

The Conibear House

by Scot Dahms



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When people hear the term "Conibear," they often think of a bodygrip trap and a man in the remote reaches of Canada developing and perfecting the trap that revolutionized trapping. Frank R. Conibear was the man's name and few people see him outside of this narrow view. One thing that has escaped the history books is that this man was also crucial in the opening of the Canadian Northwest Territories to prospecting and mining exploration.

But how could a trapper in the remoteness of Canada do this? Easily, when he was also a skilled carpenter who had built a boarding house for his new bride and he to run during the summer when the furs were not prime. Although in the remote reaches of Canada, the town where he lived, Fort Smith, was the gateway to the Northwest Territories through which all prospectors and miners must pass.

Fort Smith lacked housing for intermittent and permanent travelers, so Frank built a building with

multiple rooms for rent, a billiards room, and a café. His mother, Ada, was known as "The Grand Lady of the Northwest," and his father, Lewis, was a marine engineer for the many paddle and screw powered boats used as buses on the waterways of the North. Finished roads were a dream in the area in the early 1900s.

Ada and Lewis provided an example to Frank in business operations of the north as they had operated a general store in the north since 1911. They had built such

good relations with the local Native Americans, that their fur was more frequently brought to the Conibears than the Hudson's Bay Company.

The possibility of the Conibear House started in 1923 when Frank travelled to Rochester, Minnesota for treatment of hearing problems. Frank had scarlet fever when he was 3 years old and his ears discharged continually after that. When he was 14, the right ear became very painful and a swelling over the bone behind right ear developed and persisted for about a month. When Frank was 17 years old, a similar condition occurred behind the left ear.

When Frank enlisted in 1918 to support Canada during World War I, he was classified as "very deaf." He was discharged from the possibility of service and then re-enlisted to be part of the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force and trained others on how to manage a dog team and sled.

During the trip to Rochester, Frank met and married Cecelia Powell and returned with her to Fort Smith to continue trapping. The Conibears had acquired property, and on it Frank built the Conibear House, which he and Cecelia operated.

By February 1930, Frank wanted to sell the Conibear House because of health reasons. The Conibear House was three stories including an attic, veranda, and balcony. It included an attached woodshed and detached warehouse built of 9-inch logs. Although he wanted to sell, he continued to accept

it would be catering to the aerial companies only, not the public. Aerial mail service made Fort Smith very accessible.

The Royal Canadian Air Force could be used by the sub-recorder at Coppermine for forwarding applications for claims to Fort Smith with as little delay as possible. The convenience to the public of having up to date information at Fort Smith would be considerable, the delay caused by having to communicate with Ottawa and the expense being considerable.

By April 1930, an agreement had been reached for rental of the buildings for a year. The head mining engineer thought the price was too high, but there were few buildings in Fort Smith from which to choose.

This again seemed to be perfect timing as the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company indicated they were going to be operating in the far north that year. The company had just freighted supplies into Dismal Lake and they were going to operate from that base during the summer. The company had just purchased two new airplanes especially for working in that area. Dominion Explorers had established a base at Hunter's Bay on Great Slave Lake and had a party of men and three planes waiting there.

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ular building is the only one available. It just meets our requirements and in view of the considerable activities now commencing, it was necessary to come to an immediate decision or we would have been forced to build a house.

An article was written about the new office titled "Interior Department Opens New Mine Office at Fort Smith: Three Men to be in Charge in Far North."

Realizing the tremendous interest developed in prospecting and mining exploration in the Northwest Territories, and the necessity of providing every assistance possible to foster development work, the Honorable Charles Stewart, Minister of the Department of the Interior, has decided to have Mr. C.C. Ross, Supervisory Mining Engineer, open an office at Fort Smith.

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Frank wanting to sell at this time was perfectly timed as Fort Smith was the logical place for the head office of the supervisory mining engineer in dealing with mineral claims in the Northwest Territories lying in that area north of latitude 60. Fort Smith was on the direct route into this area for all prospectors, aerial and otherwise. If the head office were at Ottawa,

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The great development in prospecting in the Northwest Territories to which Fort Smith is the natural base has made it necessary that the Department open an office there to occupy the same position in regard to the mining operations as that at The Pas does to the work in northern Manitoba.

Fort Smith does not have many available structures and it so happens that this partic-

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The establishment of this office in the Northwest Territories will render material aid to both the individual prospectors and the exploration companies which are operating in that district. The opening of the Coppermine River reserve on July 1 of this year is causing several large exploration companies to carry on exploration work in the Coppermine River area.

The large important lead-zinc property at Pine Point, Great Slave Lake; the copper deposits

at Hunters Bay, Great Bear Lake; and the discoveries on the Nahanni River, are additional areas in which important mineral discoveries have been made and which are due for considerable attention this coming season.

In 1934, the Department of the Interior was looking for a location to place a Medical Health Officer to support their operations in the area and again, the Conibear House came into the conversation. To do this though, the building needed

to be electrified to meet the needs of the medical officer. This mostly revolved about having good quality lighting and heating to make sure medical supplies did not freeze.

Frank made several upgrades to the structure to host medical examinations in individual rooms along with a large waiting room with a separate entrance, office, and dispensing room. Doctor Morrow was the first to take up residency in the Conibear House. Frank's price had now dropped to \$4,000. Doctor J.A. Urquhart would take over for Doctor Morrow.

On August 14, 1940, an agreement for the sale of the Conibear house was registered in Fort Smith. The agreement was with Stephen Yanik, Junior, of Goldfields, Saskatchewan, for \$2,800. Yanik did not make his payments so the property reverted to Frank. Frank then sold the property to the Northern Transportation Company on May 26, 1942.

In September, 1942, the Conibear House was rented for use as the liquor store at Fort Smith and to provide accommodation for the liquor vendor during the winter. Considerable improvements were made to convert it into a suitable premises for a liquor store. Those included alterations inside and protective arrangements on the windows and doors.

It seems the final sale was again at the exactly right time. For years, Frank had been troubled

with severe pains in his back. In November 1942, he was on the Barrens when one of the back attacks came. Had the attack been a little more severe, or had he been in a different place, it might have been his finish. Fortunately, he was at his main cabin where all his supplies were. He did not recover completely that winter, and the journey back seemed to bring the trouble to a head. So, in April 1943, Frank went to the Mayo Clinic where he had a disk removed from his spine, and the vertebrae spliced with a bone from his leg. From then on, Frank's main residence was at Victoria, British Columbia. Besides his health, his other concern was the education of his children and again the timing was perfect to ensure this.

The time spent in Victoria allowed Frank to develop and test his Conibear trap to perfection. His first patent was awarded in 1937 and his second, and most important, was awarded in 1961. He would have at least 16 patents and he sold the rights to reproduce his patented trap to the Animal Trap Company of America.

Life is based a lot on timing and Frank seemed to benefit most from this. You could say that his scarlet fever at a young age set the revolution in motion and that the timing put everything in place for it to happen.

Scot Dahms is a trapping historian from Wilmington, Ohio.

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