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**Northerners jump into the boat the way we jump into the car.
Summer Travel in the North in the 1950s.**

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“Beyond the Grid”
Winning the Prairie Gamble**

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Travel

Northerners jump into the boat the way we jump into the car.¹

In this part of the world travellers always arrive at the dock because air, road and water all have their terminus at the lakeside dock. (Larmour 1988:3)

1. **Background: Early use of boats in the north** ...*far more miles than appear on the map...*²

For millennia, First Nations travellers have followed traditional water routes in Saskatchewan's north. These "highways of the north" were used for communication, trade, extraction of resources and subsistence activities.³ Archaeological evidence shows that First Nations people have been camping for thousands of years at Frog Portage, for example, over which travellers between the Churchill and the Sturgeon Weir River route to the Saskatchewan River carried their canoes. The mighty Churchill River was essential in the opening up of the Athabasca and Mackenzie basins to the fur trade and brigades of paddlers. On the continental divide, the Methye Portage between the Clearwater River and Lac La Loche isolated Denedeh, the homeland of the Dene people, for millennia before Peter Pond accessed the area in his challenge to the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly in the late 1700s. (Abel 1993; Marchildon and Robinson 2001; Digital Rivers (Ontario) Inc. 2003)

Even today, the path [at Methye Portage] is wide enough for a wagon to use. Many voyageurs passed over the portage with countless tons of furs and trade goods on their backs. Today, the track is worn deep where they walked. (Northern Saskatchewan Heritage Site 2001)

Before the advent of the outboard motor, canoeists and barge operators shot rapids, poled or hauled their vessels against the current, portaged over difficult terrain and travelled many more miles than the crow flies, following meandering waterways. Horses were sometimes used on portages. (Daniels 1980; Ausland 1998)

...for supplies, for the Bay store. They go there, over to Cheecham... And summertime to Big River... by canoe... paddling all the way. (Daniels 1980)

Knowledge and experience in building and repairing canoes was passed down from father to son. Repairs had to be made with materials available in the bush.

You cut down and peel that [birch tree], you know, from the top... and [make] no hole and make a little canoe. ... That's the way living, you know. Sometimes go in the bush and cut that. ... It's not heavy... And no nails. No nails at that time. ... You know that spruce? ... Spruce from under, the roots. That is thick, you know,

¹Thanks to Leslee Newman, WDM Education/Extension Co-ordinator, for this header.

²Ausland 1998

³See Winkel 2002 for an exploration of evolving economics and social history in northern Saskatchewan.

and cut it like that, you use his knife. ... put it in his teeth and he pull it toward him, and he worked and he worked and he pull at it. It split in half. That's why; sew it. ...with the spruce roots... Yeah, that's how you make canoe. [And to] make it waterproof... you use [spruce] gum. You know, when you sew... no water leak. No water in the canoe. (Métis riverman, Fred Daniels, in Daniels 1980)

Handling large freight barges required skill, strength, co-operation and courage.

The cold water is strong. Sometimes they had a big rope, a big rope, sometimes it took 14 men or 20 men to pull the barge. It took four guys on the barge. Some people died too. It was too hard for them. Sometime the river is crooked. Who would steer the barge? The water is strong. These people pull the barge and she is heavy in the back. She is like a rock. ... That was a time of hard job. (Daniels 1980⁴)

Travel and freighting on the rivers by York boat, canoe, motor canoe and barge continued to be important over the years. The northerner had a reputation for hardiness and ingenuity.

[In the 1920s, Halvor Ausland] set out for the North in a 21 foot home-made boat with only oars for propulsion. The going was tough, but he finally arrived at Skeleton Bay on Frobisher Lake (known locally as Island Lake). They rowed that boat for some 250 miles!

In 1922... He purchased two new eighteen foot Chestnut canoes and a brand new two-horsepower Evinrude outboard motor. This was the first outboard motor to ever enter that part of the country. He then set out for the Mudjatic River, locally known as Deer River, for the barren-land caribou that wintered in the area.

It was a grueling [*sic*] trip down the Churchill River and up the Mudjatic River. On the way, the motor's propeller hit a rock and shattered. He now had a serious problem, however, with ingenuity that was common in the north, he went into a swamp and cut down a dry tamarack snag (known for its hardness), and carved a wooden propeller. Heating a bolt from his tool box, he then burned a hole through the wooden propeller in order to fit it onto the shaft.

In this manner, he continued his journey having to stop every few miles to fashion a new propeller, the wooden variety would not last very long. As well, the propeller was not balanced properly, the vibration causing the motor to shake so badly that a bolt from the bracket holding the motor on the canoe came loose and fell into the water. To solve this problem another piece of tamarack was driven into the hole to hold the bracket. By the time he arrived at his trapline, the motor was in pretty poor shape. (Ausland 1998)

⁴Seventy-five year old Métis riverman and freighter Fred Daniels. Mr Daniels worked on Revillon Brothers and Hudson's Bay Company barges out of Fort Chipewyan to La Loche and Big River.

2. What was used on northern waterways in the 1950s? ...Yeah, good old Johnson...⁵

Technological and Design Improvements in Engines

Bess and Ole Evinrude introduced the first inexpensive, lightweight and portable outboard motor in 1909.⁶ This had a tremendous impact on northern transportation. By 1922, the Evinrude two cycle outboard engine for canoes was a fact of northern life. (Kupsch and Hanson eds. 1984:241) Many improvements were made over the years: the dry cell batteries of the early engines were replaced by magneto ignition systems which fared better in wet conditions; a water cooling system replaced air cooling; in the mid-1930s, Evinrude developed the reed valve fuel intake which increased fuel economy and became the industry standard. It is still standard today. (Crozier *et al.* 1985:6-7)

Between the late 1940s and 1955, better noise reduction was developed with aluminum and, later, fibreglass engine shrouds and a new rubber mounting design which separated the engine from the hull to reduce reverberation. After the late 1940s, gear sticks gradually became more common, allowing boat operators to start their engines while still tied up to the dock. Supplies and passengers could now be loaded while the engine warmed up and, when ready, the boat could be backed away from the dock at slow speeds. (Crozier *et al.* 1985:8)

From 1951 to 1956, the average size of an outboard engine grew from about nine h.p. to more than 14 and four stroke cycle engines became increasingly available. (Crozier *et al.*⁷ 1985:7-9) Boats were also larger and faster, reversing the 1930s trend which saw boats considerably reduced from the 30 foot lengths of the 1920s. Boat design had evolved from the long narrow “runabout” to something shorter, wider, deeper hulled and more stable in choppy conditions, with planing and semi-displacement styles the most popular.⁸

Inboard engines were also available, usually for larger boats. These heavy motors had developed from early car engines with an angled V-shaped drive shaft, better cooling, and more complex ignition systems. (Crozier *et al.* 1985:11-12)

⁵Daniels 1980

⁶In 1907, Wisconsin's Ole Evinrude invented the outboard motor, a single_cylinder 1½ horsepower engine for row boats. Although he considered it merely a gadget, his wife realized its potential and began to market it. In 1909, Evinrude forms Evinrude Motor Corp. in Waukegan, Wisconsin. Evinrude's son, Ralph, along with co_founder S.F. Briggs, bought the Johnson Motor Corp. in 1936. This became the Outboard Marine and Manufacturing Corp. In 1956 the name was shortened to Outboard Marine Corp.(OMC) In February of 2001, Canada's Bombardier Corp. purchased the bankrupt company. In May 2001, Bombardier announced the beginning of a new era in Evinrude and Johnson and began manufacturing outboards in the fall of 2001. (Kelley 2003)

⁷Crozier *et al.* cite Webb, W.J. and R.W. Carrick The Pictorial History of Outboard Motors (1967) Renaissance Editions Inc., New York frequently in their publication, without page references. The Saskatoon Public Library's copy of this book is missing, so I have cited Crozier *et al.*, with pagination.

⁸The planing hull is very smooth and V-shaped, tapering to a flat bottom toward the stern. At speed, the bow lifts and the boat rises to the surface of the water. A semi-displacement boat is slower and more suited for utility functions and is very stable at speed. (Crozier *et al.* 1985:13)

Technological and Design Improvements in Boats

Wood was the main material used in boat construction: oak, fir and mahogany were most common. In the late 1940s, aluminum boats were produced by Dunex Metal Company of St Boniface and advertised as “unsinkable”.

The company offered a reward to anyone who could sink it (with a few restrictions on how the sinking was done). The hull was riveted rather than welded as most aluminum boats were at that time. (Crozier *et al.* 1985:12)

Other companies offered welded models.

Developed in wartime, fibreglass hulls became popular in the 1950s. There were no seams or rivets to leak; flotation cells were designed into the moulds; the colour persisted through the thickness of the hull which meant that scratches did not show so much; the popular planing style of hull could easily be moulded. If the hull were holed, a patch could be applied. The relative cheapness of the lightweight aluminum and fibreglass boats was encouraging for small-time operators as well as cottage and lodge owners in the north. Also in the 1950s, rot-resistant marine fir and mahogany plywood became very popular for small and medium sized boats. It was very strong and its flexibility allowed some flaring at the bow. A fibreglass layer could also be applied to wooden hulls for protection. (Environment Canada 2003; Crozier *et al.* 1985:12-13)

Many northerners made their own boats and canoes. There was also some Saskatchewan-manufactured commercial production.⁹ Little information is available about these small outfits, many of which apparently did not last long.

In February of 1946, Emil, with the help of Jake Doerksen, built a second boat, which was thirty-eight feet long. In the beginning of June, J. K. Johnson took it by tractor and wagon to Sled Lake and then it was taken by water to Dore Lake. John and Dave Aubichon from Sled Lake, were hired to help take the boat through the channel. The boat got stuck in rapids. The channel was the width of the boat. The water rose, while the boat was wedged, thereby freeing it. (Zinovich and Vik n.d.)

As well, both boats and motors were brought into Saskatchewan from elsewhere. Canoes, fishing boats and motors could be ordered from Eaton’s catalogue. The Chris-Craft, produced in Michigan, was an industry standard for leisure craft in the 1950s. Many companies who had produced rowboats and small runabouts in Canada and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s failed during the Depression. Some companies turned to the luxury cabin cruiser market during the affluent post-war era. The fishing boat and runabout survived, however, kept alive by small, often family-run, outfits which supplied local markets. Alberta’s Northwest Industries Ltd, needing to diversify after the war, built a variety of fishing boats and runabouts into the 1950s.

⁹Saskatchewan boat builder Ernie Backlund operated tourist camps in the La Ronge area in the '50s and '60s and built boats into the 1970s. An Eaton’s Viking 12 h.p. outboard motor, manufactured by Gale Products Division, was donated to the WDM by Backlund’s daughter. (WDM-1997-S-319 and 320 files, Western Development Museum, Saskatoon) It sold for \$365.00 in 1959. A 14 foot plywood runabout cost \$189.00, a 12 foot fibreglass car-top boat cost \$265.00 and a 12 foot aluminum car-top boat cost \$189.00. (T. Eaton Company 1959:416-417)

The Alberta Boat Company of Edmonton built a range of boats, including pleasure craft, multi-passenger vessels, utility boats for the RCMP and the Hudson's Bay Company, hydroplanes, tugs and skiffs from 1912 to 1971. They also built freight canoes, powered by 10 - 15 h.p outboard engines, for the Hudson's Bay Company and supplied outboard motors to fishermen, prospectors and the recreation market. This company also designed and constructed air craft skis for Saskatchewan's government air ambulance service. (Crozier *et al.* 1985:17-31)

In the 1950s and beyond, canoes maintained their importance. Strapped to the struts of a bush plane, the canoe could easily be air lifted into remote areas and launched from a float. Motors were attached to canoes which had either commercially-made or home-made braces rigged at the stern. Motor canoes were designed with a flat stern for attaching the engine. The canoe could be paddled in difficult waters and had such a shallow draught that it was invaluable for work in muskeg areas. They were also repairable in the bush.

I know we broke a canoe one day when we were out. We beached it and I thought, boy, this is it now, we've had it. But he looked around and got a tree with some gum on it and built a little fire, a tomato can or something and melted it up or warmed it up and turned the canoe over and done his patching right there and in an hour or an hour and a half we were going again. Well I was worried. I thought we've sure had it. It's a long way to hike out of here. (Phelps 1976:21)

Motor boats were safer than canoes and row boats in storms. They were preferable for working upstream and were less tiring for longer journeys. Larger amounts of passengers and cargo could be transported by motor boat, compared to canoe or rowboat. A single person could control speed and direction more easily with the motor driven vessel than with the paddle, oar or pole driven boat. Motors were also used at times for manoeuvring float planes in crowded spaces or into docking areas, attached to the side of the plane.

3. What were boats used for?

Northerners remember clearly the old days and the changes that the outboard motor brought to their lives.

We did not visit very much, as we did not have a motor boat as yet, and rowing the boat was hard work. We bought a cow and some chickens and really managed fine with just shopping twice a year. (housewife at Dore Lake in the 1930s, quoted in Goliath n.d.)

Fishermen, trappers, merchants, government employees, police, prospectors and geologists, lumbermen: all these and more have used the motor boat to make their way in northern areas.

a. Transportation of people ...Now it takes you half-hour...¹⁰

Casual *ad hoc* transportation of nurses and doctors, church staff and missionaries, justice

¹⁰Morin 2001:00:09:59

officials, electoral offers and many others in their day to day activities kept the waterways busy from late spring to early fall.

We even travel by canoe and paddle, not by motor 100 miles an hour. Those days, no motor- just paddle. ... Used to take two days to Beauval those days, paddling. Now it takes you half hour. ... Used to follow... [the] Beaver River all the way, eh, two to three hour only, to the mouth of the river and if it's windy you're stuck there, eh. (Morin 2001:00:09:59)

That's my life. I didn't like staying in town too long. Two or three nights is enough for me, then I have to go across. I can't stay still here- hyper. But once I leave, I feel well. When I can't go to the bush it's like my heart stops. That's why I always have a motor, gas... soon as I feel that way I leave to the bush.

(A. Gardiner 2001:005:22:14)

Of course, there was no transportation at that time [in the mid-1950s]. There was no road. You had to go down by boat to The Pas and back again. But we had a 22-horse Johnson, the biggest motor that came out at that time. And we had a speed boat and it was pretty damn fast. (Carriere 1976)

There was motors, Evinrude at first, then L2 were made. Evinrude was a heavy motor and they shake a lot when driving. (McCallum 2001:00:15:31)

b. Transportation of food and supplies ...*the services and the type of goods were increased...*¹¹

The opening up of the north to lumbering, mining, trapping and fishing meant that small settlements in remote areas needed to be supplied with food, equipment, household goods and a few luxuries such as fresh vegetables and liquor.

...in the [government trading post in the early 1950s] store... in some areas [the kinds of goods sold] varied depending on the population or the type of trading you were doing. For instance, there was a difference in the La Ronge - not quantity or quality - variation of goods in La Ronge because of the road. ...going back to the trading post that I operated first, there would be just the staple goods that was necessary, that the people needed and that.Like flour, lard, sugar, tobacco, these things. All these necessities. ...Canned milk, some canned goods [such as vegetables and beans]. We always had to have those. ...Very little bread shipped in. ...We got fresh vegetables] Not very often. You would have them from time to time but it wasn't a regular stock. You would have fruit, apples and oranges in season, and potatoes and onions. (Broome 1976)

The government stores in the north gradually expanded the stock available from the late 1940s into the 1950s.

¹¹Broome 1976

As the years went on and it became more viable and the demand for more goods, then the stock increased as the demand. In most cases, most of these stores grew from a small, you know, forty or fifty thousand dollar operation to... a quarter of a million dollar operation it's up to now. And the services and the type of goods were increased. As the dog team went, the snowmobiles had to come in and equipment for them, motor boats and ... [there was an obligation on the part of the government to upgrade services as access to the north grew and changed.] (Broome 1976)

c. Trapping *Mostly every trapper has a motor now.*¹²

Trapping was an essential industry in the northern region, particularly for First Nations and Métis people. In the 1959-1960 season, 843 Indians, 1,161 Métis and 67 whites (3.2% of the total) were trappers. (Buckley 1962:45) As early as 1952, spurred by the Saskatchewan Fish Marketing Board initiatives, which encouraged the building of filleting plants and helped to stabilize fishing incomes, many trappers, who fished in the summertime, had boats and outboards. The motor boat became so ubiquitous that it was considered by some to be “nothing”.

[While horses were used to cross the river in winter,]...in the spring [we used] Nothing, motor and boat. (Misponas 2001:00:45:00)

Most trapping was carried out in the winter, when access to remote lakes and muskeg became possible. However, often trappers used their boats to get into remote areas before freeze-up and to get out again with their winter's catch with the spring break-up.

d. Commercial fishing *...gas and motors ...were much, much cheaper...*¹³

In the early days, most fishing was carried out in the winter and huge trains of caterpillar tractors dragged out sleds piled high with boxes of frozen fish to the rail heads.

...at that time, the remote areas were only accessible to markets... through fish in the wintertime. The winter operation was the natural freezing and overland transportation. ... Otherwise it was too expensive to transport the fish by air. ... Occasionally a fisherman would have an aircraft during the summer or he may have been doing something else in the summer. But you would perhaps have an aircraft come in to bring him supplies and send out fish and that to share the load, share the cost, but basically it wasn't very economic.... The cat swings were the thing from Wollaston, Reindeer, and into La Ronge too from Pine Oaks and the outlying areas. (Christenson 1976)

During the 1940s, after a few roads began to push their way north and bush planes became a fact of life, fresh fish could be shipped out to the south. Fishing boats with inboard or outboard engines began to be seen on many northern lakes, hauling in lake trout, white fish, pickerel and northern pike.

¹² “A relatively well educated [Métis] man in his late sixties, living in Buffalo Narrows”, quoted in Valentine 1952:7.

¹³Christenson 1976

[Compared to today, fishermen in the 1950s were] less likely to be in debt at the end of an operation than now because... costs were much lower then... I don't know what the initial wages were in 1955 but I don't know whether they were much more than 75 or 80 cents an hour at that time. Nets were cheaper and gas and motors of course, were much, much cheaper. Probably he didn't have as good a living now but the net result of his fishing operation was probably better in a sense. (Christenson 1976)

Fish filleting plants sprang up, especially encouraged the Saskatchewan Fish Board and Fish Marketing Service in the late 1940s, and this helped spur commercial summertime fishing in the remote north with large and small fishing boats.

Without processing plants close to the source, there were large production of whitefish in the La Ronge area and the Beaver Lake area that could not have been utilized otherwise. And in Reindeer Lake, the whitefish came under the - well, I don't think it was actually classified as B whitefish but on the market in the summer particularly, it may as well have been because you had trouble exporting it. And this made it possible to fish Reindeer the year round in those years. There were some good producers on the lake. ... Up to that point, I don't think there were too many ...self-sufficient fishermen, that is fishermen with their own outfits. I think to a large degree, the fishermen were fishing for someone else. A packer or a buyer, he more or less supplied the nets and the equipment in a lot of areas and I think, for the first time, a lot of them became independent. (Christenson 1976)

Life on the water could be dangerous, as described by a Dore Lake fisherman.

We left Joseph's Point with Nels Edson's boat and a small one cylinder motor. The boat was so crowded that they were towing a small fifteen foot Chestnut boat that was very sea worthy. Kelly Ofafasson and I were put in the small boat, with a couple of sleigh dogs and some blankets. Everything was fine, until a big storm came up and we were two or three miles from the Island. The waves got so high from the east that the bow of our boat landed on the stern of the boat that was towing us. They cut us loose. We had it safely around the sand bar on the west side of the Island. (Wopnford n.d.)

Mink farmers also fished for large supplies of their rodents' favourite food.

E. Recreation

Lakeside resorts became popular in the 1940s and 1950s, and the motorboat began to replace the canoe and rowboat for sport fishing, travel, exploration and waterskiing. As shores nearest the province's southern settlements became crowded with cottages and camps, and the chances of catching that "big one" dwindled, those with enough money chartered bush planes and flew in to remote camps where the fish were still plentiful and the loon still called.

There were an awful lot of tourists in La Ronge in those days. There were 12 to

14 outfitters in town, and any morning there would be at least 175 boats go out.
(Ernie Backlund, quoted in Saskatchewan Education 1992:72)

Car-top motorboats were also popular with city folk who wanted to get away from the rat race. In the mid-1950s, outfitting and guiding was important in providing seasonal employment, particularly for First Nations people. (Buckley, Kew and Hawley 1963:5)

The early development of holiday camps and resorts in the north is related to the incursion of a few roads, and the proliferation of the motorboat is part of that story. The 1949 provincial map shows summer resorts north of Prince Albert at Cold Lake, Loon Lake, Walburg, Paradise Hill, Turtle Lake, Big River, Debden, Sturgeon Lake, Emma Lake, Sunnyside Beach, Prince Albert National Park, Candle Lake and White Fox (Nipawin). By 1958, there are many more, including Beauval, Black Bear Island Lake, Besnard Lake, Lac La Ronge, Montreal Lake, Clearsand Lake, Nipawin Provincial Park, Anglin Lake, Chitek Lake, Waterhen Lake, Flotten Lake, and Denare Beach. (Saskatchewan Motor Club 1949; Saskatchewan Department of Highways and Transportation 1958)

e. Prospecting, geological exploration, surveying and mapping

Access into remote areas without roads in order to examine and identify geological formations required using the waterways of the north. Travel to and from camps by motor canoe or motorboat was common and, even with the advent of the bush plane, boats were needed to navigate muskeg and areas covered in bush. Surveyors creating maps from which to build roads and bridges also had to get into the thick of it, in places where often planes could not go.

Prospectors usually worked with one or two partners, moving out into the bush by dog sled, canoe or bush plane to their area... If air transport were being used, the canoe would be strapped to the struts of the float plane. The plane would return to pick up the prospectors and move them to another area or fly them home.
(MacKenzie 2003:3)

...at that time [1958], I was working for the Saskatchewan Department of Highways, and that was the year of John Diefenbaker's great northern vision... when I heard that they needed somebody to engineer the road north of La Ronge, which was at that time called the Uranium City road, I said I would like to go up there. ...we went up there with virtually no equipment to get going on this survey thing, and we needed a canoe. (Shearer 176)

f. Miscellaneous users

First Nations people living off the land have always used canoes on the waterways. In the 1950s, with motorboats and motor canoes available, life was sometimes easier.

Its easy picking berries now we got outboard motor. Long ago only canoe we use to paddle. (Albert Gardiner in I. Gardiner 2001:003:09:23)

One final example serves to demonstrate how ingenious the Saskatchewan northerner can be in his use of the boat:

Let me tell you a story about my buddy here. I was on my way to go fishing and I saw this boat coming carrying a white something, I thought it was DNS, boy it was this guy (point to Albert Caisse) he was riding a white fridge. I stopped to talk to him, he ask me if I wanted a beer I said sure, he opened the fridge, this was out in the lake on a boat, a[nd he] handed me one, I was happy to get a cold beer, I opened it took a drink but had to spit it out because it was so warm, I thought he had the fridge plugged into a generator, boy that was funny. (Laughs)

(Albert Gardiner, in Caisse 2001:001:06:27)

And many of us are still using motorboats:

Each year, millions of Canadians participate in water related activities. Activities using a power boat represent a significant portion of that number. ...in 1996, 9.3% of Canadians as a whole made use of a power boat, with the highest participation rate being in Saskatchewan (16.7% of the population) ... (Natural Resources Canada 2002)

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