

Sample Writing for the Group of Seven Book
By Michael Burtch

When Dr. MacCallum talked Harris into joining him on an exploratory trip in search of new landscapes to help the artist revive his spirits and to enable him to overcome the haunting memories of Algonquin Park, it was Algoma that eventually beckoned.

Manitoulin Island was their first stop and although later, members of the Group would return to the mainland area of La Cloche to find inspiration, Harris was restless to move on. Taking a steamer from the island to the CPR station at Cutler, the two headed west for Sault Ste. Marie. Harris and MacCallum certainly knew about Thomson's trip in 1912 and they were likely responsive to Frank Johnston's reports of his 1916 winter excursion to Hearst. Harris may have in fact gone through Sault Ste. Marie in 1909, on his way to the Minnesota lumber camps in the company of writer Norman Duncan. The CPR had just opened its Montreal to Minneapolis line that year. The extensive media attention focused on the resource economy and tourism would certainly not have gone unnoticed by Harris. Whatever spurred them on, they were embarking on a project that would take them to an area that would definitely not be "the Rosedale of the North".

The District of Algoma had been created in 1858 as a provisional judicial district in the Province of Ontario. It originally encompassed all the lands once known as Rupert's Land' from the French River to the Pigeon River on the Minnesota/Ontario border, with Sault Ste Marie as the district seat. In 1871, the portion from White River north and west was reconstituted as the District of Thunder Bay; in 1888 Manitoulin Island was severed, the District of Sudbury in 1907 and finally in 1912 the District of Timiskaming

was created. Except for areas close to larger settlements, most of the districts were, and are still, known as unorganized territories. Population density was extremely low, a fact that perhaps is lost on those who apply the “empty landscape” derogation to the work of the Group of Seven. In 1911, estimates based on the Canadian census show the population density of Algoma West to be 0.2 people per square kilometre in the unorganized territory.

Life along the rail line however, was not as desolate as the population statistics suggest. As was the practice for all rail lines, tracks were subdivided into sections, generally seven to nine miles in length. Each section had a “section house” for the section foreman as well as lodging for the maintenance crew responsible for the upkeep of the rail section. Often families accompanied the workmen. Children were home schooled and books provided by the ACR through a travelling library service. The greater the need for maintenance on certain sections the larger the community around the section house would grow. Areas like Canyon, Montreal River and Frater saw relatively substantial growth. Equipment sheds to house velocipedes, snow removal equipment, signage, switching gear and other tools of the trade added to the little communities. Sidings were located at each section stop to allow loading, parking and passing of trains. Down bound trains were given the right of way and sometimes waits could seem interminable. The waits would provide great opportunities for berry picking, target practice, fishing and, if you were an artist, sketching. Schedules were, well, to put it diplomatically, loose, published timetables notwithstanding. Loading passengers and/or freight especially on the mixed

trains could be very unpredictable. This was sometimes exacerbated by engineers having to stop to check trap lines or crews deciding that they needed to stop for happy hour.

Life along the rail was not easy. Some settlers merely eked out a subsistence, trying to live off the land, hunting, fishing, guiding, beach combing for errant pulp lumber and taking odd jobs like lumbering, clearing rights of way along the rail or fire ranging. One such family, the Gordons, lived at Mile 103 and the same day in September that Harris, MacCallum, Johnston, and MacDonald left Toronto for Algoma, the body of Jim Gordon, the father, was hoisted onto a down bound train, wrapped in a blanket. He had died in his bed overnight and too poor to accompany him to his burial at Garden River, Mrs. Gordon and her two children said their goodbyes track side.

The rail line was dotted with cabins for tourists, especially on scenic lakefront properties and for fire rangers. Logging camps and loading areas were also found frequently along the line. Loggers would either skid their loads on dangerously high “braggs” during the winter, or drive the logs down numerous creeks and rivers during the spring to get them to the flatbed loading docks. It was one such camp, at Mile 122, that Harris and MacCallum stopped for several days in May 1918. A photograph, later purchased by Dr. MacCallum, was taken from a trestle at the camp and shows the swollen Agawa River menacingly swirling around the trestle footings, with log piles and the roof of the camp further along the rail and no less at risk than the trestle. Harris was not a newcomer to lumber camp life having ventured to the camps of northern Minnesota with Norman Duncan nine years earlier. The rough and tumble lifestyle of the lumberjack was so embedded in folklore that it would be difficult to claim surprise at the conditions

in camp. The ACR did its best to mitigate some of the hardships of camp life by providing passengers with fine dining which could be washed down with copious amounts of beer. A cafe car menu from around 1920 boasts of Roast Spring Lamb (with mint sauce), \$.60; Prime Roast Beef, \$.50, Fresh Asparagus, \$.35; New Potatoes in Cream, \$.15; Sliced Tomatoes, \$.25; Lettuce, \$.30; Sliced Cucumbers, \$.30 and to finish Strawberries and Cream for \$.20 all prepared by the legendary Siss Goodman. The beer was usually welcome fare for anyone bound for the ostensibly “dry” lumber camps. Of course, as with any prohibition, moonshine manages to find ready markets and the camps were certainly no exception!

They arrived at Mile 122 just two weeks prior to the first ever river drive down the Agawa. Lumbermen were busy with the final preparations for the drive, gathering 4 foot pulp logs in holding areas from the camp down to Mile 108, the last holding pond just above Agawa Falls.

Harris and MacCallum stayed a few days before moving on. Harris had a chance to do some small sketches. The lumber camp was situated alongside the Agawa River in a narrow valley bordered by steep bluffs on the east side of the river and highlands to the west. Even with the intensive efforts to prepare the winter cut logs for the journey to southern pulp mills, the surrounding landscape would have given Harris a taste of the limitless painting opportunities of the area.

When the two left the camp they head north to Hawk Junction and then to Michipicoten Harbour on a spur line. The harbour situated near the westerly tip of a

peninsula jutting into Lake Superior was, in 1918, the terminus for trains bearing ore to the massive ship-loading wood trestle piers. Hopper cars could be shuttled to a point on the pier well above the decks of the lake freighters moored below. Activity in 1918 was not as brisk as it had been in the preceding years. The Helen Mine was closing because of depleted reserves. One can imagine that Harris would have been at a loss to find anything to scenic there. It wouldn't be until the fifties, when nature had started to reclaim much of the land scarred by industry, that a member of the Group would return to Michipicoten and that was A.Y. Jackson.

Harris and MacCallum left for home just in time. On June 1, high water caused by spring run-off and heavy rains flooded the Agawa. Logs piled by the rail side of the Spanish River Pulp and Paper Company's (Dennison) lumber camp in preparation for the log drive were swept into the angry river. Eyewitnesses recount that at 2:00AM on the 2nd of June, the upper log dam burst as a result of the rising water levels, releasing 13,000 chords of pulpwood. Within 6 hours the logs had roared down the river, over the Agawa Falls and into Agawa Bay where awaiting tug crews were left dumbfounded by the spectacle. The toll the raging river and the uncontrolled logs took was heavy. Rail from Mile 126 to Mile 111 was washed out in several locations. The wooden trestle bridges at Miles 122 and 120 were swept away. It took weeks to repair the damage but by then Harris was back in Allandale already plotting his return to Algoma.

The washout of 1918 only added to the financial woes of the ACR. Unable to exact compensation from the Spanish River Pulp and Paper Co. for the damage their logs inflicted, the rail company had to dip into already limited funds for the repairs of rail, rail

bed and three trestle bridges. The company was trying to pull itself out from the heavy debt load that had resulted in receivership from 1914 to 1916. Like so many competing railway companies the ACR had lost investors to the war effort. Worse still, the line to Hearst, just completed in 1914, was costly to construct and the ACR defaulted on bonds that had been issued to finish the rail. The English bondholders who took control of the company were reluctant to throw money at new rolling stock or rail upgrades even though operating revenues were healthier than one might expect. The two most northerly lines that the ACR had been built to intersect were themselves reeling under heavy financial losses, partially due to staggering capital costs and partially because most of the lucrative wartime traffic was handled by CPR. By September of 1918 the Federal Government took over the Canadian Northern and the National Transcontinental Railways to form part of their new intercontinental line, the Canadian National Railway, CN.

One of the ACR's more stable revenue streams came from catering to tourist, fishermen and hunters. At the turn of the century surveyor R.S McCormick had proposed and surveyed a route to the CPR line much further east, meeting near Chapleau rather than at Franz. This route would've been less scenic but more cost effective to build and operate. His plan was over-ruled by Clergue, who apparently felt that a route taking advantage of the opulent splendour of the Agawa Canyon and other breathtaking views closer to Lake Superior would generate more traffic. By 1918 his vision would certainly be vindicated by the painters that would turn scenes from Clergue's "backwoods" into

icons of Canadian nationalism.

Harris and MacCallum would surely have picked up one of the promotional brochures produced by the ACR to lure visitors. These brochures were generously illustrated by photographs and full of information from canoe routes, fish and game regulations, route maps, mile by mile descriptions of the landscape and points of interest, guide information, detailed camping gear recommendations and advertisements for the house keeping cabins that dotted the route. For larger groups, the ACR had partnered with lodge owners at spots like Spruce Lake and Agawa Bay. Log cabins, the ones built starting in 1912 were available for \$2.00 per night total regardless of the number in the party and for a round trip fare that was attractively priced. To go to Mongoose Lake, which was one of the suggestions floated by Harris as a back-up plan in case a railway boxcar was unavailable, cost \$5.20 per person. When the Group did avail themselves of this option in 1920, the grand total for fare from the Sault and accommodation for a month would have been \$80.80 split four ways (canoes, then like now, were extra)!

Interestingly, although not publicized in the brochure, fully furnished boxcars in use by survey and work crews, could be rented subject to availability. Contrary to the widely accepted notion that the ACR had to custom fit a car for the painters, the company, according to articles and social notes in the Sault Star, made a regular practice of providing these early mobile homes to customers with deeper pockets than the average tourist. They would be hauled to prearranged sidings at prearranged times. A recent drawing supplied by contemporary Sault based artist, Ken MacDougall, diagrams the interior of a similar car he stayed in as an employee of the ACR in 1947. His father

Stewart was also a long time employee of the rail line as well as a friend and travelling companion of A.Y. Jackson. The drawing of the car #1055, a sister car to the #10557 used by the group in 1919, provides great insight into the accommodations one might have expected. The telephone in the 1947 version would be the only concession to modern conveniences. Bunks, tables, sinks, shelving, desks, stoves and firewood boxes provided all the necessities except that for which, as Harris points out in a letter, were required to answer the call of nature. Most importantly for anyone wishing to enjoy the scenery, both sides of the car had windows.

Back at Woodend, Allandale, Harris kept himself busy doing chores around his summer home and sketching. It is obvious from his correspondence with MacDonald that he was less than enthusiastic about the “ meagreness of the material at hand” and was “ hankering after fall colouring”. Running into MacCallum at the Allandale train station Harris announced to MacDonald after a short chat that they had decided to return to Algoma in the fall and that he wanted MacDonald to join them. In the first two letters to MacDonald, he discusses both the boxcar and cottage option, noting that if they took a cottage at Mongoose they could use it as a base from which they could camp at other points along the line. In his third letter, Harris announces joyfully “ Well James, Me boy, down on your knees and give great gobs of thanks to Allah! We have a boxcar awaiting us on the Algoma Central!” MacDonald, in spite of concerns that his weak physical condition might slow the party down in the field, was equally excited. Apparently not even the prospect of MacCallum's sonorous snoring was a deterrent. The good doctor had

been conscripted to perform cooking and housekeeping duties as well as undoubtedly helping to underwrite the venture. Perhaps however, in hindsight, his most important role would turn out to be that as the groups' photographer. In this role he left numerous photographs of scenes painted by his comrades, a valuable record, making site identification easier today. The fourth member of the party, Frank Johnston, who was described by Harris as the "anemic doddering Frank", was invited to join and although he needed to get a leave from his duties with the war art commission, he too agreed to the trip.

Departing in the evening of September 10, the four made their way northward on the CPR overnight, transferring in Sudbury for the western line to Sault Ste Marie.

According to the schedule, they should have arrived in the city around noon on the 11th, giving them ample time to check in with the ACR and perhaps to inspect what would be their home away from home for the next several weeks. Since the boxcar was likely sided in the Steelton Yards, close to the steel mill, they probably made their way to the then elegant accommodations of the Algonquin Hotel to enjoy one last evening of relative comfort. The northbound mixed train departed from the Bruce St. Station at 9:00 AM and by 9:06 it would have been picking up the boxcar from the yard. One can imagine the excitement of the travellers as they rumbled northward out of the city, climbing into the Precambrian Shield, past Island Lake and along the heights south of the Goulais River Valley and over the Bellevue Trestle at Mile 19. If the morning wasn't foggy, this would have been their first view of Lake Superior in the distance. Framed by the imposing Robertson Cliffs, the Goulais snakes through some of the most spectacular landscape in

the north. The height of the trestle, which was rebuilt in 1915 to replace the wooden structure with steel, offers a breathtaking vista. At Mile 30, the train stops at Searchmont, the small town that Clergue had envisioned as the junction of the ACR and his Algoma Eastern Railway from Sudbury. It was never built and the town of Searchmont, nestled along the Goulais River among the soaring hills, remained a sawmill town. The train continued northward and past a string of scenic lakes and rivers; Achigan, Ogidaki, the Chippewa and Trout Lake. The engineers were bent on making Pangis at Mile 68, by their appointed time of 12.06 PM. Between 1908 and 1912 Pangis had been the terminal point for the yet to be completed ACR line to Hearst. The settlement, which got its name from the Pangissanan Ojibway elders (women) who lived in there when the ACR surveyors arrived at the turn of the century,* was the headquarters for the company that logged the area, a lunch stop for northbound trains and home for the families of trappers, timbermen and railroad employees that had been drawn to the area. It was here that J.E.H. MacDonald did one of his first drawings, a rendering of a man portaging a canoe up an embankment, perhaps from Guyatt Lake. This drawing would eventually be used in MacDonald's painting, "The Wild River" (1919) which actually depicts the Montreal River Falls. From Pangis, the train continues past Spruce and then on to Mongoose Lake where MacDonald and Johnston would have surely seen the cabins that would serve as home to the painters in 1920. A few minutes later the train starts to enter the Batchawana Bowl and again the two newcomers could survey the mountainous contours of "castle rock" and the rapids of the Batchawana River as they rumbled over the bridge that they

would soon get to know so well. As the train climbs out of the valley it follows a horseshoe route and at several locations the party would have been able to look back into the amazing landscape that would serve as one of chief sources of inspiration for the duration of their Algoma visits.

With barely time to catch their breath, Montreal River opens up as they curved around the huge trestle bridge. To their left, the awe inspiring Montreal River Falls and Valley, to their right, the headlands of Solemn Land start to reveal themselves. The train has to climb behind them to the highest elevation reached anywhere along the line, at Hubert Lake. At Mile 102.5, the then bustling community of Frater was a significant rail depot, with numerous sidings and “wyes” for train turnarounds. One mile later, the train, in 1918, poked its' way slowly across a huge wooden trestle from which Superior's shining waters could be seen from the closest spot that the line comes to the lake. The trestle was replaced through a herculean effort in 1925, by fill, but in 1918 the slow orders that were in place for the ageing span gave ample time for riders to absorb the view down the Agawa Valley to Lake Superior. Whether Johnston took advantage of the slow pace of the train, came back later or worked from a photograph of the scene, he was the only painter to have captured this breathtaking vista, in his painting “ Algoma” 1918, (Winnipeg Art Gallery). MacDonald writing to his wife Joan upon his arrival at Canyon recalls his reaction to the scene.

“ I think the most impressive sight I have had on this trip, was a view of Lake Superior from a place about eight miles from here, on the way up. The railway is within about four miles of the lake and probably 1500 feet above it, commanding a view of

craggy hills, waterfalls and the winding Agawa. I have never seen anything as impressive as the half revealed extensiveness of the lake. It certainly was "Superior" in all ways.

There was a hazyness in the air which merged the horizon with the sky and that smooth glimmering infinity of waters was like "a glimpse of God himself". A few large islands could be seen and great rocky shores stooping gradually to the waters. One of the islands was twelve miles long' the brakeman told me, but "it looked like a crumb on the table. I have not quite assimilated this experience yet. It is something to be quiet about, and think over."

This would have been only the beginning of the experience". As the train began its slow descent along the Agawa, the northern wall of the valley unfolds and the river bed below, unfold in a continuous panorama. The train rolls over the falls of the Little Agawa and, at Mile 112, it enters the jaws of Agawa Canyon, along the canyon floor and past a series of idyllic waterfalls flowing over both side of the towering granite walls. On Thursday, September 12, at Mile 113, the boxcar is unhitched and a new era in Canadian art begins.