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# When the Eyes of the World Were on *La Côte-Nord*: The Adventures of a Paramount Newsreel Cameraman in Québec

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Article abstract

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Fernstrom Ray

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### **Abstract**

In this first-person account, the Swedish-born cameraman Ray Fernstrom recalls his crossing of Quebec in an aeroplane piloted by aviation pioneer Roméo Vachon in 1928. Fernstrom, who was then employed by the *Paramount News* newsreel, was on a mission to get images of the crew members of the Bremen, who had crash-landed on Greenly Island, Quebec, on April 13, 1928, after completing the first transatlantic flight from East to West.

**Mot-clés** : Actualités filmées, Cinéma muet, Cinéma et aviation

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## WHEN THE EYES OF THE WORLD WERE ON *LA CÔTE-NORD*: THE ADVENTURES OF A PARAMOUNT NEWSREEL CAMERAMAN IN QUÉBEC

Fernstrom Ray

### Foreword, by Louis Pelletier (Université de Montréal and Cinéma-thèque québécoise)

The following first-person account of Ray Fernstrom's 1928 eventful journey to Greenly Island, Quebec, is reproduced from the now out-of-print *Daredevil Cameraman: The Saga of Ray "Swede" Fernstrom*, edited by Beverly Fernstrom and Russell Fernstrom (Raleigh, NC: Pentland Press, 1997), 69-82.

Ray Fernstrom was a Swedish-born cameraman working for Paramount News in the late 1920s. On April 12, 1928, he was dispatched in Montreal by his employer to film the flood devastating the East End neighbourhood of Longue-Pointe (an event also recorded on an amateur 9.5mm reel from the Louis Pelletier collection<sup>1</sup>). While celebrating a successful assignment at the Mount Royal Hotel the next day, he was informed that an aeroplane, the *Bremen*, was in the process of attempting the first crossing from East to West of the Atlantic. This was soon to be confirmed by a report that the *Bremen* had just crash landed a little after 1pm, local time, on Greenly Island, just off Blanc-Sablon in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

This event coming less than a year after Charles Lindbergh's legendary flight from Long Island to Paris was extremely newsworthy. It was even more sensational for newsreel producers who, as documented by Joseph Clark, extensively relied on airmen for the production and dissemination of their films, but also for content. According to Clark, each U.S. newsreel producer had for instance deployed at least twelve cameramen to cover Lindbergh's return to New York City on June 13, 1927.<sup>2</sup> This heightened interest for the exploits of airmen fostered the fierce competition entertainingly described in Fernstrom's testimony.<sup>3</sup> An engaging storyteller, Fernstrom does not hesitate to describe his relationship with his arch enemy—Pathé News' dastardly Tommy Hogan—as a “goddamned war,” or to describe himself as a rattlesnake. . . . Even Harold Ross's *New Yorker*, which cultivated an aloof attitude, published a piece on the reporters and newsreelmen's race to the *Bremen* entitled, “The Battle of Greenly [sic] Island.”<sup>4</sup>

Fernstrom's exciting race to Greenly Island also reveals a world in which media and communication networks are increasingly interconnected. Newsreelmen are seen closely collaborating with newspaper reporters (the photographer Eddie Jackson in this particular instance), while also extensively relying on wireless telegraphy, radio, and the telephone for communication. They also operate in a shrinking world in which individuals from many different backgrounds and origins rub elbows: Fernstrom, a Swede based in New York City, reaches the Canadian site where the German and Irish crew of the *Bremen* is awaiting rescue thanks to a fearless and resourceful French-Canadian airman, Roméo Vachon.

The original figures reproduced in *Daredevil Cameraman* have also been augmented with a number of documents taken from contemporary film journals and the spellings of some of the names have been corrected. Fernstrom's testimony has otherwise not been edited.

### **Fernstrom's Story**

Flyers, aircrafts, distant flights, anything pertaining to airships of any nature, and breaking or setting records was big news. Lindbergh had caused the fever that had swept the world. More and more, farther and farther, and always faster. The next big anticipated story would be who would be the first to duplicate Lindbergh's flight, but this time east to west, from Europe to the continental United States, North America, where were more cameras waiting.

Paramount News, the eyes of the world, wasn't a year old on the screen, but we had made significant inroads into the competition's theater accounts. We struggled to increase our circulation, reaching for every chance to improve, expand our facilities, capture stories and hence the theater business. Money, of course, was no hindrance, but news could not be bought until it happened. Then it did.

My assignment was to fly to Montreal, Canada where a flood had occurred. I covered it by air, shipped back the film, then threw a party for my pilot and delightful people we had met at the Mount Royal Hotel. It was in full swing when a telegram arrived from E. Cohen<sup>5</sup>. Two of our staff men in Germany, Stindt and Stoll, had been following the activities of a pair of fliers there.

The pilots, Baron [Ehrenfried Günther Freiherr von Hünefeld] and Captain [Hermann Köhl], had been preparing a Junkers airplane for a mysterious flight and had added additional fuel tanks to it. This led the two newsreelmen to surmise that an attempt would be made to fly the Atlantic, which could bust into a big news story if they made it across.



Ⓒ Major James Fitzmaurice at Seven Islands.

Associated Press Photo



Ⓒ "Duke" Schiller lands. Ray's camera got everything.

Ⓒ Ray Fernstrom delivers the pictures at Curtis Field, N. Y., after flying from Greenly Island.

and saw a group of spots moving down below there. Here's where the old thrill came, boiling up inside us. It must be Greenly Island! It must be Greenly Island!

We couldn't see the Bremen yet, you understand. We were 6000 feet up in the air. Eddie Jackson and I got our cameras to work from here, though, taking general views of the scene as the plane circled nearer and nearer. Everybody craned his neck to be the first to see the Bremen. And now we did see it. There she was, a T-shaped black object near the shore.

It was a great moment for the back-seat drivers. Everybody was yelling to the pilot at once: "Now turn this way; now that way; bank her over here; bank her there; now go straight on a minute." Then we zoomed by her as fast as we could, down close, so as to get shots of her at close range from the air, and then we made a landing on the ice between the main land and (Cont. on page 95)

five miles farther north, although they did not know. They never had been that far away. So we took off again.

Going on north we saw two little red spots—flags—set out on the ice near an island. We circled over the spot

## RAY FERNSTROM CAMERAMAN

Figure 1 Ray Fernstrom. *Screenland* (July 1928): 29. Source: Media History Digital Library.

The two pilots flew to [Baldonnel] Field, Ireland, which assured our men of their intent, and added Major [James] Fitzmaurice to their crew. Cameras and men were on full twenty-four-hour alert. I received a wire that read: "Remain Montreal, view possibility German flyers flying Atlantic. Landing somewhere Canada. E. Cohen."

I immediately got Cohen on the phone, and requested expenses money. He wired a lot. The party was over; back to business. Then another wire arrived: "Alert. Fliers en route. E. Cohen."<sup>6</sup>

Now it started. That alert was followed by a news explosion that has not been equaled since. There was a prolonged buildup of suspense, dangers, silence, imagination, delays, and extremely bad weather. All the elements needed for writers to build up the frustrations of a modern world. The two pilots were trying to reach the vastness of an unknown area without communications, where only an airplane could go.

Our news should have been broken shortly. "They made it!" But where? Where were the fliers and plane? Finally, somehow, word reached the outside world. They were on Greenly Island.<sup>7</sup> Where in hell is Greenly Island? We found it on the map. It was on the coast of Labrador, Straits of Belle Isle. It had a lighthouse. Maybe the keeper had a short-wave radio transmitter. In the excitement and the anxiety, I never found out. But news travels fast, even by carrier pigeon.

How could we get there? Who had a plane? I made a series of phone calls to all parts of Canada, Maine, New York, and found there were only two Fairchild's equipped with skis and owned by a little outfit in Quebec called Canadian Transcontinental Airways. A company with a large name but only two planes!

The aircrafts were located at Lake Saint Agnes<sup>8</sup>, quite a distance from Quebec. The only way to get there was via a train, which was made up of a short haul with two cars and a broken down steam engine.

When I arrived, I found the Fairchild's were cabin jobs with Radial Pratt & Whitney 423-horsepower engines. Newsmen of all kinds had arrived at the Château Frontenac, including friends and competitors. And with the heightening tensions, friends became enemies and ruthless competition began in deadly earnest. But I found a guy to confide in, for in our frustrations a companion was needed.

Eddie Jackson was a still photographer, a real old trooper, wise in the ways of cut-throat competition. Everyone was trying to get those planes, so he and I decided to pool our mental resources in an effort to get both of them. We decided that he should go to Lake Saint Agnes and try to get us aboard at least one.



News arrived that Duke Schiller, the famous Canadian pilot, had already taken off with one of the planes on a rescue effort over ice and snow, a thousand miles from the lake to a tiny spot in the middle of the Straits of Belle Isle. There went half our chances. Pouf! The possibilities of finding the area were slim. It was a frozen sea with a little lighthouse in the middle, on a lone, unheard-of arctic dot.

Every minute, more and more newsmen, photographers, and newsreelmen arrived with every chartered plane or train, giving us nervous twitters. Eddie and I were no competition to each other. His stills were for newspapers and my reels for theaters, which made our pact reasonable, and the only way to protect each other's interest was to be in two places—the lake where the lone remaining plane was located, and Quebec where I would remain. My thinking was to find the guy that owned the airline, made the decisions, and controlled the aircraft.

He ran his business from his home, which I finally located. By now he had clammed up and gone into hiding from the swarm of news hawks, vultures, eagles, and rabble that had descended on Quebec. It cost me real dough to see the frail Frenchman, but he had good cognac and was very gracious. Once I wormed my way into his confidence and hideaway, I hoped he would be pleased to have one friend for company. However, I was as much a friend as a rattlesnake because by that time life itself had paled when compared to the big scoop that was in every newsman's imagination.

My first job was to call the boss from the phone hanging on the wall. When I entered the Frenchman's home, I wanted to rush for communication with my boss, but became as cagey and calm as possible. I turned on my best charm for that plane and phone, saying my job was at stake and my wife was expecting a baby at any moment, trying to gain his sympathy.

I got New York on the phone. "Keep someone on your end from now on. By all means!" I instructed. "I have a slim chance of getting the only transportation available. Wire me ten thousand dollars at this address, fast. I'll be right back, don't go away." I returned to the old Frenchman.

"Swede," he said, after much prodding, "Hearst has bought and confirmed one seat in that plane, which has room for only four passengers, in addition to the pilot and the mechanic." Then he added that the other three seats were bought and confirmed, except for one that Pathé Newsreel had purchased but had not yet confirmed by wire, for five thousand dollars. *Daily News* had one seat. That meant Eddie Jackson was in. Associated Press of Canada had the other, confirmed. I had one chance—Pathé's seat. I rushed back to the phone.

“Mr. Cohen, get every son-of-a-bitch and girl to wire me here, hundreds of telegrams. Tie up the wire service! Pathé hasn’t confirmed the last seat on the plane. I’ll do the rest. Get ’em going as fast as you can!” Now I went to work, pleading with my new French friend. I laid five thousand on the table, asking, begging. How long would I have to suffer this torture? Where is Pathé, anyway? Why wasn’t someone here for them, like I am for Paramount?

Finally, the doorbell rang. I ran to answer. He tried to stop me, but I told him to pour us a drink. The telegraph messenger handed me a bunch of telegrams. I ripped one open. It was a confirmation from Paramount News, which I stuck in my pocket. He opened all the others; all from Paramount. I asked to use his typewriter, and wrote out a contract as best as I could, in duplicate.

Then a thought struck me. How would we fly over two thousand miles of wilderness, snow, ice, and open sea without gasoline? I asked him about that.

“Oh, we have gasoline cached all the way to Labrador, for we are trying to get an airmail route flying up the coast in the spring.” It was now April.

“How much do you have stashed all the way?” He told me. “I’ll buy it, every last drop!” But he was too smart for me.

“Not until you have a seat on the plane.”

“How long are you going to make me wait for Pathé?” I questioned. He finally agreed on six o’clock PM. It was now five-fifteen, and the telegrams kept arriving. I gladly obliged at the door, shoving telegrams under rugs, seat cushions, behind the piano, anywhere I saw a chance.

Six o’clock arrived, and we shook hands. I signed, he signed, then we both swigged a well-earned drink. I wrote another contract, handed it to him, and with a sly smile on his face, he sold me every drop of gasoline the company owned that was cached or at Lake Saint Agnes, which thwarted any and all competition.

The Frenchman phoned for a train to the lake, chartered the locomotive and one passenger car, and I made him go with me to make sure there were no hitches, because he owned the whole setup and gave orders.

When I got off the train, I knew Pathé’s man would be there, so I hired a few lumberjacks for bodyguards, for no one in our business at that time took any chances. The four I hired were mean, tough hombres, and I paid them twenty buck each; ten now, ten when I boarded the plane. “Watch me, my equipment, and my film,” which during those hectic hours had been sent from New York by way of a chartered plane Cohen had kept as a standby in Quebec.

No wilder gang ever assembled that that at the lake airport on the ice for one lone ski-equipped Fairchild. Roméo Vachon, our pilot, was a fine, tough guy who could easily have been a lumberjack.<sup>9</sup> He had steel-blue eyes and an easy grace about him that was reassuring. He had flown the wastelands many times, and it showed on his face. He wore an amused “what’s all the excitement about” expression. “Yes, I think I can find the way,” he assured us. And I felt better.

Among the early morning crowd, angered and frustrated competitors watched as two newspaper men, one still photographer, and one newsreelman climbed aboard. I was glad I had given my bodyguards the ten spots, as they had loyally elbowed everyone out of the way while I lugged my camera to the Fairchild.



Figure 2 Fairchild Model 71 of the type Swede and Vachon flew to Greenly Island on the big “Scoop.” It was fitted with skis for the venture. Source: *Daredevil Cameraman*.

He skimmed fast and smooth over the ice and snow of Lake Saint Agnes as we took off into the wild unknown. Thanks to the Almighty, none of us knew what lay ahead. We no sooner reached the correct altitude when the air got rougher than hell. “What’s up?” I asked Roméo.

“Oh, this is normal. It’ll be like this quite often,” he explained. As I returned to my seat, I noticed the two reporters. They looked green. So I whispered to Eddie, if one can whisper in a noisy Fairchild. “Eddie, let’s talk about those two bastards off the plane when we land if there’s a place for them to stay.” They were air sick. Eddie and I had the stomachs of goats and did not feel the trip, but their illness would be a way to get rid of them.

“I’ll ask Roméo,” he volunteered.

Roméo had planned our first overnight at a place called Seven Islands [Sept-Îles]. He said there would be a dog sled there to meet us when those on the ground spotted the plane over the village. There was also a Hudson’s Bay store, accommodations, and a telegraph operator. This would be the last civilization before we reached our destination, Labrador and Greenly Island.

At the first opportunity, Eddie asked he two green-faced reporters if they would like some greasy pork for a snack. The looks on their faces told all. I think they wanted to die, so we suggested they stay at Seven Islands, as we good guys would bring them back the story. We reminded them that we had three more days of rough air ahead, and they agreed to our suggestion. What would

they write about anyway? We could bring them back all the stories they needed. Eddie explained that he had been a newspaper reporter before becoming a still photographer and promised them the world; human interest, sidelines, the works. No need for them to go on. Stay at Seven Islands. We fed them sickening suggestions of food, like the one about the guy who had the strongest stomach in a contest. The chap won at breakfast when he ate a mouthful of oatmeal, puked it up into his dish, and went on eating it. That did it! The two reporters couldn't wait to get off the plane, and wouldn't think of flying another mile with us crazy bastards.

Roméo Vachon slipped the plane, then leveled off for a smooth landing. "All hands to work," he yelled, and he meant *labor*. First, we had to fold up the hinged wings, then drain the oil from the engine, dig deep holes in the ice for tie-downs, tie her down, cover the engine with a canvas hood, unload our stuff, and then came the dog teams. Pilot, mechanic, cans of oil, luggage, and three of us on one sled, three on the other. I stayed with Roméo and the mechanic, for Roméo was a thoroughly experienced bush mail pilot, with plenty of rough weather and terrain flying time. [Georges Ouellet] was the mechanic, a capable, willing man of twenty-one years.

Vachon knew what we were doing to the reporters and was happy to lose their weight in the plane. He even helped out by offering information that the air was seldom as calm as we had experienced. That encouraged our dead-weight passengers to do their reporting from a nice warm haven on Seven Islands. Then I whispered to Roméo to fill them in on the hazards ahead. He told of the bad weather, fog, and rough air, with the only refuge being scant Indian villages, etcetera. The reporters spoke with sled drivers and the store keeper at the Hudson's Bay Company and were further filled with the horrors of the vast snow country that lay ahead up north. If we had heard the yarns spun or read the news accounts these two excellent reporters sent out to the world during the days and nights we were gone before our return to pick them up, we wouldn't have gone on the flight either, and that includes Vachon, for imagination is far worse than factual experiences.

While we were at Seven Islands, Duke Shiller's plane arrived from Greenly Island with the Irishman, Major Fitzmaurice. They had come to help the Bremen and rescue the stranded fliers, and needed fuel to get to Lake Saint Agnes. This, of course, would completely ruin me, and wreck all of Paramount News' chances

for the biggest scoop of them all. This would have been okay with me, except for the previous arrival of my arch enemy, Tommy Hogan, in a nifty little Waco plane.

Since the birth of Paramount News, our keenest, most resentful and competitive newsreel had been Pathé News (sees all, knows all), and of all the thorns in my side, Tommy Hogan was number one. And I know it was mutual. If the two reels were competitors, we two guys made it a personal feud. Feud, hell—a goddamned war!

When our boss formed Paramount News he took Pathé people with him, which included all but Tommy Hogan, whom he had left behind. Tommy was jealous because we got more salary. Now, here he came, crashing my free-reign party, and arriving with his old flying buddy Bob Fogg. Bob was a New England pilot of great ability, daring and experience.

“You in charge of this exclusive story, Swede?” he asked. His “exclusive story” sounded like the hiss of a diamond back rattler, the son-of-a-bitch! We both shot the arrival of Shiller’s plane with our Akeley’s<sup>10</sup>, then the exodus from our sister ship, and I shuddered with fear that all were aboard. Thank God, only Duke, the Major, and the Duke’s mechanic had arrived. The stranded pilots had opted to stay with the Bremen.

We completed the coverage jointly, for now he had cut into my cake. Somehow I had to get the film back to Lake Saint Agnes and thwart Tommy. I knew he was scheming to screw me, too. But I held the aces—gasoline.

Fogg tried to get Vachon to give him gas, but Vachon explained that I owned all the fuel. Score one. Vachon told me Fogg had decided to use casing head gas which he could purchase at the Hudson Bay store. But Roméo told him he wouldn’t fly. fifty miles without burning up his valves and crashing. Tommy pleaded with me to give him gas.

“Give you gas to kill my story? Hell no! You bastard!” I thought if I gave them gas they would fly north, but Tommy wanted no more. He swore that he, Fogg, Duke, and the Major would head for Lake Saint Agnes, and agreed to take my film with them if I’d give them the gas to fly the two planes south for the sake of the German pilots’ lives. I weighed the values. Fitzmaurice was not the story; the Bremen and the fliers were, and that was another day’s flight north to Labrador, and they couldn’t follow. So I agreed.

So they all flew south, Tommy and Fogg in the Waco and Duke, the Major, and the mechanic and my film in the Fairchild. But unknown to me, Duke also was an old buddy of Tommy’s, and he faked a forced landing which allowed Tommy to get



Mr. Fernstrom photographing the daring German fliers who made first East-West Atlantic flight.

Figure 3 Fernstrom with his Akeley camera. *American Cinematographer* (December 1930): 17.

to Lake Saint Agnes first with his film and a *beat* of my Seven Islands coverage. The slimy bunch of bastards. *I* would never do anything like that! I can imagine the reaction at Paramount News headquarters. I'm glad I was in the icy wastelands and knew naught thereof.<sup>11</sup>

Early the next day, Roméo and Georges were up heating the engine oil while we ate. Then everyone got onto the sleds. A changed appearance had taken place with the four of us who were to fly. I had bought a parka, heavy matching wool pants, a pair of mukluks, big flying boots, a beret, a huge knife and holster, and sun goggles and used film tape to make slits across the latter to prevent snow blindness. Eddie was dressed in equally dramatic fashion.

This was all old hat to Vachon and Ouellet, "Away, dogs. Mush!" After the sled ride to the plane, the preparatory work began in earnest. First we loaded the gear aboard, removed the engine hood, and proceeded to heat the engine with two blow torches. Then the warm oil was poured in, and the engine started. While the plane warmed, we unfolded the wings, and locked them into place. Then Vachon replaced the mechanic, who sat in the pilot's seat, revving the engine while the rest of us tried to break the airplane skis from the ice. Once that was accomplished, Vachon taxied in circles, smoothing the crusty ice and the bottom of the skis for takeoff. Then we all climbed aboard and waved good-bye to the reporters who had so gallantly lightened the plane's load. But it wasn't long before we felt they were the lucky ones, as we were enveloped in heavy fog.

Vachon flew high then low searching for a way out. He didn't want to crash, so out to sea he headed, trying in vain to get out of the mess. We spent hour after hour in the thick heavy fog. Suddenly, a bank seemed to open up. Eddie felt his rosary, which had been blessed by the Pope, and believed his prayers had been answered. Our spirits soared. Then, *wham*, into another mess. We flew farther and farther out to sea, climbing to find clear sky. Gas was dangerously low. The only cache within our estimated reach was in a little Indian village called [Natashquan]. The outlook grew darker. It began to snow. First lightly, then thick and heavy.

Vachon estimated he had gone far enough out to sea to miss any mountains, so he headed landward. If we ran out of gas, we had a better chance on ice than water. Carefully, he began a descent, while all eyes searched ahead. Then a light opened in the blinding snowstorm. A dark patch. "Open water!" shouted Vachon, as the day waned fast, our fuel exhausted. Snow and fog ahead, water below.

Suddenly, the dark patch of water was replaced by the eerie gray of snow covered ice. “We’ve reached the shore,” Vachon called out. A slight clearing, and Roméo decided now was the time to land. But just as we were about to touch down, there was water again. He gunned the Fairchild into a slow turn, and settled into a calculated final approach as the engine quit, committing us to land.

Eddie prayed there would be no more water. Our right ski just missed a large chunk of ice, then miraculously the weather cleared to a magnificent flat field of ice, and we glided toward a perfect landing while Roméo exclaimed, “Look!”

We saw them. Low Indian huts, black as ink against the snow and ice. A few dark spots moved. “Indians!” we shouted. “God bless them!” The plane slid to a well-earned stop. More Indians. We were surrounded. They had heard but could not see us. They had also heard about our flight on the radio, and of course the stories our two intrepid reporters were painting from Seven Islands. It seems they, too, were in the middle of a bad storm, a day’s flight back.

Vachon showed us a stick he had used to measure gas. Not a drop!

“Has anyone got a drink?” I asked. They did, and we drank, then folded the airplane wings, drained the oil, performed the whole routine, then retired to our limited accommodations on a floor. But it was warm, comfortable, and interesting, as it was the kitchen, town meeting hall, and radio listening post. We heard over the airwaves in utter amazement the stories of our flight. It scared the hell out of us, almost as much as the real thing had. But the warm coffee, spiked with antifreeze of course eased our cares.

We had an Indian send-off that topped Lindbergh’s from Curtiss-Roosevelt Field. He had one lone reporter, Russ Birdwell, and his crew, while we enjoyed hundreds of wildly cheering Indians, who helped us refuel from my private cache, the Indians helped us with the warm oil, etcetera, and off we went through the day, monotonously, over the mountains, snow fields, huge rocks, until once again we were aware of the dwindling gas supply. And still no Greenly Island.

“We should be there by now,” Vachon informed us, not reassuringly. Lower went our gas supply, and the panic flag was flying in our chests once again, when Georges spotted the two red flags on the ice, then the island with the lighthouse.

Vachon banked and dove, then I spotted the crashed German Junkers plane, the *Bremen*, lying flat, behind a stone hedge near the lighthouse. All was excitement.

“Bank this way, Roméo,” I shouted as I shot pictures. “Now, over there, now here, steady,” then we landed, sliding fast over the ice marked by the two red flags.



I knew they thought we were there to rescue them instead of just making pictures, and we sure as hell didn't tell them any different. We put on a great show. Eddie and I greeted them with open arms as rescuers. But the whole idea was strictly pictures, our life's blood.

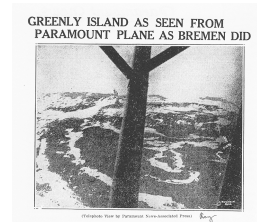


Figure 4 Newspaper clipping of the big story. Photo, adapted from Ray's newsreel, shows Greenly Island as taken from the Fairchild. Note the credit lines at the bottom. Source: *Daredevil Camera-man*.

The Germans treated us as if we were guests in their homes in Germany instead of strangers. We took our first series of pictures, then stowed our equipment on a dog sled, and all walked up to the lighthouse keeper's home, where we met our charming hosts. This was a gathering of people from the three corners of the world, together in a strange sort of void. A truly dream world, completely away from the life we knew. A cold, lonely island in an unknown wasteland. So forbidding, but dramatizing how our twentieth century was growing up. Civilization was stretching its fingers into unknown areas of mother earth, like our little group standing there in 1928, and somehow everyone knew we were friends, and that was right.

We shot picture in every category of our work—human interest, the lighthouse keeper, his wife, kids, pets, and the whole kit and caboodle with the German fliers, then more of the *Bremen* and the flyers, showing the island people their fabulous ship. We shot every angle, every news idea, every sideline of our yarn, until Eddie and I ran out of film. Only one thing remained—souvenirs. We asked the flyers and people who lived out there to write little messages about the landing of the *Bremen*.

Now it was time to get the hell out of there in time to reach [Natashquan] before dark. We took off with our precious film. I don't know to this day if the Germans thought we were there to rescue them or not, but we were newsmen and concluded that they had figured us out and went along with the game, for we wanted them there on the ice while we returned with our pictures and the scoop.

Germans are smart people, and when I look back I don't think they wanted to leave their *Bremen*, their wonderful craft, that had so capably carried them to the little haven on the North American continent. They had sent Duke and the Major for help to save the plane, but what kind of help God only knows, for no one could fly that plane off the island. It would have taken too many people and much equipment to repair her, then get it down on the ice for a takeoff—equipment that was next to impossible to get to the island. But those hard-headed krauts stayed with their ship like good captains, and with that thought we were off a little reluctantly because by this time we had all become good friends. But newsreel training took over. “Get the pictures; to hell with yourselves. Don't get involved. Get the goddamned pictures, and get them back!” And with that thought, as we flew home, we dumped every drop of gas left in each cache to kill any slight chance of competition.

We picked up the reporters at Seven Islands, and there was no need for them to imagine anymore. We had our pictures, so we lived up to our promise and gave them the vivid ones to write about, every detail. That night while we slept, they stayed up and wired every iota of what we had told them, as if they had been on the mission. This kept the news hot in the outside world. The dramatization they gave was wonderful. However, had they been along, their weight and ours would have finished the job in the waters off [Natashquan].

We were a jubilant crew as we flew south from Seven Islands. One long, safe and sound, hop to Lake Saint Agnes, with not a drop of gas behind us. It was mine, so why not dump it?

We ran into trouble. That frigging fog, all around us! No use flying back for gas. Roméo searched for a clearing, then finally banked. He saw a clear opening, a pasture in the snow beside a farmhouse with smoke curling from a chimney. Life! “Pull up your feet!” Vachon yelled. “We're going to crash.” And in panic, up came our legs. We hit, then came the screeching of the skis, and silence. He cut the old Pratt & Whitney, and climbed out to check the damage. He had landed okay, but we had struck what Vachon feared was a stone hedge. But it turned out to be a wooden one, and we had sheared off a stump that had been part of the structure.

We stood as the darkness moved in, night on our heels. Where were we? Finally a few people appeared. They had never seen an airplane on the ground before, and we had never met people like them; simple in one word, plain in another. They were neither friendly nor helpful, but interested in giving us a

respectful welcome, as though we were celebrities. Of course, we did not fully realize what radio had been telling these folks. Where were we?

A beautiful, young school teacher answered for the little French provincial parish, “[Sacré-Cœur-de-Saguenay],” and you can still find it on the map today. I am certain no one in our party had ever seen a stranger group on the American continent. I loved that little school teacher from the moment I saw her, and couldn’t take my eyes off her.

We were shown to the parish leader’s home, where we all gathered in the kitchen-living room, apparently a meeting place for the whole village because all came to view these people from another planet. Interpreters were about, and the parish priest spoke English; otherwise we would have felt we had landed in France. They spoke a strange tongue that even Vachon and Georges had trouble with, but they became very hospitable, and we were now greeted by every soul.

We washed up, were fed, then informed that there would be a dance in our honor. I nudged Roméo. “How the hell does one get a drink around here? I need one.”

“I do too.” He went over to the boss man and pretty soon after I had given Vachon a few bucks, someone left the room stealthily as the music started. A violin blended with an accordion, flute, and a harmonica in a haunting sound, but with a very good dance beat. I looked across at the school teacher and felt that old yearn to dance. I asked Vachon if it was the proper thing to do. He, in turn, asked the head man, and someone left the party again. Then the dance started. By this time we had some fine Canadian whiskey to go with our host’s Horse Blanch ale, and everything began to look almost natural to us. Finally, in answer to my request to dance, a messenger returned to talk to the head man, who nodded to Roméo, and I got my wish. We danced and danced, and later went for walk in the moonlight and found a comfortable hay-filled barn. *Ooh la la! C’est magnifique, c’est si bon, and vive la France!*

They didn’t talk much, very serious people, but...

We had trouble sleeping that night. Vachon had checked everything on the plane, so our thoughts went back to Lake Saint Agnes, wondering what had gone on during our absence of four or five days. I had lost count. My fear was that someone had found a way to get to the flyers, but knew that was impossible with the gas situation, and felt better. But I worried anyhow.

Before dawn, Vachon and Ouellet awakened us, saw to it that we had a good breakfast, then after the oil and wing routine and all the cheering and waving

from the villagers, we reached once again for the clouds. It was a relatively short flight to Lake Saint Agnes and on the approach we observed the scene below with unbelieving eyes. I had expected something, after receiving a wire at Seven Islands, which said: “Fervently hoping for a scoop. Good luck. E. Cohen.”

But below, on the ice, we saw the strangest of sights. There was a long dark line, like an aircraft landing strip, and at one end stood a black monoplane, prop spinning. I feared it was a competitor waiting to ruin my lead, hoped for scoop, and exclusive pictures I had. Many other ships were around the plane, mid hundreds or people scattered about the hanger and offices nearby.

Roméo Vachon circled, leveled smartly, touched our skis down to a perfect landing, and taxied up to the black aircraft. I had the door to our plane open and the magazine case with the precious film in my hand. “Mac” MacKean, our assignment editor, came running for all he was worth, as I jumped out.



Figure 5 The original photograph of “Swede” Fernstrom as he first steps off the Fairchild at Lake Saint Agnes. Notice Paramount’s assignment editor MacKean grabbing the film magazine and racing to the awaiting black monoplane for the non-stop flight to the lab in New York. The film screened that night. “Scoop.” Source: *Daredevil Cameraman*.

“Where’s the film, you son-of-a-bitch?” he shouted, hugging and banging me on the back. He grabbed the magazine, then raced to the big black monster with wheels, not skis. That explained the dark runway we saw from the air. The snow had been scraped clear, leaving a smooth strip for the heavily loaded plane. Two men hung onto the struts, and within seconds the pilot revved the engine to the maximum, while the men tried to hold back the aircraft, as it broke loose in a blast and catapulted far down the runway, trying desperately to become airborne. Finally, just when it looked as though it would crash, the pilot pulled fiercely on the stick and the plane slowly, gradually gained altitude then swung about and headed straight south to New York.

I asked one of the men what that was all about. He explained that MacKean had brought the plane from the States, the cabin was crammed full with five-gallon gas cans of aviation fuel, and had installed a waddle pump, so he could refill the plane's tanks in flight.. The aim was a non-stop flight to New York with my film. I found out later that only once did they see the ground, and that was not until they were near New York's Curtiss Field. I stood there, suddenly alone on Lake Saint Agnes, feeling completely deflated. Roméo Vachon came over to me. "Come here, Swede. I want to show you something."

We walked over to our plane, and he pointed up to a section of the fuselage where the big engine was mounted. Then I saw it. A quarter inch of sky showed between the two sections. Another few minutes and we could have lost our motor and crashed. "God!" I whispered. "Thank you, God."

Eddie Jackson walked up to me. "How are you going to get back to New York, Swede?" I hadn't given it a thought. "Let me fly you with us to Hartford, Connecticut. There, you can make arrangements to get back to New York."

Eddie's office had supplied him with a large cabin plane, so I flew with him to Hartford, where we bid each other farewell for a job well done, and he took off in his Waco. I phoned E. Cohen collect, from the airfield.

"Charter a plane, and land at Curtiss, Long Island. We'll have some boys meet you," he instructed. And that's what I did. We landed at Curtiss, where I was surprised to see our guys shooting pictures of me and the plane. It hadn't dawned on me that during the flight to Greenly Island and back, our expedition had become such important news. The suspenseful buildup the two reporters had wired home had made our trip exciting reading.

Then I heard about all their efforts, the preparation for our arrival at Lake Saint Agnes with the film, and to hell with me and my camera. The pictures were the interest. That's all Mac wanted. Poor Mac! I guess he waddle pumped his war from Quebec to New York, and almost passed out by the time they landed at Curtiss where Al Richard, assistant editor, grabbed the magazine case of film, jumped into an Ireland amphib, flew to the Hudson River, hopped into a speedboat, then a motorcycle with a sidecar and a police escort, up the wrong way of a one-way street, West Forty-third, and directly to our office lab.

While talking to Cohen on the phone in Hartford, I had read off all the captions for the film to him, so the titles were ready by the time Al got there and within an hour theaters all over Manhattan had our pictures, our scoop.

Then came the surprise of a lifetime for Eddie and me. While we were gone, it seems the Associated Press (AP) and my boss had gotten together and agreed to cooperate so AP could have still photos made from my negatives. Something I had never heard of, as AP had never had photos of films before nor shown interest in them until this story broke. Cohen, ever alert for anything that would build up Paramount's prestige, had agreed to supply them with my stuff.

Eddie Jackson had made a fast retreat to Governors Island and his office, but there throughout a special issue of his own newspaper, were my pictures, printed hours before Eddie's arrival. He gazed in disbelief at his paper and the credit lines. "Paramount News—Associated Press Photos."

That was the birth of the great Associated Press/newsreel cooperation and my pal Eddie hasn't spoken to me since. I don't blame him. Even had I known it, which I didn't, I probably would have double-crossed him anyway, for that's how fierce the competition was among us bastards in that golden era of news gathering.

Mr. E. Cohen called me on the carpet when submitted the expense account for that trip, but he signed it, and gave me a fifteen-dollar-a-week raise and a five-hundred-dollar bonus. The following morning, he asked me where I had been the night before?

"Out doing the town."

"Well," replied Cohen, "you lost five hundred bucks, because I tried to get you to make a personal appearance at the Paramount." That one scoop became a special issue with Paramount News, and it ran in theaters all over the world until finally my old friend, Bernt Balchen, in a Ford Tri-motor equipped with skis, could go to Greenly Island and bring the German fliers to civilization and a Broadway ticker tape parade.

Paramount News received a whopping amount of money from the newsreel accounts of our successful expedition, close to a million dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. Now our newsreel was number one, and everyone was happy. This meant we had to fight even harder to stay on top.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The amateur 9.5mm reel is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MgH1xAstTk>.
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph Clark, *News Parade: The American Newsreel and the World as Spectacle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 20-25.

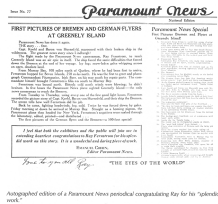


Figure 6 Autographed edition of a Paramount News periodical congratulating Ray for his “splendid work.” Source: *Daredevil Cameraman*.

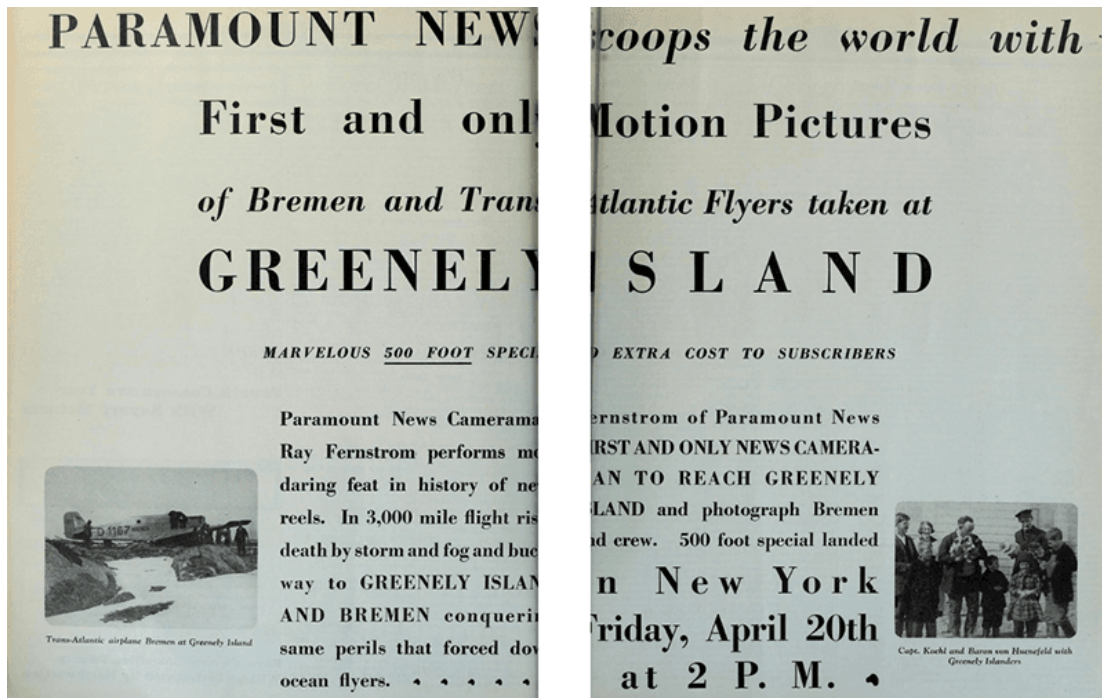


Figure 7 *Film Daily* (22 April 1928): 6-7. Source: Media History Digital Library.

- <sup>3</sup> According to *Film Daily*: “Pathé News was first to bring to New York views of any of the airmen, obtaining shots of Major Fitzmaurice on Seven Islands. Fox News had been first in with views of the rescue preparation at Murray Bay. Friday (April 20), Paramount News electrified New York with pictures taken on Greenely [sic] Island.” *Motion Picture News* also lists issues of the *MGM News* and *International News* newsreels with Bremen footage. “Newsreels Bask in New Light of Popularity,” *Film Daily* (23 April 1928): 1, 4; “Newsreel Resume,” *Motion Picture News* (28 April 1928): 1349.
- <sup>4</sup> “The Battle of Greenely Island,” *The New Yorker* (28 April 1928): 15.
- <sup>5</sup> Emmanuel “Jack” Cohen, head, Paramount News newsreel. Cohen had formerly been managing editor of Pathé News until 1927, when he had been recruited by Paramount to launch the company’s new newsreel. Newsreel historian Raymond Fielding credits him for the “speed, quality, and scope” of the organizations he directed. See: Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911-1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972).
- <sup>6</sup> Von Hünefeld, Köhl and Fitzmaurice took off at 05:38 GMT from the Baldonnel Aerodrome, near Dublin, on April 12, 1928. “Bremen (Aircraft),” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bremen\\_\(aircraft\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bremen_(aircraft)) (last accessed 2 January 2022).
- <sup>7</sup> Located a few kilometers off Blanc-Sablon, Greenly Island is now a bird sanctuary.
- <sup>8</sup> Located about ten kilometers inland between Baie-Saint-Paul and La Malbaie, and now known as Lac Nairne.
- <sup>9</sup> Roméo Vachon (1898–1954) is one of the most accomplished aviation pioneers in Canadian history. Born in Beauce to a large farming family, Vachon joined the Royal Navy as an engineer during the war, and then the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1920. After obtaining his commercial pilot license in 1923, he worked as a bush pilot doing fire patrols and photographic work over remote areas and mail service for Laurentide Air Service, the Ontario Provincial Air Service and, by 1928, Canadian Transcontinental Airways. He became in 1938 Superintendent of the Eastern Division of Trans-Canada Airlines, and then station master of the new Dorval airport in 1940. Vachon also contributed to the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan during the Second World War. In 1944, he was nominated on the Canadian Air Transport Board and participated to the Chicago Conference that led to the creation of the International Civil Aviation Organization, whose headquarters were established in Montreal. Sources: “Joseph Pierre Romeo Vachon,” *Canada’s Aviation Hall of Fame*, <https://cahf.ca/joseph-pierre-romeo-vachon/> (last accessed 2 January 2022); “Roméo Vachon,” *Wikipedia*, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rom%C3%A9o\\_Vachon](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rom%C3%A9o_Vachon) (last accessed 2 January 2022).
- <sup>10</sup> Designed by US naturalist Carl Akeley in the 1910s, the Akeley camera incorporated a gyroscopic tripod head producing smooth pans and tilts, a viewfinder system pairing the lens used for cinematography with a second auxiliary lens integrated to the non-reflex viewfinder (both lenses were installed upon a single sliding plate that could be changed in a few seconds), and a cylindrical shutter with a 230 opening. It also used 200-foot magazines that could be pre-loaded and replaced in about ten seconds. These unique features made it the favorite of explorers, documentary filmmakers (Robert Flaherty famously used it for *Nanook of the North* [1922]), and newsreel cameramen in the late silent era.
- <sup>11</sup> In “The Battle of Greenely [sic] Island,” *The New Yorker* indeed credits Tommy Hogan for bringing “the first pictures of Fitzmaurice to town”.