On The Trail
Excerpts

Chapter Two, "A Homestead Claim"

As the days of August fade into September, an ideal climate is ushered into northern Minnesota. There are many beautiful days of calm and sunshine, each drawn to a close by a grand sunset over the lake. The mosquitoes decrease, and altogether it seems that nature grants a time of relaxation before the rigors of winter set in...

The season had been changing rapidly while the log house was going up. In the low-lying areas, fall does not come with a blaze of color as in the hardwood forest, but rather there are more subdued tones of yellows and browns; the tamaracks turn a golden color before they drop their needles.

It was time to lay in the winter groceries, and what a shopping list that was: 500 pounds of flour, 100 pounds of sugar, 50 pounds of rice, 50 pounds of coffee beans, 50 pounds of salt, 50 pounds of dried beans, and 25 pounds each of dried apricots, apples, prunes, and raisins. All this, together with a supply of kerosene, was brought in on the motor launch. Some of the groceries were stored under the beds, for space was at a premium. There were no canned goods in this order, for this would have been considered an extravagance or a sure sign of sloth. In all these matters, Father ruled, and his decisions were not questioned; any item ordered must bear his stamp of approval. Antonia noticed, however, that nothing Mother requested was denied.

Chapter Seven "The Lonesome Trail"

The first day's journey brought Fred far into the bog. North and west from the homestead as he had come brought him to the area of the floating bog. The black spruce clumps had become smaller and the trees themselves shorter until there were only scattered and stunted trees, four to six feet tall, though they were over 100 years old. Even such limited growth could not be supported by the floating bog, and finally there were only a very thin moss and a poor kind of grass. The pitcher plants were still in evidence; these hardy carnivorous plants actually have a pitcher about six inches high, which is about a third filled with liquid. The pitcher plant catches and digests insects in this liquid.

The going became treacherous and Fred tested the depth with the longest tamarack snag he could find, possibly ten feet long and, driving it down through the surface mosses, he found nothing solid for the length of the pole. The last stretch of floating bog was negotiated on hands and knees for better weight distribution or else he would surely go through.

By night, Fred found better going again and a place to make camp. He chose a clump of spruce in which to spend the night and busied himself setting up camp. First a well was dug. Using ax and knife, he worked out a hole about two feet deep. In about an hour, there was water in the well, and after bailing out the debris, the next water coming in was fit to drink.

A shelter came next. Much of the time Fred slept in the open, but just now he took time to build a shelter. A spruce tree provided most of the material. The branches were cut off and the trunk became a ridge pole that was wedged into the low branches of two convenient trees. Five feet sufficed for height, seven feet for length. The back was into the wind and the open front faced the fire. Small tamaracks formed a lean-to frame and then the spruce branches were laid over for a roof. It wouldn't shed much rain, but it would trap heat from the fire and afforded protection from the wind. The bed received his next attention. Again spruce boughs were used. First large boughs were laid to get off the wet ground, then smaller and smaller boughs were added until just the soft tips, "spruce feathers," formed a final pallet.

By this time, some water had collected in the well; enough to cook the sharp tail grouse that was shot along the way. Some small, dry tamaracks were gathered for a fire and two forked sticks were driven in the ground to hold a green pole on which the pails were strung by their wire bale. The grouse was boiled in one pail and later the other pail was used for tea. The only remaining chore was the gathering of firewood.

A woodsman has a relaxed time about his evening fire—a well-deserved rest from the day's hike and a chance to ponder the events of the day. Fred had seen no game save the flocks of grouse and prairie chickens on the cranberry bog and a lone sandhill crane. There were plenty of tracks, however. Tracks of traveling caribou were everywhere.

The evening turned into night and the world shrank to a little circle of firelight. There was a damp chill in the air and the fire felt especially good. All was quiet, so that the crackle of the fire sounded unnaturally loud. Then there came a solitary call—a wolf howl, starting low and rising, then falling again. After a few minutes an answering howl came from a different quarter. "I guess they know I'm here," mused Fred as he turned in for the night.

Chapter Fourteen, "Perils Along the Trail"

The two-man crosscut saw keened its way through several trunks as the trees were felled for limbing. One had hung up, however, with its long branches twisted in the neighboring trees. So while Ben swamped out those on the ground, Fred went to take care of the hang-up. He labored a bit at the base with ax and cant hook and then, as many another lumberjack has foolishly done, he took his ax and walked up the slanting tree trunk to cut off the entangled branches. Fred wore a pair of moose-hide moccasins and they were slick with frost. He had not gone far when he slipped and literally fell out of the tree. He landed in a heap in the snow with the double-bitted ax buried in his leg beneath his folded left knee. Fred grabbed the ax by the handle, jerked it fee, and threw it away. Then he straightened his leg and saw the blood spurt completely over the other leg. Ben came running to see what had happened but at the sight of

all the blood and the gaping wound, he fainted and fell helpless in the snow.

Fred worked with frantic haste. He stripped off his cloth mackinaw belt and buckled it above the wound. Then he inserted a cedar branch for a twister. The tourniquet was effective and the flow of blood stopped. Fred clung grimly to the cedar stick.

Ben stirred and slowly regained awareness of where he was and what had transpired. Fred tried to keep his voice calm, “You'll have to get me to town, Ben,” he said.

Ben worked with efficiency now. He placed a row of logs on the sled bunks and over these laid a bed of cedar boughs. Fred was able to hobble to the sled and they were off on a twelve-mile race to Kelliher. As they approached the town, Fred realized he would not retain consciousness. A great weakness was coming over him and there were large areas of black in his vision. His last act before losing consciousness was to wedge the tourniquet twister under his body so that it would not loosen.

Chapter Seventeen, “No More Soup!”

Before setting out on his last trip into the bush country, Fred wrote a letter of proposal to Antonia. It was stated in a language that they both understood. “If you think you are old enough now, I would like to marry you.”

The letter arrived on New Year's Day of 1919. Appropriately, it signaled new beginnings. Antonia penned a letter of acceptance, but it was a letter that was never delivered, for up in Canada, Fred was on the wrong side of the law.

There had been some misunderstanding when Fred purchased his trapping license. Certain animals could not be trapped by a nonresident, the official said, but when Fred tried to recover his money, he found that “license fees are not refundable.” So he went trapping anyway, pursuing the valuable fisher, martin, mink, beaver, and fox.

When spring came, Fred was out of the bush well before breakup. At a trading post he found a fur buyer and disposed of his skins. Trapping had been good, and the price was high. The pelts brought a good price, but there was one grave hitch in the transaction, for the sale of furs was illegal and there were none of the prescribed coupons to go with the skins. As Fred walked through the little village, he was stopped by a Canadian. “For a hundred dollars I'll keep my mouth shut,” the man said. Fred looked at him and decided this man wouldn't keep his mouth shut for any amount of money. “Go and get him,” he said and began buckling on his snowshoes. There was no time to catch and hook up the dogs, for the Mounty was right in the village, and Fred had no desire at the moment to make his acquaintance.

The first few miles on the trail passed by in considerable apprehension, but when there was no sound of a dog team on the back trail, Fred settled into a fast trail pace. It was 60 miles to the railroad, but there would be no stops; this would be a 60-mile snowshoe race.

Chapter Twenty-Five, "Fanny"

Fall days are short in northern Minnesota. The nights come quickly and are often very dark. It was on such a night in the fall of 1925 that Fred came home from Redby after taking in a load of whitefish. He could come fairly close to home by dead reckoning, but on a night as black as this, he usually resorted to sleeping on the boat off the shore. The motor was cut off and the anchor was about to go down when Fred heard something in the distance that brought a smile to his face. It was the barking of Fanny, the border collie that they had brought from the Reservation. The boat edged closer and stopped again while Fred listened for Fanny's obliging bark. By this means, he made shore and home, and thus Fanny announced herself as a companion and helper. It would be so for all of her life.

Fanny often rode on the boat, usually taking a position on the tip of the bow where she could watch the waves and the sea gulls. When she was home, Fanny took her place just outside the door. There she would habitually stay and keep watch on the household activities and the children. From there, too, she could watch the lakeshore. Anyone or anything could move along out there without interference, but Fanny would bark an immediate alarm when anyone turned in toward the house.

After fishing was over, Fred took to the trapline, and Fanny went along. It seemed to be the kind of life that Fanny was born for, and an experience that fall provided a thorough initiation.

It was close to Hillman Lake that Fred and Fanny came upon a male timber wolf that had just been caught in a snare. After a few frustrated lunges, the wolf stood motionless with slanted yellow eyes fixed on his captors.

As Fred appraised the fine animal he had caught, he was contemplating an old idea. He had sometimes thought he would like to try mating a male timber wolf with a female dog. The resulting offspring would be Fred's idea of sled dogs. Now it seemed that he could accomplish the first part of his plan, and so, after some maneuvering and no small struggle, the wolf was muzzled and hog-tied. Then, with the wolf slung behind his neck, legs in front, Fred began the seven-mile journey to the Deer River house. What was lacking in harmony as the three struggled along was made up in determination.

There were several stops for rest, but the trip was accomplished and the wolf was finally tied by a length of cow chain to the porch of the Deer River house. These were rather strange goings on; the house that had been the focal point of a dream and that stood alone and silent so much of the time, now had a wild wolf tied to the front doorstep.

The immediate aim was to tame the wolf, and this proved to be a slow, if not impossible, task. At the end of a week, the wolf would eat rabbits that were left for him but would not eat while the man and his dog were present. Meanwhile, he watched them come

and go until he recognized every move. Finally the wolf struck. With a quick maneuver, the wolf had Fanny trapped in a corner, and in the next instant was lunging for her throat. It might quickly be said that a male does not attack a female, but the rules had already been violated, and not by the wolf. Fred, with a rifle in his hands, was presented with an instant decision: he could have the wolf or the dog...

Chapter Twenty-Seven, "The Depression"

Fred still trapped in those hard times, and Antonia and the children got in the wood and prepared the rabbits. The kids went to school, and finally when there was no bread for the lunch, Antonia sent along soup made from canned beef stock. It was embarrassing when Dorothy asked the teacher if they could warm it on the stove, but the soup was nourishing.

The children got home from school just at dusk, and then, after the wood was in and supper was over, it was family time just as with any other people. There was no entertainment as we know it now, but Antonia made a wolf-and-sheep board just like her father had made when they first came to the homestead. There were studies to do, too, and Antonia helped the children.

It seemed a long time since they had enjoyed the light of a gasoline-fueled mantle lamp. Finally the fuel for the kerosene lamp was also gone and the children did their schoolwork by the light of a burning wick immersed in a tin can of tallow. Outside the telephone wires sang their mournful song in the cold, for this was "The Depression."

Chapter Thirty-One, "Waskish"

Almost simultaneous with the arrival of the Petrowske family in Waskish, two boys came to the back porch of the old log house that was now the Petrowske home. One of the boys leaned nonchalantly against the door jamb while the other jumped on Bud and began to wrestle him to the floor. Bud was older and bigger and finally sat on his impromptu antagonist. At the doorway stood the other unannounced guest who was bigger than either of them. On his head was an aviator-style cap with the ear flaps dangling. Chopper mitts hung loosely on his hands as if about to fall off. "Toldja ya couldn't do it," he grinned at the boy on the floor. On the floor was Glen Back, son of Peter Back who kept the hotel, while the boy at the door was Cecil Davidson. "Let's find McCoy Kid and play cops and robbers," was the boisterous invitation, as they charged back out into the snow. If we follow them into their activities, we may also learn something of the flavor of Waskish.

Chapter Thirty-Three, "The Little Fish"

Just before winter starts is a time of relaxation in the woods, and that of 1940 was no exception. Indian summer came and held long—it was an ideal time to hunt ducks and get the trapline ready. On November 10th, Fred and Bud were up on Lost River, dressed in light clothes and armed with shotguns. The day began with normal moderate weather, but in the afternoon

it began to rain, and this quickly changed to snow ahead of a strong north wind. They were in for a blizzard. They had just gotten started on the return journey when the storm hit. To Bud's amazement, Dad turned right around and, with the wind at their backs, they headed for the heavy timber.

The trapline hatchet was used to fell a spruce tree, and from its boughs a lean-to shelter was made, complete with a raised mat of spruce boughs. The shelter helped, but certainly did not produce comfort, and there was no sleep that night.

The wind raged and howled and bent the forest trees about like straws. Snow fell continually, making a smoky fire which, together with the whirling gusts of wind, made the shelter nearly untenable.

Sometime during that wild night, a flock of geese passed over, their honking blending with the voice of the storm.

The snowfall stopped with the coming of daylight, and with it came the realization that for some inexplicable reason Fred had lost his eyesight. Bud built up the fire and dried their clothes. They shared a breakfast they would long remember—it was half a bacon sandwich saved from the previous day's lunch. Then they started out, Bud leading the way and holding onto Dad's hand. Fred's sight returned in a few hours and they plugged along in knee-deep snow. The tall slough grass laid over by the snow made every step an effort. There were six miles between them and Fred Schwarten's shack, and as the day wore on, a real danger came creeping in. The travelers became listless and just didn't care much anymore. One would break trail for about 20 feet and then sit down in the snow. Then the other would get up, push on by, and sit down. At one time a deer stood in the trail ahead. “See the deer?” “Yup.”

Just how they stumbled into the camp they never knew. Neither could later remember whether they had started a fire or eaten anything, but they woke up under the covers of the bunks almost 24 hours after they reckoned they must have gone to sleep. One more night was spent in the camp and then they walked home on the river ice, for the river had frozen, then flooded over and froze again, making very good walking.

They were two days late, but Antonia had a hot meal ready in no time, for she was expecting them.

The storm was always known as the Armistice Day Storm. Fifty-nine people died in the storm in Minnesota, many of them duck hunters.