

Pike's Portage: A Distinguished Place

By Morten Asfeldt and Bob Henderson

We had to make use of a chain of lakes, eight in number, lying to the south of the stream. This is by far the prettiest part of the country that I saw in the North, and it was looking its best under the bright sunshine that continued till we reached the fort. Scattering timber, spruce and birch, clothed the sloping banks down to the sandy shores of the lakes; berries of many kinds grew in profusions; the portages were short and down hill; and caribou were walking the ridges and swimming the lakes in every direction. A perfect northern fairyland it was, and it seemed hard to believe that winter and want could ever penetrate here, but on the shore of a lovely blue lake Pierre the Fool pointed out a spot where the last horrors of death and cannibalism had been enacted within his memory.

Warburton Pike, *The Barren Ground of Northern Canada*, 1890

Pike's Portage is more than a trail leading from Great Slave Lake to Artillery Lake at the edge of the Barrens in the Northwest Territories. It is an age-old trail that has been used by Native people for centuries as an access route to the Barrens and to the herds of caribou that sustained their lives. It is a route that *makes sense* geographically in this land, avoiding the canyons and waterfalls of the nearly impassable Lockhart River. It is a route that reflects the intimate and necessary knowledge of the Dene and Métis people that allowed them to survive in this remote and often harsh place. More recently it has served as a transition to and from the remote windswept Barrens and the more hospitable and inhabited shores of Great Slave Lake for early explorers, sportsmen, and adventurers who travelled east and west across northern Canada. In the early twentieth century it was a trapper's rite of passage, marking a commitment to a long, cold winter in the pursuit of white fox and wolf furs and the unending quest for caribou to fend off starvation for themselves and their dogs. Today, few dog-team or snowshoe tracks are seen on Pike's Portage; rather, in late winter and spring, the trail is packed hard by snow machines carrying hunters from the nearby community of Lutsel K'e in search of caribou and musk-ox. In summer, only a few footprints mark the path; those of the most committed and adventurous canoe parties, who carry heavy loads uphill through a series of lakes and portages before reaching Artillery Lake, where they launch their canoes and set out for Baker Lake, Chantrey Inlet, or perhaps Kugluktuk – journeys that will take them most of the ice-free summer months.

Navigating the ocean of Great Slave Lake and struggling over Pike's Portage is an experience shared by most people whose stories linger in the East Arm, and for us, as for many others, knowing these stories has given voice to the rocks, hills, trails, sandy beaches, and old, weathered cabins of this historically rich and geographically unique and beautiful place - this distinguished place. As we have travelled by snowshoe, dog team, canoe, and even airplane, our experiences and imaginations have been filled with images and stories that breathe life into the land and enable us to travel with a heightened curiosity that would otherwise be missing.



Over Pike's Portage the easy way - by dogteam. Photo credit: Morten Asfeldt.

The stories of the people who have struggled over Pike's Portage are many and varied. They include sport hunters Warburton Pike, Ernest Thompson Seton, and Buffalo Jones; surveyors Guy Blanchet and the Tyrrell brothers; the eccentric John Hornby and his one-time partner James Critchell-Bullock; a long line of trappers including Helge Ingstad, Gus D'Aoust, and Roger Catling; Noel Drybones and the Métis guides of the Beaulieu clan; homesteaders Dave and Kristen Olesen; explorer George Back, who chose the nearly impossible Lockhart River route to Great Slave Lake over the traditional Pike's Portage route; Hudson's Bay Chief Factor James Anderson and James Stewart, who made their way over one of the *other* byways to the Barrens; and John McInnes, who has been retracing many of these lesser known and hard to follow byways in a Sherlock Holmes manner as only he can. These are some of the stories of Pike's Portage. We will focus here on the surveyor stories

beginning with the unusual Warburton Pike.

When the English sportsman Pike arrived to the southern end of Artillery Lake after 14 months of travel with Denesoline and Métis families the portage was a well established route known as Ka a Ku, meaning “place where you go up to the Lake”. Pike was returning to Great Slave Lake and ultimately back to his home in Victoria from the Barren Grounds. His ventures north from Great Slave Lake involved heading north from McLeod Bay between the late fall to spring of 1889 – 1890. The goals of this fourteen-month adventure, largely inspired by the writings of Samuel Hearne, were, in Pike’s own words, “to try and penetrate this unknown land, to see the musk-ox, and find out as much as I could about their habits, and habits of the Indians



The first portage from Artillery Lake headed for Great Slave Lake. Photo credit: Morten Asfeldt.

who go in pursuit of them every year”. This should be standard enough, but in 1889, Pike stood as a landmark for recreational travellers beginning to enter the interiors of the North. The Yellowknife Chief Zinto acknowledged that Pike was the first white man he had seen away from the forts that were dotted along the common travel routes. Pike himself was aware of his rare status as a white sport hunter and traveller, yet also aware of his unique position as a forerunner of sport hunters and leisure travellers, although his travels were anything but leisurely. He writes in the preface to his book that “no great political reformation depended upon my report”, and “my only excuse for publishing this account of my travels is that the subject is a reasonably new one, and deals with a branch of sport that has never been described.”

Pike, amazingly with not much training in the art of surveying, did manage to produce a serviceable map building on the efforts of George Back (1833). Interestingly, Pike shows a route to the Coppermine via an overland route, the headwaters of the Back and the Lockhart River/Lake system including the easterly route heading to the Thelon River and what would soon become known as Pike’s Portage – the main highway route to and from the Barren Grounds. Indeed Pike by wisely following in Hearne’s footsteps to travel under indigenous guidance, opened doorways to the main Arctic river routes north and east from Great Slave Lake.

Before Pike, the recreational sportsman whose travels fit the description of peregrinations, there was the intensely focused George Back, a man with a mission. With Dene guides and Hudson’s Bay Company support, the naval explorer Back was commissioned to provide aid for fellow explorer, Sir John Ross and to find the source of the Great Fish River, presumably where Ross would have retreated when his ship had been trapped in Arctic Ocean ice.

While wintering at Fort Reliance, near the mouth of the Lockhart River at the most eastern reach of Great Slave

Lake in 1833 – 34, Back received word that Sir John Ross had returned safely to England. Nevertheless, Back spent the summer of 1834 mapping the Great Fish River, and a second winter at Fort Reliance, before making way for England in the spring of 1835. The expedition was a grand success and an extraordinary journey of exploration and mapping in remote and unknown territory along a river filled with boat-crushing rapids and waterfalls. The expedition was a feather in Back’s hat that should have solidified him as a bona fide Arctic explorer; the river is now rightfully named the Back River.

Strangely, Maufelly, one of Back’s local guides led the explorer up the Hoarfrost River deeming it the “only practicable route”. It is anything but. Why he elected to avoid the traditional

hunting route up to Artillery Lake (the Ka a Ku portage) remains a mystery. Perhaps he had some notion of the merits of a direct route to the Great Fish River headwaters. Direct yes, but the difficulty more than counters any merit in the decision. Perhaps the hunting, as they travelled living off the land, was thought to be better. Earlier in the spring/summer season, the eastern arm of Great Slave Lake can be clogged with ice longer into the season than routes further to the west, but by mid August (when Back left Great Slave Lake) this likely wasn’t an issue. This route choice remains a mystery.

Nevertheless, Maufelly would redeem himself. Recorded in Back’s journal on August 24, somewhere beyond Walmsley Lake, while travelling through a bewildering maze of islands and bays, Maufelly “remark(ed) that many winters had glided away since he had visited the Thlew-ee-choh, as a boy; with his old father; but that he remembered his saying that there were numerous sand hills in its vicinity; and he felt some confidence now, that we should, sooner or later, find it.” Three days later, Maufelly found the hills of his memory.

When a map of that region is placed on a flat surface today, it is quickly observed that lakes, rivers, and long snake-like eskers of sand dominate the landscape with no obvious route across the terrain. Just imagine Maufelly guiding Back to those *specific* sandhills using only the map etched in his mind from his childhood journey. His talent for way finding is almost beyond belief and highlights the critical role Aboriginal people have played in the exploration of northern Canada.

Back scouted the Great Fish (later called Back) River and returned due to the lateness of the season to Great Slave Lake via Aylmer, Clinton-Colden and Artillery Lakes. He named Artillery Lake, “out of respect to the distinguished” artillerymen in his crew. The crew wintered over at Fort Reliance built for them by Hudson’s Bay man Alexander

McLeod who joined the expedition on the promise of a promotion and increased pay. The next summer Back and company returned over Pike's Portage, built boats from the timber on what is now called Timber Bay on the south west reaches of Artillery Lake, and successfully descended and ascended the Great Fish River without any loss of life; an amazing feat. Back's maps of the routes he followed were largely neglected over time.

The first serious surveying exercise over Pike's Portage was conducted in 1900 by J. W. Tyrrell. Tyrrell had written preparing to depart that...

"The country lying to the west of the Doobaunt, and comprising an area of about ninety thousand [square] miles, remained shrouded in mystery."

Now that's a surveyor's challenge. Tyrrell detailed the portage naming its lakes for the members of his crew. From Artillery Lake, he set out for the Thelon with a sixty-six year old sketch map drawn by one of George Back's native guides. Splitting his party into three to maximize the mapping of the country east of Great Slave Lake, a total of 1,719 miles of new surveying was conducted including the trip down the Thelon River to Hudson Bay and return to Artillery Lake.

Lastly, the 1920's Department of the Interior surveyor, Guy Blanchet solidified the mapping of the Lockhart Lakes north and west of Pike's Portage to the Headwaters of the Coppermine. As biographer Gwyneth Hoyle wrote, "Pike's Portage had been his gateway into the world he loved."

So it was that Back and Pike explored the headwaters for the Back River (Great Fish River), Tyrrell explored and surveyed the Thelon and Blanchet the Coppermine. All followed the ancient trail to the Barren Grounds, Ka a Ku or Pike's Portage: a distinguished trail.



The first view of Great Slave Lake after leaving Harry Lake.
Photo credit: Morten Asfeldt.

Thanks to David Pelly and Gwyneth Hoyle for their chapters on Tyrrell and Blanchet respectively. For a full set of stories of this distinguished place, see *Pike's Portage: Stories of a Distinguished Place* edited by Morten Asfeldt and Bob Henderson Natural Heritage Books, The Dundurn Group, Toronto, 2010. The book can be found in the Book Reviews on page 46.

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