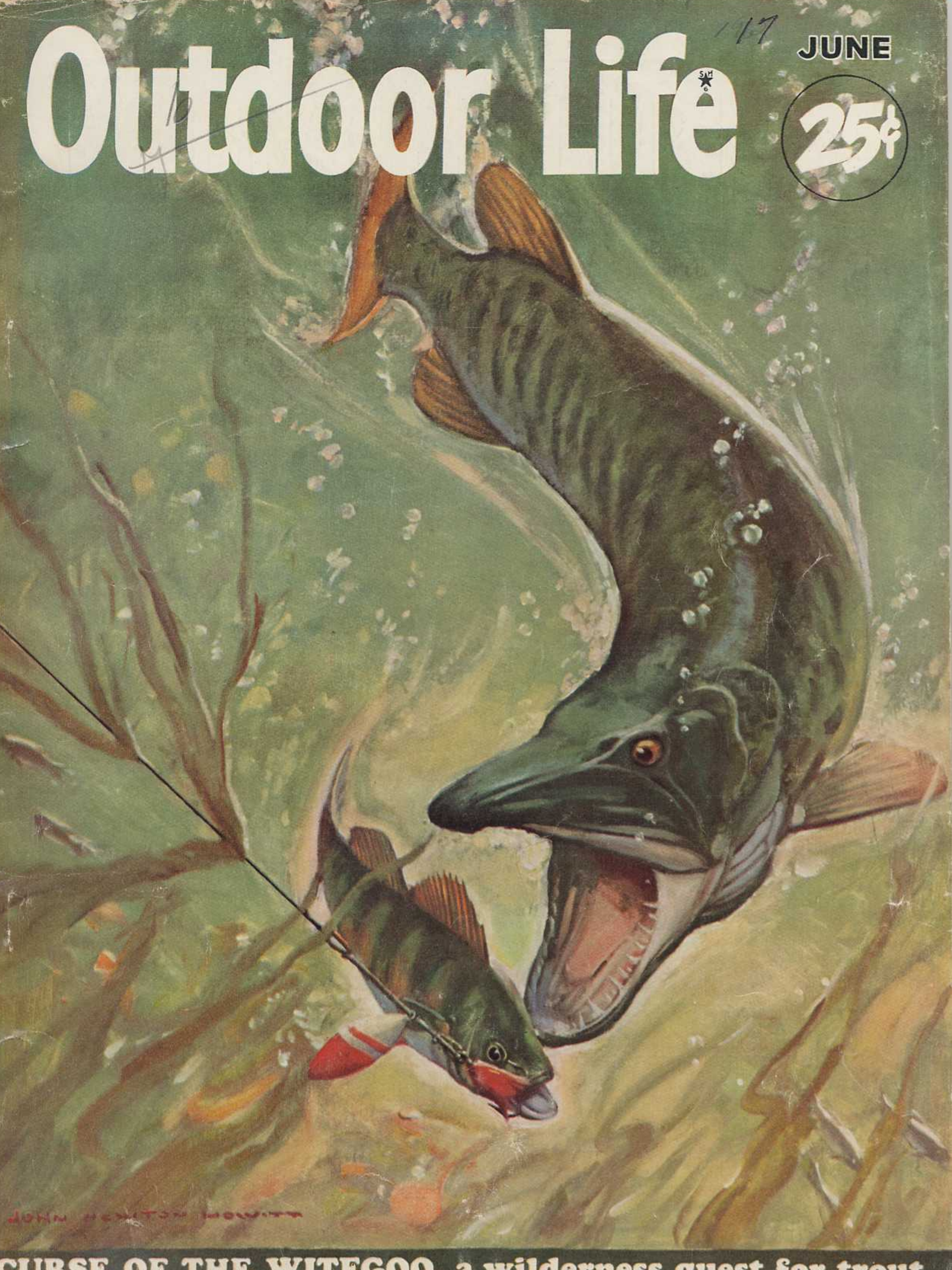
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CURSE OF THE WITEGOO, a wilderness quest for trout

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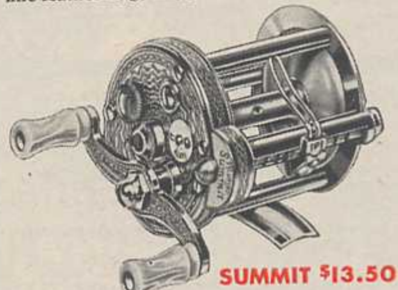

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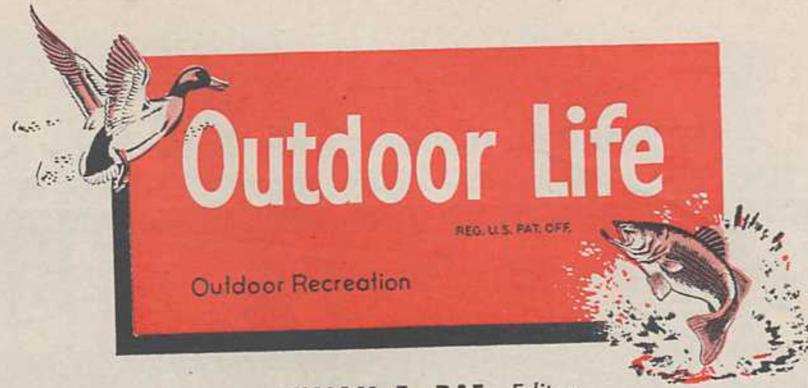

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The dying Cree girl's family wait stoically just outside the tent. Later her foster father broke down and sobbed out his grief

Curse of the Witegoo

by ROB F. SANDERSON

This is the story of a fishing trip to northern Ontario where a demon Indian god guards a wilderness lake filled with mackerel-sized trout.

It all began in the summer of 1946 when Dr. John A. Tasche, my fishing and flying side-kick, intercepted an end-of-the-rainbow tale. Rumors whispered that a bush pilot and his prospector landed on this lake and, fishing from the pontoons with a hand line and bacon bait, tied into five-pound brookies by the bushel. The lake was called Sutton. After that one day's fishing, the pilot moved to British Columbia, and the prospector never came out of the bush. That's as far as the rumors went. We had a name but no lake. A close search of maps of the area showed no lake labeled Sutton. We began making guarded inquiries of everyone we knew who was familiar with the territory.

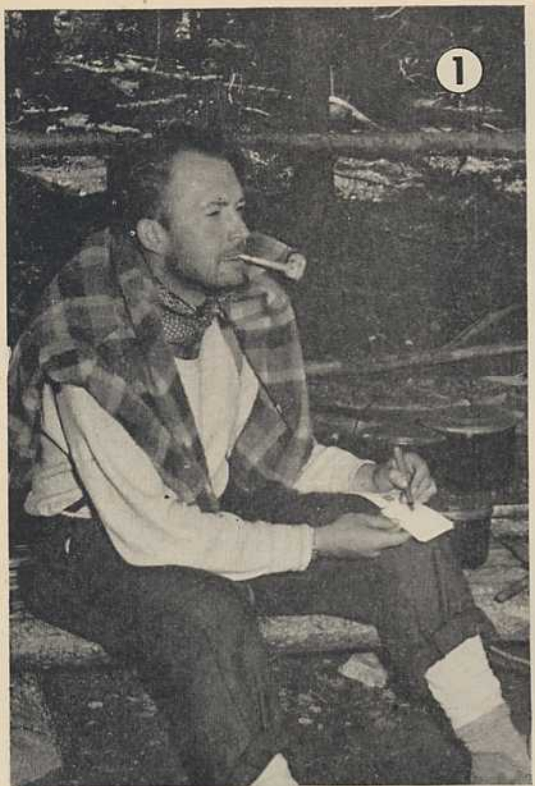
Finally the fur-trade department of the Hudson's Bay Company located it. They said Sutton Lake is the source of the short Sutton River, which drains into Hudson Bay between Cape Henrietta Maria and Weenusk Post. We got a more detailed map of this territory, but it didn't help much. It showed a straight line for the river and a generalized ellipse for the lake. Vague hachures indicated a narrow range of uplands about the lake. For many miles south of these, the map was a vacuum of white sparsely veined with dotted lines for rivers. The whole set-up was potent stuff for our imaginations, as good trout waters are generally believed to end at the southern edge of the muskeg wastes.

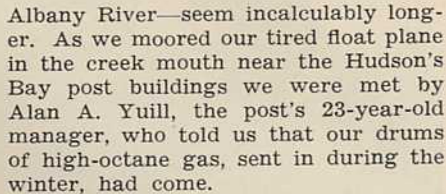
"An entirely new trout country," John enthused. "Maybe hotter than the Nipigon of 1910. Maybe a new world record." Swearing each other to secrecy, we vowed to make the trip as soon as better maps would permit.

In March, 1947, a new chart, W.A.C. No. 181, was issued, but the word UNRELIABLE overlay vast empty spaces. It was 1949 before a chart giving sufficient detail to warrant planning the trip became available. That winter we assembled a pared-down outfit that, when spring came, proved too heavy a load for John's Fairchild 24W monoplane.

At last, in June, 1951, soon after the northern ice break-up, we sat high in the sky behind a newly installed 185-horsepower helicopter engine which was to power our long-postponed flight. Customs clearance at a Minnesota-Ontario border lake was efficient and brief, and our next stop was far to the northeast at the outpost town of Nakina, Ontario, where we were to leave civilization behind. While we refueled we were briefed by Chuck Austin, veteran pilot of Austin Airways, on the route to Fort Hope.

Northwesterly head winds and detours around turbulent showers made our hundred-odd mile hop to Fort Hope —on Eabamet Lake, just north of the





Albany River—seem incalculably longer. As we moored our tired float plane in the creek mouth near the Hudson's Bay post buildings we were met by Alan A. Yuill, the post's 23-year-old manager, who told us that our drums of high-octane gas, sent in during the winter, had come.

A young Indian arrived just as we'd finished securing the ship and delivered an invitation for the three of us to lunch at the near-by dwelling of Vital Brisson, the only other white resident in the area. Once a multimillionaire lumberman, now guardian of an inactive mine, Brisson met us on the path and pridefully showed us his garden. Near each plant was a worn-out utensil, ready to protect its ward from the almost nightly frosts.

Until now we hadn't mentioned our plans lest someone upset them by insisting our small plane was not equal to such a trip. But during lunch we divulged our route and destination. Brisson frowned immediately and recalled a story, current in the summer of 1949, that a 600-horsepower Norseman bush freighter had flown into Sutton via the

1 I write a note to leave behind, saying who we are, in case the plane should crash

2 Our far-north objective—Lake Sutton—looms from the haze. Will it meet all expectations?

3 Vital Brisson warns us of the lake's forbidding reputation. "Indians fear it," he says

4 The Indians arrive by motor canoe to report that a young girl is dying. Can we help?

5 This pike took three of my lures. With spreader and disgorger I retrieve them all

6 I place the note in a bottle wrapped in shiny foil and tie it on the Norseman's wreckage

7 John nets a fighting brookie while trying out his spinning tackle off the bouldery shore

8 Al Yuill, standing on drums, helps John refuel after our perilous return to Fort Hope

longer but safer Weenusk–Hudson Bay route and had met almost immediate disaster. Within a day after landing, the ship and its entire outfit burned completely.

While this talk passed across large mugs of steaming coffee, we were interrupted by a clamor from the sled dogs outside. A motor canoe had arrived from the Cree village across the lake, and already a spokesman for the tribe was hurrying up the path. Al went to the door and exchanged a few sober syllables with the courier, then turned to us.

"A young Indian girl is dying at the village," he said to John, having learned earlier that he is a doctor.

While John hurried to the plane for his emergency bag, Brisson motioned me aside.

"This lake where you plan to go has a peculiar reputation," he said ominously. "The Indians fear it. Only one man has been able to trap there successfully, and he drank only spring water. Not water from the lake, mind you. Spring water. By the way, do you have a good-luck charm with you? Myself, I would never go on a long trip without one."

I was wearing an old flying cap, one which has roofed me in cockpits on five continents. Thinking that the cap might qualify, I mentioned it in extravagant terms. Brisson's wistful concern abated at my assurance, and I quickly collected my cameras and went to join John at the canoe.

We speeded across the lake to the Cree village, where the entire population stood around one group of tents. We were escorted immediately to the patient. After a short examination, John announced that the girl had died minutes before our arrival. We assembled in front of the tents for an informal inquest, interpreting through Johnny Yesño, the financial wizard of the Treaty Indians, who reputedly has amassed a fortune as an independent trader, trapper, fisherman, and general wheeler and dealer.

"Possibly a cerebral hemorrhage," John diagnosed. "Without an autopsy, it's impossible to be more definite."

"Witegoo—that's what Cree people say," said Johnny. He pronounced the

(continued on page 73)

CURSE OF THE WITEGOO

(continued from page 23)

word "Wit-ee-goo," drawing out the last syllable in a moody sigh.

"What's a witegoo?" I asked.

"Evil spirit," Al explained. "Maybe you've heard it called windigo, which is the Ojibway name. The Indians hereabouts have more evil spirits than you Americans have television sets."

"Bad spirits all around," Johnny said soberly. "Catch Indian anytime not careful—maybe white man, too."

We had a short, interesting visit with Johnny, and asked him about the lake we intended to visit. "Plenty trout," he told us. "But bad country. No like men."

We went back to Fort Hope and refueled our plane. Figuring a 10 percent reserve, we needed gas for a 630-mile flight. In addition we wanted as much more fuel as we could carry, so that we could do some exploring. When we'd filled the fuselage tank and the two wing tanks, we loaded an extra keg and a half in the cabin. Then we hurried to the post kitchen for supper. After we'd eaten, Al cleared his throat and spoke rather solemnly.

"The Indians are worried about you. You were kind, and they want to protect you. They claim this witegoo has something to do with your plane."

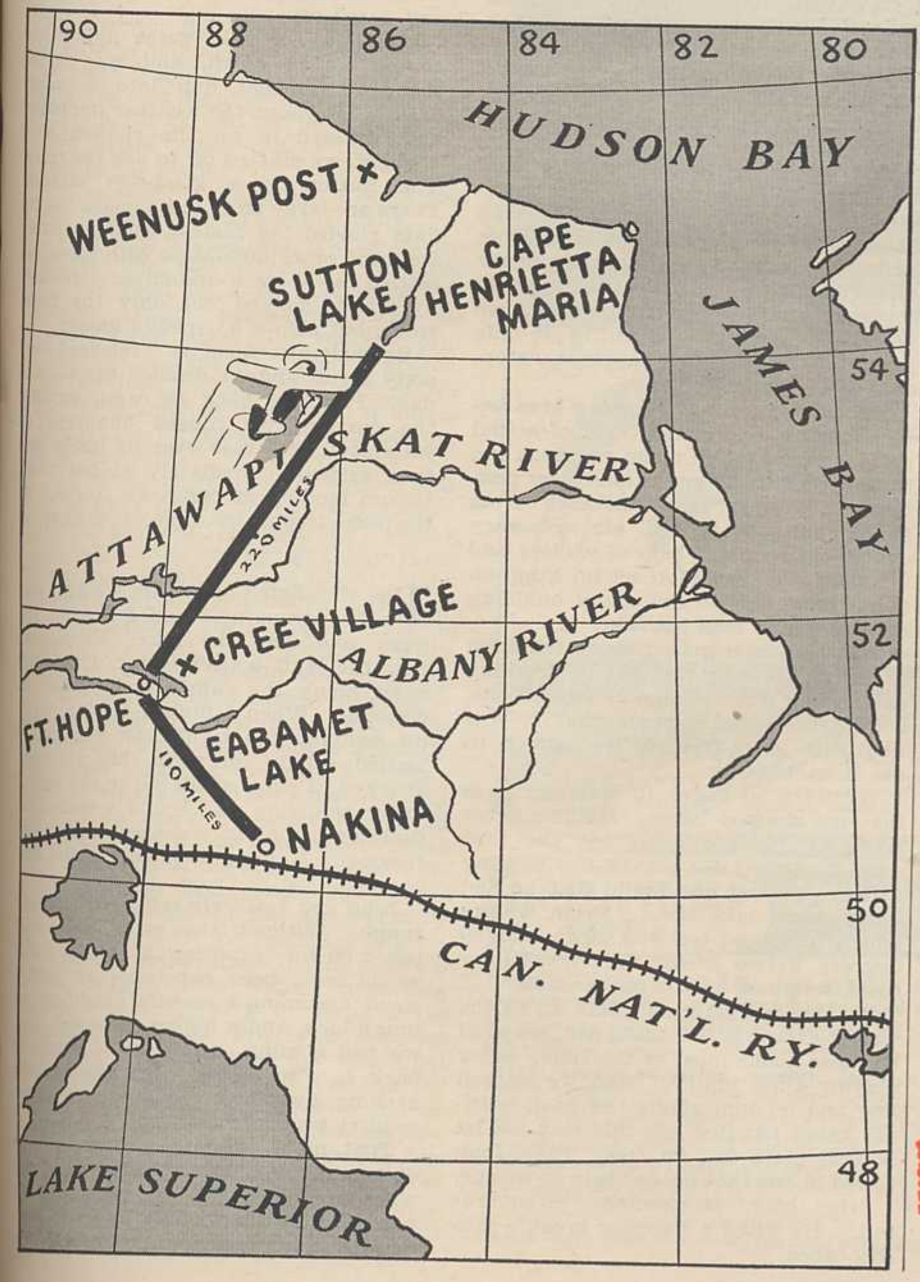
"What could it possibly have to do with our plane?" I asked.

"The girl was stricken just about the time they heard your engine," he replied. "They claim the spirit of the Lake Sutton country is evil to men, and since it is a spirit of the air it positively detests airplanes. The dead girl's real father—the old Indian you met is her foster father — once visited this country and that's why she was chosen to die. They've built up quite a case."

"But we were almost sixty miles away when the attack came," John protested.

"At that distance these people sometimes can distinguish between sounds made by different planes of the same make and engine type," Al informed us.

"Acute hearing doesn't make them clairvoyants," John scoffed. "Kid stuff.



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Let them lose sleep about evil spirits—not me."

The subject was shelved.

The weather cleared during the night and the freshly washed sun had barely risen when we taxied out for departure. Before we took off I noticed deposits of red lead along the wing root, but I didn't mention it since I figured that the tank must have overflowed at last refueling. We tightened our safety belts, let the ship weathervane into the wind, and opened the throttle. The plane broke water sluggishly, and we spiraled to a safe altitude before heading out on course.

The terrain changed forty minutes north. Irregular granite uplands sank beneath an endless prairie of muskeg. We nosed to 7,000 feet, and the watery wastes below shrank to a jumble of clouded mirror fragments. Some distance north of a large bend in the rapids-choked Attawapiskat River we began to slip off our course.

At first we suspected a wind shift, but an erratic swing in the compass soon warned that we were caught in an uncharted zone of magnetic disturbance. If the zone was broad we might become hopelessly lost for to save weight we'd left our sextant at Fort Hope. Ignoring the compass, we tried to keep a constant relative bearing to the sun.

The compass settled down at last and we resumed course uneasily. Ten minutes beyond our expectation the lake of our five-year quest emerged from under the distant haze—a narrow finger of silver pointing north between darkly forested bluffs. Throttling back, we descended and flew the entire 35-mile length of the sparkling sapphire waters at a 1,500-foot altitude.

We located a likely camping area before landing, and in the thrill of actual arrival we forgot all about witegoos and their nether-world operations. Our pontoons grounded some distance from shore, but we ferried all necessary equipment with the help of waders and a rubber boat and soon set up camp on a hill near one of the many bubbling springs which feed the lake.

This seemed a good time to tell John of Brisson's warning about drinking only spring water. Common sense alone, John felt, would indicate that it was relatively germ-free, so we agreed to use it exclusively.

We were so eager to wet our lines that we skipped lunch. Minutes after stringing his rod John felt the first vibrant strike. He played the fighting fish to the boat and found that he had a six-pound lake trout. From waters which averaged ten feet deep and 50 degrees F. we reeled in several gray trout weighing up to ten pounds.

Because we returned them all to the water, except a few table fish, we used barbless hooks most of the time. After playing a fish until he tired, we slacked line and let him shake the hook without being handled. In this way we let several more fish go free. Then John reeled in one that needed help to escape.

"Hey, look," he shouted. "A squaretail." He lifted a flapping brookie into the canoe.

It was a brookie all right, but a G.I. issue. It was a drab olive-gray. Probably many of our previous catches, which had been smaller and livelier, were the same sort of brookies, but from their dull appearance we mistook them for grays. An absence of pinkish or speckled brilliance was characteristic of all the brook trout we caught in this region.

After creeling a couple of three-pounders for eating, we went back to camp by way of the anchored plane. A float plane is always vulnerable to natural hazards, and since shoals prevented our bringing the craft within reach of solid shore ties, we had to anchor it. We tested all lines and knots carefully. The anchor flukes caught deeply into the soft bottom where nothing short of a strong wind shift, we felt, would unseat them.

We gorged on a supper of broiled trout and dehydrated potatoes. Afterward we lay about the fire waiting for darkness. Owing to the far-north latitude and the June solstice, at 10 p.m. we could still see the placid lake dimple to sporadic trout rises. It was late when we zipped into our sleeping bags and dozed off.

The honk of wild geese flying low roused us at dawn, and we peered through the tent flap into a misty drizzle. By 9 a.m. the weather improved and, dressed in all the clothes we'd brought, we started off to fish the river. The Sutton is a good-size stream. There are large trout in its pools, but its flats yielded the fastest fishing. After frequent experimentation with lures, we settled on a black-and-silver streamer fly which hooked not only the most trout, but also a 5¼-pound lunker.

By early afternoon we'd released over sixty trout, and we decided to call it a day. Paddling back to camp against the current, we roused hundreds of waterfowl that rose over us lazily and then settled immediately at our rear. Before landing at camp we stopped at the plane to pick up some extra gear.

The ship listed under my weight, and a few drops of liquid fell from the wing root into the lake. Suspicious that the stuff wasn't water, I ran my hand along the fabric and sniffed it. Gasoline. When I flicked on the cockpit switches the right-tank gas gauge settled solidly on zero. My stomach dropped. I cut a small slit in the fabric under the wing and found a leak at a fuel-line coupling between wing and fuselage. Gallons of precious fuel had escaped.

John and I soberly refigured our fuel range. Without the extra gas we'd taken on for "exploration," our position would have been hopeless. As things stood, assuming a no-wind condition, no tough luck, and a higher air speed than we had coming in, we could make it back to Fort Hope. But any rubbernecking by plane around the near-by country was definitely out.

That night we talked over our predicament. We agreed that since we were already on the lake we would explore the immediate area by boat. But, despite that conservative resolve, I'd

slept my last sound night's sleep. From then on, the slightest noise snapped me from restles slumber to bright-eyed wakefulness.

On the third morning we drifted down the Sutton once again. Fishing seemed to be strictly a trout proposition, so when my spinning line separated from its Devon lure after a solid strike, I didn't know what to expect.

I then tied on another artificial, but soon another savage strike broke my line. Taking a light bait-casting rod, I worked several minutes before drawing the third strike. The line held, and I stepped ashore to beach a thrashing northern. The jointed lure was firmly trebled in his jaw, and, using a spreader to look down his maw, I saw my first and second lures still firmly imbedded. I promptly retrieved them with a disgorger.

The time came to land on a sandbar and cook a couple of fresh trout for lunch. We'd barely cleaned the bones when dark clouds inflating themselves rapidly above the horizon announced an approaching storm. We doused our ashes and set off for camp.

No sooner had we arrived than the wind shifted and began to whip itself into gusts of great intensity. The tent cowered, light rope ends stood out like windsocks, and the lid blew off the stew kettle. John ran to the lake to look at the plane.

"The anchor's dragging," I heard him yell. "She's heading for the rocks."

I sprinted for the boat, sliding aboard behind John, and we paddled furiously for the escaping craft. At times the anchor caught temporarily and we gained a few yards. But the gale propelled the ship apace with our approach. We strained to catch her before the fragile aluminum pontoons crumpled against the jagged shore rocks, but our gain was slow.

An increasingly bouldery bottom near shore gave better hold to the anchor, and the ship's drift slowed. We overtook her only a little more than thirty yards from the granite-fanged shore. John leaped to a pontoon and was at the controls in a flash. The starter whined, the engine coughed, and, with a terrific blast of power, the ship shot to safety.

The propeller blast caught me obliquely and blew my good-luck cap into the whitecaps, but it didn't worry me at the moment. Alone in the boat, I was unable to navigate into the wind. I fought grimly to reach the least formidable section of shore, and managed to beach the boat. When the gale subsided I relaunched the boat, and John taxied over to pick me up just as a pouring rain began.

Fishing Sutton Lake itself was our next project. We waited just long enough next morning to be sure the weather would be fair, and then we shoved our rubber boat out into what we knew was literally a bathtub for trout. Trout were everywhere, and almost anything with a hook drew strikes. Though John and I have a standing rule that when one hooks a fish the other reels in, we frequently played fish simultaneously. When our tired arms finally

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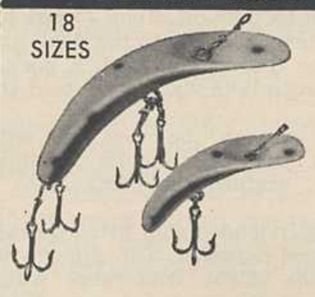

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laid down the rods early that afternoon, each of us had tossed back over $100 worth of trout.

Then we did a little exploring. We landed on the east shore to examine the rusting skeleton of the ill-fated Norseman plane that Brisson had told us about. Then we walked back into the bush to look over the near-by country, and sighted a brush wolf in yellow summer coat. Along the hillside above the lake we came upon the charred remains of a trapping camp. The rusting barrels of a carbine and a .22 rifle lay among the ashes.

Next day we moved south to a bay and set up camp on a level gravel beach near a spring. Then we went fishing. I tied into a brookie weighing five pounds fourteen ounces, but he proved to be a loner. The fishing was slower than previously.

Since we'd already explored much of the lake and river, and our short gas supply prohibited expeditions to outlying waters, we talked over plans for leaving. Living in the shadow of impending misfortune was wearisome, and our thread of luck was too frayed to risk unnecessary straining.

By morning the ceiling was high and the visibility good. We quickly agreed to skip the two additional days of fishing we'd planned. I wrote a typically trite "explorer's note," giving all information in case we went down en route to Fort Hope, put the note in a bottle wrapped in shiny aluminum foil, and hung it on the Norseman wreck.

We were ready to say farewell to Sutton. But as the plane vaned into the wind prior to take-off, John loosed his seat belt, hopped out onto the float, and returned to the cockpit with a pocket cup filled with lake water. He held the cup high.

"To the witegoo," he cried, and, with the air of satisfying a long-contained repression, drained the contents at a gulp.

Our lightly loaded ship lifted quickly and hastened skyward. Off either wing tip lay the silent wilderness which might hoard the record trout of our hopes, but now this country was farther beyond reach than ever. We ruddered the nose to the course, climbed above the muskeg, and leveled off at 6,000 feet. John adjusted the mixture control to economize on fuel.

Mottled clouds moving southeast across the desolate wastes below warned us to expect no assistance from the wind. But the engine gauges read normal, we flew through the magnetically disturbed zone without confusion, and the flight proceeded under control. But we faced one big problem, and it stuck in my throat like a fishbone.

This was the essential transfer of fuel from the fuselage tank to the left wing tank. Fuselage fuel could not be fed directly into the engine, and tank-to-tank transfer was impossible while the receiving tank was feeding the engine. To transfer fuel by stopping somewhere along the way would be to risk a crack-up on the notoriously treacherous waters of some shallow muskeg lake. Several gallons of our priceless gas would also be consumed in take-off and climb afterward. Finally I thought of a method which both of us hoped would do the trick.

When the left gauge read nearly empty I began pumping fuel from the fuselage to the empty—and leaky—right tank. As I did so I saw droplets of leaked gas gather on the trailing edge of the right wing and vanish into the slip stream. But just before the left tank went dry I switched the engine to the right tank and began pumping gas furiously into the left.

Either the transfer was too slow, or the leakage too great, but before the fuselage tank pumped dry the right tank began sputtering. The starved engine coughed and spurted, and the ship lost altitude. I pumped frantically as the altimeter unwound: 5,500, 5,000, 4,500. At 4,000 feet the pump sucked air and the transfer was complete. The engine cut in, smoothed, and we purred along thankfully at 4,000 feet until Eabamet Lake appeared in the distance.

The gas gauge still had a wiggle in it as we descended in a wide arc over the trim white buildings of Fort Hope, creased the blue water, and rode to shore on wings of spray. Al threw us a line and we made fast for refueling. As the left wing tank swallowed two twelve-gallon kegs with room to spare, Al remembered something.

"The old man who plays Ouija with the witegoo asked about you this morning," he said. "He told me not to expect you if your ship didn't fly in today."

I glanced at John, who was nursing the last drops from the gas hose. Silently I wondered what awful things might have happened had we stayed on at Sutton for additional fishing following John's defiant toast to the witegoo. Would we have discovered giant trout? Or would we have met our end, as the leathery old Indian predicted? Did my good-luck cap or our drinking the spring water have anything to do with our fate?

Further speculation will have to be done by someone else. John and I, more than ever, are strictly trout men. Record witegoos aren't in our line. THE END

Two-in-One Fly Reel

The convenience of an automatic fly reel is combined with the best features of a single-action job in a new low-cost, lightweight reel of aluminum and stainless steel. A ratchet-type trigger action controlled by the little finger permits smooth, fast take-up with the hand in casting position and gives the fisherman complete command of his line at all times. An adjustable-tension drag disengages for smooth take-up when reeling in.

Bird's-Nest Tweezers

A handy pair of tweezers with bent-over points, specially designed for unsnarling backlashes, is now available through tackle dealers. Small enough to fit any tackle-box tray compartment, it's a useful tool to have along when a seemingly hopeless bird's-nest snarls up your reel.