

Sports Illustrated March 16, 1959

Seven weeks after the start, Arthur Moffatt's expedition to the vast and uncompromising tundra of the Great Barren Grounds had reached a critical point. The six-man party had started out from Black Lake in Saskatchewan. Their destination was an isolated outpost on Baker Lake in northeastern Canada, some 900 miles away. On August 1 they entered a bleak, wind-swept country only once before crossed in its entirety. Now the days grew short and cold, food stocks low. With 400 miles to go, the party faced its greatest challenge.

AUGUST 18

We went down a beautiful, swift stretch of river today. There were piles of cumulus clouds overhead and in the blue distances brilliant golden hills. There were groves of white spruce and lovely sandy beaches. A remarkable countryside.

This is the part of the route where Tyrrell [Dr. J. B. Tyrrell, who in 1893 led the first and only other expedition across the Barren Grounds.—Ed.] had constant rain and cold, also patches of old snow everywhere. But for us it has been very pleasant—this despite the fact that we are more than a week behind Tyrrell's schedule. Not a fly for weeks and cool at night.

AUGUST 20

Today we shot a couple of heavy but short rapids, only the second of which I looked over. Not very smart of me. I probably should be more careful.

George [Grinnell], who had been feeling poorly after trying a yellow mushroom, went back to his tent after supper. He found a big white wolf right in camp. I went up on a hill and saw three more—two adults and a gray pup. I watched them lie down on the next ridge, curling up to sleep, though two of them first put their noses in the air and howled.

AUGUST 21

Waves on Dubawnt Lake running three feet. We had to stop at 10 after only four miles. I went to sleep at 2 p.m., while the wind rocked and snapped the tent, then woke at 5. For some curious reason, I busied myself figuring out how much cash we had left to get us home from Baker Lake. Not too much.

Wind shifted to north after supper. May move tomorrow—at least I hope so. Only about 20 days' food left. Lean caribou is temporarily filling, but does not stay with you. We get five meals out of the caribou—four quarters and back meat, plus heart, tongue and liver. Neck and spareribs for lunch meat. Unfortunately, we do not have enough wood to make soup. No more onions, dried vegetables.

Skip [Pessl] says my pankin [a small pan] is causing grumbling among the men, since they think I'm getting more than they are. Could be. Will use bowl from now on.

Ptarmigan plentiful here, red-throated loons too, also a single arctic tern today. Herring gulls and longspurs common. Some pipits.

AUGUST 24

Still haven't moved since the 21st. George suggested last evening that, if the weather clears, we get up at 4, eat hardtack and jam and shove off. That was exactly how it went. He called me at 4:30, before dawn but light enough to see. Only a slight breeze was blowing, and the sky was almost clear. It turned out a great day for a change. We made 30 miles and are now 20 minutes of latitude north [of the 63rd parallel]. An ominous note crept in, however. We had a heavy frost this morning—the first of the trip. Summer is definitely over. It was cold all day, and I wore long underwear for the first time, also mittens, parka, sweater and two shirts most of the day. When the parka was off, I had it across my knees. Legs and feet get very cold in a canoe.

Stopped for lunch on point of mainland, after a smoke stop. At end of the latter I ran out my fishline, with a Dardevele, and before paddling a dozen strokes had a heavy strike. The fish hooked well, and I had to play him for 10 minutes. He fought hard. I couldn't get him into Bruce's [LeFavour's] net, finally had to lift him in by the gills. He weighed 12 pounds, very nice for a lake trout.

Joe [Lanouette] hates the 4 a.m. rise. He never looks ahead to cold, hunger or whatever we might have to face. He lives for the present only. Pete [Franck] is just the opposite. He is always worrying about running out of food or being caught by the cold before Baker Lake. Others are concerned, too.

Skip suggests a walk to the Arctic Circle after we reach Baker Lake. I'm all for it if money and film permit. It would be a great adventure, and a second or third film to add to the summer's work. We might even try for the Magnetic Pole, much as Carol, kids, home and bacon and eggs appeal.

Incidentally, did not forget Creigh's birthday on August 16—or Sally's on August 21. I have thought of the kids often lately. Sure like to see them soon again. But might as well hit this for all it's worth, while here.

[From this point on, there is a marked increase in the number of personal references in Art Moffatt's diary. The combination of fatigue, hunger and the fear that winter would soon close in on them was beginning to have a profound effect on the expedition. There was something about the land, too. The immense expanse of starkly bare rock and green tundra, a thing of grandeur at first, stretched on endlessly. Each hill began to look like the hill before it. One rapid blended into another. Everything had a ring of tiring familiarity. The bearded men became moody and silent. They kept more to themselves, and when they spoke it wasn't always pleasant.]

AUGUST 25

An argument today over whether to breakfast at 4:30 when we get up or at 9. I seemed to be the only one who really favoured an early breakfast, but the arguments against it—lose time, wind, etc.—and the manner of critical delivery at me got my goat, especially when Skip said my argument that three hours of paddling were bad for the heart was simply a cover for wanting breakfast. I offered to cook it myself, but he wouldn't hear of it. I finally said we would have breakfast before we left, and that was that. Everybody went to bed angry.

AUGUST 26

Skip up getting breakfast at 5. I woke then, became the second man up, got the canoe loaded, and all set to go. Everybody was ready about 10 minutes before breakfast. Tempers still edgy, but maybe we'll make good time this way.

AUGUST 28

Paddled all afternoon, made 25 miles, well into Outlet Bay. Camp at sundown.

AUGUST 31

We got off to a good start in fine weather. And what wonderful luck. I saw several gulls feeding on the carcass of a caribou across the river and decided to get out the camera and take motion pictures with the telephoto lens.

I was thinking this would make an interesting bird shot when suddenly the gulls flew up and a wolf walked into the frame. He picked up the carcass, worried it and then began to eat. A tremendous sequence.

[On September 1 the morning broke cold, windy and wet over the three tents pitched along the lichen-covered rocks. Talk immediately centered on food and fuel and reaching Baker Lake, still some 10 to 20 days off by Moffatt's calculations. The men again were forced to sit tight. That afternoon, as Moffatt lay

napping alongside his canoe, he had a dream of death. He recorded this premonition in his diary the next day—a day, incidentally, when snow first fell on the expedition.)

SEPTEMBER 2

As I dozed yesterday I had a scary dream of being on a frozen lake with men, finding the ice of the lake frozen into artifacts. One big circle, a tent ring, floated loose as I stood on it; and in clear water below I could see a gray canoe (mine?) broken and resting on the bottom among caribou bones. Then Carol appeared and urged me to leave, but I continued to stand on the ice and fritter away my time. Rather a clear dream. Full moon tonight. Must get out of here soon, and will.

SEPTEMBER 4

It was a very cold night last night. My feet were numb all night long, kept me awake. There seemed to be no frost—until I got up for breakfast. It was snowing. Flurries came down until 11 a.m., but the wind was down. We landed at the beginning of a gorge portage, carried our lunch to the top of a 30-foot bank and ate. The sun came out, the sky cleared and the afternoon was warm and windless. I carried our heavy food pack across and got some fine shots of the men with canoes and boxes and of the wonderful green and white waves, some 10 feet high, in the gorge itself. The green, white and cobalt-blue water was a beautiful sight, with the reddish rock walls of the gorge and the deep red of the dwarf birches all around.

"Toward the beginning of the last part of the 2-mile portage you leave the hard clay and damp places, and come out on an old beach—the high point of Hudson Bay's post glacial submergence." This is Tyrrell's description of our present position. On this loose gravel were bear tracks and some handsome green-and-white pebbles, some of which I collected for my girls.

SEPTEMBER 5

Pete worried about cold weather, ice and snow. Me too. Hope we can move tomorrow. Only about 15 days of oatmeal left, five days of cornmeal, 18 days of hardtack, 18 days of sugar and 11 two-pack mashed potatoes or 22 one-pack days. Four days of macaroni, meat supply good, canned meat, fish and caribou. Should make it, unless weather turns very bad.

SEPTEMBER 6

Breakfast at 8. Cloudy, cold, snow flurries, and very strong northwest wind, but decided to move anyway, despite the dangers. We haven't much time left. Also decided to portage last 100 yards of rapid, partly to get warm, also to avoid risk of wetting or of hurting film and cameras.

I had used the tarp on my bedroll last night. Very warm and comfortable, but rolling it up, plus rolling a half dozen cigarettes for the day took quite some time and apparently teed off Skip. Also portage took some time. Skip and Pete both shot it, both hitting rocks, Skip cracking a rib, Pete cracking planking.

At lunch Skip let me know he was mad, and I gathered there was more to come, but I took it calmly, saving my thunder for a big blast, should it come later.

[That afternoon, they saw their first Barren Grounds grizzly bear.]

I paddled back to the other canoes as fast as possible, maneuvered then to get through the shallows to the shore and jumped out with my camera.

Skip followed along behind. I ran up the slope about 100 yards, set up the camera on its tripod and focused on the bear, which was coming toward me. When it moved, it ran. It had seen us and twice reared up on its hind legs. It was a huge critter, about seven feet tall, with a beautiful tawny coat and a powerful rippling run. Its legs at the ankles seemed as big as my thighs.

The bear kept right on coming. I shot about 30 feet of film of him. Then he circled downwind. He reached the lake shore due south of us and started toward us again. Skip and I were still 100 yards inland, and both of our canoes were aground in very shallow water.

Bruce had spoken of the grizzly's proclivity to charge, so I was getting nervous. As the bear came on fast, Skip and I started to run for the canoes, but the bear, seeing us go, apparently for the first time connected the sight of us with our scent. Whatever the reason, he turned tail, tore like an express train back along the shore and then across a rocky point, flushing three ptarmigan as he ran. He splashed across a marshy flat, up into dwarf-birch hillside and up a hill as fast as a horse could gallop. A magnificent sight, but glad to see him go.

Earlier, while cooking, I saw a large flock of snow geese flying south. Everything going south—we're still pushing north. Time we got out of this country.

Several caribou carcasses on shore of Grant Lake, drowned in rapids or gorge, most likely—or did a grizzly get them?

SEPTEMBER 7

Up early. White wolves on top of the esker across the Chamberlin River. Hard wind from west. We worked hard, got to top of Grant Lake, then saw red gas cans and something white that looked like a tent on the east shore.

We paddled over to lee of the sand point, landed and found that the white thing was no tent but a small piece of muslin covering 24 one-pound tins of dried Beardmore vegetables—carrots, beans, spinach, cabbage and beets.

The guys went crazy. Skip was really angry at the way they acted. I wasn't sure it was not a cache, but the muslin obviously was set so as to be visible to someone coming from south. We took the stuff, figuring it had been left there for us by Ray Moore flying in on one of his Canadian government mapping trips. Whatever, we celebrated with a huge mess of vegetables and caribou glop, carrots and beans mixed. Supper was wonderful.

[The occasional warm afternoons of the week before had stopped. Increasingly, the men were taking chances. They now shot down churning chutes of white water which, a month earlier, they would have scrutinized with a doubtful eye. Then, on September 9, came a wind that ripped at the campers with an insane ferocity. Huddled in the protection of the rocks, the Moffatt party did not know that this same wind broke an anemometer at Churchill, the Hudson Bay settlement to the south of them.]

SEPTEMBER 9

The morning broke wet and snowy. I lay in my tent getting wetter by the minute. Outside a gale was blowing, and bitter cold had set in. The hills were white.

Everything in the tent got soaked. My clothes, sleeping bag, the works. Pete's tent blew down and tore. I could not leave my tent, even though I was soaked to the skin. There were two inches of water on the tent floor. So I got into Joe's sleeping bag with him. We were both uncomfortable, but it was the only warm and half-dry place for us to go. Others worked outside, accomplishing little, but Skip is a great believer in activity for its own sake.

SEPTEMBER 10

It snowed again. Everything is frozen, and more snow clouds are solid in the sky. Wind still strong. But we are going on anyway. There is no time now to sit around waiting for the niceties of weather. We're all running scared. This is the third day of snow. There is a strong north wind. It has been freezing all day. Frozen feet are becoming a real worry, our torn boots being porous as blotting paper.

In spite of the heavy winds and snow squalls, we made it, with the help of a strong current, down to a 10-foot falls above Wharton Lake. But there, was ice on the paddles, the hills were still white and there was no sun.

Skip was exhausted tonight. His cramped tent last night made him sleepless. Ten days' sugar supply left, about same amount of hardtack, 10 days' oats, five days' cornmeal. Joe broke two of three remaining peanut butter jars tonight on portage. Even a little item of that sort is becoming vitally important to us. The food situation is poor, but we mean to get out of here as fast as possible now. About 200 miles to go.

[On September 11, the Moffatt party, having travelled with snow squalls and wind in their faces all day, reached Wharton Lake. The following morning the weather was better than it had been for a week, although the skies were still spotted with clouds. After a portage around rapids, Art Moffatt wrote, "I cooked fish and bully, pudding and tea. Then, in darkness, I made the last portage trip for a load of wood, my packsack and two poles. I thought of wolves on the way but saw none. Good distance today. Marjorie Lake tomorrow." And this is the last entry Art Moffatt was to make in his diary.]

CRISIS ON THE RIVER

On September 14 the Moffatt party awoke, packed and set off, almost routinely, on the river as it had so often recently. But this was not to be a day like any other the men had ever known. Before sunset, disaster would come to the freezing waters of the Dubawnt, and it would be Joe Lanouette, whose diary entry for the day appears below, who would tell the terrifying story.

FATEFUL DAY

SEPTEMBER 14

This has been the most harrowing day of my life. It started as many others recently: bleak and dismal under a cover of clouds. It was below freezing, and the sand was crunchy and hard from its layer of frost and ice.

Once on the river, the pleasant sandy esker country dropped rapidly behind us. We paddled along, no one saying much of anything. Finally, we pulled into a gravelly bay for lunch. George, Bruce and I scurried around looking for wood scraps, Art heated a kettle and Skip and Pete fished from the shore. Almost immediately, Pete latched onto a 17-pound orange-fleshed lake trout and wrestled with him for over 20 minutes.

After a fine lunch of fish chowder, we shoved off again at around 2:30. The weather was still dismal, although the wind had dropped. In a few minutes we heard and saw rapids on the horizon. This surprised us. Art had figured we had already shot the last two rapids into Marjorie Lake. Actually, what we had gone down were only riffles, and what lay ahead was the real beginning of the first rapids.

At the top, the rapids looked as though they would be easy going, a few small waves, rocks—nothing serious. We didn't even haul over to shore to have a look, as we usually did. The river was straight and we could see both the top and foot of the rough water quite clearly, or we thought we could. We barreled happily along. We bounced over a couple of fair-sized waves and took in a couple of splashes, but I didn't mind, as I had made an apron of my poncho and remained dry enough. I was looking a few feet in front of the canoe for submerged rocks when suddenly Art shouted "Paddle."

I took up the beat, at the same time looking farther ahead to see what it was we were trying to avoid. I was surprised to see two lines of white. I looked at them in helpless fascination. It was too late to pull for shore. Our only hope was to pick what seemed to be the least turbulent spots and head for them. I was not really frightened, but had, rather, an empty, sinking, "it's-all-over-now" feeling. We went over the falls and plunged directly into a four-foot wave. The bow sliced in, and a sheet of foaming green engulfed me. The canoe yawed, slowed. The current caught the canoe once again and plunged it toward the next falls a

few hundred feet away. By some miracle, Art straightened the canoe out a little, but we were still slightly broadside as we went over the second falls.

This time the bow didn't come up. I could feel the canoe begin to roll over under me. The next few seconds telescoped into a vivid recollection of water all around me, foam and clutching currents pulling me along with the canoe, which by this time had rolled bottom up. Then the foaming roar stopped, the current lessened. Art and I were clinging to the canoe.

The seriousness of our position had not yet fully dawned on us. At first the water didn't feel too uncomfortable. My heavy parka was full of air in between its layers, and I was quite buoyant. Art draped himself over the stern of the canoe and yelled to me to do the same at the bow. Then I saw that Bruce and Skip were in the water too, their canoe also having swamped.

The next thing I knew, George and Pete were paddling furiously by us in the red canoe, heading for shore. I watched them as they leaped out, dumped their packs and headed back toward us. Packs were floating all around us. Art was holding onto the canoe with one arm and my pack and his 86-pound camera box with the other. I saw Art's pack floating off in another direction and swam a few yards after it, but by this time my parka was soaked, so I came back to the canoe. I told Art in a dry, disinterested voice that we had just pulled a damned-fool stunt and that this would likely be the end for us. He assured me through chattering teeth that this was not the case and that, although it would be hard, we would pull through in good shape.

George and Pete went after our packs first. To our horror, as George struggled to haul my soaked pack into the canoe, he lost his balance and toppled overboard. George almost overturned the canoe trying to haul himself out of the water. That would have put all six of us in the water. None of us could have got out. Finally Pete paddled to shore, dragging George along. They dumped the water out and came back. This time they managed to drag Bruce and Skip to a small rocky island and leave them there.

By now I was almost completely paralyzed by the cold water. I couldn't swim. I couldn't move. Bruce and Skip on the island began shouting "Hurry up." Art took up the cry. Soon so did I.

My mind became fogged. I remember Pete shouting to me to grab hold of his canoe. I did. So did Art. I was holding onto Art's pack. We got nowhere, although George and Pete paddled like fiends. I lost my grip on Pete's gunwale and shouted for him to come back or I would drown. He quickly stopped paddling. I grabbed onto the red canoe again.

The next thing I remember my feet were scraping over the rocks near shore. I took one or two steps, using every single remaining ounce of strength I had, then collapsed unconscious on the rock and moss ashore.

My next recollection, hazy as it is, is one of being in a sleeping bag, with George giving me a brisk rubdown. He kept asking, "How are you doing, Joe?" and I kept telling him that I was doing fine and to quit pounding me. I remember that I felt warm and comfortable all over except for my feet, which seemed abnormally cold. I passed out again.

When I came around next, I was surprised to find that I was completely naked and in a tent. I couldn't figure out why this should be. I sat bolt upright. It was dark out. Someone thrust a large can under my nose and told me to take five swigs. I did. Then Skip came into the tent, undressed and got into a sleeping bag. After a while, I looked out of the tent. I turned back and casually asked Skip where Art was. He replied that Art was outside. We lay in silence. Finally, I asked what would Art be doing outside. Skip replied, "You might as well know. Art is dead."

AN EPILOGUE TO TRAGEDY

Death by exposure, contrary to the popular myth, is not an easy thing. George Grinnell, writing later of the ordeal in the water, noted that "one does not simply go to sleep. He passes out from pain. When he is unconscious, he has pleasant dreams. They inspire him to live." Moffatt, tossing back and forth between consciousness and unconsciousness, finally reached shore. He knelt on the ground. He shook and his teeth chattered. He asked several times, "What do you want me to do?" Lanouette was delirious. He could not answer. Grinnell too was in mortal danger of dying from exposure. Franck, exhausted by his labors, had nevertheless still to rescue Pessl and LeFavour from their island sanctuary. Not until he got back was there anybody to take care of Moffatt, who had been in the water the longest. Pessl, when Franck had got him to shore, placed Moffatt in a dry sleeping bag and massaged him. But it was too late.

In counting its loss, the expedition also gave thanks for its blessings. All might have gone under. Lanouette and Grinnell came perilously close to dying. The survivors rested for a day, gathering strength and planning their next move. On the afternoon of September 15 the sun came out for the first time in 9 days. Had it not, they all might have perished but, with the encouragement of warmth, came a relaxation and a renewed faith that the expedition would, ultimately, succeed. The five abandoned an earlier plan, arrived at desperately in the wake of tragedy, to send Pessl and Franck for help. They would now make the trip together. The next day they carried Art Moffatt's body to the top of a hill where, because they could not dig in the frozen ground, they laid him down and placed his canoe over him.

In the aftermath of Moffatt's death, the men felt acutely the loss of their leader. They were frightened of the water and of winter as they had never been before. Sticking timidly to the shore, they outlined every cove and inlet, often portaging where they once would have canoed. It was thus that they came to Aberdeen Lake, 18 miles across at its widest point. The men looked fearfully at the sky. With their food almost gone, they had to attempt a crossing, although common sense told them that it would be a mistake. As if to justify their fears, darkness settled around them at mid-lake. A tempest broke over them and in the violent, wind-scudded water, the two canoes became separated. They battled for three hours and then, much as Ulysses found a haven on the shores of Phaeacia, they were heaved up by huge waves onto the opposite shore—the canoes only yards apart. This was the last of the great dangers on the journey through the Barren Grounds.

On September 20 the expedition met several families of Eskimos. In their graciously pleasant but—to the men—roundabout way, the Eskimos were working up to extending an invitation to share two freshly killed caribou when one Eskimo pointed to the sky. A blizzard, he seemed to be saying, and the Eskimos left. A day and a half later, the countryside now coated in deep white, the Eskimos were back with an offer of tea. Tea, as it happily turned out, was a bountiful two-gallon pot filled with caribou steaks. The men dipped their hands into the pot and gorged themselves. In a matter of minutes they had eaten approximately 30 pounds of caribou. They finished off with half a pot of fatty broth, gulped down with Eskimo tea.

Refreshed, the Moffatt party set out again. On September 21 they reached the Thelon River, still 100 miles from Baker Lake outpost. They now headed southeast for the first time. The river ran deep and fast. On September 24 the five men put ashore at Baker—a strange and haggard band that had eaten its last meal a day before. The men carried their packs up the beach and turned their canoes over them instinctively, to protect the contents, although the packs were empty.

The journey through the Barren Grounds was, for all purposes, over. That afternoon the last scheduled plane of the winter left for Churchill. Skip Pessl alone remained to guide a Canadian Mounted Police plane back to Art Moffatt's body. The mournful expedition is pictured on the preceding pages. Today, a simple cross marks Moffatt's grave at Baker Lake, in the wilderness he loved.