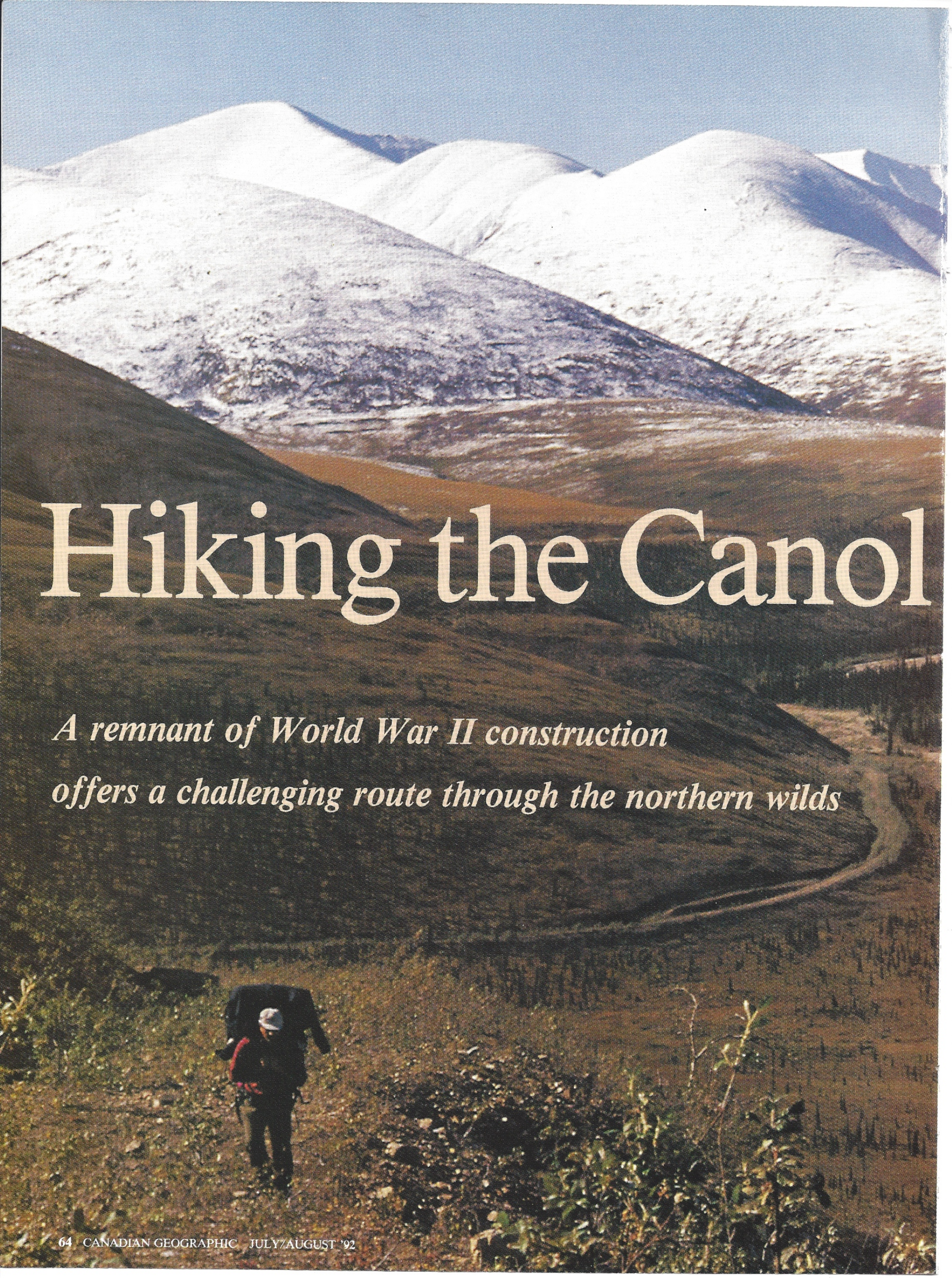


Hiking the Canol

A remnant of World War II construction offers a challenging route through the northern wilds

Trail

By Larry Pynn

IT LOOKS SO EASY. There on the shoreline of the Twitya River sits a sturdy raft fashioned from logs and oil drums. What luck, I think. Here is ready-made transport across the single most dangerous hazard on the 370-kilometre Canol Heritage Trail. Despite being tired from a five-hour hike, despite the wet falling snow, despite the excessive size of the craft and, most of all, despite my better judgment, I decide to give it a try. With scarcely a second thought, I toss my 25-kilogram backpack onto the raft and shove off with a long wooden pole.

What on earth have I done? The flow is much faster than it looks. The raft is too big and awkward for one person to manoeuvre. My feet are slipping through the logs. My energy is zapped. The current carries me downstream, and I envision myself drifting for days with no chance of reaching the other side. My one hope is to steer for a gravel bar three-quarters of the way across the river. Closer, closer the bar approaches, then . . . damn, I lose my pole. No time to think, only react. I grab my pack — a lifeline containing all the essentials for survival — and leap off the raft.

God help me, I'm drowning!

With the Canyon Ranges behind him, the author nears Mile 65 on the trail that was once the Canol road and pipeline.

Judy Walters

Sinking under the weight of several layers of clothing, numbed by the icy water and unwilling to release the pack, I struggle for my life. Then, several long seconds later, my feet touch bottom, barely at first, then firmly enough to drag myself on hands and knees onto the gravel bar, hauling the pack behind like a ball and chain.

No time to rejoice. Fearful of losing my pack, I stuff my coat with matches, cubes of fire starter and my emergency locator transmitter. Then, I hoist my pack loosely over my shoulders and start wading through waist-deep water toward the other side. Just two metres from the shoreline, the water turns deep and hurtles through a narrow chute. I aim for a stump protruding from the far bank, and take another flying jump with the pack. Made it. But what's this? My legs are buried to the knees in stinking muck. I drag myself on all fours out of the muck and onto the shoreline.

Spared from the Twitya's wretched abyss, I now risk freezing to death in a desolate, snow-entombed boreal forest. For 30 minutes, I bushwhack back upstream through 10-centimetre-deep snow toward the Canol Trail, hoping to find some sort of shelter, perhaps a remnant of one of the many construction camps built half a century ago. Increasingly hypothermic but with a single-minded sense of purpose, I find only a pocket of spruce trees and a crude windbreak made of rough planks and sheet metal, evidence that I am not the Twitya's first victim. Still, it is a welcome sanctuary, offering partial protection from the blowing snow.

both: Larry Pynn

RIGHT: near Godlin River, the author encountered Jeff Hohner and Richard Campbell of Vancouver and Gordon Rennie of Fort St. James, B.C., who travelled the complete Canol Trail by bicycle. For much of the time, the trio had to push or carry their bikes, and cycling is not a method they recommend. Walking remains the preferred means of travel despite, as Judy Walters of Vancouver found, some foot-numbing river crossings (ABOVE).

With cold, wet hands, I rifle through my pack. Almost everything is soaked, including several packs of matches stored in plastic bags that are not completely sealed. Aware of the urgency of my situation, I select a dry corner of my wool longjohns, wrap it around my wet hand, and strike the driest match I can find. To my relief, a flame! The gas stove is next, then the fire starter and eventually dry twigs beneath the trees. My fire begins oh so tentatively at first, then becomes a roaring success — so successful that the trees catch fire twice, and I scramble about with handfuls of snow to put it out.

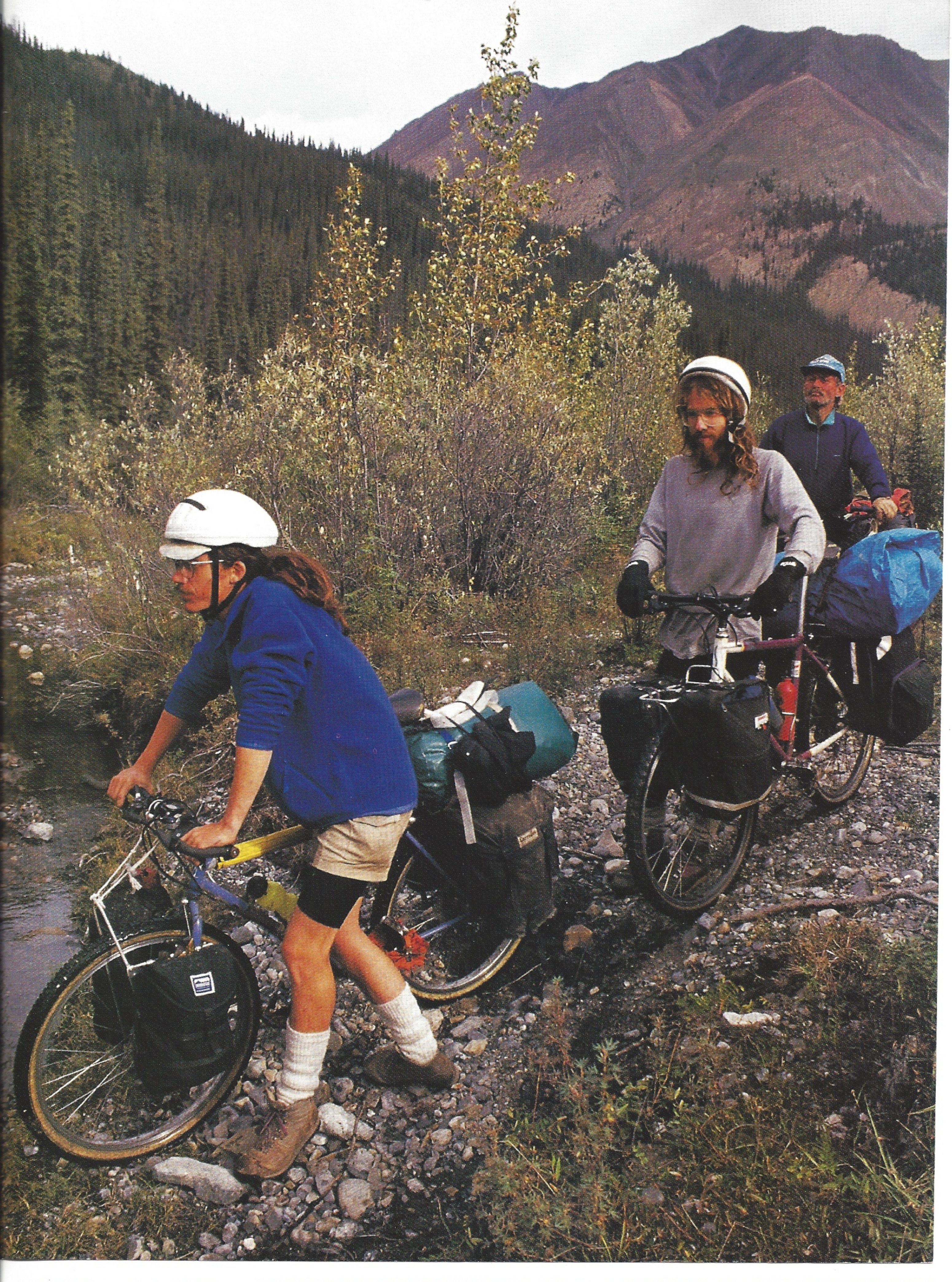
That night, after my gear has dried over the campfire, I ask myself how I could have risked so much so easily.

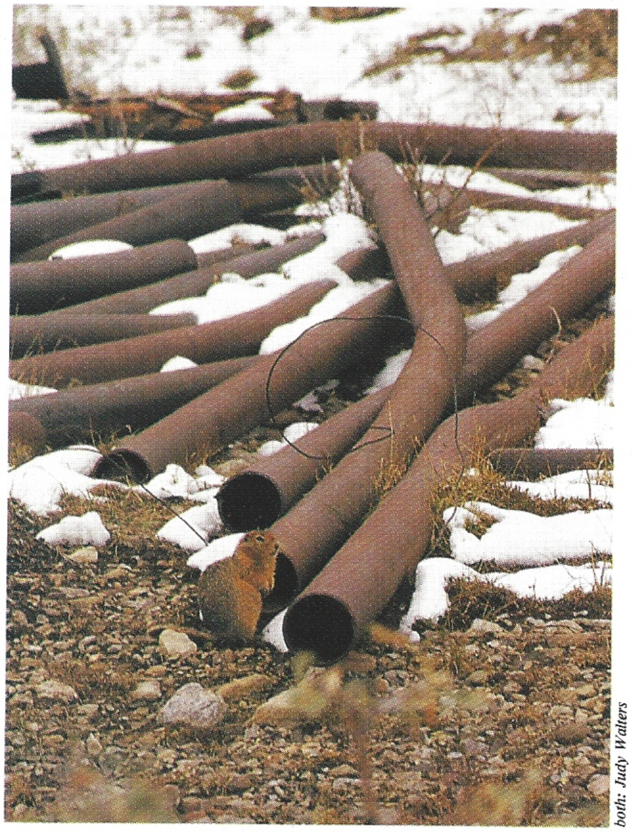
Swirling, unpredictable and occasionally frightening, the Twitya River is a fitting symbol of the Canol Heritage Trail, a 370-kilometre portal to some of the most diverse and challenging geography in North America. It can also offer a three-week journey through time, an opportunity to relive one of the biggest, but least-remembered, U.S. military boondoggles of World War II — the costly and ill-conceived construction of a road, telephone line and oil pipeline through almost 1,000 kilometres of Canadian wilderness from 1942 to 1944.

After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, U.S. military officials sought a secure oil supply to help defend Alaska against possible attack. They chose a challenging inland route from the Mackenzie River oil fields at Norman Wells, N.W.T., southwest to a 3,000-barrel-per-day refinery in Whitehorse, Yukon. The controversial project officially cost $134 million U.S., but estimates that included the military's total hidden costs have ranged as high as $300 million (3.1 billion in 1992 Canadian dollars). To make matters worse, the oil flowed for only one year. A special committee of the U.S. Senate headed by Senator Harry Truman reported in 1944 that the Canol project was a waste of precious war resources. It criticized the military for proceeding with the inland pipeline route based on the assumption that coastal oil shipping lanes were vulnerable to Japanese attack. However, the Canol (short for Canadian Oil) had its defenders, too. "The Canol Project was one of the most stupendous construction feats of its kind ever undertaken," wrote historian Richard Finnie in the *Canadian Geographical Journal* in 1947. "It was also one of the least understood and most maligned."

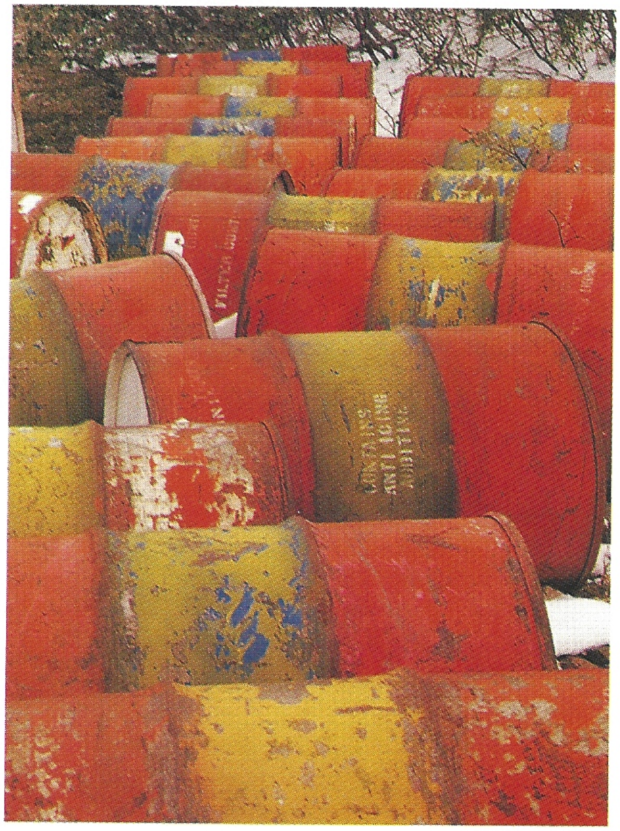
As World War II wound down and the Japanese threat to Alaska evaporated, the United States ordered a hasty retreat from the Canol in March 1945. The estimated $1 million (U.S.) annual cost of maintaining the pipeline — built above ground and vulnerable to washouts and slides — could not be justified. Tankers from the west coast of the United States could deliver much larger volumes of oil to Skagway at much lower costs.

Today, the Canol route is divided into two sections. On the Yukon side, the south Canol is a well-maintained gravel road,



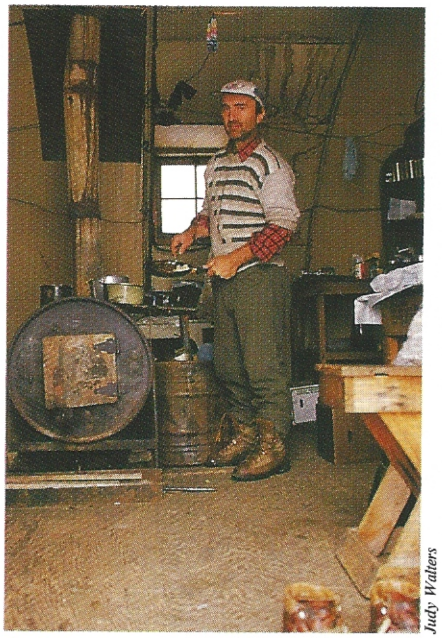


both: Judy Walters



Scores of buildings and tonnes of supplies were left behind when the U.S. Army abandoned the Canol in 1945. Buildings (LEFT) are routinely stripped for firewood, while lengths of four-inch pipeline (LOWER LEFT) offer ground squirrels a handy refuge. Drums once filled with fuel-line antifreeze (LOWER RIGHT) have kept their colour in the North's cool, dry climate.

RIGHT: author Pynn takes advantage of a surviving cookstove at Pump Station 4 to concoct a hearty breakfast.



Judy Walters

Larry Pynn

providing access between Whitehorse and the community of Ross River. On the Northwest Territories side, the north Canol is as wild and woolly as ever, abandoned but not entirely forgotten. In 1983, it was designated a heritage trail by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

There is no easy or typical way to traverse the Canol Trail. People have done it on foot, horseback, motorcycle, all-terrain vehicle, snowmobile, even mountain bike. Some are content to view the south end near the Yukon border, some the north end near Norman Wells, and some, like me and a dozen or so others each year, are crazy enough to attempt the whole thing.

I suspect my reasons for tackling the Canol were similar to those of the construction workers — adventure, personal challenge, love for the outdoors. One hiring-hall sign at the time of the construction sounded more like a dare than a warning. "This is no picnic," it read. "Temperatures will range from 90 degrees above zero to 70 degrees below zero. Men will have to fight swamps, rivers, ice and cold. If you are not prepared to work under these and similar conditions do not apply."

My adventure began on the barren grounds of the Mackenzie Mountains at Mile 208, the end of the road for most vehicles on the Canol, and was to end at Dodo Lake near Mile 36. (The Canol left its legacy in imperial measurement. The Yukon–N.W.T. border at Macmillan Pass is Mile 230; the Mackenzie River at Norman Wells is Mile 0.) But first I had Paul Romer to deal with. He stood outside pump station No. 6 and peered at me suspiciously through the swirling snow. "You've got educated sweat," he concluded. "Sure you've done this sort of thing before?" Now, here's a 64-year-old mountain man standing in an August snowstorm, draped in a black garbage bag and accompanied by nine surly, scrawny mongrel dogs. And he had the nerve to ask if *I* knew what I was doing.

Without asking, he hauled my backpack into the pumphouse's decaying shell, and explained how he came to Canada four years ago from France. He currently lives in the bush near Muskiki Lake, Alta., but emerges from social hibernation every so often to lead French tourists on hikes into the Canadian wilderness. He especially likes the Canol because of the cross-section of fellow travellers he meets along the way.

On this cold morning, Romer has returned from a trek along the lower Canol trail with his daughter and three clients, moulding them according to his personal wilderness philosophy: "I give them a rough time to begin with. I push them so I know their every reaction in every situation. I don't approach them in a friendly way. In the bush, you can't afford to be polite." Then he added with an actor's flair: "I'm not violent, but I like to get mad." Hmmm. Well, gotta be goin'. As I hastily secure the pack onto my back and prepare to leave, several of Romer's dogs begin a chorus of threatening howls. "They're excited and want to go, too," he explains. "They might bite you if you get too close."

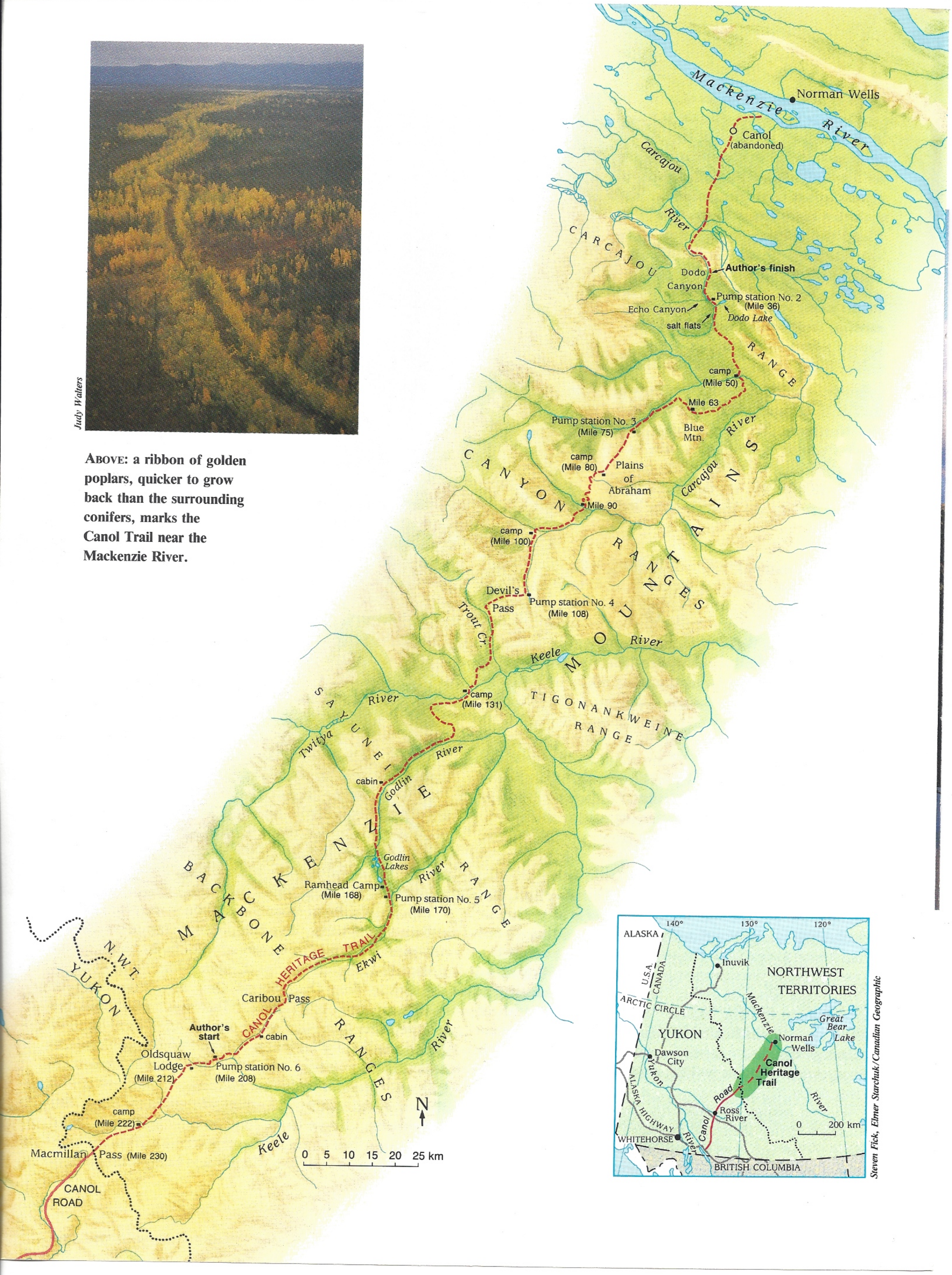
With that final, comforting thought, I proceeded eastward past a hulking row of abandoned, rusting trucks toward the enticing remoteness of the Mackenzie barrens, a unique alpine-tundra ecosystem surrounded by 2,000-metre-high mountains. The 20,000-hectare barrens have been declared a United Nations international biological site. Birds and animals range over the rich plateau, a fact that has not gone unnoticed to man. Hunters from Ross River travel the Canol in search of caribou and moose, as do naturalists from Oldsquaw Lodge, a wilderness retreat at Mile 212.

I spot half a dozen mountain caribou in the near distance and a northern harrier dive-bombing a gyrfalcon perched on a hillside. It is a modest display of wildlife, by barrens standards. At Oldsquaw Lodge, Connie Miller, a 33-year-old chiropractor from Owen Sound, Ont., vividly described the wildlife experience of a lifetime. "There was a grizzly bear and wolf watching each other on the tundra. All of a sudden, they both started to look nervous and there, loping through the tussocks, was a wolverine with two babies. It was fabulous."

Several previous wilderness adventures in northern British Columbia had taught me to expect anything in the North. But it was still a surprise to see snow as early as August 19, an omen that winter had arrived exceptionally early in the Mackenzie Mountains this year. Cold would be my constant com-

Judy Walters

Above: a ribbon of golden poplars, quicker to grow back than the surrounding conifers, marks the Canol Trail near the Mackenzie River.


Mackenzie River
Norman Wells
Canol (abandoned)
Carcajou River
CARCAJOU RANGE
Author's finish
Dodo Canyon
Pump station No. 2 (Mile 36)
Echo Canyon
salt flats
Dodo Lake
camp (Mile 50)
Mile 63
Pump station No. 3 (Mile 75)
Blue Mtn.
Carcajou River
camp (Mile 80)
Plains of Abraham
Mile 90
CANYON RANGES
camp (Mile 100)
Devil's Pass
Pump station No. 4 (Mile 108)
MACKENZIE MOUNTAINS
Trout Cr.
Keele River
camp (Mile 131)
TIGONANKWEINE RANGE
SAYUNEI RANGE
Twitya River
Godlin River
cabin
Godlin Lakes
Ramhead Camp (Mile 168)
Pump station No. 5 (Mile 170)
BACKBONE RANGES
CANOL HERITAGE TRAIL
Ekwi River
Caribou Pass
Author's start
cabin
Oldsquaw Lodge (Mile 212)
Pump station No. 6 (Mile 208)
N.W.T.
YUKON
camp (Mile 222)
Macmillan Pass (Mile 230)
CANOL ROAD
Keele
N
0 5 10 15 20 25 km
140°
130°
120°
ALASKA
U.S.A.
CANADA
Inuvik
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
ARCTIC CIRCLE
Mackenzie
Great Bear Lake
YUKON
Norman Wells
Dawson City
Yukon
Canol Heritage Trail
River
ALASKA HIGHWAY
Canol Road
Ross River
0 200 km
WHITEHORSE
River
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Steven Fick, Elmer Starchuk/Canadian Geographic panion through an ever-changing landscape. Night temperatures routinely dipped below freezing, demanding three wool sweaters on the frostiest nights. Daytime winds could freeze wet running shoes solid, forcing me to thaw them in cold water before donning them to ford creeks. There would be warm sunny days, for sure, when all seemed right with the universe. But as summer waned, I could never count on the sun as I could the cold.

As wilderness trails go, the Canol begins as a veritable freeway, a raised gravel road, virtually devoid of vegetation almost 50 years after its construction. Under these high-altitude, bug-free conditions, it is possible to cover 15 to 20 kilometres a day despite a heavy pack and the temptation to stop and ogle the mountain scenery every few paces.

Trail conditions are also a testament to industrial man's impact on the fragile north. Peter Kershaw, a geography professor at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, has studied the Canol for almost 20 years, ranging from investigations of the rate at which plants revegetate to the rate that oil spills dissipate. His latest research on palsas — peat-covered permafrost mounds, possible clues to permafrost's southern range — is assisted by three undergraduate students funded in part by The Royal Canadian Geographical Society. Working from a base camp near Oldsquaw Lodge, Kershaw sees the Canol as an incredible natural research laboratory. And while he acknowledges the Canol project remains an ugly scar on the landscape, he points out its size relative to the Mackenzie Mountains: "When you walk through it, you think what a devastation this is. But when you fly, you realize how small the zone is."

Outside Oldsquaw's back door rests a gruesome example of the Canol's continuing impact on the environment — several metres of telephone wire wrapped around a bull caribou's antlers. In the Yukon, the copper-coated wire has been removed from the Canol Road, but in the Northwest Territories it still litters the landscape and ensures a cruel death for unsuspecting wildlife each year. "Here, try to bend it with your bare hands," urged Oldsquaw's owner, Norman Barichello, knowing full well pliers are needed. "It's amazing an animal could wrap that much around itself."

My plan was to hike alone to Mile 108, the heritage trail's midway point, where fresh food supplies and Judy Walters, my hiking companion for the final leg of the trip, would arrive by charter aircraft. I soon discovered that the solo hiker never feels completely alone on the Canol. Willow ptarmigan are forever rocketing skyward at close range. Curious caribou actually come closer for a better look. Aircraft pilots use the Canol to guide them through the Mackenzie Mountains. And all those construction relics — teetering telephone poles, bullet-ridden trucks, dilapidated shacks, scattered pipe and errant oil drums — provide a historic human touch as they grudgingly yield to the elements.

On the Canol, other travellers are a welcome sight, like a letter from far-away relatives, offering a chance to exchange anecdotes and information about trail conditions. On my third day, I had just crossed the knee-deep Ekwi River when someone hollered "Hello" from the other side. River crossings require removing your pants, putting on running shoes to keep your hiking boots dry, and wading downstream at an angle, using a wood staff to keep your balance. I'd never removed my pants and taken a cold shower for an interview — not even the time I covered a nudist-colony beauty pageant — so this was a first. I dropped my drawers and waded back to the other side where Wes Hodgson, a 31-year-old carpenter, and Donna Denny, a 24-year-old restaurant waitress, both from Norman Wells, were making tea.

Below: Donna Denny and Wes Hodgson of Norman Wells, N.W.T., with Buster the dog, take a break on the banks of the Ekwi River.

Larry Pynn

They had flown by chartered plane to Mile 108 and were headed south to Macmillan Pass. Walking parallel to the path on the other side of Trout Creek, they had spotted close to 20 Dall sheep. On another day, a wolf came within six metres of camp to check up on their dog Buster. They warned me that the trail became worse farther ahead and said they had crossed the Twitya upstream at a braided section by wading, swimming and floating their packs on a small log raft. "It got so deep, so fast," recalled Denny, glad to put the worst behind her. "And was it ever cold."

Later that afternoon, near Mile 170, I encountered Brad Bell, a 26-year-old mechanic from Fort St. John, B.C. Bruised, beaten and limping back to Macmillan Pass, Bell had driven his all-terrain vehicle too fast through heavy brush and had slid off a high, narrow section of trail. His vehicle and trailer tumbled down a cliff, breaking the throttle cable, cracking the handlebars, damaging one tire beyond repair and puncturing another. "I thought I was dead," Bell related, pointing to bandages on his forehead and extensive scrapes on his rib cage. To his surprise, the machine fired up the next day,

Judy Walters

Right: biologist Norman Barichello and son Josh display the wire-wrapped antlers of a bull mountain caribou, one of an annual toll of animals snared by Canol project trash.

Left: red-leaved bearberry and yellow Schreber's moss, among other flora, frequently brighten the Canol hiker's path.

and he managed to fashion a switchback trail up the mountainside to the Canol Trail. "I wanted to make it to Norman Wells," said Bell, who had turned back in an attempt to hike the Canol two years earlier. "I can forget that now."

Buoyed by long hours of daylight, I took just three days to reach Stan and Debby Simpson's Ramhead guide-outfitter camp at Godlin Lakes, Mile 168. The Canol poses a mixed blessing for the Simpsons' big-game hunting business. They use the trail as a convenient landing strip outside their base camp and for transporting 35 pack-horses back and forth to Macmillan Pass in June and October. On the down side, foreign clients paying $10,000 and up for a wilderness hunting experience are put off by Canol travellers — some of them hungry, hurt and needing help — streaming past camp each year.

The Simpsons have flown out hikers with broken ankles, provided food to thread-bare travellers and gas to stranded motorcyclists. Even the couple's 1983 wedding reception was interrupted when five Esso employees from Norman Wells pulled up on motorcycles and three-wheel all-terrain vehicles. "I guess one day we'll have to start selling hamburgers and souvenir T-shirts and forget the hunters," Stan jokes.

Any hiker equipped with topographic maps should have little trouble following the Canol despite numerous washouts and landslides, particularly on the northern half of the trail. However, the Simpsons are amazed no one has drowned on the Twitya River. They recall one fellow showing up at their camp on a small motorcycle and wearing only his underwear on his head and a garbage bag around his body. His raft carrying provisions had flipped on the Twitya. On another occasion, a German hiker struck his head on a rock while crossing the river and had to be rescued by his wife. Even the most prepared hikers find the Twitya a serious challenge. In 1988, a six-member Canadian army team had to summon a helicopter from Norman Wells late one night after one of their men became stranded on a gravel bar and another was swept downstream.

Despite the real risk of death, the territorial government refuses to put a bridge, tramway or even a life-saving rope across the Twitya River pending settlement of native land claims in the region. Yet tourism authorities continue to promote the Canol as a tourist destination with little thought to the consequences. As author and outdoorsman Sandy Gage accurately points out in his book, *A Walk on the Canol Road*: "The road, considered in its entirety, puts the backpacker at considerable, perhaps unjustifiable, risk."

Grizzlies are also a potential hazard on the Canol, and a constant source of northern folklore. Fellow travellers warned me about a nuisance grizzly airlifted from the Norman Wells garbage dump to a nearby mountain ridge. An Alberta family of three on two motorcycles and an all-terrain vehicle was briefly chased by a grizzly at Trout Creek a couple of days before my arrival. And a week before that at Ramhead, three of the Simpsons' crew on a horse roundup spent an hour up a tree before a grizzly got bored and sauntered off. However, it should be noted that Oldsquaw Lodge has conducted nature walks for years without firearms and without incident. Caution, common sense and perhaps a can of pepper spray are the hiker's best defence against grizzlies.

Between Godlin Lakes and Trout Creek, the Canol trail becomes increasingly shrouded by thick willows and poplars, at first blocking views of the mountains and then demanding some serious bushwhacking. From Trout Creek north to Dodo Canyon, the trail frequently disappears, the result of washouts, landslides and encroaching brush.

While I prepared to break camp on day five beside the Godlin River, three gaunt mountain bikers showed up heading south to Macmillan Pass. Gordon Rennie, 50, of Fort St. James, and Richard Campbell, 27, and Jeff Hohner, 30, both of Vancouver, were completing a traverse by pedal power and warning others not to attempt it. "It's been a tough trip," confirmed Rennie, a schoolteacher who placed an ad for companions in a Vancouver cycling club newsletter. "We've been pushing our bikes 35 to 40 percent of the time."

There seem to be as many ways to hear about the Canol as there are ways to travel it. David "Dingo" Smith, a 28-year-old Australian adventurer, and Josje Hebbes, 29, from The Netherlands, met by chance in a bar in Inuvik. Together they spread out a Northwest Territories map on the table and followed this strange dotted line — the Canol Heritage Trail — through the Mackenzie Mountains. "People said it was too hard," Hebbes reflects. "So I just put it out of my mind until I met David. We've known each other for 12 days."

The hike from Trout Creek over Devil's Pass to Mile 108 was particularly punishing. My fingers were cracked from the cold and my feet were badly blistered. Then, amid the coldest and most unforgiving stretch on the Canol trail, I stumbled upon a half-moon Quonset hut still in habitable condition. At

Larry Pynn

that point, I would not have traded it for a week at the world's finest resort. It contained a barrel wood stove for heat and cooking, creaky bunks for sleeping and several boxes of soup, biscuits, chocolate, coffee and mashed potatoes — excess provisions from a 44-person expedition from Oxford, England, one year ago. From this decadent wilderness oasis, I would lick my wounds and await Judy's arrival.

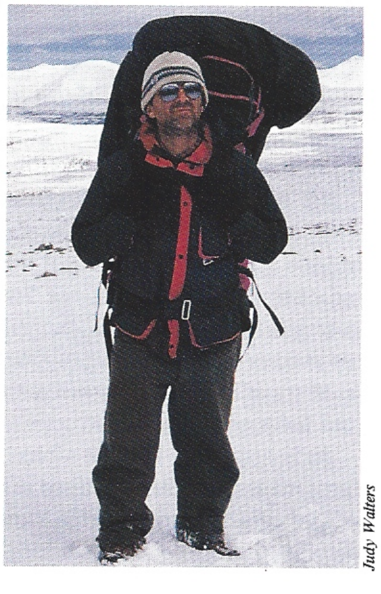
Oh, how the winds howled at Devil's Pass, funnelled with demonic force down the frozen, barren slopes. Graffiti on the Quonset walls confirmed my own impressions. Five men from Norman Wells on snowmobiles in 1984 simply scrawled: "Windy as hell." One person added: "Six inches of snow, rain, hail, sleet, you name it!" And a traveller from Idaho wrote: "Stopped to rest my weary bones and eat a porcupine and dry out. Hope the weather is better to Norman Wells."

The harsh conditions and the historic buildings at Mile 108 gave me cause to consider the stalwart men who built the Canol, and to wonder how long their legacy will last. More than 50,000 military personnel and civilians — at least 80 percent of them Americans — worked on the Canol project. Even though they were warned about the tough conditions before they signed on, thousands of workers quit because of inadequate clothing, overcrowded living quarters, unsafe and unsanitary working conditions, and the lack of recreational outlets. Historian Finnie noted that workers had "nothing to do after completing a shift but feel sorry for themselves and nurse grievances against their foremen."

All along the trail, the remaining buildings are being stripped by travellers for firewood. Given the harsh conditions at Mile 108 and the absence of trees for wood, one can hardly blame the hikers. As with the Twitya River crossing, the real culprit is the absence of management. Until the land claim is resolved or a management regime put into place, one can only hope travellers will burn wood already rotting on the ground and leave the standing structures intact.

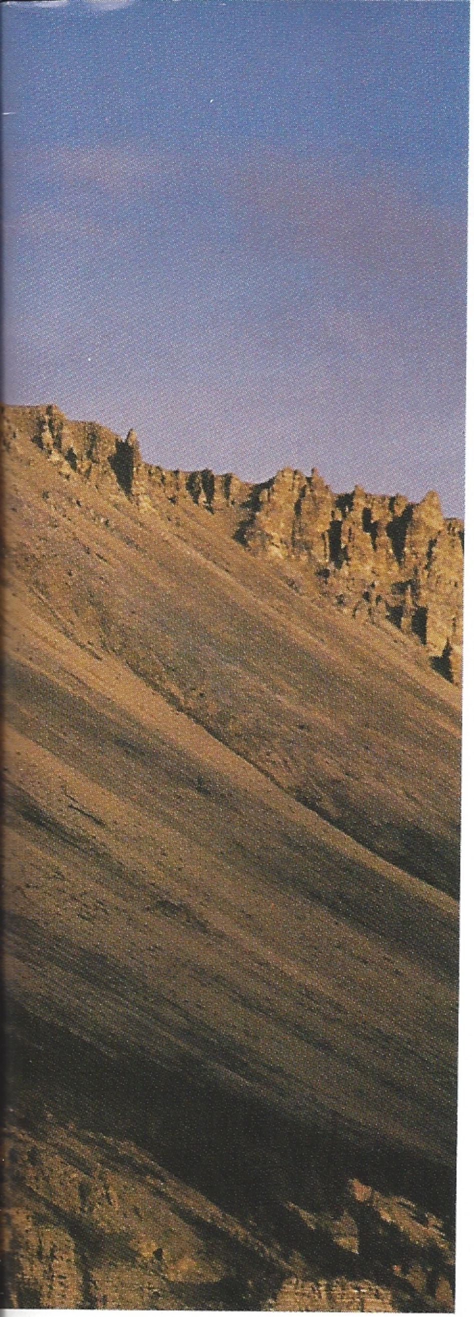
Judy arrived in the late afternoon on a charter aircraft. A farm magazine editor — raised in the B.C. Interior community of Horsefly but now based in Vancouver — Judy arrived short on wilderness experience but long on determination, common

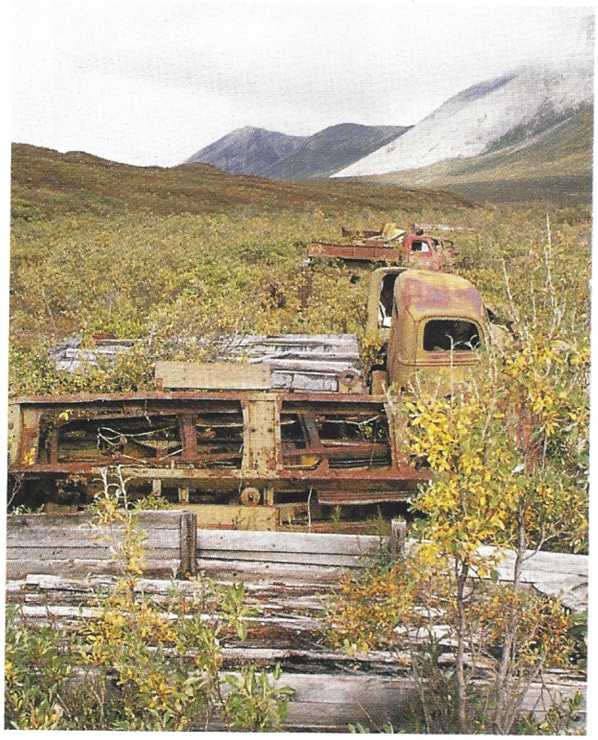
Right: the author crosses a late-August snowscape on the Plains of Abraham plateau.


Judy Walters

sense and efficiency. She had even found room in her luggage for a can of beer and a pack of my favourite taco chips. Judy's conversation and companionship were highly valued, not only because we would meet no other travellers on the Canol, but I finally had someone to complain to. The plane had been piloted by Perry Linton, a 30-year veteran of the Mackenzie Mountains. He touched down with big bouncy wheels on a rocky plateau next to the Canol Trail, and flew off almost immediately under a low threatening cloud. We would meet again. Rather than hike the final two days through soggy, featureless muskeg to the Mackenzie River — an anticlimax to such a dramatic trip — we decided to pace ourselves and fly out by float plane near Dodo Canyon, the last, and perhaps most spectacular, geological formation on the Canol Trail.

The hike from Mile 108 to Dodo Canyon proved to be a challenging series of steep ascents in contrast to the relatively flat terrain of the lower Canol Trail. The switchback trail to the 1,700-metre-high moonscape of Plains of Abraham





Left: Dodo Canyon is among the most dramatic portions of the Canol Trail, and a popular outing spot for Norman Wells residents.

Below: Alaska willows grow up and around trucks abandoned a half-century ago, as nature slowly reclaims the land borrowed for the Canol line.

both: Larry Pynn

stretched 10 kilometres, a breathtaking but torturous journey mercifully accomplished in calm, dry weather. However, the upper Canol also offered the greatest diversity of wildlife and landscapes — moose on the lush lower flanks of Blue Mountain, mountain caribou at mineral licks on the sprawling, braided Salt Flats, and Dall sheep flecked against seemingly non-existent rock ledges in Dodo Canyon.

Camps and pump stations in the north half also tended to offer bare-bones accommodation — rarely as quaint and well-equipped as Mile 108, but at least a cot, table and wood stove in an inevitably drafty room. Trail etiquette dictates that travellers should always leave a small amount of dry kindling and wood beside the stove to kickstart the next cold and weary traveller.

Pump station No. 2, at Mile 36, would be our final base camp for day trips into Echo Canyon, a dramatic sliver of rock with veiled waterfalls and fast-rushing creeks, and into Dodo Canyon, a strange and magical place with red rock cliffs rising skyward like castle walls.

At night, Dodo Canyon became a theatre for the northern lights. Long wandering streaks of pale light wafted over the cliffs like smoke from a ghostly campfire. Others danced vertically skyward, brilliant glossy sheets of ice embraced by a dark, unearthly sky. This would be the Canol's final chilling performance for us. Tomorrow we would leave, and, for this year at least, no one would follow down the trail.

The next afternoon, we signed the pump station's guest book and added our leftover provisions to the cabin's emergency rations kit. Then, with the abruptness of the military's departure from the Canol, we left for Dodo Lake, bushwhacking through willows, hopscotching over wet, lumpy hummocks and squinting through blowing snow. We had almost given up on Linton reaching us when we heard the faint drone of an engine, then watched his airplane punch a clean hole through the gathering storm and splash down gracefully on Dodo Lake.

Soon we were airborne for Norman Wells, our first stop on the way home. Below, we could see that winter had dropped like a big white pillow over the Mackenzie Mountains, scarcely before they could flaunt their brilliant fall colours. Soon our footprints would be brushed away by the winds and smothered by the snow, leaving only the legacy of those who carved the Canol from a rugged wilderness half a century ago. ◆

Larry Pynn, a frequent contributor to Canadian Geographic, lives in Vancouver.