

# BENNY AMBROSE: LIFE IN TH

**W**hen Benny Ambrose ran away from his northeastern Iowa farm home near Amana at the age of 14, there was little to predict that he would become a legendary figure in Minnesota's north woods. Yet, a chance encounter brought him there, and for more than 60 years he lived in the lake country along the United States-Canadian border, subsisting by prospecting, trapping, guiding, and gardening. After his death in 1982, he was honored with commemorative markers on each side of the international border, two nations' tributes to the person reputed to be the north country's most self-sufficient woodsman.<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin Quentin Ambrose was born in about 1896. Little is known about his early years up to the fateful day in 1910 when he ran away. "I left home because my father got remarried . . . married a lady that I called the devil's grandmother. Back when I left, I threw a huge, live hornet's nest in her bedroom and I had to make tracks."<sup>2</sup>

The 14-year-old dreamed of going to Alaska to pan for gold but, lacking enough money, took a job as a farmhand in Wisconsin's apple-orchard country. In the following years he moved to other farm and construction jobs throughout the Midwest and annually harvested grain in the Dakotas. He was working near Sioux City, Iowa,

in 1917 when the United States entered World War I, and he promptly enlisted.<sup>3</sup>

Ambrose was assigned to the famed Rainbow Division, which served on the front lines in France. In later years he never talked about his overseas experiences except to tell about an Ojibway army buddy from Grand Portage. This man kindled Ambrose's dreams by describing a vast and beautiful timbered wilderness filled with lakes and rivers in northeastern Minnesota, where gold and silver were waiting to be discovered. He decided to prospect there for a year or two to raise the money needed to go on to Alaska.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after his military discharge in 1919, Ambrose headed for Hovland at the northeastern tip of Minnesota. At that time *The America*, a 182-foot steamer, was the only commercial transportation from Duluth along Lake Superior's north shore, as the mud-mired coast road was not suitable for such travel. During the 12-hour trip, the steamboat stopped frequently to collect herring and trout from Scandinavian fishing settlements, some so small they had no docks. With its engine shut off, the unanchored steamer bobbed on swells as Ambrose watched from the deck. While fascinated by the rocky coastline with gravelly beaches where rivers cascaded into Lake Superior, he could not keep his eyes off the tree-covered hills that rose sharply from the shores. He itched to find what lay beyond.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Burgette Hart, "Cousin Benny," unpublished family history, Boulder, Colo., Feb. 1987, p. 2, copy in author's possession. The author wishes to thank all who corresponded and were interviewed for this article. In addition, Jerry Jussila of the U.S. Forest Service was of great help in assembling materials.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Ambrose, tape-recorded, transcribed interview by Ray Chase and Earl Niewald, Ottertrack Lake, Sept. 1, 1977, p. 18, tape and transcript in District Forest Service Headquarters, Ely. Ambrose was notoriously careless about dates. He told friends one birth date, but his driver's license bore another and his daughters believed that still another was correct. The dates ranged from 1894 to 1899.

<sup>3</sup> *Cook County News-Herald*, Sept. 9, 1982, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Burgette Hart, "More About Benny," unpublished family history, Boulder, Colo., Oct. 15, 1990, p. 1, copy in author's possession.

<sup>5</sup> Here and below, see *Cook County News-Herald*, Sept. 9, 1982, p. 1. The account of the steamer voyage is based on Calvin Rutstrom, "Adventures in Solitude," in *North Writers: A Strong Woods Collection*, ed. John Henrickson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 193-94.

*Canoe campers portaging in Superior National Forest, about 1930*



# BOUNDARY WATERS

At Hovland he took a job as a fireman on a steamer running to Grand Portage. Later, he worked for Hedstrom Lumber Company and helped construct houses in Grand Marais. Ambrose built a cabin for himself on McFarland Lake near Hovland, trapping and prospecting in his spare time. After a year or so he turned the dwelling over to a trapper friend and moved to the upper Gunflint Trail area, lured once more by stories of rich mineral deposits.

When he first hiked up the Gunflint Trail in the early 1920s, it was a narrow, winding dirt road with steep, rocky ridges stretching 40-some miles through dense forests from Grand Marais to Gunflint Lake. Used by loggers, miners, and the operators and clients of a few hunting and fishing lodges, it followed old Indian pathways and logging trails through real "bush country," alive with small game, deer, and moose. Travel beyond



*Benny Ambrose, from a snapshot taken by fishing client and friend Roy Watson*

## **RALPH WRIGHT-PETERSON**

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Gunflint Lake was by foot or by canoe up the Granite or Sea Gull rivers to Saganaga Lake.<sup>6</sup>

Ambrose eagerly prospected on both sides of the border throughout the area known as Quetico-Superior, but he never struck it rich. For income, he trapped in the winters, guided lodge guests in the summers, and sometimes worked at odd jobs, but prospecting always was his primary interest. He made friends with the established trappers in the area and with Ojibway families from Grand Portage to Atikokan, Ontario, including his "neighbors" on the Canadian side of Saganaga and Gunflint lakes. They taught him their skills of hunting, fishing, canoeing, fur trapping, snowshoeing, and surviving long winters when the temperatures sometimes plunged to 50 degrees below zero. By all accounts, the Indian people respected Ambrose and showed him some of their best trapping and fishing areas. In return, he did for them what he could. Once, for example, he helped Ojibway friends transport a bull for more than 40 miles over the border lakes from Winton to their farm on the Canadian side of Saganaga Lake.<sup>7</sup>

Ambrose soon became a close friend of Russell Blankenburg, a young mining engineer

who had extensive wilderness land holdings and mineral rights. When not busy with the Blankenburg family's fishing camps on Gunflint and Sea Gull lakes, the two prospected throughout the area. They found deposits of gold, silver, nickel, iron, asbestos, and cobalt, but none in quantities that would be profitable to mine.<sup>8</sup>

Through the early 1920s Ambrose guided guests from the camps who were after the big, native lake trout found in the cold, deep waters of Saganaga, Gunflint, and Sea Gull lakes. (Walleyes had not yet been stocked in the area.) When the Blankenburgs sold their Gunflint Lodge to the Spinner family in 1927, Ambrose continued to guide for the new owners. In *Woman of the Boundary Waters*, lodge owner Justine Spinner Kerfoot describes a small group of "experienced and congenial men," including Benny, as everyone called him, who "gave to any party they took on a trip an unforgettable experience and a feeling of comfort in the woods." Kerfoot remembers Ambrose as a popular guide but one she could not hire for a whole season because "he couldn't be tied down that long."<sup>9</sup>

Far from the stereotype of the silent woodsman, Ambrose was as noted for his storytelling and conversational skills as for his fishing expertise. Over the years, he developed friendships with clients that became a network, connecting him to people in many parts of the "outside world." He reportedly read everything that he could get his hands on. In later years a radio, in addition to the diverse reading materials left by visitors, kept him well informed on current affairs, economics, and politics. He was known for expressing his views in down-to-earth and practical terms.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to guiding, his life trapping was rugged and lonely. It required running the lines in subzero weather and being out for days, sometimes weeks, at a time, working from trapping shacks and improvised shelters spaced a day's travel apart. Ambrose set, inspected, and lifted beaver traps in icy water. He rough-skinned the animals where they were caught, saving from the carcass only the liver to eat and the castor for its scent, used to trap other animals. At a shelter, he scraped any remaining flesh from the hides and

Ambrose guiding a satisfied fisherman, Mr. Hoxier, Ottertrack Lake, late 1940s



<sup>6</sup> Justine S. Kerfoot, interview by the author, Gunflint Lodge, Sept. 27, 1990, notes in author's possession.

<sup>7</sup> Holly Ambrose to author, Oct. 6, 1990; Bob Cary, *Root Beer Lady: The Story of Dorothy Molter* (Duluth: Pfeiffer-Hamilton, 1993), 117-18; Justine Kerfoot, *Woman of the Boundary Waters: Canoeing, Guiding, Mushing and Surviving* (Grand Marais, Minn.: Women's Times Publishing, 1986), 16-23; Robert M. Jacobsen, interview by the author, Mesa, Ariz., Oct. 27, 1990, notes in author's possession.

<sup>8</sup> Ambrose interview, 19-21.

<sup>9</sup> Kerfoot, *Woman of the Boundary Waters*, 62, 183; Kerfoot interview.

<sup>10</sup> H. Ambrose to author; Kerfoot interview.





rolled them into a bundle to be thawed at his homesite. There he laced the hides to ash hoops and hung them up to dry. When sufficiently cured, the furs were ready for sale.<sup>11</sup>

Buyers from both Canada and the United States traveled up the Gunflint Trail to obtain furs. Ambrose also sold pelts in Mine Centre, Ontario, when prospecting in that area. Beaver was the mainstay, fetching between \$40 and \$80 per piece in 1927, but there were also marten, mink, fox, otter, lynx, and fisher. Bounties were paid on both sides of the border for timber wolves, and their hides provided Ambrose some additional income.<sup>12</sup>

**D**uring his first years along the Gunflint Trail, Ambrose had no fixed dwelling. If a trapper's cabin happened to be available near his work, he used it; if not, he simply pitched a tent, even in the dead of winter. Sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s he moved onto a peninsula on Ottertrack Lake (shown on some

maps as Cypress Lake) along the U.S.-Canadian border. This became his permanent homestead, although it would be many years before he built a cabin. He purchased the land from Lloyd K. Johnson of Duluth in a deal closed with a handshake and a promise of future payment. Ambrose said that he chose the 19-acre point of land because "it was the prettiest spot I ever saw." It was wild, uninhabited, and so remote that even today the nearest road is 15 miles away. From the ridge he could see the long, narrow lake lined with cedar trees and sheer cliffs of gray Precambrian rock. Loons called their mates from the canyonlike body of water, and the surrounding green, forested hills echoed their calls.<sup>13</sup>

This same point of land in years past had been a favorite campsite of Indians, explorers, voyageurs, traders, and loggers. It lay along the old Voyageur's Highway, established as the border by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842. At the summit of Monument Portage between Ottertrack and Swamp lakes stood one of the large steel international-boundary markers.<sup>14</sup>

The nearest towns were Ely, which could be reached by about 40 miles of paddling and portaging or snowshoeing, and Grand Marais. To get to Grand Marais, Ambrose had to canoe and portage about 10 miles—up Ottertrack from his homestead to the 90-rod Monument Portage, across Swamp Lake and its portage, and then across Saginaga Lake—to paths leading to the Gunflint Trail and town, still some 60 miles distant.

Game and fish were close at hand; summer-time brought strawberries, blueberries, chokecherries, and other edibles. Using his farm background, Ambrose started a vegetable garden by hauling in packsacks of organic muck from beaver ponds. From his occasional trips outside of the north country he brought back black dirt. A cousin remembered his visits: "He always carried a huge canvas sack. . . . He would fill his sack with rich Iowa soil and manure and carry it back with him. In a few years he had created a fertile garden plot with carrots, radishes, rutabagas, lettuce, and potatoes, as well as raspberry bushes, roses, and a few fruit trees." The surplus he canned, stored in the root cellar he eventually built, or shared with friends. He baked his own bread, so his food purchases were simple: flour,

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Madsen and Dinna Madsen, tape-recorded interview by the author, Saginaga Lake, Ontario, Aug. 15, 1991, notes and tape in author's possession.

<sup>12</sup> Carv, *Root Beer Lady*, 118; Kerfoot, *Woman of the Boundary Waters*, 31; Madsen interview.

<sup>13</sup> Kerfoot interview; Kerfoot, *Woman of the Boundary Waters*, 11; H. Ambrose to author.

<sup>14</sup> Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur's Highway: Minnesota's Border Lake Land* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1983), 17; Robert Beymer, *The Boundary Waters Canoe Area: The Eastern Region* (Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 1979), 2: 102.

yeast, sugar, coffee, salt, baking powder, dried fruit, and a few canned goods.<sup>15</sup>

Even though he described himself as "sort of a loner," Ambrose gradually developed a network of friends and became a familiar figure along the Gunflint Trail and in the towns he visited for supplies, mail, and companionship. He stood about five feet, ten inches tall and was wiry and muscular in build. Below his felt hat a confident smile lit up his ruddy-cheeked, weatherbeaten face.<sup>16</sup>

Ambrose assumes legendary status in the memories of friends and acquaintances. He was on good terms with the game wardens, forest rangers, and customs officials on both sides of the border, exchanging information about weather, water conditions, and fire hazards with them. According to Opal Enzenauer, who with her husband, Don, operated Voyageurs Outfitters on Sea Gull River, "He sized up people in a hurry. If he liked you, he liked you and would talk forever; if he didn't, he wouldn't give you the time of day." Mike West, a fellow trapper and longtime friend, described Benny as "a helluva good guy and damn honest. He loved to talk and was a damned good canoe paddler and damned good in the woods. But he had too much ambition. He'd set some 100 traps and never did get back to half of them." According to Art and Dinna Madsen, owners of Camp Sagonto at Saganaga Lake, one of his favorite expressions was, "I'm 100 years behind on my work."

Story has it that on winter weekends he occasionally snowshoed into Grand Marais, danced the schottische all night, and then headed back up the Gunflint Trail. Sometimes in the summer he awoke at 3:00 A.M. to get to Grand Marais that evening, in order to play shortstop on the local baseball team the next day. An ardent Republican, he was always ready to talk politics, and he always voted, even when he had to snowshoe to the polls.

Art Madsen, who homesteaded on Saganaga Lake in the "hungry thirties" and became one of Benny's best friends, remembered:

He was the toughest guy, and he could out-snowshoe anybody in the woods. He wasn't speedy, just kept a steady pace without stopping to rest. He was completely at home in the woods and lived

half his life in a tent. Benny would always come to visit in the worst weather, and usually with his shirt unbuttoned.

Adding to the legend, or perhaps just recording it, Justine Kerfoot wrote in her weekly newspaper column: "Ben, hardy and physically tough, took pride in being able to carry the heaviest load, of traveling in the coldest weather of winter with a hat and open shirt. . . traversing ice in the spring and fall that no one else dared to tread."<sup>17</sup>

Roy Watson Jr., president of the Kahler Corporation of Rochester, Minnesota, who fished and camped with Ambrose for many years, recalled two sides of the celebrated wilderness guide: "He once held four bears at bay in his camp while he cooked up coffee. Yet, he stayed up in the wee hours to make a fire to warm drenched-out 'hippy' canoeists even though he always said he didn't like them."<sup>18</sup>

Each spring at ice-breakup, Charlie and Petra Boostrom, who opened a lodge on Clearwater Lake in 1927, invited Ben and other young woodsmen of the area to a "rendezvous." The hunting, fishing, and socializing sometimes went on for a month until the new guiding season started. Ben also exchanged occasional visits with another north-country legend, Dorothy Molter, the "root beer lady," who had moved to the area in the 1930s and eventually lived alone on Knife Lake. He brought her home-grown vegetables and helped her start her own garden.<sup>19</sup>

Ambrose's reputation extended beyond this informal yet tight-knit community. Burgette Hart wrote about her childhood memories of "Cousin Benny's" annual visits during the 1940s and 1950s to their farm near Waukon, Iowa.

He slept with the windows open, even in chilly weather and usually slept on the floor because the beds were too soft. He told about chopping holes in the winter ice and lowering canned foods into the water to keep them from freezing. He said that he had to be careful about food storage whenever he left the cabin, because the bears would break in if they smelled food.

I think I owe my first teaching job to Benny. While I was still at Iowa State Teachers' College, Superintendent Bob McLeese from Hawkeye, Iowa, came to interview. . . . Because of something

<sup>15</sup> Jacobsen interview; Hart, "Cousin Benny," 1.

<sup>16</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, see *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 20, 1974, p. 1B; *Cook County News-Herald*, Sept. 9, 1982, p. 1; Opal Enzenauer, interview by the author, Sea Gull River, Sept. 26, 1990; Madsen interview; H. Ambrose to author.

<sup>17</sup> Madsen interview; Justine Kerfoot, "On the Gunflint Trail," *Cook County News-Herald* column, undated clipping in author's possession.

<sup>18</sup> Roy Watson, Jr., interviews by the author, Rochester, July 1991, notes in author's possession.

<sup>19</sup> *Cook County News-Herald*, Sept. 9, 1982, p. 1; Cary, *Root Beer Lady*, 118.



I said, he realized my mother was Benny's first cousin. Suddenly I became a VIP. For several summers he had fished at Benny's camp. . . . He told me that Benny was an excellent guide, wonderful companion, and one of the most interesting people he had ever talked with. I was hired on the spot.<sup>20</sup>

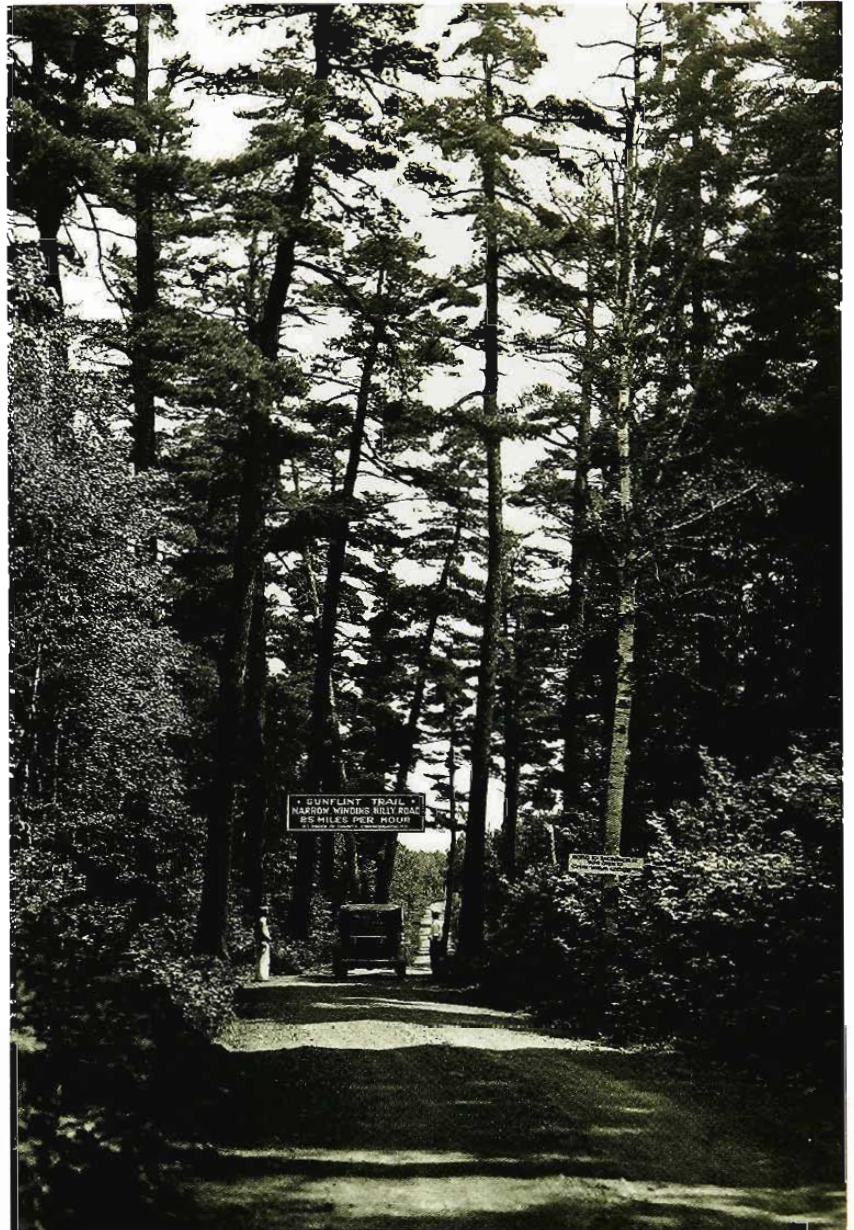
**D**uring their early years in the area, Ambrose and his friends were hardly aware of the federal government's regulations that affected the unspoiled land they loved. As time went by, though, the controls impinged more and more on their lives.

In 1909, a decade before Ambrose arrived in the north country, President Theodore Roosevelt had established the Superior National Forest in northeastern Minnesota. This act withdrew a large tract of federally owned land from settlement but permitted logging. (The forest boundaries enclosed thousands of acres of private- and state-held land as well.) Then, in 1915, Congress passed an act allowing temporary occupancy in national forests for up to 30 years.<sup>21</sup>

Hardly a year went by that Congress did not enact legislation trying to balance the conflicting interests of conservationists, loggers, landowners, recreationists, and resort owners. The U.S. Forest Service, working under the Department of

Agriculture, was left to come up with day-to-day solutions and to deal with the people affected by the ever-evolving management plan.<sup>22</sup>

In 1922, for example, the forest service responded to pressures from land developers by



*Gunflint Trail, 1932. The overhead sign reads, "Narrow, winding, hilly road. 25 miles per hour," while the tree posting announces, "Road to Saganaga is now open to Chik-Wauk Lodge."*

<sup>20</sup> Hart, "Cousin Benny," 2.

<sup>21</sup> M. L. Heinselman and H. C. Johnson, "Outline History of the BWCA," pamphlet by Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, 1976, p. 1; R. Newell Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior, A Land Set Apart* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), 29.

<sup>22</sup> Here and below, see Heinselman and Johnson, "Outline History," 1–4; Kerfoot, *Woman of the Boundary Waters*, xii–xiv.



*Saganaga Lake, early 1940s. Posed before Ambrose's laden truck, from right: Ben, the only one without a jacket; Val Ambrose, his wife; Dinna Madsen, owner with her husband, Art, of the lodge at Saganaga; Dick Madsen.*

starting work on the Echo Trail, Fernberg Road, and the upper end of the Gunflint Trail in the formerly roadless area. Each year the Gunflint was gradually extended until it finally reached Sea Gull Lake in 1930. From that point, resort owners extended a private toll road to their places on Saganaga Lake—free to their clients.

Conservationists such as Sigurd F. Olson, the teacher and writer from Ely, and Paul B. Riis, an Illinois member of the American Institute of Park Executives, protested these intrusions. National groups, such as the Izaak Walton League and the Ecological Society of America, and local organizations, such as the Taxpayers' League of St. Louis County, the Tower Commercial Club, and the Duluth Chamber of Commerce, also fought against development in the national forest.<sup>23</sup>

In 1926, as government policy continued to evolve, Secretary of Agriculture William M. Jardine issued a proclamation establishing 640,000 acres of wilderness within the Superior National Forest: "The Forest Service will leave not less than 1,000 square miles of the best canoe country in the Superior without roads of any character." There would be no recreational development, although logging was allowed as long as it preserved scenic tree screens along lakeshores and around campsites. Underlying this decision

was the hope that the federal government would eventually be able to purchase the private and state land within the forest.<sup>24</sup>

It was in the early 1930s that Marian Valora McIlhenny ("Val"), a former Northwestern University classmate of Justine Kerfoot, visited northern Minnesota for a summer's respite from her M.D. program in internal medicine. Working at Saganaga Lodge, she quickly became entranced with north-country living. The lodge was right on Ambrose's route from Ottertrack Lake to the Gunflint Trail, and he was soon stopping regularly to court Val. According to Kerfoot, McIlhenny fell in love, gave up her plans to return to school, and in January 1937 married her 40-year-old suitor.<sup>25</sup>

Ambrose promised his bride that he would build a permanent log-cabin home on Ottertrack. He started several but was always sidetracked, so they lived in a shelter with board flooring, wooden siding, and a canvas top. In the center stood a wood-burning oil-barrel stove, its stovepipe running out the canvas top. Their first child, Bonnie, was born there in 1940; their second, Holly, was born six years later in the Grand Marais hospital. Bonnie later recalled: "Mother got through those winters somehow. I don't know how, but she did. There was no cabin until later—much later. She

<sup>23</sup> Heinselman and Johnson, "Outline History," 1; Jim Dale Vickery, *Wilderness Visionaries* (Merrillville, Ind.: JCS Books, 1986), 190–92; Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 24–25.

<sup>24</sup> Heinselman and Johnson, "Outline History," 2; Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Kerfoot interview; Holly Ambrose, conversation with the author, July 27, 1994.



used to sleep with potatoes in her sleeping bag to keep them from freezing." Bonnie also remembered that when they baked bread on top of the stove in the winter, part of the loaf would bake and the rest would freeze.<sup>26</sup>

Wolves, attracted by furs curing, frequently came around the shelter, howling in the night. In the summer, bears rummaged through the garden compost pile. Ambrose was often away from home overnight—or longer—trapping and prospecting, while Val and Bonnie contended with the animals and sounds of wilderness nights.<sup>27</sup>

Game warden Robert M. "Jake" Jacobsen from Ely, a longtime friend of Ambrose's, often stopped to visit.

You could look up at the peak of the tent and see daylight. Snow blew in the cracks. . . . Ben liked to follow the tracks of a fisher until he ran it down, which could take up to three days. He would go down to the lake to get water in the winter and sometimes not come back. When Val finally went down to check on him, she could see the tracks and know what had happened, but it really upset her.

Catching a live fisher was not just sport for Ambrose. Animal farms along Lake Superior paid one hundred dollars for fur-bearing animals suitable for breeding.

Val's interest in gardening equaled Ben's. Before they met, he had mainly been interested in growing food. Under her influence he began to favor roses, lilacs, petunias—"any flowers he could get his hands on," according to their daughter.<sup>28</sup>

The couple shared the rugged wilderness life for ten years, but after Holly was born, Val insisted on moving to "civilization" so their daughters could go to school and have playmates. Ben refused to give up his home, and Val left, taking the girls. After about 2 years in Ohio, where she directed a hospital laboratory, she found a job at the medical clinic in Virginia, Minnesota, where the children grew up. In 1951 the couple divorced, according to the daughters, without bitterness, each understanding the other's needs.

Through childhood and high school, the girls spent their summers on Ottertrack Lake. Of those times, Holly wrote:

We had everything kids could want—freedom and what seemed like the whole world to spend it in.



*Ambrose and his oldest daughter, Bonnie, at the family's first home site on Ottertrack Lake, 1944*

Our father pretty much left us to develop our own faith and convictions. There were no other kids, but we didn't notice. . . . For pets we had a dog named Fritz, bass and walleye tied up all over the lake. snakes, raccoons, sometimes wolf pups if he happened to live trap them. birds, squirrels, otter, martins—you name it, we had it—not in cages though.

**W**hile Ambrose was busy improving his homestead and supporting his family in the 1930s and 1940s, a coalition of foresters, conservationists, and some area business people on both sides of the international border was pushing for more wilderness legislation. In 1938 the forest service had established the Superior Roadless Primitive Area with boundaries similar to the present Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, including Ottertrack Lake. Ten years later, after a great deal of argument and compromise, the Thye-Blatnik Act directed the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to buy all resorts, cabins, and private lands within two-thirds of the wilderness area in Lake, Cook, and St. Louis counties. That same year the forest service changed the name of the region to Superior Roadless Area; in 1958 it officially became the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA).<sup>29</sup>

Shortly after passage of the 1948 act, the government began what turned out to be its lengthy

<sup>26</sup> Hart, "Cousin Benny," 2; H. Ambrose to author; Bonnie Ambrose Wasmund to author, Dec. 19, 1991.

<sup>27</sup> Here and below, see Jacobsen interview.

<sup>28</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, see H. Ambrose to author; Wasmund to author; Cary, *Root Beer Lady*, 118. Holly became a geologist and eventually moved to Alaska. Bonnie, a psychologist and management consultant, settled near Washington, D.C.

<sup>29</sup> Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 156–64; Heinselman and Johnson, "Outline History," 2–3.



pursuit of Ambrose's homestead. For the opening round, a 1949 letter from Superior National Forest personnel to Lloyd Johnson stated: "We are interested in acquiring lots 1 and 3, Section 27, Township 66 North, Range 6 West. According to our records they are owned by Ben Ambrose, but the Lake County records show the above descriptions as being assessed in your name." Ambrose and Johnson, who had never officially recorded their transaction, did not respond to this letter; probably, they hoped that the issue would disappear. But throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s the forest service pursued negotiations with Ambrose (and Johnson) and Dorothy Molter. As time went on, the talks changed from discussion of purchase prices to threats of condemning the properties and evicting the owners.<sup>30</sup>

In the meantime, other controversies swirled. In 1949 President Harry S. Truman issued an executive order barring airplanes from flying below 4,000 feet over the area. As a result, wealthy fishermen could no longer fly in to lakes that canoeists had paddled for days to reach. Resorts that depended on the fishermen closed, and, in the eyes of the forest service, the value of remote property such as Ambrose's declined. Nevertheless, Ambrose fully agreed with the ban on fly-ins: "I took a bitter stand against them. Blankenburg did the same thing and one fellow . . . that I went to St. Paul with a couple of times [to testify at public hearings]. Even in the thirties I took the stand that the canoeists got to have an area of their own."<sup>31</sup>

Snowmobiles came into common use in the 1950s as a means of winter transportation, and their recreational use expanded rapidly into the Superior Roadless Area. In 1964 the forest service decreed that snowmobiles were winter motorboats and could use designated motorboat routes. This made the Voyageur's Highway a major snowmobile path. Noisy wintertime travel past Ambrose's cabin soon surpassed the level of summertime canoe traffic. At the same time, the improvement and extension of the Gunflint Trail facilitated public access by automobile to Sea Gull and Saganaga lakes, increasing the number of motorboats in the region. As a result, conservationists continued to demand protective regulation.<sup>32</sup>

Ambrose himself took advantage of the modern conveniences that fit his life style. His most prized possession was a battery-powered radio, which brought him the daily news. In the late 1950s, as he neared 60 years of age, he acquired a snowmobile for essential travel and transportation of winter supplies. This enabled him to haul propane tanks to heat the little cabin he had finally built and to fuel his outdoor kitchen stove. In the early 1960s he bought a secondhand pickup truck, which he left with friends at the end of the Gunflint Trail. During the summers he kept small motorboats on Ottertrack and Saganaga lakes and a canoe on Swamp Lake so he no longer had to portage his watercraft. Storing these in the wilderness area became a violation of government regulations in 1964, but after Ambrose notified one of his fishing clients, a U.S. Supreme Court justice, of the problem, the forest service made an exception in his case.<sup>33</sup>

Ambrose's life changed in other ways, too. Over time he added to his homestead a boathouse, root cellar, icehouse, cabin for his daughters, water tower, an army-surplus squad tent for guests, and an outhouse. By the 1960s, he did less trapping and guiding in order to spend more time prospecting. He bought a portable drilling rig and worked for various individuals and mining companies, prospecting and taking the core samples required to keep claims active.

As time wore on and the forest service's attempts to oust Ambrose from the BWCA escalated, friends came to his assistance. In 1962, for example, Roy Watson Jr., the Rochester businessman, wrote to Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, whom he knew well.

Since 1931 he has lived on this site, erected several small cabins through his own efforts with ax and saw, skidding the logs on the ice during the winter. Over the years he has made literally countless numbers of trips from the end of the Gun Flint Trail to his abode, packing in black dirt and manure to make a garden and to keep it growing. He has also blasted out rock to make a garden area as well as his cabin areas. By canoe on his back over several portages he has done this.

If one were to assign a value of a dollar an hour to the work it would exceed \$100,000. He is 64

<sup>30</sup> Galen W. Pike to Lloyd K. Johnson, May 11, 1949, Ben Ambrose Land Purchase file, Superior National Forest headquarters, Duluth; Cary, *Root Beer Lady*, 155-57.

<sup>31</sup> Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 165-85; Ambrose interview, 1. The flights did not stop until 1953, when the Eighth District Court upheld the order. Offenders were arrested and fined.

<sup>32</sup> Ambrose interview, 4; Heinseman and Johnson, "Outline History," 3.

<sup>33</sup> Here and below, see Cary, *Root Beer Lady*, 118-19; Eve Blankenburg, interview by the author, Sea Gull Lake, Aug. 14, 16, 1991, notes in author's possession; Watson interviews; Enzenauer interview.

years old and naturally wants to live out his life in the home he has made for himself. . . . Recognizing that the law provides that the government acquire the land, Mr. Ambrose is certainly willing to comply and accept a fair price for his property. It seems only fair, though, that he be given life tenure, before the property reverts to the government.

No response from the senator is on file, but in the margin by the last paragraph of the letter is a bold, handwritten "Yes."<sup>34</sup>

About the same time, the *Cook County News-*

*Herald* reported: "Ben Ambrose, who lives far inland on the border, made a trip to Duluth last week. The Government is trying to buy his land and he is none too happy about it." Apparently, this was not the last trip Ambrose made to forest service headquarters. A 1963 interoffice memo records still another conference with Lloyd Johnson and Ambrose. Johnson verified that he had sold the property and that the government should pay Ambrose, even though he still owed Johnson some money. The memo continues, "Mr. Johnson talked about . . . Mr. Ambrose's promises from prominent people in Washington that he could remain there and they would go to bat for him." These people probably included Humphrey and fishing client James Forrestal, whom Ambrose knew before he became secretary of the navy and then defense under presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Truman. During World War II, Forrestal had called Ambrose to Washington to testify about the tin deposits he discovered in Canada. Johnson may also have referred to the Supreme Court justice who had reportedly helped Ambrose with his watercraft-storage problem.<sup>35</sup>

**T**he Wilderness Act of 1964, introduced in the Senate by Humphrey, required, among other provisions, that all homesteads in the BWCA be surrendered to the government and all man-made structures be removed by 1975. The scene was set for a classic conflict—immovable persons vs. irresistible government.<sup>36</sup>

Having refused to sell their homesteads, both Ambrose and Molter found their properties condemned and themselves facing eviction. The forest service had run out of patience, but it was not to have the last word. Ambrose, too, had run out of patience, according to an account by personnel attempting to serve condemnation papers at Ottertrack Lake.

He glanced at them, but didn't read them entirely. He knew what they said because it had been explained to him. He turned the papers over, looked out the window thoughtfully, sighed, then

## Destroy This? **NEVER!**



Yes, we are deeply concerned about the same country. Many people love it and yet they do not realize what a priceless treasure we have in it. It is a matchless, a unique possession, which nothing can replace once it is gone. There is nothing just like its wild loveliness. We would as soon shatter the Hope diamond into small media-

cre bits as to spoil this country with resorts and airplane noise and confusion. We need to keep this tiny remnant fraction of what was once a mighty wilderness as a primitive area where we can find clarity, solitude and peace.

FLORENCE PAGE JACQUES

## *Friends of the Wilderness*

FRANK ROBERTSON, President

BILL MAQUIE, Secretary-Treasurer

Writer Florence Page Jacques and artist Francis Lee Jacques supported the conservationists' cause with this poster, about 1960

<sup>34</sup> Roy Watson, Jr., to Hubert H. Humphrey, Sept. 4, 1962, Ambrose file, Superior National Forest headquarters.

<sup>35</sup> *Cook County News-Herald*, Sept. 13, 1962, p. 1; R. W. Nelson, forester, memorandum 5420, Apr. 3, 1963, Ambrose file, Superior National Forest headquarters; Watson interviews; Carv, *Root Beer Lady*, 119.

<sup>36</sup> Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 220-23.





*Benny Ambrose at his homestead, January 1974, a few months before learning he would be allowed to remain*

looked back at the men. "You go tell your boss," he said evenly, "that I've got a loaded .30-.30 Winchester sitting in the corner of this cabin, and the next person in uniform who steps on my dock is going to get blown into the lake."

They got out of there quickly and the district couldn't find anyone who would go back up there.<sup>37</sup>

Area residents were up in arms about the impending evictions of Ambrose and Molter, who became folk heroes in their battles with the government. The media stood ready to pounce.

When Bob Cary, an avid outdoorsman and friend of Molter's who happened to write for the *Chicago Daily News*, published the story—and sent it across the country via wire service—an uproar ensued. The forest service recognized that it was in a no-win situation and delayed final action.

Federal officials finally agreed that the government would not only buy Ambrose's property on Ottertrack Lake and Molter's on Knife Lake but also that the two would be permitted to stay in their homes until 1975. (Both would be elderly by

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<sup>37</sup> Here and below, see Cary, *Root Beer Lady*, 157–61.

then.) They could not, however, use the sites for commercial enterprises. In April 1964 Lake County officially transferred ownership of Ambrose's property to the U.S. Forest Service. No mention of purchase price has been found, but persons close to Benny estimated the amount at between \$35,000 and \$50,000.<sup>38</sup>

**T**en years passed. Contrary to expectation, Ambrose and Molter remained hale and hardy in the 1.1 million-acre wilderness. The winter of 1973–74 was a tense one for them. The expectation was that they would be evicted from their homes, probably in the summer, in order to meet the 1975 deadline mandated by the 1964 Wilderness Act.<sup>39</sup>

In the end, though, the government bent. The forest service designated Ambrose a federal wilderness volunteer, thus allowing the 78-year-old to live out his life on Ottertrack Lake. (Molter was given similar status.) In signing the agreement, Harold Anderson, supervisor of the Superior National Forest, signaled the government's change of heart: "To us they are part of the culture of the area. . . . They are oldtimers. They are part of the pioneer group that went in there in the early days. . . . I'll be damned if I could be a part of throwing them out." As a volunteer, Ambrose would provide information to the forest service about local lake and forest conditions and give emergency assistance to campers. In return, the forest service would look out for his welfare. He had won his battle for lifetime tenancy.<sup>40</sup>

**O**n September 1, 1977, forest rangers Ray Chase and Earl Niewald walked the sawdust-and-bark trail that wound up the incline from Ambrose's boat landing to his living area, a 10-by-12-foot weathered log cabin with a tar-papered roof. Its one room was just big enough for a stove, bed, table and chair, gun closet, battery radio, Coleman lantern, and piles of newspapers and magazines. There were deep claw marks on the heavy wooden door. Near the cabin were huge stacks of firewood.<sup>41</sup>

The visitors had come to record an interview

as part of the Superior National Forest oral history program. Ambrose was dressed as always—black wool pants with suspenders, a red plaid shirt unbuttoned down the front revealing a cream-colored thermal undershirt, and a black felt hat. Ankle-high leather boots and wool socks completed his outfit. Longtime acquaintances, the rangers knew that Ambrose was a storyteller. A simple question would set him off on a circuitous answer filled with yarns that spanned his lifetime.<sup>42</sup>

The woodsman spoke of his years of fruitless searching for a legendary "lost gold mine," finally deciding that he did not need a big mine, "just a chimney. . . . just enough to get by on. . . . Independent!" He told about finding deposits of iron, copper, cobalt, nickel, and asbestos, but never of quality, quantity, and location to be profitable: "a seam here, a seam there, a seam over there—that stuff don't work out now, but a hundred years from now somebody's going to get rich when the good stuff is all gone." He recalled important people he had guided; some had invited him to visit them. "I spent three days in a coal mine in Centralia, Illinois. . . . The people that own it, I guided for Blankenburgs." And he spoke with pride of his daughters' visits:

I took Holly over to get a Canadian fishing license. . . . I don't know where the boundary is, but it's out there somewheres in the middle of the lake. . . . I am proud of the Quetico here, glad to have it. At least we have a little wilderness where the airplanes can't go.<sup>43</sup>

Ambrose's most immediate concern was the location of the new snowmobile routes, about which Congress, conservationists, and recreational users were wrangling.

What in hell are they going to do with these goddamn snow machines? Are the politicians going to sell the country down the river or what? Well, jeeminy jumped-up christmas, if . . . they got to have a place, don't have them go through here. . . .

The way it was last year they were running night and day. Some days at least 200 machines would go by here. . . . I lose money on gasoline 'cause I'll not charge for it. I do tell them to replace

<sup>38</sup> Cary, *Root Beer Lady*, 161; Oliver S. Johnson, Lake County Register of Deeds, to U.S. Forest Service, Apr. 7, 1964, Ambrose file; Watson interviews.

<sup>39</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 20, 1974, p. 1B.

<sup>40</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 14, 1974, p. 1A.

<sup>41</sup> Description from author's visit to Ottertrack Lake; see Ralph Wright-Peterson, "Remembering Benny," *Boundary Waters Journal*, Winter 1990, p. 28–29.

<sup>42</sup> Jerry Jussila, interview by the author, Ely, Sept. 25, 1990, notes in author's possession. Ottertrack Lake was within Jussila's jurisdiction, and the two men became close friends during Ambrose's volunteer years.

<sup>43</sup> Here and two paragraphs below, see Ambrose interview, S, 9, 14.





Ben Ambrose with his beaver catch at the headwaters of the Kawishiwi River, 1924. The lone trapper posed for his own picture, tripping the camera shutter with the string attached to his left hand.

it, and about two out of three do. I did give a fellow five gallons one day. I didn't like to, 'cause it's too much of a problem in this slush to bring it in. But on the other hand, you can't hardly leave a man stranded. I don't know whether they don't know those things burn gas or what . . . but can you turn them down if they are stuck out there, two o'clock in the morning, thirty degrees below zero? . . . with small children . . . no ax, no shovel, or nothing. When I was 50 years old, it didn't bother me. I didn't give a damn, but at my age I gotta be careful.

The 80-year-old told the two forest service men about a heart attack he had suffered at Pettigony Lake while up to his waist in water.

Leaving the lake, he had driven himself by tractor to the house of a friend, who flew him to the hospital in Grand Marais for a 19-day stay.

Several years after this interview, Sam Cook, outdoor writer for the *Duluth News-Tribune*, visited the homestead, accompanied by Ambrose's longtime friend Jake Jacobsen. Along with the woodsman's opinions on inflation, politics, and the American hostages in Iran, the article revealed some of his philosophies of life. Ambrose's attitude toward time was evidenced by four alarm clocks on a shelf, each with a different time, and calendars hanging on the walls for the years 1980, 1979, and 1897. A yellowed poster read, "Worry is like a rocking chair. It keeps you busy, but it don't get you nowhere." The octogenarian told Jacobsen, "I can't die yet, 'cause I got a hundred years of projects to do."<sup>44</sup>

On September 2, 1982, the Associated Press wire service reported from Ely:

The U.S. Forest Service will bend the rules for Benny Ambrose one last time today.

Just this once, the federal government will allow motorboats into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of northeastern Minnesota, to carry friends and family to Ambrose's remote cabin for his memorial service. . . .

Ambrose . . . was found dead Friday [August 27] next to the burned-out remains of a three-sided canvas tarpaulin, where he cooked in the summer. His body was found by a Forest Service portage crew, hauled out aboard a sheriff's float plane and cremated.

The cause of death is unknown, but officials think the 80-plus-year-old outdoorsman suffered a heart attack.<sup>45</sup>

A simple memorial service, arranged by his daughters, included readings and remarks by those who had known him best. A canoe paddle, an ax, a beaver trap, and an old felt hat were laid out on the table that served as a podium. Bouquets of flowers from his garden were placed along the paths. Family and friends, including foresters and rangers from both sides of the border, gathered. After devotions, readings, and a eulogy, Bonnie and Holly paddled across the lake and scattered their father's ashes on calm waters.<sup>46</sup>

A few days after the memorial service, the air smelled of woodsmoke once more. Flames rose from Ambrose's cabins as a forest service crew

<sup>44</sup> *Duluth News-Tribune*, Jan. 25, 1981, p. 8C.

<sup>45</sup> *Rochester Post Bulletin*, Sept. 2, 1982, p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> Watson interviews; Justine Kerfoot, "On the Gunflint Trail," *Cook County News-Herald*, Sept. 9, 1982, p. 3; Bonnie Wasmund and Holly Ambrose, "Funeral Service In Memory of Benjamin Quentin Ambrose," Sept. 2, 1982, copy in author's possession.

razed the homestead, burning what they could and removing the remainder, so the site would revert to its natural state. Only the rock foundations and the hewn stone steps remained. The rangers piled a cone-shaped stack of native rock as



a silent tribute to the man who had lived there for more than half a century.<sup>47</sup>

A metal plaque has since been placed against the rock ledge on the Canadian shore. The upper-torso etching by John Beauchard, a Canadian game warden, shows Benny with his confident smile, wearing a plaid shirt open at the throat. Below the etching is his name and the dates of birth and death—with a question mark after the 1896 birthdate. As columnist Ron Seely wrote: "In time the point will be again as Ambrose found it, and the old man will be but a memory, growing fainter with time, just as the laughter of the loon fades almost imperceptibly into silence when dusk turns to night in the North Country."<sup>48</sup>

*Rock memorial, Ottertrack Lake*

<sup>47</sup> Jussila interview.

<sup>48</sup> Wright-Peterson, "Remembering Benny," 23; Ron Seeley, "One Canoe Trip Became a Lifetime," *Canoe Magazine*, Apr. 1984, p. 10.

*The portrait on p. 125 is courtesy Roy Watson; those on p. 126, 130, 131 and 136 are courtesy Bonnie Ambrose Wasmund; the map on p. 127 is by Patti Isaacs, Parrot Graphics; p. 134 is from Earl Seubert; p. 137, Jerry Jussila. All others are in MHS collections.*





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