

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Ernest C. Oberholtzer

DATE: circa 1963

INTERVIEWER: None given.

Original Reel 2 (cassette tape 4)

Transcript: 19 pages, draft, carbon copy

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED:

Oberholtzer's narration to accompany lantern slides he took on his 1912 trip to Hudson Bay. (The slides remain part of the unsettled Oberholtzer estate as of July, 1980.) The trip covered 3,000 miles through western Ontario, Manitoba, and the Northwest Territories of Canada up to Nueltin Lake and Hudson Bay and took six months.

NOTE TO USERS:

This carbon copy is the only copy that was present in the files as of 1998.

MR. O.: ...in 1911, and it was our last place where we saw Indians or natives of any sort, any human beings, though there were just a couple of places below in the same river about a mile away where we saw some more of them. Those old women – some of them are laughing you see – they're laughing partly because I tried to take a picture. There was one very seriously crippled old lady, and when she saw me, she was angry and came up and was about to smash the camera with a stick. I couldn't stop her. I just had to stop and just stood there still, looking right at her defiantly, and she finally stopped, luckily. Now, these were on the way up in Reindeer Lake, and we – is that all right for an introduction?

MISS K.: The picture of the boat and the mask and the Indians on the boat?

MR. O.: Yes, this was at the southern end of Reindeer Lake, and we had tried in the morning, farther down, when we first came in, where there was a big dog farm – they keep their dogs there in the summer with a man or two in charge and give them barely enough to keep them alive ready for work in the winter.

MR. H.: You thought you were going to be eaten up then.

MR. O.: Well, it was quite an experience. Billy was very much afraid of Indian dogs, and as we approached the place, there was a very high dock that was used for these York boats which are pretty tall – a lot taller than our canoe and so it was quite a bit above the lake, and the dogs which were up on the hill came down and got out on this dock. How many there were, I don't know, but it was just on solid mass of dogs.

Their tongues were hanging out, and you could see that most of them had porcupine quills all over their faces. It was a horrible sight. Some were starving to death. They came out, and they were all growling, but their tails were going this way, real slowly. Not just wagging – but as long as they were moving at all, it was a little bit encouraging. I called to these men. I wanted to ask them something about our route through that lake, but they never answered. They just stood there and looked at us dumbly. And I knew you couldn't ask Billy to get our He'd never get out there in the world – never. And so he said: "Don't be afraid. Doggy no hurt." And he had the bow of the canoe up this way – he was as far away as he possibly could be, and so he got up to the dock. I knew you couldn't get up there without climbing out, you see, among all these dogs. I looked and I saw all their tongues hanging out and they were (sound of growling) but their tails were going this way, and I thought to myself: Oh, dear, I don't want to get out there.

But then I thought, now those men surely wouldn't let me just be eaten up here. They didn't call the dogs off. Then I saw it was plenty deep water, too. And so I thought, I've got to get out there if I'm going to get any information, and I said, "Oh, doggy, doggy, doggy." I spoke to them as though I knew the. Of course I suppose they never heard anybody speak to them that way before. They're usually terribly abused by these Indians, but I pulled myself up, right among them. They were still going the same way, and I stayed near the edge, where I could dive if one grabbed me. But they didn't. It was wonderful.

Their tails were going this way and they were (sound of growling) – sort of growling at each other too. Two men standing up there, motionless on top of the hill. So when I got to the end of the dock, the procession followed me all the way up to the top of the hill. Billy had immediately pushed off so no dog could jump down into the canoe, you see. Oh, he was terribly afraid of these Indian dogs. But he said to me, “Doggy no hurt.” So I went up and I tried in the best combination of English and Ojibway that I could to talk to these Crees, and they acted as if they didn’t know anything at all. They were very uncooperative, but I showed them Tyrell’s little sketch map of this route and I wanted to know about various islands and thing. I thought I got some information. I came back. The dogs kept following me just the same, and I let myself down and got in the canoe.

Well, this is another picture taken right around _____ Lake itself from such a lookout as Hawkes’ Summit where we went. I won’t say that this is at that place, but we found similar lookouts almost anyplace. There were islands, islands, islands, islands – you couldn’t tell lakes from islands.

MR. H.: Did you mention something about Hawkes’ Summit?

MR. O.: That was the place where we cached the note.

MISS K.: You named it.

MR. O.: We named it for Arthur Hawkes that I told you about, this fine Englishman who at one time had been London correspondent on the Manchester Guardian.

We got out below where those old women were, at one place where

There were hundreds of these antlers lying around from previous years. They'd already had their big slaughter. They were located on this island and this was the crossing place for caribou. They'd go out in little narrow canoes – just dugouts, and they'd spear these reindeer in the spine – break the spine. Then the reindeer would drift down into this river, and they'd leave them there. Of course these deer would be dying a long time, often. They would spear all they possibly could, because the theory was that the more they killed, the more there were. Maybe there was something to it, about thinning them out. I mean there might have been something to it. But anyway that was their belief, and apparently it had never diminished the herd.

Now here are the Eskimos that we met when we got to Hudson Bay. They weren't the first ones we saw. The woman is over on that side and this is her sister, and these we reached after we'd gone three days down in this rickety old sail boat. The tent is made of reindeer skins. The old lady at the bottom is the grandmother, and on of those is the grandchild.

MR. F.: What were the names of these Eskimos?

MR. O.: I don't know their names.

MR. H.: Personal names?

MR. F.: No, tribal names.

MR. O.: I can't tell you that either. I don't think I've got that anywhere. I never got that far.

MR. H.: Did you converse with them at all, or was it a question of ...

MR. O.: No, you would be surprised. I had, I guess, at least two hundred words – here are some of the first caribou we saw. That was before we got into the actual barrenlands. There are three of them going to shore.

I had about two hundred words from the Canadian Survey, and you would be amazed how much that helped. You couldn't do that with Indians, but with Eskimos who were so naturally eager to help and be friendly. They were very outgoing, very different from the Indians who don't want to get friendly with you at first. And I just got along wonderfully.

Now here we were up on the point, and there was the northern shore of this big lake, something like Rainy – no trees. We saw moose coming. As we went east they were coming west against the wind all day long.

MR. F.: Caribou?

MR. O.: Woodland caribou – barrenland caribou.

MR. F.: Is this Nueltin?

MR. O.: No, that isn't Nueltin Lake.

MR. H.: Oh, isn't it?

MR. O.: No, it was before we got there.

MR. H.: Oh, I thought that was the place where you said Billy McGee chased them across a little bay.

MR. O.: Well, he ran down the hill from up there, yes. We were having breakfast up there, and we saw these deer going upwind on the other side, but that wasn't Nueltin Lake yet. But this was one of the first places where we saw them. This was where we saw those other people – the last people that I said we saw more about a mile below, and this man was camped on the hill top, and I remember he was in poor health. That was why he hadn't gone with the rest of the Indians that we met on the last portage before that, down to Reindeer Lake – Hudson Bay fort. He was up there, and they looked a dreadfully shabby lot. Last men we saw, I guess. This was at the last Hudson Bay fort which we'd left ten weeks before. That was on the north end of Reindeer Lake, and that is Alphonse Chippewaian who was a candidate for going with us for about a hundred miles to help us so we wouldn't take too long going up there. We had no map or anything.

And that's a Catholic Church that had been built entirely by their hand. They made shingles, siding, everything – the twelve Stations of the Cross. They made everything except the organ. An organ that you work with your feet had been brought in over all the portages in the winter, and it turned out when we attended Sunday service that Alphonse Chippewaian (who was to go with us, we thought – the next day he backed out) was the organist. The first we knew of this we heard this sort of indefinite wheezing, and that was the organ, you see. And all the women were sitting on one side of the floor, and then the aisle, and all the men on the other side. Now that doesn't show up well

Here, but that is intended to show something about these routes. I don't remember which of those maps, but it looks as if some of that was Tyrell's route rather than ours and taken out of his. Maybe there'll be another one pretty soon.

MR. H.: Upside down? Or backwards.

MR. O.: Yes. That gives a general location of where we were. There's the map of North America where we wanted to show on that map which side of North America we went into – North or South.

MR. H.: This was for you lecture series, wasn't it?

MR. O.: Yes. That has to be turned upside down, because that is my route. Now there's Hudson Bay you see. Now the blue part was on Hudson Bay and the blue part down below was the part that (so far as we know) had been traveled. The red part was the part that hadn't been traveled, not by canoe, anyway – where you came down from Churchill to York Factory. No, that isn't it exactly, because from there on it's red, too. I don't know just why one part of that's red and one part blue – oh, I tell you. The blue part is the part where we came down with the Eskimos in their sailboat, you see. The red part is the part we did on our trip. Way down at the bottom (I can't tell you offhand just exactly) was the railroad – that blue part.

MR. F.: In the finish?

MR. O.: Yes, until we got to the Pas and then we came down to Winnipeg. That's it. That's exactly it. One was where we had artificial travel, and the other was where we went on our own.

Here they were coming up a rapid, and they poled instead of paddling – they poled, pushed their way, and it was very swift. All these Indians, except the guide in the back, had been drunk and they were in bad shape. They were a bum looking lot, and they got out, and they were just hardly able to stand, except this old fellow, whose name was Green wood. He was about fifty years old, and his trousers were rolled up to the knees, and if he wasn't the most attractive old fellow.

MR. H.: Where was this now?

MR. O.: Well that was below Reindeer Lake. Now these are Indians in our own country. That's just here by mistake. That's in this Rainy Lake district. But those other Indians were before we got up to Reindeer. Oh, yes, this is another picture of those caribou that landed down below us one morning, the same crowd you saw before. Finally I got Billy to chase down there, and they got excited and they all jumped in the water, and you heard all their antlers hitting together like this.

Now there are some of the inhabitants of Dubrosche, the last fort going up, where this old priest was, a very fine priest. They're all Chippewaian – all belong to the Catholic Church. They were friendly.

Now this is one of two old women that were there at that camp where all the meat was hanging up – that first picture you saw. This one was benevolent. The other one – you can't push it so you can see the other one I suppose. Her face – she's paralyzed. Her face

is all drawn. There, now, if you can get it back so you can look at that one. Now she's the one that took umbrage so at my taking a picture, and she suddenly dashed at me just screaming, and she had a great big stick. The rest of them were all amused, but they just sat still, sort of petrified. When I saw her I couldn't do anything more. I just stood absolutely still there and looked right at her, and she finally stopped. Now that is at Dubrosche again. That's the native and his tent at Dubrosche. See, he's got a stove there with a stove pipe on it. Quite modern.

MR. F.: That a little boy or girl with him?

MR. O.: Well, that I don't know.

MR. H.: What are those things hanging from the poles?

MR. O.: Fish – some kind of fish.

Here is a picture in the barrenlands. This will give you a little idea of how it looked. That is a portage – one of the places where we had to carry around. That's one reason why it's so difficult to find you way around through all those boulders you see. It is a place where the river almost petered out. It spread out over a half a mile or so, you see.

MR. F.: Is that your canoe?

MR. O.: Yes.

MR. H.: Is that your canoe?

MR. O.: Yes, well not, just a minute.

MR. H.: It doesn't look like a canoe. It looks like a boat.

MR. O.: Just a minute now – can you shift it back this way a little

bit? Maybe I've got this wrong. No, there was no boat there like that. For a moment you had me hesitating in thinking that was on Hudson Bay after we met the Eskimos and the tide went out. Just a minute. Well, I still don't know. I can't tell you. Maybe I'll know pretty soon. I don't think that is our canoe either.

Now this was taken the same place, that last place where we saw any human beings you see. Of course, that's hand-colored and not very well done, either.

There was an old lady at Dubrosche – Chippewaian – nice old woman. Fine type of Chippewaian woman. There's Alphonse Chippewaian and I guess that's his wife and daughter. He was the one that was going to go on this trip back down.

This is a much earlier picture taken in the Quetico the first year – a guy that they finally threw in jail and he never got out. I'd just caught a trout. Would you have known – had any idea that that was of me? Would you? That's so. Well, that was taken in 1909. These are two local Indians, and they're colored wrong. Here are a couple of moose in this country.

Now here are Eskimos. This was the man that owned the boat in which he took us down to Churchill. He borrowed our canoe – you see the open gunnels on the canoe – on the condition that he take me along. He and his brother went along. They had a gun. I crouched in the middle, and we went up a small stream as far as we could – very rough and boulders. All of a sudden, far off, we saw a seal. That's what they were hunting. He raised up a little bit, and fired and missed. We were bobbing all around like this in the current, you see,

And I thought, well, he never could have hit that anyway. How could he have, with the canoe wobbling. So we turned around and went down. I thought, well he's going to try again. All of a sudden we saw blood, and I thought, well, maybe he did get it anyway. A few minutes later here we saw a great big dark grey bag – that isn't colored right – it wasn't brown – sort of rolling around in the current, and it was the seal dead, shot through the eyes. It was another shot – oh, it was a long ways.

Mr. F.: What body of water was this in?

Mr. O.: Well that was a river – what it was called I don't know, but it was after we had gone down the coast for at least fifty miles, and we stopped in the estuary of this other little river, you see.

Now this is a stockade for dogs, and I think that one was at Dubrosche, but that was another one of those dog farms, you see.

Now that's the Eskimo, the first human being we saw after seven weeks. We finally came over this last portage, always expecting to see Hudson Bay, but never did, and there was this huge body of water. Of course, I thought, that must be Hudson Bay, but I didn't say anything right away. I was thinking quickly – well, could there be a body of water as big as that? Oh, no, there's none that big. That must be Hudson Bay.

The next day we could see a little figure way out in the distance, moving. Then Billy say: "Guess see smoke." He pointed over this way along the shore and we saw a little curl of smoke. Then we could see this thing was approaching, and we loaded up our canoe. He had part of a seal on the back of that, you see, and he had his harpoon

and old rusty gun. By the time he got there we had our canoe loaded, and he was paddling double paddles. Well, you can't stop – you'd have to rest that on something or you'd upset – it's like a bicycle – you have to be in motion or you upset. So he came up and his face was just wreathed in smiles, and he laid his double paddle across our canoe and he held out his hand to me to shake hands. But he didn't hold it out to the Indian, and the Indian didn't show any sign of greeting him either. He then motioned for us to follow him over to where we saw this little curl of smoke, about half a mile away along the shore. He paddled as slowly as he could so that he wouldn't upset – like this. And we were just paddling with all our might, because, of course, these canoes aren't anywhere near – this is just like a knife – this boat he has, this kayak. Well, then we got over there, and we saw a creature come into the water, way down, because there were all boulders. You couldn't get right up to the dry shore – all boulders. This miniature creature who was just coming out as fast as he could immediately began taking hold of our things, and it was this one, and I thought, at first, before I had much of a look, it must be the man's wife. But it turned out to be his oldest boy, and this was the boy that adopted me and told me so many words, you see, afterward. He was just wonderful. He was so benevolent he didn't know what to do, and he was the one, like all the children, who was covered with vermin, and the one that sat too close.

This isn't the same family. These are Indians at Dubrosche, as they were then – all Christians. This is the Eskimo again when

He got up there and shot – well, it was when we landed below where the other family –

Mr. F.: Goose?

Mr. O.: No, he shot us a beg gull. They took everything, but when they had good seal meat or good Arctic salmon, they threw these things and hawks in the old boat, which had a lot of ballast in it, very heavy rocks – 200 pound boulders if they could get them. The women lifted them like nothing. They were heavily ballasted so it wouldn't upset in the seas, you see. They'd throw these things in, and that's a sort of pantry, and when you're walking around in there it's very greasy and you slip on those things. But if they get all out of food two weeks later and nothing to eat, well then they go look in there for the most desirable of what remained. It might be an old gull.

Mr. H.: Even though it's rotten?

Mr. O.: Well, yes, you can't be too squirmish when you get to that stage. Now, there is the grandmother and that was at the second camp when we went down there.

MISS K.: What is she carrying?

Mr. O.: She's carrying wood – driftwood that she's picked up along the shore for fire, and look how she works, and she's all drawn up. Now she won't last very long. She might last another winter and she might not. And she might be one of those who when she realizes she's nothing be a nuisance and an encumbrance on the Eskimos, then she does what they're supposed to do frequently. I don't know just how often they do this, but it's a regular practice. Some terrible night – forty below zero – when they haven't had food for a long time, and the men

Are hunting all around and they can't get any food, and they come back, same report. Or maybe they go off for two days before they get back – no food. A person like that, stripped to the bone, would crawl out through the entrance and go out and lie down in the snow. That's the end of them.

Now, here his is coming in again with that gull. Sometimes he'd shoot a gull. I saw him do that. One of the children would pop out of this igloo – not a stitch on – climb in there – a little child – a little boy, maybe about twelve – and he'd been lying in there where it was warm. But he'd pop out, dart into the water, and he'd go out there maybe up to his neck, and get this gull and bring it in. Here it's a seal they're bringing in. See, they just put the strap on, and you drag it in. You can just see the head.

Now this, of course, is down in this country, and exactly why I've got it in there I can't tell you. There was some special reason. But that's not up there.

This is as you're approaching the barren grounds going down through some of these lakes before we got into Nueltin, you see. It was getting sparser and sparser. You can see how the trees are. They're small – no underbrush –and this is the river going down there below where we saw all those caribou horns, when you're getting down just below one of the little rapids. Some of those we could run; some we had to portage.

Mr. H.: That's above Nueltin?

Mr. O.: Oh, yes.

Mr. H.: North of Nueltin?

Mr. O.: No, south of Nueltin. I mean before we got to Nueltin. This is the way they look when you get a good view of one of them swimming. They swim rather high, you see.

MISS K.: Caribou?

Mr. O.: Yes.

MISS K.: What kind of growth in the background, Mr. Oberholtzer?

Mr. O.: Well, that's mostly spruce. That's about all you get up there, and when you get in there, it doesn't look as thick as it does in there. It's park-like. There's practically no underbrush.

Mr. H.: Ober, that's about it, though there was one picture I wanted to try to find which I wasn't able to find on all those men – really a masterpiece.

Mr. F.: How old were you when you made this trip?

Mr. O.: Let's see. How old am I now? You people are too good on arithmetic. That's the trouble. Well, I went in 1911. I was then twenty-eight years old. So you can figure, I must be nearly ninety now.

(More pictures, after a pause to find them.)

That's the kind of thing the glacier left. I don't know what that is in the center. You have two, maybe three. But we had those things to dodge all the time, right where we would be portaging, you see. We'd have to go around or through them. Sometimes you had to slide down bad places with the canoe. It was frightfully rough country. There were very, very few places where the rock was what the geologists say in place, the original, you see. It was all this overlaying stuff. It was just

dumped there by the glacier.

Mr. F.: Did your canoe ever upset?

Mr. O.: Well, we lost our rifle. We never upset while we were in the canoe, but we did have this one serious accident.

Now, that's typical barren lands, and that's down below in one of these raped things, you see.

Mr. F.: Is that your canoe over there on the left?

Mr. O.: Will you run that back a minute. I didn't see it. No, that's rock.

MISS K.: There's a canoe there.

Mr. O.: Is there?

MISS K.: Yes, it goes way to the edge of the slide.

Mr. O.: You're right. You've got better eyes than I have. Yes, that's the canoe, but it looks empty. Well, I'll tell you what we may have been doing. We may have been letting it down there with a rope, you see. That's what we would do on some of those frightfully rough places like that where there was no channel. It doesn't show the man. Maybe Billy was holding the rope. That's the only way I can explain it.

This is one of those Eskimo boys – the second one.

MISS K.: Is he smoking a pipe?

Mr. O.: Yes, he had this pipe. I gave the father tobacco, but he didn't use it. They gave it to the baby. I know I didn't give him that pipe.

That's these same fellow that upset down below and had this wonderful old Greenleaf. That's the man on the shore. They were all used up. They'd been drinking and they didn't have one bit of energy. They were absolutely worthless. They upset one of the canoes and smashed it all to pieces. Then Greenleaf made them a lunch, and immediately he won my heart. That's one of these old women at Dubrosche, last post going up there, on Reindeer Lake. Chippewaian.

Mr. H.: Well, that's about it, Ober.

Mr. F.: Will you describe this accident, Ober?

Mr. O.: Oh yes. Of course, my main desire with wild animals was to get close and do as I'd done with the moose, study them, find out everything I could about their habits, their looks and take photographs as close as possible. Anything especially that illustrated the habits and so we passed many, many wonderful opportunities.

Mr. H.: Oh, here's the one – here's the one!

Mr. O.: Oh, Killa Caribou. Yes, now these are the men that met us on the portage before we reached those old women where they had killed all those caribou for the winter. They killed those for winter food and for clothing. They take the best of the skins and tan those and make all their clothing, and some of their tents. They get the dried meat. They dry the meat and chop that up and make pemmican. They put it in skin bags, and they had just had this. Then the men started down, having had this wonderful success at hunting. They left the women there to do those jobs for the winter, and the men all started

down to the present-day fort, you see, Dubrosche, which was about 150 miles south of there. We'd just come from there. We were going on what we thought was going to be one of the last of our portages, a rather long portage. We were about in the middle of that when we heard a peculiar sound, and we just didn't know what that was. It was kind of ominous, and in a moment we were completely surrounded by these men whom we had never seen before in our lives. And they acted very strangely. They looked at us very skeptically, as if they thought that we were doing some damage. They surrounded us, and immediately began to look at our things. They opened some of my pack, and they didn't smile. They were very grave about the whole thing. So then I picked out the man that looked most like the chief. He was a little fellow, and I don't know which one that was in that picture. But I walked up to him, and handed him a part of a plug of tobacco, and held out my hand to shake hands, and he shook hands. Immediately it was all off – everybody smiled and laughed.

Mr. H.: What language did they speak?

Mr. O.: They'd speak Chippewaian. I didn't know any Chippewaian, but I just shook hands with him and handed him the tobacco and smiled. And then they all immediately began to talk like everything, but they went on examining. They'd never seen things like that you see. Oh, they picked everything apart. They didn't take stuff out, though, but while they were doing that, you felt uncomfortable. You just didn't know what was going to happen.

Mr. H.: Boy, they're a tough-looking bunch, aren't they?

MISS K.: They're bearded?

Mr. O.: Some of them have got beards, yes. Well, it may indicate that there was some white blood mixed in there, you see. White people had been in Dubrosche a good many years.

Mr. H.: The cab is here...