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Canada's Big Back Yard

[THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES]

MAY - 2 1975

The Northwest Territories is an enormous triangle of land, water, trees, ice, rock, minerals and oil.

It is the greater part of Canada's upper half and most of it has remained unchanged for ten thousand years. It has 1,304,903 square miles and more than 40,000 people, the majority of whom live in small settlements along the Mackenzie River and in two towns, Yellowknife and Inuvik.

The NWT has four vast regions — the one on top is the Baffin region, the islands of the Arctic, Ellesmere, Melville, Devon, Banks, Victoria, Baffin and the rest. It has one sizeable community, Frobisher Bay, on Baffin Island, above the Hudson Strait, which has a population of 2360 and which was incorporated as a hamlet on April 1, 1974. The regions below, Inuvik, Fort Smith and Keewatin, stretch east from the Yukon to the Atlantic.

The regions are not cohesive; only the long winters, the permafrost and the mapmakers give them a rough unity. The upper part, above the tree line, is a land of ice, polar bears, oil and the aurora borealis. The east, on the shores of Hudson Bay, is hard rock, rich in minerals. The most hospitable part is in the west, the sub-Arctic, from the Great Slave Lake in the Fort Smith region, up to Tuktoyaktuk, in the Inuvik region, along the Mackenzie to the edge of the Beaufort Sea.

The Mackenzie is Canada's longest river; it flows north. Its valley lies between the mountains to the west and the barrens to the east, and it is in large part broad and flat with rich, solid soil in the south. There are substantial forests in its southwest, with trees up to twelve inches thick, and there are skinny little willows in the north, centuries old and no broader than a man's thumb. It has an ever-changing delta of flat, thin bush cut up by a million lakes, ponds and streams. It has Great Bear Lake which is a quarter as large as England and so cold that the fish stay close to the shore. It is, among other things, a natural place to lay pipelines to carry Arctic oil and gas.

The climate of the NWT is surprising — it is cold but not as totally cold as the uninitiated assume; Yellowknife on the Great Slave Lake, the capital of the Territories (and with 8300 people the most populous town), has a mean July high temperature of 68.8 degrees and a mean January low of minus 25.6. Days of 80 degrees and above are common in July and the southern part of the Mackenzie valley has three and a half frost free months a year. Fort Smith, near the Alberta border, has registered 103 degrees in the summer, a temperature which would attract attention in Florida, and even Tuktoyaktuk, above the Arctic Circle and on the edge of the Beaufort Sea, has a