

# ANCIENT ARCTIC

There is more than one side to story of the Far North.

by Nelle Oosterom

**F**ort Conger in Canada's High Arctic is what most people expect a heritage site to be: buildings and artifacts linked to specific events — in this case the establishment of a polar research station in the nineteenth century. Men lived, worked, and died there in a heroic quest to explore the Arctic.

Contrast that with Saoyú-?ehdacho National Historic Site in the Northwest Territories. It consists of two boreal forest peninsulas on Great Bear Lake that are sacred to the Sahtú Dene people. The oral history of the area goes back thousands of years and makes reference to a time when land to the south was full of ice and giant animals ruled the world.

Recognizing Saoyú-?ehdacho (pronounced SAW-you-eh-DAH-cho) as a National Historic Site clearly challenges conventional notions of what heritage is all about.

"We tend often to look at heritage value traditionally as when Europeans go north, like the Franklin expedition or Peary's assault on the North Pole," says James De Jonge, a manager with Parks Canada's National Historic Sites Policy Branch. "It's very much the European discovery of places that were already known by Aboriginal cultures.

"Establishing and giving recognition to places like Saoyú-?ehdacho is really acknowledging both sides of the coin — that we have places that are an extension of European exploration experience ... and we also have these places that have this enduring significance over a long period of time."

Saoyú-?ehdacho's designation as a National Historic Site in 1996 was part of an effort by Parks Canada and the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to recognize the history of groups that had been largely ignored — including Aboriginal peoples, women, and ethnocultural communities.

It was chosen because it is essential to the history of the Sahtú Dene, whose oral tradition and stories are tied to the land and help define who they are as a people. The site's plants, animals, and landforms are as significant as its built environment — gravesites, cabins, and other artifacts.

At 5,587 square kilometres, it is also Canada's largest National Historic Site. Jointly managed by Parks Canada and the Sahtú Dene, it's located just south of the Arctic Circle, accessible only by air or seasonal ice road.

Fort Conger, on northern Ellesmere Island, is even more remote. The site was an important staging area for North



Fort Conger, Nunavut.

Pole exploration. Artifacts found there go back to 1875, when the British Arctic Expedition's HMS *Discovery* wintered at this place. That expedition lost four sailors to exposure, and many others were afflicted with scurvy. Reproductions of memorial signboards erected to honour two of the lost sailors have been reinstated to the site. Other notable features include the remnants of an experimental garden planted by American explorer Adolphus Greely in 1882, the foundation of his

expedition house, and the remains of a cairn erected by the British Arctic Expedition using discarded tin cans filled with gravel.

But perhaps the most significant of the artifacts there are three small buildings constructed in 1900 by explorer Robert Peary. Although they look unimpressive, Parks Canada historian Lyle Dick points out that these little huts say something important about Arctic exploration — that attempts to explore the polar regions were only as successful as the willingness of early explorers to learn from the indigenous people.

Early British exploration parties wintered aboard their ships. Scant heat, poor air circulation, and excessive condensation that resulted in water dripping onto shivering crew members made life miserable for those on board.

"They really had not made an effort to learn from the Inuit and how they survived in this rigorous climate for so many centuries," says Dick.

Greely, leader of an expedition mounted by the United States army, thought to improve on things by throwing up a large prefabricated building at Fort Conger. But it proved impossible to heat because he ignored basic Inuit architectural principles that enable a small space to be heated comfortably with one or two blubber lamps.

Robert Peary was among the first High Arctic explorers "to really study Inuit life ways and to apply that knowledge in his polar expeditions," said Dick of the man credited with being first to reach the North Pole.

It was Peary and his expedition party members who tore down Greely's southern-style house and used the wood to construct the igloo-sized shelters that were linked by passageways roofed over with muskox skins and snow blocks.

He was also the first to employ whole Inuit families, says Dick.

"Inuit women made clothing for his parties, the men hunted, they led sledging excursions, they helped Peary in



Saoyú-?ehdacho, Northwest Territories.

all areas of adaptation to the High Arctic, and I think that's one of the main reasons he was more successful than earlier expeditions, which often ended in disaster."

While not designated as a National Historic Site, Fort Conger's buildings are classified as Federal Heritage Buildings and the site bears a plaque to note the national historic significance of the First International Polar Year, of which the Greely expedition formed a part. Parks Canada is responsible for maintaining the site and the area, which is in Quttinirpaaq National Park of Canada.

Because few people can realistically visit the site, Parks Canada and the University of Calgary last summer conducted a 3-D laser scan of the area.

"Our intention is to create a virtual Fort Conger, which will serve as a digital archive for the site and its contents," said Peter Dawson, an associate professor of archaeology at the University of Calgary who is heading the project.

"It will also provide an opportunity for people to visit Fort Conger from their home computer via the Internet."

Parks Canada hopes the virtual project will bring this internationally significant site and its rich story of exploration, adaptation, and survival to more Canadians and to people around the world.

## Parks Canada Centennial

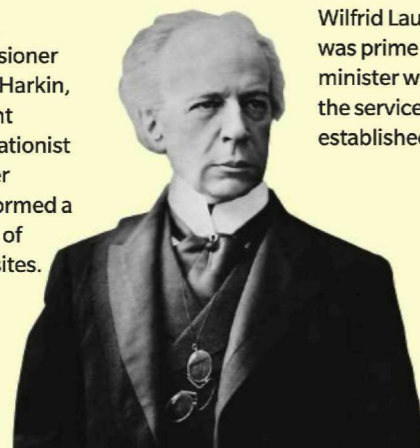


In 1911, Canada became the first country in the world to establish a national park service. The U.S. formed its service in 1916.



The first commissioner was J.B. Harkin, an ardent conservationist who over

twenty-five years formed a nationwide system of parks and historic sites.



Wilfrid Laurier was prime minister when the service was established.



The agency was originally named the Dominion Parks Branch. It was also called the National Parks Branch and Canadian Parks Service before it became Parks Canada. The first National Parks Act, passed in 1930, asserted that national parks were for the "benefit, education, and enjoyment of Canadians."



Banff was already a national park — established in 1885 — when the agency was formed. Four other mountain parks existed in 1911: Glacier, Yoho, Jasper, and Waterton Lakes.

In 1919, the agency took responsibility for preserving and developing sites of historic significance. The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada was established that year to identify and recommend such places.



Lake Erie at Port Dover, Ontario, which commemorate French exploration and claims to the area in 1670, and Forges du Saint Maurice in Quebec, Canada's first industrial village.

The first historic sites named in 1919 were two on the shore of

Today Parks Canada administers forty-two national parks, four marine conservation areas, and 167 national historic sites. Its mandate is to protect Canada's natural and cultural heritage while managing these places for visitors to appreciate and enjoy.