

Chapter 1 of: An Indispensable Mountie

Adventures of the First Woman Mountie

Book 6

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Print ISBN: 978-1-7772424-2-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-7772424-3-5

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CHAPTER 1. THE MAD TRAPPER

December 27, 1931

A cabin on the Rat River,
60 miles south of Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Canada

The stranger didn't know it yet, but he only had 21 more days to live. People actually called him 'the stranger,' as he tended to keep to himself and only spoke to people when necessary and, even then, in the fewest number of words possible and never providing an opening for more general, let alone interesting, conversation.

He had a real name, of course, but he'd previously gone by a different name in the Yukon, and possibly under yet another name before that, in the United States. In any case, no one was ever to be entirely certain of his real name

Later, he would become known in the media as 'The Mad Trapper of Rat River,' but not yet. And he almost certainly wasn't crazy, either, at least not according to those who later closely examined his behaviour¹.

His true origins were another mystery. Certainly, he had moved around different parts of the United States and Canada in his time. He was first seen in July, when he'd come to Fort McPherson to buy supplies. As the summer turned to fall, he'd show up here and there, asking directions from a roving hunting party, or to buy supplies from a trading post, but still speaking only in short sentences and always directly to the point. The trading posts were content with him because he always seemed to have enough money for whatever he wanted to buy.

In this particular time and place, he was making his living as a hunter and trapper, and these activities had him ranging across more than three thousand square miles, bounded to the west by the Richardson Mountains that separated the Yukon from the Northwest Territories, to the north by Aklavik and Inuvik, to the south by Fort McPherson, and as far east into The Barrens as he cared to travel.

This area was rich in animals he could hunt, like caribou, and fur-bearing animals he could trap, like wolverine and lynx. Among the challenges, however, were the distances involved. As he identified the best places to set his trap lines, he found that, to manage them, he had to rotate among locations that were as much as 60 miles apart from each other: a long way to walk or snowshoe!

The stranger's solution to this problem, was to establish caches and camps at various locations. Whereas an open camp need not be hidden, his caches had to be carefully concealed so that he could store supplies, and even money, without risking their being stolen.

¹ According to the official 1933 RCMP report, there was a man in the area who went by the name of Albert Johnson (although his real name was unknown). However, the RCMP discerned no evidence of insanity and, to contrary, found him to be "an extremely shrewd and resolute man, capable of quick thought and action. A tough and desperate character." See: "The Case of 'Albert Johnson'" in *Report of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for the Year Ended September 30, 1932*, Dominion of Canada, Ottawa, 1933.

In that way, he could lighten the weight of his pack which made the walking easier and left him with the ability to carry such pelts as he was able to obtain from his traplines. In one location, he had followed a wolf family's tracks to their den, which was a spacious cave in a rocky outcrop. He had shot the wolves, so he could sell the pelts, and taken over their den as one of his caches. He had just finished outfitting the last of his network of caches and had returned to his cabin on the Rat River.

People wondered not only who the stranger was, but where he was from, and what had brought him to the region. Naturally, there were rumours. Some people thought he must be on the run from the law back in the United States, although there was never any evidence to support such a view. Others thought he must have killed someone in a duel, while still others thought he'd simply come north to get away from people, and their society, and their conventions. He wouldn't have been the first person to come to far north to get away from 'civilization' and/or the 'law.' People's speculation may have been simply a way of explaining the stranger's aloofness and reticence, but they would have been fueled if anyone had occasion to examine the cabin that he'd constructed.

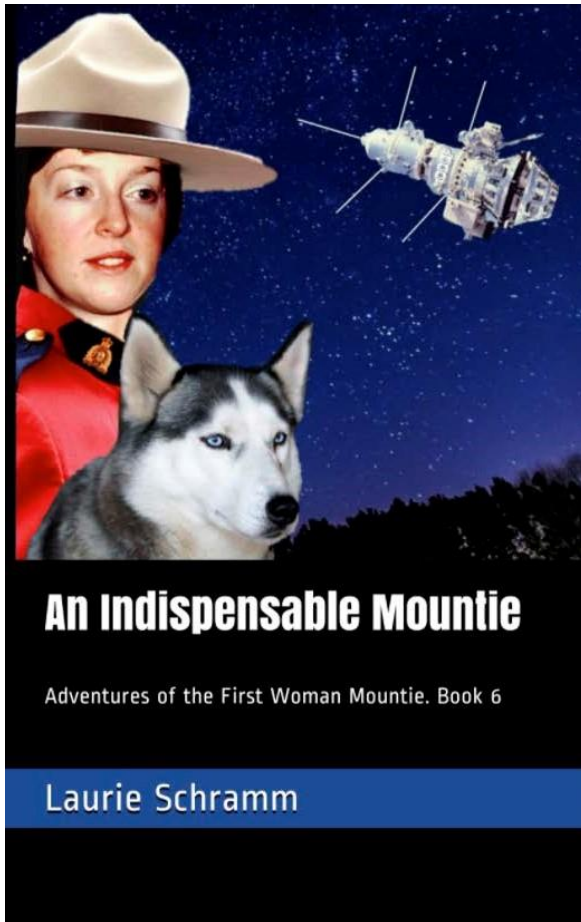
It was not a large cabin, perhaps eight by twelve feet on the inside and constructed of 12-inch-diameter logs. That was not unusual. The doorway was only about three feet above ground level, which wasn't all that unusual for a log cabin, because it was easier to excavate some of the soil, and lower the floor on the inside, than it was to build extra layers of logs.

What was unusual, was that the walls were reinforced with extra logs and sod to a height of 20 inches above the ground, all the way around the cabin. The reason for this became clear upon entering. Only then could a person see that the floor had been dug more than three feet below ground level, and also that holes had been bored just above the lowest level of logs, and spaced at intervals around the entire perimeter. In other words, the stranger had constructed a fortified bunker with rifle-ports. That was certainly unusual!

What was he afraid of? That someone might come after him? And why? The answers remain elusive to the present day.

It has already been pointed that the stranger did not interact smoothly or constructively with others. Only the previous week he had been engaged in a heated argument with several other local trappers, over the placement of traps. Tensions had risen, and the other trappers, possibly based on nothing more than suspicion, had accused him of interfering with their trap lines. Only words had been exchanged, however, and nothing had been resolved, with the stranger walking away muttering about individual rights and the other trappers muttering about going to the police. In fact, the others trappers did go to the police.

The Mounties arrived at the stranger's cabin the next day.



RCMP Constable Alexandra Houston's adventures continue in: ***An Indispensable Mountie. Adventures of the First Woman Mountie Book 6***, by Laurie Schramm, 2021.

Available on all Amazon websites worldwide,

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