

Beckwith was a character to remember

BY ART GUNNELL

IF YOU were to ask anyone if they knew who was the most unusual character to inhabit the wilds of Northern Ontario, most people would nominate Jimmy McQuat, the man who built a log castle for a woman who never came.

But wait, younger people may know of Wendell Beckwith, the Citizen of the World, who lived illegally for many years in a log cabin on remote Whitewater Lake, 250 miles northwest of Thunder Bay.

Beckwith's story has been told many times. The Thunder Bay Museum has a large file including many interviews and stories about the man who left his family in Wisconsin to live and work by himself doing what he called pure research.

He considered himself a scientist, even though he was self-taught, had little, if any, formal training, and did not produce any earth-shattering discoveries or formal scientific papers.

His interests lay in esoteric subjects such as gravitation, radiation, and numbers. He built his own telescope and other apparatus to make astronomical and meteorological observations.

Apparently the stone structure in England known as Stonehenge fasci-

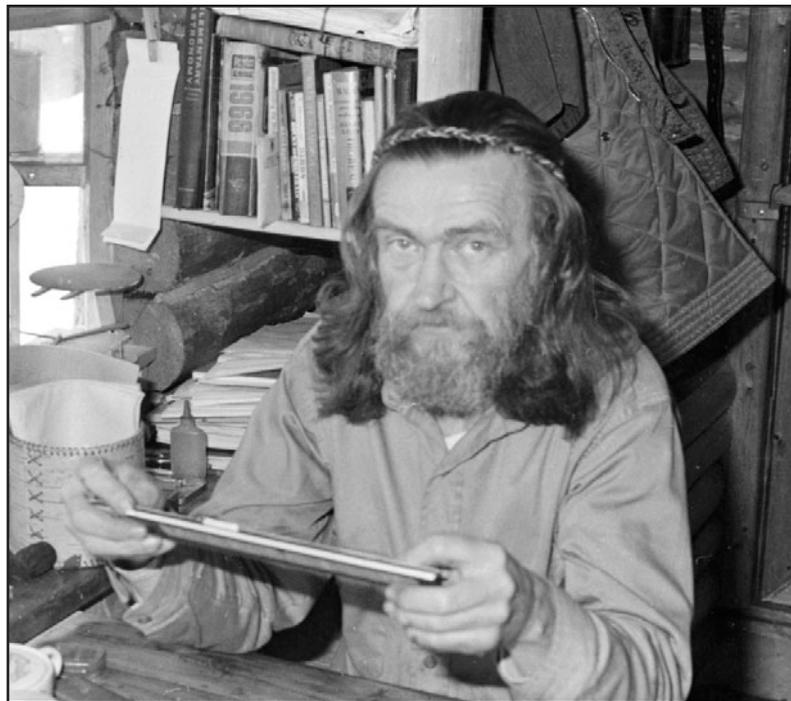
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nated him. He seems to have preferred to engage in popular rather than academic works of science.

Beckwith was always pleased to see visitors and to show them his work. Those of us who did visit, generally thought he was a bit eccentric. One idea that was very successful, was his design of a semi-sunken cabin that was easy to heat in winter. He noted that "it only took a small amount of wood to keep the temperature in the cabin above freezing."

During his 18 years on Best Island, Beckwith made friends with the Native people who probably kept him alive during his first years there. He was involved with the idea of the ill-fated Ogoki Lodge which was going to bring tourists to the



COURTESY OF THE THUNDER BAY MUSEUM

Wendell Beckwith was one of Northwestern Ontario's most intriguing characters.

area. He certainly was not a hermit, and always enjoyed his visitors. He could spend hours, and he did, explaining his theories; even though we could not make sense out of them.

After his death in 1980, his possessions were acquired by the province. The buildings are part of the park. So far it seems that they will be allowed to return to nature.

Our museum has plans to one day offer a display of his tools, equipment, records, and artifacts. For that we wait with great anticipation.

Looking Back is written weekly by one of various writers for the Thunder Bay Museum. For further information visit the museum at 425 Donald St. E., or view its website at www.thunderbaymuseum.com.