

Gaining Perspective on the 1912 Epic Canoe Journey

Racial injustice is perpetuated when our written history reflects only one or a simplified perspective. The trouble with history is that it can be so easily written or re-written as certain brave voices die out and other fine storytellers edit the message or merely forget some of it.

Ernest Oberholtzer respected the local Rainy Lake Ojibwe, what we now call the “Anishinaabe” people. Throughout the years, the trustees of Ober’s legacy have come to learn new and deeper stories about Ober’s deep respect for and life-long partnership with the Anishinaabe, and in 2015 we wrote the words, “Indigenous Peoples” back into our mission statement and embraced another world view including honoring traditions and offering ceremony at the beginning/end of or integrated into our summer seasons. But there is one story (*at least one*) left to be re-told or told in a more shared way.

As readers know, in 1912, Ober dreamed of becoming a known explorer, and he intentionally called upon the strength and expertise of guide and friend, Tay-tah-pah-swe-wi-tang (*name meaning far distant thunder*) also known as Billy Magee, to join him in a 2,000-mile trek to Hudson Bay and back via the Hayes and Lake Winnipeg. They squeezed this journey into one season from ice to ice, and Ober returned with hundreds of unique photos plus six “books” or chapters of his penciled journals—edited together (by the Foundation) in 2012 into *Bound for the Barrens*.

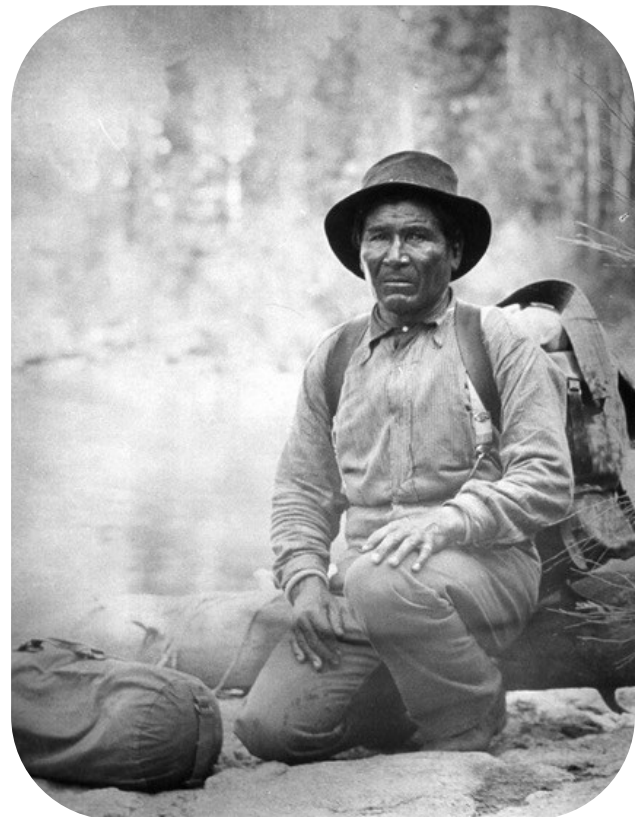
After the Hudson Bay trip, Ober did not portray himself as a major new explorer, but he *was* proud to be named to the renowned Explorer’s Club, and he printed glass slides and made speeches to schools and various groups to regale the trials of this shared journey. We know that the 1912 epic tale had some amazing elements: being a trip unguided by men who knew the region, Ober creating new maps when they were entirely off the map on Nuelthin Lake and to the Thlewiaza River, meeting a solo kayaker named *Ukkitaaq* (“Bite”) who restored them to strength once they’d reached the enormity of Hudson Bay. By autumn, the two paddlers beat the local Cree at their own game when they steadfastly paddled upstream on the Hayes River, still missing the steamboat at Norway House. And then somehow—somehow—they both paddled into and down the huge Lake Winnipeg with winter ice biting at their heels. Reading between the lines of Ober’s understated journals, we are utterly amazed at how they made it through to civilization at Gimli.

We have mostly missed Billy Magee’s perspective on all of this, and although Billy and Ober continued their friendship, it did not include more adventurous paddling, and eventually Billy suffered a stroke and died in May of 1938.

But archival work at the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation is full of surprises. In late August, I finally re-discovered a file that contained a long sought-after transcription of Ojibwe tapes that Ober recorded in 1948 with Billy’s cousin, Johnnie Whitefish. When Ober sat down with Johnnie, we can guess that Ober was trying to find details that even he may have known were missing from the well-told Hudson Bay stories. Ober was hungry to hear of the 1912 oral histories as told by Tay-tah-pah-swe-wi-tang. (continued on page 6)

Ernest Carl Oberholtzer penned these words to accompany the documentation supporting the Foundation initiated in his name in 1964:

“An example, among others, of the opportunity for creative leadership of this sort, which this Trust is intended to encourage, lies in the protection of primitive wilderness such as Indians [sic] knew before the advent of white men. No natural resource of the continent today is vanishing so fast or hopelessly as the original primitive scene and its living creatures. It is a basic problem of today for both white men and red. Out of the wilderness sprang the Indians. They are an integral part of it. They were its custodians for untold centuries. Today they offer a main hope for its future—one that lies above all within the scope of their genius and traditions. Their very mode of life was as creative as the wilderness itself.” Ober later elaborated, “Tolerance, understanding, recognition that all races, out of their special genius and experience, have something to give for the common good were never more needed. (...and to that extent become pertinent to the objectives of this Trust.”



Dear Readers,

There are some thoughts that can only come together *after* an experience, and I will wait for further inspiration regarding this covid-affected summer season, but I can at least breathe a sigh of relief. We played it carefully—trustees worked hard in group decisions, yet we also took risks. It would have been easier to cancel the whole summer season in, as my Dad would say, *one swell foop*. But we had smallness and remoteness on our side. We kept pressing for “yes” when the answer was a solid “maybe,” and we were, after all, able to offer a measure of good and grace, humor and beauty, from one tiny spit of rock for about fifty people in smaller than usual groups this year. The drum was lonely, and so we cared for her as we cared for our own souls.

Now it dawns on me, on us, that I am also writing the last of the “Dear Readers” columns as executive director of this fine, grappling, unique organization. So be it. I do not doubt all that I said in July about falling back in the flock. And yet I feel more gratitude than the average goose, to be sure. Nothing, not one thing in thirteen years, has been done alone. I’ve always known—and say again—that the force that holds this ancient and sometimes battered or flood-worn island together is love. And you, reading this column, you know what love you have also put into the place. *Miigwech*.

Do please read on. This newsletter attempts to share some of the fun and surprise of the Mallard 2020 summer, and you will enjoy Teghan’s piece, page 3.

I am loving the new truth in the piece about Tay-tah-pah-swe-wi-tang and the perspective he now gives us, even eighty years after his death, about the epic canoe journey that helped form the legacy of one adventurous German and the wilderness-related careers of many others. Personally, I believe Billy’s cousin, Johnnie Whitefish, 100%, and I’m grateful for Johnnie’s honesty in this re-telling. It’s no surprise, in a way, that it took us so many decades to be sure of the translation of Johnnie’s words about Billy’s stories of 1912. We weren’t ready.

I don’t even have to ask you to please support the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation in this time of leadership transition—I know that a great number of you care about Ober’s unique legacy of values and islands as much as I do. Many thanks to you all for being a significant and continuing part of this fine and evolving northwoods legacy. Its energy is thriving. The winter newsletter will be able to introduce to you our new director, so stay tuned! And enjoy the sun-waning days of autumn.

Remember the knowledge that is carried in the seed.



Beth E. Waterhouse

To Contact Us:

Mallard Island is alive and well and the Rundell family, with help from David Markwardt and others, are soon closing up as always. Thanks to the Thrune family for their work pulling the no-wake buoys. Thanks, once again, to all of the summer caretakers. We exist due to our volunteer power.

Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation Trustees are:

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Please visit our expanding web site at www.eober.org. If you click on “contact” you will be able to “register” for the healing ceremony by sending a quick email to Beth Waterhouse, executive director. She will count to “60.”

Please add the Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation to your annual giving as well as to your estate! Call for details. We can also receive gifts of stock. Ober’s legacy will carry on for several more generations—we are confident of that. Call Beth for more information: (952) 401-0591.



MALLARD ISLAND

THE OBERHOLTZER FOUNDATION

The Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation maintains Ober’s legacy and North Woods island home as a source of inspiration, renewal, and connection to Indigenous Peoples, kindred spirits, and the natural world. Gi-bezhig-oomin

This newsletter is published twice per year, generally February and October. Cover sketch of Mallard Island is credited to Gene Ritchie Monahan. Send poems, stories or articles to Beth Waterhouse at beth@eober.org

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For more information, visit
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Please support this organization (and this newsletter) as you are able. To learn more about this Foundation, please contact Executive Director, Beth Waterhouse, at < beth@eober.org > Mailing address: 4370 Brookside Court, #205, Edina, MN 55436. (952)-401-0591.

“Mallard, This is Only the Beginning”

By Teghan Grulkowski

I always knew I belonged tucked away in the pocket of Mother Earth. Growing up in the seemingly misplaced bluffs of southeastern Minnesota blessed me with easy access to what I still consider some of the most beautiful sights I've seen. There I developed a connection with Nature that I could never quite put into words. After one course in Environmental Science and at 16 years old, my mind was set.

Through a series of crazy circumstances, I ended up six hours north of my homey Winona bluffs in the northwoods attending Bemidji State University. Not once did I question whether I was in the right major, but I had no idea what I wanted to do with it. Then one very cold Bemidji morning a flier reached my hands and I read the words, “STEWARDS OF THE WILDERNESS.” A beautiful lake scene was background for a brief message describing a week-long naturalist seminar. I grabbed a copy and stuffed it into my folder. A week or so later I had some extra time and decided to apply, assuming I'd be one of many with little chance.

February 4th, 2019, “You are in!!!!” I was SO excited, but still had no clue what to expect. I still had months and months to ponder what it would be like, yet what happened those six days was something I never could've imagined.

August 11, 2019, packed and ready. My two hour drive passed quickly and ended when a man in high tops waved me in. Introductions were made on the pontoon and away we went. I'll admit I was incredibly nervous having never done such a long trip away from home and knowing absolutely no one. But once we got away from the dock, up the channel, around the corner of a beautiful island... It's hard not to mindlessly stare. Even with numerous old structures, this tiny island blended flawlessly, almost hiding amongst rock outcroppings... Yet its presence was undeniably strong.

Daniel Andersen (host and teacher for the week) gave us “stewards” a tour and I could already tell we'd get along just fine. As for Mallard itself, it had many small and wonderful nooks and crannies to be revealed through more private conversations. *Everything* caught my eye, the cedar planks, the water flowing through the channel, the way the topography was designed for footpaths. I was looking forward to developing my relationship with Mallard as well as my new neighbors! Dinner with all of them snug in the wannigan, exchanging the basics—it felt like old friends simply reminding each other of our whereabouts. The connections deepened when we all walked up to Ober's Drum Room and shared crazy stories for hours until the fire was nearly out. We reluctantly said our goodnights and ventured back to our cabins. I crawled into my bed in Cedarbark House and let the Rainy Lake waves lull me to sleep.

Coming to the Island, I knew nearly nothing of Anishinaabe culture or Ernest Oberholtzer. What I learned was not only fresh, but the setting made it all the more enchanting. Being a part of several experiences: the ceremony, interacting with the Drum, and my favorite, hosting the First Nation elders, made me feel honored. Everything stuck with me so intensely. Just thinking back writing this makes me very emotional and appreciative of the lessons they gave me. My newfound admiration and respect for the Anishinaabe people led me down a road as an individual that I never saw myself going down. I never had an answer to “what will you do after you graduate?” I still didn't, and I was about to start my senior year. It was Mallard that somehow guided me into Bemidji State University's Records Office requesting an Indigenous Sustainability minor. It was Mallard that introduced such significant people that I still keep contact with them over a year later. It was Mallard that lit my path.

I took an internship with the Leech Lake Reservation Division of Resource Management. I spend my days enjoying the beautiful reservation forests surveying pollinators and setting up protective measures for native and sacred plants. I was even brought ricing on Leech Lake.

As for my direct relationship with Mallard, I will be evolving from *Steward* to *Caretaker*. Though it's bittersweet that it'll never be my exact same steward family as on that first Sunday afternoon pontoon ride, I know my Mallard family as a whole will grow. It's very exciting to know I will be able to care for Mallard Island the way she has cared for me. This lovely island came into my life when I needed her most—a strong example of resiliency in what seems like a downward spiraling world. Yet there's Mallard, calm as ever.

I'm so thankful for Beth, Daniel, Kel and my fellow Stewards, and for every single one of our days. And most of all, thank you for breaking the ice with the Anishinaabe people who have now taken on such a role in my life. Cheers Mallard and *Stewards of the Wilderness*, there will never be enough thanks.

Teghan



Pebaamibines offered us the chance to learn the ways of net fishing, thanks to his treaty rights. Here, the nets are drying on the clothesline near the herb barrel.

(Photo by Dave Rolloff.)



Our Summer In Photos!

A “distanced” discussion about maps takes place in the shadow of Ober’s *Bird House*, so named by Billy Magee in the late 1920s. Please note the completed railing on last summer’s restored balcony. Thanks Craig Fernholz! That structure looks so much like it did ninety-four years ago; it’s amazing. Left to right in this photo: Beth Waterhouse, Tom McCann, and George Glazier.



Early in the season, Summer Program Director, Mairi Doerr, put her time and creativity into re-covering the two front seats on what continues to be called the “new” pontoon, purchased back in 2007—and it was used even then! ~ Thanks, Mairi!



Liz Auxdry parching Rainy Lake wild rice over the firepit.

Naanookaasi

Looping wings slow as wind carries bird above huge lake.
Miniscule bird drops to familiar rocky spit of island.

She rests in cedar tree, sitting at last in June sun.
The island is quiet. Why not here, she wonders?

It is night, but darkness does not diminish this urge.
Needle beak finds its way to lichen and web.

In three days, bird sits proudly atop small lichen cup.
Cedar tree bows in wind, stands in rain, houses chatty red squirrel.

Having arrived fertile, bird quickly drops two eggs.
Once or twice a day, needle beak turns egg toward sun.

Mama sits proudly, lifts with wind; hanging food appears nearby.
She learns from island spirits that her name is Naa-noo-kaasi.

One day a tiny crack, another, bits of shell, wet feathers
Soon two to feed, beak to beak and nectar drop by drop.

Many eyes watch her daily. She becomes proud of her brood.
Nothing to fear in this cedar tree, and sweetness is plentiful.

Soon enough, three grow to fly. Fatten up. Learn to dive.
Tiny eyes scan horizon, wind rush, soar away.

BEW

9-19-20



Mama Hummingbird was one star of the season, giving us the successful hatch of “Sissy” and “Buddy,” so named by Prudence Johnson. Sissy was, of course, the larger of the two fledglings and first out of the tiny nest. Buddy learned fast.

(Photo by Mary Swalla Holmes)



For the Cedarbark job, Mark Granlund drove the barge-pontoon with more than one heavy load of rock—burying those pontoons in a luckily calm lake. Not easy to steer with that much weight, eh Mark?



(continued from page 1)

At first, Johnnie didn't want to talk—he had been sworn to silence on these stories by Billy himself. But finally after skirting the stories for long minutes on the valuable tapes, Johnnie opened up. What we learn, better late than never, experienced by Billy in 1912, re-told by Johnnie in 1948, and finally transcribed in 2002 and found again in 2020 is fascinating stuff. It is time we refresh the pages of history.

First of all Billy was more than an equal on this epic journey. And yet we realize from this transcription of Johnnie Whitefish's re-telling that he was handicapped more than we knew by not knowing the language.

Here's Billy, speaking when nearing the end of the trip, "It was the first time I understood someone the whole time I was up there. Not once did I understand anyone while on the trip. Not even in English." Furthermore, we learn that Billy absolutely knew in Indigenous ways about his own region, but that he was out of his element once he was beyond the boundaries of home and memory. For instance, he was confused about tides, and his story describes "disappearing water."

"...Our boat stopped moving and we were on bare ground. We were scared. We tried to be careful. Later we pushed out on the water, but it kept disappearing. I didn't know what to do. We were in the water, but then it would dry up. I didn't know what was going on..."

Finally and most importantly, *something* happened in the north end of Lake Winnipeg in the third week of October that could so easily have ended Ober's life (and legacy) and changed the telling of this story forever. Ober's journals say simply: "I still felt unfit for paddling and was not altogether sorry that the wind was still blowing." We notice, however, that Ober is sleeping a lot; Billy is cooking. Ober: "I stayed by the fire most of the day (Oct 25), doing nothing but read my old notes... Went to bed early on the chance of the wind dropping in the night."

Billy's stories add this: (as told by Johnnie Whitefish)

"Then he (Ober) started shaking out our packs into the snow. Right there, he shook out the packs into the snow then he laid down. 'Heat up some food,' I said. Well, I got the food ready and called out as I got things together, but he wouldn't answer. He was curled up on the ground, and then he said to me, he lifted up his head and stared at me. 'Eat,' I said. 'I'm going to sleep,' (he said) He was going crazy, but then he fell asleep. So I went to bed too after I ate... He slept two days straight. After two days, I told him to eat something. He lifted his head. 'How am I doing?' he asked. 'Fine,' I said. 'I thought I saw some people,' he said, but then he went back to bed. Toward evening, it started getting bad. He wouldn't get up and he kept saying, 'I'm crazy, I'm crazy'... Anyway we were there another two days and finally I shook him awake. 'Wake up!' I said. And he did, finally. He woke up early..."

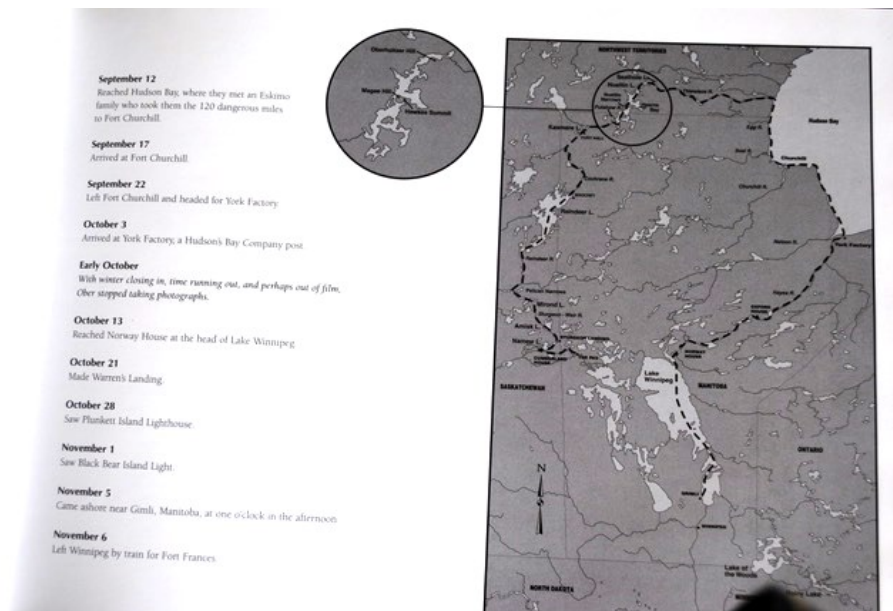
What we learn, here, is a new perspective on those late October days in 1912. Billy Magee saved the day. He was so much more than a hired paddler or "friend and guide," and indeed, his strength and perseverance—fire-building and calm headedness is exactly what brought them to Gimli and home.

No, Ernest Oberholtzer never really claimed to be *savior* of anything and, in fact, was commonly pretty humble about the trip. Some even believe that Ober himself knew he was missing part of the story of that week of the trip, which may have motivated his push to get Johnnie to finally tell all he knew some 36 years later—a full 16 years after Billy's own death. No one was exactly *false* in the telling of this great story, but we were missing a very important viewpoint and set of circumstances. We re-tell this story now to honor the role and the perspective of Tay-tah-pah-swe-wi-tang.

* * *

Editor's notes: We have David Treuer to thank for the 2002 transcription of the Ojibwe, with the assistance of Nancy Jones and Dan Jones as transcribers in that year. We have David Pelly to thank for the Indigenous name of the kayaker, "Ukkitaaq," identified generations later in Pelly's travels and writing of the 2008 book, *The Old Way North*. Our thanks to Joe Paddock, Ober's biographer crafting *Keeper of the Wild* (2001), for details from Ober's own journals, also found in a day-by-day re-telling in *Bound for the Barrens* (2012), edited by Jean Sanford Replinger.

(Photo from ECOF archives)



Letter from the Treasurer

Dear Friends of the Oberholtzer Foundation,

I don't have to tell you how difficult life has become for us—for humanity— whether with physical or economic changes and for many of our dear friends and family, but I'm an eternal optimist, and I believe that these difficulties and their results do have a bright side. Let's talk about that for a moment.

Our planet has received a well-earned rest, less pollution, less congestion in our major cities, and some citizens found that staying home brought new relationships with our children or our neighbors. Mallard Island also had an ecological rest, and the birds and animals were well aware that fewer island guests brought freedoms.

So this letter is about all of us setting the stage for “a major reboot,” but what will that mean? We first learn by looking back: we all have had a major shakeup to our normal habits. We found we could drive less, fly less often. We explored our local and national parks in huge numbers, and Nature showed us her colors.

How are Mallard, Hawk, Crow and Gull Islands? At this time of year, Nature has taken over again; animals are meandering without pause, and trails are untrodden by people with a purpose. This slower summer was a gift to the natural world.

The gifts for the Foundation over the years, made by you and other institutions that share a related mission, have sustained and prepared us for this occasion. Through this year we've had most of our programs canceled, but there was a conscious effort to take advantage by restoring a couple buildings and preserving more of the archives, readying them for times when we can build back the summer programs. As you can see below, Cedarbark House has been secured by a team of friends and contractors who have made staying in that wonderful water-lapping structure again possible.

Our “reboot” has had one advantage, albeit with sacrifices by those who may not have had the chance to participate in a program, but we again are mostly able to maintain our islands without financial loss, essentially keeping expenses and revenue almost even, preparing us for a new year. This is partly due to our frugality but also due to many hours of contributions from skilled volunteers and board members who have tirelessly added their energy.

As always we also ask for your support for which, if you've responded this year, we can't thank you enough. This is a living legacy, and you're a part of it.

Michael Reid

612-695-5349

MikeGReid@gmail.com

Cedarbark House stands firm and strong on its two new cribs, thanks to the organizing work of trustee, George Glazier and the skilled labor and materials of *Boyum Construction*. Completed in mid-August. It takes unusual labor to maintain unusual Ober-structures on Rainy Lake! George Boyum and Ryan Bloom are seen working here. Our gratitude is huge.





MALLARD ISLAND

Ernest C. Oberholtzer Foundation
4370 Brookside Court #205
Edina, MN 55436

Anishinaabe Healing Ceremony

To be held at Judson Church, 4101 Harriet Avenue South, Minneapolis 55409

On Saturday, October 24, 2020 at 2:00 p.m.

With Pebaambines (Dennis Jones) as elder, healer (and his associates)

“This Anishinaabe healing ceremony will be conducted with the use of a “little boy water drum” [*Gi-bezhig-oomin.*] The name of this drum translates to “We are all one,” and this is both the drum’s name and his mission on this planet. The drum has come to us at this time from out in the universe, and he came to help humanity with our evolution. He is accompanied by other water drums who have also been made manifest. This presentation will be about what the water drums have been doing since their arrival on planet Earth.” – Pebaamibines is also an Oberholtzer Foundation trustee.

As this year’s fall gathering, it is our intention as a Foundation to carefully host a group ceremony meant for the healing of Minneapolis and the healing of the Earth at this time. It is open to those of you who wish to attend, wearing masks, to witness this ceremony in person. (This will not be a virtual event.) There will be no group singing, though there will be Anishinaabe music, drumming and words of healing.

Please email [beth@eober.org] or call (952) 401-0591 to “register” and leave a message with your phone number and the number attending. Call early. (No cost.) When the number reaches sixty (60), the registrant will have to decline your indoor attendance. All please enter Judson at the **41st Street entrance door**, and seating will be appropriately spaced. If you have forgotten your mask; a mask will be available. Exiting will also be done as directed, at the end of the ceremony.

[To participate, you must reserve your spot, thank you! Strictly limited to 60 participants!!]

Bring your tobacco / small packets of tobacco will also be available at the door.

