

END OF AN ERA: Two Iconic Businessmen Retire

Story and photos by
Gill Gracie, Air Ronge.

Garry Thompson and Scott Robertson spent their careers serving the North, and the community was startled when they both announced their retirement in 2023.



Garry Thompson

OSPREY WINGS AVIATION

Garry Thompson came north with his family in 1950 at age ten and fell in love with airplanes and tourism. In 1967, he opened the first tourist camp at Nemeiben Lake to accommodate the increasing number of visiting anglers. He sold it to buy a bigger camp at Missinipe, which he, his wife Bonnie and their three children operated as Thompson's Camp for decades.

To transport his guests to fly-in lakes, he bought an airplane and had a local pilot teach him to fly it. Then, he gradually bought out Nipawin Air, continuing operations under that name. After a few years, he sold the company but soon found himself repossessing it. He renamed it Osprey Wings.

The water base at Otter Lake (Missinipe), with a beaver and a Turbo beaver at the dock. The two-pane window at the corner of the office is where Garry had his dispatch station set up, where he could see the comings and goings.



Former Saskatchewan Lt. Gov. Gordon Barnhardt (in orange jacket) and a crew of colleagues and friends experience Garry's jet boat rides. With his trademark brown hat, Garry is barely visible at the wheel behind the windshield.

He built a fleet of 22 skis and float aircraft, expanding to La Ronge-based wheeled charters to serve uranium mines with shift change flights and adding a La Ronge water base. Several years ago, the Thompsons sold the camp portion of their operation, focusing on the air company.

Now in his eighties, Garry worked as owner, pilot and dispatcher while Bonnie and daughter Allison took care of the books. The Thompsons announced the closure and sale of Osprey Wings in March. The new owners are operating under the same name.



Painting by Garry Thompson



Garry is also famous for his side gig - jet boat rides up some of the rapids on the Churchill River. Many tourists have been thoroughly soaked during the scenic tour, often distracted by one of Garry's many tall tales!

An accomplished northern artist, Garry rarely sells a painting. He keeps most originals and gives away prints to friends and visitors.

He and Bonnie continue to live in Missinipe.

to bush camps and catering to a mining camp.

He took over management in the early 1990s with the assistance of sister-in-law Diane Robertson. Other family members are shareholders. His father was in the store every day for as long as possible; he passed away in January 2010 at the age of 81.

Not only does Robertson's offer groceries, dry goods, clothing, trapline supplies and the best butcher shop in the north under Guthrie Winn, but the store is also part museum and a great tourist attraction. Scott displays a unique collection of Indigenous arts and crafts, from antler carvings to beaded jackets and moccasins, canoes and luxurious furs. There are historic photos of customers and paintings by local artists. Much of it is for display only. Scott is among the few trained, skilled and knowledgeable fur buyers left.

Visiting Robertson Trading is a northern experience visitors flock to, which will be sorely missed.



Fresh produce – and antler carvings, a couple of mounted northern animals, and a selection of paintings by local artists.

ROBERTSON TRADING

Scott Robertson moved to La Ronge as a boy with his family in 1967 to operate a grocery and fur-buying business. Of the four children, it was Scott who worked alongside his dad, Alex, to build a new store and turn it into a significant grocery operation capable of expediting



Furs, beadwork, paintings, photographs, birchbark baskets, hide-making tools, rock hammers and a few warnings about bad cheques!



Scott with his executive assistant manager, his sister-in-law Diane, against a backdrop of tanned coyote skins. A photo of his dad and long-time resident Vern Studer is on the wall behind.

For several years, wife Karen, a retired teacher, along with their three children and two grandchildren who live in various parts of Canada, have been training Scott for retirement by requiring his presence elsewhere than in the store. Scott is listening and plans to close the iconic store at the end of December 2023. It will be a massive loss for the area.

Scott and Karen plan to travel and enjoy their new cabin on Lac La Ronge.