

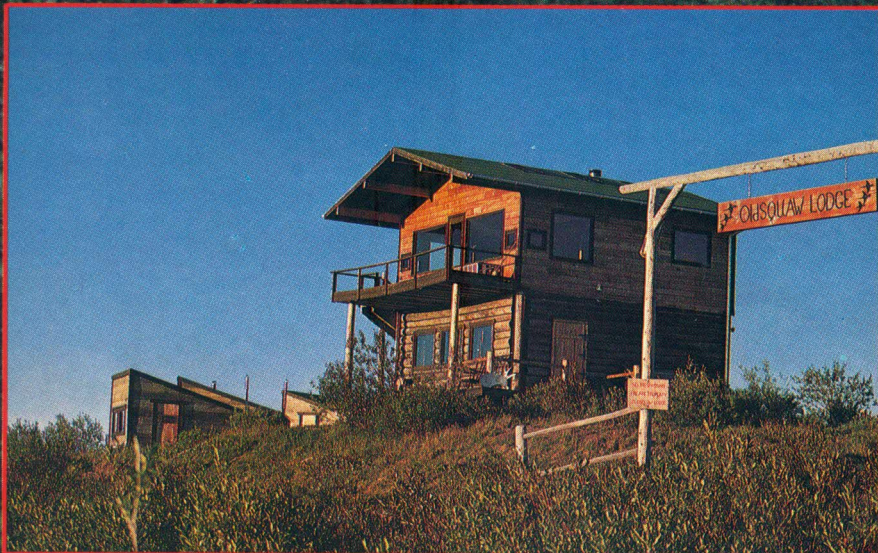
Beyond The Yukon

Where The Road Ends, The Adventure Begins

Just getting to the start was a three-day ordeal, but an unforgettable ride in unspoiled wilderness was the payoff.

By Charles R. Kelly

Want to get away from it all? Canada's Northwest Territories are about as far away as you can get, and still will be when Alaska and the Amazon have both turned into suburbia. The adventure starts where the road ends, at Oldsquaw Lodge (inset).





Bears. Grizzly bears. Every time newcomers to the North draw up chairs in a circle with the people who live there, the subject comes up, usually first. Everyone has a tale or two of harrowing escapes, but statistics of bear attacks in Canada's Northwest Territories show that either the stories are exaggerated or the bears aren't very determined: there have been only three maulings in the last 20 years in this huge expanse of wilderness. In fact, moose are probably as dangerous, but who tells moose escape stories? So bears were uppermost in our minds as we set out to mountain bike across one of the most remote parcels of land in North America.

The Canol Road was built in 1943/44 as an emergency oil pipeline route from the source at Norman Wells to the refinery at Whitehorse, 600 miles away, to supply fuel for the possible defense of Alaska. By the time it was finished, hailed by its builders as one of the great engineering triumphs of the century, it was no longer necessary, and the \$134 million project was completely abandoned only a few months after the first barrel of oil was pumped along the 4-inch diameter pipeline.

From the western terminus at Whitehorse northeast to the border of the Northwest Territories, about 400 miles of the road are still in service, although the further out one gets, the rougher the road. The last inhabited place that can be reached by vehicle is Oldsquaw Lodge about 12 miles past the Yukon/N.W.T. border and only 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle. This final 12 miles took an hour of four-wheel-drive, as our host Sam Miller eased his vehicle through streams and around the ruins of bridges long collapsed. From here to Norman Wells the road has fallen into such disrepair that it is impossible to truck traffic, but perfect for mountain biking.

Miller and his partner Nancy Eagleson, both biologists, spend the few temperate months of the arctic year at Oldsquaw, which has room for 10 guests. In June and July, their visitors are bird experts and botanists, both amateur and professional, who make the long trip up here to observe arctic flora and fauna from this unique window on the tundra.

By August the wildflowers are past their glory and the birds have moulted from their brilliant mating plumage. Two years ago, when Miller and his friend Tony Carson heard about mountain bikes, they wondered if cycling on the Canol might not be another way for people to see the breathtaking scenery and the wildlife of this true wilderness area during the few weeks of (relatively) good weather in this month.

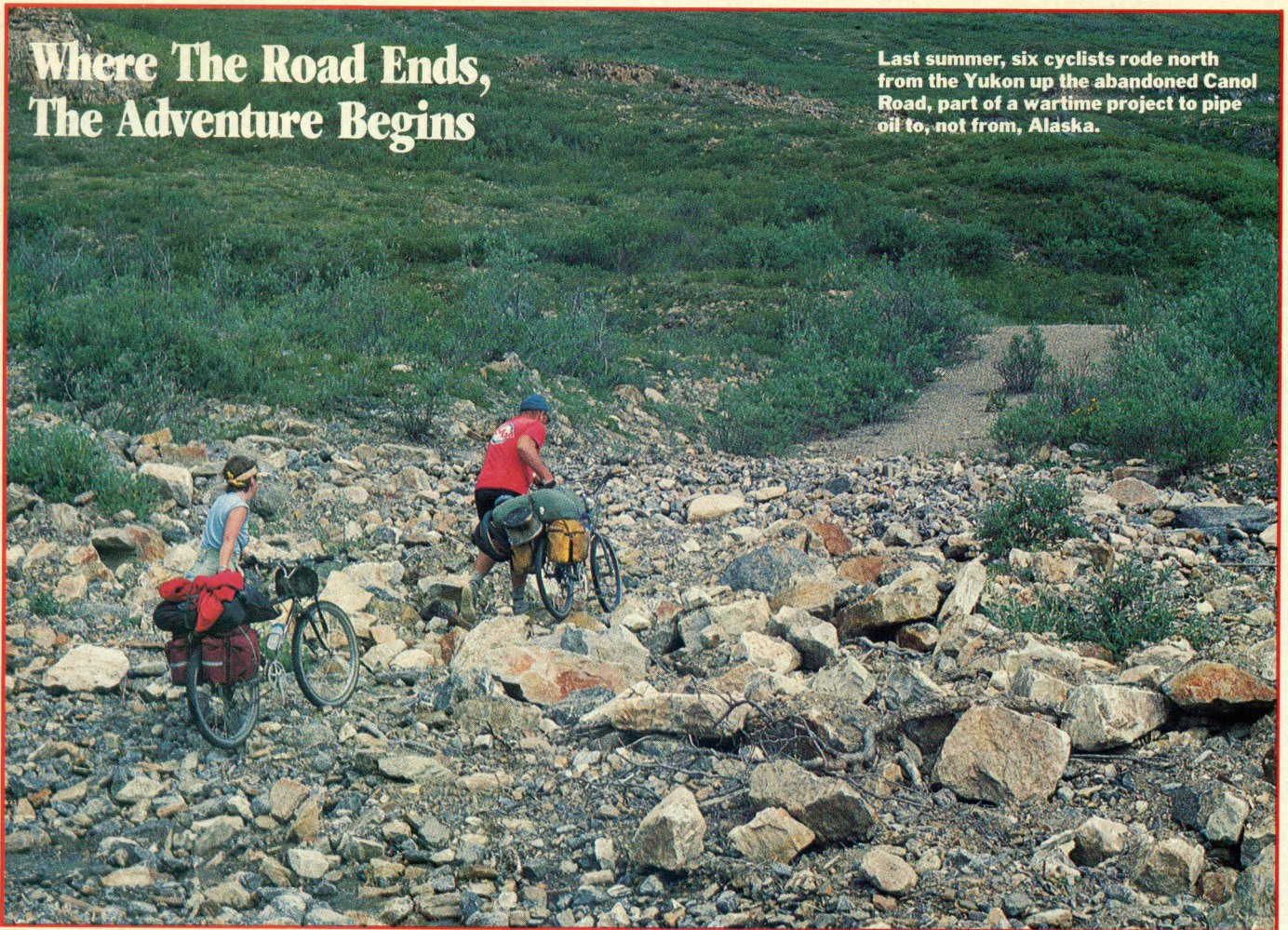
Accordingly, in August 1985 six riders, three men and three women assembled to take on the Canol, two of us from California, one from Seattle, two Canadians including Carson, and our guide, Nancy Eagleson. Just getting to Oldsquaw from California was quite an experience—two days of plane flights and another entire day in Sam's truck driving from Whitehorse.

We cycled out of Oldsquaw under perfect blue skies, a good omen in these mountains, which can change from days like this to blizzards in a matter of hours, even in summer. Loaded down as we were with touring gear, our first day's goal was Caribou Pass, about 25 miles away. The road was still passable to four-wheel-drive or motorcycle for a mile or so past the lodge, but then we came to a washout that was the end of travel for anyone who couldn't carry his vehicle. From here on, our ride was frequently halted as we struggled over washouts and through rivers without bridges.

In this otherwise pristine wilderness the signs of man are occasionally jarring. There is the road, of course, but after four decades it is no more than a game trail in places. Now and then we came upon the remains of the camps occupied by the builders of the road, and here we found old trucks and buildings, long since

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Last summer, six cyclists rode north from the Yukon up the abandoned Canol Road, part of a wartime project to pipe oil to, not from, Alaska.



stripped of anything useful, but otherwise preserved by the climate. Rusted oil drums sit in 40-year-old stacks, and the unhealed scars of the shallow quarries that supplied the gravel road surface testify to the length of time it takes for the tundra to regenerate.

The former presence of man here is overshadowed by the current presence of nature. All the animals use the road surface as a convenient game trail since the gravel surface is considerably firmer than the muskeg on both sides, and almost before we were out of sight of the lodge we started seeing tracks and what the locals politely and euphemistically refer to as "sign" of grizzly bear, wolf, moose, and caribou. Ptarmigan, already partly moulted in winter white on the bottom half only, ran along the sides of the road ahead of us before bursting into noisy, buzzing flight. Enormous moose and caribou antlers, which are shed every year, were a common sight on the trail. Nancy pointed out the nest of a pair of Golden Eagles on the side of a cliff, and we could see the scraggly head of their chick peering at us over the rim.

Descending from the lodge to the first of our many river and creek crossings, we encountered another form of local wildlife. Insect enthusiasts might be thrilled to know that as of last count there were about 130 different species of blackflies and mosquitoes in Canada. These bugs are carnivorous and have been known to carry off pets and children under the age of 12.

On our first day of riding we only had to cross one creek, and some of us carefully removed shoes and socks before wading across. This was the last time anyone took such precautions, as in the next few days we were to learn that wet and cold feet are a fact of life in this country. On subsequent crossings we waded inhesitatingly across the rushing, thigh-deep creeks in jeans and

boots, accepting wet gear as part of our dues.

The last thing we expected as we sat eating lunch was the sound of a motor, but it was unmistakable. Presently a tiny motorcycle hove in sight, piled high with camping gear, a folded inflatable raft, a rifle, camera gear, and almost incidentally a rider. His name was Archie Knill, and he had started out from Norman Wells on his trail bike the summer before. He told a harrowing tale of capsizing his raft while crossing a river, nearly losing his camera gear and motorcycle, then dismantling and drying his engine. Caught by snow (in August) before he could complete his trek, he had left his equipment at a hunting camp and flown out the previous summer, returning almost a year later to retrieve it. He also told us of the river crossings we would have to deal with soon. "I had to cross the Ekwi river six times," he reassured us, "But you can carry your bikes, so the only bad one should be the last one, where it's deep. Pretty wide, too." He regaled us with bear-escape stories before leaving.

Even in places where it was possible to ride faster, we kept our pace down to a very reasonable speed. With bear "sign" on the trail every few hundred yards, we didn't care to surprise a grizzly in the low willows that lined the road. "These aren't park bears," Sam had told us, "And they don't associate people with handouts or garbage. Mostly they'll run away from you. But if you come zipping around a corner and run smack into one, or scare a cub when his mama's around, that's trouble." A lot more trouble than scaring the president of the Sierra Club while he's hiking with a Senator.

Accordingly, we whistled and sang as we rode slowly through the willows, giving Mr. or Ms. Bear or even Jr. Bear plenty of time

to amble off the trail.

We spent our first night at a tiny cabin Sam had constructed in a treeless valley, using for his materials the fallen telephone poles and washed-out bridges along the road. (The action of the permafrost layer a foot or so beneath the ground surface pushed most of the poles over only a few years after they were erected.) "Bear boards," planks studded with nails and bolted over the door and window, kept the bruins out between human visits, but one corner of the cabin was scarred where a bear had tried to claw his way in. "They like petroleum products," Sam said. "I guess one of 'em smelled the chainsaw oil in the cabin."

Sam had laboriously hauled in our food and a small supply of firewood a few days before, and a bush pilot delivered supplies to our next planned camp. We ate very well, with Nancy whipping up excellent dinners, and breakfasts of "bannock," a staple of the North. Bannock is flour, water and salt, fried in oil and washed down with "camp coffee," grounds dumped straight into boiling water. There are two schools of thought on drinking such coffee. Some strain out the grounds through teeth or moustache, while others chew them up and call it adventure.

The second day of riding followed the Ekwi river from its origin near Caribou Pass to another of Sam's cabins about 35 miles away. The riding got tougher immediately, and at one point we found ourselves struggling down a canyon where no trace of road existed. Pushing our bikes over watermelon-sized boulders, we made our first couple of deep creek crossings, where we learned something about packing a bike for off-road. Before the ride started there had been some debate as to what kind of panniers to use. Most of the group felt that front bags would be an encumbrance; I was using front and rear "off-road" panniers, but all the others carried their gear in rear panniers only. With all the weight on the rear wheel, the women had a hard time lifting the poorly balanced bikes high enough to keep their gear out of the hip-deep water. So for reasons of efficiency rather than chivalry, each of the men first carried his own bike across, then returned for one of the women's.

At our second campsite we met the fiercest animal of the trip. Our camp was a mile or so from a small dirt airstrip used by a hunting outfitter, and the bush pilot had left our food by the side of the strip. When Nancy went past the outfitter's cabin to retrieve our breakfast, a large hound who had never seen anything as appetizing as a bike blocked her path. Retreating, she convened a group for the effort, and the hound decided that discretion was the better part of valor.

Although there are few people in this neck of the woods, those who are here concentrate their activities around what's left of the Canol. Aside from the man on the minibike, we met the outfitter near our second camp, as well as a German couple who were hiking for a month in the area. But the biggest surprise was a small helicopter setting down about a hundred feet from our camp. The pilot had spotted us, and he and his two companions just dropped in to chat and have some coffee. And when he asked if we wanted a quick ride, we couldn't resist.

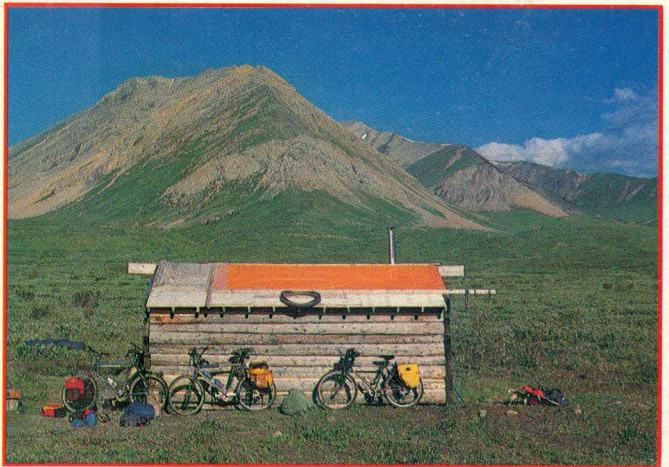
In the Northwest Territories the rules for pilots are loose. We took a ride that would be illegal in most parts of the civilized world; quick, adrenalin pumping flight, missing barren peaks by inches. Looking down we could see the Canol, a well-defined stripe across the muskeg marked by the dense willow growth on both sides. Just as suddenly, we were back in camp saying good-bye. In half an hour the chopper would be at Oldsquaw, two days away by bicycle.

We spent a non-traveling day at camp exploring the area, then turned back on our course. Returning we found the going easier because we were now familiar with the road and could pace ourselves better. As we stopped for lunch beside the Ekwi, we were surprised by a bull caribou running down the streambed perhaps 50 feet away. He was limping, and a large bloody wound on his neck indicated that he had just escaped from a predator, probably a wolf.

Camping again at Caribou Pass, we spent another day exploring the surrounding mountains. From the camp we could see Dall sheep on the high ridges, as well as caribou. Two of our group encountered a grizzly on their hike and ended up taking a much longer route than they had planned in order to avoid him. This caused those at camp a few anxious hours; the reasons for hikers being overdue in this country can be serious.

Through the trip Nancy marveled at the fine weather, saying that it was unusual to have this many nice days together. As we broke camp for the last day's ride back to the lodge, the weather turned more normal, leaden skies and cold wind. This was all the incentive we needed to move along. On warm days wet feet didn't matter, but now the cold wind numbed them. The sauna back at the lodge was a magnet, and by late afternoon we were clean, warm, well fed, and ready to brag. The next day we would spend in Sam's truck as we began our three-day trip back to the more familiar comforts of home. Without bears.

The Canol experience isn't for everyone. It's difficult and expensive to get there, and space is limited because the Oldsquaw Lodge only sleeps 10 guests. But for those with the time, money, perseverance and enough sense of adventure, it is the epitome of true wilderness mountain biking in North America. And there are plenty of bears to go around. ■



The road followed the Ekwi River and crossed it repeatedly, but the bridges are long gone. Yes, it's cold. Above, Sam's cabin at Caribou Pass.