

SHE WAITED THIRTY-NINE YEARS to be reunited with her man. By her sons she was carried to him as ashes, and they sought and found him in his long unvisited grave. Finally they lay again, together.



Batchewana River
Photo: Dave Newman

But we two, sitting here in the shelter, eating and drinking, shall entertain each other remembering and retelling our sad sorrows. For afterwards a man who has suffered much and wandered much has pleasure out of his sorrows.

– from *The Odyssey* by Homer



Ben Nelson Sr. and brother Rudolf Nilsson
Photo: unknown



Ben Nelson Sr.

Photo: Unknown

... the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it.

– from *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville



Batchewana gravesite: 1948

Photo: Matti Hietala

HE CAME TO ME BY ABSENCE: there on the living room wall of grandmother's house was the photograph that held the face of the man my grandfather, whose name I bear. As a child I looked upon it and wondered of the man. My father, an aunt or uncle would say, *That is your grandfather.* They would say it with reverence. But they would say little more. My father could only look away in silence after my questions. I knew he was gone, dead, but why and where? *Drowned*, they said. *On the Batchewana.*

I couldn't know how keenly his loss was felt by the family, a loss which occurred eight years before my birth, and twelve or thirteen before my questions. A loss such that few could ever speak his name or his circumstance. A loss and surrounding silence which for me filled fast with mystery.

TO GO TO THE BEGINNING:

Bernhard Anders Nelson

Bernhard Isidore Nelson

Michael Bernhard Nelson

Shared names revolving around wife, mother, grandmother. History – extended. Boyer. Yvonne Emilie Boyer: wife, mother, grandmother. Isidore Boyer. Through him, by extension, we arrive at a particular place. There are stories to tell. I cannot speak for them, but I have heard these things.



Isidore Boyer:
Pangis, 1927
Photo: Yvonne Boyer



Michael Nelson: Batchewana River

Photo: Rick Harris



If you were to ask me what this book is about, I could only say that it all leads to the grave, and there is not the end, but the beginning. It is now for me to speak, to release the long silent voices.



April 1947:

Go to your father; he needs you. George heard his mother's words but did not move. ***Go to him. He's not well. Find him. Help him.*** George reluctantly boarded the train and headed north to Pangis. From Pangis he walked east along his grandfather Isidore's road and by the end of the day he had reached the spur that veered off toward the old Snake Creek camp. He didn't find his father there but could see that he had recently been. Back of the

camp lay the grave where Ben had buried his best dog the month before, had hacked all day at the frozen earth to make a hole deep enough to place his Rover, poisoned by meat from a bait trap.



Ben Nelson Sr. and Oscar Boyer: Pangis, 1919

Photo: Yvonne Boyer

Pangis, 1916

Photo: Yvonne Boyer

PANGIS. HEAD OF STEEL. MILE 69, the headwaters of the Chippewa River. That is where this story will begin. Where the railway ended in 1908, no money to push it further, dead in the bush of the hills of Algoma, inland from Superior's eastern shore. The Lake Superior Corporation offered limits for cutting the virgin timber that filled the rough high country. And so arrived Isidore, half-breed, polyglot, timbercruiser, foreman. Up from Achigan he came and took a contract and would set up camp on Snake Creek, which drains to the Batchewana River. Isidore sent his wife, Georgianne, *grandmere*, to retrieve the two girls, Rose and Yvonne, from the residential school at Grand Mere, and bring them northwest to the new life waiting up the line of the Algoma Central and Hudson Bay Railway. But Geogianne found only Yvonne, for Rose had died. Yvonne would never know the true cause of her older sister's death or where she lay buried – and would never lift her silence regarding her lost sister, Rose.



Rose and Yvonne Boyer: 1904

Photo: unknown

April 1947:

In the morning George walked north along the Snake Creek wagon track, crossed the Batchewana and then took the trail along Alder Creek, thinking he might find his father at the old Abitibi camp. Krmptich's camp they called it, after Nick, Isidore's old friend who ran



Ben Nelson Sr. and George Nelson: Sault Ste. Marie, 1946

Photo: Yvonne Boyer

the Abitibi operation on Alder Creek concurrent with Isidore, who worked the country south of the Batchewana. In the manner of the country, the camps were abandoned when the cutting was done, and the buildings were usually soon occupied in season by trappers and guides or dismantled – the lumber carried off to some other site where another building might be erected. Here on Alder Creek George found his father, Ben.

PANGIS. NAMED AFTER PANGISSIN, the old Ojibway woman who lived there on the upper Chippewa when the railway arrived. In older times she would have been of the *opingitish* or *gens de terre*, or so the French called them. Pangissin. They say it was her grave that lay by the track that ran from the station down to Guyatt Lake, the one with the simple cross and the picket fence around.

With family and goods assembled, Isidore and his entourage departed Pangis and made their way along the rough tote road to the new camp on Snake Creek. Isidore led the team, and on the tailgate of the laden wagon sat Oscar, taunting and teasing his older sister, Yvonne, as she fol-

lowed, herding the pigs along – pigs that would provide sustenance for family and crew through the long winter ahead.



Ben Nelson Jr. (in buggy), Irene Nelson and Leda (cow): Pangis, 1928

Photo: Yvonne Boyer

April 1947:

When George emerged from the bush, Ben was not happy to see him. He had come to regard George, despite his considerable abilities as a bushman, to

have grown dissolute. AWOL or incarcerated throughout the war, mostly unemployed thereafter, Ben would now have nothing to do with his eldest son, then twenty-five. *Go on, get out of here, and don't come back*, he told George. But George wouldn't go. Ben threatened to shoot him, but still George wouldn't move. Better the lead from his father than the tongue of his mother. Eventually Ben relented and took George in and together they went about the business of preparing for the work to be done at ice-out.



Algoma Central locomotive: Pangis, 1920

Photo: Yvonne Boyer



Isidore, Ben Sr., Yvonne, Georgianne (grandmere),
Elizabeth Boyer, Frank Boyer: (children) Irene Nelson,
Yvonne and Frank Jr. Boyer: Pangis ~ 1923

Photo: unknown

IN 1912, WITH CONSIDERABLE REINVESTMENT, construction of the railway began again and the line pushed north from Pangis to Hawk Junction, merged with a spur that ran down to Michipicoten Harbour, and other rails were laid into the various mines that became part of the greater Helen Iron

Range. The country opened up for many – prospectors, miners, timbercruisers, outfitters; town sites were cut out of the bush, populated; some survived, many didn't, but opportunities presented themselves throughout the Superior backcountry.



Oscar Boyer: ~ 1920

Photo: Yvonne Boyer

At Pangis, Isidore's cutting operations flourished; winters were spent cutting and laying up timber for the spring drives; summers, cruising and scaling. Up from Marquette and Chicago came the managers and after the work discussions came play, as Isidore or more often Oscar, his only son by Georgianne, bush savvy Oscar would take the bosses fishing and hunting. The bounty of which these men formerly could only dream was being carried south, and the stories spread and soon they came back with sons and friends and friends of friends, and what was becoming a nuisance for the lumber camp cooks became an idea for Isidore. So he built cabins on Wart Lake, just up the line from Pangis, and opened for sportsmen an outfitting camp. With Oscar as guide, business boomed.

Oscar Boyer: ~1920

Photo: Yvonne Boyer





Ben Nelson Sr.: Pangis, 1919
Photo: Yvonne Boyer

Anders Bernhard 'Ben' Nelson came to Canada in 1907, out of the woods of Sweden and into the bush of the Northwest. Involved in the business of fur, he found his business attracted those who wished to part him from his profits. Inclined to defend himself and his interests, he found himself in Burwash Penitentiary serving time for manslaughter. Upon release in 1916, he headed north to Sudbury and then west to the country being opened up around Lake Superior. Back in the business of buying and selling fur, he met

Isidore Boyer. Friendship ensued, and there Ben met the daughter, Yvonne. In 1919, Ben and Yvonne married, and they built a home near Pangissin Station on Guyatt Lake, where Isidore also had recently moved. Ben never returned to the Old World, turned his back to the family woodlots and business, with his new wife would build a family, a life in the place he had come to love; an experienced bushman, he was an easy fit with the family he had married into. Children came – first, Mary Irene, next, George Emile. And then the move north to what came to be known as

the Rat Farm, on Circle Lake north of Lake Abitibi, in 1925. More babies came: Bernhard 'Ben' Isidore, and then Lucille Ruth, Rudolf 'Plug' Henry, Oscar Lawrence, Arthur 'Art' Brown, Albert 'Mousey' Frederic, and finally, Verena Jeanette.



Ben Nelson Sr., Irene and Yvonne: 1920

Photo: Unknown

