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CANADIAN GEOGRAPHICAL JOURNAL

PRIVATE PIONEER OFFICER "BILLY" DRUM-MAJOR OFFICER

The 23rd Regiment of Foot, now the Royal Welch Fusiliers, 1849.

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COVER SUBJECT:—*The 23rd Regiment of Foot, now the Royal Welch Fusiliers, 1849.*
By courtesy of the Royal Welch Fusiliers

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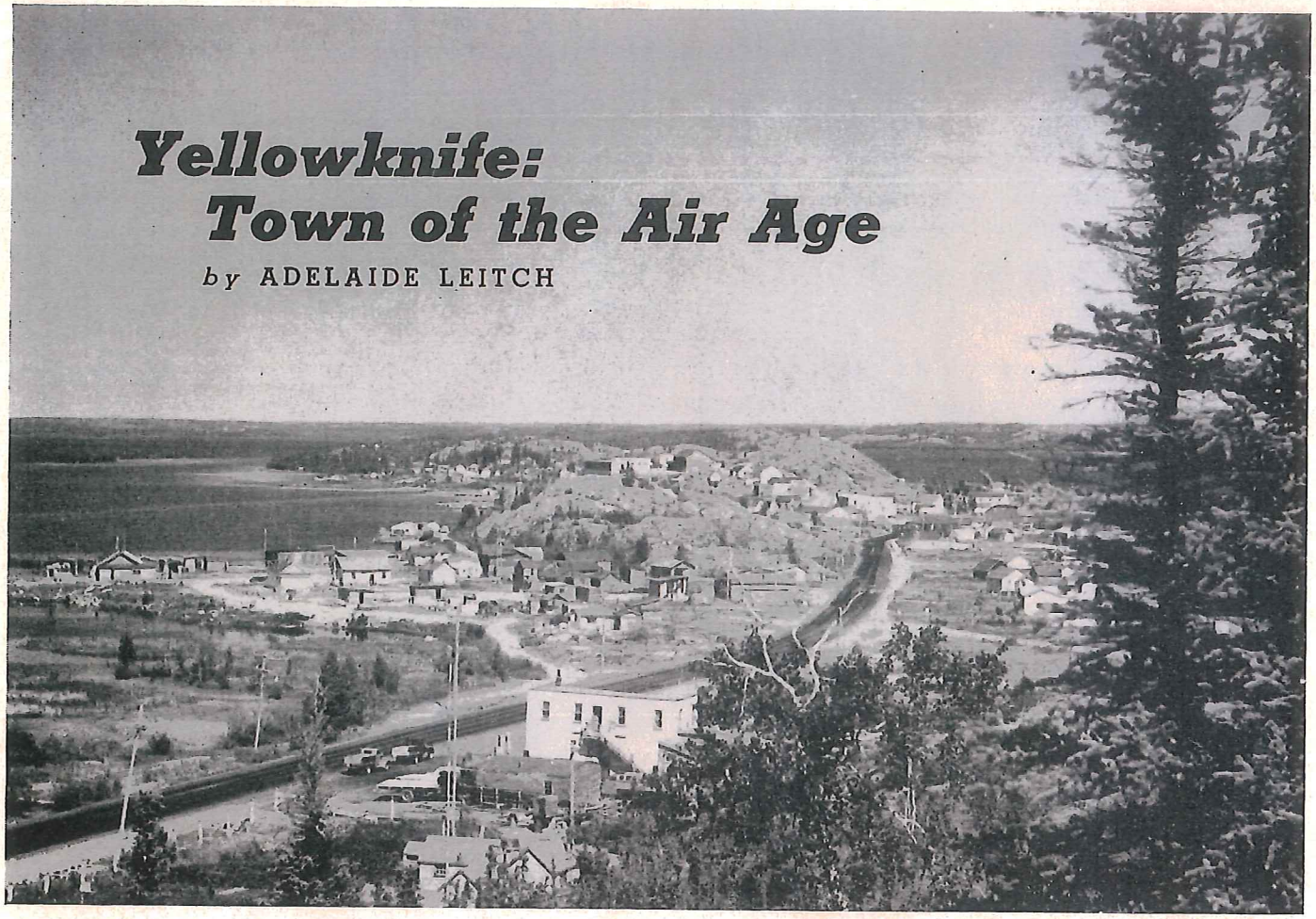
Yellowknife: Town of the Air Age

by ADELAIDE LEITCH



ON ONE of the spidery arms of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories, sits Yellowknife, a mining town flanked by some of the richest gold properties of the whole Dominion.

Once upon a time, and still within the memory of its teen-agers, you could see a resident of Yellowknife peel off a hundred dollar bill to pay for his groceries. Today, as he pays for them more cautiously with a ten, Yellowknife is a new kind of town, rapidly losing the right to the title of "frontier". For the true Canadian North, that once contained Yellowknife, is retreating over the barrens towards Aklavik and the Arctic Ocean. The sign of the times in Yellowknife today is the bush plane roaring up from the Old Town waterfront, or the four-engine flight coming in non-stop from Edmonton.

Between Yellowknife and Edmonton lie 700 miles of almost pure isolation—crossed in just five air hours. The quicksilver of hundreds of nameless lakes laces this country like silver tracery on old pottery. The smoke from bush fires rises in slow curls on a landscape flat as a tabletop and the horizon runs a full and complete circle around it.

This vast, lonely country, with scant rain or fog in near-perfect summer days, is one of the safest areas in the world in which a plane can operate, and the people of Yellowknife seldom act without some reference to the seasoned little aircraft that line the waterfront. No one takes his motor boat or his canoe and kicker down Great Slave Lake without leaving word where he has gone, and when he expects to return. When anyone is overdue, the first person to be alerted is the bush pilot, who goes scouting along the shore in search of a canoe going in circles—the accepted distress signal of the north.

When a hurried trip has to be made to another point in the Territories not served by the commercial flight, it is the bush plane that goes. When Canadian and American oil men come north for the de luxe trout fishing at Great Slave Lodge, it is a bush plane that whisks them and their gear out of Yellowknife and east to Taltheilei Narrows.

At top:—A good road connects the Old Town of Yellowknife with the new townsite on the hill.

Photos by the author except where otherwise credited.

The Eskimo soapstone from the Western Arctic is brought in by bush plane, and crack bush pilot Ernie Boffa first introduced this lovely primitive work to the "south" at Yellowknife. Polar bear and wolf skins come south the same way. When the lady of Yellowknife decides she needs a new rug for her living room, she drops around to see one of the pilots and asks him to find her a skin on his next trip north. The tanning and mounting she arranges for herself, usually sending the skin to Edmonton for finishing.

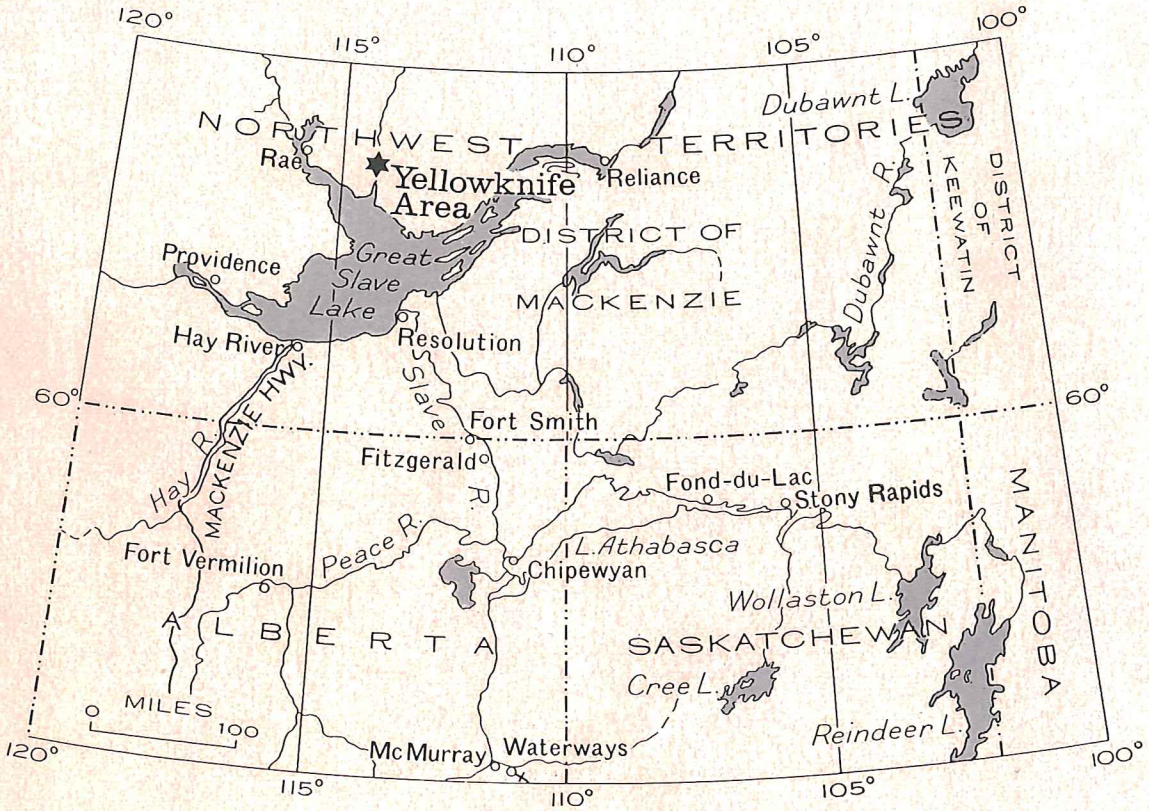
A town born truly of the air age and living under the sound of bush plane wings, Yellowknife must still do many of its heavy jobs by water. Small tugs shunt their barges across the lake to Hay River, the northern end of the new Mackenzie Highway, or south by the river route to Waterways and the end of steel from Edmonton. Freight rates come high, but not nearly so high as air freight which carries the urgent orders.

Each year, the people of Yellowknife lay bets on when the first boat from across the lake will finally break through the ice off Negus Point and dock in the Old Town. The first load, usually, is a delayed one that reached Hay River or Waterways too late in the fall and had to wait out the winter; the second brings in the fruit, vegetables and other perishables to load the town shelves. In winter, a little freight comes through by "cat" train (tractor), but merchants must still make up their inventories a year in advance, anticipate their customers' needs for the following year, and do their importing in the brief, four-months shipping season on Great Slave. When the passenger-carrying *Expediter* travelled the lake, visitors could come by an overland route along with the freight; today, with the *Expediter* in retirement, the only entrance or exit for people is by air.

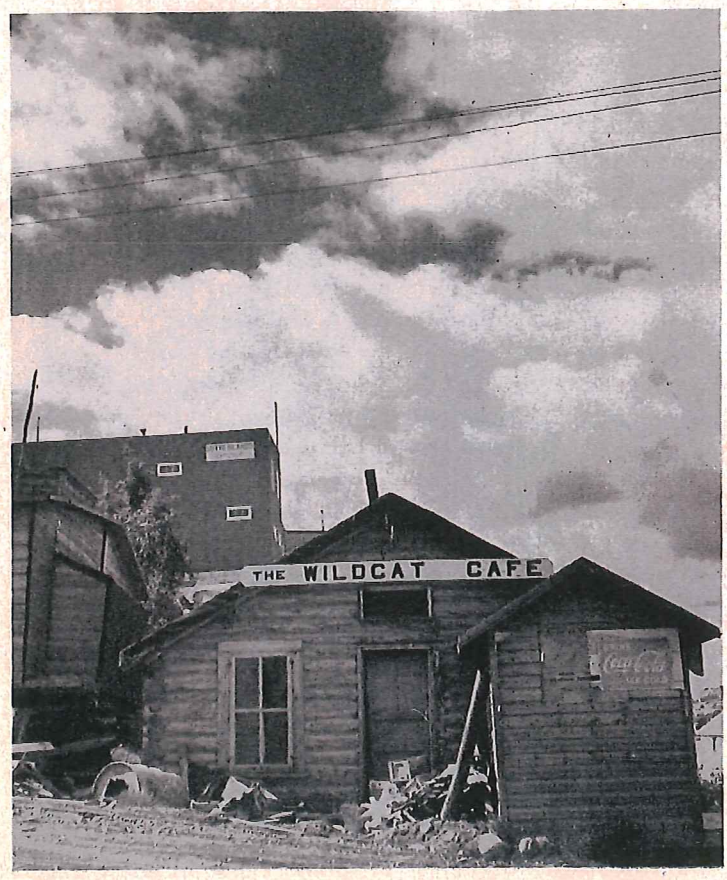
In the popular imagination the Canadian northland conjures up pictures of snowhouses and desolation. The tourist agency of the Northwest Territories in Yellowknife gets requests for information from visitors who want to see the Eskimos at Great Slave Lake. Several years ago, a visitor stepped off a plane at Yellowknife airport and looked in horror at the fleet of radio taxis that had rushed out to meet the flight.

"But *this* doesn't look like the north!" she wailed.

Sometimes the last of the ice does still linger



Some of the local Indians take life easy in front of the Rex Café on Latham Island, off the tip of the Old Town. Like the white residents of Yellowknife, they shop in the Hudson's Bay store, cruise down the lake in a canoe and kicker, and dress as they would in southern Canada.



like a film of hoar frost out in the middle of Great Slave Lake at the end of June. But in-town temperatures may be hovering comfortably in the 70's, and the youngsters are probably swimming in nearby Frame Lake or sun-bathing on its sand beach.

As time goes on, Yellowknife looks less and less like the north of the armchair traveller. Old-timers like Jock McMeekan who, in 1935, pitched his tent on the spot where Yellowknife was yet to be, can talk of the boom town days of Yellowknife and the frontier that became a settlement. Other early-comers like D'Arcy Arden and Bill Johnson can tell tales of the "good old days" of Yellowknife. But even the earliest days of this town were well within the last two decades and its growth, if swift, was orderly.

Yellowknife ("no people but 2800 characters" as one wit put it) has just about everything that an Ontario town has. The streets

Relic of the old days is the Wildcat Café. On the hill behind the Wildcat is the corner of the modern drug store.

lack pavements, but they boast radio taxis of the current year. There is a beauty parlour and a barber shop, a movie with a change of bill three times a week, drug stores, cafés, and hardware shops. It has probably more clubs, groups and organizations than any other place of its size in Canada, and they range from established ones like the Masons and Elks and Women's Auxiliaries, to the purely local and regional one like the Daughters of the Midnight Sun who celebrate on the longest day of the year.

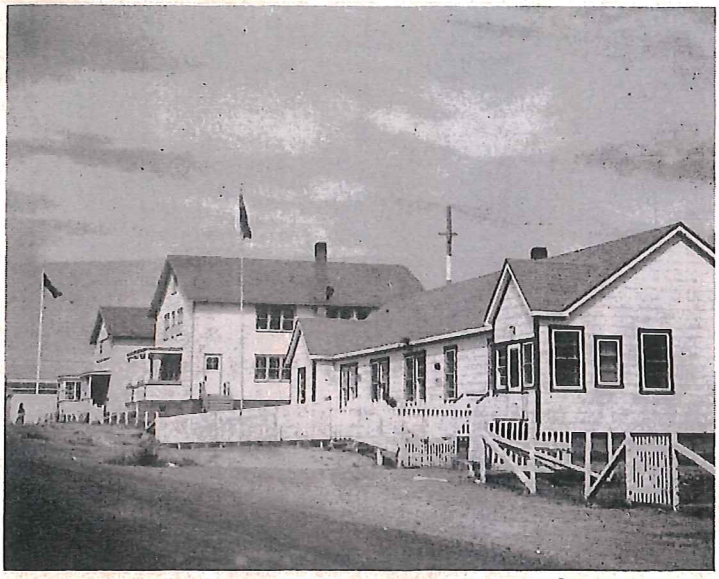
There is a photographer from Europe, a Handicraft Guild president from Czechoslovakia, ex-residents of the Maritimes and the West Coast and an assortment of places in between. The people of Yellowknife can attend churches of many denominations, including Anglican, United, and Roman Catholic. The public school, with its big expanse of glass and its modern equipment, is the only school in the Territory that is maintained primarily by local taxation, with a little assistance from a government grant, and administered by a local school board. A new separate school in the same modernistic style of architecture was being completed in the summer of 1953.

There are comfortable new apartments for government personnel and there is a 40-bed Red Cross Hospital with all modern equipment. The visitor is always surprised at the amenities of the Ingraham Hotel in the New Town, which include the only cocktail lounge in the Northwest Territories.

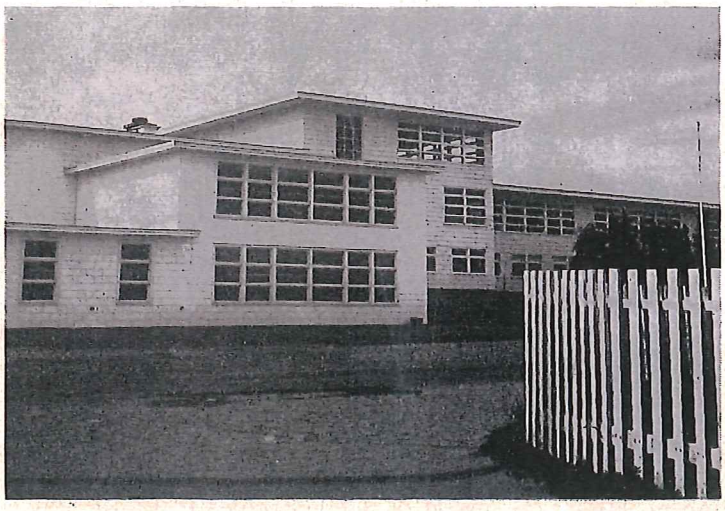
Even more unexpected, probably, are the agricultural experimental plots on the edge of town, conducted under the supervision of the officer in charge of the Dominion Experimental Substation at Fort Simpson, where it is found that certain hardy crops grow faster and bigger than they would farther south. The flower gardens are luxuriant under the long days and light nights of the northern summer, and the size of individual plants is not just an optical illusion. One of the most idyllic small valleys of the whole Territory is between Yellowknife proper and the holdings of Giant Mine. Ringed by steep walls, fronted by the blue water of Yellowknife Bay, the little farm of Martin Bode looks like something out of one of his

The Public School is built on modernistic lines, as is the Separate School which was completed last summer.

Today Yellowknifers are building small, trim homes for themselves on the new townsite on the hill. Inside, the houses are as modern as any found in a town closer to the international border.



The government-built administration buildings house all the components of local law and government. In the summer of 1953 Yellowknife became a municipal district and in 1954 it will have its first officially elected mayor.



Fur was the basis of the old empire of the Hudson's Bay Company in the Northwest Territories, and prime pelts can still be found in the shop of Weaver and Devore. Bruce Weaver looks over a choice white fox among the collection of blacks and silvers.

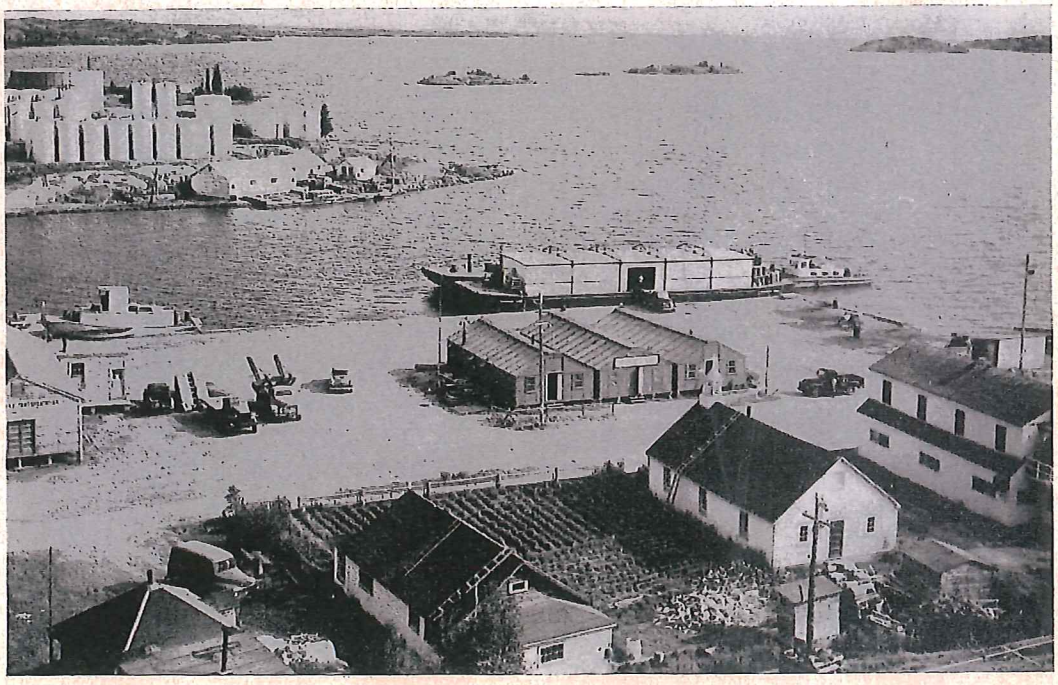
own Danish story books, lifted bodily from the fertile Danish lands of home.

The barrens that lie to the north and east are anything but barren. Hundreds of different wild flowers have been identified here and, in the late summer when the tundra shifts into the muted shades of fall, the colourings may be more subtle than the riotous maple and birch of Ontario, but they run a gamut of shades just as varied. Whole plains look purple from the air when the fireweed is at its height.

Later on, during the winter months, sometimes from 15,000 to 20,000 caribou can be found within ten minutes flying time of Yellowknife. Many find their way into the stew pots of local Indians, but under the watchful eye of the Indian Agent who insists that all parts of the animal from skin to meat be used, and not just a few choice steaks from this seemingly limitless herd!

The wedge formations of wild ducks are familiar signs in the sky to Yellowknifers, and the warblers sing in the scant woods of the Territory just as they do farther south; the eagle builds his untidy looking nest on top of the highest tree he can find, and the ferocious looking raven comes right into town along with the gulls on foraging trips.

Out along the shores of Yellowknife Bay, the permanent village of the Dogrib Indians goes unobtrusively about its business, somewhat the worse for its proximity to the encampments of the palefaces. Here, once a year, the *Peter Pond* noses its bow against the rocks and the Indian Agent and a Mountie, scarlet-coated by the terms of the agreement, come to pay the Indians their Treaty money, promised them "for as long as the grass shall grow". One year, when the man from the R.C.M.P. appeared in his workaday khaki, the Indians took one vastly disapproving look and stalked off home— to wait until the Mountie went back



Activity along the waterfront of the Old Town means that Yellowknife is importing its year's supply of necessities in the brief season between break-up and freeze-up. Barges are pushed across Great Slave Lake from Hay River, but all passenger traffic goes by plane. In distance, left, are oil storage tanks.

and put on his scarlet tunic. Only then did they return and collect their $25 for a chief, $15 for a headman, and $5 for an ordinary Indian of the tribe, man, woman or child.

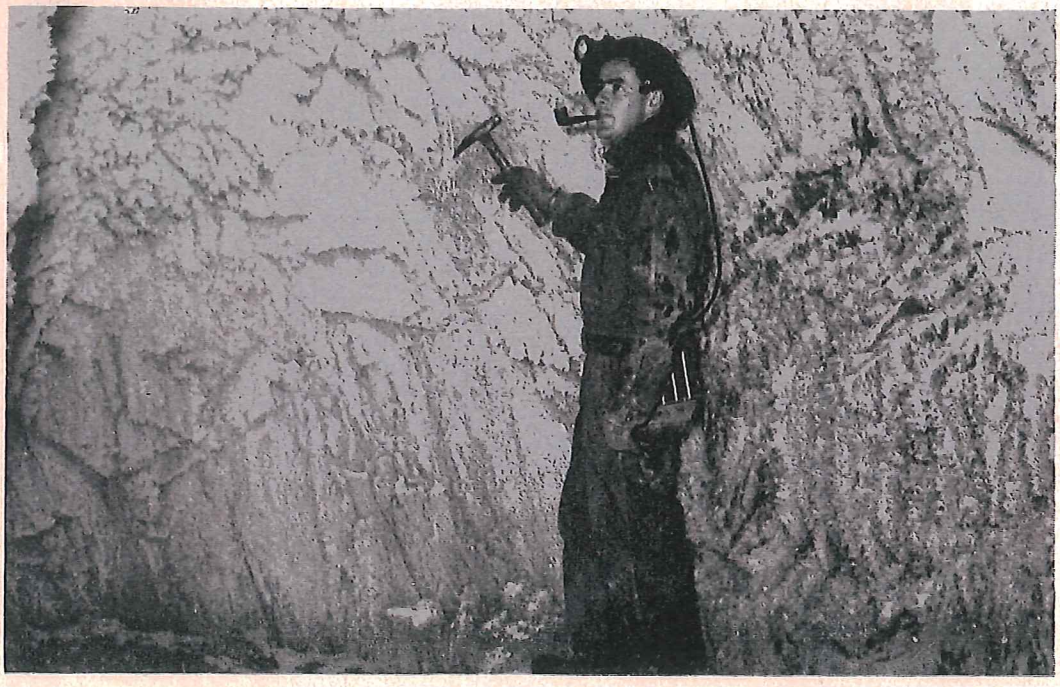
The Indians, when they deign to work, go to the mines or the fisheries, or take odd jobs in town but, when there is enough flour and coffee in their cupboards, enough cigarettes in their pockets, the idea of work becomes strangely distasteful. Illness has lessened considerably since the coming of the travelling X-ray clinic, but the health of Canada's northern Indians is still not good. Yellowknife's Red Cross Hospital is open to them too, although nurses are a little exasperated when Mrs. Peter Crooked Hand turns up an hour or so before her baby is due, with no previous announcement for a harassed hospital staff.

To the fringe of Canadians along the international border, Yellowknife may be synonymous with Eskimos—to the exasperation of the Yellowknifers themselves who never see an Eskimo unless they climb into one of the bush planes and fly hundreds of miles to the north. Nor do the winter snows muffle this semi-northern town of Canada. With a scant 13 inches precipitation a year—including snow—Yellowknife shovels considerably less of the white, cold stuff than does Montreal or Toronto and has approximately half the snowfall of the Great Lakes or northern New England. But when the snow falls, it stays, and temperatures are known to dip into the sub-60's in winter.

The people of Yellowknife in winter wear exactly what they would wear in southern cities, except that they put parkas over their business clothes and heavier boots on their feet, for the brief hike from their front doors to waiting taxis. Winter, with its long nights, is the season for parties and visiting, the months of work and handicrafts and northern lights.

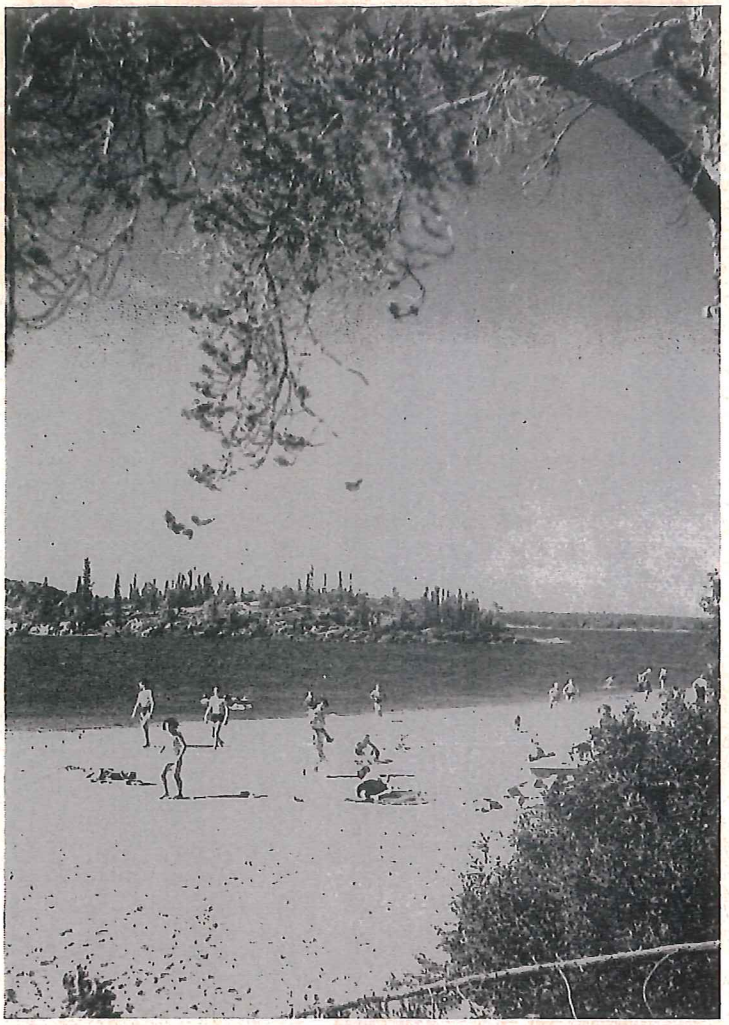
Today, gold is still the story of Yellowknife, as it was in the first boom days of discovery. Here, a gold brick is being poured from the retort at Giant Yellowknife Gold Mines Limited, one of the two big producers of this town on Great Slave Lake.

Beyond Yellowknife is land that has been flown over but scarcely investigated from the



Below the surface at Yellowknife the ground is permanently frozen to a depth of about 200 feet. This does not interfere with mining operations but if an underground working is closed and circulation of air from the surface cut off the walls become encrusted with glittering ice crystals such as we see here at Giant Yellowknife Gold Mines.

John Rennie photograph.



At McNiven Beach on a warm summer day, Yellowknifers don their bathing suits and bask on a sandy beach that looks as enticing as anything south of the 54th parallel.

Girl Guides have probably the northernmost troop in Canada at Yellowknife. At Guide Camp, the girls can go swimming every day, and the bathing suits hung outside their tents scarcely have a chance to dry.

ground. Artists sometimes fly north to the barrens to paint the subtle shadings of the arctic tundra. And local residents picnic down the lake in summer, and look for the old copper pots that the Hudson's Bay Company used to issue to the Indians. Heated to a fiery red-hot over a lakeside camp fire, and plunged quickly into the cold water of the lake, the pots begin to shed their sooty coating from the smoke of many Indian fires, and mellow into the rich tints of old copper.

It was copper that brought the first explorer through the north—Samuel Hearne of the Hudson's Bay Company who, in 1770, set off for the Western Arctic to locate some of the copper that the Indians were bringing in to the post on Hudson Bay.

There were skeptically raised eyebrows when, in 1789, a dour young Scot of 26 paddled up Yellowknife Bay en route to the Arctic Coast. Even his Indian companions were reluctant about the voyage, particularly when they discovered that he proposed to continue on to the land of the Eskimos. Alexander Mackenzie, giving his name to one of the mightiest river systems on the North American continent, never realized what an underground wealth in gold he was passing in his search for native furs.

Missionaries followed fur traders into the Mackenzie River system, and, eventually, settlers began to build up tiny communities. But development was slow in the Northwest Territories, and it was not until after 1920 that better transportation, the first aeroplanes, easier methods of prospecting, and a growing interest in the north began to open up the shores of Great Slave Lake.

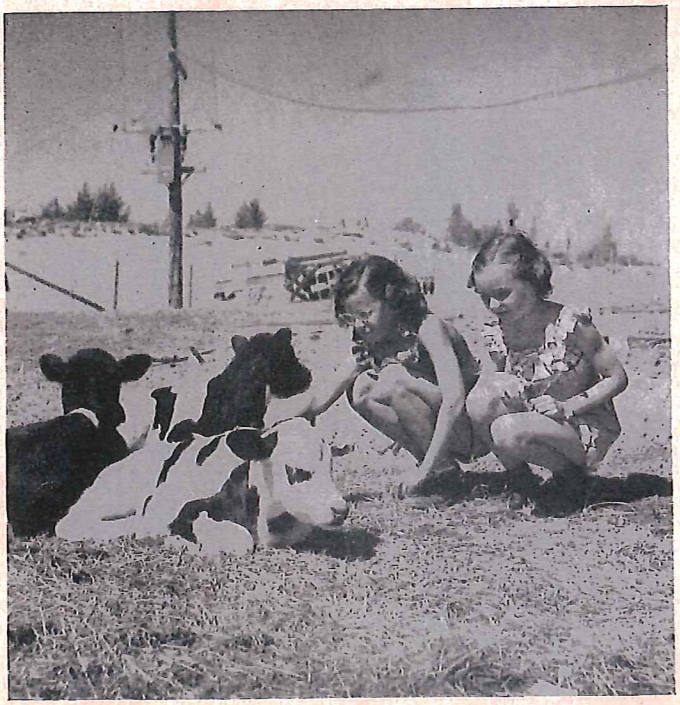
Yellowknife, still the largest centre of the Territories, boomed into newspaper headlines in 1935 and 1936, with the cry of "Gold"! Another boom hit the orderly little mining town in 1944, with new reports of discoveries by Giant Yellowknife Gold Mines. The Old Town built around the Rock gradually began to burst its seams, and a new townsite was laid out on the hill.

Today Yellowknife is still a mining town and its lifeblood is gold. In the summer of 1953 the two major producing mines—"Giant", one of America's richest producers, and "Con"

Carefully tended gardens show luxuriant growth in Yellowknife, and one of the most picturesque is this one, belonging to Danish Martin Bode, on the shores of Yellowknife Bay. He and his young son do all the work in it, and the people of Yellowknife beat a track to his door—by boat or over the rocks—to buy fresh produce for their tables.

On the edge of town, experimental plots are used to find out what the soil and weather of the Territories can do for vegetables and field crops.

Some people doubt that there are cows in the Northwest Territories but the Dennis girls have no doubt about these calves at a Yellowknife farm.



Once a year, the Indian Agent, accompanied by a clerk and a Mountie, pays treaty money to the Indians of Yellowknife district. If the Mountie fails to wear his red tunic, according to the words of the treaty, the Indians are likely to march off home again and wait until he puts it on.

Yellowknife now has its first Tourist Agency—and also the only tourist cabins in the Northwest Territories at The Cabin Court on the road between the old and new towns.

(Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada, Limited)—each poured its 1,000th gold brick. The 'special' was wrapped in bright red tissue paper instead of the usual white before being shipped out in the usual manner—by ordinary registered mail.

It is virtually impossible to steal a gold brick in Yellowknife, where the casual visitor can drop around to the post office on a gold-shipping day, and have a look at thousands of dollars worth of bullion done up in small mail sacks and dumped unceremoniously in a corner to await the truck from the airlines. With only one exit from Yellowknife—air—the gold is perfectly safe until it reaches Edmonton, whereupon the armoured cars and armed guards are called out to give it safe conduct to the Royal Mint in Ottawa!

'Con' and 'Giant' account for roughly half of Yellowknife's population of 2,800. The rest go about the business of any southern town in their stores and shops, taxi stands and homes. Many of them are spare-time prospectors,

staking the six claims they are allowed a year. Prospecting in the Territories today is no longer the work of the old prospector with his pick and shovel and bed roll. It is the work of younger men, scientifically trained, and transported by air.

Another kind of prospecting is going on at Great Slave Lake these days too—sport fishing. Oil men from Canada and the United States pay a little under $100 a day for the trip to Great Slave Lodge at Taltheilei Narrows, on the understanding that they will really catch fish. And they do. The record lake trout taken was 48 pounds; owner Len Morris calls anything under 30 pounds a minnow. Taltheilei is a unique bottleneck of water through which the biggest fish of Great Slave Lake pass to their spawning grounds in McLeod Bay. In Great Slave Lake itself, the 'minnows' that are thrown back at Taltheilei are gathered in by the commercial fishermen of the north, fast-frozen, and shipped south to the United States market, first by refrigerated barge, later by rail. The fishermen engaged in both sport and commerce think there is a new kind of gold at Great Slave Lake.

Meanwhile, Yellowknife itself stands pat on the big, northern arm of Yellowknife Bay, watching the planes roaring in from Edmonton, the bush planes taking off for the Arctic, waiting for the rest of Canada to push on north and catch up with this youthful town of the air age.

Whether it is delivering sportsmen to Taltheilei Narrows, or doing a work-horse job of freighting in the Northwest Territories, the bush plane is the true sign of the times for Yellowknife on Great Slave Lake. This Otter, belonging to one of Yellowknife's airways, is one of the newest planes.

A bush plane comes in for a landing on the waterfront. These small carriers are the lifeline of Yellowknife, for they carry everything from supplies to prospectors, do everything from taking wealthy fishermen to a de luxe lodge to going out on mercy flights.