

# SEEDY BUSINESS STORIES

By Don Pigott

## DEASE LAKE AND CASSIAR LODGEPOLE PINE COLLECTIONS IN 1984

1984 was a slow year for cone collections, due to poor crops, unlike the previous year. Our small nursery was doing ok, but Gerhard and I were keen to get out into the field. I had the good fortune to have hired Tina to look after the nursery, and I had no reservations about leaving it in her hands. We had a couple of tree improvement contracts pending but they were not scheduled to start until November.



Pine flat near Simmons Lake

We had been approached by folks in Sweden about collecting Lodgepole pine in northern BC, in the general region of Cassiar to Dease Lake. Frank Barnard had a very good network of collectors in several areas of the Yukon, notably Watson Lake, Carmacks and Rusty Creek. Frank was very well known for his abil-

ity to make large collections, and produce high quality seed. Lodgepole pine had been planted in Sweden for decades, and grew faster than the native Scots pine. It was believed that the species would be able to augment their perceived timber shortage in 40 years.

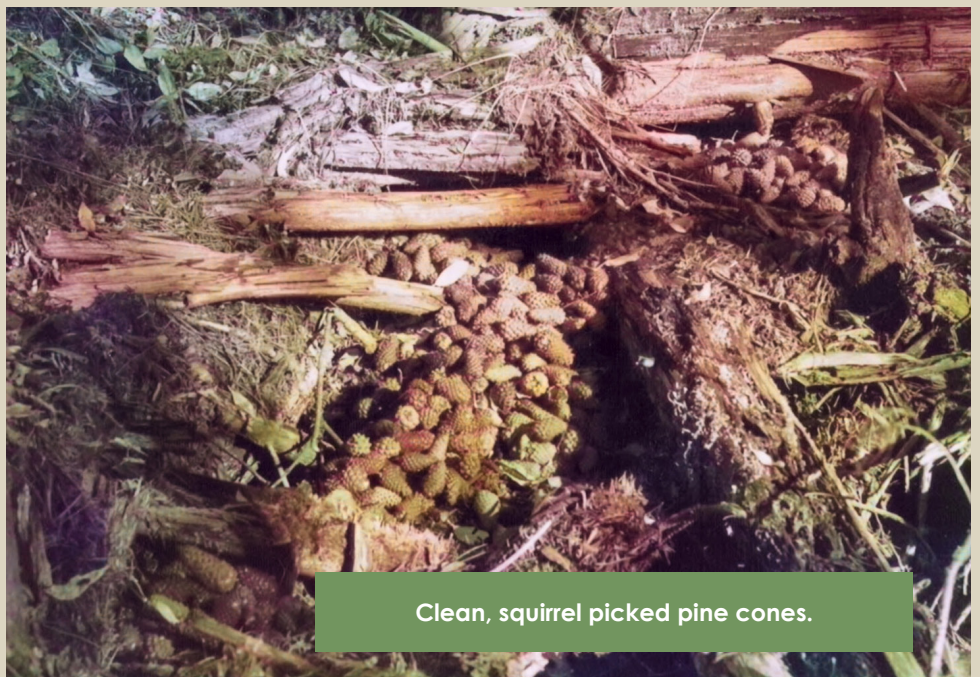
Rolf Hellenius and his wife would also go up to the Yukon each year in their motorhome and make collections.



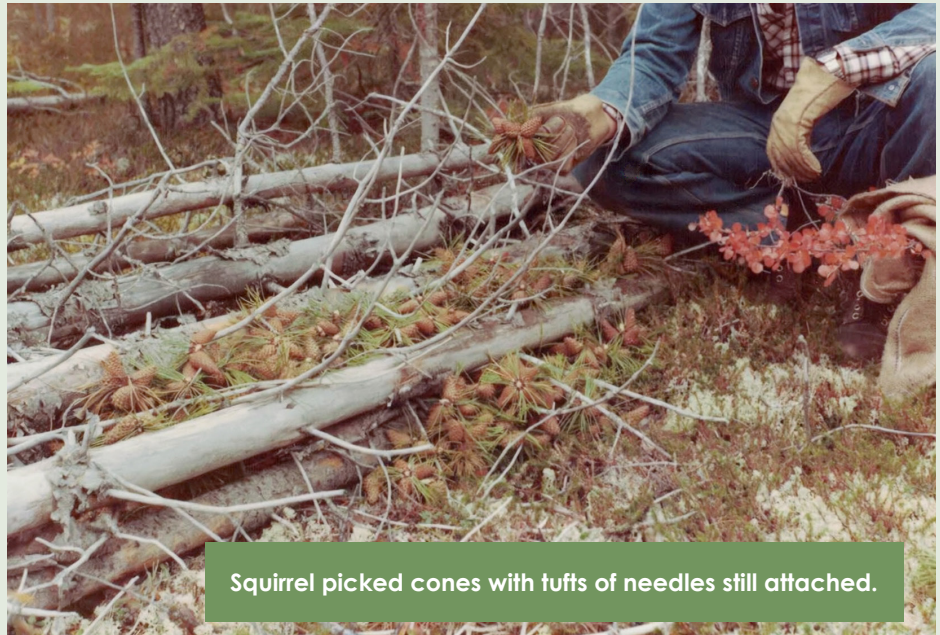
In Northern BC, Lodgepole pine cones were collected almost entirely from squirrel caches or cuttings in the relatively uniform stands. Usually these pine stands were very easy to wander around in, and there was little if any undergrowth in these pine flats. Squirrels were abundant and it was usual for caches to be less than 50 metres apart in the strands.

The cache size and type varied dramatically. Sometimes the cones were picked very cleanly with no needles attached, (see above), other times they left “tufts” of needles which had to be removed with some difficulty. (We referred to the squirrels that accumulated these piles as “cone pigs”. The size of the caches varied from 15-20 liters to sometimes 100 liters or more. There was no advantage time-wise to collect cones from felled trees or trees in burns.

When Frank heard from his Swedish buyers that we were planning to make collections in Northern BC,



he phoned me immediately. He was concerned about us infringing on his turf! We had a long chat and he offered to buy all the cones we picked, transport them to his extraction facilities at Blind Bay, process the seed, and ship it to Sweden. He made a generous financial offer, and made a compelling case in that we had no seed extractor at that time or means to transport the cones south. So we came to an agreement. The previous year Gerhard and I had made some large helicopter collections of Grand fir, all of which we sold to Frank. He was most impressed with the quality, and the price! He paid very quickly so we were quite comfortable going into a business arrangement with him.



Squirrel picked cones with tufts of needles still attached.

Dease Lake had one small motel, and Cassiar also only had one, so we decided to take Gerhard's truck and rent a camper from Tina's mother. This gave us the flexibility to collect in more remote areas without having to run back a couple of hundred kilometers to a motel each night.



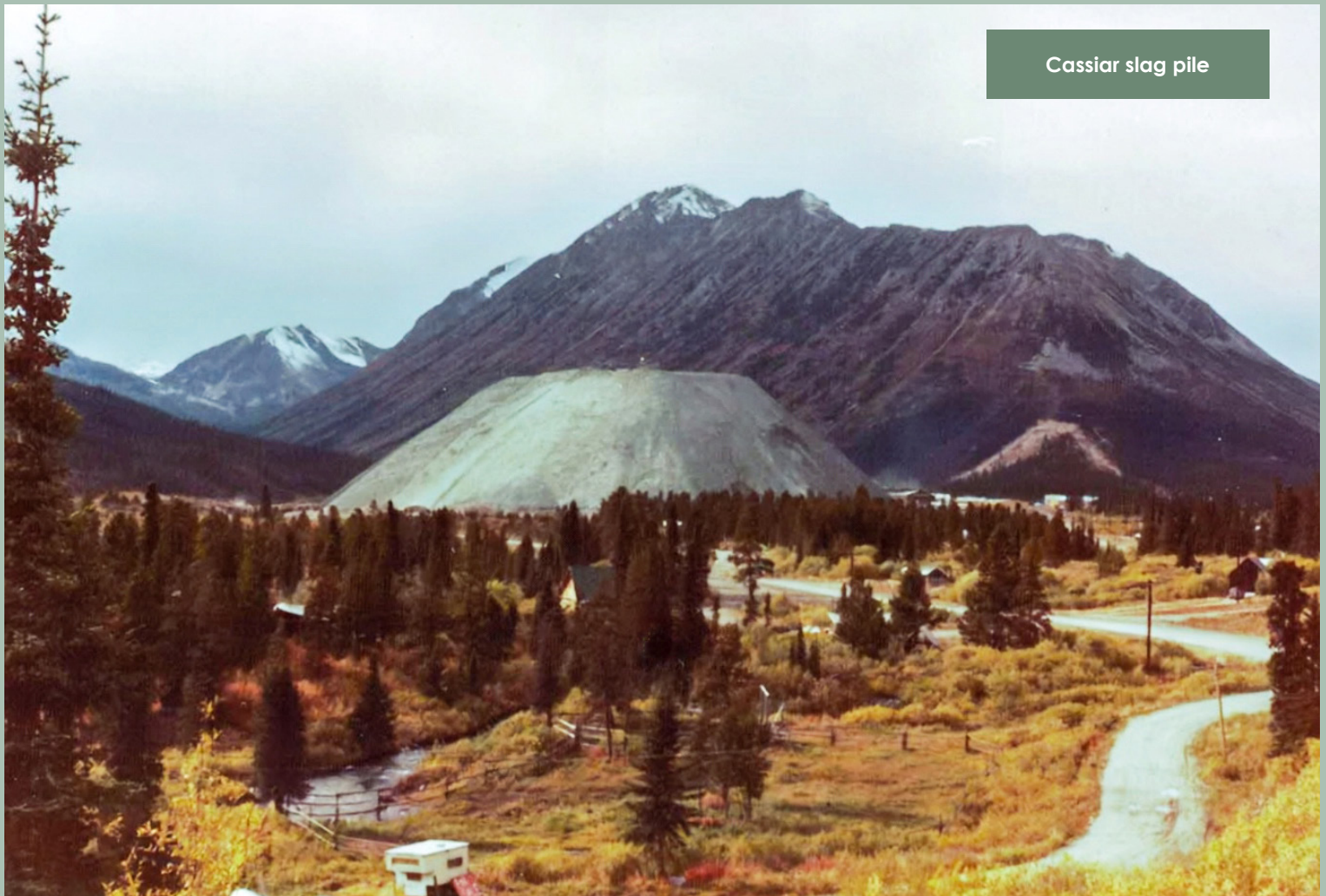
"Cone pig" — enormous squirrel cache with the cones still having needles attached.

On September 1 we left Nanaimo and headed north. We were not really in a hurry, so we took our time and eventually pulled over south of Prince George at a rest stop to sleep. In the morning we continued our journey, stopping once for gas at Smithers. We didn't realize until much later that Gerhard had left his wallet on a shelf at the gas station. By that time we were 400 miles north. When we got to a phone we contacted the gas station and arranged to have it shipped to Gerhard's home. We stopped along the road near the second crossing of the Bell Irving on

Highway 37 (the Stewart Cassiar Highway). We tried a little fishing in a small lake without success, and I left my fly case there!

The following day we stopped at 40 Mile Flats for lunch, where there seemed to be a fair amount of pine. We asked the waitress if there were any squirrels around, and she said "yes". The squirrels would fill her mason jars in a shed out back with pine cones! We told her we were interested in buying pine cones from people and would stop back later.

We continued on to Dease Lake and went directly to the government office to see one of the local Forest Service Officers, Karl Simmons. Technically we needed a permit to collect cones, but he was unconcerned. He gave us some good advice on locals that might be interested in collecting cones. Who was trustworthy and who was not! Another piece of advice he gave us was that people would want to be paid in cash. This was a bit of a shock. We had planned to write cheques, but apparently there had been many companies pass through the area, write cheques and then the cheques bounced. There was no bank in Dease Lake, but fortunately there was a CIBC in Cassiar. After we had checked out the crops for a couple of days around Dease Lake, we went to Cassiar and withdrew a large amount of cash. We set up a deal between my bank in Ladysmith (also CIBC) and the Cassiar branch, basically letting them know that we would be withdrawing large amounts regularly. While we were in the bank, the teller told us to visit Gary, the Recreations Facility Manager, because he knew everyone in town. He was a very pleasant fellow, and was keenly interested in what we were doing. He assured us that he would get the word out and he certainly did! We also put a notice up in the Rec building. Eventually he also allowed us to store cones in a garage there.



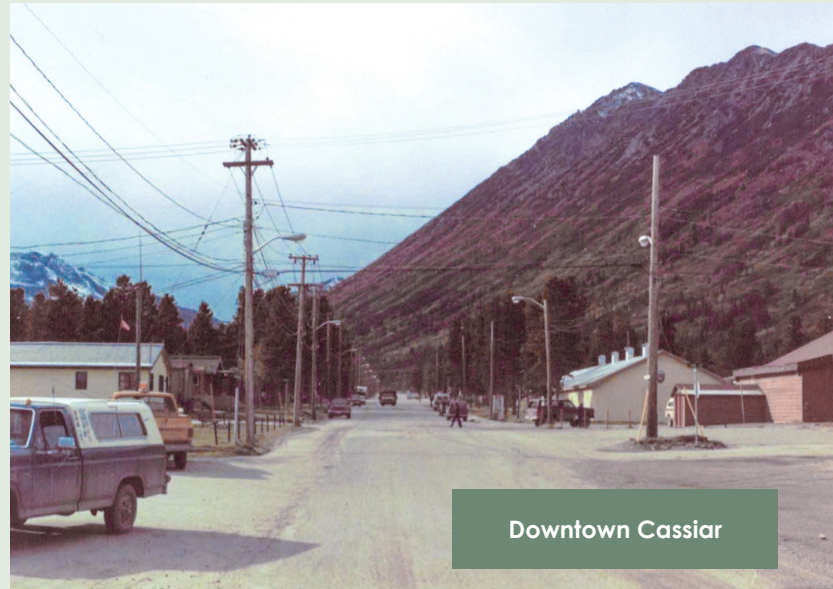
Cassiar slag pile

Cassiar was an enormous asbestos mine. It opened in 1952, and by the 70's had a population of 1500. There were two schools, two churches, a hotel, and well-developed recreation facilities. However, by 1992 the mine had shut down for a variety of reasons. There was really no other industry there. There were large deposits of jade but very little mining had taken place and Jade City had not yet started. Most people worked for Cassiar Mines. There was an enormous slag pile right on the edge of town. I am sure the effect on people's health was enormous.

Our next stop was to visit John Neuyens, who was the local Social Services representative and knew which people living on the edge might be interested in earning cash. John said that both he and his wife would be interested in collecting as well!

Our last stop was at the small Indian Reservation on Highway 37 at Good Hope Lake. Gary at the Rec Centre had suggested that we stop there. This was a very poor reserve. They had a small school and a limited budget. As we arrived, two school board representatives from “down south “were leaving. They had come north by bus. School District budget.

The principal was a very nice non-native fellow, married to a local First Nation. We explained that we would pay cash for pine cones collected from squirrel caches and cuttings. He was very keen as he said they could not afford sports equipment, particularly hockey gear to play at the Cassiar ice rink. So we explained where to look and left him with cone sacks and tags. Gerhard and I left, drove across the highway by the Lake and proceeded to have lunch. Within a few minutes we saw the old school bus leave, filled with students heading out for cones! It worked out very well for the school. We paid them enough to purchase a lot of equipment. The only wrinkle was that on one occasion they went down to the old gold mining town, Centreville, and the kids found some explosives. The RCMP were called and the explosives were dealt with.



We camped just outside the town and in the evening we had dinner at the lone restaurant in town. At 7:00 that evening we went back to the Rec Centre where a couple about our age was waiting by our poster. Gerhard did a masterful job of convincing them to collect cones for us. This couple had little or no money, but seemed really keen and trustworthy. They were clients of John Neuyen and he did not speak highly of them, but we decided to take a gamble on them. We gave them all the information they needed as well as burlap sacks, tags, etc.

We went back to Dease Lake and met up with several locals whom had professed to be interested in collecting cones. There was one group of 4 boys who were living in Dease Lake but had literally escaped from their family farm on the road to Telegraph Creek. We set them up with sacks, and said we would meet them at the local coffee shop the following day. The next day they had several sacks, most of which were good, but quite a few had obviously been picked from dead trees and had significantly lower seed counts. We explained this to them and told them we would pay them anyway.

Well, that was a wise decision! Not only did their quality improve but the word got out that we actually paid cash on delivery! We were paying \$35 for a 60 liter sack.

The next thing we knew, we had numerous people wanting to collect. Within a few days, every time we rolled into town people were running up to us with sacks of cones. We would often stay at the Northway Motel. It got so bad that we would drive on a back road into town to the motel and enter through the rear door, so we could be able to get a shower and dinner in peace.

We were starting to accumulate a lot of bags of cones and we needed to find a suitable storage location. We had noticed a log cabin down the road from the Northway Motel. The windows were boarded up, as was the door, and this was obviously a work in progress. Next door was a double-wide mobile home with a gravel truck parked outside. We knocked on the door and met Orville Mc Lean and his First Nation's wife. They were a very nice couple. Orville, like the majority of people in Dease Lake, worked as a contractor for the Ministry of Highways. When we told him we were looking for a storage facility for a few weeks, he readily agreed and would only charge a nominal fee.

Dease Lake was a small town of about 400 people, most of who worked for Highways, BC Hydro or some form of government. A certain percentage were guide outfitters or gold miners and prospectors.

In 1969, W.A.C. Bennett decided that a railroad should be built from an existing line at Fort St James to Dease Lake (660 km) and then eventually to Cassiar to open up the north for access to the wealth of minerals. It was abandoned in 1977, after using up twice the budget and still being nowhere near completion. However, the sub-grade was highly visible when were there. They also built a mammoth airport with a 6,000 foot runway. This has proven useful however to fly in workers for some of the large mines that developed in the area later.

In the 1870's there was the Cassiar gold rush near Centreville and McDame Creek. In 1877 they found a 72 oz. gold nugget at McDame Creek, the largest ever found up to that time.

There were quite a few smaller ghost towns around Dease Lake and Cassiar, and when Gerhard and I were wandering around in the bush we would find all kinds of artifacts. I brought home part of a butter box and a couple of rusted out porcelain cups.

We moved between Forty Mile Flats and Cassiar, a 200 km distance, picking up cones from our "contractors" and taking them to one of our storage sites. We also spent a good portion of each day picking cones ourselves. The terrain was flat with usually minimal vegetation. As time went on, the squirrels got much busier knocking down cones. After a while we got to recognize their habits, as well as where they would choose to cache their cones.

As I mentioned earlier, the caches were normally 50 metres apart or less. They often put their caches in brush piles, between small piles of downed logs or around old stumps. Sometimes they would leave pile of "rough cut" cones in a pile then clean them up before moving them to their final destination! In very mossy locations you could see, and follow their little trails to their caches. Their "haul roads" were easy to follow, and the direction of travel easy to establish because when there was a junction you followed the "V". They were good loggers; they almost always hauled down hill.

When convenient, we would stay and eat in Dease Lake or Cassiar, and when not we would stay in the camper and cook our own food. When I say "we", I mean Gerhard. He was a far better cook than I. Normally, however, we would make up our own breakfast and lunch. Gerhard finally overcame his dislike of peanut butter.

On September 8th we got a message at the Northway Hotel in Dease Lake that Frank Barnard would be arriving in Dease Lake the next day, after arranging some collections in the Yukon. I phoned back to his hotel in Whitehorse, and said to keep his eye out for a truck and camper parked just north of Dease Lake where we planned to collect some cones. The following day, at mid-afternoon, he found us in the bush. He looked at the cones, and seemed happy. That evening, he insisted on buying us dinner and a few beer. After a while, the 'Grey Fox' started to waiver about the price he quoted us originally! I was having none of that! I said, " Well then, we will get Reid Collins to process the seed for us and sell the seed directly to a Swedish buyer". He quickly changed his mind and agreed to the original price!

A couple of days later, there was a message at the hotel to phone Bob Sedeyco at CBC in Whitehorse. I phoned from the phone booth outside the restaurant. He explained that he interviewed people in the north doing



different things, and Gary from the Cassiar Rec Centre thought it would be interesting for folks. So he gave me a list of questions he would ask and suggested I review them first, and he would call back in an hour. Gerhard and I reviewed the questions and an hour later we had a nice conversation to explain what species we collected, where they were collected from, where the seed would be processed, and where the final destination would be.

We didn't really think much more about it until a few days later when Frank Portlock, from Forestry Canada, showed up to certify the cone collection. Many countries in Europe require that seed be Certified under OECD. The OECD Seed Scheme facilitates international seed trade by providing a framework for certifying the varietal identity and purity of agricultural seeds and tree seeds. Frank Portlock's job was to verify the location that seed was collected from. We had agreed to meet at the T&M Hotel in Cassiar. Frank Portlock and his wife, Marnie, had just come down from Whitehorse where he had certified another of Frank Barnard's collections.

Actually, I had put our collection in our name in case things went sideways with Frank Barnard. Frank Portlock relayed that he'd had a very animated phone call from Frank Barnard about my CBS interview. Apparently I had really upset a fellow named Bud Whimp in Watson Lake. Bud was a well known buffoon who owned a large portion of businesses in the area, and was well-known as a loud mouth bully. As far as he was concerned cone collection throughout the region was part of his kingdom and he didn't want any interlopers on his turf. I guess he phoned Frank Barnard in a rage, and said my interview was filled with inaccurate information.

After that call, Frank Barnard phoned Frank Portlock. Frank P just happened to be in Whitehorse still so he went to the CBC studio and listened to the interview. Frank P told us that what I had said was 100% accurate and should cause no concern. That ended it. Frank Barnard occasionally mentioned it afterwards, grumbled, but did not make an issue of it. Frank P, Marnie, Gerhard and I had a great dinner and conversation. We all stayed at the hotel and met for breakfast.

After breakfast Frank and Marnie headed south, and we continued cone collecting. In the Cassiar area, our best pickers surprisingly were John Neuyens, from Social Services, and his wife. It was likely because these were people who loved the outdoors, and it gave them a chance to make some spare cash. We spent an evening with his family and I remember their young boy showed us how to make "Indian ice cream." The cone pickers were still doing well, and the Dease Lake folk were generally the most productive.

I had previously read a book called "Notes from the Century Before," by Edward Hoagland (1966) about the whole area around the Stikine, and it was interesting to see that many of the families mentioned in that book were the names of many of our pickers. Our ritual of sneaking into town on a backroad and in the rear door of the motel persisted. Once someone saw Gerhard's truck and camper, everyone knew we were in town and people were eager to sell their cones.

About 43 Km north of the village of Dease Lake, and 15 km after crossing the Dease River on Hy 37 there was a campsite called Mighty Moe's. It was situated on Cotton Lake, which was really an expansion of the Dease River. The area was also known as Moose Meadows. A large forest fire had burned much of the surrounding area, and in fact right through his campsite. There were a few cabins scattered around and some campsites, some with covered shelters. We had seen his advertisements on almost every bulletin board from Forty Mile Flats to Cassiar.



**Mighty Moe's Place** 

Spend some time with an active northern Trapper on beautiful Cotton Lake. Wilderness camping for trailers, tenters, motorhomes, Cabins, boats and canoes for rent. Guaranteed fishing. Hunting and guiding. Tackle, Haida beadwork, driftwood and moosehorn crafts for sale. Coffee Shop.

Highway 37  
32 miles South of Cassiar, 43 miles North of Dease Lake, Box 212, Cotton Lake Cassiar, B.C. V0C 1E0

Come as a stranger and leave as a friend for home is where you hang your hat.

your hosts Mr. & Mrs. Mighty Moe & son Dewayne

After having passed it several times we decided to stop in. He invited us in for coffee, which was some very chewy, boiled coffee. Sanitation was not a high priority here, and we declined to have dinner.



We made an arrangement to store cones in one of his shelters. He was a short, very affable fellow, and although the ad below mentions a wife and son, I believe they no longer were there in 1984. We would drop cones off occasionally, and have the obligatory cup of coffee. He always tried to sell us on his \$39.95 fishing tour of Cotton Lake and the Dease River, which stupidly we declined.

On our last visit to Moe to pick up cones we arrived around 9:00 in the morning. There was a car there with Alaska license plates. When we went inside Moe had just finished cooking breakfast for an American who had stayed overnight. On his plates were

the blackest pancakes you could ever imagine!

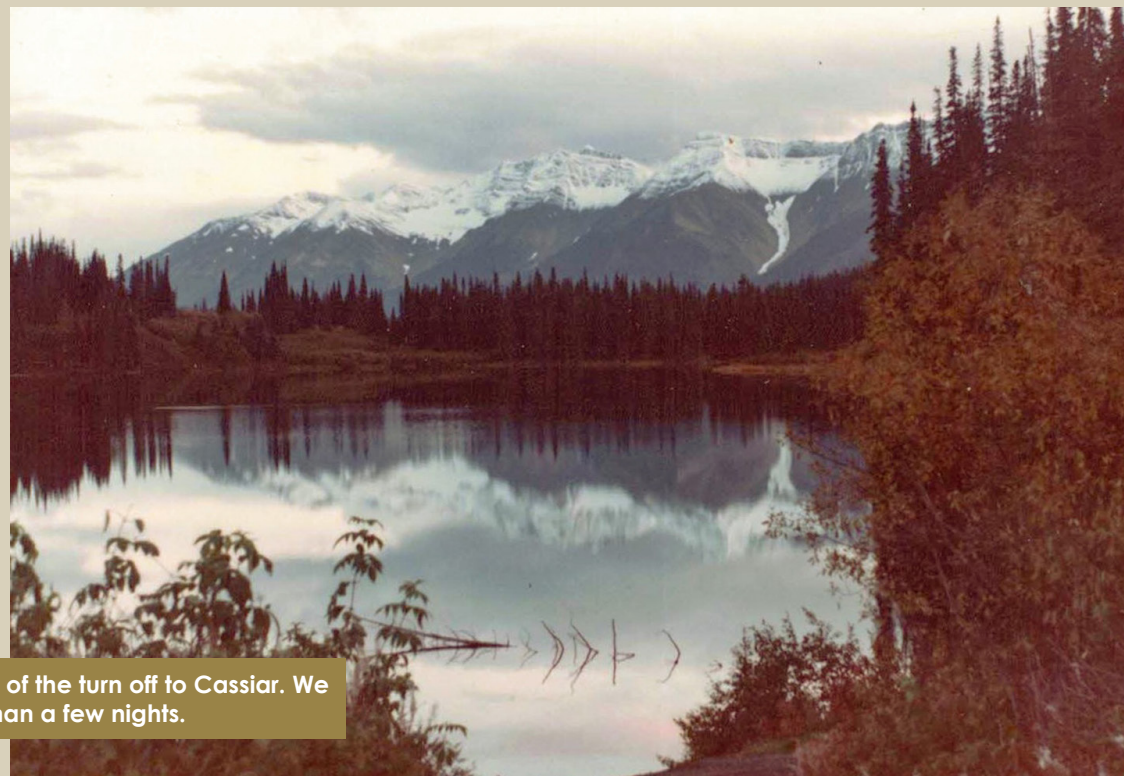
We chatted with Moe and the American for a while, and Moe decided to try to sell the American his “Fishing Tour” package. The American said, “So Moe, what kind of fish would I likely catch?” Moe replied, “Well, there’s your grayling, and Bull trout, and cutthroat, and if you were lucky maybe a burbot.” The American said, “Oh, burbot, that’s a freshwater cod isn’t it? And they get quite large?” Moe replied, “Well, put it this way — last year we got one so big that we propped it’s mouth open and used it for an outhouse for a whole year.” We all laughed.

We picked up our cones from Moe, paid him his modest fee and took them to our Dease Lake storage area at Orville McLean’s. He seemed sad to see us leave. As it got closer to the end of September, the snow was getting much lower on the hills, and on a couple of occasions we had wet snow fall on us at lake level.

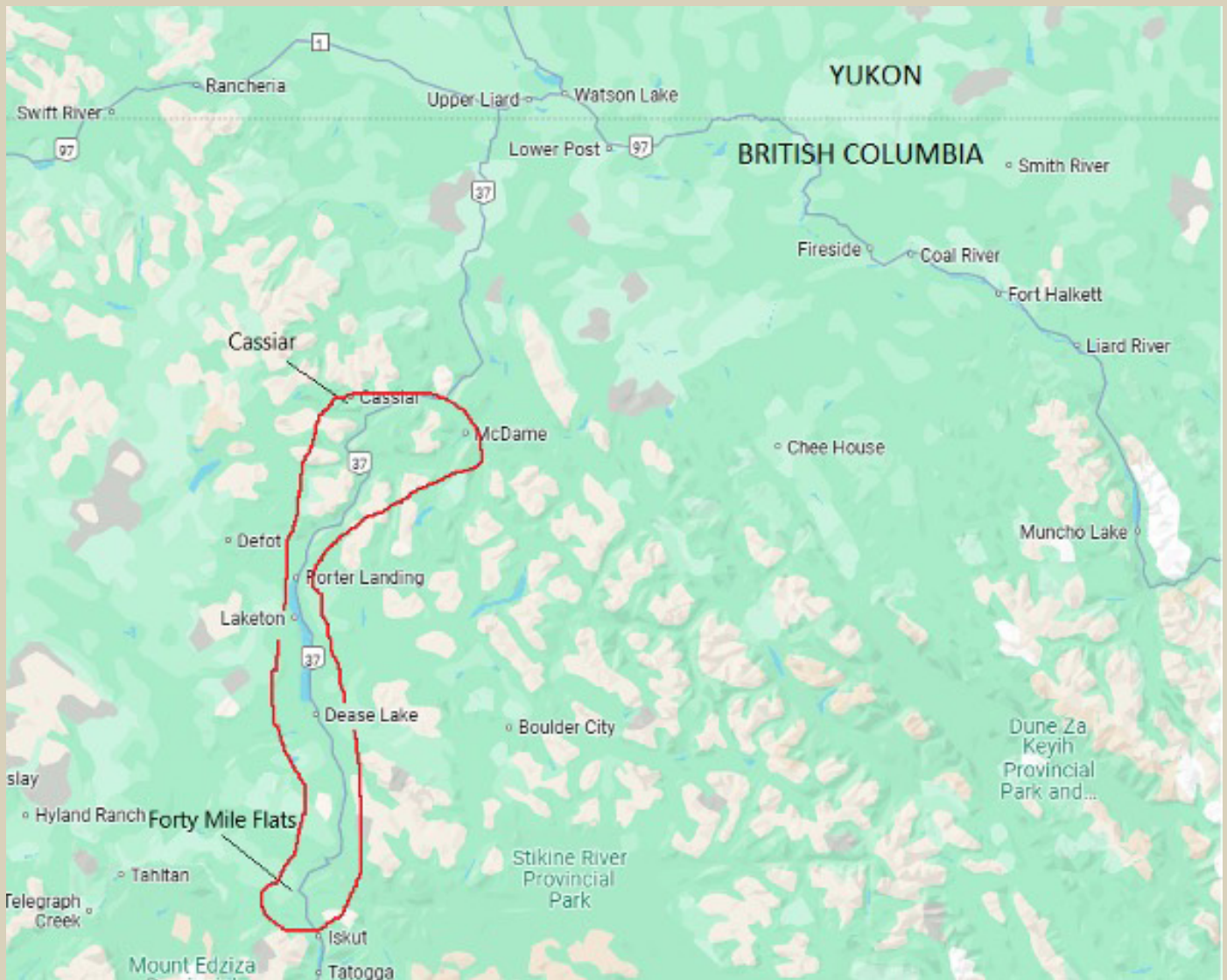
We got a call from Frank Barnard a few days later, and he said his trucker would be passing through Dease Lake within the week and to make sure to have all the cones at the Dease location. We talked to Orville and he agreed to take his gravel truck up to Cassiar and pick up the cones from the north, which were stored at the Rec Centre. On a Sunday, we led Orville up to Cassiar and we loaded the cones.

Once there were loaded, Orville took off like a shot, and we couldn’t catch him on the drive back to Dease! He had the truck partially unloaded by the time we arrived. We picked for a couple of more days, and the snow became more and more abundant. We decided to head home. We settled up with Orville, and he assured us that he would look after the loading.

With somewhat heavy hearts we left Dease Lake.



Simmons Lake. About 15 km south of the turn off to Cassiar. We camped here more than a few nights.



Lodgepole pine collection area in 1984.

The area is outlined in red. Forty Mile Flats to Cassiar (approximately 200 km).