

# On the Trail of Guy Blanchet – Intrepid Northern Surveyor

By Gwyneth Hoyle

**E**mbarking on a new path may lead to totally unexpected consequences. A first canoe trip in the 1970s with teenage sons has carried me into realms previously unimagined. I grew up in the Maritimes with a summer cottage beside the ocean – they had been to boys' camp and wanted to share with me the pleasures of camping. A week-long trip in Algonquin Park was an experience that led to more camping in summer, followed by winter reading about the wilderness travel of others. At the time, I was working at Trent University and close to members of the History Department, where the standing joke was that canoeing abilities were almost a prerequisite to being hired. My interest in wilderness travel resulted in a book, in collaboration with Bruce Hodgins of the History Department, on the history of travel on Canada's northern rivers, entitled *Canoeing North into the Unknown*.

Among the most adventurous canoeists of the late 19th century in Canada were members of the Geological Survey of Canada, as well as some of the Dominion Land Survey and members of the Northern Ontario Land Survey. George Dawson, head of the GSC at the time, and R.G. McConnell explored large areas of the north west, often in makeshift craft they built from standing timbers, or once in a rough canoe made from shaped canvas brought from Ontario, stretched over a frame and waterproofed by painting. J.B. Tyrrell and his brother J.W., the first to venture across the Barrens in Peterborough canoes, would have lost their lives but for their hardy Aboriginal guides. A.P. Low criss-crossed Ungava and extracted the secrets of its mighty rivers. William Ogilvie of the Dominion Land Surveyors discovered



The first survey group to have Guy Blanchet in charge, 1911. He is in the back row, fourth from the right: "I was 27... In some ways old and in others a bit young for the job." His favourite cook, Bill Behan, is in the centre of the back row. Photo courtesy of Richard Blanchet.

the drainage systems of the Yukon Rivers, and took part in the survey of the boundary between the Yukon and Alaska. At the turn of the century, surveyors with the Northern Ontario Land Survey, under the leadership of men like Alex Niven, canoed hundreds of miles making a complete inventory of the rivers of the province. In the course of researching *Canoeing North*, it became clear to me that surveyors were the unsung heroes of Canada.

One surveyor who enjoyed writing almost as much as exploring, was Guy Blanchet, a Dominion Land Surveyor, whose frequent articles in *The Beaver* were based on some of his work mapping the land around Great Slave Lake in the 1920s. Blanchet graduated as a mining engineer at McGill in 1905, and was hired as the manager of a coal-mine in Alberta, just across the provincial border from Crow's Nest Pass. After a year in which he spent half of his time underground, mapping the "streets" of the coal-face, and the other half behind a desk, he was looking for new horizons and heard

that there was a need for surveyors in northern Alberta.

Arriving in Edmonton, Blanchet quickly found work in a surveyor's office doing a variety of jobs, but soon realized he needed professional qualifications. After putting in the required time as an assistant to a Dominion Land Surveyor and writing two sets of examinations he received his commission in 1910. His first assignment as a DLS was to survey the 23rd base line between the 4th and 5th meridians, north of Fort McMurray. To reach the monument on the 4th meridian that marked the beginning of their survey, it took a couple of months with his twenty-man crew, travelling with the Athabasca Brigade of the Hudson's Bay Company, and then tracking their own scow up the Clearwater River. A pack train of horses, travelling light, came from Lac La Biche to meet them at the starting point of the survey and move camp for them every few days. Six months later, as Blanchet stood at the 5th meridian, listening to the ring of axes and watching the trees fall, the




Guy Blanchet making observations of the land formation from the cockpit of a plane for the Cano pipeline route, June 20, 1942. Richard Finnie, photographer. Photo courtesy of Richard Blanchet.

picket man, taking his point from the transit, arrived just three feet south of the post. This was typical of Blanchet's work – accurate and efficient. For the rest of the decade he surveyed base lines and meridians in northern Alberta, Saskatchewan, and once in Manitoba around the Berens River.

In the 1920s, Blanchet surveyed a section of the Mackenzie River, the perimeter of Great Slave Lake, and then mapped areas of the Barrens to the north and east of the lake, in terrain that held the greatest fascination for him. Toward the end of the 1920s, he was given leave from the Department of the Interior to work for Dominion Explorers, setting up an aerial prospecting camp on the western shore of Hudson Bay. While airplanes were primitive, and flying hazardous, Blanchet was able to add to existing maps new details learned during many white-knuckle flights over the area.

The Great Depression of the 1930s put a damper on exploration work and in 1931, all ninety-one surveyors in the Department of the Interior were given a preemptory notice of dismissal. It was not until early in the Second World War that Blanchet found work in northern Canada to make use of his survey skills, and this time it was in a totally new field. The American Army was attempting to build a pipeline – the Canol Pipeline - to convey oil from Norman Wells, on the Mackenzie River, across the mountains to a refinery at Whitehorse. Blanchet was hired to recommend a route for the pipeline and its accompanying road, and he made a winter trip by dog-team with a few of the local Dene people to ascertain the feasibility of the route he had chosen. He continued to work as a surveyor with many responsibilities for the project until it was completed. Soon after, he

was doing similar work for the Trans Mountain Pipeline, from Edmonton to Vancouver, travelling by railway jigger, car, or on foot, in the 1950s, finishing it just as he reached his seventieth birthday.

Guy Blanchet had a reputation as one of Canada's foremost surveyors in the first half of the 20th century, and his career paralleled many of the developments of the nation, from surveys for the settlement of the west to modern pipelines for the oil industry. I have written *The Northern Horizons of Guy Blanchet*, published by Natural Heritage Press, as a tribute to this interesting man, but also in recognition of all surveyors who toiled through the northern wilderness to map this great country before the age of airplanes and electronic positioning devices. 

Gwyneth Hoyle is a Research Associate of the Frost Centre for Canadian Studies and Native Studies, doing independent research on northern subjects. Her new book *The Northern Horizons of Guy Blanchet, Intrepid Surveyor, 1884 –1966* is featured in the Book Reviews on page 42.

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