


# A MYSTERY WRAPPED IN A PARKA

The Great Canadian Saga of  
the Mad Trapper of Rat River

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**D**y February 1932, the man the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the world's newspapers referred to as the "Mad Trapper of Rat River" had successfully evaded pursuit for over a month and a half. He had covered 240 kilometres of rugged wilderness on foot, with few provisions, in temperatures reaching below  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$  and virtually impossible conditions. The initial charge against him was trivial; yet, he had left one Mountie dead and two others wounded in his wake. And then, at a bend in the Yukon's Eagle River, it appeared the largest and longest manhunt in Canadian history was coming to an end.

In 1927, there were reports of a man identifying himself as Arthur Nelson or Albert Johnson showing up in Ross River, Yukon. However, the true odyssey of the Mad Trapper of Rat River began in July 1931, when a stranger arrived in Fort McPherson, N.W.T., on a three-log raft. His arrival did not go unnoticed. RCMP Const. Edgar "Spike" Millen, who was stationed 46-kilometres west at Arctic Red River, was ordered to observe the newcomer and conduct a standard interview to establish a reason for his presence and ensure he was equipped to live in the unforgiving northern environment.

The stranger, who appeared to be in his mid-30s, gave his name as Albert Johnson. He was clean-shaven, stood 5'9" with a slight build, and was tight-lipped. When he spoke at all, he did so with a Scandinavian accent and inquired about the best places in the area to trap.

Eventually, Johnson built a remote one-room log cabin near Rat River, north of Fort McPherson, and began trapping even though he did not obtain the mandatory licence to do so. In late December, Aboriginal trappers reported to the RCMP that someone was interfering with their traplines. Suspicion fell on the reclusive newcomer, and Millen ordered Const. Alfred King and Special Const. Joe Bernard from the Aklavik detachment (a small hamlet in the north-western corner of the Northwest Territories) to look into the matter.

To reach Johnson's cabin, the constables travelled nearly 100 kilometres by dogsled in temperatures well below zero. When they

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arrived on Dec. 26, they stood outside the cabin for an hour knocking on Johnson's door.

The complaint against him was not a serious one, and—as one chronicler stated—could have easily been resolved over a cup of tea. Yet, inexplicably, Johnson refused to let the constables in, which was a serious breach of protocol, especially in brutal winter conditions. Frustrated, King and Bernard returned to Aklavik and reported the event to their superior, Inspector Alexander Eames, and obtained a search warrant.

On Dec. 31, accompanied by two other officers, King and Bernard approached Johnson's cabin once again. This time, the trapper responded with gunfire, seriously wounding King. The other three officers swiftly put King on one of the sleds and raced their exhausted dogs back to Aklavik. Their speed saved the constable's life.

The reclusive Johnson had graduated from the negligible charge of tampering with traps to shooting a Mountie, and a new warrant charged him with attempted murder. This time, a posse of trappers and Mounties, led by Eames and Millen, made the difficult trip back to Johnson's cabin, and, to their surprise, he was still inside.

Johnson opened fire again and an uneven battle ensued in which nine well-armed officers fired repeatedly, but with no effect. Johnson had excavated a pit in his cabin floor, reinforced the roof with packed earth, ringed the lower walls with a double row of logs, and cut several narrow gun ports around the room. He had presumably used the time between police visits to convert his small cabin into a fortress.

Finally, the manhunters resorted to lighting and throwing sticks of dynamite. Although the cold had rendered many of the sticks useless, one of the charges blew the roof off the cabin, while others collapsed the walls. Inside the wreckage, Johnson remained unhurt and kept up the steady gunfire at his attackers.

The officers were in an increasingly precarious position. Aside from the terrible toll the weather was taking on them, the posse was not prepared for a lengthy siege. And worse, their sled dogs were rapidly running out of food. After a fruitless 15 hours, Eames ordered their return to Aklavik. According to some accounts, Johnson's wild laughter followed them as they withdrew.



## WHAT WOULD DRIVE SOMEONE TO RISK DEATH IN ONE OF THE WORLD'S HARSHTEST CLIMATES?

Word of the siege soon spread as far as New York and London, as newspapers and radio stations picked up the story of the silent, mysterious loner who repelled the group of seasoned woodsmen and officers. Meanwhile, Eames prepared another pursuit on Jan. 14, but Johnson had already fled the cabin ruins by the time the group arrived.

The authorities couldn't find any formal documentation on anyone named Albert Johnson, which inspired wild rumours about the man's identity. What would drive someone to risk death in one of the world's harshest climates? Some speculated he was a Chicago gangster on the run for a killing, while other accounts portrayed him as a North Dakota bank robber, a British Columbian outlaw, and a Russian spy. Soon, the thrill-driven media were referring to him as the Mad Trapper of Rat River.

His pursuers saw him as a clever and deadly foe—and, indeed, his wilderness skills were formidable: crossing creeks only on glassy ice and walking on packed snow to avoid leaving signs; camping in remote stands of timber; backtracking and mixing the police tracks with his own. He avoided detection for weeks. Since the sound of a gunshot would alert his pursuers, he trapped small animals for food and cooked them over small fires to avoid giving away his position.

Then, on Jan. 30, 1932, Millen and three other men found Johnson's camp. A gunfight ensued, and after two hours, Johnson's rifle found its mark, leaving a bullet in Millen's heart. The Mad Trapper of Rat River was now a murderer.

For the second time, Eames led his men back to Aklavik, this time bearing the body of their slain comrade. At the beginning of February, when they departed on another search for Johnson, the party of officers, soldiers, and trappers had increased to nearly 50 men. This time they employed an aircraft, piloted by famed First World War ace Wilfrid Reid "Wop" May. It was the first time in Canadian history that two-way radios and aerial surveillance were used in a manhunt. May's primary mandate, however, was to ensure that both men and dogs were regularly supplied with food and provisions, thereby enabling them to extend their pursuit indefinitely.

After killing Millen, Johnson had escaped by crossing the 2,100-metre-high, rugged, ice-covered sides and peaks of the Richardson Mountains in a blizzard—a difficult accomplishment, even for today's experienced and well-equipped climbers—and hiding his snowshoe marks by following the path of a caribou herd. Then, on Feb. 14, May observed Johnson's tracks from the air and alerted the search party. Three days later, after 48 days on the hunt, Signals Corps Staff Sgt. Earl Hersey spotted Johnson along a bend in the Yukon's Eagle River. In the exchange that followed, Johnson wounded Hersey, but it was the last injury he would inflict.

As Johnson fled, the posse opened fire, hitting him several times. The resilient fugitive returned fire, until Gwich'in Special Const. John Moses shot a bullet that penetrated Johnson's lower back and pelvis. Albert Johnson, the Mad Trapper of Rat River, died in the snow.

When the officers searched Johnson's emaciated body, they found \$2,400 in U.S. and Canadian currency (which is the equivalent of nearly \$40,000 today), some gold, a dead squirrel and bird, and teeth with gold fillings believed to be his.

Ultimately, the capture of the man who called himself Albert Johnson created more riddles than solutions. Neither his place of origin, circumstances, or his real name could be established with any degree of certitude. All that was known for certain was that he was a desperate man who could survive under incredibly challenging conditions and who—when threatened—did not hesitate to take a human life. Although the Mad Trapper of Rat River was dead, the mysterious legend was just beginning. **Y**

## EXHUMING THE ELUSIVE ALBERT JOHNSON



In August 2007, Myth Merchant Films, an Edmonton-based company, received permission from the hamlet of Aklavik to exhume Albert Johnson's body. The company assembled a team of forensic experts to try and answer many of the questions that remain about the fugitive since his death, in 1932.

Finding the grave proved a greater challenge than anticipated. Although it was surrounded by a picket fence, the body was not where it was supposed to be. After 27 hours of effort that included digging, using ground-penetrating radar, and breaking through the permafrost with a backhoe, the team found a rotting coffin with a skeleton.

Tufts of hair on the head of the exhumed body correlated with a deceased photograph of the Mad Trapper of Rat River, and an unusual gold

bridge found in the jaw matched dental records made during the 1932 autopsy.

By extracting molecules of oxygen from the teeth, an isotope analysis can determine the general area where a person lived during various phases of life. Samples from Johnson's teeth, combined with those from his bones and fingernails, helped provide a biographical picture that informed scientists he was not Canadian, but likely came from the American Midwest or possibly a Scandinavian country. It was also determined he was in his 30s.

While assembling the skeleton, the forensic team discovered that Johnson's spine was severely distorted, indicating an advanced case of scoliosis. With his inevitable asymmetrical gait, every step taken during the 48-day pursuit must have been excruciating, and it seemed inconceivable that he climbed the rugged, 2,100-metre-high Richardson Mountains. The examination also revealed a number of earlier fractures and signs of gunshot trauma, including an entry wound in the lower back and exit wound in the pelvis from the shot that killed him.

Digital facial reconstruction was performed using a laser scanner and provided an image of how Johnson might have looked. There had been claims of familial connection to the Mad

Trapper; however, DNA from bone and teeth samples was analyzed and the results proved none of those claims were true. Following the team's forensic tests, the remains were reinterred in a new coffin.



The Mad Trapper of Rat River's identity remains as much an enigma today as it was in 1932, when he instigated the most intense manhunt in the history of Canada's North.

**Arctic Manhunt: Hunt for the Mad Trapper, the film documenting the unearthing process and forensic testing of Albert Johnson's remains, aired on Discovery Channel Canada in 2009.**

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