

Roseberry Lake

By John Leeder

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John Leeder

Voice

There's an old man who lives far from Rose berry Lake, And ___ sits in his kit chen and
dreams of his past; His head's full of wood smoke, his eyes full of snow, His mind's in a place where his
bod-y can't go, But he thinks he will be there at last, ___ he be-lieves he will be there at
last. When he first came tthe north shoreof Rose ber-ry Lake, North from West Guil-ford he
padd-led the streams; He trav-eled through count-ry no white man had seen, And he
came to a lake where no white man had been. But he thought he had seen it in dreams, ___ he be
lieved he had seen it in dreams. The Par-ry Sound jail, and Rose-ber-ry Lake, If
I had my choice, you know which one I'd take, If I had my choice, ___ you know I would take My
gear and my traps back to Rose berry Lake

There's an old man who lives far from Roseberry Lake,
And sits in his kitchen and dreams of his past;
His head's full of woodsmoke, his eyes full of snow;
His mind's in a place where his body can't go,
 But he thinks he will be there at last,
 He believes he will be there at last.

When he first came to the north shore of Roseberry Lake,
North from West Guilford he paddled the streams;
He traveled through country no white man had seen,
And he came to a lake where no white man had been,
 But he thought he had seen it in dreams,
 He believed he had seen it in dreams.

Chorus:

The Parry Sound jail, and Roseberry Lake,
If I had my choice, you know which one I'd take;
If I had my choice, you know I would take,
My gear and my traps back to Roseberry Lake.

In a clearing on the north shore of Roseberry Lake,
Where the Indians camped many decades before,
He built there his cabin from stout logs of pine,
Chinked up with sphagnum as snug as you'd find,
 Where the portage comes down to the shore,
 Where the portage comes down to the shore.

And he wintered on the north shore of Roseberry Lake,
Set out his traplines in the country around,
Thinking of his family alone on the farm,
Hoping through the winter they'd come to no harm;
 In the springtime he'd be homeward bound;
 After breakup he'd be homeward bound.

Chorus

Many winters on the north shore of Roseberry Lake,
He lived with the country and made it his own;
The shantyboys came, and they hurled down the pine,
Built dams and bush roads and a railroad line,
 While he tended his trapline alone,
 He tended his trapline alone.

Chorus

To the old man on the north shore of Roseberry Lake,
There came a young man who he knew from before,
In a brand new shirt, yellow flashes on green:
"I'm a Park Ranger now; don't you know what that means?",
 And these are the tidings he bore,
 Yes, this is the news that he bore:

"This country round the north shore of Roseberry Lake,
Is now in The Park; don't you know what that's for?
Well, down in Toronto they've got a new plan,
And I'm sorry that I have to tell you, old man,

But you cannot trap here any more,
You cannot trap here any more.”

Chorus

He was leaving the north shore of Roseberry Lake;
The cabin stood empty as he walked away;
In a big hollow stump of a long-fallen pine,
He dropped in his traps and he left them behind,
 For his grandson to find them one day,
 For his grandson to find them one day.

Now an old man he lives far from Roseberry Lake,
And sits in his kitchen and dreams of his past;
His head's full of woodsmoke, his eyes full of snow;
His mind's in a place where his body can't go,
 But he thinks he will be there at last,
 He believes he will be there at last.

Transcription by Maureen Chafe.

Commentary by John Leeder

I

When the region now known as Haliburton County, Ontario, was opened for settlement in 1853, the settlers anticipated bumper crops, as they reasoned that soil which could support such large forests had to be very fertile. It was true! When the first crops were planted between the stumps in the process of clearing the land, the yields were fabulous. However, the settlers' experience was mostly with Southern Ontario or European agriculture, or none at all, and they failed to realize that the soil was light leaf mold, held in place by the forests. When the land was cleared, erosion began, and within a few years the rich topsoil was gone, exposing the infertile gravel common to most Canadian Shield areas today. People began to realize that a terrible mistake had been made, and they were not going to be able to support themselves by farming. Other sources of income were going to be needed, and quickly.

Among these homesteaders was my great-grandfather, Isaac Bice.¹ He and his brother Simon had been the first white men other than surveyors and timber cruisers to reach the area of Green Lake (now called Grass Lake), on the border of Stanhope and Guilford townships.² He eventually settled in Guilford.

At a meeting of the men of the county, someone pointed out that the area north of Haliburton (the re-

gion occupied by Algonquin Provincial Park nowadays) was mostly uninhabited. It had been the winter hunting grounds of the Algonquin tribe to the east and the Ojibway to the west, but neither tribe had claimed ownership, and few Indian³ people used the area any more, as they were settled on reserves. The wildlife had been barely harvested for decades, and the furbearing animals would have proliferated in the meantime. A number of the men decided to go north and become trappers for the winter. A group known as the Haliburton Trappers was born. Isaac Bice was among them.

A canoe brigade set out in the fall, ascending the Hollow River and crossing over into the Madawaska River system. Every once in a while, one of the men would take a fancy to an area and would split off from the group, saying goodbye with promises to meet up again in the spring, and would head off to build a trapping cabin and spend the winter.

Isaac Bice didn't find an area that appealed to him, and eventually found himself as the last member of the party, heading north on his own. When he came to White Trout Lake (now known as Big Trout Lake), he saw campfire smoke. He investigated, and found a lone Indian, sick and starving. Isaac stayed with him, shared food and nursed him back to health. In gratitude, the Indian gave him information. If Isaac continued north for a short distance, he would come to a long shallow lake.⁴ A river entered the lake from

the west.⁵ At the headwaters of that river were two large spring-fed lakes, and beaver and other furbearing animals were plentiful in the area.

Isaac followed the directions, found them to be correct, and built his cabin on the north shore of the easternmost of the two lakes, which he named Roseberry Lake⁶ after dogwood trees which were numerous in the area. He trapped in the same region for most of his life, as did other members of the Haliburton Trappers in their chosen areas.

II

When Algonquin Provincial Park⁷ was formed in 1893, one of the little-remembered downsides was that people working in the area, including the Haliburton Trappers, were arbitrarily ousted, deprived of their livelihood without compensation.⁸ There was resistance, and battles were fought between trappers and park rangers.⁹ Isaac Bice was not involved in the violence, perhaps because he was elderly and perhaps because his trapping area was far removed from the rest. However, he told the authorities, in effect, “I need to trap for another winter or my family will starve. Catch me if you can! In the spring, I’ll go down to Parry Sound¹⁰ and give myself up. I’ll go before the magistrate and take whatever punishment I have coming.”¹¹

And so it came to pass (although the rangers likely thought they’d seen the last of him). Isaac

spent three weeks in jail, and had the distinction of being the first person convicted of poaching in Algonquin Park, however honourable his crime.¹²

The next year Isaac relocated to a new trapline just west of the Park boundary. Four generations of Bices have operated it since.

III

My uncle Ralph Bice,¹³ Isaac’s grandson, was guiding a party of fishermen in Algonquin Park. They had crossed the long portage formerly connecting the north shore of Roseberry Lake with the Nipissing River,¹⁴ when Ralph had a compulsion to go back. He asked the party to wait for him, and set off back across the portage. The southern terminus of the portage was at a beach, beside a wooded point on which Isaac Bice’s trapping cabin had stood. Not sure why he was there, Ralph looked around and saw a stump. He was drawn to it, and it turned out to be hollow. He put his hand into it, through the accumulation of decades of dead leaves, felt something metal, and pulled out an old set of traps which could only have belonged to his grandfather. Ralph was convinced that he was guided to the spot by his grandfather’s spirit. This incident is alluded to in verse 8 of the song, and paranormal overtones are hinted at elsewhere.

Isaac Bice died in 1914, aged 75. I made up the song in 1984.

Notes

1. Isaac’s grandfather, John Bice, came to Upper Canada from Ireland in the 1770s. The name was sometimes pronounced, and spelled, “Boice”, by predominantly Irish settlers who confused it with the Irish surname “Boyce”, and the names were sometimes used indiscriminately. Due to variable spellings of the time, including on the part of birth registrars, some of the family were legally named “Boice” and some “Bice”; the latter was the original family name.

2. These townships are now part of the municipality of Algonquin Highlands.

3. I am more comfortable with using the term “Indian” since it was pointed out to me that in the age of European exploration, there was no country called “India”, and “Indian” was used in English to describe anyone who lived east of the Indus River and wasn’t Chinese or Japanese. This certainly applied to the early inhabitants of North America, even though at first contact people didn’t realize that a different con-

tinient was involved. The persistence of the term into modern times shows that no convenient, non-cumbersome alternative has yet been found, although many more awkward terms such as “aboriginal” (sounds Australian), “First Nations” (false cognate from French) and “autochthonic” (a jawbreaker!) are in use.

4. Now called Longer Lake.

5. Now called the Tim River, possibly after a lumber camp foreman; formerly known as the Pine River.

6. Modern maps call it “Rosebary” Lake. Arbitrary spelling changes, and even outright name changes, by bureaucrats working far from the scene are not uncommon. For instance, the lake now called “Mubwayaka Lake” was named “Palmberry Lake” by my great-grandfather, after the mountain ash tree. The large lake west of Roseberry Lake was once called Shoe Lake, later Tim’s Lake, but is now on the maps as Tim Lake. Many more alterations could be

listed.

7. Commonly referred to simply as “The Park” in my family – see verse 7 of the song.

8. This was particularly galling because the park administration encouraged rangers to trap in order to finance the park’s operations, but denied this income to those who had pioneered the industry. Some of the younger men were later hired on as rangers, by way of partial redress, as was Isaac’s son Fred (my grandfather), but Isaac was too old by that time.

9. In one instance, a group of rangers ambushed a group of trappers and beat them up so badly that some of the trappers never fully recovered from their injuries.

10. The western fringe of Algonquin Park is included in Parry Sound District, of which Parry Sound is the District Town.

11. He was holding a loaded shotgun at the time, which added force to his argument.

12. He was no saint, however; he was convicted of poaching, and fined, on two later occasions as well. Poaching by former Haliburton Trappers and others continued up into the 1930s, and many arrests and convictions were made. The offence was not considered particularly heinous because of the park administration’s conduct.

13. In addition to being a fishing and hunting guide and trapper, Ralph Bice was a resort owner, sometime mayor of Kearney, Ontario, sometime school board chairman (despite having only a Grade VIII education), author of numerous books and newspaper

columns, and a founding member and president of the Ontario Trappers’ Federation. When he received the Order of Canada, he insisted on his occupation being shown as “trapper” rather than “outdoorsman”, “conservationist” or some other euphemism, otherwise he was prepared to refuse the Order. He got his way. He died in 1997 at the age of 97. Ralph Bice Lake (formerly Butt Lake – the largest lake in Butt township – locally Eagle Lake), on which one of his fishing camps was located, was renamed to memorialize him.

14. Not to be confused with Lake Nipissing or the village of Nipissing farther north. The long portage has been superseded by a series of shorter portages via a pond called Floating Heart Lake, as well as Latour Creek and Loontail Creek. The old portage did it in one go.



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References

Much of this article is based on family folklore, no longer easily verifiable since my parents’ generation are no longer with us. My sisters, Beth Topps Willems and Ruth Cooper, and my cousin Margaret Sochasky (Ralph Bice’s daughter) supplied some information, and some facts and stories have been corroborated from the sources below. (Thanks also to Maureen Chafe for the transcription.)

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