



COURTESY: SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

» ROUGH COUNTRY: Stripped bare by glaciers, Nunavut's Dubawnt River valley was the wrong place for Arthur Moffatt and his crew to let their guard down.

In a most dreadful sort of paradise

When Arthur Moffatt set off for the Barrenlands, he envisioned a land of plenty. He was plenty wrong

BY JENNIFER KINGSLEY

It was the summer of 1955 and three canoes sat by the shore of Black Lake, Saskatchewan. Arthur Moffatt's group of six men – including himself, aged 36, and five others, aged 18 to 22 – had been trying to leave for a week. First, the food shipment hadn't arrived, so they replaced three months of provisions with whatever they could find in the village of Stony Rapids. Then they forgot three paddles and had to go back to town for them. Then the weather kicked up and the overloaded canoes took on water every time they tried to embark.

"Don't worry," Moffatt said, "We've got all summer." But they had no idea what they were in for. They'd need every possible day if they were going to make it down the Dubawnt River to Baker Lake, Nunavut, 1,400 kilometers distant, before cold and hunger overtook them.

ARTHUR MOFFATT had experience on northern rivers like Ontario's Albany, which he'd paddled alone at age 17 and subsequently guided several trips on, but this Dubawnt odyssey was much more ambitious. Privately, he wondered if his group was up to the challenge. Frederick Pessl, called Skip, was his second-in-command and had travelled with him before. So had James Franck, the youngest paddler and the most practical (he was the only one who carried matches in a waterproof container). Bruce LeFavour, the second youngest at 19, had brought along his reluctant college roommate, Joe Lanouette. These two would be the bowmen, along with George Grinnell. Grinnell would later write a book about the journey.

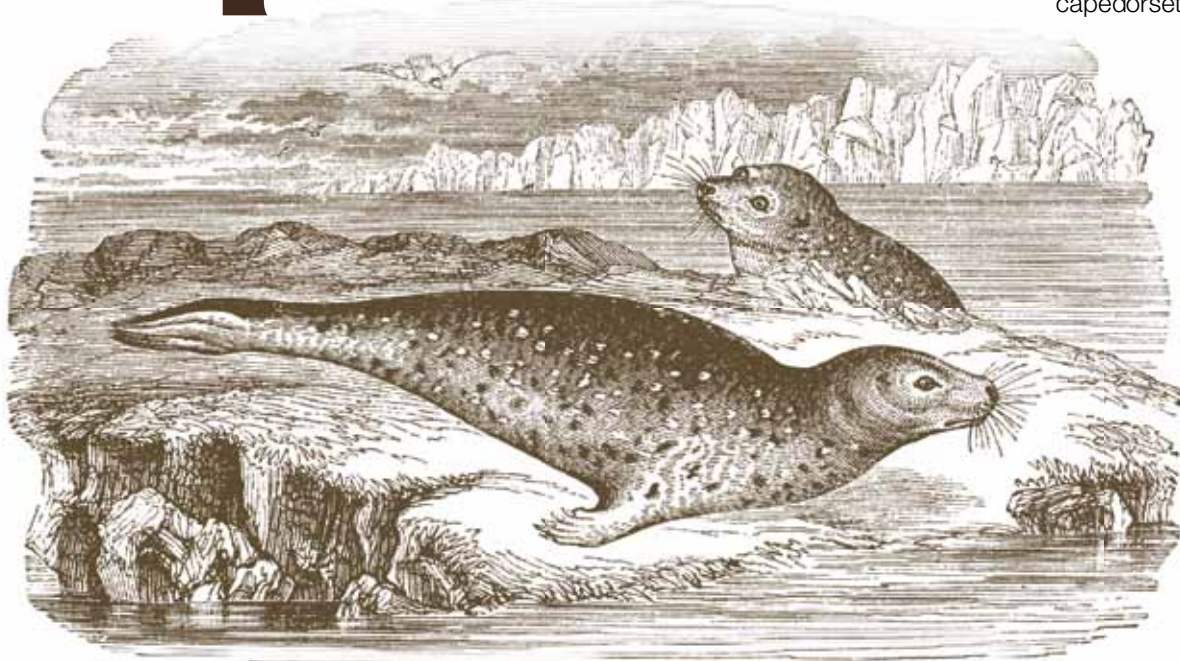
Moffatt's crew of young men came from different walks of life, but they had one thing in common: When they went North, they worshipped their leader. It didn't last. As the pre-departure days dragged on and the delays continued, the men grew restless. "If I were superstitious," said Pessl, "I would almost believe we were not meant to go down the Dubawnt." As he prepared to depart, Moffatt often thought of his family back home. Before he'd kissed his wife and two daughters goodbye for the summer, he'd doubled his life-insurance policy.

It was 7 p.m. on July 2 when they finally pulled away from shore.

THE FIRST PORTAGE took a week. Caribou trails led off in all directions and the Canadian Shield created rocky barricades as Moffatt's men stumbled through a maze of small lakes and tangles of scrubby spruce. They struggled with heavy loads and battled an onslaught of blackflies and mosquitoes. Progress was painfully slow, and Moffatt's misgivings grew. "I felt sad, apprehensive and gloomy about the summer," he recorded in his journal, which was later published in *Sports Illustrated* magazine. The physical work punished him. His neck strained from carrying his 86 pounds of movie-camera equipment on a tumpline around his forehead, and he pulled so hard

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on the strap that even when he lay down at the end of the day, his elbows wouldn't straighten.

They weren't far from Black Lake, just shy of the Nunavut border, when the hunger began. Moffatt had resupplied at the nearby Hudson's Bay post, but pickings were slim and monotonous. They had 100 bags of oatmeal for breakfasts, dry pilot biscuits with peanut butter, jam and cheese for lunch, and,

every day, a dinner called "glop": two boxes of Catelli macaroni, two tins of tomato paste, two packages of dehydrated soup, two cans of Spork or Spam, and one gallon of water. Other simple stores like mashed potatoes, onions and prunes provided the only variety.

Moffatt cooked most of the meals and distributed all the rations. "He who controls the food, controls the men," he said with a sardonic smile. If only it were true. After the

first two weeks, the crew grew hungry before, during and after every meal. They circled the supper pot each night and tried to snag the largest pieces of meat with the ladle. Only tea and sugar were not controlled, so they'd drink cup after cup until Moffatt made new rules. After that, they wet their spoons to snag more sugar crystals. They stopped sharing their extra snacks and tobacco. Peter Franck began saving pieces of his biscuits in old jam containers. The oatmeal sat in canvas packs and grew mouldy.

As July gave way to August, food supplies dwindled and tension grew. At the same time, a strange peace settled over the group. Grinnell was perhaps the most affected. He came from a wealthy but troubled family and had served in the military before joining the expedition. Possibly because of this, he considered himself superior to the other men, and didn't bring gloves or a warm sleeping bag. He followed Moffatt into the wilderness, he wrote, because he wanted to change himself – to "be born again, strong, courageous, heroic, self-sacrificing, obliging, witty, in general the most loveable person in the world." By August, Grinnell and most of the others had succumbed to a sort of delusion. They felt they were in paradise. As the food in their packs diminished, some became convinced they could sustain themselves with food from the land. Two of them had brought guns and started hunting caribou, while others fished or gathered berries. The wild feasts were like a holy communion for Grinnell, but the season of plenty in the North is painfully short. Winter was already galloping towards them.

THE DAYS GREW SHORTER, but instead of pressing his team onward, Moffatt took long walks in the morning and stayed up late at night. It seems nothing – neither hunger, lack of provisions, increasingly cold nights nor the caribou's southward migration – could rouse him. Only Peter Franck, the one saving food in jars, kept a grip on reality and urged them to keep moving. Nobody would listen. For half of August, they voted to take "holidays" and went nowhere.

By August 29, three days before they'd planned to complete the trip, they had travelled barely half the distance. The caribou were long gone, the weather changed overnight, and the men were trapped on the land. Dreams of plenty were a thing of the past. The remaining caribou steaks were "full of grubs and cysts of one kind or another," wrote Moffatt. He dreamed more often about home, but refused to take the blame for their

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food situation. Pessl and the others had taken back some control over rations by then. Moffatt insisted that "if I had been able to cook all meals, there would be no problem."


By early September, Grinnell began entertaining thoughts of deserting the expedition and dying on the tundra – in the arms of "the wonderful mother earth who gives birth to us all." He wrote that, "Death in paradise seemed preferable to life in civilization." But his wilderness ecstasy alternated with panic attacks. He feared for his life.

The men were still over 300 kilometres from Baker Lake when it started to snow. Moffatt began filling his diary with lists of supplies and meditations about his family. He'd passed through paradise and found something darker on the other side. On September 10 he wrote, "We're all running scared."

Four days later, all three boats plunged over a waterfall the paddlers hadn't bothered to scout. Two of the boats capsized. Only Franck and Grinnell stayed upright. Moffatt and his bowman had been in the water the longest, but the other two swimmers, Skip Pessl and Bruce LeFavour, were being swept downstream, so Grinnell and Franck targeted them first. Before rescuing their companions, however, Grinnell tried to haul a floating pack aboard and fell into the water himself. Franck then had to drag Grinnell back to shore and empty water from the boat before they could head back for their friends. By the time the rescue was over, the men – except Franck – were soaking wet, and Moffatt was severely hypothermic.

On shore, Grinnell unpacked a sleeping bag, removed his own sopping clothes, and climbed inside. Before falling unconscious, he called to Moffatt, "Get undressed and get in this sleeping bag with me." But Moffatt was too cold to move and Grinnell too weak to help him. By the time Grinnell awoke, Franck had started a fire using his waterproof matches, put Moffatt in another sleeping bag and attempted to resuscitate him. It was too late.

The survivors spent the night in each other's sleeping bags, nearly frozen to death. The next morning, they laid Moffatt's body under an upturned canoe and sprinted, half-starved, toward Baker Lake. They paddled big lakes and shot dangerous rapids, covering the distance in eight days. The day before they reached town, they ate their last meal – the remainder of a jar of curry powder, split five ways.

When the five young men stumbled into Baker Lake, an RCMP officer made a quick assessment: "So," he said, "you lost your sense of reality." 



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