



The Western Arctic District manager, R. H. G. Bonnycastle, tries out the Snowflier in Winnipeg before it goes north.

Over the Sea by Tractor

by Charles Reiach

Four men travel with a heavy load across the sea ice, which proves to be thinner than they expected.

IT happened the year of the Big Ice. Cold northwest winds had brought down ice which was two and three years old from near the Pole, to grind and crash its way into Dolphin and Union Straits. The ice in Coronation Gulf stayed solid till mid-August.

All the summer of '36 the supply vessels *Fort James* and *Audrey B.* tried to barge their way east through dense ice floes. At Coppermine, we had already made the first preparations for passing the coming winter on short supplies, when on September 28 at seven a.m., we saw the tall masts of the *Fort James* against the sky to the north. Coppermine River was already frozen over; however, we got our supplies ashore and under cover, and what a fine feeling that gave us!

The "*Audrey B.*" leaving Perry River.

Angus Gavin.



The *Audrey B.*, which had gone further east with supplies, ground its way into Coppermine six days later through two inches of young ice, with the district manager on board.

Owing to the restricted movements of the supply vessels that summer, our outpost at Kugaruak, fifty-six miles east, did not get its supplies. On October 27, it was decided to take an outfit to it by snowmobile. At that time we had a Ford V-Eight Snowflier, which had been brought into the country two years before as an experiment in faster winter travel. Through age and rough usage, the machine had become pretty rickety, and its latest ailment was shedding teeth off one of the gear wheels in the transmission.

The travelling party consisted of G. Claydon of the *Fort James*, the district manager (R. H. G. Bonnycastle) and myself. For safety's sake, in case of a complete and total breakdown, we took along Coyacuk, an Eskimo, and two dogs with a tiny sleigh—the idea being to walk back and have the dogs haul our bedrolls.

That night all preparations were made. Three Cogmolluk sleighs were loaded up with over two tons of supplies and roped to our strange chariot with eighty-five horses under its hood.

We knew the ice was not very thick, but we figured we could make the trip. Anyway, we *had* to make it before the days got too short for travel. The Snowflier had an open truck body covered in with canvas. Claydon drove. He first took off the door on his side of the cab for quick exit. I was also in the cab and beside the heater. To take the door off my side would have created a draught through the cab, so it was decided that the passenger should sacrifice safety for comfort. The district manager placed safety

ahead of comfort and rode on the second sleigh, and we bundled Coyacuk and his two dogs in behind.

We had been warned about tide-cracks in the ice, so we were on the look out for these. Ours was a queer outfit which took a lot of handling. To make a sudden stop would cause 5,000 lbs. of sleighs and load to crash into our gas tank. Any sudden swerve would cause an upset and broken sleighs.

At six miles out we stopped for a look at the ice. We punched a hole with the ice chisel and measured. Eight inches. Well, it seemed safe enough, and yet 2,000 lbs. of snowmobile and 5,000 lbs. of a load was no feather floating along. We consoled ourselves that salt water ice was supposed to bend before it broke.

We were travelling at about 15 m.p.h. when we saw the first ice-crack a short hundred yards away. It didn't look very wide, and anyway we couldn't stop in that short distance. The crack was running at right angles and Claydon yelled, "Here we go!"

Across, he said, "Did you see that?" "Yes," I replied, "it was about a foot across." "No," he said, "I don't mean that. Did you see the ice *bend* nearly a foot, and the water gush up before we got to the crack? I felt sure our steering skis wouldn't mount the other side."

We saw the next crack about a mile ahead, and it looked like a wide one. We stopped, and it was decided that I go ahead and watch the behaviour of the Snowflier. This crack was about two feet wide, and on a signal the Snowflier came for it. Sure enough, the ice began to vibrate, causing little wavelets along the two-foot width of open water. Then the ice began to settle and the water to flow over it. When the Snowflier reached the crack, we were ready for anything to happen; but it gave a buck and a jump up the other side . . . then safely away with all three sleighs slithering along behind.

Several times we stopped en route to find the ice that same eight inches thick. Halfway there, and about a mile off shore, right in our path, appeared a patch of ice smoother and darker than the rest. This had been an open spot and had frozen over recently. Was it strong enough? Too late to find out. "Step on the gas, brother!" I breathed. Then I filled my



The party en route—the author, Coyacuk, and G. Claydon.

lungs—as if by doing that it might lighten us enough to carry us across that ugly looking spot!

Claydon eyed the width of the doorway for a quick jump. "Get ready!" he said. I pushed my door open and held it there with one foot on the running board. . . .

How thick that ice was, we never knew. We kept our eyes glued on the spot immediately ahead of the jiggling runners, expecting every moment to see them take a nose dive and be swallowed in a swirl of water. As we reached the middle of the newly frozen area, above the noise of the engine and the rattle of the treads we imagined we heard the cracking of ice, and a black line shot out sideways across the dark patch.

The next couple of seconds seemed like hours, as we watched the edge of the old ice draw nearer . . . Then we were across, clattering gaily along over the white expanse, with the three heavy sleighs swaying along behind us.

We made the fifty-six miles in five hours. Claydon drew off the oil that night and found three more gear teeth in it. Next day we back-tracked on our trail, sleighs piled one on the other, Coyacuk all smiles. This was the way to travel in future! Maybe if he had a big hunt that winter he would buy this gas-drinking machine. . . .!

In three hours we were home again, met by the pessimistic locals of the day before. I think they were astounded to see us arrive safe and sound. And I *know* that we were!

The midnight sun shines across Coronation Gulf at Coppermine.

L. A. Learmonth.

