

Pickle Lake Odyssey

Winter camping in Ontario and how I lived to tell about it

by Terry Hokenson © 1997

Early one mid-January Saturday morning, with my belly full of eggs and bacon and hot coffee, I drove away from the family farm in central Minnesota and headed for Pickle Lake, Ontario. I didn't expect to get there that day, but I thought I could make it to Dryden or Sioux Lookout, spend the night in a motel, and make it into Pickle Lake about noon Sunday.

Pickle Lake is roughly 250 miles north of Grand Portage, which is at the northeastern tip of Minnesota. That is as the crow flies. And crows are one bird you see even in Pickle Lake. Why Pickle Lake? Because that is as far north as you can drive on a paved road in Ontario. It is very scenic territory. Up to Dryden from International Falls the terrain is especially dramatic, with the road cutting through pre-Cambrian granite at almost every turn--and there are many. The forest is dense and was set off by a thick mantle of snow. There is a lot of black spruce, interspersed with jack pine, aspen and birch.

North from Sioux Lookout the two-lane road was completely covered with a layer of packed snow and eventually the tightening curves slowed me down to a cruising speed of 45 mph.



An open creek at the edge of town.

I pulled into Pickle Lake about 1:00 p.m. on Sunday. I stopped at a small store and gas station called the Norwin, ate a sandwich, and checked into the Pickle Lake Hotel across the street.

The people I met were very friendly and helpful, and soon I had a number of possibilities to explore for my camping trip. I checked out one of the "winter roads" and saw a beautiful fast-flowing open creek just outside of town. Winter roads are roads built across frozen bogs, lakes and land where none exist in warm weather. They are made of compacted snow and ice using heavy equipment and water tankers. Some 2400 miles of winter roads are built each winter, connecting isolated Indian villages scattered across the vast, roadless reaches of northern Ontario.

I decided to go out to a closed copper mine about eight miles out of town where I was told to ask for "Cowboy." Cowboy showed me where I could park my car and how to find the road that followed the "hydro line" (powerline) out to Lake Kapkichi. I loaded my toboggan, cinched on my snowshoes, hitched myself up and





I drove out to the Umax mine looking for “Cowboy”.

and set off. The road was unplowed and the snow was deep. Pulling the loaded toboggan, I found the going extremely difficult. I had to rest frequently and soon my back knee tendons were aching from having to lift my feet so high with each step. In addition to the weight of my heavy boots and my snowshoes, snow loaded the snowshoes as well. Once I got onto the straight road following the powerline, I could see to the end of it, where stood a small metal building, but that mile of road soon began to look like infinity.

My snowshoes sank up to 12 inches with each step, and the toboggan then broke its own trail and filled in the snowshoe prints. Still, it was a fine sunny day, 10 to 15 degrees above, and not a bad day for taking it slow! I fell into a rhythm of taking about twenty paces and stopping for a breather, to avoid sweating too much.



The sign says, “Kapkichi Lake” and points to the left.

After I got two-thirds of the way down the road, I came to a creek that crossed it at about a 45 degree angle. It led straight to the lake. The lake looked closer by that route than the end of the road did, so I went down the steep bank. I scared up two grouse on the way. When I reached the edge of the lake, it was three hours later than when I’d started out from the mine.

I’d been advised that I could find a camp site on the southeast side of a nearby peninsula, but as I approached it, I noticed a couple of cabins. I didn’t want to camp near anybody’s cabin, so I decided to head for the island that was dead ahead of me when I was following the creek to the lake. I found that out on the lake, away



The island I wound up camping on lay straight ahead of me as I followed the creek to the lake.

from shore, the wind had packed the snow into a dense crust and my snowshoes didn’t sink more than a couple of inches, making for easy travel.

The surface of the lake was covered with overlapping layers of snow that had blown in from different directions. The latest deposit had come in from the northeast; it partially covered a layer that had come from the north-northwest, and yet other layers were exposed. Each layer had its own wind-sculpted style and variations. I was glad I had a pair of wraparound sunglasses, for the sun was low in the south and the snow glared fiercely.



I explored the east side of the island, looking for a camp site that was open to the southeast sun.

I approached the island's east side and looked for a clearing that was open to the southeast and protected on the north and northwest. Before long I found a good spot and packed a tent site down with my snowshoes. The tent had four slender aluminum poles 10 to 12 feet long that were comprised of a number of segments joined by an elastic cord running through them. These poles were threaded through fabric tubes on the exterior surface of the tent and fixed with hooks attached to the floor of the tent. When installed, the poles bowed in an inverted "U" shape to provide structure, on the order of an umbrella's ribs.

The cord tends to lose its elasticity in the cold and stretch out. I managed to get only two of the poles together; there was too much cord to stuff into the poles on the other two. But two were enough to make the tent stand up, albeit looking a bit deflated. I then set about making a large pile of snow in another clearing nearby that I could later dig out to make a "quinzhee" or snow shelter. By the time I had a big enough pile of snow, it was getting late in the afternoon and time to cook supper before it got dark.

For supper I melted snow in my two-gallon kettle and boiled some frozen venison I'd brought along. After eating that I prepared a freeze-dried minestrone dish for two which was also very tasty and filled me up. I tried digging in

the snowpile, but the snow wasn't set enough yet, so I left that project for the next day. It got dark about 5:30 and I crawled into the tent for the evening. Inside the tent I lighted a candle on the aluminum cookie sheet I had brought along to serve as a cooking surface and for cutting snow blocks. I took off my outer clothes and put on a polyester fleece hooded pullover top and a pair of bottoms I had made from some polyester blanket material. On my feet I wore a pair of thick polypropylene socks and over them a pair of thick knee-high wool socks. This suit inside my mummy bag, which was rated to 20 below zero, kept me comfortable. The temperature overnight was slightly below zero. I tucked a doubled-over layer of felt-like polyester lining material over my mouth and nose to breathe through.

For my first night out in the elements, I slept pretty well, although I woke a few times and needed to stretch a little to warm myself up slightly. Dawn arrived about 7:30 AM, which meant I had slept 12-13 hours! In the morning I fired up the WhisperLite again, melted snow and made hot chocolate, then cooked some granola with dried milk. The WhisperLite burns white gas and was very reliable, which is not surprising, since it was used on the Steger expedition to the North Pole. It will also burn kerosene, unleaded gasoline and aviation fuel.

Tuesday was mild, up to about 10 degrees, but overcast and threatening to snow. Soon it did



Tuesday morning I dug out the quinzhee. There was a twelve inch spruce seedling next to my head.

begin snowing, and didn't stop all day. After breakfast I dug out the quinzhee. There was enough "floor" space to sleep two, which gave room for me and my gear. I was relieved to get that job done, because the quinzhee represented a serious shelter against wind and cold.

In front of the quinzhee I set up a tarp to protect my "kitchen" area, so I could sit, cook and eat out of the falling snow. I had brought along a stout plastic crate which doubled as a cargo container and a camp stool. By noon I had nothing in camp left to do, so I gazed out over the lake through the expanse of falling snow until the snow erased the horizon. I slowly snowshoed out onto the lake, easing my sore knee tendons along. I crossed over nearly to the shore to the east and inspected a cabin from closer up. It appeared no one had been there all winter. Drift against the door, no tracks.



I followed a trail behind one cabin and found it led to another cabin. None of the cabins appeared to be used in the winter. The woods was most beautiful.

I explored the shorelines near the island and marveled at the immense, silent universe of countless driving snowflakes. When I turned to look at the not-far-away island and beheld its dimness, I appreciated the possibility of becoming disoriented in a white-out. All it would take is an unexpected rise in the intensity of what was already going on I headed back directly for camp. My sore legs allowed me a relaxed pace



Through the haze of falling snow, I saw not only an island on a frozen lake, but a refuge in the exhausting whiteness, a shelter in the biting wind, an oasis of time in a howling eternity. A place for a fire.

but I wondered whether the new snow could become so deep that I wouldn't be able to pull my loaded toboggan through it.

I returned to my campsite and set about preparing supper. I had to reinforce the supporting cords for the tarp with branches due to the weight of the snow. That evening I boiled some sausage I'd bought in Browerville, a small town near the farm. Soon after finishing a mug of hot chocolate, it became too dark to see much except the murky gray of the sky in the west.

About 5:45 PM I crawled into the quinzhee. I got into my sleep suit and put on my headlamp, a flashlight with a headband. I had



The sky cleared briefly around sunset Tuesday and produced blue snow under dark blue sky.

rigged up a remote battery pack so that I could keep the batteries warm inside my shirt. I plugged the wires into the headlamp and remembered my wife's laughter at the sight of me wearing this getup. I suppose I did look like a Martian boy scout, but it worked. I wrote in my notebook for a while, then lay in my bag as a candle burned. Since I had draped the fly from the tent over the mouth of the quinzhee to keep warmth in, I worried about the candle depleting the oxygen and after a while blew the candle out.

It was about 6:30 PM, but I was very tired and zipped the mummy bag up around my face. I lay back with my head upon a bag of extra clothes and closed my eyes. The ground under me was perfectly contoured, like a recliner fully extended. It was very quiet and the temperature was mild enough so that I didn't bother to tuck a scarf over my nose and mouth. After a minute I opened my eyes and thought I saw dim blue light. I wondered if something had happened to my eyes; then I pulled an arm out of my bag and I could see my hand! The moonlight was shining through the walls and ceiling of the quinzhee!



I got dressed and emerged from the quinzhee into a very cold, bright morning. My thermometer read 20 below zero. I walked to the edge of the lake and saw considerably deeper drifts upon the lake. After breakfast I snowshoed around the island and worried about whether, if it snowed again, I would be able to get the loaded toboggan back to the car. I also had a possible free airplane ride if I got back early enough on Friday, so I'd probably have to leave the next day, Thursday, anyway, to be sure of catching the ride.

I also had to admit that I missed having a companion to share all this with. Would an extra day add enough to my experience to make the risk of more snow or severely colder temperatures



Sparkling new snow was drifted upon the lake.

The blue light was dreamily comforting, and I slept soundly until I awoke to daylight shining through the nylon tarp at the mouth of the quinzhee. It was 7:30 AM. I had slept about 13 hours. It was around 30E in the snow cave.



A side view of the snow cave. I had to let the pile sit over night before I was able to dig it out.

worthwhile? By 10:00 AM I persuaded myself that it would be wise to leave now. I had learned that I was not quite well enough prepared, especially physically, to launch myself alone into a harsh winter wilderness and fully enjoy it. I certainly had enjoyed a great deal of it, but there had been some disappointments too.

As I headed back across the lake toward the road with my toboggan in tow, the temperature had risen to 14 below zero and I was hiking into a goodly breeze. I tucked one of my doubled-over face liners into my hood so that only my eyes were exposed. When I reached the road I found a much bigger drift along the bank and had to shovel a passageway through it to get the toboggan up on it.



Leaving the island.

While I was never in danger of frostbite on my trek out, I did have occasion to think of the value of having a “tunnel” parka hood of the type rimmed with wolverine fur. The wind was probably no more than 15 mph, but at 14 below zero, it made for quite a windchill. When I learned while eating breakfast the next morning in the hotel dining room that the temperature had fallen to 36 below, I figured with any wind at all, I would have had to wrap myself with the tent fly to protect my face on the way out.



A self portrait taken after reaching the mine.

It took me about 3 1/2 hours to reach my car. I found it almost buried in a drift. But I dug one side out, cramped the wheels over, and drove it away. I certainly hadn't reached my goal of staying out four days and nights, but I had learned a lot. I knew what I had to do next time, and I hoped I would have a partner along. Other than a few brief chills the first night, I was never in misery from cold.

I will not soon forget the rare beauty of the snow-covered black spruce wilderness, the intricate wind-etchings in the crust on the frozen lake, the startling hues of the snowscape at sunset, nor the eerie blue glow above me as I settled into my sleeping bag in the snow cave on a moonlit night.



My car was safe and sound.