

Escape from Death on Superior Ice Recalled by Charlie Davieaux, 85

By HEC

Rip Van Winkle slept on a mountain for 20 years but Charlie Davieaux lived on Michipicoten Island for 52 years and he wasn't sleeping which, in our estimation is a greater feat than that of the legendary Van Winkle.

Charlie recently celebrated his 85th birthday at his home on Algoma Avenue, and sat smoking his pipe while reliving many of the adventures of the early days in Algoma and the hair-breadth escapes from death that were a regular part of life on the island before the turn of the century.

An hour's chat with this hardy old pioneer is actually a journey into the past, a past filled with everything that makes a good story, colorful adventure, tales of incredible hardships and of the untold mineral wealth of the Lake Superior country.

Took Over Mail Run

When Charlie was 17, he went along with his father, Hyacinthe Davieaux, to Michipicoten Island to take over the three lights and the job of transporting the mail to and from the mainland. Michipicoten Island was then a bustling mining community. In 1881 the Native Copper Company was working the copper mines and had built a score of large buildings to house the miners and their stores and equipment. There was a general store, a dance hall and a completely stocked and well-operated farm replete with horses, cattle, pigs and several kinds of fowl. The community then boasted some 700 souls who enjoyed, as Charlie says, "plenty to eat and wear and plenty of wet goods."

Mail was brought in by the company tug up until the freeze up, after which it was hauled by sled and men across the 50 miles of ice separating the island from a Hudson's Bay trading post on the mainland at Michipicoten Harbour. There was considerable risk involved in these trips over the ice, especially just before the break up in the Spring when the ice was too heavy to permit the use of a boat and too thin for safety with a sled. On one of these late winter trips, the trio, Charlie, his father and one Ned Revier, started death in the face more than once during the jour-

The ice was bad in more ways than one the day they left. A horse sleigh was used to carry their boat, hand sled and other equipment to the edge of the solid shore ice from where they were to proceed on foot and by boat. At this point they made camp and remained for six days waiting for the thin rotten ice to break up. On the sixth day there was clear water for as far as they could see out, on a "u" shaped channel extending in the direction of the north shore. The boat was loaded and put in the water and the trio started out, glad to be on their way after six days in camp. The open water got narrower and narrower as they went out till finally they found themselves trapped in the narrow end of the "u" channel by fields of thickly packed ice cakes. The seriousness of their predicament became more apparent when they discovered that the loose ice had drifted in behind them cutting off any retreat to the rear. A drowning man will grasp at a straw and that, in a way, is what the three trapped men did.

Reach Large Iceberg

About a mile to the west of them was a large iceberg. It was decided to try to move the boat through the ice fields to this berg by using pike poles to push their way along. With the aid of the poles, pushing, pulling and rocking the boat sideways, they managed to reach the iceberg. Charlie says the three of them were almost too exhausted to climb on to it when they got there and their hands, numb with cold, were bleeding from the broken skin on their knuckles which had taken a beating between the pike poles and the sides of the boat. The boat was pulled up onto a low part of the berg and a quick survey of their position showed they were drifting towards Gargantuan. No man could live for many hours on this "raft" of ice, floating through ice fields that stretched away on all sides as far as the eye could see. There had been many a narrow escape for these men in the past and they had learned to take danger as a part of their job, but this time it seemed as though there was no escape. Shivering there on the drifting iceberg, the three pondered their fate and Charlie thought briefly of his young and beautiful wife and a year-old son back home.

From time to time Charlie climbed to the top of the berg to search the frozen water for a sign of open water. The wind blew half a gale and it was cold. It was late in the afternoon when he went up for a last look before darkness closed in and spotted good open water about a mile away. Charlie scurried down to tell the news to the others but his father insisted they could not make it through the ice cakes to the open water and said they would stay on the berg.

"Well, die here before daylight," Charlie said, "so I'm going to take a chance. If the boat is punctured and sinks in the ice fields it will be quicker than freezing here on this berg."

Cheer Death - First Round

The logic of Charlie's argument finally won out and they again put out through the menacing ice to "pike pole" their way to that open water. They made the open water and found clear sailing from there to the north shore. Death had been cheated in the first round but he was not through with them yet.

The grateful men dragged their boat ashore at a place called Red Snider Creek. The next day Charlie and his father left Ned and his dog in camp and walked to the post at Michipicoten River for the mail. They were delayed there several days due to bad weather and on their return four days later found Ned and the dog watching with apprehension the approach of another storm. That night the wind howled incessantly, driving a cold rain that turned to snow. They awoke in the morning to find four inches of snow on their blankets and their boat gone. The water had risen in the night and taken it out to sea. The storm howled out its fury for the next six days and during that time the three men and the dog lived on a small piece of bannock and water. All their grub, the gun and shells had gone out with the boat. The threat of drowning or freezing on the iceberg had now been replaced with what looked like almost certain starvation.

The senior Davieaux then recalled having left a birch bark canoe in the bush nearby on a previous trip and this dubious craft was dragged from its hiding place to be gummed and made fit for a trip along the open water of the shore. The only excitement during this part of the adventure was when Ned's dog was almost drowned. They finally made ashore at "No Boat Landing", from where they set out on foot to Dog River. They arrived at the "Dog" with nothing but their blankets and the clothes they had on and on the verge of collapse from starvation.

Here they were met by Captain Malcolm Patterson and Dave Kelly who looked after them till ice conditions permitted their starting back to the island several days later. When they arrived home they were given a royal welcome by their relatives and friends who had given them up for lost. They had been gone six weeks.

Charlie Davieaux has had many like experiences in his long and colorful career.

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