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Bush Pilot George Theriault's Fountain of Youth

A fishing trip with a Canadian legend.

By: James Smedley



George Theriault kills the 2 h.p. motor near a rocky point and drops a jig and yellow twister tail to bottom. In an instant, his rod is arced sharply as he angles a large walleye to the surface. The 87-year-old bush pilot reaches into the water and hoists the fat 25-inch fish. George flashes a boyish grin, while I take a few photos, then slides the 5-pounder back into the water. "This is usually a good spot," he says, tossing out his jig.

I was first introduced to George Theriault through his book *Trespassing in God's Country*. I remember being glued to pages describing his adventures in the far reaches of northern Ontario, Quebec, and Labrador. In more than 70 years of flying, Theriault has served in World War II with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), flown survey crews throughout the Arctic, established three different air services in northern Ontario, as well as hunting and fishing camps in northern Quebec and the Belcher Islands in Hudson Bay. Through it all he's fished trout, char, grayling, and walleye in remote areas most of us will only dream of.

The book is required reading for anyone interested in bush flying and angling in remote corners of Canada. I said as much in a book review I wrote for a few newspapers and magazines, and now it's my pleasure to be fishing with the venerable bush pilot at his private camp on a small fly-in lake north of Foleyet.

An Unbeatable Invitation Earlier in the summer I received an e-mail from Theriault thanking me for the favourable review and wondering if I'd like to join him for a "few days of fishing and swapping stories." A date is set and I drive to Air Ivanhoe in Foleyet, now run by Theriault's son, George Jr. I'm flown into a long, narrow lake where George Sr. is waiting at his one-room frame cabin. He welcomes me and I throw my gear on one of two sets of bunk beds. It's a cosy spot, nestled amongst the thick cedars that grow at the base of a large mountain rising up behind the small white cabin.

Wooden walkways lead down to a pair of docks: one with a boat and motor, the other where George's Cessna 180 is tied. Any uncertainty about spending a few days with a man I've never met dissipates as we enjoy a cold beer on the front deck. When Theriault suggests we go fishing, I know we're going to get along just fine.

After Theriault's initial walleye, we catch four more 18- to 24-inchers during a few slow drifts along the steep cedar-shrouded shoreline. We keep two 18-inchers for supper, and once the food fish are landed, Theriault starts up the 2 h.p. and says, "Okay now bend down your barb."

Still within shouting range of the small cabin, Theriault starts a quick troll along the bottom end of the lake. The shoreline is a mixture of sandy points, rocky drop-offs, and weedy flats. Walleye and pike are everywhere they should be, aggressively striking 1/4-ounce jigs and soft plastics dragged behind the sputtering outboard.

By the time we troll back to the dock, long shadows cast from the steep hills that envelop this productive little lake are encroaching on the cabin. Theriault docks the boat and points me to a fishcleaning board nailed to a stump near the dock. I extract four meaty fillets, but that's about all the help Theriault will accept, insisting on doing all the cooking and the bulk of the cleanup. "Relax," he says. "You're my guest."

We eat walleye, fried potatoes, salad, and his wife, Joan's, homemade pickles, along with some of Theriault's homemade wine. We remain at the table for a long time settling into stories of the north.

Past Adventures Fluent in French and English, Theriault tells me his father was an Acadian and his mother from France, and he grew up in Timmins during the Depression. "I had a motorcycle with a side car and would collect empties from prospectors coming out of the bush and cash them in. We just wanted enough so we could do the things we wanted to do." And, for Theriault, this was hunting and fishing.

He smiles while recalling his early days fishing the Mattagami River system with "full-blooded Algonquin and Cree, who paddled birchbark canoes. We used to wear moccasins in the canoes, because they were so delicate. I'd stay with their families, who still were living in tepees on Gogama Lake."

Discussions of Theriault's early years continue into the evening when he tells me how the natives got the birchbark for their canoes. "They'd wait until the winter, -40° or so, and cut around the top and bottom of the tree and slit the side," he says. "Then, they'd build a fire at its base and it would pop off with a huge crack."



Up in the Air

Theriault's introduction to flying came in 1934 when a Waco biplane on floats landed near the 14-year-old's campsite. He took the pilot fishing in exchange for a ride out of the bush. "What a thrill," he says, adding that the 20-minute flight covered the same territory as the two day hike in. "I remember thinking, 'My God, this beats walking.' "

Two years later, Theriault got his private pilot's licence. By 1942, he'd earned his pilot's wings from the RCAF, and he spent the remainder of the war

years flying the east coast of Labrador and the Gulf of St. Lawrence in small twin-engine planes looking for German U-boats.

Theriault never lost his interest in angling. Through 1949 and 50, when he flew a Norseman transporting survey crews throughout the northwestern Arctic, he fished trout, char, and grayling in areas then known only to the Inuit and a handful of other bush pilots, he says.

Theriault left the RCAF a senior flight lieutenant in 1954 to operate his own air service in Chapleau. He later established an air service at Ivanhoe Lake and another in the Wawa area. Through the 1960s, he established hunting and fishing camps in northern Quebec and on Long and Belcher Islands in Hudson Bay.

I sit transfixed as he talks about the best flies for big brook trout in legendary rivers like the Seal, Brandt, and Sutton. "They're still good," he says. "With the price of fuel, not so many people head up there anymore."

Home Sweet Home

Although he talks of the far north with great fondness, he says he doesn't miss it that much. He now has this little cabin equipped with a flush toilet and running water for his wife, Joan, who was a nurse aboard one of the VIP aircraft he flew after the war. Theriault's gravity-feed running water flows from a never-used Beech 18 gas tank secured in a cedar tree. It turns out Theriault was also a dealer in parts for Beechcraft planes. "That's where the money was, not in the outfitting and air-service business; that was more for fun," he says.

Our energy fades with the late- August light and we make our way to bed. As I stretch out in the bunk, snippets of our conversation swirl through my head like a kaleidoscope of Theriault's experiences: northern- Quebec Inuit children who could speak Inuit, French, English, and Cree by age 7; Inuit women who smelled of seal oil; flying to Jamaica in the 1950s to bring back 55-gallon drums of rum at 55 cents per gallon; fishing with Outdoor Life writers Ben East, Joe Brooks, and Bo Randal through the 1950s and 1960s; and meeting British General Bernard Law Montgomery, who he described as "a very smart man." As I drift off to sleep, I'm pretty sure that spending a few days with bush pilot George Theriault is destined to become one of my noted life experiences.

Early to Bed, Early to Rise

Theriault is up with the first hint of daylight. I crawl out of bed when I hear the coffee perking. Theriault illustrates a keen understanding of an angler's desires. I feel truly spoiled when he suggests I head out for a morning fish, while he fixes breakfast. It's a calm, misty morning. I troll as slowly as the 2 h.p. allows, with the little lake producing the same quality walleye as yesterday afternoon. A gentle rain starts as I drift off a shoal across from the cabin, where I see Theriault wave from the porch.

Over a classic bacon-and-egg breakfast, we plan our morning. We will fish the top end of the lake and cut a bit of firewood to bring back to camp. Although intermittent showers now sweep across the lake, there's no talk of staying put.

"I love the rain," says Theriault, as he casts toward a small island and nails a 4-pound pike on cue. "Fish bite well."

After an initial flurry, the fishing slows and we start combing the shoreline for firewood. Theriault noses the 12-foot aluminum boat to shore, after eyeing a well-dried dead and



leaning pine. He hands me the chainsaw and I cut the tree into 2-foot lengths, while Theriault carries them to the boat. I've had a stiff shoulder for awhile, and I can really feel it as I toss the remainder of the wood to Theriault, who catches the logs and places them in the boat. I decide to grin and bear it, rather than complain to a man of more than twice my age who is doing the same work.

After splitting and piling the wood, Theriault and I sit down to a snack of fresh apple pie. I spend the rest of the afternoon on the lake, while Theriault putters around camp. Simply trolling jigs and plastic is surprisingly effective, but I watch my portable fish finder until I see where a 12-foot flat drops quickly to 20 feet. I kill the motor and work the edge with a 1/8-ounce jig and a 3-inch softplastic minnow. It doesn't even reach bottom before it's attacked.

A misty and windless afternoon allows me to scour the bumps and edges of this small lake. I've yet to catch a walleye under 16 inches, although Theriault assures me there are small fish here. We kept two fish this morning for supper, so following Theriault's example, I bend down my barb and return every fish to the lake.

I look around at the white pine poking above the forested hills surrounding this elongated strip of walleye water. This relatively untouched work of nature has no signs of logging and is miles from any bush road or rail line. Understanding why Theriault loves it here and why he nurtures the inhabitants of what is essentially his own private lake is easy. Before flying in here, George Theriault Jr. told me he's pretty sure his dad has every walleye in this lake named.

Around 5 p.m. I see Theriault Sr. out in the yard throwing potato peels and vegetable scraps to several whiskeyjacks that hang out at the cabin. While trolling back toward camp, I catch and release a 21-inch right behind Theriault's Cessna 180. Then, I come in out of the damp day to hang my rainwear by the wood stove.

Theriault suggests a rum and coke, while he puts the final touches on yet another feast. Over a plate of walleye, salad, corn, and potatoes, we raise our glasses. "We might not be kings, but we live like them," proclaims Theriault.

A Final Fling

I awake again to the sound of Theriault shuffling about the cabin. First light brings more overcast, drizzly weather. Although Theriault hopes to fly us out today, there's no rush under these conditions. We each cradle a cup of coffee and I ask how many types of planes he's flown in his career. After a long pause he looks up.

"I think I've flown just about every little airplane that was available," he says. He tested aircraft during WWII and probably flew about 25 different kinds of planes during the war – and many more since. He's logged more than 4,000 hours in a Douglas DC3. Of the famous deHavilland Beaver, "I've flown that plane since the year it came off the assembly line in 1948," he adds.

Life's Lessons

"Life sure is short," says Theriault, pouring us each another cup of coffee. "Seems like yesterday I was walking 10 miles through the bush and living on the land for weeks at a time."

Now into my early 40s, I have an understanding of how the years fly by. And for a man like Theriault who has raised three sons and three daughters and filled his years with such a broad range of experience, I can appreciate how close to 90 years have slipped by.

I don't have to ask Theriault for his secret to a long and happy life, because I think I've had a taste of his fountain of youth in this small cabin on the lake he's shared with me. My guess is Theriault has always worked hard doing what he enjoyed. In the short time we've spent together, I've come to know a man who is generous, open-minded, and appreciative of all he has – an angler who takes the time to go fishing. Could this be the secret to longevity? I hope so.

In spite of his good health, Theriault has no illusions of perpetual youth. As a pilot, he's required to pass a medical exam every two years, but he takes one every year just to be on the safe side. He admits he's getting older and only flies when conditions suit him. He looks out at the lake through the large front window.

"We won't be flying in this weather," he says. "You should go fishing. I've got some things I want to do around here. Why don't you keep two fish for me and two for your family."

I'm getting really good at following these sorts of orders and disappear without protest. I'm hoping the low clouds and rain will continue indefinitely, but by the time I've angled four walleye, patches of blue are appearing overhead.

Heading Home

"Looks like we will get out today," says Theriault, as I fillet walleye under increasingly blue skies. "I only need a 500-foot ceiling."

Within the hour, we've packed our gear, closed the camp, and climbed into the blue and white Cessna 180. As we lift off the productive little walleye lake and climb over the surrounding hills, I feel honoured to be airborne with one of Canada's legendary bush pilots – still behind the stick. Once throttled back at cruising altitude over the vast northern-Ontario collage of forests, lakes, and rivers, Theriault speaks over the drone of the engine.

"We will have to do this again when I'm 100."

I smile broadly and say, "It's a deal."

The Flying Theriaults

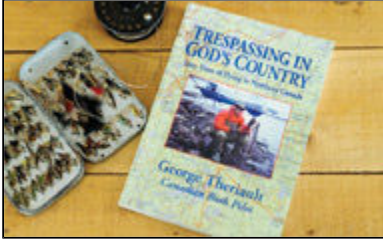
They say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, so no surprise that all three of George Theriault's sons are career pilots.

John Theriault, 58, started flying in the early 1970s, working for his parents and several other outfitters throughout the north before starting John Theriault Air in Chapleau in 1986. John is retiring this year and plans to "learn how to fish again." As a pilot and an

aircraft mechanic/ engineer, George Jr., 55, worked as chief engineer for his father before starting Air Ivanhoe (www.air-ivanhoe.com) with his wife, Jeanne, in 1980. With John's retirement, George Jr. will also be flying into several outposts of John Theriault Air. George and Jeanne's son, Joel, an environmental lawyer and commercial pilot, will be flying for his parents this summer at Air Ivanhoe, a business started originally as Theriault Air Service by George Sr. in 1959.



George Sr.'s youngest son, Richard, left northern Ontario to fly for Austin Airways, then Air Canada on commercial jets throughout Europe, Asia, and North and South America. He presently captains a 747 for Nippon Air Cargo in Japan. Richard returns to northern Ontario every summer, along with his two brothers and three sisters, for a traditional family gathering of fishing, bonfires, and music.



To purchase a copy of *Trespassing In God's Country*, contact:

George Theriault
Treeline Publishing
101-313 McDonald Ave.
Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. P6B 5Y9
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Enclose \$19.95, plus \$3 S&H

The book is also available seasonally at Ivanhoe River Inn and Air Ivanhoe seaplane base 7 miles west of Foleyet off Ivanhoe Lake Provincial Park Rd. Go to www.air-ivanhoe.com or call 1- 800-955-2951 or 705-899-2155 (10 a.m to 8 p.m) for info on fly-in and drive-to fishing adventures.

Flying Teriaults' photos courtesy George Theriault, excerpts from *Trespassing in God's Country*