

# GOLIATH OF THE WILDERNESS

Herbert Hanley Hall was a true giant among Arctic traders, a pioneer who blazed a trail across the frozen ceiling of Canada.

► By Valerie Green

It was May of 1938. In the Barrenlands around Hudson Bay, temperatures still hovered many degrees below zero as icy gales whipped the terrain. A man and his dogteam skimmed across the frozen bay, 80 kilometres from the nearest trading post. Speed was essential this was definitely no place to linger.

Suddenly the team broke loose, slamming the driver onto the ice. He was grievously injured, but somehow managed to get his team together and, with monumental grit, to drive on all the way to Churchill. Here he found only rudimentary medical aid, and three painful months passed before he could be shipped Outside, to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. But it was already too late. The man's death in the southern hospital marked the end of an era in Canadian history.

His name was Herbert ("Herb") Hanley Hall, and he died the same way he had always lived — in the midst of another adventurous ordeal. Had he been able to choose his own end, it probably would have happened just the way it did.

A true Northern giant, Herbert Hall was a tall, physically imposing figure, and he lived an outsized, legendary life as a fur-trader, explorer and pioneer in Canada's frozen North. A rare and extraordinary "wilderness man," he was a longtime employee of the Hudson's Bay Company before he became an independent trader. He travelled across the ceiling of Canada from Alaska to the Atlantic Coast — going where no European had gone before.

Hall was born on December 18th, 1880, in Port Simpson, British Columbia, and spent most of his youth in Victoria. The wilderness life always held the greatest appeal for him, and by the time Herb was 16 he had joined the Hudson's Bay Company. After serving out a three-year apprentice contract, he quit the Company and went to work for the St. Anthony Gold Mining Company in Omineca, northern B.C. After that he joined the construction gangs who built the telegraph line from Quesnel to Atlin Canal, and on into the Yukon.

The years he spent in northern B.C. were valuable experience for Hall, and when he re-entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1905, he was quickly promoted to district manager. His first year was spent as purser of *S.S. Saskatchewan*, the last of the old HBC riverboats plying between Grand Rapids and Edmonton.

One of his first adventures in the Saskatchewan fur-trade district was to trek northward to Reindeer

Lake, about 960 km from Prince Albert, to open a trading post. Another mission sent him into the Barrenlands beyond the treeline, to establish what was later to be known as Eskimo Post.

On that expedition, Hall and his Inuit companion were stranded in the wilderness for five months, during which time Herb learned everything there was to know about endurance in extreme temperatures.

His ability to survive was perhaps helped by Hall's huge frame. A veritable goliath of a man at 190 cm, 135 kg, he learned much more about survival over the years. He knew the value of fat and grease as life-savers, and how to consume at least 40 seagull eggs at one sitting.

"You have to be healthy in the North. You don't get sick up there," he used to say. "If you do, you die." His ice-blue eyes, with whites like clear milk, were indicators of his excellent health.

Hall's abilities earned him the respect of Inuit and Indians alike. Fellow traders claimed that no Native could match him on the trail, and few could out-mush him with a dogteam. Like all legends, this one undoubtedly stretched the truth, but it's impressive just the same.

In later life, Hall enjoyed telling friends about his hair-raising bush experiences. On one occasion, he returned from his traplines to find his guide collapsed on the ground and near death. The man had been drinking heavily, fallen, and struck his head. Hall called in the other Inuit to explain what had happened, in case anybody assumed he had attacked the man. The atmosphere was tense for a while, and Hall prepared to defend himself. But after a lengthy Inuit inquest, tensions eased. Everyone shook hands



RICHARD FURNER/HUDSON'S BAY ARCHIVES

▲ Iron-willed Herb Hall learned everything about Arctic survival from the Inuit. He battled the elements single-handed. And most of the time, he won.