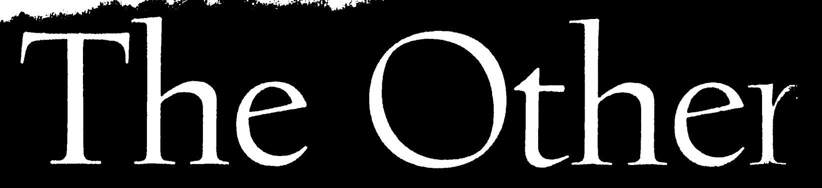


SEASONAL VIEW

Two visions of White Deer Lake, where Cyrus McCormick II and Cyrus Bentley built a butlered wilderness compound in the early 1900's. **ABOVE:** The dock where guests boarded to reach island lodges back in the day. **OPPOSITE:** A sunny afternoon on snowshoes, February 2006.

McCormick Place

Rich dudes and their parasol-toting ladies once roamed this patch of U.P. outback. We don snowshoes and packs to find out why, if these kings of industry could afford to travel anywhere, they hung out here.

TEXT BY **JEFF SMITH**

TODD ZAWISTOWSKI. OPPOSITE: SUPERIOR VIEW PHOTO.

In Chicago, a venue called McCormick Place commands a high profile in America's great city by the lake. The largest convention space in the nation, each day McCormick Place draws thousands of people who set up their booths, pitch their wares and schmooze like there's no tomorrow. The building is a tribute to Robert R. McCormick, legendary owner of the *Chicago Tribune* and one of the nation's earliest media moguls.

But what few conventioneers know is there's another expansive McCormick place. A place with anonymity, not fame; peace, not frenzy; nature, not concrete.

Chicago's McCormick Place presents 2.2 million square feet of convention space. But the other McCormick place presents 735 million square feet—26 square miles—of Huron Mountain wilderness. The McCormick Wilderness, as it's named, was conceived by a cousin of Robert's, Cyrus McCormick II, a man who, along with his friend Cyrus Bentley, likewise erected a Chicago empire, an empire built upon the grain reaper McCormick's father invented, an empire called International Harvester.

This story is about a three-day winter excursion to explore that lesser known McCormick place—now a public tract in Michigan's Upper Peninsula—and a trail, named the Bentley Trail, that traces through its heart. The trail ran through the woods from the McCormick compound north for 37 miles to Henry Ford's place in the Huron Mountain Club. Back in the day, the Huron Mountains were a sort of county-sized country club for some of America's wealthiest industrial kings.

Our mission is to use the magic of snow and solitude to help discover why this hilly domain of forest, swamp, river and lake casts a spell over those who know it. We'll snowshoe to the site where Cyrus McCormick II and Cyrus Bentley built their loggy, butlered island compound in the early 1900's, continue on to our camp on Bulldog Lake, then hike out to a set of waterfalls on the West Branch of the Yellow Dog River that the two men cherished. On our third day we'll snowshoe back to civilization. We'll carry out only what we carried in, unlike Cyrus McCormick II, who shipped a 24-ton boulder from here to Chicago to reside at his wife's grave. It was a boulder she enjoyed sunning herself on.

February 27 arrives, and at 5 a.m. our McCormick amigos are already knocking at the door. Photographer Todd Zawistowski and I are heading out with experienced McCormick Wilderness hiker Tom Foye and his friend, Marquette police detective Gregg St. John. As a gift, they've brought along another pal, Father Al Mott, a young, burly man of the cloth from Sault Ste. Marie who has agreed to break trail until noon, at which point he'll turn back. We shake hands all around and throw packs in our SUV. A light snow drifts down from a darkness that begins where the blue-green glow of parking lot ends.

A 45-minute drive lies ahead, west on M-28 to Michigamme and then north on Peshekee Grade. On the way we pass a stream of headlights from early workers driving into Marquette and the iron mine near Negaunee and Ishpeming. But soon, the traffic thins and it's pretty much just our three vehicles, headlight-lit snow flakes and dark. As we drive, something Foye told me on the phone stays in my mind. I'd asked him about hanging our food to keep it from animals. "Not really a concern because where we are going, it's so harsh, there really are very few animals in winter," he said.

We gear up in a darkness just beginning to ease. The process is simple at this point, just snap on snowshoes, pull on our packs and grab our poles. Foye checks his truck's thermometer, -10 Fahrenheit. Father Al's offer to break trail is especially appreciated now, as we feel the drag of 60-pound packs on our shoulders and look at a foot of fresh snow on the trail.

We launch, and with each 100 yards the day brightens. Soon the sky glows with thin peach-hued clouds against a powder blue backdrop. We snowshoe along past giant pines loaded with fresh snow. I pause to push a pole into the snow—a good four feet on the level.

Snowflakes hang in the air, but they don't seem to fall from clouds, rather they simply crystallize from midair; suddenly there's a snowflake where before there was none. Foye, a former chemist with BASF who holds 19 patents, explains that that is exactly what happens when temps drop to zero around here.

Foye is the leader of our tribe, having done several trips into the McCormick Wilderness in winter and summer. He first heard of the McCormick about 10 years ago when he was a Boy Scout leader; a scout mother mentioned it. Always on the lookout for new places to take the troop, he was intrigued with the thought of a vast forest studded with lakes, but was surprised at how little information he could find. For starters, it was odd he'd never heard anybody speak of the McCormick

TRAIL TIME

FROM FAR LEFT: Cyrus McCormick II ready for adventure. Jeff Smith, snowshovel and spare snowshoes at the ready. Snow depths regularly reach 4 feet to 7 feet in the Huron Mountains, thanks to lake effect snows blowing in from Lake Superior and the area's elevation, which tops out just west of the McCormick Wilderness on Mount Arvon, 1,979 feet, and Mount Curwood, 1,978 feet, the two highest points in Michigan.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY TOM FOYE. TODD ZAWISTOWSKI. AARON PETERSON

Wilderness, even though he'd spent 23 years of his life in Marquette. And when he looked for background information, at first he could only find a skimpy publication from the United States Forest Service, which owns it. But then he found a copy of *Superior Heartland*, by Fred Rydholm. Rydholm's 850-page love note to U.P. life devotes significant portions to the McCormick compound, and specifically the Bentley Trail.

At the McCormick Camp, perfection coexisted equally with rusticity.

In the early decades of the 1900's, the trail we now walk was the main access to the McCormick camp, shepherding visitors and provisions. It remains as wide as a two-track and has kept its gentle grade. But cold can make everything difficult, and after a mile, the McCormick Wilderness claims one of our guys. Father Al suddenly feels nauseated. He stops, leans on his poles, looks pale. He rests for a bit then gives it another go, but after a couple of hundred yards he says he has to turn back. We bid him adieu and watch him walk slowly away. "Maybe we should send somebody with him," I suggest.

"He'll be okay," Foye says.

Months later when I check in with Foye, he tells me it turned out that Father Al was dropping quickly into hypothermia and had already developed frost bite on his feet—one of which turned black on the bottom before healing. Though Father Al grew up Yooper, he underestimated the conditions here and dressed too light.

We continue on, and the nature show does likewise. Every stump is topped with a 3-foot-high top hat of snow. Snow covers every pond in great pillowing blankets. At one point when ducking under a slanting tree, I tip over and wallow like a dinosaur stuck in a tar pit trying to get up, but can't until I take off my pack.

By noon we reach the southern shore of White Deer Lake, and break for lunch. The crumbling foundation of a horse shed is all we see to indicate the woodland kingdom that McCormick and Bentley built here in the first decade of the 20TH century. The eight-building crew-camp was here on this mainland spot where I now sit watching St. John eat a torpedo sub and Foye a No. 16 from Togo's in Marquette. They keep a kind of sitcom banter. "We have a love hate relationship," St. John says. "I love to hate him."

The main compound of five buildings—men's lodge (Beaver Cabin), women's lodge (Birch Cabin), library, boat house (Living Room Cabin), and living lodge (Chimney Cabin)—was on an island a hundred yards offshore. During winter a skeleton crew of perhaps five manned the compound, but in summer, when visitors arrived, the crew expanded to more than a dozen. They shuttled guests to the island and back on a raft called the Good Ship Piffel, kept the linens clean, served elaborate dinners, led hikes down the Bentley Trail and elsewhere, ran fishing trips, kept the firewood perfectly cut and stacked and much more. Indeed, at the camp, perfection coexisted equally with rusticity. "There was a guy who had to stack a woodpile three times because it had to be just right," Rydholm says. Such rustic perfection also applied to the Bentley Trail. Crews had to maintain it so women could walk the middle with their parasols and not hit any branches.

Midway through our lunch, two men snowshoe through, heading our direction. They're just out for a day hike and they invite us to their camp. "We have a big canvas tent with a woodstove, gets pretty nice; stop by for some wine," one says. A McCormick place convention? We appreciate the offer but doubt we'll have time. They move on.

The sun shines bright, but temps remain on the cool side, about 10 degrees, and a wind blows from the north. We watch as the two men head off across the untracked face of White Deer Lake. It's a sublime winter scene. When we chill, we pull on our packs, grab our poles and follow their tracks, grateful for the work they've done for us.

The weather presents an evolving show. Light snow crystallizes from a blue sky. Then giant flakes pelt us in the face—a squall blowing in from Lake superior 25 miles north. Then back to sunshine, all in about 30 minutes. We see a rocky promontory rising from the northwestern shore. "That's called the Fortress, and on top is a picnic spot the McCormicks used," Foye says. The lake we're on was called Fortress Lake until 1906, when an albino whitetail deer began hanging around the area. The lake and the camp became namesakes, White Deer Lake. We continue on in the footsteps of the two men who passed by at lunch, and are now out of sight.

We're heading north toward a channel that connects White Deer Lake to Bulldog Lake like a bar connecting the lobes of a dumbbell. As we reach the northern tip of White Deer, we spy one of the men we'd seen at lunch walking rapidly back south. I call out in a cornball, trailside way, "Hey, hope you broke trail all the way to our camp."

"Not today," he says curtly and walks on.

Soon we see his pal, who stops to chat. His friend was not in the talking mood because he had just fallen through the ice in the channel, up to his

A GRAND PLAN FOR THE GRAND CAMP

After the McCormick family transferred ownership of its buildings and land to the United States Forest Service in 1967, the buildings simply sat vacant and untended. Word naturally got around among locals, and the place became something of a party haven, but not in the genteel manner of the previous owners. Beer and wine bottles piled deep in some rooms. In one small building, people built a fire right in the middle of the floor. People wrote on walls. Broke windows.

In 1984, the Forest Service announced that it was going to burn the buildings down, so Fred Rydholm visited them one last time, taking his friend Richard Hendricksen, a realtor who had never seen the buildings.

"I was immediately smitten," Hendricksen says. He rushed to strike a deal with the government. He would remove the buildings if they'd give him two years. "They said a year and a half, and I said okay," Hendricksen says. His purchase price: $50.

Winter was already near when he sealed the deal, which meant little work would get done for several months. But that gave him time to think.

One winter night at 10, he left his truck at the trailhead, put on his pack and snowshoed into the compound. The snow was all fluff, no trail was broken. It took him two hours, maybe more, breaking trail the entire time. "My heart was beating so hard in the deep snow," he says. When he arrived at the compound, he went to the Beaver Cabin, where he had installed a woodstove during the fall. "I built a fire, curled up in my bag," he says. And when the pale light of winter morning arrived, he just lay there, enjoying the silence, the scent of woodstove and old log cabin and contemplating what it meant to be the new owner of an abandoned woodland castle with a lot of work ahead.

And over the next three days, burrowed in the cabin, surrounded by snow, he wrote his business plan. He would dismantle the buildings, store them and convince somebody, somehow, to reconstruct them into a kind of historical attraction. That was 1984. The dismantling ended up taking two years. Hendricksen stored the material on platforms and covered it all with rolled roofing to preserve it. Twenty years later, the preserved piles are still there. But Hendricksen hasn't given up on his plan.

ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

FROM TOP: The boathouse with rooms for socializing above, called the Living Room Cabin. The Chimney Cabin was the main lodge for the island compound. Richard Hendricksen carefully dismantled the buildings shown here and mothballed them. They await a reconstruction plan.

SUPERIOR VIEW PHOTO

A RIVER STILLED
The Peshekee River near the trailhead of the path to White Deer Lake.

AARON PETERSON

waist, and in the 10 degree air, was in a hurry to get back to that camp woodstove a couple of hours' walk away. Terseness forgiven.

"We have dry clothes he can use," I say.

"He'll be okay," the man says, and heads off.

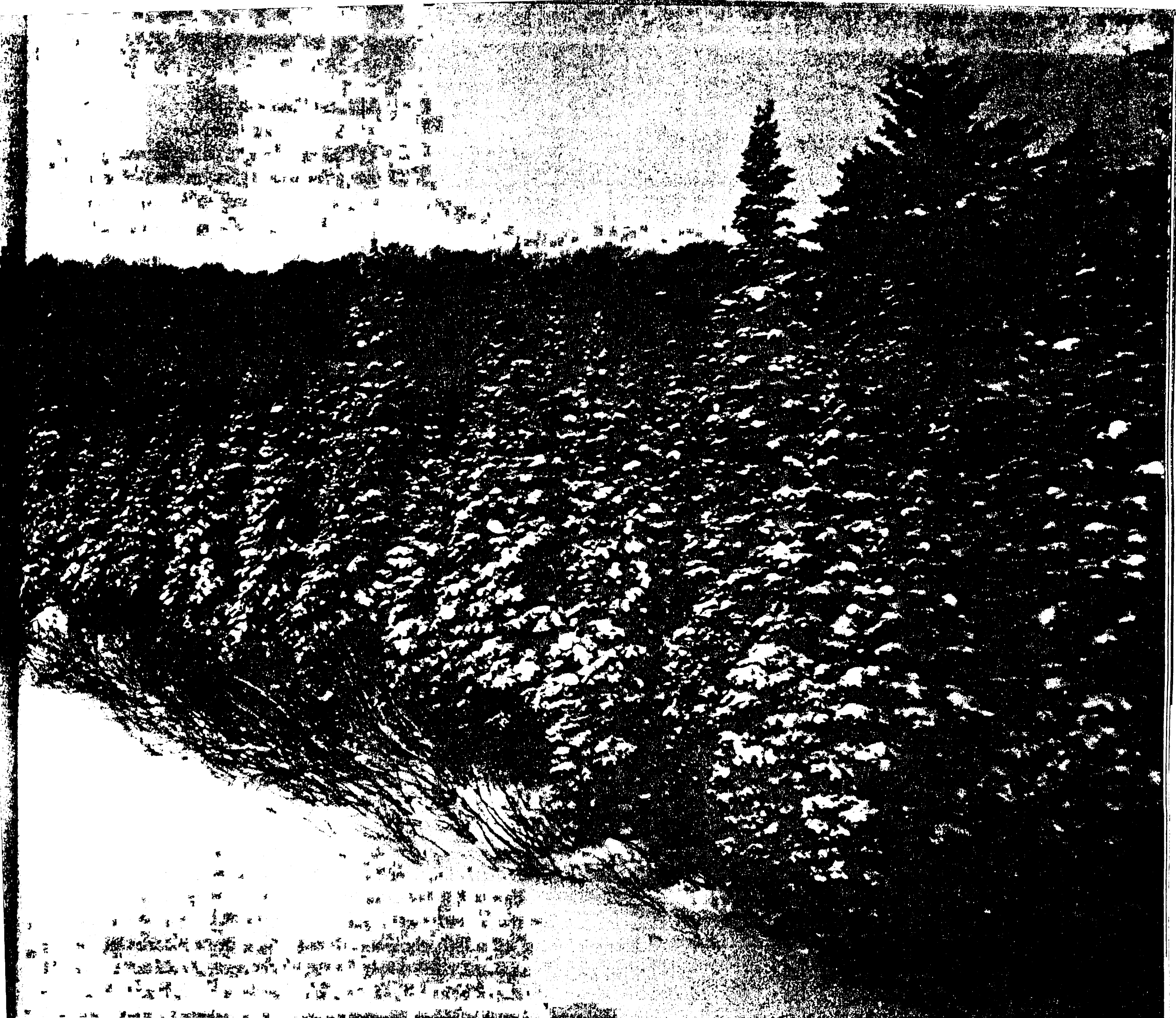
We stay on shore along the channel, but pause to stare at the hole where the man fell in and consider our own fate.

Before striking off across Bulldog Lake, Foye pulls out his ice safety system. It's a set of ropes and carabeiners that we'll use to link ourselves together while walking about 25 feet apart. Foye says he needs to give a short lesson. "If you fall through, you will be in shock for 2 to 3 minutes. The ropes will keep you from sinking, but you will go crazy. You will not be able to think. Then at 3 minutes you will calm down, and I will throw you these." He holds up two things that look like ice picks. "You catch them and claw your way back onto the ice."

Todd raises his hand. "Uh, I don't like the part about waiting for 3 minutes. I mean, what if I don't go crazy—couldn't I claw my way out sooner?"

"If I throw them before 3 minutes, you won't catch them," Foye says. The Scout leader stands resolute: you go in, it's a three-minute swim.

Foye tells us to avoid the mouth of the channel and stumps or pilings, because that's where ice is weak, and we move out across the lake. All goes well, and in about an hour we stand at the base of a 30-foot bluff, on top of which is the small field where we'll make our home. Home, of course is a relative term here, since it is simply a trench we'll dig in four



AARON PETERSON

feet of snow, with a tarp spread over the top. Todd and I in one trench, Foye and St. John in another trench, burrowed in for a -10 degree night.

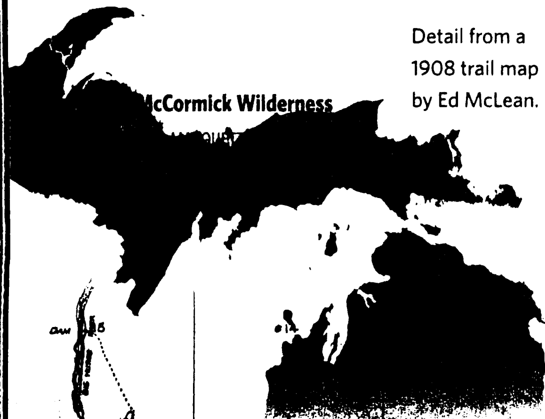
A trail is a curious thing in the way it can live on. We've all heard of Native American trails that eventually turned into cart paths, then dirt roads, then paved highways. Those trails probably followed such a development arc because they were the most efficient way to move food, goods and people across a certain piece of geography. They had logic and purpose. The Bentley Trail lives on too, but not because it's rooted in ancient wisdom of land or serves a purpose critical to life and commerce. The Bentley Trail lives on because its story captures the imagination of a particular person, and years later, another person, and so on. Never a horde, just a few. Fred Rydholm is one; Tom Foye another.

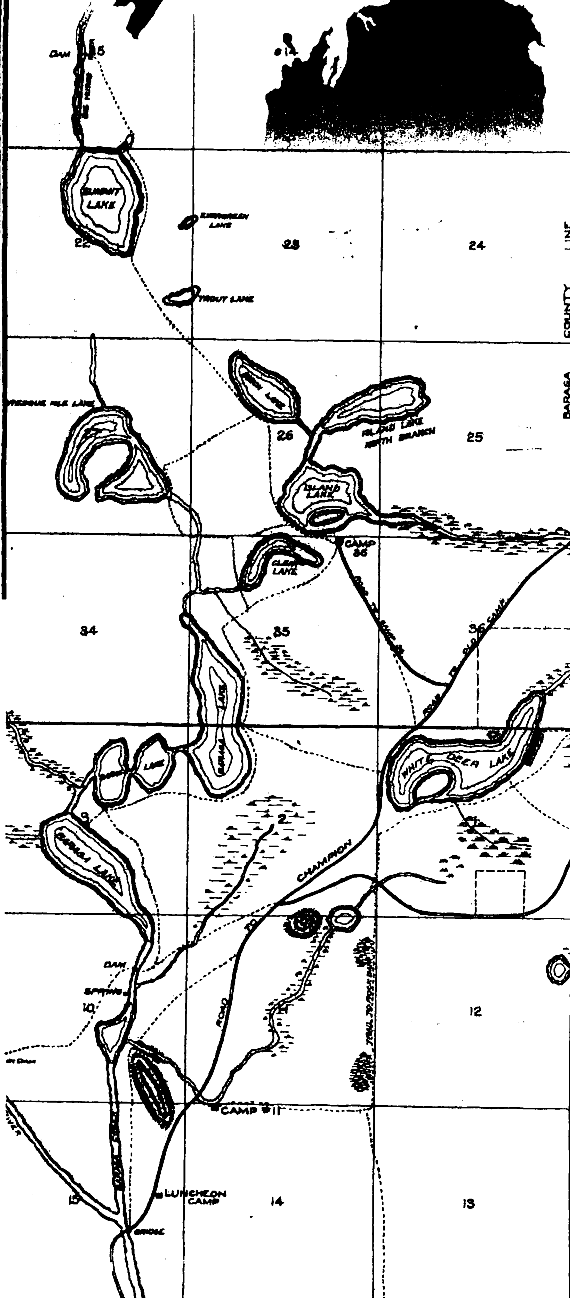
By 1936, the heyday of White Deer Lake had passed. Cyrus Bentley died in 1930, but he had sold out to McCormick in 1927. In 1936, Cyrus McCormick II passed away. The land and compound stayed in the family and was kept tidy, but off the McCormick property, trail use and maintenance dwindled. And the forests of the Huron Mountains sprouted saplings in the trail, dropped trees across the path.

Rydholm's tale of discovering the McCormick trail shares some commonality with Foye's. Rydholm had grown up in the area, and though he'd heard a great deal about the Huron Mountain Club, he'd never heard of the McCormick place at White Deer

The Bentley Trail is not a thing of dramatic vistas, like, say, something in the Rocky Mountains. It's subtle and intimate, a Michigan trail through and through.

Lake. "Nobody had ever written about it—not word one," he says. One day in 1942 when he was just out of high school and working in the forest for the Huron Mountain Club, a man he was working with, Jim Dakota, told him the story of the Bentley Trail, the great effort to build it, the great industrialists who had walked a portion or all of it. In addition to Ford, McCormick and Bentley, there was Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, William G. Mather and others who were powerful and rich, but lesser known. "He told me the trail was abandoned," Rydholm says.





Detail from a 1908 trail map by Ed McLean.

World War II took Rydholm away and life intervened, but in 1946 he was back in the area and pursued his dream of remapping the Bentley Trail and opening it back up. And he succeeded. "I hiked that trail a hundred times and never got bored with it," he says. "And for 10 years, I hiked it every winter." The snow was sometimes so deep that he'd have to dig down a foot or two to find trail markings that he knew were seven feet high on tree trunks. He got to know the crew at the White Deer Lake compound. They'd put him up and feed him when he reached the end of the trail. But time goes on. Rydholm hiked it less. And one man couldn't possibly maintain the trail. The forest moved in again to reclaim the land.

When we crawl from our trenches in the morning, the sun shines brightly, the sky is clear, and the snow squeaks like Styrofoam in the cold. To get warm blood flowing, I strap on my snowshoes and head to the bluff, walking up and down about 20 times. Despite the chill, the sun on the last day of February is strong, and I can feel its warmth penetrate my jacket. Meanwhile Foye heats water for oatmeal, which cools in moments to a cold gluey paste. But soon our daypacks are on, and we're heading into the woods.

Foye snowshoes 20 yards into the forest, then stops. "Hmm," he says. He looks around. He heads another direction. He stops. Finding a trail under four feet of snow is not so easy. He pulls out his GPS, takes a reading, looks around again and says, "There it is." He discerns things we don't, and heads off in the right direction.

The Bentley Trail is not a thing of dramatic vistas, like, say, something in the Rocky Mountains. It's subtle and intimate, a Michigan trail through and through. We wind through forests with old growth trees towering above. One tree Foye loves is a black cherry he calls the Sentinel. It rises straight as an arrow for three or four stories before its first branch appears. The trail meanders down ravines, comes upon open fields in the forest. At one such field we stop for lunch. Foye once found a moose antler here the size of a small Boy Scout, so he calls it Moose Shed Field. A set of coyote tracks wanders across the field face. I can only imagine how thin the dog must be about February 28, here where there seems nothing to eat but snow. Well, except in our packs—Todd and I pull out Ziplocks of sliced pork tenderloin we cooked in preparation for the trip. Ice crystals encrust the surface, and eating it is like eating a meat ice cube.

We head on and soon crest a ridge and see a ravine with a tributary to the Yellow Dog River running through. "McCormick and Bentley would stop here for lunch on the way north," Foye says. "So they called this the luncheon ravine." We drop to the creek and see a shallow trench left by a beaver belly, gliding along the shore.

Soon we come to a small bridge that crosses about 4 feet above the creek. McCormick had many of these bridges built as part of his desire to make the trail more easy stroll than extreme sport. Today, the bridge has three feet of snow on it, and it's narrow, not quite wide enough for two snowshoes side by side. Foye goes first, then St. John, then me. "It always gives on the last man," Todd says. He takes two steps and proves unfortunately prescient. The snow gives way—turned out there was a missing log under all that snow. Todd falls to the ice. It's a thin layer on the stream, but it holds him as he's on all fours, for a moment anyway. It starts to give, and water washes over the ice plate as he grabs hold of ski poles we hold out for him and he scrambles up the steep snowbank. Damage report: a wet boot and pantleg. He'll be okay.

"How much farther?" St. John asks.

"A mile," Foye says.

"You been saying that for two miles."

Our destination is a series of waterfalls on the West Branch of the Yellow Dog River. Supposedly one of the most beautiful sets of falls on the system, but when we drop into their valley, we find that snow and ice lie thick over that section of river. The falls are completely obscured. Foye seems disappointed, but other than Todd's fall, we've had a great day outdoors. We head back, doubling our pace, since the trail is broken, and there's no wayfinding required. Still, by the time we get the stove lit for supper and begin the endless melting of snow for water, the sky is deep-space blue black and stars shine improbably bright in the cold clarity.

To get an idea of how obscure the Bentley Trail has become, consider that Foye had made a number of trips over the course of five years into the McCormick Wilderness before he ever laid eyes on the trail. In early 2000, a woman from Big Bay, Cynthia Pryor, called him to say that she and some others hoped to map the trail before it vanished forever. She asked if he'd be in charge of trail identification in the McCormick Wilderness.

Foye agreed, and on the first Saturday of May 2000 he met a half dozen people at a store in Big Bay to seek a trail first cut nearly a century ago. They had old maps, but met with little success. The day reached 85 degrees and the team "stumbled around in the woods and ran out of water but never found the trail," Foye says. But when they were heading back, they discovered a trail that ran northeast-southwest. They ruled it out because it didn't comport with the old maps, but the search party followed it anyway. It led to the field where Foye instructed us to dig our snow trenches, the site of an old lumber camp. "We were really discouraged," Foye says. The next day, somebody suggested they follow the trail some more to see where it led. "We'd lose it periodically, find it again, and sure enough it ran to the falls at the West Branch of the Yellow Dog," Foye says. It was the Bentley Trail; the old maps were inaccurate.

Over the course of three years, Foye remapped the entire trail, like Rydholm before him. "I wouldn't say it was an obsession, more of a hobby," he says. The process gave him a kind of historical gratification, a connection to a culture long gone from this wilderness McCormick place.

A thing to know about the Bentley Trail is that nature is not the only force working against its preservation. Saving the public portion of the Bentley Trail is actually illegal. When Cyrus McCormick II's son, Gordon, transferred the land to the Forest Service in 1967, and the government eventually decided to manage it as a wilderness area, that meant there would be no upkeep on the Bentley Trail in the wilderness area. "We offered to have the scout troop adopt the trail, but the Forest Service doesn't want to open it up. They're afraid four wheelers would ride in and leave beer cans around and damage things," Foye says. So as it stands now, if a guy were to, say, chainsaw a tree that fell over the trail or trim branches to make way for a lady with a parasol, he'd be fined. What's more, much of the trail runs through the still private Huron Mountain Club and other privately held parcels. Only about 8 miles are on public land.

The next morning, it's another chill, Styrofoam-snow awakening. When I stomp up and down the bluff to rev my physiology, I notice a beaver-belly trail that makes a giant S across the face of Bulldog Lake.

We hurry through another cold oatmeal glue breakfast, pack quickly and are soon on the trail home. Unbelievably, our sun and blue sky holds another day. We retrace our well-broken trail, and the going is easy. Across the lakes. Past the Fortress bluff. Along the shore of the White Deer Lake party island. The temps warm to about 20 during the walk—winter at its most absolute glorious. Foye pulls a tendon in his foot and has to slow. I feel bad for him, but admit I'm glad for the excuse to extend the journey. I don't want to get back to the car just yet. This McCormick place has me enchanted.

Jeff Smith is editor of *Traverse*.
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OUTWARD BOUND
Longtime Boy Scout leader Tom Foye and his sled loaded with provisions to stoke his inner furnace and fend off the cold during three days of outdoor living ahead.

LEARN MORE

Superior Heartland, by Fred Rydholm
Extensive history of the McCormick-Bentley Place, Huron Mountain Club and much more. 850 pages.

Maps and information about the McCormick Wilderness at www.mccormicktract.com.

Description of Richard Hendricksen's grand plan for resurrecting the *McCormick* Grand Camp at www.richardhendricksen.com/pages/grandcamp/index.html.

TODD ZAWISTOWSKI.