not for a fellow of John's stature. The requirement for uranium in the post World War II era made the Beaverlodge area north of Lake Athabasca a hotbed for uranium prospectors and miners. So, John Albrecht became a uranium prospector and a successful one, too. Together with his partner Leroy Tobey, he discovered the Nisto uranium occurrence on Black Lake. This discovery is best documented in *Gold and Other Stories as told to Barry Richards* a volume edited by W. O. Kupsch and S. D. Hanson and published by the Saskatchewan Mining Association in 1986. John and his partner made \$30,000 in cash (in 1948!) and received 300,000 shares of a newly formed mining company, Nisto Mines Ltd. Unfortunately, for both of them, the deposit was not large enough to be economic.

By 1950 John Albrecht was past 50 years of age and still single, trapping in the winter and prospecting during the summer season. This lifestyle does not lead to ample contact with women and when Mohammed does not go to the mountains, the mountains come to Mohammed. The mountains came in the person of Nan de Lea. Nan, a Californian actress turned journalist, had a consuming passion for fishing and hunting. In addition she was determined to strike it rich in uranium prospecting. With these hobbies and intentions she turned up in Stony Rapids in 1948 or 1949. The story of John meeting Nan, or the other way around, is quite eloquently told by Floyd Glass in a chapter *A Northern Romance* in the book *Gold and Other Stories* as cited above.

John and Nan were married and spent a few happy years in Northern Saskatchewan. Nan gave birth to a son in 1952 but she died in childbirth – not in Stony Rapids but in Toronto. John's son was subsequently raised by Nan's mother in California since John was not about to leave his beloved northern country. He continued trapping and prospecting and eventually settled in La Ronge in the late fifties. It is during this time that John made many good friends in this community. Many of us will remember John forever for his natural gift to tell stories in his thick German accent, his humour and his ability to teach children about things important to survival in the north.

It was during the seventies when I lived in La Ronge and John became the adopted grandfather of my two teenaged sons. The many outings we had with John and other friends during the winters and summers will be forever etched in our minds. He, John, lived his "golden eve" of his long and adventurous life and he shared his experiences with all of us.

In 1978, John left La Ronge in order to live near Vancouver together with his niece, Margarete, who cared for him until his death. Until 1985, with John already in his late eighties, he still came for frequent long visits to Saskatchewan. A debilitating disease however prevented him from travelling the past few years. The most recent years he spent in a nursing home where he suffered a fatal stroke on September 10, 1991.

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