

Winter 1970. I was a brash 17-year-old, confused and angry at the world over my mother's death from cancer two years earlier. In a few months I would finish Grade 11, and I was desperate to escape my hometown of Winnipeg. While leafing through an outdoors magazine one day, I came across some ads for far-off sporting lodges. I fired off several applications. Weeks later, a letter came from Chicago businessman Dale Hudson, who owned a rustic fishing camp on Elbow Lake, 900 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg. He offered me a summer job cleaning fish, mowing lawns, chopping wood and gassing up the outboards. In my off-hours I could fish. How could I refuse?

A few months later, I stood on the dock in Cranberry Portage, waiting for the approaching boat to carry me the final 42 kilometres to Elbow Lake. The man at the motor was tall and rail-thin, with wispy brown hair, nicotine-stained teeth and an equine nose. He nodded at me and said, "I'm Henry Bradley. Let's get going." I later learned he was the camp's fishing guide, as well as a trapper and farmer. In silence, we loaded my duffel bag and fishing tackle into the boat.

July 2001. My youngest daughter, Sarah, and I stood on the same dock beside a small mountain of luggage and rod cases. As an aluminum boat approached to ferry us to Elbow Lake, my thoughts drifted back to that summer 31 years ago. I was just one year older than Sarah at the time, poised to embark on a life-defining season of discovery.

Now I was back to retrace my adventures, this time with a special person who'd already travelled 1,830 kilometres with me from our home in High River, Alberta. I looked at Sarah and grinned. "This is it."

Brown eyes sparkling, Sarah smiled back and reminded me of our deal, that she had only reluctantly agreed to come along after I promised not to turn the trip into a sappy father-daughter bonding adventure dripping with sentimentalism. Like many 16-year-old girls, Sarah's definition of a good time is hanging out at the mall or going to a concert—not helping a middle-aged father reconnect with his past.

"Remember, Dad. Don't make too much out of all this."

"I won't," I said, at least pretending to keep up my end of the deal as we loaded our gear onto the boat.

For 90 minutes, Henry expertly cut the boat across wind-chopped waves on a chain of three lakes: First, Second and Third Cranberry. Surrounding us was the forest-covered mainland, rock-studded islands, ospreys and white pelicans. Between the lakes we navigated the serpentine Grass River—locals call it The Grassy—a narrow strip of water snaking between tree-studded shorelines lined with tall reeds and submerged logs. We coasted underneath a tar-black wooden railway bridge, and I wondered where the rail line could possibly go.

Finally, we reached Elbow Lake. As we headed north along the west shore, I searched unsuccessfully for any sign of the lake's two fishing camps. I saw nothing but trees, rocks and water. Then we rounded a rocky point and I had my first look at the fishing camp that would be my summer refuge.

The same view greeted Sarah and me as Stan Wilson, latest owner of the operation now called Big 4 Wilderness Camp, piloted our boat past the rocky point. Stan had forewarned me that much had changed over the past three decades, especially after a massive forest fire swept through the region in 1989, destroying all five guest cabins, the main cabin and the ice house. Only the outhouses and fish-cleaning shack were spared. Stan and his wife, Joan, rebuilt the camp the next spring.

Apart from the black spikes of charred tree trunks jutting up from the surrounding pine, poplar and birch forest, things didn't look too different. As before, five wood-sided guest cabins, all elevated by concrete pilings, were evenly spaced along the grassy shoreline. I used to cut that grass, I thought. To the west of the cabins was the Wilson's summer home, the ice house and the same shack where I swatted mosquitoes while filleting hundreds of walleye in the summer of '70.

My eyes were drawn to a dirty-white clapboard shack nestled in the trees a few hundred yards more to west. Henry Bradley's old cabin. Last time I saw it, the ground was covered in four feet of snow and smoke curled out the stovepipe chimney. That was in the winter of 1972, a year and half after my summer at the fishing camp. I'd returned to spend five weeks helping Henry tend his trap line and care for his sled dogs, all the while learning more about nature—and myself—than I ever could in Winnipeg.

Now, no smoke came from the chimney and even from a distance, the cabin looked abandoned. As Stan throttled down to approach the dock, screaming gulls lifted off a rocky outcrop in front of the cabin. I focused my binoculars on a cairn perched on the rock. It was a memorial for Henry Bradley. He died in 1982, just 10 years after I'd wintered with him at Elbow Lake.

"I'd like to have a closer look at that," I told Sarah.

I'd been at the camp for almost two weeks that summer before Henry Bradley invited me fishing. I jumped at the chance because, after all, Henry was the camp's official guide. He knew a lot about fishing Elbow Lake and just about everything else of interest to an outdoorsy kid like me.

Henry's fishing gear—an old fiberglass rod with a battered spinning reel—belied his expertise. We landed dozens of walleye in a few hours, releasing most and taking some back to camp for breakfast. That first evening, and every time we fished together after that, Henry always knew exactly where the walleye and big pike would be found. He never missed.

After unpacking and settling into our cabin, Sarah and I boated to a nearby bay for a quick fish before dark. Sarah cast out her line and watched the slip-bobber settle on the calm evening water. The float twitched and, in a wink, disappeared. She set the hook and her graphite rod danced briefly as she reeled in a fat yellow perch.

“Is that tomorrow’s breakfast?” I asked, hopefully.

“I’m going to let it go.” And she did.

As the full moon slowly brightened above us, Sarah’s eyes grew wide with excitement.

“Did you hear that?”

“No,” I said, silently cursing my hearing impairment. “What was it?”

“A wolf howled. I’ve never heard a wolf before.”

The next morning just after dawn, I left Sarah sleeping in the cabin while I boated to Henry’s cairn. There I found a bronze plaque mounted on a slab of quartz-flecked granite. The inscription read, “Henry Bradley 1919-1982. Veteran Trapper and Outstanding Conservationist. Lived Harmoniously with Man and the Environment He Loved.” As I said a prayer for this man who had shared his knowledge of the natural world with a city kid, I imagined him in a better place, but couldn’t really picture one better than this.

That afternoon, Sarah and I hiked to the old cabin that Henry had built in 1965. It was obvious the trapper who’d taken it over wasn’t big on upkeep. Peering through the windows, we saw two messy rooms strewn with garbage, old clothing and bedding. Across the yard, a rickety log shed was cluttered with broken snowshoes, a battered and boltless .303 rifle and rusted traps. Remnants of three snowmobiles lay scattered about and an old outboard hung from a plank nailed between two trees.

Sarah could see that I was disappointed. “Did you think it would still look the same?” she asked.

“I always expected it to be the way it was.”

“But Dad, that was 30 years ago.”

Henry was a bachelor farmer from the Swan River region of west-central Manitoba. After he put the crop in each spring, he’d head north to his little cabin at Elbow Lake and guide visiting anglers until it was time to go home for the harvest. Then he’d return to Elbow with nine sled dogs, shoot a moose for meat and spend the winter trapping. His closest neighbour was 21 kilometres away.

I learned a lot about fishing from Henry, but the education didn’t end there. He would point out and identify passing waterfowl, and speak reverently of the moose, caribou and wolves that lived in the region. And always, he stressed the need to look after wildlife to ensure its future. I absorbed every word.

On our last evening at Elbow Lake, Sarah and I quietly watched the sunset cast a rich, golden hue over the still water. We’d enjoyed several moments like that over the past four days and often Sarah had to rebuke me for breaking our mush-free accord. “Quit saying how great it is to be here with me, okay?” she’d chide. “I’m having a good time, too, but at least I don’t go on and on about it.”

The next morning, pilot Bob Gladstone would arrive with his Cessna 185 floatplane to take us back to Cranberry Portage, where we would begin the last chapter of our adventure. Maybe because of that, and because I sensed that Sarah, too, had become caught up in the magic of the place, I once again stretched the limits of our agreement.

“Maybe some day I’ll bring one of your kids here,” I said. This time, however, there was no rebuke. Instead, Sarah turned to face me and smiled as she spoke. “Maybe I’ll come, too.”

January 1972. I’d come north by Greyhound from Winnipeg to Flin Flon, where I’d unsuccessfully sought work at a gold mine. Sitting in a café in Cranberry Portage, 50 kilometres south of Flin Flon, I considered my options: return to Winnipeg a 19-year-old unemployed failure, or visit Henry Bradley at Elbow Lake. Then somebody suggested taking the train and arranging to meet Henry at Heming Lake, a desolate railway siding 21 kilometres west of Elbow.

But getting word to him was iffy. The local radio station had an evening phone-in program that served as a kind of message centre for residents of remote reserves and settlements, so I called in and asked them to broadcast my plans to Henry at Elbow Lake. Soon I was on a train chugging north of Cranberry Portage and entering a stark world of snow-shrouded trees and ice-entombed lakes.

As we approached Heming Lake and the train began slowing down, I looked out the window and saw nothing but snow and ice. But when the door opened, Henry was there with his sled and team of nine Siberian huskies. I happily shook his wool-mittened hand and we set off to spend the night in a nearby cabin with an old trapper named Joe.

Soon we were sipping hot tea while Henry explained how lucky I was. “I hardly ever listen to the radio,” he said. “I was sitting there reading my Bible and something made me turn it on.”

After our floatplane landed in Cranberry Portage, Sarah and I slung on our backpacks and made our way to the train station, a boarded-up brick building surrounded by broken glass and garbage. Two hours later the train arrived, and we jumped into a boxcar for the short jaunt north to Heming Lake. With the sliding door wide open, we had a panoramic view as the train chugged north.

When we disembarked at the Heming Lake Siding, Sarah and I opted to carry our heavy packs another mile up the tracks, despite the oppressive heat. We needed to be close to the lake’s only dock, where Bob Gladstone could pick us up with his Cessna the following afternoon. Sarah selected a perfect campsite in a mossy clearing surrounded by towering pines. She asked if the area was as I remembered it. “Not really,” I said. “But it was winter and a long time ago.”

It was -30°C the next morning as I huddled in a blanket on the sled and Henry ordered his dogs to start. I felt like a character in a Jack London novel. After an hour of traversing narrow forest trails and frozen lakes, Henry declared it my turn to drive. He sat on the sled and shouted commands as I grasped the wooden handles and tried to stay upright. I only fell once.

This time my stint at Elbow Lake was akin to a five-week northern outdoor education course. Henry was a master tracker and he eagerly shared his expertise, showing me how to set traps for lynx, wolf, mink, red squirrel, muskrat and beaver. Above all, though, Henry impressed upon me the need to stop trapping a certain species—no matter the market price—when populations were low.

Soon I was trekking solo on snowshoes to check sets several kilometres away. Sometimes, I'd shoot a snowshoe hare for supper, although we usually ate moose meat carved from the frozen carcass stored in the shed.

After five weeks, it was time to head home. We travelled by snowmobile along Elbow Lake, then southwest along the three Cranberry Lakes and the frozen Grass River, backtracking the same route I'd taken by boat in the summer of '70. There we saw five wolves chase a dozen caribou across the ice a half-mile away. Three hours later we pulled into town and soon I was boarding a southbound bus. I vowed to return.

Sarah and I erected the tent, unrolled our sleeping bags and ducked inside to escape the hordes of blackflies. A cool breeze wafted through the screened windows. We soon ventured back out after donning head netting and wandered to the nearby lake. The water was blue and expansive, unlike my first visit.

In early evening, we cooked canned stew on a single burner stove and boiled water for hot chocolate. Before long, we retired to the tent to read and savour the silence. Sleep came quickly.

The next morning, we explored the forest and lakeshore. When Sarah retreated to the tent to escape the flies, I caught pike off the dock. Too soon, it was time to break camp and meet the plane.

The 20-minute flight back to Cranberry Portage was bumpy. But in the co-pilot's seat, Sarah didn't stop smiling.

Our northern adventure was coming to an end. In the back seat, I felt a little sad, but happy to have shared the experience with Sarah.

I'd learned that although you can't repeat history, revisiting it can be magical.