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“All is Well”: Language and Place in the Poetry of John Haines and the Milk Label Diary of Fred Campbell

The length of our days is threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet their span is but labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away ... So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. (Psalm 90: 10–12)

On a bright summer afternoon in 1959, John Haines and his wife Peg hiked a backcountry trail in the woods behind Richardson, a small, nearly deserted town seventy miles down the highway from Fairbanks, Alaska. Haines, a World War II veteran who began homesteading in the area a decade before, was headed for a trapline cabin of an old friend, Fred Campbell, who had passed away earlier in the year. Campbell was a genuine sourdough, a miner and trapper whose roots in Alaska went back five decades to the gold rush era of the early 1900s (fig. 1).¹ Campbell never married, lived alone, and had no surviving relatives in Alaska, so following his death a few friends went to his cabins and traplines to salvage some tools and gear. At his main cabin on a ridge behind the Richardson Roadhouse, they found numerous carpentry tools, two fishing rods, two rifles in fair condition and a shotgun considerably less functional, three pairs of showshoes, an old bear skin, seventeen gallons of kerosene, and a gold brick form that the probate court assessed as having no cash value. They took it anyway. The backcountry has its own standard for measuring worth.²

Another of Campbell's cabins sat on a shallow lake fourteen miles to the northeast along a trail the old man had blazed decades before. The lake was officially unnamed, but everyone in the area knew it as Campbell's Lake. John and Peg had visited the cabin with Campbell many times before



Figure 1. Fred Campbell and Halo, a young pup he gave to John Haines. *Personal collection of John Haines, reprinted with permission.*

while he was alive, and they knew the trail well. Now, a few months after Campbell's passing, hoping to find some snares and maybe a few dog harnesses, the couple made the trek over the windswept domes and marshy lowlands, arriving late in the day. As they rounded the lake and approached the small sod-roofed cabin, they noticed the door had been pushed open with enough force to unhinge it. The contents of the cabin lay strewn across the ground, evidence of a visit by a hungry bear. Haines reached the cabin first and peered inside,

his eyes adjusting to the darkness, and saw scattered on the dirt floor a number of labels that had been peeled from tins of Carnation evaporated milk. Lines of handwritten script appeared on each label's reverse side. It was Fred Campbell's diary.

Throughout his life in the backcountry, Campbell kept a diary in terse, abbreviated script in which he catalogued the day's events—the wood he chopped, berries he picked, broken tools he repaired, clothes he mended, and every other routine task a life in the country demands. He recorded the number of marten he trapped and ptarmigan he shot, and noted the many scraps his dogs waged with each other and the occasional porcupine. He kept diaries in each of his trapline cabins—though only a few scattered pages of the one recovered by John and Peg Haines survives. The lake cabin diary contains a week or two of entries, then months-long gaps while Campbell was away, followed by another cluster of entries when his hunting and trapping excursions brought him back to the lake. These are windows into the old miner's life, providing brief glimpses of both a wilderness and a hardscrabble lifestyle in the tradition of the Alaska pioneer.

That Fred Campbell wrote his diary on the blank side of milk labels demonstrates how the very materials which nourished his body in the wilderness also provided for his mind and spirit. What caused the man

to remove those labels and jot down a few words about the day just past underscores a central point of the human condition—we make sense of our lives by telling stories. The act of transcribing one's life to paper creates an identity; the self-reflection required to examine each day's events, then choose which of them deserve to be recounted in written form, raises the diarist to a dimension of thought where themes of worth and validation abound.

Haines, an aspiring poet who would later write about Campbell and the other Richardson sourdoughs in both his poetry and prose, camped overnight with his wife in the tumbledown cabin where they read Campbell's diary in the summer twilight. The next day Haines stuffed the labels in his pack and they began the long walk back to Richardson.³

Richardson

In the summer of 1903, just one year after Felix Pedro's gold strike led to the founding of Fairbanks, two men made a humble gold discovery to the southeast on Banner Creek, a tributary of the Tanana River. Mathew Johnson and Carl Z. Luidlab filed a discovery claim on 16 July 1903, and by the following year another twenty-three claims had been staked on Banner, with another dozen on Buckeye Creek and the other tributaries in the area. The rush was modest by Alaska standards, yet the confluence of Banner Creek and the Tanana proved an ideal location for riverboats to offload cargo, and by 1905 surveys began for a townsite at that spot.⁴

The new town was named for Wilds P. Richardson, head of the Alaska Road Commission and the man who led construction of a trail from Valdez to Fairbanks (later named the Richardson Highway). The town quickly became the distribution point for the Banner and Tenderfoot mining districts and soon boasted a population of over 1000. Newspaper accounts from Fairbanks heralded the rapid growth of the area, including plans for local telephone service.⁵

As is the case with many gold rush towns, however, Richardson no sooner reached its peak than its decline had already begun. A telegraph crew working in the area in 1911 found a row of abandoned cabins, all with 1906 calendars hanging on the walls marking the duration of the town's heyday at exactly one year.⁶ Other gold rushes in the Interior, such as those at Ruby in 1907 and Iditarod two years later, no doubt pulled many stampeders away from the Richardson area. Mining activity, despite a slight resurgence in the Tenderfoot district in 1916, steadily declined over the years when it appeared the productive creeks had been exhausted.⁷

Richardson did not vanish, however. The Valdez-Fairbanks trail remained the primary transportation route to the Interior and in succeeding years was improved to allow passage of wagon trains and eventually automobiles. No less than three roadhouses operated in and around Richardson between 1915 and 1920, and mail service to the town continued until 1943.⁸ But the small town on the banks of the Tanana never again recaptured the hustle and boom of its early years when a young man named Fred Campbell arrived to prospect its creeks.

Fred Campbell Comes North

Born on 7 June 1881, in Michigan, Fred Campbell was in his twenties when he joined the rush of prospectors to Alaska.⁹ He arrived in Richardson in 1907 and apprenticed himself to two old-timers, Charles W. Strite and Mauritz Matteson, as a laborer on their Banner Creek claims. Three years later, he struck out on his own and filed a claim on Hinkley Gulch, the first of many he would stake over the next five decades.¹⁰

As a young boy in Michigan, Fred Campbell had no schooling and could neither read nor write when he first arrived in Alaska. Shortly after settling in Richardson, he met an itinerant Episcopal missionary named Margaret R. Wightman who, from her post at St. Luke's Mission in nearby Salchaket, traveled up and down the Tanana proselytizing to Alaska Natives and the many miners in the district. Wightman maintained a camp just outside Richardson in an area that came to be known as Missionary Gulch. Taking the young Campbell under her wing, she gave him a Bible and taught him to read and write. He also developed an abiding faith in God. Campbell devotedly read the Bible the rest of his life, though his elementary reading skills often forced him to spend an entire evening focused on a single page.¹¹

Campbell began staking ground in the Richardson-Tenderfoot area just as the stampede years were waning. In many cases he prospected claims that had been worked over previously and abandoned for one reason or another. But he persisted. He built troughs and sluice boxes, and obtained a boiler for thawing the frozen ground. He worked the area's major waterways—Banner, Buckeye, Tenderfoot, and McCoy creeks—as well as smaller tributaries like Dublin Creek and Hinkley Gulch. A ridgetop placer gold deposit, ignored by others due to the lack of available water, Campbell worked by laboriously hauling the ore to a nearby gulch where it could be washed.¹² And though he never made anything close to a fortune at the trade, the way of life clearly suited him to the degree that he patiently worked his claims long after others had abandoned the area.

Apart from what can be learned from a few yellowed pieces of paper in a musty ledger of mining claims, little is known of Fred Campbell in the years he built a life for himself in Richardson. A sore tooth brought him to the dentist in Fairbanks in May 1934—a visit memorable (and noted in the local newspaper) only because it was his first time in the city in twenty-five years and the locals got a kick out of the miner’s wide-eyed astonishment at elevators and picture shows.¹³

As one who lived so intimately with the land, Campbell certainly fell under its natural rhythms, performing the labors of each season in accordance with preparing for the next. He built a small but sturdy cabin above Buckeye Creek on a ridge that came to be known as Campbell’s Hill. He broke a forty-mile network of trails and traplines, complete with backcountry camps, in the country to the north and east. By summer, he prospected for gold in the creeks and benches; in winter, he harnessed his dogs, lined them out single-file, and mushed from one trapline cabin to another. With his .22 and 30-06 rifles he hunted whatever game the country supported, learning the land well enough to witness the natural ebb and flow of wildlife populations—the tender balance between moose and caribou with wolf and bear, rabbit and marten with fox. Season after season, year after year, Campbell lived the quiet, solitary life of a miner and trapper in Alaska’s wide-open country.

And in the autumn of his sixty-third year, Fred Campbell sat in one of his trapline cabins after a long, arduous day of travel and carefully peeled the label from a tin of Carnation evaporated milk. On the blank side of the label he scrawled with a fountain pen:

Arived. All is Well. Bear had
been in camp, torn tent. And a
bit of other damage – Tired.¹⁴

The Milk Label Diary

The entries on the milk labels recovered from his lake cabin date from September 1944 to February 1953. Each is written in a simple, declarative style and offers a brief catalog of the events of the day (fig. 2). One of the first reads:

Rained. Sharpened axes. Picked
cranberries. Brought 30 lbs meat in.

From 18 September 1947:

Rained all night. Snowed all
day. Cut wood. Dogs howled.

Two days later:

Picked berries. A fine day.
Cut wood.

Other entries reflect the many hardships of a life in the backcountry. On 7 March 1946, Campbell and his unruly dogs arrived at the lake cabin after the fourteen-mile trek:

It was an awful trip. Snow
is deep and no trail that broke.
Jane is in heat. Which did not
help the trip one bit.

His entry on the summer solstice of 1945, a day of unbroken daylight, reveals in its poetic cadence a contented man:

Took a rest. Listened to the birds.
A lot of noise around hear.
I have a mounon bluebird out the
door. Old cow in the Lake. Everybody
worked all night Except me and dogs.

Campbell penned these lines two weeks after his sixty-fourth birthday, during his fourth decade in the Alaska bush. It's easy to imagine the old miner in his cabin on a warm summer evening, a tired dog at his feet, his thoughts settling on the day's labor and peaceful ease he has earned for himself. That he takes a rest, listens to the birds, and jots down a few words about the workings of the natural world around him—workings he had been observing for enough years that the regular parade of seasons blended together into a diorama of his very life—demonstrates the measure of value he placed on this land and the importance to him of recording it in ink. His list of literal objects—the stuff of his life—is self-affirming. As the objectivist poet George Oppen wrote, in perhaps his most famous lines of verse, "There are things / We live among 'and to see them / Is to

know ourselves’.”¹⁵ The timeless appreciation Campbell displays can only be earned with the decades he gave to the land.

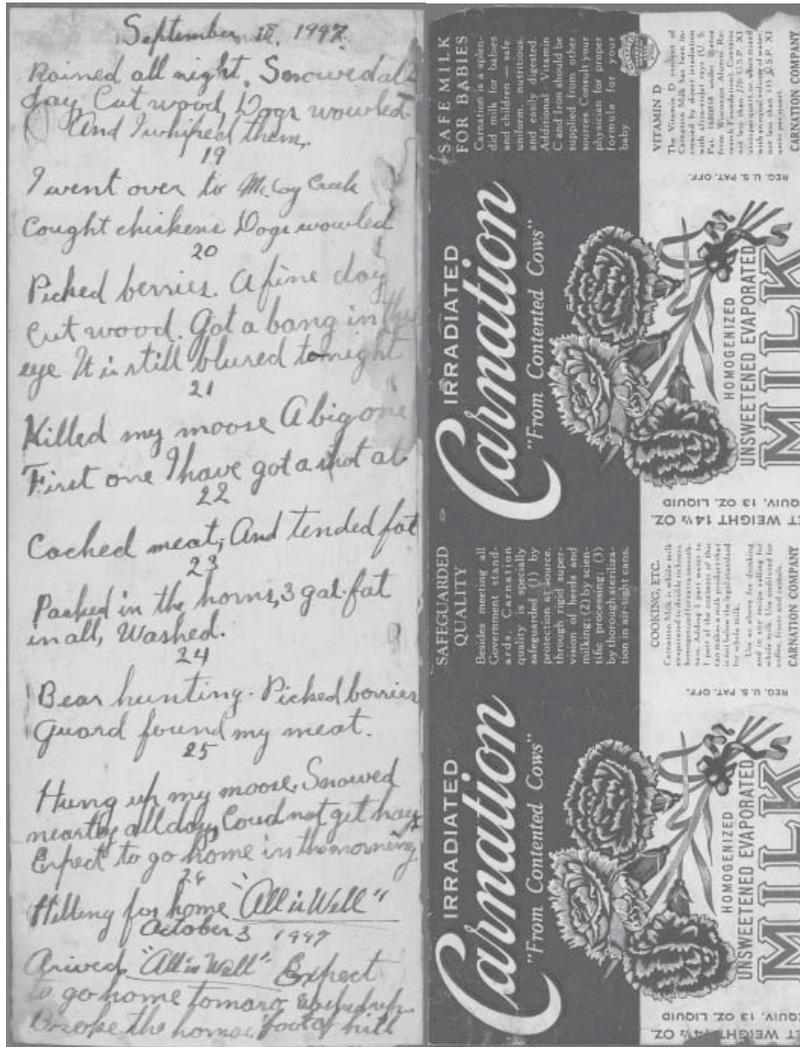


Figure 2. Both sides of a page from Fred Campbell's diary—the Carnation milk label and the reverse side where he wrote daily entries. Note the two listings of Campbell's signature phrase, "All is Well," at the bottom of the label. Fred Campbell Collection, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Reprinted with permission.

Perhaps because it was acquired well into adulthood, the ability to read and write became a source of great pride to Campbell. The simple act of transcribing his daily life to paper granted permanence to his existence and established a not insignificant degree of self-worth. Writing and the concept of identity are intertwined for the diarist. Campbell's milk labels represent the landscape on which he was able to define and project the identity he chose for himself, that of a hard-working sourdough carving a life from the wilderness. Such autobiographical narrative, writes Jens Brockmeier, "is the very place where we construct our identities, interweaving past and present experiences with the threads of a life history."¹⁶ The keeping of a diary is by its very nature an intimate, personal experience, one that the diarist likely does not intend to share with others. It differs from traditional autobiography in that the writing is rooted in the immediacy of the experience which, although it may reflect a larger thematic context, is not necessarily governed by it. The day-to-day catalog of otherwise mundane events found in Fred Campbell's diary assumes an authenticity by virtue of its unpolished *freshness*, thereby representing the terrain on which he projects that self of which he is most proud—the backcountry pioneer living off the land and who, just as importantly, is able to write about it all using his newfound skill with a fountain pen.

The diary's first entry, dated 22 September 1944, contains a phrase that Campbell would repeat over and over in the succeeding years: "All is Well." Even on days when he complained about his aching bones, the dogs running off, or a bear tearing into his cache, Campbell invoked these three words as a kind of mantra, usually underlining them for good measure. The self-affirming quality of the phrase underscores that life writing is an act by which we make sense of, and thereby add value to our lives. Though the diarist ostensibly writes for no audience but himself, there is always an imagined *other* that is reading and simultaneously validating all that has been written. The signature phrase "All is Well," repeated over one hundred and fifty times in the eight-year span of the diary, stands as Campbell's testimony, for himself in the present and the indefinite reader every diarist has in mind, to the richness of the life he spent decades slowly building. It is all too easy to reduce such a life, and its accompanying diary, to sentimentality and romanticism—yet Robert Fothergill writes of the diarist's sincere and often subconscious ability to create this brand of self-dramatization:

What the diarist talks about and the tone the diarist habitually adopts combine to construct a diary persona, which may represent the actual living person quite fully and fairly but which is, nonetheless, a version of the self that the diary text serves to project and reinforce.¹⁷

Other entries similarly document the identity of Campbell's diary persona. From 2 April 1946:

Snowed this Morning.
Lofed all day. Red Bible.
A beautyful afternoon today.

These twelve simple words bear witness to the extraordinary place the writer has chosen as his home, the moments of repose he has achieved with decades of toil, and his spirituality. Later that fall, after a hard day on the trail, Campbell rescues one of his puppies who fell into the lake. His diary succinctly notes his reaction: "Glad." On a winter day when the temperature dropped (by his estimation) to seventy below, Campbell first professes "Glade to be in camp," but after two days of compulsory rest writes, "I hate to stay indoors always." If the somewhat enigmatic phrase "All is Well" suggests the general atmosphere of the miner's life, the day-to-day entries more explicitly reveal the identity of a man at peace in his "beautyful" home.

This does not mean to suggest, however, Campbell only penned statements that reflected glowingly on his life. One night when his dogs howled, Campbell "whiped them." He often notes a "sore back," a "bang in the eye," or that his bones "ake all over" — conditions hardly surprising for a septuagenarian breaking trail and chopping wood. His diary contains evidence of many struggles, all of which further validate the diarist's existence and claim to the land. Barbara Frey Waxman notes that for many older writers, later life is not a period of stagnation, but is marked by spiritual and emotional growth: "The life writer in old age often takes up the pen to share her or his hard-won wisdom and reflections upon how to create a meaningful existence."¹⁸ One could not expect that an account of Campbell's life would include only successful hunts and spells of bird watching, and it would be a mistake to characterize either his diary or his life in such exclusively romantic terms. The projected identity is not an idealized image, but a complete one.

Campbell's deep spirituality also informs his daily writing. He proved a devoutly religious man from his first encounter with Ms. Wightman at Missionary Gulch and spent countless evenings reading his Bible. He also obtained copies of *Watchtower*, the magazine of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the dogmatic and apocalyptic nature of which left Campbell a true believer unafraid to proselytize. He was given to quote passages from the Old Testament to anyone who would listen, often lecturing the guests at the Richardson Roadhouse on Noah and the flood. A solitary life in the backcountry necessitated a solitary practice of his religion. Campbell rarely, if ever, attended an organized church service. His entire concept of spirituality developed from a written text—the Bible—received in relative isolation. The value he subsequently placed on the written word is immeasurable.

Apart from the milk label diary, a single undated and unfinished letter written by Fred Campbell exists. Addressed (but never mailed) to Major and Mrs. John Smetana of New Orleans, the letter appears to have been written sometime during the early 1950s,¹⁹ and begins with a warm greeting and news of the weather in Alaska. From there, it becomes a rambling sermon regarding the wisdom of God and the obligation of man:

God's Laws of righteousness [are] the only answer, they are just [and] true. They are beyon[d] our human thoughts. ... And never make a [mockery] of God's Laws. If you do, You will be distroying every-ones human rights on earth along with your own life. ... Those creative days that our Bible speakes about were 7000 years each, no more or no less. All things have theair perfect timeing.²⁰

Fred Campbell spent countless evenings shut in his cabin absorbing the text of the Old Testament and internalizing the dogma of the *Watchtowers*. He observed in the natural world around him the perfection of God's Laws, manifest in what he calls the "signs" of the Creator: "Water in the rocks. The thawing of the earths surface. The coal beds. The dinosaurs." Campbell was semiliterate, but clearly possessed an inquisitive mind: "To get the facts, And help to put things whear they belong, is my work. . . . To get to know what the right of things that govern man, Has cost me a lot of thought and study Hear in the north." The written word served as Campbell's spiritual and intellectual nourishment, and as he sought to "put things whear they belong," it is not at all surprising that one day he picked up a pen and began keeping a written record of his own life.

This record, as it appears on the reverse side of milk labels, forms a single column of text, each entry preceded by a number representing the date:

October 15, 1944

Built dog houses, Cut a bit of wood.

16

Heading for McCoy Creek this morning. All is Well.

17

Arived. All is Well. No snow.

18

Cut wood. Worked on cabin.
Just a least bit of snow fell.

19

Cut wood, Done a wash, Expect
to go for home camp in the
morning.

Taken in the context of his devout religious study, the resemblance to Bible verse is striking. Campbell wrote in short, laconic phrases that pivoted on the objects of his daily life. These objects assumed a spiritual dimension in that they defined his identity. All about him were signs of the Creator.

The Teacher and the Student

On a summer weekend in 1947, John Haines, then just twenty-three years old and brand new to Alaska, took a few days of leave from his job at a Fairbanks hardware store and caught a ride down the Richardson Highway. Some sixty-eight miles away he found a piece of land overlooking the Tanana River on which, after filing the appropriate papers for a homesteading patent, he built a small frame house. Following a sojourn to art school back east, Haines returned to the homestead in 1954. It would be his home for the better part of the next two decades.

His first years were spent learning the ways of the North. A hardscrabble bunch of old-timers, including Campbell, served as able teachers to the newcomer (fig. 3). Haines learned the necessary skills, such as how to read

tracks in the snow, harness a team of dogs, and sew a salmon net. When one of Campbell's dogs had a litter of pups, Haines took two—a female named Mousey and a dim-witted but strong male named Halo who would become a good wheel dog. He also spent those years in the company of books, studying the craft of poetry and writing his own collection of verse that would later earn him literary awards and accolades. The lives of Fred Campbell and John Haines overlapped for some five years in the 1950s, a brief interlude in the age-tempered vigor of one man and the youthful strength of another, but with an impact that surfaces in many of Haines's later literary works. From his poem "Rain Country":

Our faces strayed together
in the cold north window –
night, and the late cup
steaming before us...
Campbell, his passion
tamed by the tumbling years,
an old voice retelling.²¹

On many such nights, Haines watched Campbell empty a can of evaporated milk and then carefully slice the glued seam of the label. He pressed the curled paper flat and set it aside for the next day's writing.



Figure 3. Fred Campbell and John Haines in summer 1954 at Campbell's lake cabin. *Personal collection of John Haines, reprinted with permission.*

Just as Campbell's diary persona is defined by the objects that surround him—his dogs, cut wood, the snow—so does Haines in his poetry elicit a sense of timelessness through artifacts at once precise and universal. The *window*, the *night*, and the *cup* in the above verses together provide the much-noted imagistic and dreamlike quality endemic to Haines's poetry. The meaning hangs on the objects. Time is cyclical. What has happened here between the old man and the young has little to do with the linear passage of their years, but is an ancient ritual playing out between teacher and student. One wonders about Strite and Matteson, the two old-timers who tutored the twenty-six-year-old Campbell in 1907, and the nights their faces strayed together over steaming cups and elemental knowledge. How many lessons passed between them, with the eternal cold and darkness just beyond the sill? Both Campbell and Haines came by this fundamental knowledge the only true way it can be gained—by surrendering one's own sense of time to the natural rhythms of the earth. "The land gives up its meaning slowly," Wendell Berry writes, "and it is that given-up meaning, patiently waited for, that has moved Mr. Haines's poems, which honor it by a just and frugal speech."²² Because both Campbell and Haines employ a style that is sparse and direct, the allegorical meanings of the named objects take precedence over the literal ones.²³

Fred Campbell and the detritus of his life turn up in other poems by Haines. From "Deserted Cabin":

Here in the yellowing
aspen grove
on Campbell's Hill
the wind is searching
a fallow garden.

I remember the old man
who lived here.
Five years have gone by,
and his house has grown
to resemble his life—
a shallow cave hung
with old hides, rusty
traps and chains,
smelling of eighty years
of unwashed bedding
and rotting harness.²⁴

It is a lament for something just passed, a garden gone fallow and a life concluded—if not also a *way of life* now ended. The monosyllabic nouns that dominate the verse—*grove, hill, man, house, life, cave* and others—illustrate the poet's economy of language and have meanings more figurative than literal considering the poem's dreamlike quality. The objects of Campbell's life now also define his death, and in their broken-down state we see the last, bitter years of a man whose infirmities foretell his coming death: "He talks to himself / of poverty, cursing softly." In a review published three years after the above poem (and at a time when Campbell and nearly all the other Richardson sourdoughs had either died or moved away to more comfortable lives), Haines writes that poetry works best when it "embodies in a memorable way, through its sound, the images it presents, and by its rhythmic solidity and intensity, a part of our life, recognizable and hidden."²⁵ The unadorned structure of Haines's poems provides that rhythm—a typical line contains only four or five beats, sometimes less—while the imagistic nature of the poems arises from the named objects. It is a sparse writing style born of the isolated country the writer inhabits. Words are few and chosen carefully. For both Fred Campbell and John Haines, cold is cold, and hunger is hunger, and few modifiers are required.

Haines's writings often look back at a past just out of reach, though not for the sake of nostalgia, as pointed out by Kevin Walzer, but rather in a quest to witness that which is elemental in nature: "In this sense *past* refers to a level of humanity ... that is more wise, more careful, more humble than what exists in the daily flow of history."²⁶ If the titular cabin in the above poem is fallen to ruin, so is the life of its soon-departed occupant—deserted not by choice, but from the natural progression of years that makes men bitter for what their bodies can no longer do. He "wanted only to walk / in the sun and pick / the ripening berries." Time is cyclical for the earth, but for every person, in the end, it becomes linear once more. "Deserted Cabin" reads as an elegy for a departed soul, but also as a larger truth that time eventually renders every garden fallow, every house deserted, and every life ended. In the poetry of John Haines, looking back on what just happened is the same as looking back millennia.

So, too, Fred Campbell's diary. The dates of its entries notwithstanding, there is nothing in them to indicate time or place; rather it is clear the events he describes are part of a tradition that connects the individual to history. When Campbell writes "20 belo, north wind," it matters not at all that it was 7 January 1948—only that winter's cold is timeless. By the same token, Haines's memoir of his life in Alaska, *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*,

is filled with revisited episodes made universal in part by their very lack of anthropocentric time. The chapter titles alone indicate timelessness: "Snow," "Spring," "Wolves," "Shadows," "Ice," and so on. "In reliving parts of the narrative," Haines writes in the book's preface,

I seem to have wandered through a number of historical periods, geological epochs, and states of mind, always returning to a source, a country that is both specific and ideal. ... In the sense in which I write, there is no progress, no destination, for the essence of things has already been known, the real place arrived at long ago.²⁷

For the reader as much as the author, it does not matter whether a particular moose hunt or hike through the woods happened in 1957, or 1977, or yesterday. When time does appear in Haines's work it rarely comes from a calendar, but instead takes those forms a man in the backcountry would find useful—fading twilight that will allow this much work before night's onset, or the period it takes for a winter wind to cover tracks with freshly blown snow. A reader of Campbell's diary will similarly find him/herself ignoring the dates in favor of the content of the entries, which evoke more useful points of reference. A period of Campbell's life might be marked by a moose shot and dressed in autumn, the meat stored frozen in a cache all winter, and cooked and eaten in spring. Or wood chopped and stacked one year, but not fed into the stove until the next. Time moves more slowly when marked by objects that are handled only when needed, sometimes just once or twice a year. The land itself is the calendar. In his essay "Of Traps and Snares," Haines writes of the tin cans he leaves upside down in the brush near streams for use as drinking cups while on his backcountry travels. Time, as marked by the intermittent use of each cup, has a protracted continuity few of us in the so-called modern world can grasp.

Haines would later write of his early Alaska poems that they emerged from what he called "a kind of spell," born of poverty and isolation and circumstances never to be experienced again. The spell was broken when he left Richardson. His re-emergence into the outside world was "drastic and unsettling."²⁸ The poet likely discovered that time moved quickly, and objects meant less when they were abundant and disposable. Perhaps the truest measure of Haines's poetry having its own unique sense of place and time is that, according to the poet himself, it couldn't have been written anywhere else, nor at any other time in his life. The same can be said of Fred Campbell's diary. Had the old man decided to leave the bush for a

more comfortable existence (as some of his Richardson contemporaries did) it's hard to imagine his daily writing from, say, a small house on 3rd Street in Fairbanks, with cars and people just outside the door and a well-stocked grocery around the corner. The spell would have been broken.

Many years after Campbell's death and himself then pushing sixty, Haines again walked the domes and valleys behind Richardson and reminisced about the vast expanse of country Campbell once claimed as his own:

It is remarkable that one individual would claim so much, seeing it all as an extension of his own backyard. And yet, looking down from this place, sensing as I do still the old attraction of the wilderness, I can feel the appropriateness in that claim. In this enormous space and solitude another dimension of life can be felt and grasped by the ready mind. ... A cabin on a distant lake, a cache here and a tent site there; water hole, creek, and berry patch: of such native material can a life be made, and the land met on its own terms. A good life on earth, as such things go; difficult and deprived, but keeping at its center an uncommon dignity.²⁹

The Last Milk Label

On Valentine's Day 1953, Fred Campbell wrote on a Darigold label a single line about one of his dogs that ran away: "Specks went back to McCoy Creek." It is the last entry on the last page that exists. The many aches and pains Campbell wrote about in his diary caught up with him throughout the 1950s, and his life in the country slowed down. As a seventy-three-year-old man he brought home fifty lynx in a record trapping year, but it would be his last. He stopped keeping the traplines and his cabins fell into disrepair. During this time Campbell became something of a fixture at the roadhouse, the sourdough whom newcomers would seek out to hear stories of the good old days. Servicemen rotating between army posts in Delta Junction to the south and Fairbanks to the north routinely stopped in to see the old miner.

In the first week of October 1958, a friend pounded on the door of Campbell's cabin behind the roadhouse. She let herself in and found the old man in bed having suffered a stroke. He was alive, but in very poor shape. Campbell was brought to St. Joseph's Hospital in Fairbanks where he remained throughout the fall and into the winter. The life of the old miner came to an end late in the evening on Tuesday, 27 January 1959, a

night when the temperature in the Alaska Interior dropped to nineteen degrees below zero.

Notes

1. "Miner Dies At Hospital," *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, 28 January 1959, 3; Harry O. Arend, "Death and cemetery records, Fairbanks, Alaska, 1941-1959," [unpublished record], 65. Unless otherwise noted, all facts about Fred Campbell are from personal communication between the author and John Haines.
2. "Inventory of the Effects of Fred Campbell, Deceased," *Probate Court of the Fairbanks Precinct, Fourth Division, State of Alaska*, August 28, 1959.
3. John Haines, *Fables and Distances* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf, 1996), 169–70.
4. U.S. Commissioner, *Index to Locations (Vol. 1), Fairbanks Precinct, Fourth Division Alaska* [undated ledger], 551; *Mining & Minerals in the Golden Heart of Alaska*, publication of the Fairbanks North Star Borough, August 1985, 49–53. Many published accounts of Richardson's early years erroneously list 1905 as the year gold was discovered on Banner Creek. Such accounts probably stem from extant 1906 copies of the *Fairbanks Evening News*, which give the impression that gold strikes in the area occurred in the immediate past (many newspapers of the era were lost in the fire of May 1906, which destroyed much of Fairbanks). Furthermore, surveys for the townsite of Richardson began in 1905, probably causing many writers to assume the discovery of gold occurred the same year. Judge James Wickersham passed through the area in the spring of 1905 when the townsite planning began and recommended the town be named for the late Louis Sloss, who served as the first president of the Alaska Commercial Company. It no doubt pained Wickersham to learn that the locals ignored his suggestion in favor of Wilds P. Richardson, a man he detested. See James Wickersham, *James Wickersham, U.S. District Judge of Alaska: Transcripts of Diaries 1–13, January 1, 1900–February 13, 1908*, transcribed by Mary Anne Slemmons (Juneau: Alaska State Library, 2000), 213; Walter T. Phillips, Sr., "Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway: The First Quarter Century, 1899 to 1923," report to the Alaska Historical Commission (1984), 64.
5. See the following articles from the *Fairbanks Evening News*: "Eight Buildings Under Construction," 24 August 1906, 4; "Local Telephone Exchange For Richardson," 20 September 1906, 2; "Work Progresses On Tenderfoot," 22 September 1906, 2.
6. This report was provided by the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS) crew working in the area between 1911 and 1914, the photographer for which described the general abandonment of the area: "Dozens of these cabins, even small towns, and business centers having at one time, within the last ten years, trading posts, various business enterprises

including—of course—saloons, express offices, etc., are scattered over the Tenderfoot valley and other creeks within a few miles of Richardson.” See Rita Cottnair Collection, Accession Number 74-130-36, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

7. R.H. Saunders, “Geochemical Report No. 3: A Geochemical Investigation in the Richardson Area, Big Delta Quadrangle, Alaska,” Division of Mines and Minerals, Department of Natural Resources, State of Alaska (April 1965), 2.
8. Phillips, 64–66; Michael E. Smith, “Alaska’s Historic Roadhouses,” report to the Office of Statewide Cultural Programs, Alaska Division of Parks, Department of Natural Resources (1974), 19, 24; Melvin B. Ricks, *Directory of Alaska Postoffices and Postmasters*. (Ketchikan, Alaska: Tongass Publishing Co., 1965), 54. The last of the Richardson Roadhouses operated into the 1970s, and was destroyed by fire in 1982.
9. “Miner Dies At Hospital,” 3.
10. *Index to Locators (Placer), Fairbanks Precinct, 1909–1945*, District Court of Alaska, Fourth Division [undated ledger], 284.
11. C.E.B., Jr. “Two Years at Salchaket,” *The Alaskan Churchman* 6 (No.1, November 1911), 11–12.
12. *Mining & Minerals in the Golden Heart of Alaska*, 53.
13. “Fred Campbell Here 1st Time In 25 Years,” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, 26 May 1934, 4.
14. All diary citations are from the Fred Campbell Collection, Vertical File Small Manuscript, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. The diary is replete with spelling errors and inconsistent punctuation. In quoting from the diary I have attempted to preserve as closely as possible the original text, including misspellings, line breaks, and underlined passages. Minor editorial changes have been included when needed for clarity.
15. George Oppen, *New Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2002), 163 (emphasis in original).
16. Jens Brockmeier, “Identity,” in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, ed. Margaretta Jolly (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 456.
17. Robert A. Fothergill, “One Day at a Time: The Diary as Lifewriting,” *alb: Auto/biography Studies* 10 (No. 1, 1995), 86.
18. Barbara Frey Waxman, “Old Age and Life Writing,” *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, 674.
19. I have supposed the letter dates from the early 1950s for a number of reasons. Campbell refers to Dwight Eisenhower, Jawaharlal Nehru, and “the war,” by which he presumably means Korea. Additionally, the letter was written with a ballpoint pen, which, if the corresponding diary entries are any guide, he did not begin using until the early 1950s.

20. This letter contains the same pattern of misspellings and grammatical errors found in the diary. I have again attempted to preserve the integrity of the original text, making editorial changes only where needed for clarity. See Billy Melvin Collection, Vertical File Small Manuscript, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. (Billy Melvin was another of the old Richardson pioneers. John Haines rescued some of Melvin's papers as well, mostly letters from his family in Kansas and a few receipts. Somehow this letter from Campbell ended up in that collection. That the letter is written by Campbell and not Melvin is clear: the handwriting matches Campbell's, and it appears on commercially produced stationery with the header, "F.A. Campbell / Richardson Highway / Richardson, Alaska." Billy Melvin died at the Pioneer Home in Sitka, Alaska, in 1962.)
21. John Haines, *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf, 1996), 174.
22. Wendell Berry, "Speech After Long Silence," *The Wilderness of Vision: On the Poetry of John Haines*, eds. Kevin Bezner and Kevin Walzer (Brownsville, Oregon: Story Line Press, 1996), 27.
23. Marydee Stanfill, *At the Center of His Being: Winter News by John Haines*, Master of Arts Thesis, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1970, iii.
24. John Haines, "Deserted Cabin," *Winter News* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 37–38.
25. John Haines, Review of *The Young American Poets*, ed. Paul Carroll, *Kayak* 20 (1969), 67–68.
26. Kevin Walzer, "An Elegist's Dreams," *The Wilderness of Vision: On the Poetry of John Haines*, 71–72 (emphasis in original).
27. John Haines, *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf, 1989), iii–iv.
28. *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer*, 1–2.
29. *Fables and Distances*, 171.