



Filming the **TRAPPERS** of the **FAR NORTH**

HOW A TRAPPING DOCUMENTARY
PRODUCED BY THE
HUDSON BAY COMPANY
WAS BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE

BY SCOT H. DAHMS

In 1919, the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) filmed a documentary in Canada to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the company in 1920. The silent film showed unique footage of the lives of Arctic fur trappers. The film crew crossed Canada capturing extraordinary footage in the most inhospitable conditions imaginable. The film crew lugged their equip-

ment by foot, sled, canoe and icebreaker. At the time, HBC led the international fur trade and owned large parts of Canada.

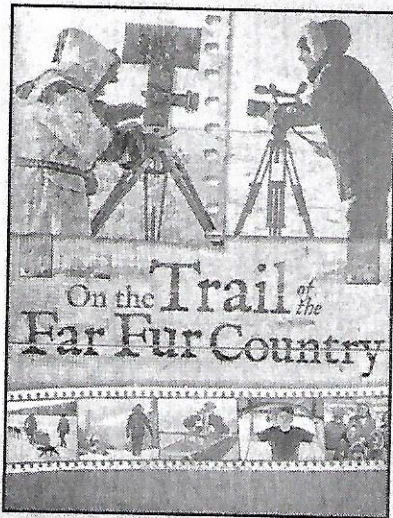
Along with the film, HBC released a written history of the company with a gramophone recording of the history as well. They also commissioned a magazine named "The Beaver" to actively chronicle the company's activities in the north. The

Beaver's name was recently changed to Canada's History. There were also celebrations planned across Canada and London.

In July 1919, the HBC icebreaker RMS Nascopie departed from Montreal toward the Arctic Circle with two cameramen, Harold Wycoff and Bill Dare. HBC had commissioned a New York film company to do the recording. The film crew's directive was to capture the company's workings and commercial land holdings. These holdings once covered one twelfth of the earth's surface. HBC wanted to sell the land and were looking for people to settle on it. The HBC executives said the film should advertise the company and its lands without appearing to do so. HBC also sent the most experienced company men to be the chaperones and escorts for the cameramen.

In northern Alberta, the film crew visited Fort Chipewyan and filmed Aboriginal trappers on the trapline. In this area, the film crew travelled by dogsled over a frozen river. The camera caught a sled tipping with crates of film equipment throw into the snow. On the Abitibi River in northern Ontario, they filmed from ca-





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noes. The film crew ran rapids, portaged hills and camped in the wilderness.

The film was completed in January of 1920 and the film was taken to New York for editing. The film crew captured 75,000 feet of film equivalent to eight hours of viewing time. The first draft was four hours long and was later cut down to two hours.

On May 23, 1920, the two-hour film premiered in Allen Theatre at Winnipeg, which was the company's Canadian headquarters. The Winnipeg audience was a mix of HBC clerks, shoppers and one hundred First Nations people dressed in traditional clothing. The First Nations community interacted with the film calling out "get your gun" or "shoot him" when animals appeared on the screen as they were not familiar with European theater etiquette.

The film was later released across Western Canada and in London. A live orchestra accompanied the film and the theaters were usually filled. One Canadian newspaper said the film showed "Scenes Never Shown Anywhere Before." A British version was screened in London. This version included footage of women wearing expensive furs spliced between scenes of Inuit hunters and fur trade posts.

The film faded from the public view. In 1956, the film, in more than 20 reels,

was given to the National Film Archive in London, England for safekeeping. In the 1980s, a safety print was made but a few people had only watched the footage.

In 2011, the film was transferred to HBC Archives in Winnipeg. In January 2012, footage from the film played in Edmonton. From there, the film was shown in the communities where it was filmed. People recognized their family members, their landscapes and their lost traditions. In 2014, a second film was made called *On the Trail of the Far Fur Country*. This film told the tale of getting the finished film back to these remote locations and the responses that the audiences had to it 95 years later.

I ordered both films and enjoyed them. "The Romance of the Far Fur Country" is a black and white silent film, which was recreated from the actual footage filmed in 1919. "On the Trail of the Far Fur Country" is a documentary including the original footage plus modern footage showing how the communities look today. If you are interested in ordering the films, I recommend watching the Romance first to see what was shown in 1920 and the Trail second to fill in all the background information. If you only order one, I recommend ordering the Trail.



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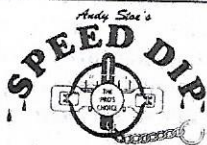
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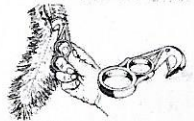
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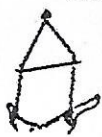
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