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ART SJOLANDER

Art Sjolander is a geologist and prospector who has lived in northern Saskatchewan since 1959. He knew Jim Brady and was involved in the search for Brady and Halkett in 1967.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Description of the search for Brady and Halkett.
- Theories on their disappearance.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Art Sjolander is a prospector and geologist familiar with the north. He took part in the search for Jim Brady and Abbie Halkett in 1967.

INTERVIEW:

Murray: I'm speaking to Art Sjolander of La Ronge who was involved in the search for Jim Brady and Abbie Halkett in June of 1967. Art, could you describe how you got involved in the search, and a bit of how it proceeded?

Art: Well I was asked, oh by...

Murray: Would it be Berry Richards by any chance?

Art: It was indeed, yes. I had previously prospected in that area for two seasons, and Berry Richards came and asked me if I would help in this search. And I said, "Of course," because these were both friends of mine. And so we proceeded, well it was the following day, and got right to it.

Murray: What were your impressions when you first arrived? What was the camp like where the men had originally set down?

Art: Well, they had one tent, one small tent. And the first thing they did, of course, was look in the tent to see what equipment was missing, because their canoe was gone. And all of their tools, their instruments, were all in the camp, as I recall. And so we assumed then that they had just gone for a short time somewhere. Then we looked up, up beyond the north end of the lake and there was the canoe. It was pulled up on

the shore. So we knew right away, of course, that they hadn't drowned. I mean, their canoe was well up in and on the shore.

Murray: It was right out of the water, was it?

Art: Oh yes, it was pulled right up on the shore, yes. And I believe it was even tied, if I recall correctly. And so then we started looking for sign of where they'd gone. We didn't pick up any sign for some little distance, but, I suppose - I assumed they'd gone north because of the lie of the land and everything. So I started going north and I'd only gone a short distance, maybe a quarter of a mile or something like that, and came into an area where there was a lot of moss. And there you could see footprints in the moss, so I mean it was evident that someone had gone that way.

Murray: How long ago? How long would prints in the moss like that last?

Art: Oh, depending on the weather, on the moisture, they might last hours or they might last weeks. There's really no way of knowing.

Murray: Given the weather conditions of that time, do you recall them at all? You thought then that those were probably fairly recent did you, at the time?

Art: Yes, oh yes. I assumed automatically that they were their tracks.

Murray: And there were two, two sets, two sets?

Art: There were two sets, there were two sets of tracks. I don't recall the weather at all. No, I don't recall what it was like. But in any case, we only saw these tracks for a very short distance, maybe seventy-five or one hundred feet, something like this. So I proceeded in that direction, and

with a great deal of wandering around...

Murray: Tacking over the area?

Art: Yeah, tacking is a good word. And eventually came to a lake, a little lake, oh probably less than half a mile in length anyhow. And I proceeded up one side and around the other side. I mean this is just wandering now, you know. There's no plan really. We were just looking, just walking, and I came around the far side of this lake, and back in from the lakeshore - oh several hundred feet, maybe - I found a wooden match, one of those little square matches that you get in a wooden match box. And, if you know anything about wooden matches in the woods, when you get them out of the box they are white, hey, the wood is white, they are relatively white. But the longer they are outside they...

Murray: Get grey.

Art: Yellowish, yellowish, they get yellowish. Well, this match was fresh. You could tell right away it was a fresh match. It had to be from those people, because there was nobody else in the country. And that was it.

Murray: No cigarette butts or anything, you just had the match?

Art: No, no sign of anything else. Until several days later. I just forgotten how long now, several days later...

Murray: There was some bad weather, I think, wasn't there too, at the beginning of the search?

Art: You know, I really don't recall, I really don't recall. But the next thing that happened was several days later. We were searching then by airplane, and there was a pilot and two of us in the plane and we were flying all over. And on this little lake, if I had a map I'd...

Murray: Lapointe?

Art: No. This is a little chain of lakes that run exactly east-west, which are anomalous in this country.

Murray: Right.

Art: They were connected by a stream, and on this one lake we found a raft that had been recently made, and made very crudely. These were logs that had not been cut. These were logs that were, rotten logs that...

Murray: Dried?

Art: Yes, that someone could use without tools. And there were two crosspieces on the raft and there were about five or six logs in the raft, but there was a nail on each end

just holding the outside logs of the raft, four nails - rusty nails, which we figured came from a very old, abandoned trapper's cabin on the opposite side of this lake. It had fallen down it was so old. And these nails must have come

from there. But this raft was not in the water; it was up on the shore. It hadn't been used I don't think. There's no way of knowing for sure. And that was it. That was all the sign of anybody. And the raft, you could see that the raft had been made comparatively recently.

Murray: How could you tell that?

Art: Well, the nails had been pounded with a rock, and the wood had been...

Murray: You could see where the rock had hit the wood?

Art: Oh yes, oh yes. And gouged a bit. You could tell that it was comparatively fresh anyhow, oh yeah. And that was it; there was nothing else. There was nothing else.

Murray: It seems confusing that they would have gotten the nail from the cabin from across...

Art: Well, this was a very narrow, a long narrow - it's a creek with these long narrow...

Murray: I see. So they could have walked across.

Art: Oh, you could walk across the creeks at either ends, yes.

Murray: Why would they have built a raft then?

Art: I don't know, I don't know. It doesn't make any sense you see, but there wasn't nobody else in the country.

Murray: Right.

Art: There was nobody else in the country.

Murray: You were convinced at the time that it was recently made?

Art: Oh yeah, no question, no question.

Murray: Because I've spoke to Jimmy Izbister this morning and he says his feeling was at the time, as he recalls it, is that the raft was probably made by a trapper, and not by...

Art: Well, it could have been made in that spring. But not any later. And you know, there's no way of judging these, the amount of discoloration from the weathering, or...

Murray: So the rock marks on the wood were fairly, were fresh? Is that one of the ways you judged it?

Art: Sure, of course. There's no other way you could. You know, there's no way you could.

Murray: Right.

Art: There's no way you could. I assumed it had been, you know, comparatively recently, but this, of course, was only my guess.

Murray: Right. Was there anything else at that spot where the raft was? I had heard from someone that there was a lean-to of spruce bows or something.

Art: I don't recall that. No, I don't recall that.

Murray: You were among the first people to see it then were you, that raft? Were you the first ones to come across it?

Art: This I don't recall exactly either, but I assume so, yeah.

Murray: You hadn't known it was there, in any case, before you saw it?

Art: Oh no, no, no. Of course not, no. No.

Murray: How many search teams were out at the time that you found the raft, do you recall that? Were there a number of planes up?

Art: No. There was only one aircraft. There was only one aircraft, but there were a number of people - four of us. I think there were four of us went out. I'm not exactly sure of this; it's a long time ago.

Murray: Right, right.

Art: I think there were four of us. And then the police arrived eventually with the dogs, and they set the tracking dog where we first found the footprints. And what they did from then, I don't know really, but they spent some time there.

Murray: That trail ended with the finding of that match, there was nothing else?

Art: There was nothing else, no.

Murray: And you never saw any more depressions in the ground or anything where they might have been, or where they might have sat down or...?

Art: No. Well, quite frankly what I was looking for was bones, a body or some remnants is what I was looking for.

Murray: Right. There were no blaze marks around any trees or anything in all that?

Art: No, nothing, nothing, not that I recall now. No, no the only such thing was tracks, a wooden match, and there's a raft. There was nothing else that I can recall.

Murray: Right. Do you recall what your feeling was about Brady as a bushman? Brady and Halkett, were they accomplished bushmen or, or moderately accomplished? How would you assess them as far as their competence in the bush?

Art: Well, I couldn't speak about Halkett, I didn't know him that well. But Brady, Brady was competent. Yeah, more I can't say, but he was a bushman, yeah. I'd been in the bush with him; I'd lived with him in the bush.

Murray: And he seemed to know what he was doing?

Art: Oh yeah, oh, no question. Yeah, he was certainly competent, oh yes. I thought an awful lot about this over the years, you know. They became lost because they were on the wrong lake. You probably know that.

Murray: Right. They didn't realize they were lost either.

Art: No, they didn't. No, they didn't know this, no. But they knew they were on Foster Lake, one of the Foster Lakes. This much they did know.

Murray: Because they were similar lakes. That's why they were confused in the first place.

Art: Yeah, these lakes were so similar on the north ends that it was almost a defensible mistake. But being lost in that country, you know, there was only one thing that a rational and an experienced bushman would do - and that is to walk south. And eventually you would come to the Churchill River, and then you'd know where you are. But there's no other goddamn way I would have gone. I would have walked south.

Murray: But would you necessarily have walked at all?

Art: Oh well, no, no. This, of course, is the first thing. But these people being experienced bushmen, they knew they were capable of walking to the Churchill River. I could. I'd walk to that Churchill River, no problem at all. I'd walk there and so could they, you know.

Murray: So it doesn't surprise you that they didn't stick where they were?

Art: Oh no, no. Well, yes and no. But their...

Murray: Their camp wasn't that far away. They must have realized they were lost fairly quickly once they got into the bush.

Art: If they were lost.

Murray: Right. If they considered themselves lost.

Art: You must be familiar with this story of possible foul play. You heard this one.

Murray: Yeah.

Art: And there isn't any way that these two men, even being on the wrong lake, were going to get lost. I don't give a goddamn, they would find their way back to where they came from. Any good bushman can do that. He'd go back to where he come from. He might have to make a certain different route sometime, or you do get confused at times.

Murray: But you'd make it back?

Art: You'll get back, oh your damn right, yeah. And I've always said that there was something unnatural about this whole thing, you know. And the one thing, while we were flying, searching, in one trip - you know it was several hours, I just forget how long now - we saw seven bears. Now this is the thing that always sticks in my mind - seven bears, which - you know, you could fly for ten years and you never see one.

Murray: Right.

Art: But we were flying, mind you, low level.

Murray: I'd heard that story from several others, too.

Art: Yeah, well we saw seven, so it leads me to think that they could have very easily walked into a bear.

Murray: With cubs, or something.

Art: We saw two bears together at one time, and one monstrous, big bastard, you know. And they could have walked into these bears, you know. You just take - boom, boom - it would have been all over, you know.

Murray: And all they would have to have been was injured, really.

Art: Well, sure.

Murray: They wouldn't have to be killed by them.

Art: Yeah, right. But if they were killed or not by the bears, but if they died somehow - there were so many bears in the area that the bears would have soon known where they were.

Murray: And eaten them?

Art: They would have. They'd take a piece and they'd drag it here and they'd drag it there, you know. And in several

days there wouldn't be a sign of any body, you know; this is how the bears do. And, well this is what I was looking for. I was looking for a body; I was looking for bones, you know. And I presume the other experienced men were doing the same thing - looking for bones, which we didn't find of course. But I still firmly believe that this is what happened, they ran into bears. You're familiar with the story. Now this is possible too.

Murray: The, the murder theory?

Art: Yeah, right, yeah.

Murray: Yeah.

Art: Now this is sort of possible.

Murray: In which case they would be in a lake somewhere?

Art: Well the only, yeah. The only thing that mitigates against that is the distances involved.

Murray: Well apparently there were people on Lower Foster but they were about two-thirds of the way down, at a tourist camp.

Art: Yeah, right.

Murray: That's, as I understand it.

Art: I don't know, you know. There's just no way of knowing what happened.

Murray: In your experience in the bush have you ever known anyone to be attacked successfully by a bear?

Art: No, no, no. I'm only saying that this is a possibility.

Murray: A possibility, right. I'm just trying to get an (inaudible).

Art: Because there were so many bears and normally, you know, the number of bears you see, I wouldn't even think about this. But because we saw so many in such a concentrated area in such short time...

Murray: This was a period when the cubs were young as well I suppose? In June.

Art: Yes, well, they were a good size already. You know, the cubs are born in February and they'd be a good size.

Murray: I've heard this expressed, that they must have been fairly hungry by the time they reached that area. Would they, the possibility they might have tried to catch a bear cub for food, and been attacked?

Art: No, no.

Murray: Would people do that?

Art: No bushman would ever try that, no.

Murray: Too foolish.

Art: That reminds me of the story of Adam Henegrue. I don't know if you know him or not.

Murray: No.

Art: He's a local Indian, my old partner for many years, prospector. And anyhow, this was up in that Foster Lake country too, many years ago. And we started one day prospecting and Adam went one way and I went the other. And I said, we'll meet at a certain lake for lunch, dinner time. So I get there and no sign of Adam. And just back from the shore and across a little bit of muskeg was a big rock outcrop. So I go, and I sit up there where I can see and out of the flies a bit, you know. And the next thing I seen was Adam - running like a blue streak out from the lakeshore. There was a few good sized poplar trees by the lakeshore, a bit of high ground, and down this little bit of a rise and into the swamp - and there's mud flying, by God. And he could see me up on this outcrop from a long ways out, you know. And of course, right behind him is a bear, you see. Oh yes. First time I ever seen a bear chase anybody - the only time. And the bear chased him to the edge of the swamp and stopped. And Adam running and mud flying! Then he finally gets up to the top and he's just a puffing and panting. You know, "Art", he says, "Art - she goddamn near got me!" he says, you know. (laughs) What had happened, there was two cubs in a tree and Adam come along - been in the bush all his life and a good bushman - he picks up a chunk of rock and he throws it at the bear and hits one of the cubs, you see.

Murray: And it squealed.

Art: And it squealed and first thing Adam knows - grrmph - you see. And he looked and there was the old bear right behind him. So this kind of thing can happen, but I would assume that men who are lost or confused in the bush are not going to do these sort of things, because you're not in the mood, you know.

Murray: Right. How many days could you walk through, I gather it's fairly hilly country there, with no food in your stomach or just moss or old...?

Art: Yeah. How many days could you?

Murray: Yeah, I mean, you know, how many days they could. They were both in their fifties, older men.

Art: Yeah, and this depends on several factors, too. Of

course, they didn't have anything to eat, hey.

Murray: They didn't have a gun or anything with them?

Art: No. It varies a lot, you know, in different areas. In that particular place there, you would have to assume that they got nothing to eat pretty well - so they could last... Depending again on the man, on the person, on the...

Murray: Right.

Art: It's up here that counts. If you panic, you're not going to last long.

Murray: Right. They were pretty stable characters.

Art: Well, at least Brady was. I don't know the other one well at all, but, oh, I assume they could last ten days or...

Murray: Even with, even walking through that area, eh?

Art: Yeah. If they were maintaining any equilibrium at all, you know. But if you get panicky, you know, you wouldn't last at all. You'd tire yourself out.

Murray: So it's not by any means out of the realm of possibility that they could walk from that point to where the raft was found, without any food?

Art: Oh yes. (Inaudible).

Murray: That's only, what? A three or four day walk?

Art: That's not that far. I've just forgotten mileage on that. Oh yes, they could have walked. They could have walked a hundred miles, you know, no trouble at all without food. I mean, I know I could and I'm goddamn sure they could. Oh yeah. No. There is no logical reason why these men didn't show up somewhere - none at all, no.

Murray: Do you think that something dramatic had to have happened to them out of the ordinary, like an attack by a bear

or a falling tree or something like that to have incapacitated them.

Art: Yeah, I'm certain now. I'm certain in my own mind, yeah. There was another place when, the same lake, where beyond which we found the wooden match. Now the way I went around that lake, I went around the north side of this thing. It was quite a long ways so it would be not easily walked. Coming back I came around the other side where there's a huge big outcrop on the shore of that lake. The lake was in kind of a half moon sort of thing, and this big outcrop is in the inside of the circle. And very steep, you know. Not perpendicular, but you know, something like this. And the top of this thing was very thickly grown, real small spruce. But

there was a kind of, almost on another ledge. There was a series of little foot holds that you could walk around the face of this thing, and you were about, oh I don't know, sixty feet or seventy feet above the water. Now I walked around that and goddamn near slipped, and I thought maybe this could have happened. They could have toppled off of this thing and slipped, but not two men - one man would do it, not two men, you know.

Murray: Although one might have grabbed the other.

Art: Well possibly, and I suggested at the time that a search be made in that bottom of that lake, you know. It was never done as far as I know.

Murray: I don't think they could ever get a diver.

Art: I think it was, I think it was. I don't think it was thought that...

Murray: Would that have been a deep lake, that small one?

Art: Yeah.

Murray: Foster is a deep lake.

Art: Yeah, practically all of the lakes in that part of the country have deep sections where you get rock that, usually in the deep end.

Murray: So at that point where you're describing, it's probably deep at the bottom of the lake?

Art: You know, I'm a little hazy on this now, but it seemed to me we had good reason to think it was fairly deep there, and brown water.

Murray: So this rock face was on the far side of the lake, away from where their camp was, right? You had to go around the lake to get to it?

Art: Well, yes.

Murray: The north side.

Art: Yeah, it was, well actually it was on the east side.

Murray: The east, yeah.

Art: The east side yeah, the east side. So, presumably they walked from where the footsteps were, through to this lake. If you went the closest way to the lake you'd come on the west and northwest side. So I assume they walked around that north side, because the match was on the east side.

Murray: They wouldn't have gone the other way around?

Art: No. It was possible but the walking we found out was difficult. So it was much shorter if they come back the other way, but we can't be sure. I know at the time when I walked there, once I started walking along this I was kind of regretting the fact that I moved the line further back behind.

Murray: Yeah.

Art: But there was something else in behind that made it difficult to choose that way, and I just don't know what it was.

Murray: But it probably would have... they would have felt the same?

Art: Well I'm sure, I'm sure they would, yeah. So I mean, this was a possibility. That's all this was.

Murray: What was your conclusion at the end of the search? What do you feel must have happened to them? You mentioned the possibility of bears. What else might have happened?

Art: Dirty work, dirty work aboard ship, you know. There's got to be one of those two things anyway. I'm positive in my mind that these men wouldn't get lost to the point of dying, you know.

Murray: Just perishing, because of starvation or something?

Art: No. No way, no, no. Hell, even the most elementary bushman would know, if you've ever seen a map of the country you know, you walk south your going to get to the Churchill River. Once you get to the Churchill, at least you know where you are, in a relative way. And there's always people along the Churchill, you know, and you can walk up or down and east or west, and your going to come to a cabin eventually, you know. This, this is so logical, the fact that they didn't do this means something else drastic happened.

Murray: Well, if the raft was theirs, they were heading in that direction - southeast, were they? They would have been headed towards Rottenstone mine if that raft was theirs.

Art: You see Rottenstone mine was southeast, yes. But oh, this raft business. The only thing about the raft, as I recall, was that it was fairly new, you see. There was no good reason for a raft actually, you know; it was a narrow stream. Of course, the water might have been a lot higher when they were there.

Murray: But it wouldn't have been that many days before that?

Art: No, no, not that much. I just forgot how many days

after...

Murray: I think Berry went in nine days after he left them.

Art: Well that's, I guess - it wasn't long anyhow, you know.

Murray: But even at the point where the raft was, could you have walked across right there?

Art: No, no.

Murray: But you could see from that point, place where you could get across?

Art: Well, you couldn't see from direct line of sight, but you could see from the terrain, you know. You could see that the valley was narrowing, you know, so there would be a stream or a very narrow lake.

Murray: So it's reasonable to assume that they would have seen that as well and realized that they could have walked, what? - a hundred yards or something like that?

Art: Oh, yes. Unless... always remember the fact that... how were these people affected temperamentally, you know. I mean, were they reasoning? This is the thing, you know. Once you panic, which is the word that I am maybe overemphasizing, but once you panic, you're finished, that's all. I've been lost, I know. Boy, I've been lost.

Murray: It's hard not to panic?

Art: Oh boy, I tell you. Oh jeez, I had to sit and talk to myself, you know. Holy Christ! And you sit and reason and reason things out. Where did I go wrong, and where did you make the mistake? In my case I, well I walked for two days. And the only goddamn thing to do was retrace my steps, because I knew I was too far. I walked way too far, much further than necessary. I only had to go about three and a half miles, and I walked for two days. This is a long story, but bush fires, smoke, couldn't see, so I start to walk backwards. And I had remembered, pretty well, the country as I walked. So I more or less retraced my steps, and eventually got back to about where I'm... not exactly to any place that I knew for sure, but I got back to this little lake and goddamnit now, where I started from in the first place, it's got to be near here someplace. So I said, here I sit. So I sat and of course by this time, there were planes going criss-crossing all over the goddamn country, you know.

Murray: They knew you were lost?

Art: Oh yeah, oh yes. They flew right over my goddamn head, you know, and well it was frustrating (inaudible). And finally one plane spotted me. Oh and what I had, I had some of that orange flagging, and right on the lakeshore there was two

little small...

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