

## Hans Birkigt and the Old Trading Post

Hans Arno Birkigt was born in Rohrs<sup>sd</sup>orf c/Chemnitz, Saxony Germany on April 30, 1897. As a young man after World War I he saw no future in his homeland. In 1928 Canada was advertising for immigrants, Hans and his friend Walter Bruchhausen decided to come. They left Germany on the Duchess of Bedford and landed in Canada in July. They chose Athabasca because it was advertised as the end of the steel (railroad). When they arrived they went to the immigration hall, it was a place for the new comers to meet their own country men and generally they found a place to stay and work until they got settled. They did farm work, cut fire wood and worked land in the summer. In the winter they worked in tie camps, saw mills and many went trapping down river. Some got homesteads from the Government for \$10.00 this was raw land.

Hans and Walter went down river for the winters to trap. There were other trappers also. Some were living year round down there. Ernst Feureisen, Sam Glew, Karl Kakl, Bill Kasemeyer, Joe Larson, Charley Lender, Fred Meyer, Dick Naumann, Aron Wagner, Amend Wright, John Pederson, August Powder, Paul Chudak, Carl Chudak, Baptiste Villeneuve, Joe Villeneuve, Gus Word, Art Christmas, Paul Wickers, Ernst Harps, Felex Powder, Herman Bieber, Fred Talbert, Cliff Bell, Tuffy Smith, Frank Brunhoffer, Hans Birkigt, Walter Bruchhausen, Ernst Henning, Earl Kay and others. They all trapped along the Athabasca River from Athabasca to House River.

In the late 30's Hans chartered a plane and flew into the Birch Mountains because fur was plentiful. He took all his gear and his dogs with him. While they were flying a bad snow storm hit and the pilot had to land on a small lake. They unloaded the supplies and dogs, the pilot wished him luck and waved good-by. Hans made camp and began to look for his axe. The pilot had hung the axe on the wall in the plane and he was

in such a hurry to get out of the storm he returned to Ft. McMurray without unloading it. Hans had to spend the whole winter without an axe. He shot some caribou, skinned them and laced the sides together to make a long sack or bag. He filled this with spruce boughs and let it freeze. When frozen, he removed the boughs and put his supplies and sleeping bag inside. That was his house for the winter. He cut small trees with his hunting knife and made a long fire in front of the bag. That's how he stayed warm. When the small trees were used up he would move camp. He would drag his tent close to the fire to thaw so he could roll it up and then move on to the next spot with a good supply of small trees where he would set up camp again. This went on all winter. Despite these hardships, trapping was good and in the spring he walked out with his pack dogs loaded with furs. He only took his 22 rifle with him, he left the rest behind because it was too much to carry. He used his 22 to shoot birds to eat and rabbits for the dogs. It took weeks to walk out because the creeks were beginning to flow and the muskegs were getting wet. When he got to McMurray everyone was surprised to see him, without an axe they didn't think he would make it through the cold winter. The pilot had reported what had happened and the rangers and trappers were asked to be on the look-out for him. Hans said it was the toughest winter he had ever spent, but despite the hardships he trapped a good supply of fur.

When Hans quit trapping he started trucking. He trucked gas for the Alaska highway when it was being built and also handled cattle.

In 1945, Abner Hingley, the raw fur buyer in Athabasca, passed away. His employer, S. Slutker (owner of Slutker Fur and Hides in Edmonton) needed a new buyer and asked Hans to take over. Slutker owned river front store property in Athabasca. Hans bought raw furs from this site, and ran a dry goods and trapping supply store. Hans paid the taxes and sold the furs to Slutker. This arrangement worked out very well.

By 1947 the store was doing well. When Hans needed supplies in Edmonton he would get Mike These or Bob Bishoff to watch the store for the day. He soon hired a full time clerk to help him out. His first clerk was a girl from Perryvale who stayed only a short time before moving to Edmonton.

One Sunday, when I was living in Rochester, Hans and Nestor Richel drove up to the family homestead. Although I didn't know him, he introduced himself and explained that he was looking for a clerk in his store. Walter Gerlach, the store keeper in Rochester, had suggested I might be interested. I had just returned home after 4 years in the RCAF and I was looking for employment. I accepted his offer and started work on Tuesday morning.

It was quite an experience, I had never clerked before and I had to get to know the people. I had some experience in fur because I trapped on the farm before joining the Air Force. It didn't take long before I knew my job and was sailing right along.

I really enjoyed to work and before I knew it, Hans and I got married on December 23, 1947. We worked very well together and I soon learned the business. We had two boys, Pat born March 16 1949, and Arno born July 15 1953.

Trappers came from all directions, they travelled by dog sled, pack horses, team and wagon, by boats in the spring and on foot. When they came to sell their furs, no matter the day or the time, we would open up for them. The Trading Post became more than just a store for these people. We stored their personal goods, one trapper kept a suit at the store so he would have something to wear in town, we helped them with their finances, and gave a hand when it was needed. One cold winter morning around 1949 or 1950 we were woken by a loud banging on the door. It was 4:00 and the temperature was 56 below. Hans opened the door to Paul Chudak, he was covered in frost and looked like a snowman.

Paul and Dick Naumann were driving to town on the river in an old Star car. It had no windshield. Paul and Dick had furs and Dick was carrying the mail. They got within 20 miles

of town when the car quit and froze up on them. Dick stayed with the car and goods. Hans drove out and towed the other car back. They didn't get back until around 11 o'clock in the morning. Dick had dish towels tied around his head and face, Paul had a coat over his head and that's how they kept from freezing. That day the fog never lifted and the temperature hardly changed. This is one trip I don't think Paul or Dick ever forgot.

In 1961 Hans had a heart attack and was out of the store for a long time so I had all the work to do. On March 10, 1963 he had another one and passed away. We were living on a farm and running the store at that time. I had to choose between the farm and the store and decided to sell the farm. The boys would be alone on the farm after school so I thought it would be better to keep the store and fur business.

I bought a house in town and all went well. In 1972 Slutker decided to sell the property that housed the store and he gave me the first chance to buy. I bought the property and ran the store until 1977. By then the boys were finished school but didn't want the business, the building needed a face lift and I wanted out. In 1977 after the spring furs were finished I sold the property to Nike<sup>CK</sup> Wintonyk.

These are some of the things I'll always remember about the store:

The store was a place for the men to gather when their wives were shopping. They would come in to look the fur over, buy their tobacco and snuff, and maybe snare wire and shells, sell a few weasel or squirrel pelts they caught around the farm and then set around and told tales. Some of the regulars were C.B. Olsen, Randy Schulte, Herman Bieber, John Babiak, Dan Currie, Ed Staszewski, Art Elliot, George Malofe. These were people I could trust and if I had to go to the bank or get freight from the bus they would watch the store so I didn't have to close up. If no one was around to watch the

store I used a sign, "back in 5 minutes" or "back at 1 o'clock" if I went home for dinner.

At a recent get-together Walter Bulas reminded me of a funny incident. Six or seven men were in the store when a lady customer came in. She asked for a roll of snuff and a pair of wire arm bands, she said she didn't want a bag. She opened the can of snuff on the opener I had beside the door and she filled her lip full. Then she kicked off her shoes pulled up her skirt and pulled on the arm bands to use as garters. You could have heard a pin drop in the store. Everyone was looking at each other and I was looking for a hole to crawl into. She gave us all a big smile and away she went.

Another afternoon a lady came into the store and asked me to phone for a taxi. It was going to be about a 1/2 hour so I gave her a chair and she sat by the window to watch for it. I was busy in the back sacking fur and for some reason I came out and my gosh, she was sitting with a bottle of wine still in the paper bag and drinking right out beside the front window. I nearly had a fit. I told her she could sit and wait but to put the top back on the bottle until she got home. I still have to grin when I think of it.

I enjoyed the Fur and Store very much in the 29 years I worked there. I have many fond memories and people treated me with respect. Through the years I had only one person that made me really angry. It was a fellow who brought in an unskinned beaver and no licence. He came in the store and demanded I buy it. I said no and meant it. He got mad and grabbed me by the arm and said you buy it. I saw red. I just gave him one punch in the ribs and down on the floor he went. Randy Schulte, C.B. Olson and another fellow hurried to the back to see what had happened. Here was so and so on the floor. C.B. grabbed him by the feet and pulled him out into the store from the back room. He got on his feet and said he was going to the police.

A few days later some of his friends came in the store

and told me he was telling everyone "Don't ever put a hand on Mrs Hans (as some people called me). That was the biggest mistake I made". The boys were just grinning from ear to ear.

To this day when I meet the fellows on the street they always speak and remind me of how I helped them out when they were going to the bush to work or going to the trap lines.

Edward House gave me his Aunt's (Mrs. Logan's) bible when she died. I did a lot of things for her and they said they wanted me to have it. I was very touched.

Hans was a member of Elks, Chamber of Commerce, Fish and Game and also a share holder in the curling rink even though he didn't curl. In 1968 Fish and Game started a trophy night. Randy Schulte was in charge and he asked if I would sponsor a moose trophy in memory of Hans. This year, 1995, will be the 50th anniversary of Fish and Game and the 27th year I will sponsor a the Hans Birkigt memorial trophy. Of the original 5 sponsors, I am the only one to continue.

may, 1995

## THE FUR TRADE

Around 1884 or 1889 the Hudson Bay Company started a Trading Post at the Landing (Athabasca). In the winter many of homesteaders, Indians, Metis, trackers and riverboat men trapped and sold their furs to supplement their income. Each one had their own territory, fur was plentiful so there was no problem. Later on the Government started registered trap lines. They were about twenty miles long and each trapper had his own territory. This was on crown land and they made agreements not to cross on to other peoples line. The homesteaders always trapped on there own land. Later on the Government made blocks or areas around the existing trap lines and each trapper was given a licence number that stayed the same every year. They used dog teams, pack dogs, horses and went on foot to tend their trap line.

The fur buisness covered a very large area. The trappers came in from all over; Smith, Hondo, Slave Lake, Wabasca, Calling Lake, Pelican, Boyle, Perryvale, Rochester, Meanook, Colinton, Grosmont, LaLaville, Baptist Lake, Wandering River, Faust, Clyde, Newbrook and many other small towns.

The main catch would be: mink, squirrels, coyotes, timber wolves, weasels, red fox, silver fox, cross fox, lynx, muskrats, beaver, and skunk. Mink ranching was a big buisness and food was plentiful for the mink. Every lake had mink ranchers because fish was an important food for the mink. Later when farmers got tractors, the mink were fed horse meat. Some of the mink and fox ranchers were George Meyer, Bob Crawford, George Crawford, Henry Boehlke, Lloyd Stark, Ambrose Hill, George Roe, Gunner Petterson, Euan Barillot, Lloyd Crawford, Martin Vanness, Ken Sutton, Jim McIntosh.

In the late fifties the bottom dropped out of the ranch fur because they started making artificial fur which was a lot cheaper than the real fur.

