

THE ROMANCE  
OF THE  
ALASKA HIGHWAY

Philip H. Godsell

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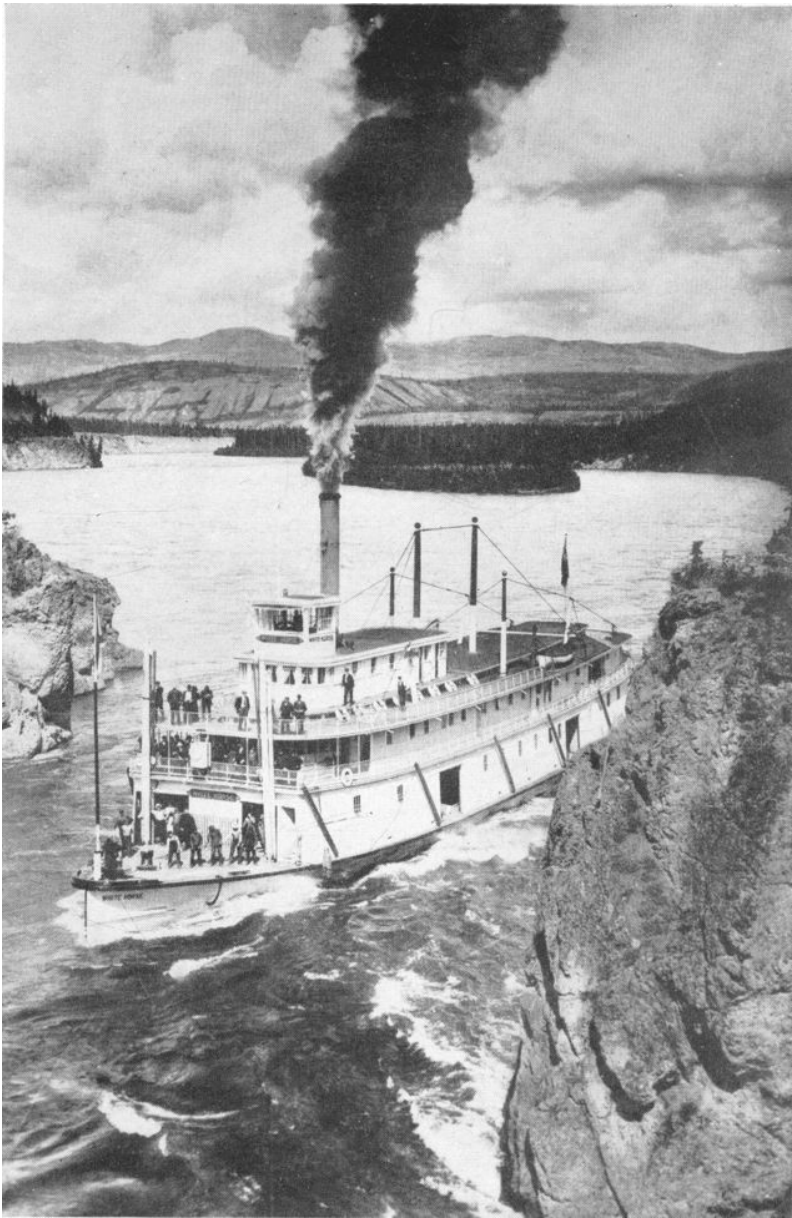
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*By the Same Author*

ARCTIC TRADER  
RED HUNTERS OF THE SNOWS  
THE VANISHING FRONTIER  
THEY GOT THEIR MAN  
Etc.



*Courtesy Canadian Pacific Railway*

The Yukon River, one of the magnificent scenic attractions  
that will bring tourists to the North.

THE ROMANCE  
*of the*  
ALASKA HIGHWAY

*By*  
PHILIP H. GODSELL  
F.R.G.S.

ARCTIC TRAVELLER, EXPLORER, AND FORMER INSPECTING OFFICER  
FOR THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY FOR SASKATCHEWAN, ATHABASCA,  
PEACE RIVER, MACKENZIE RIVER AND WESTERN ARCTIC DISTRICTS.



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DEDICATED TO

THOSE HARDY PIONEERS WHO BLAZED  
THE FIRST TRAIL INTO THE PEACE  
RIVER COUNTRY; AND TO THE UNITED  
STATES ARMY ENGINEERS AND DOUGHBOYS  
WHO CARRIED IT THROUGH TO THE  
HEART OF AWAKENING ALASKA



## FOREWORD

Canada's Northwest, and the rugged wilderness now traversed by the Alaska Highway, seems always to have beckoned to the adventurous spirit of Americans.

When the advance guard of Uncle Sam's "friendly invasion army," led by Brigadier-General William Hoge, established headquarters for the Southern Command at Fort St. John, B.C., to hack the Alaska Highway through the wilderness they were greeted as strangers. Yet Fort St. John had been established a century and a half before by a brawny American fur-trader explorer, Simon Fraser of New York State, discoverer of the river that bears his name. The first white man to cross the Churchill divide and explore the Athabasca and the lower Peace was another American, the irascible and adventurous Peter Pond of Milford, Connecticut, who not only established Fort Chipewyan, future cradle of exploration for this untamed wilderness, but became the first geographer of the Canadian Northwest.

The first attempt to link America and Asia with an overland telegraph by way of the Bering Straits, and hack a way through the British Columbia jungles, was made by Colonel Bulkley, a United States Army engineer. Yankee whalers were the first to round Point Barrow, brave the icy terrors of the Beaufort Sea and push their iron-barked prows across the western reaches of the ice-filled Northwest Passage. And the buccaneering Captain Klengenberg, a naturalized Danish-American who sailed away in the stolen *Olga*, was the first white man to discover and winter amongst the so-called "Blonde" Eskimos up on the Arctic's rim. Again, American settlers, trekking up from Dakota, Montana and even Texas, joined Canadians from Ontario and Alberta to spearhead the covered wagon caravans that blazed the pioneer trails into the Peace River country that eventually blossomed into the Alaska Highway.

To make the story of the Alaska Highway complete I have lifted the curtain on those pioneer pathfinders who, in bucking the muskegs and hardships of the Edson Trail, and conquering the wilderness, brought in their wake the frontier railroad that made possible the speedy completion of this great engineering project by providing not only transportation, but an advance base, five hundred miles north of Edmonton, on the banks of the swift-flowing Peace.

Fort St. John, Fort Nelson, the Musqua, Fort Norman, Great Slave Lake and Fairbanks are all familiar spots to me. For over thirty years the fabric of

my life has been woven about these places that have emerged from obscurity with the vast wilderness undertakings of the American Engineering Corps. In 1911 I followed dim trails that have since become a part of the great highway, and traded with the pagan Beaver Indians at Fort St. John. In 1925-1927 I blazed a Hudson's Bay fur road through primeval forests from Fort St. John to Fort Nelson, destined a decade and a half later to become the first three-hundred-mile link in the Alaska Highway. By dog-team, snowshoes, canoe and sternwheeler I have covered the entire terrain dealt with in the ensuing pages, thawing my frozen bannock along what is now the Alaska Highway, and digging into the snowdrifts for the night where Canol Camp now rises. Across the snow-capped peaks, five hundred miles north of the Canol pipeline, I have battled my way by dog-team across the Arctic Rockies to Fairbanks in the heart of awakening Alaska. As a front line observer for three and a half decades I have seen the frontiers of the North, from Labrador to Alaska, roll back to new worlds of opportunity, none greater than the region tapped by the Alaska Highway and the Canol oil project.

As Lewis and Clark opened up the mighty trans-Mississippi empire so, out of the destructiveness of war, there may yet emerge a new industrial empire in this Last Northwest—an empire carved from primeval forests by brown-shirted doughboys to weld together in lasting and perpetual bonds of friendship two neighbour nations and bring undreamt of riches to generations as yet unborn. And historians of the future will enter new names in the book of pioneers. Along with Lewis, Clark and Mackenzie; Fraser, Fremont and Carson, will be written O'Connor, Hoge and Sturdevant, the builders of the Alaska Highway.

P. H. G.

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PART I

PRELUDE TO ALASKA HIGHWAY

## CHAPTER I

### Before the Highway Came



It is just a century ago now since the first covered wagon caravans rolled out of Independence, Missouri, carrying a land-hungry population into the unknown and unoccupied Northwest. With that inherent restlessness which has always characterized the American race, these hardy pioneers, whose fathers had defied Shawanoe and Cherokee scalping knives and tomahawks to rear their puny cabins in the Dark and Bloody Ground, again braved starvation and Indian arrows until the vanguard of this mass migration gazed upon the blue reaches of the Pacific. Today the wagons roll again. This time into an equally wild and unoccupied Northwest; a Northwest of primeval forests and swift-flowing rivers whose confines abut on Alaska's saw-toothed peaks and glaciers. It is not, however, the lure of distant lands or gleaming gold that have set the wheels of these modern motorized caravans into motion, but the bloody hand of Mars.

When the bloodthirsty dragon of Hirohito opened its sulphurous maw to blast and devastate Pearl Harbour on December 7th, 1941, it also did something else. It gave birth to the Alaska Highway, that modern miracle which has bridged 1,600 miles of bottomless muskegs, roaring mountain streams and untamed wilderness.

Faced with the threat of Asiatic invasion Uncle Sam's parka-clad engineers and doughboys swung into action, to engrave on the scroll of Time a saga of ingenuity and engineering skill which has few counterparts in history. For the story of the Alaska Highway is one of vision and conception magnificent in scope, and of enterprise equally grand in accomplishment. It is a story of brains, brawn and engineering skill pitted against the unrelenting forces of nature in a land where temperatures fall to sixty-five and seventy below, and where brutish rivers, fed by mountain snows, leap down in furious abandon from the white-clad peaks tussling the sky to the westward carrying everything before them. A land of quaking bogs and bottomless marshes which forced me, when I pioneered these trails, to destroy pack-horses caught in their devilfish tentacles.



Here, in this mighty sub-Arctic wilderness, drained by the 2,500-mile reaches of the Athabasca, the Peace and the Mackenzie, with their scows, sternwheelers and Indian-manned birchbarks, have been re-enacted scenes reminiscent of the days of the Mississippi and Missouri country following the historic journey of Lewis and Clark to the Pacific. In the heart of the howling wilderness, which still howls as it has for a thousand years, lonely Hudson's Bay forts, dating back to the days of the American Revolution and surrounded by the tepees of tawny tribesmen, have become the jumping-off places for brown-shirted doughboys whose grit and courage has forever dissipated the lie that the present generation is soft and flabby.

Aboard ancient Pullmans swaying along frontier railroads United States Army Generals rubbed shoulders with grizzled trappers, moccasined Indian guides and khaki-clad surveyors. Pack-trains jogged over forest and prairie trails, urged on by drivers in ten-gallon hats and leather chaps, carrying supplies to advance bases. Deer and caribou flitted through the woods, furry black bears with insatiable curiosity raided garbage dumps and caches and, as though to round out the picture, roaming buffalo wallowed along the banks of the Slave and the Peace, gazing with bovine majesty and displeasure at this invasion of their last sub-Arctic sanctuary.

In the heart of the primeval forest men of the United States Army Engineering Corps whose forbears, under constant threat of redskin massacre, blazed the trail for the Union Pacific across the prairies and through the Rockies, lived up magnificently to their frontier traditions. Bridging unpredictable glacial streams, scaling white-capped peaks, wrestling with quaking bog and muskeg; fighting mosquitoes and bulldog flies in summer, and stinging, searing winter cold that froze the very marrow in their bones—through tropic heat and Arctic cold they ploughed ahead. And, in seven short months, the pioneer Hudson's Bay fur trail which I blazed from Fort St. John on the banks of the swift-flowing Peace to Fort Nelson, in the heart of the British Columbia jungles, was converted into a 1,600-mile military highway over which American troops, jeeps, tanks and munitions are being whirled northward to carry the war across the thousand-mile Aleutian Islands chain to Tokyo and toss the challenge back in the lap of Hirohito.

But the story of this last untamed West does not begin and end with the construction of the highway. Through these same sombre forests marched the savage feet of the first invaders from the continent of Asia. Attracted by the mist-wreathed mountains of Alaska that beckoned across the fifty-six-mile Bering Straits separating the American continent from Asia, and the land bridge of the present Aleutian Islands, bands of Asiatic nomads commenced some twenty thousand years ago to filter across in search of

greener pastures and better hunting—a tradition of this migration being still preserved by the Yellowknife Indians of Great Slave Lake. Slowly but inexorably this Asiatic invasion continued in spasmodic waves of hunting parties. Pushing up the valley of the Yukon, across the divide now bridged by the Canol pipeline, along the Rocky Mountain chain and down the wide Mackenzie-Athabasca basin, the spearhead of what was to become our Indian population crossed the Isthmus of Panama and continued on through the Brazilian jungles and along the Andes to distant Patagonia.

Along the route followed by the Alaska Highway, south to New Mexico and Arizona, you can still hear the clicking gutturals of the rear-guard of these invading nomads in the Athapascan tongue of the unfriendly Beavers and Sickannies of the Peace, the impudent Sarcees of Alberta, and the once-fierce Apaches and Navahoes of the southwest.

Once the war trail of marauding Beaver Indians, the Alaska Highway was originally a narrow path through the jungles trodden only by the moccasined feet of predatory braves who, armed with the death-dealing “detonating bows” traded from the Nor’Westers on Lake Athabasca, carried terror and rapine into the skin lodges of their Sickannie cousins, who still pursue the moose and grizzly in the forests and canyons beyond the Peace.

To adventurous Americans this lonely wilderness seems to have always had a peculiar appeal. A century and a half before Brig.-General James A. O’Connor led the friendly American invasion army into the North, the irascible Connecticut Yankee, Peter Pond, had crossed the Churchill divide, explored the lower Athabasca, reared the nucleus of Fort Chipewyan, cradle of Northwest exploration, and, with his maps and detailed information secured from roving redmen, laid the foundations for Alexander Mackenzie’s successful overland voyages to the Pacific and the Polar Sea. And while the American colonies, having fought their successful war of independence, were welding themselves into what was to become the powerful nation of today the strong arms of burly Simon Fraser of New York State were rearing on the banks of the distant Peace the stockades of Rocky Mountain Fort, forerunner of the present Fort St. John, destined to become the jumping-off place and base for the southern command of the United States highway construction corps.

Three-quarters of a century before the first trucks rolled over the Alaska Highway, other adventurous Americans dreamed of a land route across the American continent and over the narrow Bering Straits to Asia. Commissioned to run an overland telegraph line through this same rugged terrain, to be linked with another line being laid across the Siberian steppes from Moscow, Colonel Charles S. Bulkley of the United States Army Engineers had almost completed his soul-searing task when the successful

laying of a transatlantic cable by Cyrus Field in the summer of 1867 forced the abandonment of the project.

Then came the fabulous year of '98. Streaming from the four corners of the globe men of every colour, creed and nationality surged northward to dip grasping fingers into the gleaming pots of Midas. Floating on the bosom of treacherous waters in nondescript craft, slogging afoot over saw-toothed divides and ice-clad slopes, they toiled wearily through these same dark forests. Many, attempting to follow an imaginary overland route along the line now followed by the highway, perished in their tracks, leaving their bones to be picked clean by ravening wolves and coyotes.

Called upon to blaze an overland road to the Klondyke to facilitate the trek of these gold-seekers, axe-swinging Mounties led by Major Constantine descended upon Fort St. John in the summer of 1905. Clad in mooseskin and flour sacks when the sternwheeled *Peace River*, carrying their supplies got caught in the fall ice, dishevelled Mounties reached Fort Graham in time to save factor Fox of the Hudson's Bay Company from death at the hands of turbulent Sickannie hunters. Halted on the banks of the Stikine by the stroke of a penurious politician's pen the retreat was sounded, the log-walled barracks at Fort St. John were abandoned, a bedraggled detachment of trail-worn Mounties and weary pack-ponies followed their disheartened leader back to Edmonton and the Northwest returned again to its immemorial calm and isolation.

Into this almost unoccupied wilderness, still a happy hunting ground for nomad Indians and fur traders, my footsteps led me in the summer of 1911 in time to witness the last migration of settlers, many of them from far down in the States, into the unoccupied lands of the West. As I bartered guns, blankets and trinkets for the pelts of bear, lynx and silver fox brought in by tawny Indians to my picketed trading post at Fort St. John, it seemed as though this lonely land was destined to remain forever alone and aloof from that civilization that seemed so far away to the southward. And I little thought that the trails my moccasined feet followed would, thanks to an unknown Austrian housepainter and the hand of Mars, be converted in my own day into an international highway linking Panama with the Polar Sea, or that the sylvan stillness of forest and prairie would be rudely broken by the shouts of American doughboys and the rumble of motorized vehicles carrying an avenging army through the heart of my old stamping grounds to defend the rocky shores of an awakening Alaska and slay the dragon of Nipponese barbarism.

## CHAPTER II

### The Edson Trail



Five years before, a recruit to the ranks of the Adventurers of England, trading into Hudson Bay, I sailed on the oak-prowed *Pelican* from the West India dock, London, to the palisaded fort of York Factory, that erstwhile capital of the Northern fur empire established in the days of the Merry Monarch, when New York was a hamlet and Chicago was unthought of. After the isolation of the lonely trading posts of the Hudson Bay country the white lights of Winnipeg held an attraction that can only be appreciated by one who has for twelve months at a time, been denied the companionship of his own kind and had to content himself with but two mails a year, one by canoe and the other by dog-team.

They were great days those. Everything was booming. Work was looking for men, not men for work, since it was there for the taking, and everyone was happy. In bustling hotel rotundas rugged, broad-shouldered men with sun-tanned faces spoke a jargon entirely new to me. They talked of ballasting, of blasting, and the laying down of steel. There was a fascination in the airy friendliness of these men of the wide open spaces—the engineers and contractors who were pushing civilization’s steel tentacles across the muskegs and blasting a railroad through the seemingly-impassable barrier of the Rockies to the Pacific.

One met all sorts of people in those halcyon days of vast railroad projects, colonization schemes and land booms. Introductions were unnecessary for the frontier spirit still prevailed. Real estate offices flourished everywhere, offering fortunes for a song. New “cities” rose overnight on the bald-headed prairie or in the heart of primeval forests, and “corner lots” that existed only on blueprints were selling for five thousand dollars in cities that were as ethereal as the cigar smoke of the promoters.

Inspired by the friendliness of those about me, and anxious to see this Last Great West, I decided to forsake fur trading for railroading, and having obtained from Superintendent Brewer of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway a temporary assignment as Timekeeper on Ballast Gang 13, whatever that might be, I boarded a train for Edmonton.

Comprising some thirty thousand souls, Edmonton's meteoric rise from the principal trading post of the prairies to a bustling city was one of the miracles of the rapidly developing West. Thanks to the inrush of hordes of gold-seeking argonauts bound for the creeks of the Klondyke a decade before, the capital city of Alberta had emerged from its chrysalis and cast aside the primitive rule of the Fur Barons. Down on the banks of the Saskatchewan still stood the palisaded fort which, but a few years before, had given sanctuary to painted Crees pursued to its very gates by marauding Blackfeet camped on the site of the rising capitol buildings. A straggling street with ugly square-fronted stores, Chinese cafes, harness shops and livery stables on the heights facing the Saskatchewan had taken on a more prosperous appearance as brick and granite stores, blocks and bank buildings replaced them. Now, with every mile the railroads bit through rock and forest in their fight to reach the Pacific; with every new surge of land-hungry settlers groping for the vague empire of the Peace, the price of real estate on Jasper Avenue, the city's muddy main street, rose by leaps and bounds till a foot of land reached higher levels than on Piccadilly in the heart of London's prosperous West End.

Boarding a "local" at the little wooden station on First Street I found myself rubbing shoulders with a motley horde of Central Europeans west-bound to replace those wiped out by the ravages of typhoid at the railroad camps in the mountains, or others who had herded to the white lights to blow in their hard-earned dollars in the city's saloons and the brothels of Rat Creek.

After wheezing for a day and a night through a depressing solitude of bearded pines and endless muskeg the *mixed*, with its ancient Pullmans and heterogeneous string of rusty red boxcars, rolled into the famed frontier city of Edson—a sprawling little shack settlement set down in an almost bottomless morass two hundred and twenty-five miles west of Edmonton—loudly advertised in every real estate office in the land as "The Gateway to Peace River" and other high-sounding titles calculated to bait the unwary.

Three hundred miles to the northward, separated by a wilderness of swamp and forest, lay the rolling prairies and parklands of the Peace. Trapping, hunting and fur trading were still the time-worn occupations of that land of promise. A happy hunting ground for nomad Indians of a dozen tribes, it was still under the despotic sway of hard-bitten factors of the Hudson's Bay Company and Revillon Frères, who looked with jealous eyes on any intruders likely to threaten their long and undisputed rule. To the westward spread another vast extent of untamed wilderness which, with theodolite and compass, a handful of bronzed engineers were endeavouring

to bend to the will of a new generation by blasting a way through the serrated peaks to the shores of the Pacific where Prince Rupert stands today.

Being the "Gateway" to the Peace River country some enterprising souls had opened up a stage line from Edson to Grande Prairie over what was known as the Edson Trail, this alleged road being widely advertised to bring business to the town and make its prospects seem the brightest wherever "city" lots were sold. Actually the road was little more than an Indian pack trail which meandered with casual unconcern through countless miles of primeval forest, over hills and mountains, across innumerable streams, of which the Athabasca, the Little Smoky and the Simonette presented the worst obstacles, and for the greater part of its two hundred and forty long and painful miles passed through almost impenetrable, mosquito-infested muskeg.

Once a week the stage—a wagon with a couple of seats thrown across the box—drew up with a mighty flourish before the diminutive post office, a wooden cubicle smelling of freshly-sawn lumber. The optimistic passengers who had paid their sixty-dollar fares in advance leapt sprightly aboard; the buckskin-coated driver posed with reins held high and ten-gallon hat cocked jauntily over one eye, the passengers smiled, probably for the last time in many months; real estate touts snapped their cameras, and with a mighty flourish of the whip the stage started on its way.

A wary traveller would have looked with suspicion on the mud-stained riding saddle, the wooden pack-saddle and the weathered apperjos that lay beneath the seats. But those who *knew* the Edson Trail had little doubt as to the ultimate purpose they would serve. Usually the wagon got mired five miles out of town and the driver would smilingly suggest that the passengers should kindly consent to alight and stretch their legs over the bad spot ahead. For the ensuing two hundred and thirty-odd miles they would continue to walk, or wade or swim, according to the weather or the state of the rivers. If they reached their destination with the full sixty pounds of baggage allowed them they were lucky, for the wagon was usually abandoned a few miles out of town, one horse was converted into a pack-horse for grub and baggage and the other into a saddle horse for the driver!

Unfortunately many would-be settlers, most of them from the States, misled by glowing accounts they'd read in the papers, and anxious to reach the beckoning Peace River country by the quickest route, arrived in Edson with wagons, horses, oxen and household effects, prepared to set out along the much-advertised Edson Trail for the promised land.

A crude packing-case town of six hundred, of Chic Sale plumbing and multitudinous smells, with suburban lots nine miles out in the muskeg selling at fancy prices in Seattle and New York, Edson looked with casual

unconcern at the lean, long-legged farmers from Iowa and the Dakotas in blue jeans and battered sombreros who'd arrived with their wives and families to tackle the God-forsaken trail that lay ahead. You saw them squatted under store verandahs chewing straws and gazing contemplatively at teams mired in the rich quagmire of muskeg and liquid mud that flowed between the board sidewalks and boasted the title of Main Street, veiled warning of what lay ahead. Along the trail broken remnants of wagons, abandoned boxes of household treasures, discarded utensils and furniture, and the skeletons of horses—to say nothing of the occasional grave—told only too eloquently of the trials and tribulations of this trek into the Last Great West.

Emerson Hough, author of “The Covered Wagon,” could hardly have seen or written about anything more humbly modest and splendidly inspiring than the soul-searing trials of those early settlers who bucked the Edson Trail to Grande Prairie and Pouce Coupe; There is a great story in that migration, a story of quiet courage and indomitable persistence. They were seeking clean new land, depending on the promises of railroads to follow on the tail of their mud-encrusted wagons. They found clean land, but not the railroads.

Of those who tackled that earthly purgatory many laid down their lives in the first Great War, while the grave has claimed many others who trekked from Edmonton beyond the Big Smoky. But there are still living vigorous old-timers who recall that long, uphill fight with gripping gumbo, with bottomless sink-holes and the perils of the trail. Their wagons laden down with women, children, baled hay, oats, spare harness, and farm implements with which to break the virgin sod, they rolled out of the squalid town of Edson to battle the wilderness with little else but the courage in their hearts.

At night horses were hobbled, belled and turned out to crop at wild peavine, at willow buds, to devour perhaps some noxious weed that would deprive their unfortunate owners of their only means of transportation.

As the sun sank in a riot of lemon and scarlet behind the black filigree of the pines, axes wielded by brawny arms would send their echoes reverberating through the darkening forest, bringing stately conifers crashing to the moss. Around huge campfires whose leaping flames cast grotesque shadows into the encircling walls of indigo trail-worn men scraped the grime of the muskeg from sweat-drenched clothes, repaired broken wagon-tongues and harness, or rested bone-weary limbs on fragrant beds of spruce boughs, sniffing the tantalizing aroma of steaming coffee, sizzling beans and bacon and browning bannock as the women bent to their evening chores. Yet, despite the rigours of the trail, mate called to mate and

many a starry-eyed lass and brawny youth, pierced by the shafts of Cupid's arrows, plighted their troth by the flickering glow of these night fires.

Supper over and horses tended, the exhausted travellers would roll themselves in their mud-stained blankets. Gradually a yellow moon would creep over the ebony rim of spiked pines to light the way of the denizens of the night. Sleek lynx and foxes would gaze with cat-like eyes at these intruders of the wilds as they slunk on padded feet through indigo thickets in search of food. Warned by the man smell stately moose and timid deer would melt into the shadows. Through the primeval stillness would come the mournful whoo! whoo! whoo-who! of a night-owl and the piercing scream of a rabbit caught in the iron talons of some predatory hawk. But the emigrants slept on. Theirs was the dreamless, God-given rest of the weary.

Sometimes the cavalcade was halted. While grim-faced men fashioned a crude coffin, and others dug a lonely grave, weeping women tenderly prepared some loved one for eternal rest. The brief, devout service over, a marker was placed at the head of the fresh-turned earth and the wagons rolled along. Sometimes in the night a sharp, shrill cry of pain would cleave the silence to be followed by the plaintive wail of a new-born infant. Thus life went on.

Rising by the light of the stars the women replenished the fires and cooked a hasty breakfast while the men rounded up horses and oxen and prepared to tackle the trail ahead. "Giddap!" The shrill cries of angry drivers blended with the creak of straining harness, the crack of whips and the sucking chuck, chuck, of feet and legs caught in the suction of the muskeg.

Felling trees and bedding muskeg with corduroy, pitting their puny strength with clutching roots and rock-ribbed ridges; climbing precipitous slopes, descending into green-walled valleys, or lurching through the desolation of grey rampikes where forest fires had swept the land, leaving in their wake a tangle of uprooted stumps and blackened carcasses of forest giants, the cavalcade battled on. Sometimes a scant two miles rewarded a day of blood, sweat and gruelling toil. Twenty miles was a record.

Rafting the Athabasca they forded countless streams which, overnight, would be converted into raging, frothing torrents by a heavy rain or snowfall in the mountains. Losing horses from swamp fever or hoof-rot from constant immersion in swampy soil, those whose iron will had not deserted them rafted the Big Smoky at Besantson's Crossing, where a current-powered ferry was later installed, and saw at last through the scattered poplar copses the green swell of virgin prairie, reaching westward to the Wapiti, they had dared so much to attain.

There was the little English widow who brought her seven young children over that terrifying trail and planted a garden at Bear Lake so



breath-takingly beautiful and so fragrant that men took the longer way around to feast their eyes on the flowers and revel in the delicately wafted perfume. Behind genial Jim Meade trooped a gallant company of strapping young men who had hardly reared their sod huts on the prairie and broken the soil than they followed their leader overseas to lay down their lives in the mud and desolation of Flanders. Wallowing over this wilderness trail Bill Pratt painfully transported a second-hand Gordon press, some odd type, a roll of paper and a sharp butcher knife with which to cut it. He intended to give the first citizens of Grande Prairie a weekly paper. Instead the rickety press in his little log hut recorded for posterity the hopes, fears, laughter, tears and tragedies of those first pioneers who planted their homes on the bald-headed prairie. Not all who set out reached the rolling prairies of the Peace. Giving up in despair the less stout-hearted trickled back with little but the ragged clothes on their attenuated shoulders, calling down sulphurous curses on those who'd lured them to disaster.

After overcoming almost insurmountable difficulties those who'd staked out their plot of land eked out a miserable existence in their squalid sod huts the following winter, snaring cottontail rabbits, doing a little trapping, and fighting bitter cold and mounting drifts that often threatened to engulf them.

While resembling in many respects the covered wagon migration across the prairies of Nebraska, Wyoming and Idaho, this Twentieth Century trek into the Last Great West was a highly individualized affair. Usually parties of two or three pooled their food, the hauling power of their teams—everything, and struck out with fierce independence in search of new worlds to conquer.



Brig.-General James A. O'Connor, in charge of the Northwest Command.



Brig.-General Clarence L. Sturdevant, who blueprinted the Alaska Highway.



Brig.-General William M. Hoge, who supervised the preliminary work at Fort St. John-Fort Nelson.

In the light of present events this northward wagon trek seems puny by comparison with the vast fleets of motor trucks that speed today over the 1,600-mile Alaska Highway, which literally begins where the Edson Trail ended. Yet in conquering that two hundred and fifty-mile strip of wilderness it was those same pioneer homesteaders who brought in their wake the pastoral railway that made possible the speedy completion of the great defence highway by providing not only transportation but an advance base five hundred miles north of Edmonton on the banks of the distant Peace.

## CHAPTER III

### By Stage and Sternwheeler



At Edson I learned that Ballast Gang 13 was working up towards the mountains in the vicinity of Fitzhugh—now Jasper Park, dear to American tourists and big-game hunters—and boarded a jerky train which ambled towards the Yellowhead Pass at a round eight miles an hour, frequently sinking into the muskeg and having to be hauled out by the wrecking gang. We passed the Big Eddy trestle, lurched by slashes in the wilderness dotted here and there with rude log cabins, side-slipped into the muskeg, remained there for a couple of hours and continued on our way. Here and there were strings of sweating horses driven by bronzed skimmers naked to the waist, their sinewy hands grasping the handles of scoop-shovels as they levelled off the ballast with which they were vainly attempting to convert the quaking muskeg into something more substantial.

I found the string of rusty red boxcars housing Ballast Gang 13, which comprised a couple of hundred Central Europeans and three Norwegian straw-bosses, reposing on a siding near a cluster of log buildings bearing the name Bickerdyke. Shaking hands with the foreman, a huge, tow-headed Swede, I proceeded to get acquainted with my future home, a combination office and living-room in the rear half of a boxcar furnished with a wooden table, a chair, a bunk, and a pair of fruity blankets which I promptly replaced with my bedroll.

Each day the *mixed* ambled out of Edson, bringing another load of Central Europeans whose knowledge of English was confined to the word “Mister,” which, spoken with varying degrees of wistfulness or emphasis, was supposed to convey whatever meaning was desired. It took three gangs, the contractors said, to build a railroad: the gang going out, the one on the job, and the one coming in to replace them.

Each morning I trudged through the shimmering heat haze between twin ribbons of blazing steel to check up the gang and see that all were on the job. Ahead white-capped Mount Robson tusked the sky of cobalt while, through the scented shadows of the pines, I caught the sound and sight of gurgling waters tumbling northward to swell the mighty flood of the

Athabasca and carry fur traders' scows north from Athabasca Landing to the Arctic. A shrill whistle would come echoing through the pines and a train of flatcars would clatter by, loaded with more steel to feed the voracious appetite of the Pioneer, which, with remorseless deliberation, disgorged steel rails upon the ties already laid to receive them through the rock cuts and morasses of the Yellowhead and along the valley of the wicked Fraser.

The glint of picks and shovels in the sunlight would indicate the presence of a work gang and soon I would be in the midst of scores of panting, perspiring humans toiling in the sun while straw-bosses paraded up and down the track like soldiers, gruffly bawling out their orders. The ballast train would come screaming down the track and the men would dash for the shadow of the woods, glad to snatch a momentary respite from gruelling labour. The sides of the flatcars would fall, the conductor would pull a lever, the huge drum at the rear of the train would revolve and the metal-snouted plough would move inexorably the length of the cars, spilling more tons of ballast out on either side. Thus were the muskegs, similar to those encountered later by United States Army engineers along the Alaska Highway to the northward, conquered. In Edmonton one heard nothing of the typhoid which took its daily toll. It was casually referred to as mountain fever and the foreigners who made up the construction gangs died like flies to be buried without ceremony in nameless graves.

Up in the heart of the Yellowhead Pass at Mile 1, B.C., where the Mounted Police, who patrolled the right of way, had no further jurisdiction there had sprung up a camp which, for lawlessness and the lightness with which human life was held, resembled American mining towns in the days of the two-gun men. There in the heart of the Rockies was gathered a lawless element: dance hall girls and ladies of easy virtue, tin-horn gamblers, whiskey pedlars and rum-runners, the human dross from distant cities, all waiting to fleece the railroad worker when the paycar came along. Murders and "drowning accidents" were frequent, while many a man, unwise enough to flaunt his roll before these human vultures, vanished into the near-by Fraser River. The killing of two British Columbia Provincial policemen late that summer climaxed this growing state of anarchy and resulted in a wholesale clean-up.

For five miles on either side of the track there existed a law forbidding the importation of liquor. But there were few Mounted Police to enforce this prohibition act, and since enormous profits were to be made peddling it to the construction gangs a lawless element conducted an active and surreptitious trade in bootleg hooch.

There were many diverse ways in which this illicit liquor was smuggled in. There was one particular lady, Babe Courteau, who was in the habit of

making frequent trips to town. Leaving her doubtful resort with a lithe and lissome figure she'd return with every evidence of having added surprisingly to her *avoirdufois* during her fleeting absence. Suspicion fell upon the lady when her return to the line was invariably followed by a jamboree and free-for-all fighting that held up the work and made contractors tear their hair. At first she blasphemously and indignantly refused the kindly offer of the police matron to investigate the cause of her contracting and expanding girth. Forced to acquiesce, there was found strapped around her slim waist a rubber bag containing two gallons of fiery alcohol, to which was attached a rubber hose, the nozzle reposing within her scarlet garter. To serve it it was merely necessary for her to flip up her skirts, bring out the nozzle, squirt the desired snort into a glass and tuck away the evidence. She was promptly whisked away and placed behind the bars, but still liquor continued to trickle in.

To those who prosecuted this illegal traffic the ubiquitous Sergeant "Nitchie" Thorne, of the North West Mounted was a particular *bête noire*. He was here, there and everywhere, and had the faculty for turning up at the most inopportune time in the most unexpected places. Then, one day, a wagon load of fat porkers, consigned to Pedersen and Fell, the boarding contractors, drew up before the wooden sidewalk of Prairie Creek. Gazing meditatively at the sleek pink carcasses Thorne lifted his slender steel probe, placed it abstractedly between a porker's ribs—and pushed. To his unbounded amazement *the pig began to leak!* The defunct animal exuded a stream of amber liquid that smelled suspiciously like whiskey. Jabbing another pig at random produced similar results, causing the inquisitive Mountie to investigate the balance of the load. Within each innocent-looking porker was a rubber bladder containing two or three gallons of whiskey. The mystery of still another flow of liquor had been solved!

As the steel rails pushed inexorably through the Rockies towards Fort George which, as the town of Prince George, was to vie with Fort St. John years later for the right to become the southern terminus of the Alaska Highway, I experienced a nostalgic longing for the Northern pine woods and the sun-kissed lakes and rivers I had known.

On a visit to Edmonton my trail crossed that of Fred Lawrence of Fort Vermilion, who was organizing a venture financed by Grenfell's of London, England, to reap profits from the development taking place in the Peace River country. Intrigued by his description of this land of milk and honey, of rolling hills and grassy prairies, so different to the sterile swampy country of Hudson Bay, I finally consented to go north again and establish a trading post at Peace River Crossing for the new Peace River Trading and Land

Company, or the Diamond-P, as it was called from the markings on their bales and cases.

A few days later I boarded the Athabasca Landing stage at the Transit Hotel near Edmonton with lively recollections of the only other stage I knew—the one that ran from Edson to Grande Prairie, and I saw to it that I was attired for walking, should the necessity arise.

It was a magnificent August day and a grateful breeze rustled the cottonwoods and poplars as we clattered along behind the four-horse team urged on by old man Kennedy, the driver. The Athabasca Trail, as it was known, was a passably good dirt road, especially where it meandered through beautiful park-like country interspersed with poplar groves.

Along the winding trail there streamed a constant caravan of wagons drawn by shagannapie cayuses and driven by the dark-skinned descendants of the *coureurs de bois* who had originally explored the land. Attired in black felt hats or cowboy Stetsons, buckskin coats, jean overalls and beaded moccasins, they lolled on their loads as though they hadn't a worry in the world, little realizing that within a few short months this Athabasca Trail was to oust the Edson Trail and become the highway for a covered wagon trek that was to transform the country to the northward and forever end the carefree life they loved.

Imbued with the restless spirit of path-finding forbears; driven from the plains to the southward by the disappearance of the buffalo and the invasion of white settlers, they'd pushed up into the Athabasca country and established settlements at Lac la Biche, Athabasca Landing and Lesser Slave Lake, raised a little grain and potatoes, and spent most of their time freighting for the fur traders or acting as *bateaux* men on the annual fleet of scows that left Athabasca Landing each summer bound for the fur forts that dotted the two-thousand-mile reaches of the Athabasca and Mackenzie rivers north to the Arctic foreshore.

Next evening we topped the spruce-clad Tawatinaw Hills and saw below, enshrouded in the glimmering heat haze wherein wisps of wood-smoke floated languidly, the far-famed frontier settlement of Athabasca Landing, then the jumping-off place for the North. A picturesque and bustling place redolent of the atmosphere of the frontier, it consisted of orderly rows of red-roofed, whitewashed trading posts and Mounted Police barracks, the Roman Catholic and Anglican missions, the inevitable square-fronted Chinese cafes and pool-rooms, and the rowdy Union Hotel, mecca of every trader, riverman and roughneck from Fort St. John to Fort McPherson; scene of leave-takings, reunions and noisy brawls. On either side the settlement was flanked with the log cabins of half-breed rivermen and the conical white tepees of swarthy and stolid Crees.

Here English was at a discount. Everywhere one heard the soft, sibilant Cree or the French *patois* of the forests. Scarlet-coated Mounties rubbed shoulders with swarthy *bateaux* men in beaded moccasins, whose ghostlike dogs slunk ever at their heels. Tartan-clad squaws with beady-eyed papooses slung in mossbags on their backs trailed from store to store behind their tawny masters. Black-robed priests mingled with grizzled fur traders, or bronzed trappers whose canoes, laden with packs of forest peltries, lay on the beach under the ceaseless scrutiny of their vigilant eyes lest the camp curs that roamed around like predatory wolves should pounce upon these treasure cargoes and destroy them.

In wide-brimmed Stetsons clerks of the fur companies strutted importantly around exchanging knowing glances with roguish-eyed half-breed belles. Down at the river bank *Métis* deck-hands were stowing freight from the wagons aboard two white-painted sternwheelers: the *Echo* and the *Athabasca River*, whose black funnels emitted puffs and balls of cottonwool smoke. God's country, as the land to the northward was known, had a language all its own. Civilization became the Outside; a river bank a cutbank; an aggregation of mudded huts a fort, while goods in the stores were priced in terms of "skins" instead of dollars.

Of all the frontier settlements Athabasca Landing was the busiest since, through its narrow portals, passed all goods consigned to that, then, almost unknown region vaguely called the North. Each spring the river bank became a shipyard where hundreds of ten-ton scows and *bateaux* were thrown together, pitched and launched, ready to be piloted down the turbulent rapids of the Athabasca by brawny *Métis* to Fort McMurray, and thence to their destinations at the isolated fur posts down the Mackenzie.

Goods for the Peace River country were conveyed up the western arm of the Athabasca and across Lesser Slave Lake. Here another string of rickety Indian carts and shagannapie ponies conveyed them across the seventy-five-mile portage to Peace River Crossing, where the sternwheeled steamship *Peace River* carried them west to Fort St. John and Hudson Hope in the foothills, or east to Fort Vermilion near the junction of the Peace and the Slave.

Piling aboard the *Northland Echo* which, years later, was to transport American Army engineers and doughboys north to string the Canol pipeline from Fort Norman to Whitehorse, I was relegated to a diminutive cabin redolent of pork and beans from the galley below. The last of the freight was trundled aboard, the raucous shriek of the siren echoed back from the wooded heights, the red-painted paddle-wheel commenced to beat the chocolate waters into froth and the bow nudged slowly into the current. To the accompaniment of vociferous farewells from shadowy figures lining the



bank and the yelping chorus of countless Indian curs the sternwheeler commenced to breast the strong current while two Indians at the bow tested the channel with striped poles, shouting the depth in Cree to Captain Barber on the Texas deck: “*Tapagook! Tapagook! Kootwasik! Kootwasik!*” and a frenzied warning “*Nianan!*” as the depth dropped suddenly to five feet.

My fellow passengers included an obscene Falstaffe from Montana who proposed to establish a brewery at Lesser Slave Lake, though how he expected to accomplish this miracle in prohibition territory under the eagle eye of patrolling Mounties I was at a loss to understand. There were a couple of reserved Englishmen whom you couldn’t approach without a proper introduction; two real estate sharks in search of possible townsites; trappers, priests, and a couple of self-effacing nuns, while the lower deck was crowded with a heterogeneous collection of freight, Indians, squaws, papooses, and the inevitable horde of dogs chained to whatever happened to be handy.

As the sun dropped in a blaze of orange and scarlet behind the dark filigree of the pines an enormous moon sailed above the jagged tree-tops, transforming the river into a molten stream of silver walled with stygian blackness. A cool resinous breeze swirled out from the woods, dispelling the clouds of droning mosquitoes. But they were abroad bright and early, swarming aboard in aggressive battalions every time we pulled ashore to take on wood to feed the voracious appetite of the boilers.

The *Northland Echo* was as near to being amphibious as any steamboat could be; she would wallow across sandbars like a crocodile to sidle into deeper water and continue her thudding progress only to be grounded again and entail the stringing of hundreds of feet of cable to some monarch of the forest when the steam winches would literally haul the protesting, creaking white-housed vessel over the mud flat and back into the channel.

On the third day we were unceremoniously dumped ashore at the head of the rapids to wallow across an eighteen-mile portage and re-embark in the antiquated and unseaworthy *Midnight Sun*, which negotiated a serpentine stream, chugged laboriously across the blue waters of Lesser Slave Lake and deposited us at the half-breed settlement of Grouard. Seated in a rickety wagon behind an Indian driver we wended our way through clumps of cottonwoods interspersed with whitewashed Indian cabins, climbed a hill and halted before the Hudson’s Bay post, a square of red-roofed buildings surrounded by pointed pickets and surmounted by a tall flagpole from which fluttered the scarlet ensign bearing the magic letters “H.B.C.”, often interpreted as “Here Before Christ” or the “Half-breeds’ Curse.” Beyond rose the spires of the Roman Catholic mission, and beneath the hill the neat log barracks of the North West Mounted Police.

The low, beamed trading store, reeking with the acrid fumes of *kinnikinnick*, was crowded with Indians, 'breeds and a few white freighters drawing rations for a trip across the portage to Peace River Crossing with freight for the down-river trading posts. Learning that Donald Stewart, the mail courier, was leaving for the Crossing in the morning I lost no time in engaging a seat beside him.

Bright and early we were on our way across the seventy-five miles of muskeg, mud and up-ended roots, furrowed originally by the moccasined feet of Cree war parties, that was by courtesy called a road and vividly recalled the notorious Edson Trail. In places it was a mere gash through the poplars, yet over this trail every pound of freight for the entire Peace River country to the northward had to be hauled.

The land was still a trapper's and fur trader's paradise, the intrusion of white settlers being looked upon as but a distant and uncertain possibility. Unemployment or poverty were unknown since everyone trapped, traded or freighted, owned his plot of land, raised his own vegetables, and hauled hay from the vast natural hay fields around the lake to feed his horses and cattle. A general air of tranquillity and prosperity permeated the whole land. But already at Edson, and on the steamer, I'd met the vanguard of the forthcoming white invasion, and I wondered as we rolled along how great a change the next few years might bring to the happy, thoughtless children of the woods who called this land their home.

At noon on the second day we rounded a forested bend to come face to face with a tall, broad-shouldered man in stiff-brimmed Stetson and scarlet tunic. At first I had the illusion that he was riding a diminutive cayuse till he came closer and his immense size and muscular frame became apparent. Donald emitted a disgusted snort. "Howd'y Andy!" he grunted as the Mountie halted beside him. "This here," he expectorated disgustedly, "is Sergeant Anderson o' the Mounted P'lice. Anything I can do for ye, Andy?"

Andy's heavy Icelandic features, pitted with blue powder burns, widened into a smile and I found myself gazing into a pair of cold, ice-blue eyes. "I'm yust going to look your load over T'onald—yust going to look your load over."

"Look over my load—*hell!*" growled the incensed Donald belligerently. "Don't ya know nuthin' Andy? Don't ya realize this here's His Majesty's mail?"

"That's yust it, T'onald," the Sergeant whipped off the lashing and proceeded to dump mail sacks, baled hay, grub-box and everything unceremoniously into the quagmire. "You see," he remarked with a distinct lack of tact, "a lot o' booze has been leaking into the Crossing since you started to run the mail."

By the time the red-coated representative of the law had ridden off, without finding any incriminating liquor, Donald was beside himself with anger. "That God-damned square-head," he exploded. "I've met some hard-boiled policemen in my time but he's the toughest yet. I'd like to . . ." He jerked angrily on the lines to relieve his feelings, leaving his threat unfinished.

In saying that Andy was the toughest policeman he'd ever known Donald was merely expressing the sentiments of every fur trader, riverman and roughneck from Athabasca Landing to the Rockies. Literally and figuratively Andy was a law unto himself. Dashing in where angels feared to tread, Andy seemed to blunder ahead yet always got his man. One of the famous stories told round the campfires of the North was of the time he dogged a criminal for months only to find him buried deep in the heart of the Rockies. Anxious to show that he'd caught up with his quarry at last he was said to have severed the head with an axe and brought the grisly relic back in a gunnysack for evidence, scaring the wits out of an inquisitive nigger porter on the train who let his curiosity get the better of him and peered into the forbidden sack.

I had been told of the magnificent sight that would unfold itself when we topped the nine-hundred-foot bank of the Peace, but I was unprepared for the stupendous grandeur of the scene. Like a wide ribbon of silver the tranquil river meandered through a rich green valley joined at no great distance by the sombre Smoky River as it emerged from its purple-shadowed canyon. High above, upon the topmost pinnacle of a twelve-hundred-foot cone, a flashing spot of whiteness marked the resting place of Twelve-Foot Davis, the only man to ever run the unbridled Peace River Canyon to the westward and emerge from it alive. "He was everybody's friend—and was never known to lock his cabin door," was the epitaph Peace River Jim had carved on the lofty gravestone of his friend.

Easing our way down the precipitous slope we clattered into the diminutive settlement of Peace River Crossing which boasted a telegraph office, a Mounted Police barracks and the log trading posts of Revillon Frères and the Hudson's Bay Company, while, moored to the bank, the sternwheeled *Peace River* awaited her cargo to leave for Fort St. John.

That Donald had succeeded in outwitting Andy soon became obvious. Hardly had the local worthies gathered to celebrate the mail's arrival than Donald planked a fat bottle of Joe Seagram's rye whiskey triumphantly on the table, with the assurance that there was plenty more to come. "Andy thought he was pretty smart," he gave me a portentous wink, "but there was one place he *couldn't* put his mud-hooks in spite o' that red coat. That was inside the mail bag where I had this packed in moss!"

Soon my trading post was established and teams commenced to roll in with cases and bales of trading goods. Meanwhile I had found time to visit the site of Alexander Mackenzie's first fort, which he'd established near the mouth of the Smoky in the fall of 1792. Spending the winter here trading with the Beavers he'd used this as the jumping-off place for his voyage to the Pacific. For many years afterwards the Forks, as this place was long known, remained the focal point of commerce, and here Nor'Westers, X. Y. traders and Hudson's Bay men fought their bitter fight for commercial supremacy in the wilderness.

Around the mud hearths of Black Mackenzie—said to be a direct descendant of the explorer through a Beaver woman—and others whose forbears had participated in the fray I was told how, exactly a century before, the Hudson's Bay Company had girded its loins and set out to wrest the fur trade of the Peace from rival Nor'Westers. Across beautiful Athabasca Lake John Clarke had sailed to Fort Chipewyan at the head of a hundred *voyageurs* and a fleet of fourteen painted birchbarks. Dispatching one party to Great Slave Lake, Clarke set out with forty-eight men to carry the fur war to the Peace, depending entirely on the country to furnish game for sustenance. But he'd under-estimated the aggressive and unscrupulous character of his adversaries. Snatching up the gauntlet the Nor'Westers hurried a party of *coureurs de bois* ahead of the Hudson's Bay men, with orders to drive all the game back from the river banks, and send all the Indians inland to prevent them affording succour to the enemy.

On the heels of the intruders followed McGillivray to make sure none of his Nor'Westers gave aid. Disaster was inevitable. Eighteen of the Hudson's Bay men perished from starvation and exposure, the rest being forced to capitulate, deliver up all their goods to the Nor'Westers and undertake not to trade for another year.

When Clarke returned the following fall his men were forced into a disturbance by the Nor'Westers, he was seized, and thirty bales of trading goods exacted as bail. The breakdown of the Hudson's Bay offensive was complete. And not till 1821, when the warring companies buried the hatchet and amalgamated, did the Hudson's Bay Company fall heir to these trading posts along the Peace.

## CHAPTER IV

### Fort St. John



At last Keewatin, god of the North Wind, unleashed his furies. A howling blizzard roared down from the Pole, obliterating the pines and cottonwoods with stinging clouds of swirling snow, sealing the sloughs and ponds and filling the grey waters of the Peace with frozen slush which congealed at last into an up-ended mass of ice and bordeaux. 'Breeds hauled out their fringed capotes of buckskin, and Mounted Police their short buffalo coats, fur caps and moosehide mittens. The silvery tinkle of sleigh bells filled the air, mud chimneys and stovepipes sent their white plumes weaving into the coppery sky, and the whole country took on the dazzling white garb of winter.

It was sixty odd below when I mounted an irascible pinto and headed for Lesser Slave Lake in January. So cold was it that my buckskin capote, bearskin chaps, heavy moccasins and blanket socks failed to keep out the searing frost, and every breath condensed in an icy breastplate on my chest.

Twenty miles out from the Crossing I met the vanguard of still another movement of restless whites into the almost untenanted empire of the Peace. It consisted of a tired team of heavy work horses hauling a large caboose on creaking bob-sleighs, an enormous white pennant of smoke trailing from the stovepipe that penetrated the roof. A hoary old veteran stood before a diminutive window guiding his team with reins that passed through a leather flap in the canvas wall. Stopping the conveyance he invited me in to get warmed up.

Inside was a panting red-hot cook-stove, split wood, a wardrobe and a conglomeration of trunks, household furniture, harness, saddles, pails, pitchforks and what not. A grey-haired lady with a kindly smile offered me a welcome cup of tea, inquired anxiously the distance to the Peace, and asked me a thousand questions about the land. As my eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness I observed a couple of good-sized girls and a boy huddled atop some blankets in a corner. "We druv' up all the way from Montana," the old man told me. "Aimin' to settle on the north bank o' the Peace. They say as how there's lots o' good clean land there."

A mile further on I met a similar, though far more dilapidated, conveyance hauled by the queerest team I'd ever seen, an ox and a mule. Ere I reached Lesser Slave Lake I encountered seventy-two of these emigrant outfits, and learned that an endless procession was wending its way down the frozen reaches of the Athabasca. Many of these settlers seemed quite poverty-stricken and ill-equipped to carve out homesteads in a land where they would have to depend entirely upon the fruits of their own toil. Yet the slogans: "Grande Prairie or Bust," "Peace River or Bust," "Grand Falls to Grande Prairie," scrawled on the canvas sides of their rickety cabooses bespoke an inward courage that would not be easily thwarted. Some had come from Ontario, while others had driven all the way up from Idaho, Wyoming and even Texas. One and all seemed aloof and suspicious, truly strangers in a strange land.

During my short absence from Lesser Slave Lake Settlement, as Grouard was still called, it had undergone a remarkable transformation, with frame hotels, barber shops, Chinese cafes and places of less respectability, all smelling strongly of newly-sawn lumber, lining either side of "Main Street." City cowboys, muffled in gorgeous chaps and buckskin coats rode jerkily about in search of love, adventure and town lots. Half-bread belles were up in arms at the advent of some flashy, high-stepping dance hall girls from the Outside who were doing a land office business dispensing the pleasures of amorous dalliance. Not to be brushed aside by these tinselled ladies of the night, scorned backwoods beauties raised their tents around the Fig Leaf Hotel and reduced the price of love from five dollars to fifty cents. With professional pride the painted ladies indignantly appealed first to the Bishop, then to the Mounted Police, to run out these scabs, but the call of the wild was stronger than the coo of the city dove and, abandoning their perfumed work benches, they were forced to work their passage out on the first boat.

For miles around, in hayfield, muskeg and forest, town lots were being surveyed; half-breeds were selling their ancestral homes for a song, and the smallest strip of "inside" property was selling from a thousand dollars up.

While Mounted Police were busy in their eternal search for booze the unorganized caravan continued to trickle in and out of town, some taking the Peace River trail I'd just traversed, others branching off westward along the trail to the trading post at Sturgeon Lake, and on to Grande Prairie. As many as a hundred of these home-seekers passed through in the course of a single day. Business boomed, and everyone seemed happy and content save certain hard-bitten old traders and the homeless 'breeds who'd been mulcted of their land by townsite sharks and squandered their money on wine, women and song.

“The country’s gettin’ too damned crowded—too damned crowded!” Miles McDermott up at the Hudson’s Bay post slapped a slab of sowbelly angrily on the counter. “These here people are streakin’ in like the children of Israel crossing the Jordan, or was it the Red Sea?” he eyed me belligerently. “If they think this is a promised land they’re crazy. This ain’t no place for settlers. Damn it man, it’s just a fur country.”

Already the Fur Barons could see their empire tottering. If these unfortunate settlers had been smallpox or a plague of locusts they could hardly have been more unwelcome. By old-time fur traders the length and breadth of the land they were bitterly resented, and none would stir an inch to help them, while at many of the posts resentful factors refused to sell them supplies for cash on the grounds that all their goods were needed for the Indian trade.

When I crossed the Peace the following May with old Dad Griffin, the mailman, and climbed the nine-hundred-foot bank to the plateau en route to Fort St. John to take charge of the Revillon post there the undulating stretches of parkland along the north shore were already dotted with the diminutive log huts and sod dwellings of these settlers. Each night we contrived to camp at one of these pioneer homesteads since it was the unwritten law of the land that everyone was welcome and that every settler should leave his latch-string hanging out.

Eighty miles west of the Crossing the trail dropped down an eight-hundred-foot precipice to a picketed square of buildings facing the river—Fort Dunvegan, with a population comprising Fred Bedson, the factor, his wife, clerk and an old French-Canadian ferryman. I chuckled. Here was the “bustling city of Dunvegan” I’d seen widely advertised in Edmonton. On First Street I’d passed a real estate shark’s window emblazoned in immense white letters against a background of vivid purple with the word DUNVEGAN and gazed in wonderment and disbelief at a working model of what purported to be this vast developing metropolis of the North. Factories sent up clouds of cottonwool smoke; diminutive trains puffed ceaselessly to and fro but never stopped; autos were parked in droves on wide, electrically-lighted boulevards, and hundreds of little cardboard bungalows with emerald green lawns dotted the suburbs of this “city.” Lots on the sidehill were selling from eight hundred dollars up, and “inside” property at five times that amount.

“If these sharks in Edmonton could find a way of building houses on those sidehill lots they sure wouldn’t have to work long,” Bedson grinned. “Why, even a bird can hardly find a toehold to build a nest there.”

Leaving the lonely and much misrepresented spot to its well deserved isolation and ferrying across the Peace we climbed the far bank and rode on

over smiling prairie to the rustic settlement of Spirit River, settled by Alex Monkman, an old Klondyker and the discoverer of the Monkman Pass.

Between here and Pouce Coupe the country was *terra incognita* to the whites, known only to a few nomad Indian hunters. When Jimmy Holden, Revillon's trader was unable to find me a guide I started in to rustle around myself only to learn that the principal trouble lay in the fact that the Beavers, who occupied Pouce Coupe prairie to the westward, were bitter enemies of the Crees. Only the year before, it appeared, a band of Lesser Slave Lake Crees had penetrated the Pouce Coupe country with the intention of trapping and hunting there for the winter. But angry Beavers had pounced upon them like a nest of hornets, the droning hum of their bullets sending them scurrying for home. At last I managed to prevail on a husky Cree hunter named Joseph Hoole to act as guide. Though he'd never been over the trail he finally managed to get a rough map on a piece of birchbark from one hoary old veteran who'd hunted in the country.

Securing fresh pack-horses Joseph and I plunged into the unknown. Along lovely jackpine ridges, down one cutbank and up another, through gloomy swamps, and over flower-strewn prairies criss-crossed with the tracks of bear, deer and game of all kinds, my cayuses followed the Indian guide with tireless gait. At night we hobbled out the horses, or staked them on picket lines, with smudges to keep off the mosquitoes. After retracing our steps for a day in search of lost and straying horses, and wallowing around for four days in the torrid heat of a depthless muskeg looking for the trail, we emerged on the edge of a wide stream and saw, reaching out in endless folds of emerald green, a wide and treeless prairie.

Across the wide reaches of Pouce Coupe's virgin prairie we jogged along dim Indian trails unknown to any white man until as darkness fell, we struck fresh marks of unshod hoofs that led down a narrow gully past a scattering of luminous tepees to what looked like an ancient blockhouse set in a hidden valley at the edge of a purling stream, now known as Dawson Creek.

Seated before an enormous stone fireplace within the smoke-blackened log walls I made the acquaintance of the original discoverer of Pouce Coupe with its two hundred square miles of virgin prairie, the bearded pioneer, Hector Tremblay, who, through trouble with the British Columbia Police, had fled, years back, to this inaccessible spot and carved out a homestead in the backwoods. As we dined on bear's ham and bannock the old man complained of feeling crowded. *Three* settlers had already raised their cabins along the creek!

Purchasing a few supplies from the log store wherein he bartered furs from the Beaver Indians we continued on our way. Pouce Coupe, over which



we jogged, derived its name from an old chieftain, Cut Thumb, of the Beaver tribe who still continued to look upon this country as their own, and upon all whites as unwelcome usurpers. For generations the Peace River had been considered the southern frontier of their land, in recognition of which it is still known to the Crees as the *Amisk-winninew-sipi*—the Beaver Indian River, though a section of this tribe still roamed these prairies, while a smaller offshoot occupied Grande Prairie to the southward.

That night we camped in the tepees of a couple of Cree families pitched on the bald-headed prairie and enjoyed the purple birch syrup, the delicately-browned bannock and the rabbit stew that old Noseky's genial squaw placed before us. Had I been able for one fleeting moment to part the veil of the future my eyes would have encountered hordes of brown-shirted doughboys and American construction troops spilling from a frontier railroad at this very spot. For here, on a bitterly cold March night in 1942, there arose the tented city of Uncle Sam's friendly invasion army, and the hamlet of Dawson Creek—which was still to rise on the site of these tepees was to find itself projected overnight into a rip-snorting town of thousands, with six thousand motor trucks lined up later, waiting to negotiate at six-minute intervals the 1,600-mile Alaska Highway that wound through the wilderness ahead.

As we puffed our pipes around the lodge fires, and exchanged in Cree the gossip of the trail, we received a visit from an old Iroquois moose hunter named Napoleon and the blackest Cree I ever saw, Joe Meskinak. Evidently considering the occasion warranted a celebration, Meskinak arrived back in camp a couple of hours later full of abuse and bad liquor and frothing at the mouth. After making a couple of attempts to brain me with a whiskey bottle, kicking down the lodge poles and bringing the tepee tumbling about our ears, I succeeded in roping the homicidal savage who spent the rest of the night firmly trussed to a cottonwood stump, alternately sobbing, shrieking abuse and howling out his war song.

Next day, accompanied by Napoleon and a retinue of armed and mounted Beavers who made the woods ring with their ancient songs, we followed a dim hunting trail through grey-bearded pines and thick-boled cottonwoods that were to echo years later to the staccato exhaust of American tanks and jeeps, forded the steep-walled cutbank and picketed our horses in a beautiful little meadow.

As we made camp a couple of nights later Napoleon led me through the woods and pointed down below. A thousand feet beneath us the wicked South Pine roared tumultuously 'twixt wooded banks, throwing its swirling waters into those of the Peace some miles below. It was a vast panorama of purple mountains, dark green forests and yellow cutbanks split by swiftly-

flowing streams. Far off to the westward a pointed cone made a jagged break against the skyline.

“Ego Minahag-o-Waskihagan!” He pointed to a diminutive square of white buildings nestled at its base. “Dere’s de Pine Fort—white man,” he added, “him call him Fort St. John.”

Swimming our horses and rafting our supplies we debouched from the woods onto a river flat as the declining sun painted the distant peaks of the Rockies a smoky scarlet. Near by arose the diminutive white barracks of the British Columbia Provincial Police, and beside them the abandoned log buildings, corrals and stables of Superintendent Constantine’s axe-swinging corps of Royal North West Mounted Police, first to tackle the task of hacking an overland highway to the Yukon. Below us the Peace surged in a brown flood, bearing upon its turbulent bosom vast islands of float and driftwood, urged onward as melting snows in the near-by Rockies raised its impetuous volume hourly.

Upon the wide, sloping flat across the river, at the base of an empurpled range of jagged peaks, rose scores upon scores of conical, smoke-stained tepees painted blood-red by the slanting rays of the setting sun, the summer encampment of the pagan and unwhipped Beaver tribe. The far bank was vibrant with colour, life and movement. The musical *tankle, tankle* of horse-bells mingled with the high-pitched cries of scolding squaws, the yelping of slat-ribbed curs and the incessant throbbing of tom-toms. High up on a pointed knoll some savage was sending his quavering medicine song to the spirits.

Unslinging our rifles from the sheaths beneath our saddle flaps we fired into the sky. There was an immediate commotion across the river and a narrow dugout headed in our direction, to be swept around the point below. Finally Kenneth Beaton, son of the Hudson’s Bay factor, and a coppery Beaver with quill-worked headband emerged from the willows and volunteered to ferry us across. Unsaddling our horses and driving them into the flood we dumped our baggage into the dugout and headed for the other shore.

As we re-saddled and rode between the lodges the pagan Beavers greeted us with lowering and unfriendly looks. Untamed Indians, they still retained their pride of race and looked contemptuously on the whites as being a decidedly inferior people. Strong-backed squaws were busy with camp duties; scraping skins, hauling water, carrying piles of brush or chopping wood. Piled on tripods of poles was a heterogeneous assortment of dried meat, pack-saddles, skins, striped rugs, copper pots, Winchester rifles and clothing.

Dismounting before a square of whitewashed log buildings, another relic of Mounted Police road-building days which now bore the sign of Revillon Frères, I shook hands with Harry Garbutt, whose place I was taking since he was to guide an expedition through the Laurier Pass. Entering the Master's House I found a reception committee of Chief Montaignais and two-score raven-haired Beavers squatted on the floor, each belted with an enormous buffalo knife in a brass-studded scabbard, many wearing colourful porcupine-quill headbands and armlets, for which the tribe was famed. The same bright, alert eyes and impudent mien I'd already noticed characterized these cousins of the fierce Apaches of the southwest, whose hands were ever on the go as they supplemented their guttural speech with the sign language of the plains.

Situated a hundred yards to the southward, and surmounted with the inevitable flagpole, was the picketed Hudson's Bay "fort." From Frank Beaton, the factor, I received a decidedly cold reception. A loyal and bigoted retainer of the Company he'd married into one of the tribes and become a sort of uncrowned king to the motley fur hunters who made Fort St. John, or the Pine Fort, as they called it, the centre of their hunting and trapping activities. Against all fancied usurpers of the Company's long-cherished monopoly he harboured an inveterate and unyielding hatred, and for years at a time wouldn't desecrate his moccasins by stepping on Revillon's soil or on the deck of any opposition steamer. Towards white trappers and settlers who later trickled in he adopted the same unyielding attitude, often refusing to sell them badly-needed supplies, even though they tendered cash, on the grounds that all his goods were needed for the Indians.

When the advance guard of American highway construction troops arrived at Fort St. John in March, 1942, to establish the base here for the southern command, they were welcomed as newcomers to the country. Yet, not only did Fort St. John owe its origin to a burly American fur trader-explorer, Simon Fraser of New York State, but even the maps and much of the information that enabled Alexander Mackenzie to make his successful exploratory journeys to the Pacific and the Polar Sea had been obtained from the adventurous Connecticut Yankee, Peter Pond, who blazed the first trail across the Churchill divide into the valleys of the Athabasca and the Peace, and founded Fort Chipewyan, starting point for Mackenzie's explorations.

One has to go far afield to ascertain the influences leading to the creation of these small forts, which were to have such a tremendous influence in moulding the future destinies of nations; an influence entirely disproportionate to the puny squares of log huts with their feeble palisades and handfuls of lonely exiles. Fort Churchill, and the trading posts around Hudson Bay that were a fruitful cause of wars 'twixt France and England,

owed their existence to the dishonest treatment of two despised French bushrangers by plutocratic politicians at Quebec. Norway House, long a famed establishment on Lake Winnipeg, and pivot of inland transportation from the Atlantic to the Pacific, owed its importance to troubles arising out of Lord Selkirk's Red River colonization scheme, and to the subsequent seizure of the Nor'Wester's stronghold at Fort William; while Fort Chipewyan and Fort St. John can trace their beginnings to the fall of Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham.

With the passing of the French régime in Canada the system of trading licenses had been revoked and the *pays d'en haut*, the mysterious upper country, was free. Hiring dispossessed French bushrangers as guides, disbanded Scotch and British soldiery loaded bark canoes with trading goods and set out along the trail of the old French *coureurs de bois*. Soon an army of half-wild backwoods buccaneers, armed to the teeth and unhampered by legal restraint of any kind, overspread the plains and forests west to the Saskatchewan; carousing, quarrelling, sowing anarchy wherever they went, interfering with the women of the tribes, debauching squaws and braves alike with poisonous alcohol, and leaving in their wake a trail of disease and corpses.

Years of ceaseless commercial warfare followed, with no holds barred. Lawlessness became rampant throughout the land, and the savages, debased by the indiscriminate sale of firewater, were on the point of open revolt when, with dramatic suddenness, the dreaded scourge of smallpox—the Red Death—burst upon them. Terrified by the devastating effects of the loathsome epidemic the natives scattered in a vain hope of outdistancing the scourge, only to carry its pestilential breath into the remotest corners of the wilderness. The effects of the epidemic were threefold: an otherwise inevitable war, which would have culminated in the wholesale massacre of whites, was averted; most of the fur traders were brought to the verge of ruin, while the disreputable element was practically eliminated.

For the first time the surviving traders seemed to realize the folly of cutting each other's throats, pooled their goods and divided up the profits. So lucrative were the results that the Frobishers, Alexander Henry, Peter Pond and other leading traders consolidated their interests and bent their energies towards diverting the furs that flowed from far-off Athabasca to the Hudson's Bay forts around the Bay into their own hands. Pushing westward towards the source of the Churchill they intercepted these birchbark flotillas so successfully that Frobisher bartered over twelve thousand beaver and other skins, which were en route to Samuel Hearne at Churchill.

The success of this venture caused the adventurous Peter Pond to push still further into the wilderness, and as the morning mists lifted from the

Athabasca in the summer of 1778 Indian hunters, gazing from their tepee doors saw, with astonishment, a fleet of painted bark canoes manned by gaily-attired *voyageurs* speeding over the flowing waters to the rousing chansons of Old Normandie. In the foremost, plying his paddle as vigorously as any of his crew, knelt Peter Pond, adventurer and soldier of fortune, the first white man to cross the Arctic watershed.

About forty miles from where the Athabasca enters into the lake of the same name he reared a rude log dwelling and broke the first soil of the Northwest. An unpretentious cabin of unbarked logs, roofed with poles, it was destined to become the birthplace of Fort Chipewyan, future cradle of discovery for the vast untrodden hinterland that reached north to the Polar Sea and west to the Pacific.

Thirty-eight when he first sighted Athabasca Lake at the mouth of the Peace, Peter Pond had run away from his home in Milford, Connecticut, on January 18th, 1740, when only eighteen, entered the British Army and fought the French at Ticonderoga. His first appearance on the pages of fur trade history was at Detroit, engaged in a sanguinary duel of which he naively wrote: "We met the Next Morning Eairly & discharged Pistels in which the Pore fellowe was unfortenat." Ever active, Pond didn't remain cooped up in his little fort on the Athabasca. First he examined the lower reaches of the Peace, then penetrated the land of the Yellowknives and Dog-Ribs on the dismal shores of Great Slave Lake. The first geographer for the Northwest, his maps were often crude and compiled largely from Indian reports, yet they added greatly to the white man's knowledge of the West.

By 1785 most of the influential traders had consolidated their interests into a co-operative organization known as the North West Company, and for the first time Big Business reared its head upon the continent of North America. An organization of dynamic virility and power dominated by shrewd Scotch-Canadians from Montreal, it sent its brigades of Indian-manned bark canoes weaving a fantastic pattern three thousand miles into the heart of the unexplored West.

When Pond returned from his lonely Athabasca outpost to the annual gathering at Grande Portage on Lake Superior two years later he didn't find things to his liking. The firm of Gregory and McLeod was formed and Pond departed again for the Athabasca wilds, accompanied by Alexander Mackenzie, a young clerk from Gregory's counting house.

A more perilous venture could hardly be imagined. Apart from the natural difficulties in transporting goods through three thousand miles of wilderness in flimsy bark canoes they would have to face the implacable hostility of their erstwhile associates in a land where might was law. That winter the rocky, fir-fringed shores of Athabasca Lake saw a battle royal for

furs; one of the partners, Ross, was killed, another maimed for life, and many of the *voyageurs* were injured in the strife. Fear of intervention by the British Government caused the rival firms to unite and next year Pond left the North for good, but not before he'd imparted to the youthful Mackenzie his vast knowledge of the land and its geography.

Inspired largely by the information gathered by Peter Pond, Mackenzie left Fort Chipewyan on the 3rd of June, 1789, by bark canoe and traced the Mackenzie to the Polar Sea. Three years later he wintered at the mouth of the Smoky, near Peace River Crossing, built a canoe capable of carrying ten *voyageurs* and a ton and a half of baggage, and struck out on his successful voyage to the Pacific, passing the mouth of the South Pine near Fort St. John, which he called the Sinew River, almost meeting disaster in the Peace River Canyon sixty miles to the westward.

No time was lost by the virile North West Company in capitalizing on these discoveries. Trading posts and log forts were established on the dismal shores of Great Slave Lake; along the forested banks of the Mackenzie as far north as Fort Norman, and in the game-filled valley of the Peace. In the summer of 1798 Simon Fraser of New York State, the subsequent discoverer of the Fraser River, reared the first Fort St. John—or Rocky Mountain Fort, as he called it—near the spot where, over a century and a half later, the American Government handed over as a goodwill gesture to the Canadian Government the million-dollar, steel bridge erected by United States Army engineers across the Peace. Moved later to the North Pine its name was changed to Fort D'EpINETTE, or the Pine Fort, by which Fort St. John, its successor, is still known to the natives of today.

In the summer of 1823 Fort St. John disappeared in flaming ruins at the hands of marauding Beavers. Rum constituted one of the staple articles of trade in those days and the Beavers had received just enough firewater to whet their appetites for more. When they became importunate Guy Hughes, the factor, slammed the gates of the stockades in their faces. But the Beavers, inflamed with alcohol, displayed the same tempestuous spirit as did their Apache cousins under Cochise and Geronimo in more recent times. Though Hughes and his four employees buried their liquor kegs deep in the earth it failed to avert the tragedy. Determined at all costs to get their hands on the firewater howling Beavers threw themselves upon the fort, put it to the torch, massacred the factor and his men and left the place a welter of flaming ruins.

Returning from a hunt next day Baptiste LeFleur and another French employee were saved from a similar fate by Chief Pouce Coupe, leader of the southern Beaver band. Crossing the Peace with a band of warriors he upbraided the northern Beavers for their rash act, furnished the survivors

with a dugout canoe and dried meat and saw that they got safely down to Fort Dunvegan.

At about the same time the Sickannies, another truculent branch of the same tribe, destroyed Fort Nelson, three hundred miles to the northward; murdered the factor and all his men, looted the fort and disappeared into the Rocky Mountain fastnesses with their booty. For some years nothing remained of these two posts that now figure so prominently in the construction of the Alaska Highway. Fort St. John was finally re-established on its present site by Chief Factor Robert Campbell, and in the summer of 1865 a new Fort Nelson was reared by Chief Trader Cornwallis King from the ashes of the old near the mouth of the Musqua, or Bear, River.

Winding up the thousand-foot escarpment behind the Revillon post at Fort St. John was the beginning of a well-graded and excellent highway which seemed suddenly to disappear into nothingness on the plateau above. It was all that was left of the first attempt to drive an overland route through the jungles to the Yukon so that prospectors and gold-seekers, leaving Edmonton, could reach the goldfields of the Klondyke without leaving their frozen corpses along the trail, or having their bones picked by prowling wolves and foxes; a job that was relegated to members of the North West Mounted Police.

On September 4th, 1897, Major Moodie was commissioned to blaze a trail for such a road. Leaving Edmonton with a pack-train, three constables, an Indian guide, and a half-breed helper, who later went insane from hardship, he was swallowed up in the fastnesses beyond Fort St. John to emerge thirteen months later at Fort Selkirk after all hopes for his safety had been given up. Scourged by depthless snows, forest fires, starvation and a doubtful diet of butchered pack-horses he reported the route unfeasible.

Why, with the gold rush over, Commissioner Perry should have received orders from the Government at Ottawa in 1905, reviving the idea of this road to the Yukon, and insisting upon its immediate construction, is still a matter of puzzled conjecture. Appointed by the Commissioner to this Herculean task, Major Constantine reared his headquarters on the southern bank of the Peace at Fort St. John. Clad in mooseskins patched with discarded flour sacks when the S.S. *Peace River* got frozen in with their supplies the Major's corps of thirty-two Mounties attempted with nothing but guts, brawn and axes to emulate the work done later by ten thousand United States Army troops with modern bulldozers and mechanical equipment.

By the end of the first season this handful of men had driven the trail ninety-four miles from Fort St. John through matted pine forests, almost impenetrable barricades of *brulé*, fallen timber and bottomless morasses.

Under Inspector F. J. Camies the work was re-commenced in the spring, and when Commissioner Perry arrived that fall to inspect progress he was able to traverse three hundred and seventy-five miles of completed trail, graded hills, bridged streams and corduroyed muskeg. Pulling in to Fort Graham the Mounties arrived just in time to stop another Indian massacre. This time the trouble had originated when Factor Fox, endeavouring to interpret orders framed in far-off Winnipeg, proceeded to cut out the usual fall fur debts to his Sickannie hunters. Failing to see the situation through the eyes of distant shareholders the wild Mountain Sickannies served notice on the harassed trader that if he didn't kick through by morning they proposed not only to loot the post and burn it, but to consign him to the river, on the assumption, presumably, that dead men tell no tales. Giving himself up for lost Harry Fox had already secreted canoe, blankets, dried meat and ammunition in the willows of a near-by creek when Corporal Sid Clay came unexpectedly upon the scene, read the riot act to the awed Sickannies and unquestionably saved the factor's life.

When the British Columbia Government refused to share the cost of pushing the Mounted Police road beyond the Stikine it became the Road to Nowhere, the project was discarded, the Fort St. John barracks were abandoned, and Black-Jack MacDonnell returned to Fort Saskatchewan with the surviving pack-horses and a bunch of ragged, trail-worn Mounties who wondered at the weird ways of politicians.

Today the jungle has reclaimed its own. The resthouses built every thirty miles have fallen in; fire, frost and landslides have eaten up the grades; muskegs have swallowed the rotting corduroy, the rivers have long since wiped away those never-trodden bridges, and the officer who directed the forlorn enterprise that was killed with the stroke of a penurious politician's pen when near completion, sleeps quietly in his grave while others from the land of the Star Spangled Banner pursue his unfinished task. Will history, one wonders repeat itself? And will the majestic highway, rushed to completion with such a tremendous expenditure of money and labour, be left to languish and return to nature when the excitement of this war is over and peace again throws her mantle over the globe?



## CHAPTER V

### The Madness of the Wolf



Today as United States Army trucks roll through the settlement of Fort St. John, projected overnight from a marooned colony of a few hundred settlers almost cut off from the outside world into a prosperous community of over ten thousand souls, with a modern airport from which Soviet-bound lend-lease bombers wing their way northward, it is hard to conceive that its very existence was menaced not so long since by the spectre of Indian outbreak and massacre.

As I traded with the Beavers it didn't take me long to realize that Chief Montaignais and his unruly tribesmen were in a decidedly ugly mood. Ever since they'd ridden in from their Rocky Mountain haunts and come across Lucien Breynot's brown-shirted Government surveyors slashing base lines through their hunting grounds, and cutting down "their" trees, the young bucks had been spoiling for a fight. To make things worse, old Davis' band had come across another party led by Aikins on the Fort Dunvegan trail, while Attachie's band had encountered still another, headed by Graham, up near the Halfway River.

Hardly a day passed but some sinewy young buck, his snake-like locks bedecked with dyed eagle down and porcupine quills, would fondle the haft of his huge buffalo knife in the brass-studded scabbard at his waist and openly boast of the day when the mighty *Tennesaw* would drive us "white dogs" into the swirling waters of the Peace.



*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Fort St. John, 1942—Headquarters of the Southern Command of the American Highway Construction Army.



*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Piping Fort Norman oil across the Yukon divide to furnish Alaska with back door fuel supply.

About two weeks after my arrival I was gazing through the windows of the “French fort,” as the Revillon trading post was called, at the scores of conical tepees that rose in luminous red triangles against the darkness of the June night, listening to the resonant throbbing of the tom-toms and the quavering whoops of frenzied Lame Dancers. For a while the querulous songs, the blood-tingling resonance of the drums and the monotonous “*A-ha!*” “*A-ha!*” “*A-ha!*” of the gamblers made sleep impossible, but at last I retired and drifted off.

I was awakened by the slamming of a door and the guttural grunts of someone prowling through the house. Leaping out of bed I lit the lamp to see Isan Noseky, my interpreter, lurching into the bedroom, dragging his squaw behind him, his coppery features distorted with fury.

“*Paskisikun!*” he screamed, reaching for my Winchester. “Gimme me dat gun . . . gimme dat gun, *Okemow*—I’m going to shoot the heart out of that *atimochisk*, The Wolf.”

Next moment the Cree half-breed and I were locked in a furious struggle as he made frantic attempts to obtain possession of my rifle and put his suicidal threat into execution. At last I managed to choke the distraught Isan into a less belligerent frame of mind. His black eyes still flashing, he told me in an almost incoherent mixture of Cree and English how he'd left his young squaw in his tent behind the post to challenge The Wolf in a game of *la halle* in Chilli's cabin.

About midnight The Wolf had gone outside and a few minutes later a piercing scream had split the night, coming from the direction of his tent. Dashing outside he found his terror-stricken squaw floundering through the willows, pursued by a shadowy figure that suddenly melted into the darkness.

Aroused by stealthy movements she'd seen coppery fingers yank aside the door-flap. Terrified she had slit the tent cover and dived outside just as the naked figure of The Wolf came bounding in. With a cry of fear she had made a frantic dash for Chilli's shack, with The Wolf in hot pursuit. Now, Indian-like, Isan's one thought was revenge—to even up scores with The Wolf regardless of all consequences.

With nearly a thousand disgruntled Beavers camped around the post the situation was fraught with potential dynamite, and what made things doubly serious was the fact that while these Indians had little love for the whites they bore an unquenchable hatred for their ancestral enemies, the Crees, who kept scrupulously to the south side of the river, only crossing to trade their furs, but never daring to pitch their lodges on the northern bank.

A predatory savage, lithe as a panther, with smouldering black eyes and the features of a Sioux, The Wolf was a dangerous and influential headman of the Beaver tribe who, on more than one occasion, had already lifted his hand against the whites, and had once attempted to stab Beaton in the back. Only a few years before The Wolf and Bellyfull, chief of the Sickannies, had attacked a camp of Klondykers on top of the thousand-foot hill behind the fort. After days of gruelling toil the gold-seekers had at last assembled their heavy wagons upon the brink of this precipitous slope. Unfortunately for them a young man connected with quite a different party had shot an Indian cayuse a few days before, under the impression that it was running wild. Like devils incarnate The Wolf and his friend had led their followers upon the camp of the unsuspecting whites and sent wagons, supplies and teams hurtling down to the yawning gulf below, where the mouldering remains may still be seen.

Clubbing my way through the horde of wolfish curs that infested the big Beaver village next morning I put the situation up to Beaton, suggesting that I be sworn in as special constable and be empowered to arrest and bring

in The Wolf. The factor, however, was frightened, and to my disgust refused to take any action. I accused him of lacking courage, and being afraid of The Wolf, not realizing as yet that the Beavers were vastly different from the peaceful Crees with whom I'd been associated around Hudson Bay.

Returning to the French fort I found a score of Crees gathered there from across the river and Noseky, aflame once more, haranguing them and vowing vengeance on The Wolf, while from the Beaver tepees came a significant and ominous silence.

About thirty of Lucien Breynot's survey boys strolled down from their camp on the hill that evening looking for a game of baseball. The Crees, always ready to oblige, joined in and soon a rollicking game was in progress in the clearing behind the fort.

Attracted by the noise, old Beatton strode over with three buckskin-coated Rocky Mountain trappers who had just come down-river on a raft. Meanwhile the Beavers were pouring out of their lodges, mounting their cayuses and riding insolently around, many of them brandishing their Winchesters, and all armed with the inevitable buffalo knives. With quavering yelps and excited whoops the Beavers continued to pour in from all directions until they completely encircled the field. Beside me Beatton, tense, grim and austere, seemed ill at ease, his eyes flitting anxiously from one mounted Indian to another.

Suddenly the clearing was in an uproar. From the willows emerged the predatory figure of The Wolf. His dark visage venomous with passion he stalked arrogantly through the midst of the players, a flood of guttural Beaver clicking from his lips.

Next moment I felt my wrist caught in a vice-like grip and gazed into the greying face of Beatton. "He's inciting the Beavers to attack us whites—kill us and throw us into the river," he growled. "He's telling 'em to loot the posts. Look at them brutes over there," he pointed, "they're loosening their guns from under their saddles!"

Their snake-like eyes glittering with venomous hate the Beavers were straining forward, alert and tense, fingering the triggers of their carbines, while the Crees were herding defensively towards the upper end of the clearing. Rapidly The Wolf was working both himself and his followers into a frenzy.

Then, into the clearing like a thunderbolt charged Noseky. Avoiding the clutching fingers of the Crees he bore down on The Wolf with upraised fist. Cold shivers ran up and down my spine since to strike an Indian was the one unforgivable sin. Like a flash came the realization that if Isan hit The Wolf not a white man or Cree Indian would leave that flat alive. It would be a case of the Guy Hughes massacre and old Fort St. John all over again. A single

thought coursed through my mind. Whatever happened I must prevent that collision between my Cree interpreter and The Wolf.

Leaping forward I caught a glimpse of The Wolf brandishing his buffalo knife and shouting. Within a few rods of Noseky a warning shout caused me to turn my head. With upraised knife The Wolf was charging straight for me. There was a thud, an anguished yell, a silvery arc shot past my eyes and a buffalo knife thudded into the ground at my feet. A well-aimed baseball bat in the hands of Harry Phillips, Breynot's head packer, had struck The Wolf's wrist and knocked the knife from his grasp as he was about to bury it in my back.

Next moment Noseky and I were struggling on the grass. Through the acrid dust clouds kicked up by flying hoofs I saw Appassassin bounding towards us. Pouncing on the prostrate Noseky he and a couple of Crees twisted a L'Assumption sash around the half-breed's wrists and shot him, biting and cursing, towards the post. Reeling to my feet I found myself the centre of a pandemonium of yelping Indians, pawing horses and a scattering of thoroughly-frightened surveyors who seemed belatedly to sense their imminent danger and were making tracks up the hill. Half-hidden in the yellow dust clouds and careening cayuses Beatton was haranguing Chief Montaignais who sat his pawing pinto torn between conflicting minds. "Get your Crees over to the post," bellowed Beatton, "and I'll try to get Montaignais and these Beavers quietened down."

While Beatton succeeded somehow in inveigling Montaignais and his tribe of hornets over to the Hudson's Bay post I managed to herd the still defiant but somewhat frightened Crees over to the French fort.

By a master stroke of diplomacy old Beatton succeeded in swinging the tide in our favour. With a liberal handout of flour, tea, sowbelly and black tobacco he succeeded in turning the Beavers' thoughts from bloodshed and massacre to feasting. All night the big village of tepees glowed red with the cooking fires. All night the valley resounded to the beat of tom-toms. Shadowy figures galloped past the darkened windows of my trading post, screaming vile epithets and insults at the Crees who crouched behind the log walls fingering the triggers of their Winchesters. But though the Crees ground their teeth in impotent rage they refused to be drawn into the trap set by these young hot-heads and fortunately held their fire.

Towards dawn, as the revellers slept off the effects of their celebration, the Crees slunk warily through the mist-enshrouded woods and paddled back to the southern shore. A few days later the Beavers rounded up their ponies, struck their lodges and pitched off north on their annual summer moose hunt along the narrow moccasin trail that has since become the

Alaska Highway. Not, however, till the last pack-pony had disappeared over the jagged skyline did Beatton and I breathe freely.

It soon became evident that even Fort St. John was not to remain beyond the restless migration that was rapidly filling up the vacant parklands and prairies of the Peace. Hardly had the Beavers disappeared than a party of settlers pulled in from the Crossing, headed by ex-Constable Jamieson of the British Columbia Provincial Police; Mackie Smith and MacKenzie—all bound for Hudson Hope in the foothills, sixty miles to the westward, to take up homesteads with the intention of converting them into a townsite and reaping a fortune when the promised railroad bridged the Peace there.

However, despite this promise and their high hopes, they were destined along with other settlers who arrived at Fort St. John to remain for the next three decades marooned and forgotten. Not till the American construction troops poured in, buying at exorbitant prices all the beef, pork, turkeys, hay and grain they could furnish, and provided every mother's son big enough to haul a pail of water with immediate and highly-remunerative employment did they find their long sought El Dorado.

Late that August Constable Hidson of the B.C. Provincial Police stepped down the gangplank of the S.S. *Peace River* to take charge of the barracks. A tall, granite-faced man, he'd been on duty in Vancouver and this was his first experience in the Indian country. Spending a couple of days with me he finally moved across the river with Mannie Gullion, a Cree half-breed, as interpreter.

A month later the entire Beaver tribe came clattering down the hill again, erected their lodges and engaged in another round of gambling, feasting and dancing. But there was a disgruntled taciturnity beneath their apparent gaiety. They'd encountered other survey gangs cutting down "their" trees and had vainly demanded payment at fifty cents a tree. Then the mysterious moccasin telegraph had brought word of hordes of white settlers overrunning the Dunvegan country to the eastward.

To make matters worse a wizened runt of a medicine man named Andree had ridden in with a ragged entourage of Pouce Coupe Beavers, telling of a further intrusion of settlers who were raising their sod huts along what is now known as Dawson Creek and straddling the wide reaches of Grande Prairie with barbed wire and snake fences that cut off ancient trails. At the same time Hidson received word that a settler's cabin had been sacked, his effects pilfered, and two valuable live silver foxes stolen. It was also reported that these new Pouce Coupe settlers were living in fear and dread of being set upon and massacred by the Beavers—a situation that was not without its dangers, and tended to make these Indians more awkward than ever.

Late in February I received a call to the barracks where I found a young Beaver named Little Bear sitting disconsolately in the office. "I arrested him at Pouce Coupe on a charge of stealing a lynx from Meskinak's traps," Hidson explained. "We found a lynx in this fellow's lodge. He refuses to talk to Mannie and asked me to send for you."

As I questioned the young brave in Cree he deliberately avoided all mention of the lynx and confused the issue by talking of *foxes*. Listening carefully, putting a lead question now and again, I suddenly found myself in possession of the facts surrounding the raid on the settler's cabin which Hidson had sought in vain.

Early that fall Little Bear had been approached by Andree, the medicine man, to aid him in a raid on the cabin of one of the settlers. The object apparently was not to despoil the victim so much as to terrorize the rest of the settlers and cause them to vacate the Beaver hunting grounds. Only a few sod huts as yet dotted the prairie, while many of these settlers brought with them memories, or traditions, of the Minnesota and other massacres and were mortally afraid of Indians. Sensing this alarm, Andree had decided to bring things to a head and scare them out of the country. One dark night the pair had sneaked over to the cabin, forced an entry in the absence of the owner, smashed up everything they could lay their hands upon, and stolen two live silver foxes. These Andree had knocked on the head, skinned and traded with a Grande Prairie Cree for a pair of beaded gauntlets.

Hidson's jaw hardened as I unfolded the story of the plundering of the settler. Bundling the brave back into the wooden cell in the lean-to behind the barracks the constable snapped the lock. "I'm going to get a warrant from old Beaton for this Andree's arrest, though it'll probably break his heart to sign it," he rasped. "These Hudson's Bay men," he continued, "seem to think an Indian can do no wrong. How about saddling up and coming along? You were talking of going to Grande Prairie for some goods you're short of. This thing's serious," Hidson's brow clouded. "If that damned Indian gets away with this it won't be safe for those settlers. Anything'll be liable to happen."

Hidson was absolutely right. The safety of the settlers would be seriously jeopardized if the police weren't able to assert their authority and bring Andree to book.

"All right," I agreed. "I'll round up a bunch of horses and be over first thing in the morning."

Sunset next day found us camped in a heavy stand of spruce beyond the deep canyon of the South Pine. At dawn we breakfasted on flapjacks, bacon and coffee, threw the packs on the horses and followed the familiar pack trail through the dense woods towards the Cutbank River. On our third day



out Mannie swung in the saddle and raised a warning hand. Through the woods echoed the barking of dogs and the ringing blows of axes. Spurring forward we drew rein before a huddle of smoke-stained tepees ruddy with the glow of the night fires. Leaping from the saddle Hidson tossed the reins to Mannie and together we combed the lodges. Disregarding the angry imprecations of broad-hipped squaws and the threatening scowls of skin-clad bucks we searched the camp in vain.

“Damn that moccasin telegraph,” exploded Hidson as we spurred forward once more. “Now I guess we’ll have to search every damned camp between here and Grande Prairie City. Any idea where this Andree might have gone?”

“Chances are,” I suggested, “you’ll find him at the main Beaver village, where I camped with Noseky last summer. We should hit there late tomorrow.”

The sun was dropping towards the gleaming crests of the distant Rockies when we debouched into a long white stretch of snow-covered prairie late next day and saw, rising like the indented teeth of a saw, the serrated tepees of the Beaver camp. An ominous silence hovered over the smoke-stained lodges as we drew closer. Not a living soul was anywhere to be seen. Not a dog barked, yet an electric tension seemed to fill the air.

“Better be careful,” I warned Hidson, who had a dangerous contempt for Indians. “Don’t precipitate anything. If we can’t get Andree now maybe we can grab him on our way back from Grande Prairie.”

Dismounting, Hidson strode towards the nearest tepee, stooped and raised the door-flap. A lean hand sent him spinning backwards. In the doorway, mouthing curses, stood a tall, hawk-faced savage, his lank locks streaming from beneath a skunk-skin cap onto the shoulders of a dingy blanket capote, his fingers playing convulsively with the haft of his buffalo knife. It was our friend, The Wolf, who’d raised so much trouble at Fort St. John that spring.

“*Awoos atimo shimaganis!*” he snarled. “Dis Injun home—you no come here!”

But Hidson was in no mood to brook defiance. Swinging forward he prepared to close with The Wolf.

A rustle of frosted willows drew my eyes to the creek, I caught the glint of a rifle barrel. “Look out!” I warned. “The creek’s chuck full of Beavers—they’ve got us covered.”

With eyes glued to the smouldering orbs of the mouthing savage Hidson backed towards the pawing horses. A swift, almost imperceptible movement and he was in the saddle. With Mannie riding ahead, his face the colour of chalk, we headed across the open prairie. The minutes seemed interminable

as we drew slowly away from that seething village, followed by howls of derision, towards the poplar bluff a mile ahead. With pounding heart I held my mount to a walk, fearful lest any sign of haste should cause some itchy trigger finger to tighten and riddle us with bullets.

The bluff drew closer, a straggling poplar or two slipped by. Hidson mopped his forehead. "I don't mind telling you," he admitted, "I sure got the wind up when I heard the click of those gun-locks in the creek. We rode right into a trap. Damn it," his face worked with anger, "no bloody Indian's going to slip anything like that over on me. I'll get that black bastard yet."

"Them Beavers is sure pilin' for trouble," Tremblay informed us when we sat around his hospitable board, glad of the warming fire that roared up the stone chimney. "And these here settlers what's comin' in is sure pilin' up trouble for theirsels by bein' so almighty scared."

Old Tremblay was also having his own troubles. Driven to desperation by hunger the Pouce Coupe settlers had eaten all their seed potatoes and gazed with hungry eyes on his huge root houses filled to the brim with potatoes of his own raising. Resisting all persuasion and insults levelled at him by these hollow-eyed men he refused to open up. And that spring, thanks to his far-sightedness, each of them received sufficient seed to plant their gardens and raise a bountiful harvest to tide them over the difficult year that lay ahead.

Hardly had we finished supper when a deputation of settlers put in their appearance, anxious to know if there was any truth in the rumour that the Fort St. John Beavers intended to join up with those from Pouce Coupe and "massacree" them in the spring. Despite my assurance to the contrary they departed later, worried and unconvinced.

Bright and early next morning we bid our hospitable but taciturn host good-bye and hit out along the white trail that lay ahead for Grande Prairie.

## CHAPTER VI

### Trailing the Firebrand of The Rockies



It was a clear, frosty night when we jogged down the snow-filled trail that constituted the main street of Saskatoon Lake, the original Grande Prairie settlement which had sprung up around the Hudson's Bay trading post where old Peter Gunn had exercised his long, benevolent rule. On either side a scattering of log cabins and square-fronted stores flashed whitely in the silvery light of a full moon. It was bitterly cold and our hooded capotes and bearskin chaps failed to keep out the frost. As I cantered along at the head of my string of pack-ponies looking for a stable and a place to flop a familiar voice hailed me.

"Hey, Godsell—what in hell are you doing up in this neck of the woods?"

From the shadows emerged a dark figure, his hand raised in friendly salutation. It was Corporal Clay of the North West Mounted Police, who had helped build the abandoned police road to the Klondyke.

"Hello, Sid," I answered, "just looking for a bunk house and a place to cache these cayuses."

"The barracks is over there behind that alleged cafe," laughed Clay. "Dump your bedrolls at the door, and take your cayuses over to Joe's."

Half an hour later Hidson and I were reclining in comfortable armchairs, absorbing the grateful heat thrown out by a crackling box-stove and discussing the events of the trail when Sid arose. "How about a shot?" he grinned.

"A shot!" I ejaculated. "What do you mean—a shot?"

"A shot, a drink, a snort—name your poison, Scotch, rum or brandy."

Throwing back a green Hudson's Bay blanket he opened a trunk. "Take your choice," he invited.

Inspired by the mellowing influence of potent rum Clay entertained us with his own dry humour, and told in his own inimitable way how he'd cleaned up the Baker gang, a bunch of American desperadoes who'd made themselves as notorious as they were elusive rum-running along railroad

construction to the southward till "Nitchie" Thorne had traced the liquor-laden porkers to their door and forced them to look for other fields.

To their misfortune they'd chosen to pack a seventy-five gallon consignment of illicit liquor to the Indian reserve at Sturgeon Lake, ninety miles east of Grande Prairie, expecting to catch the Indians as they came in from their spring hunts and barter the booze for a small fortune in beaver, mink and silver fox skins. With bottles embedded in innocent-looking cases of compound lard they'd hit north by a little known trail that cut across the Edson Trail and joined the Sturgeon Lake trail east of Grande Prairie.

Patrolling nonchalantly along towards the close of a June day the Corporal had found himself suddenly face to face with an unknown 'breed who'd emerged from the woods and showed little stomach for the unexpected meeting. The travel-worn condition of his horse, and the fact that it carried no pack, indicated that he must be the advance guard of some party that, for good reasons of their own, were keeping out of sight.

Lulling the 'breed's suspicions Clay had ridden on, dived into the bush and, executing a flanking movement through the darkened woods, he had found himself gazing from behind a protecting cottonwood on a campfire around which squatted the 'breed and three tough-looking whites in mud-stained chaps and ten-gallon hats, one of whom he promptly recognized as Baker. For the sake of comfort they'd discarded their heavy revolvers and gun-belts, while stacked beside a purling creek were cases upon cases marked "compound lard." It didn't require the presence of a number of demijohns to tell the Corporal that such stealth was hardly necessary to the transportation of a consignment of lard into the territory, while the mere presence of Baker under such surroundings, and so far from the beaten trail, was all he needed.

Petrified with astonishment the rum-runners saw a red-coated figure step briskly and airily into camp. "Stick 'em up!" Clay ordered. "We've got you covered." Then, to imaginary reinforcements lurking in the bush, "Stay where you are, boys, and keep 'em covered while I collect the artillery." Before the dazed desperadoes could collect their wits Clay had appropriated the discarded weapons while the 'breed, overawed by the presence of the redcoat, was forced to truss his companions with halter lines.

The sun was just rising above the tree-tops when a strange cavalcade cantered past a crowd of wide-eyed Indians into the little trading post at Sturgeon Lake. Ahead on his mud-bespattered pinto rode the 'breed, followed by a string of pack-horses laden with cases marked "compound lard," and three unshaven, dejected whites, each with his wrists tied behind him and his feet lashed beneath the belly of his horse. In the rear jogged

Corporal Clay, his sun-tanned face lighted with an ironic smile as old man Carr, factor and magistrate, looked on in open-mouthed surprise.

For the next few days the little trading post was the scene of much unwonted bustle and excitement. Then came the final reckoning. The wrathful prisoners were paraded before the magistrate and the entire tribe of local Indians to see their liquor destroyed. Looking very formal, grey-bearded Tom Carr seated himself at a pine table draped with a red flag. At the edge of the little creek stood Corporal Clay, tally sheet and pencil in hand, and beside him the post clerk, sworn in as special constable, holding a formidable hammer.

“Gentlemen, Injuns and others,” Magistrate Carr’s keen grey eyes peered from beneath his shaggy brows, “ah’ve called ye here tae witness, as prescribed by law, the destruction o’ seventy-twa gallons o’likker wrangfully imported inta prohibition Injun territory contrary to the King’s ordinances for the guid’ government o’ the land. Ah must noo call upon ye,” he turned deep-set eyes on Clay in which lurked a suspicious twinkle, “tae do ye’re duty, Corporal.”

Time and again the hammer fell and each time an amber stream of liquor poured with a throaty gurgle from the broken bottle to mingle with the crystal waters of the creek while the clerk kept tally. As the last bottle and demijohn contributed their contents to the swift-flowing stream there was a sudden surge. Casting aside their blankets Indians, squaws and children leapt forward, kettle in hand, in the vain hope of salvaging some of the wasted firewater.

“Some people get queer notions,” Clay chuckled. “We destroyed every bottle according to law yet those hombres weren’t satisfied. Insisted,” Clay bridled, “that Tom Carr—the magistrate, mind you—and I spent three days caching the booze in washtubs, jerries and kettles from the store and that the bottles we smashed were filled with tea! Here, have another shot before you hit the hay,” his shrewd eyes sparkled with mirth. “If that damned Baker was here now he’d swear to God this was his booze we’ve been drinking.”

While our horses rested Hidson and I floundered on borrowed mounts through billowing drifts towards the new settlement called Grande Prairie City that had arisen some twenty miles to the southward. Despite the thousands who’d trekked in over the Edson Trail most of the prairie over which we rode was still an unoccupied waste of white desolation dotted here and there by the occasional sod hut or poplar cabin, while the settlers, lacking an immediate source of revenue, seemed desperately poor. Some were subsisting on cottontail rabbits caught in snares, and even on the flesh of wild horses, herds of which roamed the foothills; others, turned trappers, were reaping a modest harvest from the pelts of coyotes, lynx and foxes,

exchanging them for flour, salt, powder and bacon sold at exorbitant prices by the traders who bitterly resented this white invasion.

Petrified with cold we raised at last the bleak, unprepossessing huddle of shacks, barns and the frigid frame hotel that boasted the euphonious title of Grande Prairie City. Disposing of a tough steak that must have been cut from one of the oxen that succumbed on the Edson Trail, and obtaining a few supplies from Fred Hassler's log trading store, we lost little time in turning our backs on the squalid nucleus of what was to become the key city of the Peace. At that moment it would have required more than the gift of prophecy to envision it as the first in a future chain of modern airports bridging two thousand miles of wilderness and linking the arsenals of the United States with an Alaska girded to repel a possible Nipponese invasion.

A week later we crouched in a draw a couple of miles from the spot where we had had the encounter with The Wolf. At Saskatoon Lake I'd loaded up my pack-train with Indian trade goods and returned with Hidson to Hector Tremblay's. By the judicious distribution of coloured cloth and ammunition two of his most reliable Cree scouts had been persuaded to spy out the land at the Beaver camp, where they happened to be on friendly terms. They reported that The Wolf and most of the Beavers were off on a hunt towards the foothills while Andree, living in The Wolf's tepee, was engaged in some mysterious purification rites to ward off the ghosts of a couple of his tribesmen who'd passed to the Happy Hunting Grounds despite his ministrations. That morning Hidson had hitched a couple of his horses to a borrowed democrat, swung south to mislead any watchful Beavers and, circling north, we'd gone into hiding near the camp to await darkness, when Hidson proposed to effect Andree's arrest and restore his flagging prestige.

"Slow down when we reach the tepees," ordered Hidson as we broke camp. "Mannie'll drive on with the pack-train and I'll sneak into The Wolf's lodge and grab that black bastard Andree."

Hidson laid the whip across the team, sending the democrat rolling across the darkened prairie, all sound deadened by the soft snow and a rising chinook. Ahead thudded the pack-horses, urged on by Mannie. The poplar bluff slipped swiftly by. At last faint triangles of light leapt out of the darkness. Above the roar of the chinook echoed the dull reverberations of a tom-tom. "Andree!" Hidson whispered hoarsely. "Trying to scare off the ghosts of those dead Beavers." I eased the team to a halt and Hidson melted into the darkness.

My blood pounded through my veins as I awaited the outcome in considerable doubt. Each moment I expected a frightened shout to rouse the camp and bring a horde of angry Beavers about our ears. But the

monotonous thump of the medicine drum continued to rise above the moaning of the wind. Abruptly it ceased. A rosy pathway shot momentarily athwart the snow. A shadowy something moved 'twixt me and the dimly-lighted tepee. From the darkness came the sound of laboured breathing. Dark figures loomed up close, struggling and straining. A second later the gagged form of the squirming Andree was dumped unceremoniously into the back of the democrat, Hidson was on the seat beside me, and we were careening through the night.

It seemed as the democrat swayed and caromed behind the galloping horses as though Hidson's bold stroke had been a complete success. Then, above the thudding hoof beats, arose the barking of dogs and a long ululating cry.

"They're after us!" Hidson laid his whip across the flanks of the horses, increasing their reckless speed to a point that threatened the creaking democrat with destruction. Glancing back I caught a glimpse of shadowy figures whipping their horses in pursuit and orange flashes of gunfire stabbing through the night. Bullets commenced to whine overhead like wasps. Spectral figures surged by on either side, firing their guns into the air—trying to stampede the team.

Then Andree commenced to howl to his friends to rescue him. Tossing me the reins Hidson vaulted into the rear and jammed the muzzle of his revolver against the head of the howling medicine man. "Yell, damn you—YELL!" he roared. "Yell to those bastards to sheer away or I'll put a bullet through your lousy brain." With chattering teeth Andree changed his tune, yelling to the Beavers to keep away or the *shimaganis* would kill him.

The boldness of the move produced the desired effect. The careening figures surging alongside firing their guns dropped behind for a pow-wow, then cantered along at a distance, sending the occasional slug whining above our heads and yelling epithets in broken English.

The team by this time had taken the bits between their teeth and, completely out of control, were pounding across the prairie at a pace that threatened momentary disaster. The surge of cursing, swaying figures disappeared, and soon we found ourselves clattering through a narrow avenue of trees. An hour later we were ensconced within some settler's cabin, the thick log walls between us and any prowling Beavers, and Andree, safely handcuffed, scowling in a corner.

Little time was lost in preliminaries when we reached Fort St. John. In the little log barracks the dejected medicine man stood arraigned for robbery. Ill at ease, factor Beaton presided, not relishing the idea of sitting on the case lest he offend some of his leading hunters, who were relatives of Andree.

While Little Bear turned Crown witness, long-haired Saulteaux squatted on the floor enjoying the great man's discomfiture. Angry Beavers watched the proceedings with flashing eyes, asking each other in guttural tones what right these "white dogs" had to sit in judgment on a tribesman of the mighty *Tennesaw*.

To the undisguised pleasure of the Crees, and the deep resentment of the Beavers who hurried off to carry the news to their villages, Andree received three months hard labour at "squaw work" on the police woodpile, and was hustled into the wooden cell in the rear.

At last a roaring chinook denuded the side hills of snow. Soon the flat around the post was dotted with scores of Beaver tepees, and again the valley echoed to the incessant pounding of tom-toms and the querulous song of the Lame Dancers. Anxious to get away from the unceasing noise and the impertunity of the Indians I paddled across the river to spend the night with Hidson. "How's Andree?" I asked after we'd exhausted the latest gossip of the fort.

"That son-of-a-bitch's got something on his mind," he growled, "yet every time I go near the cell he looks so all-fired peaceful I figure I must be wrong."

Hidson seemed preoccupied when, a couple of hours later he placed the kettle on the stove. Suddenly he tensed. "Did you hear anything?" he snapped.

"No!" I answered. "Why?"

Without a word he swung on his heel and disappeared. When he failed to return I opened the door communicating with the cells and stared in utter astonishment. Hidson, his face all bloody, was kneeling over the prostrate form of Andree, shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat. His grey eyes blazing he picked up the snarling medicine man and pitched him roughly across the cell.

"Good God!" I ejaculated. "What in hell's the matter?"

But the Constable stood glowering down at the still defiant Indian. "I'd like to kill the lousy rat," he blazed. "Look at this . . ." He snatched up a long iron survey stake and a bone-handled buffalo knife from the floor. "How in hell did these get in here . . ." Turning furiously on the Indian he snapped on the handcuffs and leg-irons, replaced the bars pried from the cell window, slammed the door and locked it.

"He was levering off the window bars when I sneaked up on him," Hidson exploded, his face convulsed with anger. "When I entered the cell he took a crack at me with that survey stake and damned near knocked me out. What I want to know," he wiped the blood from his temple, "is how in blazes he managed to unlock those manacles."



That Andree had accomplices was obvious, and though Hidson had implicit faith in his interpreter the finger of suspicion pointed directly at Mannie. Personally I had my own ideas. "How about that squaw, Lalouise?" I suggested.

Hidson laughed contemptuously.

"I'm not fooling," I insisted. "Every Indian in the country knows she's been doubling up with Mannie in his tent since she arrived from Pouce Coupe. And I suppose you know," I rubbed it in, "that she's one of Andree's discarded wives?"

Eyeing me for a moment in blank amazement Hidson dived through the door and headed across the flat to the Cree lodges. An unearthly bedlam heralded his return. The door flew open and Lalouise catapulted across the floor with flailing arms, shrieking maledictions and frothing at the mouth. Grim-faced, Hidson followed, with Mannie slinking at his heels, and proceeded to cross-question the raving squaw who spat, cursed, clawed the air and assured Hidson her only regret was that Andree hadn't split his head wide open. At last he let her go.

The conclusion, however, was obvious. Lulling the suspicions of the fatuous Mannie she had filched the keys from his pocket while he slept. Then, watching her opportunity, she'd slipped into the barracks while Hidson was exercising the horses, released Andree from his irons, and left the survey stake and knife to enable him to make his getaway.

Next morning I observed an unusual commotion across the river. Indians were galloping wildly about firing off their guns and generally acting up. The hill seemed alive with ant-like figures spilling down the old Mounted Police road from the upper to the lower village. Finally the entire milling mob seemed to congregate around Beatton's post.

Somewhat uneasy I made my way along a trail through the woods behind the barracks. Fresh moccasin tracks disturbed the damp mould. At first I thought they'd been made by a squaw tending her rabbit snares, but the steps were too long, then I found where a horse had been tethered to a lone birch tree around which the bark was freshly bruised. Evidently some of the Beavers across the river had been in league with whoever had engineered the attempted jail-break and had tied the horse up here to help Andree in his getaway.

Just as I returned to the barracks Kenneth Beatton bounded in, pale-faced and frightened, followed by his father's interpreter. "The Beavers," he told Hidson, "they're going to kill you." In quick, almost incoherent words he explained the cause of the commotion across the river. The Beavers had heard some distorted story to the effect that Hidson had beaten up his prisoner and were threatening to cross the river and wipe out the stain of the

affront with Hidson's blood. Warned of their intention Beaton had secreted the only two canoes on that side so that the Beavers couldn't get their hands on them.

"But how," gasped the amazed Hidson, "did they find out that I'd had trouble with Andree? Nobody's crossed the river since Godsell came over last night!"

"Big Charlie, the Beaver prophet, he dreamed it last night and told the Indians," explained Kenneth nervously. "His medicine's pretty strong. Here's a note from dad."

When I returned to the post with Kenneth and Sampson I was promptly surrounded by a crowd of irate Beavers to whom I attempted to explain that Andree had brought the trouble on himself. Finally I poured oil on the troubled waters with the inevitable handout of flour, sowbelly and tobacco, while Hidson wisely remained on the south shore till the storm clouds cleared away. A few days later, to everybody's relief, the entire tribe struck their tepees and pitched off once again to the northward.

A few months later I boarded the S.S. *Peace River*, en route to the Old Country, and it was with a slight pang of regret that I watched the serrated rows of smoke-stained tepees and the diminutive squares of whitewashed buildings disappear in the autumnal mists around the forested bend.

## CHAPTER VII

### I Blaze the First Link in the Alaska Highway



In the summer of 1925 I found myself back again at Fort St. John. The once immaculate whitewashed buildings of the Hudson's Bay post and the French fort stood dingy and deserted, their gaping doors and windows like the sightless eyes of dead men fronting the flat—long since reclaimed by nature. Gone was the old life and movement; gone, too, the smoke-stained tepees of the Beavers. All that remained were my memories and old Beatton. A little more grey and grizzled, but still the same taciturn, hard-bitten trader of old, he'd driven his half-starved nags from the new post at Fish Creek down to meet the steamer.

Having long since changed my allegiance back to the Hudson's Bay Company I had been delegated through my familiarity with the region to re-organize this territory and oust Kenny MacKenzie and a number of ubiquitous "free traders,"<sup>[1]</sup> who had dared to throw down the gauntlet to the Gentlemen Adventurers.

Introducing blitz methods into the slow-moving fur trade, MacKenzie and his men had made a flanking movement by way of Fort St. John and Fort Nelson, sending scow loads of trade goods from the mouth of the Fontas River down the Liard and Mackenzie to be snatched up by hungry Redmen at Fort Simpson, Fort Norman and all down-river posts while the Hudson's Bay steamer was held up by July ice on Great Slave Lake with the new season's "outfits."

The Great War had come and gone, leaving the Fort St. John country unchanged except for an inrush of white settlers, whose cabins dotted the plateau above, and the transfer of the Company's post to this new settlement.

To the eastward the million-dollar Lamson and Hubbard Company of New York had challenged the age-old rule of the Hudson's Bay Company and brought the blessings of modern transportation to the mighty valleys of the Mackenzie and the Athabasca. The opening up of the Alberta and Great Waterways Railway, over which the halting *Muskeg Limited* by-passed Athabasca Landing and hauled freight to Fort McMurray at the head of the rapids, had enabled this aggressive organization to temporarily wrest control

from the rival factors and completely revolutionize the land. I had seen dyed-in-the-wool Hudson's Bay men laugh to scorn the American company's attempts to conquer the turbulent reaches of the Liard River with the diesel-engined *Lady Mackworth* and demonstrate the benefits of modern mechanical methods over Indian-manned scows and York boats. Just below Fort Norman I had seen Theo Link of the Imperial Oil Company bring in an oil gusher that, in years to come, was to form the basis for another mighty American enterprise—the hundred-and-thirty-million-dollar Canol project that was to pipe oil for American defence forces in Alaska across the five-hundred-mile Yukon divide.

But at Fort St. John, save for this marooned settlement atop the plateau, the country was as lonely and isolated as ever. The promised railroad had pushed on with spasmodic jerks till it had finally reached Grande Prairie and showed prospects of eventually extending its steel tentacles to Dawson Creek. At Pouce Coupe disillusioned settlers had to haul their grain over a winter sleighroad to the railroad at Spirit River at sixty cents a bushel, and owed more for transportation than the worth of the shipment when it finally reached the head of the lakes at Fort William. Many were throwing up their hard-won homesteads in disgust. Others, hope springing eternally in their breasts, hung grimly on.

Establishing headquarters at the old abandoned fort I made plans to blaze a pioneer road northward three hundred miles to Fort Nelson—a road destined to become a decade and a half later the first link in the Alaska Highway. Rounding up a pack-train, and hiring George Beatton and a Cree Indian as guides, I headed across Montaignais Prairie and through the heart of the Beaver hunting grounds towards the domain of Chief Bellyfull's Sickannies.

Angered now by the intrusion of white trappers, and displaying the same awkward truculence with which his tribe had eyed the attempt of Major Constantine and his Mounties to slash a road through this territory to the Yukon, Chief Bellyfull had recently served notice on Mr. Beatton that he would shoot the first white man who dared set foot across their frontier, the Sickannie Chief River. A threat which, in view of the predatory character of this tribe, I didn't lightly brush aside since I knew of old the activities of Bellyfull and his former partner, The Wolf. Only a few years before they had shot up the post at Fort Nelson and thrown Fred McLeod,<sup>[2]</sup> the factor, into the river.

Fording mountain torrents, leading our pack-horses knee-deep through miles of gripping muskeg, fighting alternately droning clouds of pestiferous mosquitoes and angry wasps that rose from the moss beneath our horses' feet to sting their bellies and convert them into bucking demons we pushed

ahead. Much of the trail we followed passed through rolling parklands still dotted with the wallows of the buffalo that had roamed the land until the last killing was made by Beaver Indians at Fort St. John in the summer of 1906. On a beautiful park-like flat in the valley of the North Pine, now occupied by one of the intermediate airfields in the “bomber road” to Alaska, I blazed the site for a trading post and arranged with Charlie Calahazen, a Cree half-breed who hunted there, to put up forty tons of hay as a depot for future road building and freighting.

Fording the Pine, or Beaton River, we continued on through a dismal swamp towards the Blackwater that taxed our horses to the limit and reduced our progress to eight miles a day; two of the horses becoming so inextricably mired in gripping muskeg that it was necessary to dispatch them with merciful bullets.

The trail we were following had been furrowed originally by the moccasined feet of marauding Beaver war parties. Armed with “detonating bows” obtained from Peter Pond and the Nor’Westers the Beavers had been in the habit of haunting this trail like the Iroquois of old to hunt down the Sickannies like cattle, enjoying the terror they were able to inspire with these new lethal weapons.

At Sickannie Mountain, now overlooking the splendid bridge thrown by United States Army engineers across the Sickannie Chief River, occurred the last of these senseless massacres. Entering a Sickannie village marauding Beavers assured them of friendship and proceeded to mingle with them on terms of apparent amity. Telling the children not to be afraid of their guns they offered to discharge them for their amusement. Lulled into a false sense of security the fatuous Sickannies watched the Beavers prime their guns and bring them to their shoulders. A moment later the place was a bloody shambles as men, women and children writhed in their death throes on the ground.

But such treachery was not destined to go unavenged. When next the Beavers visited their camp the Sickannies had managed to secure muskets of their own. Making friendly overtures to their treacherous visitors they secretly dispatched runners to bring in neighbouring bands of hunters. By twos and threes they straggled in without arousing any alarm. Not till his own tribe outnumbered the visitors by two to one did the Sickannie chief snap into action. To a Beaver headman squatted on the ground with one foot upon his scalping knife he expressed admiration of the weapon, bent down as though to examine it, snatched it up and plunged it into the Beaver’s heart. From the surrounding woods and clumps of willows a withering fire was poured upon the astonished Beavers. Few survived, some were tortured

and the rest distributed as slaves to widows who'd lost their husbands in former Beaver forays.

Hacking our way through miles of tangled and smoking *brulé*, the result of forest fires set by Sickannie hunters to drive out invading white trappers, we glimpsed at last the bold up-thrust of Sickannie Mountain. For a couple of days George, always dominated by Indian superstition, had been nervous and ill at ease, insisting that we were being followed and spied on as we slept.

Hardly had we reached the bank of the Sickannie Chief River when, as though to bear out his suspicions, a dark figure emerged from behind a gnarled cottonwood and Bellyfull stood blocking the trail ahead. Slowing my horse to a walk I shook hands. With Indian memory for faces he immediately recalled meeting me five years before when I'd made a canoe trip from Fort Simpson to inspect the post at Fort Nelson. His resonant whoop brought a horde of shaggy-haired, wild-looking Prophet River Indians from hiding. Packs were unslashed, pipes smoked, the redmen fed and feasted and, escorted by the dusky cavalcade, we stumbled and slid down the precipitous pack trail; all differences regarding the road being brushed aside by a handout of flour, tea and tobacco and my promise to establish a trading post among his tribe.

Reaching the foot of the nine-hundred-foot bank I looked in vain for the temporary outpost recently established there by our factor at Fort Nelson. Instead my nostrils were assailed by the pungent odour of dead smoke. A moment later I gazed on the smouldering logs and charred debris that represented all that was left of Fort Sickannie while, a gun-shot away, with windows barred and trade goods safe and snug within, arose the outpost of the free traders.

Blazing a site for a new post, and posting notice of possession, I pushed on down the Sickannie to the mouth of the Conroy, where Martin Gardiner, a genial and hospitable old trapper had carved a home from the wilderness, raising in the rich soil an abundant crop of potatoes, cabbages, rhubarb, tomatoes, carrots and other vegetables, including Indian corn, which, with berries and game from the woods, furnished a bountiful board. Caching saddles and equipment and turning our horses loose on a grassy island we transferred to a borrowed canoe and headed on downstream. It was late on the second day when we swung into the mouth of the brackish Fontas River, whence the traders had succeeded in bringing their goods overland by pack-train. Here they'd established headquarters, sawn lumber, built scows and set out on their two-thousand-mile journey down the Sickannie, Liard and Mackenzie rivers to the Polar Sea. At this same spot, to offset the local activities of these traders, our factor at Fort Nelson had established another

temporary outpost—which was conspicuous by its absence. Again I was rewarded by the sight of charred and smouldering ruins. Near by a man-made bush fire had left blackened carcasses of trees and smouldering roots yet again, miraculously, it had failed to even singe the post of the free traders.

I had read of the “good old days” during the fur war ’twixt Hudson’s Bay men and Nor-Westers when rival traders weren’t above settling scores by setting a torch to one another’s trading posts. But that was over a century ago, and I hardly expected to encounter similar conditions in this so-called enlightened age. Again I cut lines, blazed trees, and posted formal notice of possession, choosing a bold, bare promontory at the mouth of the river.

Paddling on to Fort Nelson a hundred miles to the southward I ran into Mr. Hooker of the Hudson’s Bay Company who, after vainly attempting to push on to Fontas with the diesel-engined *Liard River*, had thrown up his hands and was about to return to Fort Simpson after dumping the outfit for the Fontas post on the muddy river bank. Faced with the problem of getting these goods to their destination, and rearing a new trading post at the mouth of the Fontas, I had no alternative but to camp for the time being at Fort Nelson.

One of the loneliest and most isolated trading posts in the entire Northwest, the staff consisted of Bill Taylor, the factor, and a young clerk named Charlie Adan, who considered themselves lucky if they got two mails a year. Situated at the junction of the Nelson and Musqua rivers, and destined to become an important link in the aerial bomber road and base in the construction of the Alaska Highway, it then boasted the five small log buildings of the Hudson’s Bay post and nothing else.

In the surrounding forests Slavey and Sickannie Indians hunted bear and moose, and trapped lynx, mink, fox and marten which they bartered for knives, food, gunpowder and cloth. So costly was transportation that a hundred-pound sack of flour sold for forty dollars, bacon at two dollars a pound, tea three dollars; sugar, prunes and other dried fruits at a dollar a pound, while gasoline—when the factor could spare it for the outboard motors of one or two up-to-date trappers—was considered cheap at four dollars a gallon.

It was some years after this visit that this isolated fur post hit the headlines throughout the land.

On the sultry night of September 12, 1936, after packing the season’s take of furs which consisted of twenty-nine bales weighing a hundred pounds apiece, and valued at thirty-two thousand dollars, Bob Gillard, the clerk, and Nels Natland, his trapper-helper, were awakened by a gruff voice to find themselves covered by the guns of two bearded and heavily-masked

bandits. Herded into the cellar along with Martin Gardiner, who was sleeping below, they managed to escape at dawn to find the doors of the warehouse gaping open and the entire winter's fur collection gone. The boldness and precision of the whole affair indicated that the bandits were not only familiar with the territory but also with the movements of those about the post. Yet the few whites occupying the adjacent territory could be counted on the fingers of two hands, and their movements were an open book. The usually vigilant Indians had seen and heard nothing.

Striking for the barracks they aroused the astounded Corporal J. S. Clarke of the newly-established British Columbia Provincial Police detachment. How, Clarke wondered, could such a bulky consignment of furs be transported out of the country? Only two routes were available to the bandits: the long arduous pack trail to Fort St. John, or the fifteen-hundred-mile water route via the Liard, Mackenzie and Athabasca to Fort McMurray, past numerous trading posts, settlements and Mounted Police detachments. To the Corporal the aeroplane seemed the only answer. Yet even a transport plane couldn't handle such a load in a single flight, while the sound of the motors would unquestionably have been heard by sharp-eared Indians. The whole affair was as mystifying as it was perplexing. All that Gillard, Natland and Martin Gardiner remembered was that the short bandit was packing a .38 automatic and the tall one a .303 Savage rifle.

Promptly the Corporal turned loose a horde of Slaveys to scour the shores of the Nelson and the Musqua in their birchbarks for signs of any camp or cache, while word of the hold-up was dispatched by canoe four hundred miles downstream to the nearest wireless station at Fort Simpson to be flashed to Hudson's Bay headquarters in Winnipeg and London, to the Mounted Police in Ottawa, and to Provincial Police headquarters at the Pacific coast.

The length and breadth of Canada's southern frontier the authorities were galvanized into action as message after message came throbbing over the wireless. Within a few hours not a trader, trapper, canoe, boat or aeroplane coming out of the North escaped the eagle eyes of the Provincial Police and Mounties. From headquarters at Winnipeg warnings were flashed to leading fur houses at Chicago, St. Louis, Seattle and New York to be on the lookout for any attempts to unload the loot. Every air pilot and mechanic connected directly or indirectly with Northern transportation was subjected to closest shadowing and scrutiny. At every trading post, airfield, log barracks and wireless station throughout the land was posted a thousand dollars reward and a long list of the missing furs.

By this time the opinion was general that bandits from the United States, learning of the unprotected state of these Northern fur posts and of the



wealth of furs stored within their wooden walls, had turned to the swift, distance-annihilating plane to conquer the age-old barriers of this rugged Northland and make a clean-up. Alarmed at the vulnerability of their almost unprotected trading posts, and the swift efficiency with which this bold and daring hold-up had been accomplished, the Hudson's Bay Company spared no effort to bring the offenders to book. Unless the robbers were caught it seemed more than likely that an epidemic of similar hold-ups would occur at other isolated fur posts in the North.

A week elapsed without the faintest clue save an abandoned bush camp found by Indians on the banks of the Musqua. At the Hudson's Bay post Corporal Clarke sat checking with Bob Gillard the movements of various trappers when Indians rushed in, wild-eyed, to announce that a plane was circling the sky near the mouth of the Musqua. Dropping to the river and taxiing up to the post it disgorged Game Inspector Van Dyke, Game Warden Forrester, and Constables Duke and Cook from divisional headquarters at Prince George, five hundred miles to the westward.

Over at the barracks Forrester finally picked up a tomahawk-shaped axe that the Corporal's scouts had found at the abandoned camp on the Musqua. "Say," he knitted his brows, "I've seen this axe before . . . I've got it. I saw it in Courvoisier's cabin on Dorothy Lake when I was checking up his fur catch last year. He and Bert Sheffield trap together."

A check-up had already disclosed that Courvoisier, who had come in over the Fort St. John trail the year before, possessed a .303 Savage rifle, but other evidence indicated that both he and Sheffield were in the heart of the Rockies looking over a new trapline at the time of the fur raid. A visit to the deserted cabin at Dorothy Lake furnished the officers with a bundle of unprime furs, a couple of new gasoline cans, .303 shells, and two empty .38 automatic cartridges raked from the woodpile. Left alone at the cabin to keep vigil Constable Duke returned to Fort Nelson a week later with two wrathful trappers, Courvoisier and Sheffield, arrested on the technical charge of having furs in their possession killed out of season. Charged with the hold-up they were rushed by air to Victoria, and dismissed when they were able to produce evidence showing they were far from the scene of the robbery when it occurred. By this time opinion was general that bandits from the United States had turned the trick by plane and had succeeded in escaping with their loot.

A year later Netsenah, one of Chief Mattawa's Slavey tribesmen, was lazily swinging his paddle over the Musqua's sparkling waters seven miles above the fort when a movement amongst the willows caused him to head for shore. Deep in the undergrowth he saw a huge black bear pawing at something on the moss. Curiosity prompted the Indian to investigate. To his

amazement he discovered that the creature was clawing at an Indian-stretched beaver skin!

Chasing the bear away he came across a piece of torn bale covering, then a mouse-chewed piece of string with a lead Hudson's Bay fur seal adhering to it. Finally, high up amongst the interlacing willows on a pole platform covered with spruce boughs, he found a ragged pile of bales, the torn covering exposing the furs within.

Hurrying to Fort Nelson he confided the discovery to the Corporal and accompanied him back to the spot. As they scoured the woods the Indian emitted a guttural shout of triumph. A hundred yards deeper in the verdant wall of spreading pines Netsenah had discovered still another pole platform laden with torn bales of stolen peltries. Hurrying to the spot Clarke checked them over. The twenty-nine bales were accounted for. The missing pelts had been found at last. But the identity of the bandits remained as great a mystery as ever.

Systematically the Corporal proceeded to block out the floor of the forest and search it yard by yard. The work was slow, tiring and deadly monotonous, but at last his fingers closed on something bright, half-buried in a mat of spruce needles. It was a cylindrical metal matchbox, and he emitted an exultant gasp as he observed, roughly scratched upon it, the incriminating letters "H. C." Another day's persistent search rewarded him with a piece of tattered tarpaulin on which, still legible, were the letters "R. Sh f l." Dragging the river with trout hooks solved the mystery of how the furs had been moved. From the river bed emerged the remains of two stolen canoes, chopped to pieces with axes and held below with heavy stones.

Convinced the thieves would return to claim their loot before the snow commenced to fly Corporal Clarke decided to remain on the spot with Netsenah. Enconced in a small tent hidden beneath a heavy bower of spruce boughs they kept alternate watch, not daring to kindle a smudge to drive off the swarms of mosquitoes or build a cheering campfire to dispel the night gloom of the forest lest they be seen by prying eyes. Monotonously the weeks dragged by. A month had passed when, one night, above the mysterious noises of the forest and the soft purl of the river the Corporal's trained ears sensed a discordant note. Drawing his revolver he peered sharply into the dusk. A spear of white light lanced the blackness of the forest. "Sst!" he warned. "They're here."

As they slunk cautiously through the darkened woods the small pin-point of light was coming closer and closer when suddenly a whip-like report echoed through the pines. The Indian had stepped on a dry twig. Immediately the light blacked out.

Revolver in hand Clarke threw caution aside and leapt through the willows to be halted by a creeping vine of scarlet which writhed and twisted until it erupted into a welter of roaring flame. The cache was burning furiously, the bales popping open with loud reports, the oily pelts adding hissing flames to the conflagration. Racing to the river bank the ever-widening ripples told their own story—the bandits had fired the cache and escaped! Obviously they'd intended rafting the furs across the river where a pack-train must be hidden somewhere in the woods. Now they'd undoubtedly hasten along the Sickannie trail to Fort St. John and escape by way of Pouce Coupe. There might yet be a chance to intercept them where the Fort St. John and Sickannie trails joined beyond the Conroy.

Just as dawn was breaking Clarke set out in a canoe with Martin Gardiner and Nels to breast the swift-flowing Sickannie. Low water made travel intolerably slow, and not till midnight on the fifth day did they reach old Gardiner's cabin at the mouth of the Conroy. At dawn Clarke climbed the nine hundred-foot bank of the Sickannie and spurred on till the trail dipped, fell into a narrow coulee and met the path winding in from Sickannie Mountain. The muskeg was punched and churned with the marks of unshod hoofs, willows were freshly snapped and broken. The fugitives had beaten them in the race to the Conroy. The bandits, according to signs, were two days travel ahead.

Holding relentlessly to their trail Clarke rode in to Fort St. John to learn that Courvoisier and Sheffield had arrived three days before, sold their pack-horses and headed south in a ramshackle Ford. There was only one remaining chance to stop them. Within the hour a description of the wanted men was winging its way south to Mounted Police headquarters at Edmonton, to all towns and settlements and to border crossings at the international boundary.

The setting sun was sending shafts of scarlet across the Montana prairies a week later when Bruce Livingstone of the United States Border Patrol at Sunburst received a peremptory phone call from the immigration agent at Sweetgrass, warning against a couple of men he'd just refused admittance to the United States. An hour later Charlie Beecher, mechanic at the Sunburst Garage six miles west of Sweetgrass, blinked from beneath a car at a couple of suspicious and shadowy figures. "We want a car right away," one of them ordered. "Got an appointment with a guy across the line and gotta git there pronto."

"Better try some other garage," advised Beecher. "There's an hour's work on this car yet," he lied. "It's the only one that's in."

As the men moved sullenly away Beecher sprang to the phone and called the immigration office. Trailing an inky exhaust behind him Bruce

Livingstone sent his spluttering motorcycle careening down the darkened highway. Ahead sped Border Patrol Officer, Fred Goff. Suddenly he swerved and cut off the ignition. “*Halt!*” he called crisply to two dark, skulking figures. “Halt or I fire!” he warned as the pair commenced to run.

Before they realized what had happened the two men were manacled, handed over to Corporal Black of the Mounted Police and charged with attempting illegal entry into the States. Their names being as unconvincing as the accounts they gave of their movements the Corporal pried into their packs. In one was a bill-head marked “H. Courvoisier”; in another newspaper clippings of the Fort Nelson fur robbery.

On October 18th both pleaded guilty at Pouce Coupe to the fur robbery at Fort Nelson and Corporal Clarke smiled grimly as each was sentenced to five years penal servitude. To Charlie Beecher, garage mechanic at Sunburst, went half the reward, and to Netsenah, whom a rambling black bear had led directly to the missing fur cache, went the remaining five hundred dollars.

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[1] “Free Traders,” a term applied to independent traders who dared to invade and “poach” in the territory wherein the Hudson’s Bay Company long enjoyed a complete monopoly of trade from the charter granted by King Charles II in 1670. It is still applied to small traders who challenge the commercial supremacy of the pioneer fur company in the North.

[2] Brother of Frank and Willie McLeod whose mysterious disappearance in Dead Man’s Valley has furnished one of the major mysteries of the North. See Chapter No. 8. P. H. G.

## CHAPTER VIII

### Dead Men's Gold



No section of this last Northwest is more replete with stories of romance and adventure than the unmapped and almost untrodden wilderness lying northeast of Fort Nelson. Girded on the west by the Alaska Highway, and traversed on the north by the Canol pipeline, it is a veritable Devil's playground of snow-capped peaks and abysmal canyons through which roar sullen, brutish rivers. Given over to the grizzly, the antlered moose, the bighorn and the mountain goat, it is still one of the least explored parts of the North American continent.

Of all the stories linked with this grim, austere land that of Dead Man's Valley and the search for the Lost McLeod Mine is by far the most intriguing and has mystified the North for forty years.

Twelve years before, when Constable Hidson arrived at Fort St. John, he brought with him a letter from Attorney General Bowser, advising him of the disappearance of Frank and Willie McLeod in the Fort Liard country to the northward, and instructing him to make all possible inquiries. Since I talked Cree, Hidson asked me to find out what I could. The Crees knew nothing, as they were afraid to venture into the hunting grounds of their Beaver enemies, but Chief Montaignais told of two white men who were supposed to have been slain by the wild Nehannies north of Fort Liard. Unable to glean further information from the natives I dropped in to see old Beatton down at the Hudson's Bay post and learned for the first time the weird story of a tropical valley in the Arctic, and the search for dead men's gold. It was a fantastic tale of prehistoric monsters disporting themselves in a steaming oasis to the northward that had escaped the impact of the Ice Age; of a lost mine, murdered prospectors, outlaw Indians and hidden gold. It sounded doubly strange coming from the lips of a hard-bitten trader like old Beatton, who hadn't an ounce of imagination in his entire make-up, and I little thought as I listened to his gruff voice that my future wanderings were destined to bring me into intimate contact with the people and places he spoke of, or that, years later, I would report to Hudson's Bay headquarters

the actual existence of this so-called tropical valley which I had considered a figment of redskin fantasy.

In the summer of 1904 Willie McLeod, son of Murdoch McLeod, veteran Hudson's Bay factor at Fort Liard, had hit north in search of gold after seeing a nugget in the medicine bag of a Nehannie Indian. Amongst the nameless peaks of the Nehannies he'd made a strike, but the jealous gods which the Indians insisted guarded this hidden treasure had capsized his canoe and he'd reached Fort Liard, gaunt and emaciated, with nothing to show but a bottle containing five ounces of flake gold.

Next year, with his brother Frank and an engineer named Wade, Willie plunged again into the Nehannies. No alarm was felt as the months slipped by without a word for the country was known to be alive with big game of all kinds, and both boys were expert bushmen. But as time went on the moccasin telegraph brought strange whisperings to the lonely fort on the Liard. Hostile Indians, it was said, were roaming the Nehannie ranges, determined to permit no white man to prospect for gold or take it from their hunting grounds.

Old Murdoch was getting anxious. Then a band of mountain Nehannies pitched their tepees beside the fort and told of meeting Frank and Willie and a strange white man when on their way into the mountains the year before. En route back to the fort they'd run across this strange white man again. This time he was heading west across the Rockies, and he was travelling alone!

Convinced that his brothers had met foul play Charlie McLeod bundled together a pack and set out on the white man's trail. Compact and wiry, there was enough native blood in the eldest of the McLeod brothers to make him doggedly persistent. Mountain ranges, depthless muskegs, and swollen rivers only added fire to his resolve to solve the mystery of his brothers' disappearance and track their partner down.

At last he found himself on the waterfront at Vancouver where the trail seemed to disappear into the green swell of the Pacific. Fifteen hundred miles of back-breaking toil and his only reward the sight of the shipping in Burrard Inlet and a trail that led into the sea.

Sick at heart Charlie sought out a waterfront rooming house. Then one night came a psychic flash that Wade was in Vancouver. Perhaps it was Charlie's Indian blood that caused him to pin his faith in dreams. With revived hope he combed again the saloons and hangouts frequented by gold-seekers, traders and wanderers from the Silent Places. Entering a saloon on Water Street he espied a hawk-faced man in a trail-battered Stetson, well liquored-up and buying drinks for the crowd. Then as he turned Charlie

found himself gazing into the sunken eyes of the man he'd trailed across the Rockies.

Gulping down his drink Wade led the way to an empty table and told of his trek into the Nehannies. Prowling Indians had dogged their every step. Food caches had been broken into and rifled. Twice they'd been fired on from ambush. And when, on some nameless creek in the shadow of three red buttes, they'd struck gold there'd been another attempt on their lives. Short of supplies, fearful of the menace that lurked on every hand, they decided to abandon the mine and return later with a larger party. Beneath the Nehannie Butte, where the South Nehannie enters the Liard, they'd divided their pokes and parted; Frank and Willie paddling on down to Fort Simpson, while he'd hit out across the mountains for the coast.

Masking his disbelief, Charlie met Wade frequently, noted he was spending freely, and finally obtained a clue to the location of the strike. Boarding a train for Edmonton he jumped a string of fur traders' carts for Athabasca Landing, joined a Fort Chipewyan-bound scow brigade and, by sternwheeler and canoe, reached his father's fort on the Liard. Pausing only long enough to throw another outfit together he plunged into the heart of the Nehannies.

Again some psychic hunch seemed to lead him in the right direction. Months of weary slogging brought him to a willow-grown creek shadowed by three red buttes and choked with beaver dams which something told him was close to the spot he sought. That he'd nowhere seen the slightest Indian sign bore out native reports that the country was taboo, and recalled their superstitions that it was haunted by prehistoric troglodytes, a race of giant men with repulsive gargoyle faces who lived in caves cut from the living rock, went naked save for a matting of their own evil-smelling hair, and never missed a chance to carry off stray hunters or their squaws in their powerful, gorilla-like arms.

Paddling along the creek he caught the flash of axe-cuttings, leapt ashore, parted the shimmering willows and stood frozen in his tracks. At his feet sprawled a headless skeleton, the bony fingers still clutching a loaded rifle. Shrouded in a blanket, with feet towards the charred logs of a long-dead campfire, lay another headless figure, a bullet hole in the blanket showing that he had been shot while sleeping.

With shrinking fingers Charlie tore aside the blanket and identified Frank's clothes. On the finger of the other skeleton was a ring he recognized as Willie's. Scattered about were sluice-boxes, a wooden cradle and equipment used in handling placer gold, while, at the edge of a turquoise lake, arose a discovery post bearing Willie's name.

Crazed with the lust for the yellow metal Wade must have slipped stealthily from his blankets, shot Frank while he slept then cut down Willie as he reached for his rifle, and made off with the gold. Scooping out a lonely grave in Dead Man's Valley Charlie buried his brothers' remains and turned his face to the southward.

It was somewhere in the vicinity of this McLeod Mine that the tropical valley was said to exist. A palm-girt oasis that had escaped the impact of the Ice Age, where living dinosaurs and mammoths of a forgotten age disported themselves in steaming pools rich with luxuriant vegetation. For over fifty years stories of this legendary valley had been carried south to civilisation by travellers from the Great Lone Land, yet never could the trapper or hunter be found who could say he'd actually seen these wonders.

One American novelist, using such a background, had made his story so realistic that he was besieged with requests for further details by scientific bodies all over the world, who refused to accept his assurance that it was a product of his imagination. Again, when the *Shenandoah* was preparing to fly across the Pole these stories were revived, and newspapers wondered if the dirigible might not discover a semi-tropical region in the Arctic where prehistoric conditions still prevailed. Perhaps these ideas originated from Indian reports brought in to the posts on the Lower Mackenzie from time to time of frozen mammoths being exposed by the falling away of ice-cliffs, leaving their flesh, when thawed, still fit for dog-feed.





*Courtesy Canadian Pacific Railway*

**Juneau, capital of Alaska.**



*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Eight months after work was begun convoys of trucks commenced to roll through Whitehorse en route to Fairbanks, Alaska.

The greatest impetus to this legend arose, however, from the story told by Chequina, a Cree guide, to a party of scientists in the Athabasca country some years ago. His father was a great wanderer, he said, and had found himself amongst a tribe of Indians roaming the eastern slope of the Rockies near the headwaters of the Liard River. It was a primitive tribe whose only weapons were bone-shod javelins, and clubs made from the jaw-bones of the moose—since identified as the Sickannies. Around their open lodge fires these Stone Age people told of a medicine valley to the northward, untouched by winter snows and inhabited by monsters of incredible size. On a piece of skin a swarthy hunter had sketched one of these monsters, and this had been treasured by his father as a medicine charm. From his pouch Chequina hauled a stained scrap of buckskin on which the scientists saw, limned in perfect detail, the outline of a dinosaur—and still another story of the tropical valley was carried south to civilization.

Years after hearing this story from old Beatton I was travelling with my French-Chipewyan dog-driver through the snow-bound forests of the Liard Country, inspecting the trading posts of the Hudson's Bay Company. Finally my guide crunched through the snow-mushroomed spruce and pointed a fringed arm across the frozen river to the picketed trading post of Fort Liard. The red flag fluttered out its salutation and soon I was shaking hands with a granite-faced man in fur cap, buckskin coat and quill-worked moccasins. He was Fred McLeod, the factor, whose brothers had gone to their death in the forbidden valleys to the northward years before.

That night after a feed of roasted bighorn, while swirling flakes beat a muffled tattoo against the window panes and the box-stove crackled merrily, Fred told in the sibilant patois of the Mackenzie country how Charlie had trailed his brother's killer. "It's a tough country up there," he concluded. "The Injuns say it's ha'nted. That there's a big queer valley up there filled with animals something like elephants or . . . what do you call 'em animals in Africa?"

"Hippopotami?" I laughed.

"No!" Fred frowned. "I dunno what you call 'em—but the Slavey's figger they're bad medicine, and the Nehannie country's all taboo. Too bad," he concluded, "they say it's lousy with beaver and otter, and the finest moose and bighorn country in the world."

Next day the chief of the Slaveys dropped in but seemed afraid to discuss the valley. It was *michili*, bad medicine, he said. There were terrible monsters there, and the moose and bear were twice the size of those in the forests to the southward, while giant Nakanies lay in wait for Indians foolish enough to venture beyond the South Nehannie, and those who defied the taboo were never seen again.

At Fort Resolution on Great Slave Lake I next came into contact with the Lost Mine and Dead Man's Valley in July, 1928. I was chatting with Pierre Mercredi, the factor, when through a fleecy cloud appeared the first plane to invade these fastnesses since the two Imperial Oil planes crashed at Fort Simpson back in 1921, sending the Indians hopping like jack-rabbits for the protection of their caribou-skin tepees. From its metal cabin spilled "Doc" Oakes of the Northern Aerial Minerals Exploration Company and a bunch of mackinaw-clad prospectors led by Charlie McLeod, all bound for Dead Man's Valley on an aerial search for the Lost Mine.

Late that fall, while the snow swirled without and geese honked southward in great V-shaped battalions, I was standing beside a crackling wood-stove in the mess room at Fort Simpson waiting for the return of the sternwheeled *Distributor* from the Arctic to carry me back to my headquarters at Fort Smith. The door swung open. Bearded, begrimed and

emaciated the prospectors from the Nehannie country reeled into the room, their torn mackinaw clothing patched with greasy buckskin.

“Why,” I gasped, “I thought you fellows were back amongst the white lights long ago!”

Charlie’s cracked lips twisted in a crooked smile. “‘Doc’ never showed up,” he swore, “and we’ve sure had one hell of a time.”

They’d waited till long after the time “Doc” was due to return and fly them out to Edmonton. Then as the wild mountains took on the garb of winter, and rations petered out, they’d killed some bighorn sheep, jerked the meat, bolted their flimsy collapsible canoe together and committed themselves to some unknown river that hurtled to the southward.

Swirled along at race-horse speed in their cockleshell craft they were borne into the very bowels of the earth. Rock walls closed in till the serpentine channel, twisting in hair-pin turns, was crushed between precipitous rock ramparts that towered thousands of feet above them. Onward they were swept over black chutes roaring through narrow channels so deep that the sky was a mere silver thread in the blackness far overhead. With the air vibrating to the roar of angry waters that splattered in their faces and blinded them they were swept to the brink of thundering cascades, the dull roar alone warning them in time to scramble on some foam-bespattered ledge. Once they piled precariously ashore to find that the entire river leapt in a foaming cascade twice the height of Niagara to the rocks below.<sup>[3]</sup>

All summer they’d searched in vain for Dead Man’s Valley, only to stumble on the tropical valley of legendary fame. But not the palm-girt oasis rich with tropical vegetation. Neither were there living dinosaurs, trachadons or leathery-winged pterodactyls of a forgotten age to halt their footsteps. Instead they descended into a mist-dimmed valley eight miles long. Mud volcanoes and thermal springs spluttered from grassy bottoms, sending up coils of white vapour; geysers of sulphurous water rushed up from beneath the rocks, the air was moist and enervating and the fern-strewn moss scored with a spider’s web of animal trails.

A glossy black bear, stuffing berries into his maw, surveyed them with casual unconcern and continued with his meal. Deer stared at them in round-eyed wonder ere trotting off with a flick of their flags. Moose gazed at them in lordly aloofness. A strange species of white black-tailed mountain sheep was the only creature that shunned them. Thick-boled and heavy-foliaged the trees were more luxuriant than those in neighbouring valleys and it seemed evident that the warm mists kept winter at a distance.

It was a hunter’s paradise, yet nowhere was there the slightest Indian sign. In their rambles they were surprised to come across a cabin, a tumble-down affair that proved that the valley had known at least one human

occupant. Stretched at full length on the moss before the doorway lay the headless skeleton of a giant white man, and beside it a broken rifle—the barrel badly bent. All evidence of the man's identity had been destroyed by the pack-rats, but the bent rifle told its own story. Disturbed by a noise the man had rushed out, gun in hand, to be confronted, perhaps, by a monster grizzly, and the bear had won the day. Weathered axe-cuttings and unused firewood indicated that the nameless pioneer had perished some fifteen years before.

A week later I stood on the waterfront at Fort Fitzgerald, watching the last scow of the season preparing to leave for the south. Its departure would signify the closing of navigation till the following May. Thenceforth for eight months we exiles at these wilderness forts would be thrown back upon ourselves and our resources for company and entertainment. Ice-pans floated whitely on the ebony surface of the Slave. His pack upon his back Charlie shook hands with me and stumbled dejectedly up the narrow, slippery gangplank, beaten again by the brooding spirits that haunted Dead Man's Valley and always seemed to thwart him.

Next to invade these fastnesses was Angus Hall of Myerthorpe, brawny veteran of a hundred gold camps. Within a couple of miles of Dead Man's Valley he shouldered his pack and pushed ahead of his party, anxious to be the first to reach this elusive El Dorado, only to disappear as utterly as though the earth had swallowed him.

More mysterious still was the fate of Martin Jorgensen. Lured by the same spell he obtained an outfit from Poole Field of the Northern Trading Company at Fort Simpson and hit out for Dead Man's Valley. Months later a ragged Slavey entered the post and handed Poole a grease-stained note from Jorgensen, urging him to follow and saying that he had struck it rich. Hiring half-breed guides Poole followed in his trail. In the shadow of some nameless peak near the Flat River he caught up with Martin Jorgensen at last—a headless body struck down by some nameless hand!

Bill Powers, in whose cabin I often camped when blazing the Fort Nelson road, was next to disappear. Leaving Fort Nelson he, too, hit the trail in search of the lost McLeod Mine. When two years elapsed without a word police set out to investigate. Beyond the spot where Jorgensen had met a sudden and mysterious death they found the first evidences of disaster—skeletons of lynx and foxes in untended traps, and a sawed-off 30.30 rifle. Further up-stream they came upon the charred ruins of a cabin, with a blackened human skeleton amongst the debris, and in a near-by cache, untouched, a prospector's grub-stake, identified as belonging to Bill Powers. Again there was talk of murder.

As recently as a couple of years ago the curse of Dead Man's Valley claimed still another victim. Big and strapping, his bronze face radiating good nature, Ollie Holmberg, well known around the mining camps of Great Bear Lake and Yellowknife, left Fort Simpson in 1940 and disappeared into the maw of the Nehannies. When the date elapsed when he was due to report at Fort Simpson on his way Outside Royal Canadian Mounted Police took up the search. Other patrols have gone in since but without discovering the slightest trace of the lost prospector.

Yet, strangely enough, though death and disaster dogged all who sought the hoodoo gold trappers who penetrated these virgin hunting grounds for furs alone returned unscathed. Ed. Clausen, one of a frontier breed whose forbears risked their scalps for beaver skins in the hunting grounds of Sioux and Blackfeet, was the first white trapper to brave the mysterious terrors of the Nehannies and pulled in to Fort Simpson the following spring with his birchbark loaded to the gunwales with choicest beaver, marten, bear and other pelts.

"Them Injuns ain't so crazy as I figured," Clausen assured me. "I didn't see no giant cavemen, but I sure did come across some caves all right. I was hunting mountain goat when I ran plumb into one of 'em cut from the rock half-way up the face of a hundred-foot precipice that spans a two-thousand-foot valley. It was about eighteen feet by twelve, with a hole running straight up through the rock, which must have been a sort of chimney. I found two more that had been chiselled from the living rock by human hands. I'd believe almost anything about that country now."<sup>[4]</sup>

Today the forbidden valleys and lofty peaks that have defied all attempts to unveil their hidden secrets are surrendering their aloofness to the swinging axes and snorting bulldozers of Uncle Sam's brown-shirted doughboys. Tomorrow, who knows, these mountains and valleys may become the mecca for big-game hunters looking for new thrills and virgin fields.

So much for the background of Fort Nelson.

Faced with my own problem of getting a trading outfit up to the Fontas and re-building the post there I patched up an abandoned scow and pitched it with spruce gum gathered by the squaws in the surrounding woods then, rounding up a bunch of Indians and canoes, I loaded up my motley flotilla with kegs of nails, grub, hammers, bales and cases of trading supplies and headed for the Fontas. Breasting the awkward and treacherous Sickannie we piled ashore ten days later at the mouth of the Fontas, got busy with saws and axes and in a couple of days had reared a mud-roofed trading post of green poplar logs that *wouldn't* burn and crammed it with supplies brought by my tawny *voyageurs*.

Bucking the muskegs back to Fort St. John, and rounding up a thirty-horse pack-train I headed back towards the Sickannie, stopping at the North Pine long enough to throw up a half-way trading post and supply base, which has since become an intermediate airport linking Alaska with the United States. A week later I watched the log walls of Fort Sickannie rise from the charred embers of the former post, piled it full of trading supplies to meet the threat of competing traders, left Babe Bourrassa in charge to see no more man-made bush fires arose to wipe it out, and rode into Fort St. John, bucking three-foot snowdrifts.

When winter had sealed the rivers and muskegs I prepared to lead a cavalcade of forty horse-drawn sleighs headed by an advance guard of axe-swinging settlers north to Fort Nelson with supplies for the chain of rough-barked trading posts. Anxious to secure employment for their idle teams deputations of Fort St. John settlers in ten-gallon hats and leather chaps invaded my headquarters in the valley and signed on for the trip.

Expecting to spend the winter on my wilderness road buying furs, supervising the road building and freighting, and countering the activities of rival traders, now bitterly angry and girded to new vigour, I threw together a light caboose of canvas and lumber similar to those I'd seen on the old Peace River Trail, with a small stove and hinged bunk within. Mounted on bob-sleighs there was room within for baggage, grub and strong-box containing cash for buying furs, and room without for baled hay and oats for the team.

But old Beatton, who liked to live the hard way and hated, as only a Hudson's Bay man can, anything savouring of change, lifted his hands in holy horror at this display of effete "luxury" and dubbed it "Godsell's Palace."

Despite dark forecasts of disaster my canvas and lumber "palace" proved a great success, to the bitter disappointment of old Beatton and his cronies. In sixty-below weather George drove from within, the reins passing through a leather flap, guiding his team through a small window. At night it saved digging a hole in the snow, building a brush camp and cutting enormous piles of firewood. Apart from that this saving in time and labour gave us an additional hour and a half's travelling time on the trail each day.

Hacking through matted spruce and fallen *brulé*, doubling up on frozen sidehills and ravines, our cavalcade pushed its way through primeval forests, over blizzard-lashed muskegs now frozen hard as iron, and past Indian camps and trappers' cabins where my cash was rapidly converted into bales of glossy marten, lynx and foxes. Hard on my heels came MacKenzie's traders, cursing the high prices they accused me of establishing—unable to meet them without sustaining a heavy loss.

The great rendezvous for the Indians and white trappers who hunted in the gloomy pine forests to the north and east was at the junction of the Liard and the Nelson, fifty miles below Fort Nelson. Like the Rocky Mountain trappers of the days of Sublette and General Ashley who would assemble each summer at Pierre's Hole under the Teetons, at Jackson's Hole, and at Ogden's Hole at Salt Lake to trade their beaver pelts and make merry, they would converge at the forks of the Nelson each spring. Instinct told me that the opposition traders figured on making this the key-point for their spring offensive, with a view to cleaning up on the huge catch of beaver, otter, mink and magnificent black marten that would be brought in by birchbark canoes at open water.

"They'll be figuring that you're the man to watch," I told Charlie Adan, whom I'd placed in charge of Fontas. "Keep 'em guessing. Start building a scow when the ice melts. Take lots of time, and while you're holding their attention I'll sneak off a trading expedition secretly from Fort Nelson for the Forks the moment the ice goes out. To avoid suspicion I'll move the goods for the trip from Fort St. John to here by horse-sleigh. You can say Fort Nelson's short of goods and send them on down there by dog-team."

It was one of those rare occasions when everything worked according to plan. While the free traders were keeping a vigilant eye on Adan's slow and laborious progress with his scow, and figured they had ample time, Jack Milne slipped out of Fort Nelson with a scow loaded to the gunwales with trade goods, and manned by an Indian crew, at dead of night and headed for the trappers' rendezvous.

When, a week later, the free traders pulled exultantly in to the Forks, leaving Adan and his men still sawing and hammering at his uncompleted scow, they received the jolt of their lives. Moored beneath the log walls of a rapidly rising trading post over which floated the scarlet banner of the H. B. C., was Milne's scow. All around the forest was dotted with the tents and tepees of the hunters. From every trapper, camp trader and coppery Slavey came the same sad story: they'd sold their furs already. They'd sold them to the Company's man! Then, and not till then, did they realize that the scow whose slow and laborious progress they had watched with so much amusement and sarcasm at Fontas was but a snare and a decoy.

A year later, when the free traders finally gave up the ghost, I took over their trading posts, goods and equipment for a song.

I might mention here that in blazing this pioneer road it was not the Company's intention to use it as a means of opening up this territory. On the contrary every possible obstacle was left there to discourage other traders from using it to trespass in the happy hunting grounds of the Gentlemen Adventurers, the freight rates to Fort Nelson being artificially boosted to the



prohibitive figure of twelve dollars a hundred, or two hundred and forty dollars a ton. Nevertheless the same road, a decade and a half later, was to prove a valuable highway for those appointed to construct the Fort Nelson link in the bomber road to Alaska, and for American doughboys under Brig.-General Hoge establishing an advance base at that erstwhile lonely trading post.

My work completed I turned my back once again on Fort St. John to take up headquarters at Fort Smith and pursue old and familiar dog-team trails down the Mackenzie.

Author's note:

Fantastic as the story of Dead Man's Valley, as herein reported, may appear the following letter, received by the author from the brother of Martin Jorgensen, whose headless body was discovered in the heart of the Nehannies, is self-explanatory.

John A. Vatne,  
22 So. Nanaimo St.,  
Vancouver, B.C.,  
October 30th, 1940.

Mr. Philip Godsell.

Dear Sir:—

With the kind co-operation of Mr. A. A. Brookhouse of the Royal North West Mounted Police Veterans' Association of this city, I hereby take the liberty of making an inquiry, knowing that you are perhaps the only person who can clarify a mystery that has haunted our family for nearly twenty-eight years. Unbeknown to yourself you have already cleared up the mystery.

Allow me to explain. Only last Saturday I accidentally came across a copy of the North West Mounted Police Annual, *Scarlet and Gold*. With keen interest I read the story entitled "Dead Men's Gold." Suddenly I became literally transfixed at the words "Jorgensen Strikes it Rich." It was with mingled suspense and horror that I finally came across the facts relating to the disappearance of my long lost brother. The victim you describe as Jorgensen (Martin was his name) was my brother, even though my name as signed hereto would not indicate so.

We knew that Martin had partly outfitted in Winnipeg and set out in the wilderness in search of the yellow metal. Knowing the peculiar nature of my brother it was not surprising that he maintained a long silence. Years passed with no news. Rumours, as brought out by sourdoughs and travellers, reached us; one rumour contradicting another, leaving us in a painful state of uncertainty.

Our oldest brother here in Vancouver; another at Wolverton, Minnesota, and a sister at the same place, seemed to expect me to be the one to try and dig up some record or news of our brother. You will no doubt realize what a hopeless task this has been; especially in view of claims made by at least one stranger to the effect that he had seen our brother not many years ago.

Now I know that we are on the right track as Mr. Brookhouse showed me a copy of the 1937 issue of *Scarlet and Gold* containing the same story by you, and we very well know that any report on the records of the former R.N.W.M.P. are the only dependable records out here in a new country like B.C., or the Yukon. Mr. Brookhouse explained that you had been largely responsible in investigating some of the mysteries of the North Country, and to file your reports at Mounted Police headquarters. I feel quite sure that you can, and will be, kind enough to elaborate on this report a little further than could be done in a short article for publication. Please let me make it clear that we are not in the least interested in what gold or mines our brother may have found. All we desire is the story of his passing and the discoverer's report in a little more detail if that is possible. Be it good or bad we would rather know it all, and feel that the last chapter has been closed in the long suspense and search for our brother. May I explain the difference in names? When I was a baby our mother died and I was adopted into another household whose name I have since retained. That was near Cooperstown, North Dakota. Our oldest brother, George Jorgensen, lived in Vancouver many years and passed on five years ago.

From the facts set forth in your narrative is it quite correct to assume that all four of the deaths described were cold-blooded murders? It would appear that some gold-crazed fanatic found it easier, more certain and more profitable to do away with successful miners after waylaying them than to exert himself in getting out the gold had he found any. The Last Great West holds many a mystery, and I for one take my hat off to the sturdy

frontiersmen who came out with a clean slate and who can so vividly picture the strange epics of the Northwest such as you have done. I hope to have the privilege of reading more of your articles and stories in the future, and I am wishing you continued success in your splendid efforts. I have lived in Vancouver twelve years. I am fifty years of age, ex-serviceman with the American Expeditionary Force, member and past Commander of the local Outpost, American Legion. You will please pardon what may have been unnecessary details. It has been merely to show our sincere purpose in obtaining only personal information.

Thanking you in advance I am

Respectfully yours,

(Signed) John A. Vatne.

Fortunately the author was in a position to furnish this gentleman and his family with the information requested.

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- [3] Visited later by Fenley Hunter, an American sportsman, and named Virginia Falls. He estimated the drop at 390 feet. P. H. G.
- [4] Later the existence of these caves was confirmed by Dr. Wesley L. Bliss of the University of Mexico who led an expedition into the country in the summer of 1938, guided by Ed. Clausen. He declared that they would be of great ethnological value, and would aid in confirming the theory regarding the migration of Asiatic peoples to this continent to become the Indians of today. P. H. G.

## CHAPTER IX

### Mystery Man of the Alaska Highway



When Uncle Sam's friendly invasion army headed north from Fort St. John and dived into the jungles they must have wondered at those gasoline tins that decorated the tops of the pines and hung in rusty disarray from spreading branches. Yet, behind those rusty cans lies the fantastic story of the futile effort of Charles E. Bedaux, friend of the Duke of Windsor, to conquer the region now traversed by the defence highway. Whitened bones of prairie broncs picked clean by prowling wolves and coyotes; twisted gears of caterpillar tractors embedded in the clutching grip of quaking muskeg, and the deflated remnants of rubber rafts tell of the disorganized retreat of the Napoleon of the Rockies from the saw-toothed ranges to the northward.

It was back in the summer of '34 that the name of Charles Bedaux first became impacted upon the Canadian Northwest, and unbelieving residents of Fort St. John heard with amazement of the approaching army of exploration. From Dawson Creek on Pouce Coupe prairie, sixty miles to the southward, a *de luxe* expedition such as the North had never seen was preparing to launch itself upon the wilderness. A mysterious expedition that was going to show insular trappers, traders and pioneer sod-busters something new in exploration. Equipped with gleaming, low-slung limousines, Citroen tractor trucks, similar to those used by the Swiss Army, rubber pontoons, truck-loads of shiny suitcases and cases of champagne; a lady's maid and herds of capering prairie broncs, stocky Charles E. Bedaux told inquiring reporters in throaty French accents of his plans.

"It's fun to do things others call impossible," he flashed his magnetic smile. "Everyone says that to take a fleet of automobiles through the unmapped Rockies, where there are no roads, can't be done. I say *can*. If I succeed it will open up a vast region which has never been explored. The Government," he laughed, "hasn't much faith in me, but I have done the impossible before."

The reporters smiled.

“When Citroen crossed Africa in caterpillar tractors,” he explained, “I said it could be done in ordinary automobiles. They said I was crazy, that the desert was difficult enough even for caterpillars. I took five passenger cars and went across. Now everybody’s doing it.”

What Mr. Bedaux *didn't* seem to realize was that crossing Africa in caterpillar tractors was a different proposition to climbing the precipitous slopes of the Rockies with these clumsy vehicles, wallowing through unending miles of gripping muskeg, and shouldering through primeval forests pierced only by the runways of the fox, the wolf and the lynx, where, eight years before, I had experienced troubles of my own in getting through with a pack-train.

Chugging in to Fort St. John, the staccato cough of the caterpillar tractors awakening strange echoes in the solitudes, came the expedition at last: two shiny limousines, five lumbering tank-like Citroen tractors, asbestos tents, a hydroplane, three river *bateaux*, electrical gear galore, a uniformed wireless operator with equipment, cowpunchers in gaudy chaps and ten-gallon hats, and a hundred and thirty prairie broncs who'd never seen a mountain that didn't have a man-made trail. There was Madame Bedaux, too, gracious and smiling, with her pretty French maid, Josephine, companion of former jaunts; Madame Alberta Chiesa, a guest, and the irrepressible Charles E. Bedaux himself with his enormous valet, Bob Chisholm—all full of bright ideas.

The first one thrilled the poverty-stricken settlement to the core. Learning that Fort St. John lacked a water supply this generous stranger financed with a kingly gesture a forty-thousand-dollar pipeline to bring water in from Charlie Lake.

Marooned settlers at this forgotten frontier outpost gazed at each other with questioning eyes. Who was this magnetic Charles Bedaux who travelled like some oriental potentate and tossed money around with princely splendour—and what was the object of this incursion?

Like Halley's comet streaking across the heavens, the name of this mercurial Frenchman flashed from time to time across the headlines. A nine-dollar-a-week itinerant waiter in New York, his first job after landing from his native France with only a few dollars in his jeans had been washing glasses in a waterfront saloon. Then he'd worked as sand-hog on the East River tunnel, and later patented an efficiency squeeze system to exact the last ounce of sweat from the worker that had earned him labour's undying hatred, netted him untold millions and made him the leader of a fashionable international set; friend of money barons, ambassadors and princes, whom he entertained with regal splendour at his magnificent French chateau.

It was after his mysterious trip into the Northwest when Wallis Warfield Simpson fled through the night to seek sanctuary in his famous Chateau de Cande that Bedaux first attained world fame. Behind those battlemented walls the exiled Duke of Windsor and the lady he loved defied the edicts of mitred bishops and rounded out a romance that caused a throne to totter. Advance agent for Windsor's trip to investigate the ways of the American working man two years later labour's angry protests echoed through the nation against the man who'd devised the hated system—and the trip was off.

After the fall of France, Bedaux and his beautiful American-born wife were confined in the monkey house at the Bois de Bolougne zoo by the Nazis. Escaping, he next showed up in Africa, where, prior to the American occupation, he was living in luxury with a large staff at the Aletti Hotel in Algiers, shunned by Britons and Americans as an active pro-Vichyite. In the dark hours of Darlan's assassination his name again flashed like a meteor across front pages when he was arrested on suspicion of being linked with those who planned the tragedy. Released, he was re-arrested on the order of General Giraud on a charge, according to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, of trading with the enemy. Mysterious and unpredictable as ever, he turned up last December at Miami where he was promptly seized by immigration authorities for alleged passport violation.

As for the destination of this expedition it seemed to be wrapped in even greater mystery than the identity of its leader. "We're heading for Telegraph Creek," was Bedaux's vague reply to all questions.

"Telegraph Creek!" guffawed a grizzled old trapper who'd been eyeing preparations with an enigmatic eye. "Say, brother—you're wastin' a lot o' time foolin' around with them thar fancy cayuses an' tanks an' all this fuss an' feathers. Go back to Edmonton, take the train to Prince Rupert and catch the steamer. Telegraph Creek's right on the Stikine, right on the steamboat run—an' a no-account place at that. This way you'll land nowhere—an' it's gonna cost you *plenty!*"



*Photo by the Author.*

Godsell blazing first link in Alaska Highway, 1925.



*Photo by the Author.*

### Godsell's pack-train at Fort Nelson.

In skirmishing order the Bedaux cavalry, headed by chief packer F. L. C. Lamarque, charged into the timber. A hundred prairie broncs, loaded with shiny tins of gasoline for the motorized transport bringing up the rear, stumbled ahead to establish advance bases. West to Cache Creek, and north along the turbulent Halfway they climbed and slid and stumbled. Sinking now to their bellies in quaking swamp, or engulfed in the icy waters of frothing streams that came tumbling down from the mountains, they floundered on. The first pitched battle occurred not with ravening wolves or grizzlies that the expedition most feared, but with diminutive bees and wasps that swarmed in hissing anger from their nests in the moss beneath the invading hoofs. That unrehearsed rodeo beneath the pines beat anything seen at Calgary or Cheyenne. No frontier-day celebration produced horses that could buck, and keep on bucking with such sustained and conscientious persistence as this gasoline-toting cavalcade. Flimsy cans shot skywards in scintillating glory, spraying rocks and muskegs with showers of odoriferous "rain," to remain suspended in the pine boughs and sway drunkenly in the breeze.



In the wake of the capering pack-train snorted lumbering caterpillar-tractor trucks, stimulating the languid livers of pulchritudinous passengers to unprecedented activity as they jolted over up-ended rocks, fallen carcasses of trees, and slithered down precipitous cutbanks. Wallowing like antediluvian monsters through the morasses they carried fear and terror to wall-eyed redskins.

No rattling Parisian taxi ever wove a more devious and perilous course through the streets of that once fair metropolis than did Bedaux's snorting tractors as they wallowed through the wilds. Northern gods looked down and laughed, tossing obstacle after obstacle in the path of these frustrated heroes opening the flood-gates of heaven and turning placid streams into raging torrents.

As the rear-guard of the conquering army headed northward on its thousand-mile trip to nowhere old-timers shook their heads. What was it all about? Where were they going? And why? Supposing they got those unwieldy tractors three hundred miles or more back in the bush—what of it? They'd only be marooned there till horses brought the passengers out. But one or two who'd heard the distant and as yet faint rumblings of Europe wondered if there wasn't more behind this expedition than met the eye, and whispered that Bedaux was in the pay of some foreign government.

From out of the rugged timber-strewn country to the northward news of this modern Hannibal filtered through to Fort St. John and Hudson Hope by dispatch riders sent to keep the waiting world in touch with the progress of the expedition into "unexplored" land wherein Hudson's Bay factors had traded with the red men for a century and a quarter. Each brought some hair-raising story of tribulation, disaster and high adventure that shrieked to high heaven of bad judgment and worse management. For trappers, traders and Indians thought no more of penetrating into this region with a cayuse, a few traps and a rifle than does the city dweller of going to the corner store for groceries.

From somewhere near the Sifton Pass mud-bespattered riders on jaded ponies brought to Fort St. John another message. Wireless equipment had been jettisoned. Caterpillar tractors, though serviced by a crew of experts brought especially from France, were continually breaking down; a search party was looking for Jim Blakeman, cowboy packer, who'd mysteriously disappeared. Then came another message: Blakeman had turned up! He'd gone back to recover a load bucked from a refractory pack-horse. Heavy rains had wiped out the trail. A nomad Indian with a perverted sense of humour had misdirected him and he all but succumbed to exposure, hunger and mosquito bites.

The tractors had been beaten by the weather, streams ordinarily fordable had been converted into raging torrents by heavy rains. The Halfway River above Graham was found a raging fury. Attempting to avoid a crossing by skirting the mountainside the rain-soaked gumbo gave way, plunging two of the unwieldy vehicles three hundred feet down a precipice to be smashed to atoms on the rock-strewn riverbed below. Barely in time to save their necks, Madame Bedaux and the fair Josephine had leapt to safety. "Fortunately," reported Bedaux, "we anticipated trouble, and four of our motion picture machines were trained on the cars at the time!" The raging Halfway claimed another tractor. On a raft of thirty-foot logs decorated with bloated rubber pontoons the expedition was being ferried across. Caught in the fierce current the raft careened with race-horse speed downstream towards the boiling rapids below. Plunging into the icy current the cowboy sailors swam to safety, while the "unsinkable" raft, with its load and tractor disappeared into the white spume of the rapids, caromed against the canyon wall and disappeared forever around the bend—headed on its long unauthorized journey down the Peace to the Polar Sea.

Moccasined Indians brought word that many horses had been drowned, or lost through injury, and valuable food supplies ruined whilst swimming them across streams. Much the worse for wear the two surviving tractors were lurching drunkenly along with rheumatic squeaks and lightening loads, while horses were nearing the point of exhaustion.

More hair-raising disasters! Headed by F. Geake, a party succeeded in some mysterious manner in getting caught in a flood on the Musqua when the river—as these mountain streams are apt to do—rose eight feet overnight. Caught on a submerged knoll in the middle of the river amidst a bunch of fear-maddened, plunging horses they were saved from death after being immersed to their necks in icy water half a day. Thomas Grainger was drowned in the Kwadcha River.

In their asbestos tents Madame Bedaux and her ladies crouched around the stove, the sinister silence of the night pierced by the banshee wails of ravaging wolves and yelping coyotes. Led by jungle instinct they slunk through the shadows with gleaming eyes and slavering jaws, waiting to feast on hapless horses fast weakening and lagging on the trail.

With predatory wolves skirmishing on their flanks, and devouring gaunt horses, that daily died or were abandoned, the bedraggled adventurers, abandoning useless tractors, limped in a series of forced and painful marches to the lonely Hudson's Bay post at Whitewater.

Unused to muskogs, and continual wading through bogs and icy streams, the pack-horses were succumbing daily to the ravages of hoof-rot and swamp fever. Thirty died in a couple of days. By September 27th only

eighty of the original hundred and thirty were fit to load. “We have horses enough—but not enough horse strength,” Bedaux bemoaned, “to carry our food and equipment.”

The Napoleon of the Rockies had met his Waterloo. The signal for retreat was sounded. Trappers and riders, coming in to Fort St. John, likened it to a rout. With a two-foot fall of snow blanketing slippery hillsides, and surviving horses sagging at the knees or swaying under half loads, there was danger of the whole party being marooned in the bush for the winter.

On October 16th John G. Bockock alighted from his slat-ribbed cayuse at Hudson Hope and announced that the defeated Bedaux expedition would arrive the following day. And arrive it did! Two dilapidated ladies, to say nothing of the fair but mosquito-bitten Josephine; a bunch of bearded, smoke-begrimed men in patched and greasy overalls, and a woefully reduced number of gaunt horses that staggered beneath the weight of empty pack-saddles. Gone were the tractors, the rubber rafts, the wireless and all other “aids” to exploration *de luxe*.

The genial and enterprising Bedaux had *not* succeeded in taking his motorized cavalcade across the Rockies to its unimportant destination. Neither had he succeeded in demonstrating his ability to accomplish the impossible. Speaking as one who has covered this region countless times by pack-train and dog-team I would venture to say that this highly publicized expedition succeeded in one thing only. In confirming the prophecies and warnings of those who knew the region, and in furnishing a shining example of how *not* to attempt the conquest of the wilderness.

Standing amidst the dilapidated wreckage of his abortive expedition a mud-stained woe-begone figure, the mercurial leader refused to admit defeat and smiled away his unceremonious retreat. “We hope,” stated Charles Bedaux in a Press dispatch, “to tackle the undertaking next year—and go through with it. The gasoline consumption of the five tractors was terrifically high. When we abandoned, or lost, the machines we had gasoline for only a hundred miles, and our next cache was two hundred miles away. The driving bands were ruined by the constant wearing of the gumbo mud. The engineers who designed the tractors didn’t know what gumbo mud was like. And hoof-rot did the rest.”

It was variously reported that this fantastic expedition, that made the eyes of pioneer trappers pop out of their heads, cost close to a million dollars. There is no doubt it cost *plenty*. “This trip has been unique,” smiled the irrepressible Bedaux. A conclusion that no one has yet been known to disagree with.

On February 19th, 1944, as this book was going to press, word was flashed over the radio that Charles Bedaux had committed suicide at Miami,

Florida, by taking an overdose of sleeping tablets. His death occurred as two special assistant attorneys general were preparing to seek federal grand jury indictments charging Bedaux with treason arising out of his activities in Vichy, France, and Algiers, prior to the American invasion of North Africa. On the previous Tuesday morning United States Attorney Biddle stated in Washington Bedaux's attorney found him unconscious in his quarters at the immigration bureau. Rushed in an ambulance to Jackson Hospital he remained in a coma till his death, leaving behind a suicide note, the contents of which have not been revealed.

In the light of these events old-timers are again wondering if there wasn't more beneath the surface of Bedaux's mystery trip through the strategic region now traversed by the Alaska military highway than has been revealed, and if, as some suspected at the time, he wasn't actually working for some foreign government.

PART II

WAR TRAIL TO TOKYO

## CHAPTER X

### America's Vulnerable Back Door



The roar of bursting bombs over Pearl Harbour on that never-to-be-forgotten December 7th, 1941, brought home to American people as nothing else had ever done the shattering realization that the wide reaches of the Pacific no longer provided immunity from attack, and that the aeroplane, by annihilating distance, had completely disrupted our false sense of isolation and security.

To Canada the realization had been brought home eighteen months before. The cataclysmic blitzkrieg on Norway, the lightning attack on neutral Belgium and Holland, and the swift demoralization of unhappy France revealed to Canada the vulnerability of her unprotected North.

For years Canadians had fondly cherished the illusion that their country was impregnable and unassailable in case of war. That, separated by three thousand miles of ocean from bellicose Germany, and by the wide Pacific from Japan, they could treat with scorn the ravings of war-mongers. That the implacable grey barrier of Britain's navy stood 'twixt Canada's rock-bound shores and the pent-up hordes of Nazi Germany. But the new type of blitzkrieg with air-borne troops and screaming dive-bombers bridging time and distance caused Canada to realize with growing alarm that what she had counted on as her surest protection—the isolation afforded by the vast unoccupied reaches of her Northland—had, overnight, become a serious menace in being undefended and provided an open door to flying squadrons bent on surprise attack.

That Hitler's seizure of Norway and Holland included a plan to secure possession of Iceland and Denmark's war orphan, Greenland, with the intention of dominating the North Atlantic sea route and using these islands as bridges in an ultimate attack on Canada through her undefended back door became sufficiently obvious to even the most obtuse despite America's Munroe Doctrine. Long before its occupation by British and American troops there had been much coming and going between Germany and Nazi sympathizers in Iceland, much infiltration of unobtrusive German "tourists" with Trojan horse ideas.

From Iceland it is only a two hours' hop to Greenland, which is separated from Canadian soil at one spot by a scant two hundred miles. From Greenland's southern peak, Cape Farewell, to the Straits of Belle Isle off Newfoundland it is only two or three hours by air, and the rocky shores of Greenland would form a convenient base from which to launch a desperate air attack to cripple Canada's transportation and disrupt her Eastern industries.

To the westward lay the undefended Hudson Straits, giving access to Hudson Bay—that great inland sea which bites down into the heart of the continent within short flying distance of Detroit, Buffalo and other great industrial cities—a region patrolled at that time by only a few scattered Mounties with their revolvers and dog-teams. Through Hudson Bay half of the North American continent was won for France, for England, for King Louis again, and last of all for no monarch at all, but for a commercial kingdom. This back door sea route into the heart of Canada contributed in no small way to beating France to her knees and supplanting the *Fleur de Lis* with the Cross of St. George. At the sub-Arctic port of Churchill the massive grey ruins of Fort Prince of Wales, once second only to Quebec and Louisbourg in strength, and battered by the cannons of La Perouse's frigates, furnish a constant reminder of the vulnerability of North America's back door.

Germany had long cocked an appraising eye at this, then, undefended and completely vulnerable area. A German-subsidized expedition ostensibly took soundings, checked ice movements, water temperatures, currents and navigating conditions in Hudson Bay and Straits in 1928, and no doubt charted shorelines, fjords and inlets with a view to a possible blitzkrieg of the 1940 pattern aimed at this continent. The eyes of Nazi spies had been busy in these isolated and forgotten regions as elsewhere. In the months preceding the war considerable coming and going was reported between certain Canadian Nazi sympathizers and Winnipeg's former German Consul, Herr Rodde. From Hudson Bay the German Government secured test samples of white whale oil for use in the manufacture of precision instruments for aerial navigation, even arranging to install reducing machinery at Fort Churchill. Hidden gasoline stores cached in the heart of the tundra by the Rev. Father Paul Schultz, "The Flying Priest of the Arctic," an Imperial German air ace in World War I, were recently unearthed and disposed of by Mounted Police when it was discovered that this missionary to the Eskimos had mysteriously disappeared.

Equally conversant with flying conditions and prospective sky lanes linking Europe with America via Iceland and Greenland, Germany had the fullest information on this prospective line of possible attack. In 1920

Commander Von Groneau flew Roald Amundsen's old plane from Iceland to Labrador, and from Labrador to Nova Scotia and New York. Next year he headed south from Greenland to Labrador, followed the St. Lawrence to Montreal, and flew on to Chicago. In 1933 he crossed the Greenland ice cap and zoomed over the Canadian mainland by Cochrane in Northern Ontario, to Detroit. A few weeks later he landed his Dornier Wahl flying boat with its German crew near Winnipeg. From there he followed the strategic Hudson Bay Railroad to the sub-Arctic port of Churchill, flew west across the Barren Lands and returned by the Mackenzie valley to civilization. Ostensibly he was just a pilot of Goering's Luft Hansa, whose civil character was even doubted at that time, and proved to be a mere camouflage for the future Luftwaffe.

That the northern reaches of this continent covered by Von Groneau were not overlooked in plans for German *lebenstraum* was abundantly proven by the publication by F. D. Brockhaus of Leipzig, Germany, of a book entitled, "Between the United States and the North Pole," by Colin Ross, the Nazi spy. Apart from five visits to the United States in search of German living space he also visited Canada's almost uninhabited two million square miles of wilderness known vaguely as "the North." Greenland he saw only as a basis for possible operations against this continent, and Labrador as undefended living space, easily vulnerable to military attack.

"It is a great historic question," Ross stated, "whether nations heavily over-populated (like Germany) will suffer forever a few million people to possess whole continents *just because they got there first*. Canada is like a gigantic storeroom in an ancient castle. A few downstairs rooms are used, the rest are never opened. Yet in old storerooms," he observes significantly, "one discovers many worthwhile things amongst the junk. Storerooms can be made roomy and light for peoples. . . . One must abandon prejudice against climate and degrees of latitude. That's why, when I began my fifth American journey, I went as far as Baffin Land."

Neither had Uncle Sam's step-child been overlooked. For Alfred Wollschleger, another author-spy, had written of Alaska, the Achilles heel of our northwest defences, as "one of the great reserve territories for the Nordic race."

Drawn up by the elite of Nazi Germany's Geopolitical Institute in Berlin there also exists an "Alaska Plan," drafted after the Weimar Republic by Karl Haushofer, Colonel Ewald Banse, Von Niedermayer, Major Foertsch and other military experts during the period when Nazi Germany and Russia were on friendly terms which envisaged the invasion of the United States by way of Siberia, Kamchatka, the Bering Straits and Alaska. One of the best



modern studies of Alaska was written by Doctor Martin Mueller and presented before the Institute for Colonial Geography at the University of Leipzig under the sponsorship of Professor Heinrich Schmitthenner, head of that Institute, in 1935. Entitled "Colonial Economy and Settlement of the sub-Arctic West of North America" it contained detailed information about all landing and harbour facilities, airfields and natural resources, and included excellent maps of Alaska drawn by the author showing future short air routes connecting Berlin, London and Leningrad with Alaska via the North Polar region. It was undertaken within the "German-Alaska Plan," which envisaged a three-pronged offensive via the Arctic Sea route against Point Barrow, across Bering Straits to Cape Prince of Wales, and from the naval and air bases on Komandorsky against Dutch Harbour and the Aleutians, all carefully adapted to ice movements in those particular regions.

Thus Alaska, on the other side of the continent, with its meagre population and its fifteen thousand odd miles of undefended coastline, depending almost entirely on imported supplies for its existence, also found itself in a position of appalling danger when the war threatened to spill northward to Kamchatka and Siberia.

Although originally discovered in 1741 by Captains Vitus Bering and Chirikov, the search for the pelts of the sea otter during the rule of peasant-born Catherine the Great of Russia first placed that long-neglected region on the map. Sent to exploit Alaska's rugged terrain Alexander Baranof established a fort at Three Saints' Bay on Kodiak Island in the summer of 1784 and, with an eye to securing control of the Aleut hunters who inhabited the thousand-mile chain of Aleutian islands extending west towards the present Jap base of Paramushiro, married the beautiful daughter of a local chieftain, acquiring as a dowry the services of seven hundred coppery hunters and canoemen.

Ironically enough the sleek black fur seal sought by Baranof caused the bloodiest fur stampede in history. Untold ships were wrecked and men were slaughtered wholesale. Bloodshed and pillage reigned from Alaska to Mexico, and though the Aleuts put up an ineffective resistance against this brutality with their feeble darts all that saved them from massacre and complete annihilation was the creation in 1799 of the semi-official Russian-American Company, with a fur monopoly over the land. Named Governor of Alaska, Baranof finally established his capital at New Archangel, or Sitka. Living in a log castle surrounded by feudal pomp and circumstance, and insisting upon being called His Excellency, this peasant autocrat extended his rule over a wide extent of the Pacific coast, reaching as far south as San Francisco. Today his portrait, hanging on the wall of Juneau's Baranof

Hotel, gazes down in stolid cynicism at the frantic military bustle and confusion that this once-silent land has fallen heir to.

Not until October, 1867, did the Stars and Stripes replace the Russian Imperial flag over the capital of Baranof's erstwhile empire, when William H. Seward, President Lincoln's Secretary of State, purchased Alaska from Russia for \$7,200,000. And in securing this enormous territory of 586,400 square miles—one-fifth the size of the United States—the Government was charged with extravagance, the region thereafter being referred to as "Seward's Folly" and "Seward's Ice-Box."

Having acquired this immense land of snow-capped peaks and eternal glaciers Uncle Sam proceeded to deal with it as an unwanted step-child. Treated originally as Indian territory, it wasn't till Congress was reminded of its existence by the gold rush of '98 that it was given a code of civil and criminal law; and not till 1912 was it granted a local legislature. In 1868 neglected citizens of Sitka, fearing a native uprising, had even been forced to appeal to Canada for protection, the Canadian Government sending a man-o'-war to Sitka, which was followed later by the U.S.S. *Jamestown*.

Alternately wooed and neglected by absentee vested interests that have mined Alaska of some five billion dollars in peltries, fur seals, gold, minerals, timber, fish and other products without anything being ploughed back, Alaska has long been a land of spectacular booms and dark depressions. Boasting a population in 1940 of only 72,524, half of it native, it is in the same latitude as Sweden which, with only 175,550 square miles, and far less in the way of potential resources, is able to support a population of 6,000,000 in comparative comfort.

Not only has Alaska been for a long time sensitive to its neglect but, unlike the United States, it has been equally sensitive to the menace afforded by its undefended condition and relatively close proximity to Japan, whose activities through its fishing fleets, and the importation of immense quantities of scrap iron and other war materials, has long been looked on with keen suspicion and distrust.

In the summer of 1940 Alaska received a sudden and unnerving jolt when the paw of the unpredictable Russian Bear descended on Soviet-owned Big Diomedes Island in the centre of the fifty-six-mile Bering Straits separating this continent from Asia, and was reported to be establishing a large military air base within a mile and a half of the American-owned Little Diomedes.

For the first time the realization was brought home to the American people that instead of America and Asia being separated by the wide Pacific a scant fifty-six miles actually separated the two continents, and that, with

only three hundred American soldiers stationed at Chilcoot, Alaska was wide open to attack.

Eight years before the late General Billy Mitchell had warned the White House that whatever power controlled Alaska would control the North Pacific, and had forecasted with prophetic accuracy the dangers of Japanese aggression in which carrier-based bombers would bridge hitherto unbelievable distances; only to be broken for his pains and posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal by a conscience-stricken Congress. “Alaska,” he had added, “is the most central place in the world of aircraft, and that is true whether of Europe, Asia or North America, for whoever holds Alaska will hold the world, and I think it is the most important place in the world.”

Anthony Joseph Dimond, Alaska’s representative to Washington, had also lifted his voice in warning against the activities of Japanese fleets of fishing craft swarming over Alaskan waters and around the Aleutian Islands. Yet the bulk of Dimond’s pleas fell on deaf ears. The old guard in the army and navy, who had broken Billy Mitchell, also turned their big guns on Tony Dimond when he urged that steps be taken to guard Alaska, and pointed out that the three hundred American troops protecting the half million square miles of his constituency had their guns pointed in the wrong direction—towards their cousins across the Canadian border rather than in the direction of those Nipponese who were ferreting out the secrets of Alaskan waters and presented the real menace to its future security.



*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Coloured troops build culvert.



*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Day and night bulldozers and scrapers were busy making new short cuts through the forest.

On a clear day you can look right across the Bering Straits from Alaska's Cape Prince of Wales to East Cape on the shore of Soviet Russia. Centuries ago this route, and the Aleutian Islands chain, were followed by the nomad immigrants of Asia who became our present Indians. The last to cross were the Eskimos, who left a trail of frozen middens, sod huts and driftwood ruins right across the roof of the world from Asia to Baffin Land, Labrador and Greenland. For countless centuries Alaskan Eskimos and Siberian Mosinkos, or Chukees, have visited backwards and forwards in nothing more substantial than their skin oomiaks, without a thought that they were bridging two mighty continents. Siberian Mosinkos had, in fact, established a regular trade route from the Siberian coast across the Bering Straits and Kotzebue Sound to exchange ivory, oil and sealskins with Alaskan Eskimos for red fox skins, once high in demand amongst the Cossacks for their picturesque headgear.

Warned by the potential threat of the Big Diomedes, Congress and the War Department became galvanized into action, prepared to spend an initial

\$45,000,000 on Alaskan defences, which has since risen to over \$200,000,000—over twenty-five times the amount originally paid by Uncle Sam for its possession.

The first consignment of American troops arrived in Alaska aboard the *St. Michael* in the spring of 1940, and on July 4th Alaskans cheered themselves hoarse as eight thousand troops marched with guns, jeeps and cannon through the streets of Anchorage. They were further cheered when Major-General Simon Bolivar Buckner, head of the Alaskan Defence Command with headquarters at Anchorage, commenced to rear Fort Richardson near by, and by the appointment of Captain Ralph Chandler Parker as Commandant of the newly-established Thirteenth Naval District of the Alaskan Sector.

As blueprints that had long accumulated dust in office desks were brushed off, work was pushed ahead with frenzied speed. A submarine and air base were rushed ahead at Sitka. Under the dynamic hand of Marshal Hoppin, manager of Civil Aeronautics Administration in Alaska, elaborate air bases were slashed from the primeval wilderness at Fairbanks, Anchorage and at Kodiak Island, all subsequently linked with intermediate airfields and weather stations from Nome to the Alaska-Canada border. Dutch Harbour's defences were strengthened, army troops rushed northward, military roads slashed through the matted pines, and pilots trained to meet new enemies: sub-zero temperatures, icing, sudden fogs and the fearsome and unpredictable williwaws that haunted the mist-draped Aleutian Islands that reach southwest in a chain of volcanic peaks and lava-strewn rocks to within seven hundred and twenty miles of the Japanese base of Paramushiro. No longer could Donald MacDonald warn that three men in a boat could blockade Alaska's winter port of Seward, or that but a single cannon, used as a flowerpot on Government lawns at Juneau, alone guarded Alaska's long and unprotected coastline.

Comforted with the knowledge that a fleet of United States dreadnoughts rode at anchor at the \$400,000,000 Hawaiian naval base at Pearl Harbour, two thousand, five hundred miles away, and reassured by the pyramiding 1940 defence programme, Alaskans felt a security they might not have experienced had they been able to look but a few short months ahead. There was but one wish that these defence plans left unfulfilled, an overland highway linking Alaska with the United States, eliminating forever her enforced isolation and furnishing a valuable lifeline in case of the undreamt of possibility of Uncle Sam's fleet being immobilized, or destroyed, by enemy action.

## CHAPTER XI

### Lifelines to Alaska



The idea of a highway to Alaska was by no means new. As far back as forty years ago F. H. Harriman, veteran United States railroad builder, envisaged a Canada-Alaska railroad to be linked with a projected Russian railroad by bridging, or tunnelling, the Bering Straits whose ice-filled waters were already being braved by the iron-barked prows of Arctic-bound Yankee whalers in search of bowheads and baleen. In fact, considerable progress had been made with the idea when it was brought to naught by the activities of the Japanese foreign office. According to the late J. A. L. Waddell, the engineer assigned by Harriman to the work, the Japanese, after the Russo-Japanese war, had exacted a verbal understanding from the Czar that the Russian link in the inter-continental railroad system would not be built. Undeterred, Harriman was still determined to go through with the project when his death temporarily ended the great railroad expansion era and the idea was dropped.

From time to time the idea of an overland connection bringing Alaska into closer relationship with the United States made sporadic appearances before Congress, only to be shelved till Donald MacDonald of Fairbanks definitely blocked out a proposed international highway on a map. Before going north to Alaska he had done location work on a couple of transcontinental railroads. Spending eight years as resident engineer for the Alaska Government Railroad, and eighteen more as locating engineer for the Alaska Road Commission, he started a vigorous one-man crusade in 1928 for an overland highway to the States.

The Seward *Gateway* followed up the suggestion with a special edition, and Fairbanks, always on its toes, inaugurated an international highway association with the slogan: "Seven Million Dollars Purchased Alaska for the States, Seven Million more will make Alaska one of the United States." The next year the Alaska legislature went a step further, and requested a conference between representatives of the United States and Canada, in which tourist-minded British Columbia professed a lively interest.

Pursuing his idea with fiery zeal Mr. MacDonald envisaged a road that would eventually link Panama with the Polar Sea, and excited considerable interest with the publication of an imaginary “Motor Log” in the *New York Times* wherein he painted glowing pictures of a wildly beautiful, primitive land with ancient totem poles, vast caribou herds, flashing trout in tumbling streams—two thousand miles of scenic wonders—advocating work on the road as a means of relieving the depression and fostering greater friendship between the United States, Canada and Russia. This one-thousand-two-hundred-mile highway, he contended, would link Alaska’s Richardson Highway with Hazelton or Prince George in British Columbia, and connect with feeders from Vancouver, Spokane and Seattle, this latter city having been Alaska’s foster mother since the days of the gold rush. With prophetic vision he also foresaw the possible military advantages of such a road. In an article published in *Liberty* eighteen months before the tragedy of Pearl Harbour, he wrote: “I don’t know who taught people to place all their reliance in Pearl Harbour, but I do know their blind faith is not shared in Alaska. We can’t afford to let Alaska remain a naval liability, which is exactly what she will be as long as she has no overland connection with the States.”

In those good old days, however, when this project was first mooted—when to speak of war was war-mongering and democracies seemed to feel that the surest way to preserve peace was to blindly refuse to consider the possibilities of war—the advocacy of the highway as a possible defence measure was out of the question. Consequently, it was viewed entirely from its scenic qualities, its possibilities in opening up the country, and as a tourist attraction that would eventually be extended to Cape Prince of Wales so that visiting motorists from the United States could enjoy the magic of the midnight sun and the sight of the Polar Sea. Writing in June, 1931, to the Soviet Chamber of Commerce, Mr. MacDonald suggested that, as a goodwill gesture and a part of their Five-Year Plan, they extend their own road system northeast from Irkutsk via Yakutsk to East Cape. This, they replied, they were unable to do, and suggested that the link be supplied with aviation.

Aroused by the agitation for this highway Congress, in May, 1930, authorized President Hoover to appoint three commissioners to study the project in collaboration with three others appointed by Canada.<sup>[5]</sup> When, in 1933, they recommended construction Congress enacted a law authorizing President Roosevelt to negotiate with the Canadian Government on the matter.

By 1938 progress had gone no further than the appointment of two new commissions to investigate costs and prospective routes. The American



commission comprised Congressman Warren Magnuson of Seattle; Doctor Ernest Gruening, Director Division of Territories and Island Possessions; Donald MacDonald of Fairbanks; F. W. Carey, Public Works Administrator of Portland, and Thomas Riggs, ex-Governor of Alaska. Co-operating with them was a Canadian commission comprising the Hon. Charles Stewart, Brig.-General Thomas Tremblay, J. M. Wardle, Arthur Dixon of the Department of Public Works, Victoria, and J. W. Spencer of Vancouver.

After a joint meeting at Victoria, B.C., on April 27th, 1939, the commissions promptly took the field, making ground and air reconnaissances of every possible route.

Out of the investigations emerged three suggested routes: the coastal route originally advocated by Donald MacDonald, and two more-favoured routes designated officially "A" and "B." By this time the ominous shadow of approaching conflict had for the first time coloured the glasses of those concerned and military requirements were superseding scenic and tourist considerations, though the words "Defence Highway" were spoken *sotto voce*, while both nations continued to ship vast quantities of war supplies to Japan.

Route "A", with feeders from Seattle and Vancouver, had its jumping-off place at Prince George, beyond the historic Cariboo Trail, striking north to Hazelton and Telegraph Creek, up the Skeena and Stikine, paralleling the existing telegraph line to Teslin Lake. Crossing the Yukon by way of Tagish and Whitehorse of gold rush fame it would reach Fairbanks, Alaska, by the picturesque Tanana Valley. West of this was MacDonald's coastal route, the proximity of which to numerous Pacific inlets would have greatly facilitated construction but would have rendered the highway equally vulnerable to enemy attack.

Route "A" was also under the disadvantage of paralleling the coast approximately a hundred and fifty miles inland, making it too vulnerable from possible carrier-based air attack, while the heavy snowfalls and resultant short season along with its steep gradients and sharp curves offset its scenic advantages as a possible military highway.

Two young Americans at least displayed an abounding faith in the possibilities of Route "A". In May, 1939, Slim Williams of Alaska and John T. Logan of New York set out from Fairbanks to make a motorcycle trip south to Hazelton, B.C., to demonstrate its possibilities to Assistant Secretary of War, Louis Johnston, who'd derided it. Two months later they reached Dawson, considerably the worse for wear but still full of abounding courage and determination. Seventeen days later they turned up at Whitehorse, ragged and unshaven. Following the telegraph trail to Carcross, Atlin and Telegraph Creek they eventually emerged at Groundhog, struck

south along the telegraph line near the Fifth Cabin and eventually turned up, complete with battered motorcycle, at Hazleton.

This wasn't, however, Slim's first acquaintance with the proposed highway. A sourdough trapper, Donald MacDonald had met him in 1934 when locating a road through the Copper River country, and helped finance him to make a trip over the route by dog-team. Shoeing his sled with wheels at Seattle Slim mushed on for the Chicago World's Fair where Mrs. Roosevelt was given a ride on his sled and afterwards remarked: "The outstanding thing I remember about the fair was the big Alaskan advocate for the international highway with the far-away look in his eyes."

Behind the telegraph trail followed by Slim and his companion lies another stirring story of American imagination and enterprise in an attempt to bridge the gap between America and Asia and open up a world-wide telegraph communication through this, then, untrodden wilderness. It was the first effort to make British Columbia and Alaska an immense land bridge between the United States and the vital centres of Siberia, Russia and the Orient. Back in 1858 Cyrus W. Field of Stockbridge, after facing tremendous odds and endless setbacks, had practically completed the laying of the first submarine cable over the bed of the Atlantic between America and Ireland when his hopes were dashed by the parting of the cable in mid-Atlantic. Three more abortive attempts convinced everyone but Field that the transatlantic cable was an impossibility.

Watching Field's failures Peter Collins, a former partner in the cable enterprise, concluded it would be much easier to lay a cable across the fifty-six-mile Bering Straits than across the stormy Atlantic. His idea was to link the United States and Canada with the European telegraph system by an overland telegraph line running through the heart of British Columbia and Alaska, across the Bering Straits, and over the Siberian steppes to Russia. In 1864, as the Civil War was drawing to a bloody climax, Queen Victoria and the Russian Government extended their permission, and from Hiram Sibley, first President of the Western Telegraph Company, Collins received a cheque for one hundred thousand dollars, followed by another from Congress for half that amount, with their blessing on the enterprise.

To lead this hazardous expedition the Western Union Company appointed Colonel Charles S. Bulkley, a U.S. Army engineer who, during the critical days of the Civil War, had been in charge of the South-West Military Telegraph. The Colonel had also constructed a line down the Atlantic coast to New Orleans, and had strung military telegraph lines through the domain of hostile Kiowas and Comanches.

From San Francisco Colonel Bulkley headed north with a fleet of twenty-four boats bearing five hundred men, twelve hundred miles of

copper wire, and several tons of green glass insulators, for the mouth of the Fraser River. From Portland the line was hewed by R. Haines and J. Gamble three hundred miles to New Westminster, and when it finally crossed the Fraser, Frederick Seymour, Governor of British Columbia, was there to lend a hand spanning the treacherous stream. In the primeval forests around Puget Sound men cut and barked countless poles which were rushed north to the sweating men toiling through the forests of matted spruce, plagued by tropic heat and voracious mosquitoes. While his men toiled through forests and over ranges north of Fort George, the Colonel was reconnoitring the fjords and inlets of the Inside Passage for American navy sloops dispatched by President Lincoln to land supplies. The work proved heart-breaking and exacting to the last degree, but on New Year's day, 1866, the Collins overland telegraph pushed its way through the forests of British Columbia to the banks of the Yukon, then Russian territory. From St. Petersburg to Amur, Siberia, thousands of miles of connecting line had already been constructed.

Suddenly the project blew up overnight. Undefeated, Cyrus W. Field had stayed with the submarine cable and on July 27th, America and Europe spoke to each other for the first time in history. Live currents ran from Europe to America. Boston fired a salute, and New York set off fireworks; factories and ships whistled, and exuberant schoolboys rang bells and set gigantic bonfires. London and Paris, Berlin and Rome, confirmed reports of the triumph. Queen Victoria's congratulatory message crossed the Atlantic, and President Buchanan returned her felicitations. But up in the British Columbia jungles word of Cyrus Field's success proved a body-blow. Colonel Bulkley gave the order to cease work and led his tattered and trail-worn workers back to civilization. And for years thereafter squaws amused beady-eyed papooses with shining glass insulators and tawny hunters bedecked necks and wrists with copper wire.

Route "B," following the Rocky Mountain "trench," became the most favoured of the prospective routes. Beginning also at Prince George it was scheduled to follow the valleys of the Parsnip and Finlay to Finlay Forks and Sifton Pass, hit north to the Liard River, to Francis Lake, over the height of land to the Pelly and on to Dawson, thence down the Yukon valley to connect with the Richardson Highway near Fairbanks, passing through a region almost as primitive today as when the brawny arms and pioneering feet of Hudson's Bay traders blazed a hard-won trail into the land.

Just a hundred odd years ago the indomitable Robert Campbell of the Hudson's Bay Company was fighting his way through this difficult and, then, almost insurmountable terrain, contending alternately with hunger and hostile Indians, establishing a line of trading posts and opening up trade with slippery Chilcats who found robbery and pillage more to their liking than

trapping furs and engaging in legitimate barter. On Francis Lake the trader threw up a log fort, descended the Pelly to the Yukon and established Fort Selkirk, only to be driven out by a horde of milling redskins. Surrounded suddenly by a score of painted Chilcats, some attempting to shoot him, others to plunge their knives into his body, Campbell was only saved by the weight of numbers. Half stunned, destitute of coat and ammunition, with the fort pillaged and destroyed, he was forced to cross the mountains over the route much of highway "B" was scheduled to follow till he reached Fort Liard and floated to the safety of Fort Simpson at the junction of the Liard and Mackenzie rivers. Campbell and his men were reduced to eating moccasin thongs and the parchment windows of their huts as they toiled for weeks and months through a region over which Alaska-bound bombers now wing their way in the space of a few short hours.<sup>[6]</sup>

The advantages of route "B," as submitted by the joint commission, were: it was the shortest route to the Alaskan boundary, would prove least costly, and would be conveniently located in regard to the existing airway from Edmonton to Fairbanks. The cost of a twenty-four-foot grade, with a twenty-foot gravel surface, was estimated at \$25,000,000 at the, then (April, 1940), cost of materials and labour, and it was estimated that it would take five, or six years to build.

On the face of it the price seemed small enough to insure the safety of democracy's westernmost bastion from almost certain attack. With Europe in flames, with Hitler shaking the mailed fist at America and attempting to undermine this country with spies, saboteurs and Fifth Columnists, and Japan, linked with the Axis, growing more arrogantly vocal daily over her future East Asia co-prosperity sphere, there was no longer any doubt that strategic Alaska would ere long be marked for Nipponese aggression.

Since the days of the Russo-Japanese war Tokyo had displayed a lively appreciation of the strategic importance of America's possessions in the North Pacific. The plans of Harriman for an America-Asiatic railroad had been ruined by Japanese intervention. Again, at the naval armament treaty with Japan and other nations in 1922 Tokyo had extracted a promise from Uncle Sam not to fortify the Aleutians, a promise the United States had continued to adhere to after the treaty had elapsed.

In 1940 the following significant item appeared in a Seattle newspaper:

### JAPAN GREATLY DISTURBED OVER PROPOSED HIGHWAY TO ALASKA FROM UNITED STATES

The newspaper *Hochi* stated today that Japan is greatly disturbed over reported plans for building a military highway from

the United States to Alaska through western Canada. The newspaper said that the Tokyo foreign office was informed that a string of air bases will be built along the highway by the United States and Canadian governments.

*Hochi* declared “American measures in this direction will be regarded as a continuation of the horseshoe-shaped encirclement of Japan by the Washington Government. Military bases of the United States would thus be strategic from Singapore via Australia, the Philippines, Hawaii and the United States to Canada and Alaska.”

Yet, despite the recommendations of the Alaska Highway Commission conflicting political and commercial interests now arose to delay the vital work indefinitely.

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[5] The United States commissioners were: Herbert H. Rice of Detroit, Ernest Sawyer, Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, and Major Malcolm Elliott, Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army, and President of the Alaska Road Commission. Canada appointed Hon. George Black, M.P., for the Yukon, J. M. Wardle, Chief Engineer, Canadian National Parks, and G. P. Napier of the B.C. Department of Public Works.

[6] While going through discarded records at Fort Simpson in the winter of 1921 the writer came across a number of stained sheets of blue paper covered with faded writing. They proved to be Robert Campbell’s original report of this expedition, from which the above material has been drawn. To preserve them for posterity the writer salvaged them and sent them to Hudson’s Bay headquarters, where they now rest in the archives. P. H. G.

## CHAPTER XII

### Northwest Passage by Air



Under the dynamic hand of Major-General Simon Bolivar Buckner, a strapping, ruddy-complexioned Kentuckian with a love for dogs and fishing, Alaska was transformed overnight in the face of enormous difficulties, of which the most serious was the lack of transportation and the fact that only one railroad, with a summer port at Anchorage and a winter port at Seward, was available to serve this mighty region of snow-capped peaks, eternal glaciers and fertile valleys whose southern coasts were warmed by the balmy caress of the Japanese current.

By the summer of 1941 Anchorage, squatting in the shadow of saw-toothed crags already dotted with searchlights and anti-aircraft batteries, and flanked by Fort Richardson and the huge hangars of Elmendorf airfield, found its population suddenly increased from three thousand to nearly twenty thousand, most of them engaged in defence projects.

At Fairbanks, commercial capital of Alaska, the army air base of Ladd Field, with seven thousand troops, had been established, with underground quarters, housing, movies, clubs, canteens, living quarters, swimming pools and bowling alleys—secure alike from Arctic temperatures and enemy bombs. As the centre of the Alaskan defence scheme over thirteen million dollars had been spent on a base covering forty square miles and employing twenty thousand people. A striking change from the two thousand population it boasted when I crossed Alaska by dog-team from the mouth of the Mackenzie in pre-war days.

At Sitka, with its ancient green-domed Greek church, a submarine- and air-base was rapidly nearing completion, while at Dutch Harbour, mid-way in the scimitar-like string of Aleutian Islands pointed like a dagger at the heart of Tokyo, a vast air and sea base was being rushed ahead which would, when completed, be large enough to accommodate a sizable part of the Pacific Fleet. The only serious defect in the entire defence set-up was that Alaska, for all its strategic importance, still lacked adequate connections with the arsenals of the United States. It was, in fact, like a front line army without a supply line except for the slow and vulnerable sea route.

At this point Canada was called upon to furnish the missing link, an aerial "Burma Road" that would provide the United States with the means of maintaining a direct contact with Alaska by plane. Canada's readiness to cooperate was motivated by recognition of the plain and disturbing fact that Alaska was as much a frontier of Canada as of the United States, and that an enemy established on the soil of Alaska would have an uninterrupted run for bombing planes down the valleys of the Yukon and the Mackenzie into the very heart of Western Canada.

What was needed, the permanent joint defence board decided, was a chain of fully-equipped airports with four-thousand-foot runways, radio and weather stations, beam apparatus and lighting facilities to guide night-flying pilots in all weather over a country of illimitable distances, most of which bases would, of necessity, span the heart of the Canadian wilderness.

In consultation with Washington, officials of the Canadian Air Ministry and the Department of Transport drafted plans. Two routes were considered, one west and the other east of the Rockies. The western route would begin at Vancouver and follow roughly the coast line north to Whitehorse. The eastern route would be linked with airports at Grande Prairie, Fort St. John, and two more airports in the heart of the almost untrodden fastnesses situated at Fort Nelson and Watson Lake, all joined with the Alaskan airways at Whitehorse.

The latter route, which avoided the mists, fogs and execrable flying weather of the coastal region, had already been proposed by Canada's Civil Aviation authorities in the late '20's, and was surveyed in 1925 by order of the Hon. C. D. Howe, the choice being later confirmed by J. A. Wilson, head of the Civil Aviation Branch, after he'd flown over every mile of it in 1936.

A pioneer air service had already been blazed by Grant McConachie over the mountain passes. In 1934 Ted Field and McConachie, intrepid bush flyers who'd learned Northern flying the hard way without hangars, flying fields or repair shops, surveyed an air route to Alaska at the Government's request. Considering the coastal route too risky they blazed a northwest passage by air east of the mountains and through a low-lying pass to Whitehorse and organized the Yukon Southern Airline. A bi-weekly contract was awarded them on Mr. Howe's recommendation in 1937, and this service continued to fly in all weather and without landing fields, McConachie and his pilots, putting their faith in the gods of the skies, skis and pontoon floats.

Canadian survey parties were still in the field at the beginning of the war, and some thought was given to abandoning the project in favour of other defence needs. It was decided instead to expedite the completion of the route, a decision that was fully justified by subsequent events since it enabled Canada to offer the United States, when that country entered the

war, the free use of a twenty-five-million-dollar airway to Alaska, relatively free from the danger of enemy attack and connecting with established air and ground communications at Edmonton and Fairbanks.

Meeting in Victoria, B.C., on November 13th, 1940, the Canada-United States Permanent Defence Board, under the chairmanship of Colonel O. M. Biggar, decided to recommend to their respective governments that the air route from Edmonton to Fairbanks be developed on the basis of plans already set in motion by the Canadian Government. On December 18th funds were released, the Canadian Government undertaking the plan at its own expense; contracts were let and Homer Keith of Edmonton was appointed District Airways Engineer in charge of airport development at Grande Prairie, Fort St. John and Fort Nelson.

At Grande Prairie, which Constable Hidson and I had first seen as an ugly blot on the virgin prairie, the first of these bush airports arose beside the now bustling rural railroad centre. Shipping material to the end-of-steel which, in a last expiring convulsion, had reached Dawson Creek, the Tomlinson Construction Company hauled equipment for the Fort St. John airport over a settlers' wagon road that followed the pack trail I'd ridden with my Iroquois guide, Napoleon, in years gone by. There the old Indian camping grounds and racecourse atop the thousand-foot plateau behind the old fort furnished another ideal site for a northern landing field.

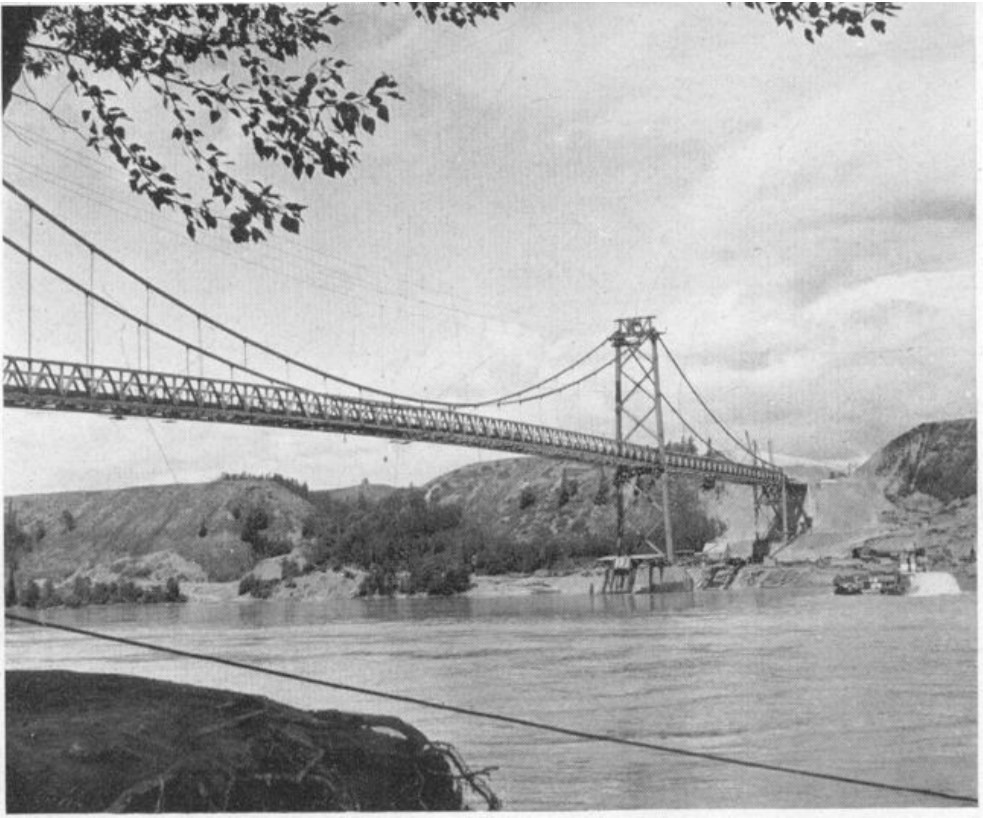
But rearing a modern airport at Fort Nelson, a vital link in the new air route over two thousand miles of almost uninhabited wilderness broken only by the snowshoes of trappers and Indian hunters, presented quite a different problem. In March, 1941, tractor trains with mechanical "cats" and cookhouse cabooses, hauling seven hundred and thirty-four tons, commenced to buck and bulldoze their way over the pioneer fur road I had blazed from Fort St. John to Fort Nelson back in '25. Dauntless men with stout hearts manned the train of snorting tractors and bulldozers that roamed through the forests like antediluvian monsters, arousing superstitious terrors in the hearts of the few remaining Beavers who hunted in the land. But even their courage and vitality wasn't quite equal to the stubbornness of that rugged terrain, and four hundred and twenty tons of gear had to be ditched where I encountered Bellyfull, on the banks of the frozen Sickannie Chief River, already knee-deep in icy slush.





*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Doughboys and Mounties line up for the official opening of the Alaska Highway.



*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Uncle Sam's million-dollar gift to Canada, the steel bridge spanning the Peace River near Fort St. John.

In April the six tractors started back over the body-shattering trail to bring down the cached equipment to Fort Nelson. But carefully drawn plans were defeated by an unusually early break-up. As the third tractor, hauling the cookhouse caboose, lumbered across the frozen Musqua there was an ominous growl of sundering ice. The sleigh-borne caboose reared, canted, toppled sideways, spilling out the cook and projecting six hundred dollars worth of food supplies into the icy waters to settle with the tractor on the muddy bottom of the stream. All night the fourteen-man crew of the tractor train battled with eight feet of ice-choked water. At dawn the dripping men surveyed their divided forces. On one bank were two good tractors, and one considerably the worse for wear. On the other, separated by two hundred feet of roaring mountain torrent that had burst its bonds two weeks too soon, were three other tractors that had somehow to be brought across.

For the first time Chief Higgins and his mud-caked cat-skinners were stuck. Till the river subsided from flood level nothing could be done. Around smoky campfires bored men figured out a plan. The best swimmers would fight the current, carrying across a steel cable. Once on the other side they'd remove the carburetors and drain the oil from the marooned monsters, hook them together with cable and try to haul them under water across the Musqua with the power of the other tractors. Orders came that it was too risky, that they'd have to build rafts. The men said nothing, went on with their original plan, and, if reports are correct, saw the tractors emerge from the frothing waters covered with gumbo and dripping muskeg mud, but otherwise none the worse for their immersion. After weeks of gruelling toil the supplies cached at the Sickannie were loaded aboard scows and soon the solitudes of Fort Nelson echoed to the tattoo of hammers, the jarring growl of drills and the rip of circular saws as a large airport rose beside the lodges of Chief Mattawa's wide-eyed tribesmen. Ere the geese winged their way southward Fort Nelson was linked with the outside world by a modern airport rushed to completion in record time.

Watson Lake, which boasted a solitary trapper's cabin, situated in a still more inaccessible section of British Columbia near the Yukon boundary, was selected for the next bush airport. Knock-down boats built at Vancouver were shipped by coastal vessel to Wrangel, Alaska, and transported up the swift-flowing Stikine to Telegraph Creek, famed jumping-off place for big-game hunters and fur trappers. Hauled seventy-five miles over a sleigh road slashed through primordial forest, they were reassembled at Dease Lake, loaded with equipment and towed up the Liard River to Lower Post where a twenty-five-mile portage road was cut to the site chosen, whence a sawmill and tractors had already been whisked through the air by plane. Despite the difficulties this link in the bomber road had also been completed ere the snow commenced to fly.

The most northerly in this chain of Canadian air bases, later to be linked with the Alaska Highway, was reared at Whitehorse, of gold rush fame, a place which derives its name from the whitecaps, or whitehorses, of the near by Miles Canyon Rapids that claimed the lives of so many gold-seekers. Situated at the head of navigation on the two-thousand-mile reaches of the Yukon River, which empties into the Bering Sea at St. Michael, its long waterfront is lined with red-paddled sternwheelers; the *Whitehorse*, *Klondyke*, *Nusaltin* and *Keeno*, that churn their way downstream to Dawson.

Scattered along the beach are the rotting remains of other sternwheelers which plied these waters in the hectic days of Sam McGee, while sharp-eared malemutes roam the streets, ready to fight over the slightest scrap of offal. Linked with the outside world by fast-speeding planes Whitehorse is

also connected with the Alaskan port of Skagway by the hundred-and-ten-mile narrow-gauge White Pass and Yukon Railway, now booming as it never did before.

Here, in the storied land of "Soapy" Smith, where straw-haired dance hall girls mulcted *chechakos* of their hard-earned gold-dust, Archie McEachern and his crew of a hundred and thirty brawny helpers put the finishing touch to the last of these Canadian airports. To this modern air base with all the latest aids to aerial navigation army bombers and planes of the Northern Airways and the Pan-American Airways soon were winging their way in ever-increasing numbers, forerunners of the fleets of lend-lease bombers that were to roar up from the southward to be taken over by amazingly efficient Russian girl pilots and crews at Fairbanks and be flown across the Bering Straits to blast the Huns from Stalingrad and Dneiper. Caught on the crest of this new wave of prosperity that was sweeping both Alaska and the Yukon, Whitehorse was living over in a minor key the boom days of '98.

Bill Patterson, the bank manager, shook his head with a wary smile and prophesied that the boom would soon be over—that it would be a case of bannock and moose steaks again. But Joe Morrison, father of the airport on the lofty aerie overlooking the town, was frankly and unashamedly optimistic. "Peace, war or revolution," he grinned, "Whitehorse is on the map to stay. It's the new gateway to the Far East. I work for Pan-American, sure—but let me tell you this southern air route they've just mapped out isn't a patch in speed, safety and economy with the Great Circle route to China, Japan, India and the rest of the universe. And Whitehorse is the natural key-point—the top of the world junction to it all."

Hardly had the "bomber road" been born and American bombers commenced to wing their way to secret bases in Alaska than the flaming fury of Nipponese aggression fell like a thunderbolt on Pearl Harbour. In one fell stroke the worst fears of Alaskans were realized in the holocaust that had descended upon the Pacific Fleet, leaving great dreadnoughts an immobilized mass of twisted girders and displaced guns, and making the entire North Pacific vulnerable to carrier-based planes from the southwest. Overnight the distance between Attu and Kiska at the western extremity of the Aleutian Islands chain, and the Jap base at Paramushiro, seemed to shrink to alarmingly narrow proportions. Anxious citizens, studying global maps instead of the misleading Mercator's projection, had further ground for alarm. They discovered that this same chain of volcanic islands presented perfect stepping stones for a hostile attack on the Pacific coast, the outermost being situated practically half-way between Tokyo and San Francisco. They also discovered that the short Great Circle route from

Seattle to Japan crossed these same Aleutians and was only four thousand, nine hundred miles in length. Fourteen hundred miles shorter than the usual six-thousand-three-hundred-mile steamer route via Hawaii!

On the bright brisk morning of that same December Sunday, August Heibert, assistant engineer of KFAR, the Midnight Sun Broadcasting Station at Fairbanks, rolled out of bed about nine o'clock and though the station didn't go on the air till noon idly turned on the short-wave to see what was going on. Tuning to a station that was carrying a drama he went on shaving when the play was rudely interrupted. "Japanese planes are bombing Honolulu, have attacked Pearl Harbour, and are bombing Hickham Field!" The astounding news flashed out of the ether. Unbelieving he turned to another station only to hear the news repeated. With trembling hand he relayed to Anchorage word of the world-shattering event.

Promptly General Buckner snapped into action. Guns roared at Fort Richardson, summoning troops to arms. Army trucks with shrieking sirens rushed them swiftly to strategic positions. Anchorage's streets were cleared of cars, merchants taped their windows in anticipation of an immediate bombing raid, and trucks roared through the blackout hour after hour with guns, war supplies and ammunition. War planes roared through the murky darkness. Rumours spread that enemy bombers from a secret Jap carrier, cruising off-shore, had planned to blast at Alaska at the same time as Hawaii, but had been defeated by a fortuitous fog accompanied by a sweeping blizzard and driving snow. Congress, rudely awakened, voted to send emergency food supplies to Alaska. Home Guards were formed, while at Fairbanks in the heart of the territory every family was ordered to prepare a packsack with two weeks' supply of food, bedding and clothing, and be prepared to take to the woods at a moment's notice. Meanwhile Alaskans, with ears glued to radios, heard a Tokyo announcer declare that Alaska, too, had felt the might of Japan's war lords; that three thousand had been killed in the bombing of Anchorage, and that Kodiak and Dutch Harbour were in flames.

To Alaskans, wise to the ways of our own primitive Asiatics—the Indian and Eskimo immigrants from the Siberian side—Pearl Harbour came as no overwhelming surprise. For your simple, bland Eskimo, like his Asiatic cousin, doesn't believe in taking chances. He smiles an enemy off his guard, lulls him into a sense of false security and strikes with the swiftness and venom of a rattler. What they had really expected was a lightning stroke from the Jap-owned Kuriles aimed at Dutch Harbour and the Aleutians.

Neither did Alaskans have any illusions concerning Jap fishing fleets and floating canneries that each year encroached closer and closer on territorial waters of Soviet Siberia, British Columbia and Alaska's Boston

Bay and Panhandle. That these fleets were manned largely by Imperial naval officers, and honeycombed with Jap fifth columnists, waiting for the Nipponese equivalent of *Der Tag*, was no secret. Yet the warning of Tony Dimond that many of these seemingly inconsequential schooner captains had gold-braided uniforms, epaulettes and swords tucked in their sea chests at Nagasaki and Tokyo had fallen on deaf ears. Neither was there any secret that these same ubiquitous slant-eyed fishermen were charting every last inlet, bay and unmapped island, sounding water levels and piling up information for the Mikado's sabre-rattling war lords.

The same widespread espionage was also directed at our Australian friends down under by fleets of Japanese-manned luggers, ostensibly engaged in pearl fishing. They, too, realized that the majority of the skippers were Japanese Imperial naval officers busily engaged in mapping and photographing Australia's little known northern coastline, and in other ways preparing for a future attack on the sub-continent.

When these snub-nosed luggers first edged amongst the innumerable uncharted islands and coral reefs that dot north Australian coastal waters only the pearlers got alarmed. Shouldered ruthlessly and impudently off their own pearling beds by these yellow-skinned peacetime invaders they protested in vain to Canberra.

Like the easy-going democracy it was, Australia disregarded the cries of dispossessed pearlers as dangerous war-mongering and brushed aside their wrathful protests. Residents of the sunny cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide were too wrapped up in sports, politics and the chase of the almighty pound to be worried about the picayune troubles of a handful of bushed pearlers a thousand miles away. It wasn't till a handful of Jap pearlers and poachers had increased to hundreds, and then to thousands, that the howls of missionaries about Jap violation of the aboriginal black-fellow reserves jolted Canberra into action. Up to this time Australia, like the United States and Canada, was too interested in selling industrial products to Japan to realize her future existence was being jeopardized. Anxious to go to any lengths towards placating Japan, Canberra, like Ottawa and London, wouldn't countenance any action that might hurt the tender feelings of Tokyo's war lords.

But these piratical Jap pearlers were stealing girls! Morality must be preserved at any cost. Something must be done about it! That these same native girls were readily traded off by their blackskinned parents for a bottle of gin or a sack of rice didn't enter into the picture.

Sailing from Port Darwin in a converted admiral's barge, with a Vicker's gun mounted at the prow, "Captain" Colin Bednall sailed with a five-man crew to carry the white man's law to the blackfellow's country and chased

out the yellow-skinned marauders who were fast converting aboriginal reserves into Nipponese brothels.

“I don’t suppose there are any white men apart from the six of us who can claim to have chased Japanese, hundreds of them, before the war, with a single gun,” laughed “Captain” Bednall later. “If they ever found it necessary in their long years of preparation to be impolite to white men they sure didn’t mind high-tailing it when trouble came along. Today,” he chuckled, “I can hardly believe that with that little launch and my five-man crew we scattered the whole damned Jap pearling fleet and chased them from the waters of Arnhem Land.”

Unfortunately there was no Yankee equivalent of hard-boiled “Captain” Bednall cruising off the western Aleutians save the infrequent visits of the coastguard cutter from Unalaska; though Captain J. E. Shields, the salty master of the *Sophie Christensen*, did create a sensation in ’37 by demanding that Washington supply guns to enable himself and others to drive off Jap poachers from Alaskan fisheries at Bristol Bay. Around the strategic islands of Attu, Aggatu and Kiska, inhabited only by a few scattered Aleuts deriving their living from fishing, sealing and whaling, these Nipponese fifth columnists had resorted to countless subterfuges to explore and chart those tortuous channels.

Mike Hudakof, chief of the little Aleut village on Attu, recalled an occasion when a warship anchored in the harbour and Jap officers, resplendent with swords and gold braid, came ashore. Mike was frightened, but the visitors proved friendly, saying they merely desired to plant a cross on the grave of a member of the Japanese royal house who’d died there years before. Climbing to the highest elevation the Japs planted a huge white cross and boarded their ship. All day the vessel remained in the harbour while little yellow men scuttled about the deck with bright instruments, making notes and observations. When they departed Mike’s curiosity led him to the “sacred spot,” only to find that the grave was a delusion and a myth.

Mike told of Jap poachers who raided the priceless sea otter herds when coastguards’ backs were turned. He told of marks of mysterious keel boats in the sand, and patches of grey paint scraped on the rocks, and of vessels that other Aleuts had seen emerge like whales from the waves to ride the waters and dive beneath the sea again.

He also recalled the occasion back in the ’30’s when, as a gesture of international amity, a Jap plane was to fly from Tokyo to Washington carrying felicitations from the Mikado to the President of the United States. Politely Tokyo asked permission to station a few observers along the Aleutian Islands to wave the plane along its course. A Japanese warship

dropped them off at strategic points, leaving each party a rowboat, supplies and large quantities of elaborate “fishing tackle” such as the Aleuts had never seen before, including lines marked in fathoms, with no hooks but lumps of lead at the end.



*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Truck convoys hurtle north along the completed war trail to Tokyo.





*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Canadian Alpine troops prepare to carry battle to mountainous sections of the Alaska Highway.

While the flight was unavoidably delayed these yellow-skinned observers laboured from dawn till dusk at their oars while others swung the lead-laden lines interminably. Then Tokyo apologized. So sorry—the season was so late the trip would have to be postponed. Ambassadors of both nations were photographed on the steps of the White House, the Jap warship picked up the assiduous “fishermen” and the goodwill flight was forgotten.

A year later a United States cutter was negotiating one of the dangerous passages north of Attu, using the latest available American navigation charts. Sounding her siren, swinging the lead and creeping along at a dangerous half dozen knots there loomed out of the fog a Jap warship. With a polite toot the warship cut across her bows at *twenty* knots to disappear in the fog with throbbing engines, leaving behind a yeasty foam that bespoke their speed and the accuracy of her charts. Those “goodwill fishermen” had done good work. How effective the work was was soon to be displayed in a bold and long-planned attempt to use these islands as stepping stones for an actual invasion of Alaska and the Pacific coast of North America.

## CHAPTER XIII

### War Trail to Tokyo



When Hirohito's yellow hordes, following up their sneak attack on Pearl Harbour, penned MacArthur's men in their foxholes on Bataan, overflowed in a riot of bloodshed and barbarism through the Dutch East Indies, and swarmed through the steaming jungles of Burma and the Malay Peninsula, every thinking man realized that nothing short of a miracle would prevent the tidal waves of war lapping over to this continent.

Dumbfounded at first by the swift and dynamic advance of these merciless Iroquois of the Pacific, Caucasian contempt for the yellow men withered before the appalling tragedies of Hong Kong and Singapore. With the sinking of Britain's mighty battlewagons, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, even the mainland of Australia became seriously menaced while, for the first time, the imminence of a New World invasion rose as a haunting spectre and Alaska, rushing ahead her long-neglected defences, found herself thrust into the position of strategic importance long since foreseen by the late General Billy Mitchell.

With the grey legions of the modern Attila at the very gates of Moscow, the United States fleet badly crippled at Hawaii, and the Kamchatka Peninsula threatening at any moment to explode in a volcanic blaze of fury the North Pacific suddenly assumed a vital role in global war strategy. With Japan hungrily eyeing Soviet bases in Kamchatka, always a serious threat to Tokyo; prepared the moment Russia broke under the hammer blows of the Nazis to carry fire and sword northward into America's back yard, the fate of all civilization rested on Stalin's ability to hold back these ravaging hordes and thereby prevent the northward surge of Japanese troops into Siberia and eventually Alaska, across the way.

Yet, despite the urgency of a military highway to ensure Alaska with a supply route independent of the now vulnerable sea lanes, the project continued to be stalemated, thanks to conflicting political and commercial interests and the long fight 'twixt American and Canadian interests over the location of the route. In vain Tony Dimond stormed the fortress at Washington; in vain Donald MacDonald thundered: "Not only is an empire

at stake; not only are a valiant frontier people threatened with all the horrors that have occurred in the Pacific, but we run the risk of losing the world's most strategic area from which a foul enemy may dominate all North America. Time is pressing! Let it not be said of us, as it has been said too frequently of others: 'Too little, and too late.'” Mr. MacDonald added that the hesitancy of a joint defence committee to touch the matter was due to violent dispute over the route.

To bring matters to a head President Roosevelt was finally driven to adopting stern measures to force a decision. On Monday, February 2nd, 1942, Brig.-General C. L. Sturdevant, Assistant Chief of Engineers, was called to the War Department at Washington and told that a decision had been reached to construct a highway to Alaska, and that a plan for surveys and construction must be submitted promptly. Two days later the plan was forthcoming, and on February 14th a directive issued to proceed with the work. On the previous day the United States Government intimated to the Canadian Government that the gravity of the Pacific situation made a land connection with Alaska imperative. Ottawa assented the same day with an alacrity that had previously been sadly lacking. On February 20th a new note of alarm appeared in Eastern editorial comment, the *Globe and Mail* of Toronto warning: “If Australia and New Zealand should be conquered then the Japanese will feel free to turn their attention to our Pacific coast.”

Meanwhile Colonel, later General, William Hoge, accompanied by another high-ranking United States army officer and an engineer of the Public Roads Administration, appeared at the head office of the Northern Alberta Railways at Edmonton and presented credentials to the General Manager, James McArthur. This little pastoral railway, with one branch thrusting northward to Fort McMurray, tapping the two-thousand-mile Athabasca-Mackenzie river system reaching to the Polar Sea, and the other meandering through the Peace River country to Grande Prairie and Dawson Creek, leisurely but efficiently moved grain and livestock and carried in supplies to the settlers. Its sixteen locomotives and six hundred employees, with a score of passenger cars and a few hundred boxcars, were more than sufficient for the calm, easy agrarian life, and never for a moment did this frontier railroad expect to be catapulted overnight into a strategic ribbon of steel linked with one of the most spectacular phases of the allied war effort.

“At first I could hardly credit my ears,” James McArthur related, stunned by the unbelievably vast projects the American officers unfolded. Projects that would completely revolutionize his railroad and crack the North asunder. “I realized what all this might mean for us, but I wanted to make sure. I checked the credentials, consulted the proper sources, and was convinced.”

Complete secrecy surrounded the arrival of the delegation, not even the Mounted Police or the Army being informed. The discussion lasted all that fateful morning. At noon the three men left for Dawson Creek, where they were driven over the old Fort St. John-Fort Nelson trail by Homer Keith of the Grande Prairie airport, and W. D. Miller, President of the Western Construction Company. After an aerial reconnaissance of the bomber road they returned to Edmonton and headed for Washington, the train being held up en route to enable them to get in touch with the capitol by phone.

On March 1st McArthur received a wire from Washington saying the supplies and equipment had already commenced to roll. Next day the first train arrived. Work on the Alaska Highway had begun!

But the highway, instead of following any of the routes laid out by the Road Commission, was to follow a new route "C" from Fort St. John to Whitehorse, welding the airports of the bomber road into links in an overland highway to Fairbanks. The magnitude of the prospective undertaking can only be appreciated by looking back to the primitive conditions that prevailed in the United States in pre-Civil War days and visualizing the army being called upon overnight to slash a wilderness road through forests, morasses and over mountains from New York to the heart of Kansas, or from Chicago to New Orleans. And to make the job still tougher one must remember that men could be put to work only on the two ends and a couple of intermediate places on the selected route. Here, too, one had to contend with the gripping tentacles of endless miles of muskeg, with the Frost King tossing in fifty- and sixty-below weather, causing one's breath to whistle in white plumes from pinched nostrils and condense in an icy breastplate on one's chest, freezing ears and hands to marble whiteness without warning.

"We'll go as fast as it is possible to do the job," was General Hoge's cautious comment when he'd looked over the unbroken wilderness terrain that lay ahead, still little changed since the day when Columbus discovered America. From first to last it was going to be a fight, with time and frost the prime factors, and an unfriendly and aroused nature, that thwarted man at every step, bent to the will of these invaders of the wilds.

At one-thirty on the bitterly cold morning of March 9th, while the thermometer registered thirty degrees below zero and a biting polar blizzard carried with it a white smother of drifting snow, the advance guard of the friendly invasion army, led by Colonel Robert D. Ingalls, stumbled from the "Sod-busters' Express" to gaze in consternation at the world of whiteness broken only by a shadowy huddle of frame houses. They had reached Dawson Creek at the end-of-steel where, years before, Hidson and I had snatched Andree, the medicine man, from the tepees of the Beavers. But to

coloured troops, some of whom were seeing snow and experiencing sub-zero temperatures for the first time in their lives, it might have been the end of the world. "Where do we stay?" wailed a bemused doughboy. "Take any snowdrift you like," the brazen-throated voice of the Major rose above the shriek of the wind as he dumped his bedroll on a yielding drift, "this one belongs to me."

Whipped by icy winds in the blackness of the night, frozen troopers fought the blasts to set up tents. Tent-pegs refused to penetrate the frozen ground, lines being finally tied to logs, boxes, and whatever weighty article was handy. As stoves were set up and lighted a six-inch pool of melted snow and ice formed in the centre of each tent where troops cursed and swore in a turkish bath of steaming vapour till a better drained site on sloping ground was found.

The first regiment to pull in to Dawson Creek was the 35th, the Quartermaster's unit remaining there to requisition and receive supplies and equipment, distribution being left to supply officers who availed themselves of the flatbed tractors lined up on the siding; shovels, tractors, cranes, scrapers and patrol graders moving out to the job under their own power, with drivers blowing on freezing hands and plucking icicles from eyebrows while temperatures varied from thirty degrees to forty-seven degrees below and settlers' horses and broncos bucked and reared with fright as these strange mechanical monsters roared and coughed their way over wilderness trails. But the biting frost was a blessing in disguise since it enabled the advance guard of the road construction army to penetrate into the heart of the wilderness ere, in mistaken friendship, the sun could smile and convert frozen trails into quagmires of clutching gumbo and yielding muskeg.

At Washington three United States Army Generals had been entrusted with the herculean job of completing in less than a year an enterprise which the Highway Commissioners reported was a five, or six, years' undertaking; the project being divided into two military zones; a northern command with headquarters at Fairbanks, Alaska, and a southern command situated at my old stamping grounds at Fort St. John.

Appointed to the southern command on June 6th, later to be given complete charge of the entire Northwest Command, Major-General James A. "Patsy" O'Connor was frequently to be seen by his men bouncing through the muskeg in a jeep, his face and uniform blackened with grime, right behind the lead "cats" as they forged through the primeval wilderness uprooting the trees in their path. Short, spry and active, he had graduated from West Point in 1907 and had later been given the work of tunnelling Corregidor Fortress in Manila Harbour.

In charge of the northern command in the Yukon, Brig.-General William M. Hoge, a tall, broad-shouldered and granite-faced native of Booneville, Mo., came to the North with a Distinguished Service Medal for building pontoon bridges under German shellfire in the first World War. Supervising all preliminary operations at Fort St. John and Fort Nelson he returned to the United States in August to head a combat division of engineers when the two commands were merged into the Northwest Command and General O'Connor took over, establishing his headquarters at Whitehorse.

Famous as one of the most expert shots in the American Army, Brig.-General Clarence L. Sturdevant, Assistant Chief of U.S. Army Engineers, looked after construction and blueprinting of the highway back at Washington, translating the urgent requests of field Generals Hoge and O'Connor into countless train loads of supplies, jeeps, bulldozers, concrete mixers, gasoline, regiments of soldiers and allocating shipping routes. Flying from Washington he journeyed over the beginnings of the road to view the problems with understanding eyes, and see the highway that was said to be an impossibility snake through the matted jungles with seven league boots. Assisting General O'Connor as *aide-de-camp* was Lieutenant Richard L. Neuberger; Major-General Eugene Reybold, Chief of Army Engineers, heading the army of road builders, with Colonel John W. Wheeler in charge of construction, and Thomas H. MacDonald and J. S. Bright representing the Public Roads Administration. Canada was represented by Major-General W. W. Foster, D.S.O., special commissioner for defence projects in the Northwest.

In undertaking this mighty frontier project American officers and the United States Army Engineering Corps were merely living up to old established traditions, many of the great United States frontier undertakings having been accomplished by the nation's soldiers.

One of the most important explorations in American history was that made by the Lewis and Clark expedition after the Louisiana Purchase. These frontiersmen and their followers mapped out half a continent and extended the dominion of the Stars and Stripes to the Pacific Ocean. Meriwether Lewis was a U.S. Army Captain, William Clark, a Lieutenant, while all their men held army ranks, as did those who now plunged into the wilderness to slash the military highway from Dawson Creek to the heart of Alaska. Surveys for the first transcontinental railroads were undertaken by that same corps of army engineers who now undertook to buck the British Columbia forests. In the blazing heat of summer suns, in winter's icy grip, under constant threat of Indian arrows, U.S. Engineers with rod and transit sighted the passes followed by the Union Pacific over the continental divide. Surveying passes through which passengers now ride in every comfort in

luxurious Pullmans Captain J. W. Gunnison and his company were massacred by hostile Utes. The army was a mighty influence in settling the entire United States frontier. Kit Carson scouted for blue-coated cavalry columns. Phil Sheridan and U.S. Grant served their military apprenticeship in the western wilderness, while Colonel Kearney and his Missouri volunteers opened up the hostile hunting grounds of Pawnees, Kiowas and Comanches from Fort Leavenworth to the gaunt hills of Mexico. In more modern times this undying pioneering strain has been a persistent thread in the fabric of army activities, as instanced in the construction of the Panama Canal and the Bonneville Dam across the Columbia River. Now, once again, the American army was pitting its might against what was to be America's Last Frontier.

While a city of army tents mushroomed from Pouce Coupe's snow-blanketed prairie, and Dawson Creek's five-cents-to-a-dollar square-fronted store became temporary headquarters for the new army of occupation, Colonel Hoge lost no time in rushing troops forward to an advance base already prepared at Fort Nelson by a rattling cavalcade of six-wheeled lorries ere the frost went out of the ground.

Once again Fort St. John settlers were greeted with the unexpected spectacle of motorized transport hurtling northward to some undefined spot in the heart of the jungle. But, unlike the ill-fated and ludicrous Bedaux expedition, this amazing eruption of brown-shirted doughboys and coloured troops flashed past at express speed and with such driving efficiency that, before the break-up on April 10th, a U.S. Engineer regiment, twelve hundred strong, was established in a camp site at the erstwhile lonely fur outpost of Fort Nelson.

Marooned Fort St. John settlers welcomed these newcomers from across the border with open arms, being projected into wealth beyond their wildest dreams. Conveniently situated across the Peace, with river communication with the railroad at Peace River, Fort St. John became, overnight, the jumping-off place for thousands of troops, contractors, pilots, surveyors, mechanics, guides, cat-skinners and truck drivers, whose white tents rose in serrated streets, known as Fort Alcan, upon the prairie.

To exiled settlers who, lacking markets, had for twenty years been literally taking in each other's washing, this unexpected eruption furnished a cash market at boom prices for all their beef and produce; employment for themselves and their teams at unheard of figures, and work along the line for everyone, down to teen-aged waterboys, who'd rarely seen the colour of a dollar bill, at seventy-five dollars a month and board. Old Beatton, now grizzled and grey and long since retired to the isolation of his cabin in the

valley, vainly tried to enthuse while confiding to his cronies that the country was going to the dogs.

Penned up on their reservation to the northward the ragged remnants of the once-powerful Beaver tribe gathered around the ageing Wolf and gazed with smouldering eyes and tight-drawn lips as convoy after convoy of American troops hurtled through their erstwhile hunting grounds without so much as giving them a passing glance.

While the population of Fort St. John pyramided from a few hundred disgruntled settlers into a thriving town of ten thousand, Dawson Creek at the end-of-steel daily added new spurs to accommodate the lines of flatcars loaded with bulldozers, trucks, cranes, giant scrapers and bulging boxcars. As the station increased four-fold in size a boom frontier town of cafes, pool-rooms, frame hotels, warehouses and barber shops arose to the eternal tattoo of carpenters' hammers. Within a miraculously short time the hamlet of Dawson Creek with its three hundred population became a rip-snorting frontier town of ten thousand, with a floating population ever passing to and fro.

Hardly did the shipment of equipment for the Alaska Highway get under way than endless miles of steel pipe commenced to arrive at Fort McMurray and Peace River for transportation by sternwheeler, *bateaux*, motor-propelled barge and winter road to Fort Norman near the Arctic Circle, whence the oil discovered there by Theo Link of the Imperial Oil Company in 1920, was to be piped five hundred miles through the land of the mountain goat and grizzly to Whitehorse to furnish a back door fuel oil supply to American planes, jeeps and trucks in Alaska. A well-preserved military secret, submerged at the time in the more spectacular military highway, this hundred-and-thirty-million-dollar enterprise under the unimaginative name of the Canol (Canadian Oil) Project was to cause fireworks to explode on the floor of Congress a year and a half later.

For the present the fireworks were all reserved for those whose decision was responsible for routing the highway by this new and unforeseen route east of the Rockies, which had not even been shown on highway road commission maps save as a red-dotted airway. Complaints couched in terms of bitter and unbelieving indignation piled into Washington thick and fast. Promptly the Alaskan International Highway Commission wired President Roosevelt:

We are delighted to hear through the Press that the road to Alaska is to become a reality and that the army has belatedly accepted the view which your Commission has been urging upon it for several years stop However we know that the Army's



making a serious blunder in the selection of the route if it is to be built as reported and would strongly urge that you request the Army to confer with this Commission which has studied the subject thoroughly for four years stop The route reported to have been selected by the Army cannot possibly be built within the time limit supposedly announced for it.

On top of this shower of complaints came a statement from the Hon. George Black, member for the Yukon, and others, that the selection of the Fort St. John route was a tragic blunder, and that for twelve hundred miles it would have to be laid over quaking tundra and bottomless muskegs, where it would probably sink under heavy traffic when the frost went.

Writing in *Travel Magazine* of New York at this time (the article appearing four months later, in June, 1942 issue) I stated:

That this route will present problems in mastering the deep muskegs and bogs goes without saying. I remember once losing two pack-horses that became so deeply bogged it was impossible to extricate them, making it necessary to shoot the animals. But there is nothing that capable military engineers can't overcome, and I have seen the Grand Trunk Railway west of Edson, and through the Yellowhead Pass, laid over worse terrain than this. There is one distinct advantage that Mr. Black and the original Highway Commission have apparently overlooked. The military setbacks of the past two years have shown how distances have shrunk, and how easy it is with transport planes, parachute troops and carriers to cut lines of communication previously considered safe, a fact no doubt considered by military authorities at Washington in deciding on this route. Both of the other routes suggested are closer to the Pacific, and would be vulnerable from air and sea attack via the Pacific coast, while the new road, linked with the mid-West as well as with coastal highways, is situated five hundred miles inland, with the Rocky Mountain ramparts as a protective barrier between it and the coast.

The bitter opposition of Seattle and other coastal cities to this route isn't hard to understand. Most of Alaska's shipping and business control is centred in Seattle, consequently the original tourist highway was planned to run through the tourist-catering states of California, Oregon and Washington, and on up through equally tourist-minded British Columbia, which controls most of the Yukon-bound business. Most of the seasonal

employees of the Alaskan canneries are hired in Seattle which clears around fifty million dollars worth of Alaska-bound cargo annually, the street passing through the docks being known as "Alaska Way," while in Pioneer Square a huge totem pole commemorates Seattle's role in the development of this territory. The Northern Commercial Company—the Hudson's Bay Company of Alaska—has its head office in that city. In fact, since that day in '97 when the *Portland* discharged the first ton of gleaming Klondyke gold upon her waterfront, Seattle has been a sort of stepmother to that land of eternal glaciers, and can trace much of her development to that connection.

The selection of route "C" would not only switch a vast volume of profitable trade from Seattle to Edmonton, the capital of Alberta, and place that city in a particularly favoured position, but it would contribute considerably to the earnings of the Canadian Pacific Railway, a potent force in Canadian politics and economics. Thus this railroad would not only derive more of the long-haul business from the industrial Eastern states, but, having recently acquired control of Grant McConachie's Yukon Southern Air Transport operating along route "C," it would be in a highly-favourable position to compete with Pan-American Airways at Seattle.

Testifying in support of route "C" before a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee General C. L. Sturdevant asserted that the Fort St. John route had been selected "for the purpose of connecting the airfields," while Lieutenant F. Brewer of the Air Corps Ferry Command pointed out that the only way to put in vast quantities of gasoline required at Watson Lake and Fort Nelson airports was to fly it in, and that the road was vital to the efficient operation and supplying of the bomber road.

While more and more troops hurtled forward to push the highway ahead an agreement that was a model of mutual friendship, trust and understanding became the subject of an exchange of notes between J. Pierrepont Moffatt, United States Minister at Ottawa, and Prime Minister Mackenzie King of Canada.

The United States agreed to complete and pay the full cost of the highway under contracts made by the United States Public Roads Administration without regard to whether the contractors were American or Canadian. The United States Government also agreed to maintain the highway until six months after the war, and to turn it over to Canada, free of charge, to become an integral part of the Canadian highway system open to United States citizens without discrimination.

Canada, on the other hand, agreed to furnish the right of way; to waive import duties, sales tax, income tax and immigration regulations, and to permit those in charge to obtain timber, gravel and rock from any Crown lands adjacent to the road. The United States Army would first rush through

an initial pioneer road that would afterwards be converted into a permanent highway by the U.S. Public Roads Administration.

## CHAPTER XIV

### The Highway Marches On



While the conflict over route "C" continued to rage troops in ever-increasing numbers were being rushed to other points, to attack the wilderness from Fairbanks, Watson Lake, and Whitehorse. The first troops the 18th, the 93rd (coloured) and the 340th reached crag-shadowed Skagway, Alaska, on April 18th. Soon docks at Anchorage and Skagway were piled with a heterogeneous accumulation of mechanical equipment the like of which the North had never seen before: giant bulldozers, trucks in endless profusion, mountains of gasoline drums, shallow draft, diesel-engined boats, cranes, jeeps, concrete mixers and portable electric plants till it seemed as though the limited capacities of the autocratic and much despised Alaska Government Railway and the single track, narrow-gauge White Pass and Yukon line over the old gold-seekers trail of '98 would be overwhelmed.

The twenty-foot tide at wind-swept Skagway, where the effigy of "Soapy" Smith, the town's one-time Lord of Misrule, still stares across the bar at "Jeff's Place," made it necessary to pull up the host of loaded barges at high tide, beach them and unload them with spluttering crawler cranes that scuttled about the hard sandy beach as the water retired. To handle supplies more efficiently the hundred-and-ten-mile White Pass and Yukon Railway with its twelve locomotives weighing from sixty to a hundred tons apiece, and dating back from four to forty years, was taken over by the army, the engines being promptly named by facetious doughboys for sweethearts and movie stars. "Mae West" was to be seen snorting and panting in a way that certainly libelled its pulchritudinous namesake as it hauled a string of cars laden with jeeps, troops and bulldozers over the 2,900 foot divide. To aid "Mae West" and other wheezing locomotives more engines were brought up from an abandoned ghost town in Colorado.

Rushed to Fairbanks and Whitehorse, construction troops were soon sweating through mosquito-ridden jungles to make contact with each other and with road gangs working up from the south. From four hundred Whitehorse's population rose to fifteen thousand, eighty per cent of them

Americans, referred to as the “Army of Occupation.” But there was no sting in the appellation since they brought with them a genial friendliness and an era of new-found prosperity. With no night life, no “place across the tracks,” few girls and fewer means of recreation, with liquor almost unobtainable and bootleg “moose milk” retailing at thirty-five dollars a quart, Whitehorse, in the words of a Lone Star state trucker, was a boom town without a bang. Hotel rooms were occupied by two or three at a time; Mounted Police handling Canadian wrongdoers, while American military police looked after their own.

Many of these American troops were youngsters who’d never had a job that amounted to anything; many had faced frustration and fought through the throes of the depression. Here, however, was a frontier job whose very magnificence thrilled these lads from Brooklyn, Yonkers and Padunk; these lads from Georgia, Oklahoma and “Joisey” with a fierce pride and awakened memories of backwoods ancestors with powder-horns and long Kentucky rifles. “They took to the job like ducks to water,” remarked one of the engineers with pride, “the boys simply didn’t know the word ‘can’t.’” Consequently, construction work leapt ahead, excelling the most sanguine anticipations.

To survey and locate the highway ahead of the construction troops R. A. N. Johnston, forester in charge of aerial surveys, and K. H. Siddall, chief location engineer of the Ontario Department of Highways, flew north with a special camera fitted to their plane capable of taking miles of photos from eight thousand to ten thousand feet on seventy-five-foot rolls ten inches wide. Since poor water made it impossible to develop them on the spot they were flown nightly to Spokane, Washington, brought back a couple of days later, placed side by side, subjected to stereoscopic examination and the shortest route selected with due consideration to muskegs and other impediments. So swiftly did the doughboys herd on their trail that the road staked by Siddall and Johnston was frequently broken through; construction gangs wallowing forward with an engineer hanging precariously onto the step of a bulldozer directing its rough progress through the virgin forest with a compass.

From the line laid out by the aeroplane pictures engineers marked a centre line on the ground, clearing just enough brush to make it visible. Then a twenty-ton bulldozer would come snorting down the line, pushing over trees like some huge antediluvian monster, followed by a couple more with a rear-guard of two others thrusting aside trees, *brulé*, tangled masses of interwoven roots, boulders and debris like a snowplough clearing drifts.<sup>[7]</sup> Strung out behind for thirty to fifty miles were soldier units, khaki-clad men who wielded saws, picks and made the forest ring with swinging axes as

they chopped down trees for culverts, hauled gravel, cleared slash and hacked out a rough trail road while waterboys passed from group to group baling water from galvanized pails to quench their constant thirst and leather-throated officers bawled out orders.

Bad muskeg was overcome by deviations that followed ridges; by gouging vast trenches and filling in with rock, and by felling timber, piling it, brushing the highway five feet deep and building the road atop the corduroy. Gravel was available at convenient spots, and while there was rarely any tunnelling to be done seven hundred bridges had to be built from local timber, some of the streams being two thousand feet in width and liable to be transformed overnight by melting snows from shallow rivulets to roaring torrents. Usually, and especially in rocky areas, the stunted pines weren't deeply rooted, roots brooming out in shallow fans, easily brushed aside by inexorable bulldozers. The same applied to the dwarf spruce of the muskegs, though patches of heavy-boled cottonwoods attempted a determined, though short-lived stand, against the mechanical monsters invading their cloistered recesses. Troops soon learned not to disturb permanently frozen ground, leaving the centuries-old humus in place as insulation, covering it with brush and trees cleared from the sides and filling over the whole with gravel and crushed rock. So successfully did army locaters duck around muskegs that in a two-hundred-and-sixty-five-mile stretch reported to be impassable they crossed less than four miles of bog.

With frenzied speed the watchword, the work went on unceasingly day and night, seven days a week, the gloomy forest reverberating to the staccato roar of lumbering bulldozers, tractors, concrete mixers and other mechanical aids to road building that had taken possession of the erstwhile aloof and silent wilderness. Patrol scouts, flown ahead with hand-saws and axes, bridged streams in advance of the relentlessly-oncoming bulldozers, while mahogany-visaged Indians looked on, amazed at this invasion of their hunting grounds and not a little fearful of these mechanical monsters that seemed animated by some remorseless and vengeful spirit. "I thought," Chief Mattawa of the Fort Nelson Slaveys confided, "it was the old devil himself kicking down trees and digging up the earth."

To the aboriginal owners of the land the coloured troops were a constant source of interest. "*Tipiskow Inninew!*—Midnight man!" gasped a dusky Slavey, seeing his first Negro. "Then ah guess," the coloured lad chuckled as he studied the Indian's mahogany countenance, "yo' mus' be jes' about a qua'ter to twelve yo'self."

Looking for stray Negroes who became hopelessly lost if they strayed far from road or camp soon became a major occupation for Indian guides and scouts. Fear of wolves was another horror that seemed to beset the

coloured troops who, at first, insisted on building sleeping stages high above the ground, or constructing huts up in the trees like the Dyaks of Borneo. Always they were ready to laugh good-humouredly at themselves and their fears. Seeing snow for the first time, and hearing of Jap raids, a coloured trooper from Georgia turned a wry face to his officer. "Say, Boss," he exclaimed, "if them thar Japs come over here a-bombin' they jest couldn't miss us pore darkies—we all'd show up jest like flies in a milk bottle!"

As bitter forty-seven-below weather, that froze a streak of oil poured onto the snow into a bar as hard as iron, broke before the impact of torrid summer suns and mountain snows melted, puny streams were converted overnight into roaring torrents, sweeping everything before them as they rose eight, ten and even fifteen feet in the space of a few hours. From the moss emerged voracious mosquitoes in torturing clouds, biting savagely through khaki shirts and drill overalls, leaving white welts on tormented skins and acquiring for themselves the name of "bush bombers."

Thawing snow and driving rains converted the muskegs into sucking quagmires of oozy oily blackness. Tropical temperatures changed the matted spruce forests into fiery furnaces, the nights becoming one long, droning torment to those who'd failed to find mosquito bars of gauze to drape about their beds, while the Stygian darkness, which pressed down like some living thing, became vocal with the mysterious noises of the night, the grrk! grrk! of countless millions of amatory frogs, the whirring wings of ducks and the eerie hoot of the night-owl. Mail was infrequent, recreation non-existent and labour incessant.

Exasperation piled on exasperation as contractors found themselves thwarted in getting overlooked machinery and spare parts for stalled equipment, thanks to war-time priorities, red tape and restrictions. A big shovel and its contingent twenty trucks and forty truck drivers were idle for weeks while a purple-faced contractor argued for days with a manufacturer in Detroit by jammed and inefficient radio connection over priority numbers for supplying a vital shovel part. Another contractor, when only two hundred and fifty tires out of an order for *one thousand, two hundred and fifty* came through owing to red tape and priorities, was forced to place much of his equipment on the deadline. Considering endless similar tales of grief heard all along the road it is a wonder it was ever completed. For there is no rock more impregnable than red tape and officialdom.

As the work went on pilots of Alaska-bound bombers, winging their way through the skies, looked down on thin, pencil-like lines stretching tenuously through the dark evergreens that blanketed the land from end to end, drawing daily closer to each other. Here and there were busy anthills of

military activity slashing the green carpet with ugly scars and unsightly blotches.

The wilderness through which these doughty doughboys toiled and sweated beneath broiling suns was a dark, forbidding panorama of everlasting forest, pierced here and there by bejewelled lakes that mirrored an azure sky, the flaming pyrotechnics of sub-Arctic sunset and the diamond-drenched violet of approaching night. A harsh, stern land where none but the strong could survive. A land of illimitable distances, nameless lakes, and brutish rivers that burst from the breasts of surrounding peaks. A land unchanged from the days when the first white explorers had set foot upon the shores of this continent.

As they hacked through black-massed battalions of spruce and serrated rows of colonnaded pines still others rose in a seemingly impenetrable sage-green barrier ahead, parading in mass formation like an inanimate army determined by the very weight of numbers to resist and wear down the threatening forces of invasion. Now and then some lordly moose would emerge from the matted wall of evergreens to stare in silent wonder at the desecration of the wilds and plunge with palmated antlers back into the greenery. Curious black bears, ambling from the woods, boldly raided food caches and haunted the outskirts of the tented towns to feast on the remnants of doughboys' meals consigned to woodland garbage heaps. Cottontail rabbits, background of the economy of the woods and fur trade, would hop in long-eared alarm ahead of snorting bulldozers, lacking the sense to dodge their on-coming path. In some spruce-fringed clearing, dotted with old camp circles and the whitening skulls of buffalo, twin columns of denuded cottonwoods, towering forty feet in lonely isolation, would meet invading eyes, their tops bearing a hollowed tree-trunk wherein rested the remains of some Beaver chieftain whose moccasined feet had once threaded these dark aisles in search of moose or the brown pelt of the beaver.

Back off the route, in a wilderness apparently devoid of life, there was a teeming population continuously on the move. In the cloistered underbrush slinking denizens of the wild preyed upon each other in their fight for survival; the slinking wolf upon the caribou, the yellow-eyed lynx and fox upon the long-eared cottontail, bushy-tailed marten, ermine and owl upon mice, and the hawk upon the rabbit. Night and day, with relentless activity, the primeval battle went on unceasingly. Elusive creatures, their every movement furtive, light of foot, springy, effortless of gait, went their soundless ways; grey ghosts that materialized and vanished on the instant, melting into the shadows at the sight of man to stand, watching him, from skilfully selected cover.



Herding everywhere on the heels of the army came a horde of contractors operating on a cost-plus-fixed-fee basis, all expenses being refunded in connection with the work. All contracts being handled by the United States Public Roads Administration, the principal contractors comprised the E. W. Elliott Company and the Dowell Construction Company of Seattle; the C. F. Lyttle Company and Green Construction Company of Sioux City and Des Moines, Iowa; the Oakes Construction Company of St. Paul, and the R. Melville Smith Company of Toronto, which, with associate companies, numbered fifty-four in all.

Owing to the wide disparity in wages paid American and Canadian workers an unworkable attempt was made by the Canadian Government to segregate Canadian workers in camps between Dawson Creek and Fort St. John, and from Fort Nelson for a distance of two hundred and seventy-five miles westward, other sections being awarded to American contractors. Since American and Canadian workers were bound to meet, and the first thing they'd discuss was their relative wages, it wasn't long ere the latter developed a bitter feeling at the preferred position of their American co-workers.

Take for instance the Canadian truck driver who was paid seventy-five cents an hour for the first forty-eight hours, and time and a half in excess of that. He meets a truck driver working for a United States contractor and learns that his counterpart is paid a dollar and forty cents an hour for the first forty-eight hours, and two dollars and ten cents an hour thereafter, all in appreciated American funds.

The Canadian trucker received for his seventy-seven hour work week \$68.63 in Canadian funds, while the U.S. trucker, similarly employed for the same time, received \$123.70 in U.S. funds, equivalent to \$136.07 in Canadian money. In almost all categories the higher rates paid U.S. workers were proportionate, while in the matter of food and living accommodation the Canadian felt he lived less well than his co-worker from the land of the Stars and Stripes.

All workers on the road were charged \$1.25 a day for board, deducted in the currency in which their wages were calculated, making the American's daily contribution \$1.38. But luxuries such as chicken dinners, olives and an abundance of green vegetables which relieved the monotony of American mess halls left a good deal to be desired from the Canadian worker's standpoint. At first U.S. camps, under orders, refused to feed Canadian workers who might find themselves stranded at American camps at meal times. Canadian camps, in retaliation, soon refused to serve Americans. These difficulties were soon ironed out, but the Canadian worker had other grievances. The U.S. worker on the highway wasn't subject to the

withholding tax imposed in the U.S.A., therefore his pay cheque didn't reflect the exigencies of war as did the Canadian's with its deductions. Over such grievances the Canadian worker soon became vocal, asserting loudly that if the C.C.F. were in power such inequalities wouldn't occur, a fact that may yet be reflected in the future polls of the Dominion.

To settlers long marooned and forgotten, and to frustrated Canadian workmen who'd ridden the rods during the depression in unavailing search for work, this sudden accession of prosperity brought in the wake of the American troops caused a violent swing towards the elimination of the International boundary and a political and economic union with the United States that would make one country of the whole of North America, causing American money to flow northward—ending forever the long stagnation and picayune thinking that had characterized Canadian money barons in the past. Northerners pointed to the strangling of the Northland by British vested interests, as exemplified by the Hudson's Bay Company, whose sole aim in the past had been to follow the old British axiom of pre-revolutionary days, keeping back settlement and retaining the Northwest as a preserve for game, Indian hunters and big fur interests, thus holding the North in a state of suspended animation.

Returning from an inspection of the road a U.S. Army officer remarked: "Alaska is like a cocked pistol pointed at the heart of Japan. The trigger is being drawn back, and the safety catch is off. The Alaska Highway will soon supply the bullets. Day by day," he continued enthusiastically, "you can see a new corridor of light breaking through the timber where young American lads—lawyers, truck drivers, medical students, clerks and fishermen—are sweating side by side, driving through America's Burma Road."

As the work rushed ahead the conflict in Washington and Seattle didn't slacken, but seemed to grow on its own volition. With the pioneer road forging northward by leaps and bounds delegate Dimond introduced a bill for immediate construction along the "A" route. Meanwhile another proposal, emanating from neglected and sidetracked Prince George, four hundred miles west of Fort St. John, gained powerful army and administration backing. Army troops were promptly rushed to this sleepy and disappointed little town on the Fraser to begin surveys for a possible railroad along the "B" route to the Yukon border and thence to Fairbanks. Already army supply chiefs were beginning to favour a railroad in view of the possibilities Alaska was unfolding as a springboard for an offensive across the Aleutian Islands, aimed at Tokyo. If it proved necessary to station three hundred thousand troops in Alaska for defensive purposes it would, they estimated, mean a daily shipment of ten thousand tons of supplies. Fifteen trains of only thirty-odd cars, hauled by standard locomotives could,

it was argued, pull this load every twenty-four hours without difficulty, and without the wear and tear a far smaller tonnage would entail on the highway. Other plans envisaged the conversion of the White Pass Railroad to a double track, standard gauge road, and the extension of the Alaska Government Railway to the shores of the Bering Sea.

The highway enterprise had already been likened to a battlefield and as such, like any field of combat, exacted its daily toll of human life. A pontoon ferry, crossing Charlie Lake near Fort St. John, capsized in a sudden squall, drowning two officers and ten men. Eight more were drowned crossing the treacherous waters of the Peace in flood stage. A tug, towing a barge load of equipment to Wrangel, was lost with all hands in a howling storm. Other workers were crushed or maimed beneath overturning bulldozers and tractors. Bridges, streams and many spots along the highway bear the name of some ill-fated serf of freedom who gave his all to make the highway a reality. The brooding wilderness does not surrender easily. Ruthless, with passionless eyes, it exacts its inexorable toll from those who dare disturb its immemorial silence.

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[7] Typical of the vast amount of mechanical equipment used in this onslaught on the wilderness the 35th Regiment was supplied with the following: twenty heavy and twenty-four light gas tractors and bulldozers; six pulled road graders; three patrol graders; six rooter ploughs; six twelve-yard carrying scrapers; ninety-three half-ton dump trucks; a six-ton prime mover truck; seven four-ton cargo trucks; nine two-and-a-half-ton trucks; twenty-five jeeps, ten command cars; one sedan; twelve three-quarter-yard pick-up trucks; a truck train; two half-yard shovels, and pontoons, all new equipment being used. Added to this were portable electric generating units, concrete mixers, compressors, ploughs, gas-driven saws, pile drivers and electric welding machines.

## CHAPTER XV

### Alaska Strikes at Hirohito



While ten thousand American troops, five thousand civilian workers, and seven thousand groaning motor trucks were toiling and moiling through the tropic heat of British Columbia's moss-bearded forests the long-awaited Jap thrust at Alaska came out of a murky dawn sky. With bursting bombs casting a fiery glare amidst the clouds of smoke and shattered wreckage that spewed skywards from the naval base of Dutch Harbour, carrier-based Jap bombers struck on June 3rd, 1942.

Emboldened by their stupendous successes in the South Pacific, and driven to white-hot anger by the bombing of Tokyo by Jimmy Doolittle—one of Alaska's native sons—Hirohito's war lords had launched a two-pronged attack headed directly for the Pacific coast of North America.

One prong was to run afoul of Uncle Sam's navy at Midway, and reap disaster. And, but for the grace of God and General Buckner's strategy, the other prong would have been running Alaska from Governor Gruening's house at Juneau and sending their bombing squadrons south to strike at Seattle and San Francisco, only four hours' bombing distance from Alaska's southern bases.

On that memorable June morning, shrouded in those low-lying clouds that haunt the Aleutians, a Japanese force of two carriers, three cruisers, eight destroyers and four loaded troop transports that spoke eloquently of intended invasion, moved down the deserted chain of volcanic islands. Behind them they had already placed ashore a landing party at Attu, seized its little radio station and imprisoned the local Indian Department's school teacher along with Mike Hudakof and his ninety-five Aleut tribesmen. On uninhabited Aggatu they'd left another landing party. Between them and their goal lay only Dutch Harbour and the more strongly-fortified Kodiak Island.

Ploughing through the ebony waters off-shore, screened by fog banks from Dutch Harbour the carriers released fifteen fighters and four bombers emblazoned with the Rising Sun which roared low over the settlement and sent their bombs cascading down. As warehouses erupted into flame there

was spirited but relatively weak resistance. Jap officers emitted throaty chuckles. The work of their espionage agents had proved correct. There was little to fear from a full-dress attack.

As bombers circled and fighters dropped contemptuously lower to reconnoitre the unexpected happened. Dumbfounded Jap pilots found themselves pounced on from behind by land-based pursuit planes and torpedo bombers. Like a swarm of angry hornets war planes bearing Uncle Sam's insignia came blasting at them, hurtling up from the westward. Roaring in for a second attempt, the Zeros were sent crashing in flaming pyrotechnics into the sea by more U.S. fighters winging from this mysterious and unsuspected air base.

Swiftly the alarm flashed southward, the entire Pacific coast from Juneau to the Panama Canal, girding itself for the expected Japanese invasion, was placed in a state of rigorous alert. In British Columbia, stretching from the Alaska Panhandle south to the American border, radio stations were silenced and defence forces prepared with gritted teeth to meet whatever eventualities might arise. Panama Canal officials reported that the alert, enforced since June the 2nd, had been tightened in line with similar measures taken the length of the United States. Everywhere the greatest tension prevailed as the New World awaited, agog, further manifestations of Japan's aggressive intentions towards this continent, hourly expecting word of a major naval engagement in the North Pacific. In a speech in Ontario, Howard Green, M.P. for Vancouver south, voiced his belief that the Japanese attack on Dutch Harbour precluded an attempt to invade the North American continent, while Secretary of War Stimson attempted to quieten the alarm by cautioning that the United States must expect reprisals for the air raid on Tokyo.

Outwitted and confused by the aerial attack from the rear, the invading Nipponese armada returned to Kiska, keeping well out of range of planes based at the mystery airfield, which had escaped the observation of their spies and scouting planes.

The explanation of the slim margin by which Alaska was saved can now be traced to two innocent salmon-packing canneries which were the covers for one of the Alaska Defence Command's most remarkable achievements—the secret construction of two hidden airfields to guard Dutch Harbour from a repetition of the sneak attack on Pearl Harbour.

“Even after Pearl Harbour our publicized naval stronghold at Dutch Harbour did not have one protecting airfield within eight hundred miles. Not one—and the Japs knew this!” explained Major-General Buckner. “I selected Umnak and Cold Bay as two satisfactory air base sites. Umnak is

situated sixty miles beyond Dutch Harbour, and Cold Bay eighty miles closer to the Alaskan mainland.”

To help the deceit along General Buckner continued, Colonel Lawrence V. Castner, a member of his staff, named the two airport projects “The Blair Packing Company” and “Saxton and Company,” and throughout these took on the outward guise of innocent salmon-packing operations, while in all official correspondence the jobs were entitled simply “Project ‘A’.”

“All Umnak and Cold Bay mail was addressed to these fake companies, and our radio messages conformed to the picture,” General Buckner added. “Engineers worked furiously despite ice and high gales to install a steel landing mat within two months. The Japs didn’t give us much more time than that, but when they came sneaking in force down the Aleutians under cover of heavy fog on June 3rd we had pursuit and bomber planes on the two fields. They came within ninety miles of one of the two secret airfields—Blair and Saxton—while their carrier planes scouted the island chain. Because they brought four transports loaded with troops it is a fair assumption that they intended occupation. They attacked Dutch Harbour with carrier planes, and it would have been a good choice for their landing operations. However, in the midst of their well-planned assault the Japs found themselves attacked from behind by land-based pursuit planes, and bombed and torpedoed by land-based bombers. That upset their rickshaw. Here their spy work, which had made Pearl Harbour possible, had failed.”

While the Japs holed up in barabaras cleverly blended with the drab grey hillsides on Attu, Aggatu and Kiska, the Alaska Defence Command promptly organized to oust them from the newly-seized American territory. Prowling through mists and williwaws the General dispatched another secret expedition westward to establish a foothold on the Andreanofs from which to blast the Nips from their Aleutian holdings. Desperately short of shipping, the secret flotilla made up of coastal vessels, discarded tugs, abandoned barges and whatever dilapidated craft could be gathered together, was loaded with men and equipment. Good fortune in dark skies and teeming rain kept Jap scout planes grounded until the motley flotilla had reached its objective and discharged men, machines, bulldozers and landing mats on the barren beach. Two weeks from the day of departure sweat-drenched men had levelled off a landing strip, spread steel mats, and the first green and tan bombers with glassed-in noses dropped through a rift in the clouds and fogbanks to a landing.

Against a thousand odds, against the worst weather the unfriendly gods of the Aleutians could marshal against them; against dangerous icing, and unpredictable williwaws that snatched control from pilots’ hands and spun big bombers on their backs as though they were feathers, Uncle Sam’s war

eagles blasted Jap torpedo boats, cruisers and landing barges, and rained down a curtain of hell on grovelling Nips and shore installations, sending them reeling back for a last prolonged and determined stand on Attu, which managed to hang on grimly till the spring of '43.

If anything was needed to raise to almost fanatical heights the frenzied work on the highway the thwarted attack on Alaska certainly did the trick. With almost unbelievable celerity the corridor through the unending, monotonous green miles of matted timber lengthened. Bridging the Sickannie, khaki-clad troops pushed westward along the Prophet River, erstwhile rendezvous for Chief Bellyfull's Sickannies. Heavy rains and bad weather had kept the southern advance guard bottled up near Fort Nelson till the latter part of June, when they broke loose, averaging three miles of road building a day, traversing some of the toughest country, including a hundred and sixty miles of rugged Rocky Mountain terrain. Two narrow passes had to be crossed—Summit Lake, the highest point along the route with an elevation of four thousand, three hundred and fifty feet, and Muncho Lake, a favourite resort for Indian trappers. On September 26th a bulldozer driven by a member of the 340th Regiment from Whitehorse almost collided with another driven by one of the 35th Regiment working northeast at a point three hundred and five miles west of Fort Nelson. The north and south had met. The seemingly impenetrable wilderness barrier had been bridged!

Some of the units had brought along their regimental bands, which helped bolster the morale of tired troops and provided a strange note as they echoed through scarlet-tinted sub-Arctic forests or back from unnamed peaks while soldiers filed past open field kitchens for evening mess. Army officers and troops had been supplied with sleeping bags, blankets, folding cots; regular pyramid army tents equipped with small wood-burning stoves, being used to house them. The contractors set up large tents, or portable buildings, for kitchens, mess halls and bunk houses, and dormitory tents in preference to smaller units. Attracted by the smell of food black bears, those friendly clowns of the woods, came rambling out of the thickets at night to nuzzle and feast on garbage piles till they became as tame as pet dogs, affording constant amusement to camp visitors. Their friendliness soon became embarrassing enough to make it necessary to build bear-proof warehouses and caches, and to secure the windows so that perambulating bruins wouldn't invade one's sleeping quarters in the night.

Up at Teslin Bay east-bound doughboys had met at least one Indian who thought the Alaska Highway a swell idea. Some years before, after an unusually good winter on the trapline, George Johnson, a dusky brave of the Teslin band, had purchased an auto. Not till the car was shipped in by rail, sternwheeler and scow did it occur to the ambitious redman that cars needed

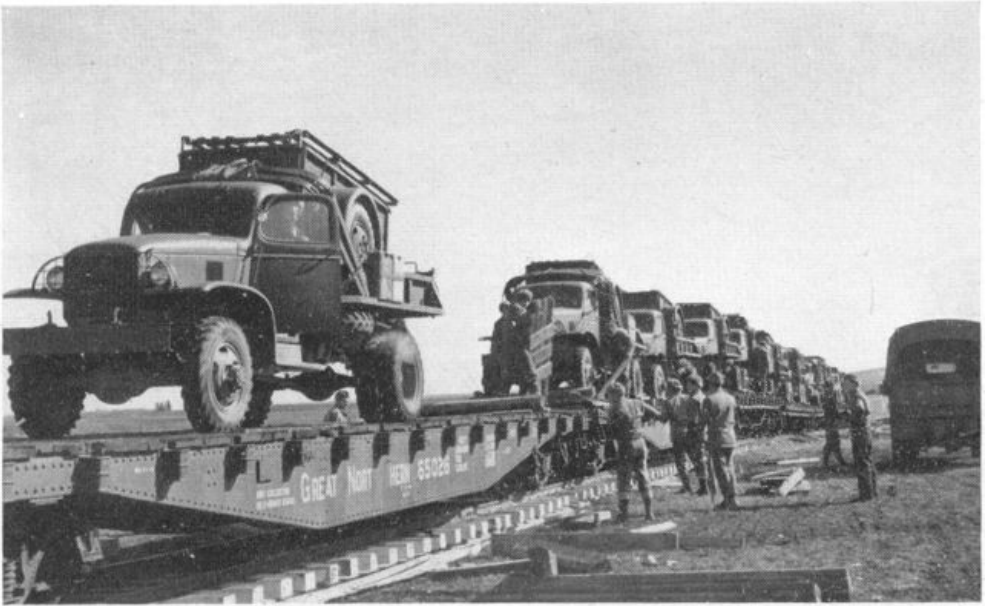
roads, which were conspicuous by their absence. Undaunted, he cleared a three-mile road through the bush, over which he took his dusky tribesmen joyriding, mulcting them of furs in payment for the novel pleasure. Now he proudly drives what's left of the car along the highway considerate doughboys hacked past his wigwam door.

Late the previous March parties of P.R.A. Engineers had made reconnaissances by dog-team, one investigating the proposed route from Sickannie Chief River west from Fort Nelson to Steamboat Mountain, fifty miles away, where the foothills emerged from low-lying muskeg in rounded knolls and rock-ribbed ridges, and continuing through Summit Lake Pass to Muncho Lake. These ground trips collaborated with air trips by army officers. Up to this time the army had been disposed to push the road north from Fort Nelson, following the Fort Nelson River to the post I'd established at the trappers' rendezvous at the Forks of the Liard, then west along the Liard to Watson Lake. Since this route was wet and swampy the final location was run through Summit Lake Pass and on down the Trout to the Liard.

From available maps and popular belief the army understood that a succession of mountain ranges ran north and south that would have to be crossed. Maps showed a high range between Watson Lake and Whitehorse, with passes at an elevation of six thousand and seven thousand feet. The army was told it would have to swing south from Watson Lake to Dease River and enter Whitehorse through the Lake Atlin country, lengthening the route by five hundred miles. Aerial inspection disproved this and located a line west of Watson Lake, crossing a low divide between the Rancheria and Swift rivers—the Mackenzie-Yukon drainage area—at an elevation of only three thousand, five hundred feet. Consequently the highway never drops below two thousand feet, its highest elevation being at Summit Lake Pass, only four thousand, three hundred and fifty feet, and its average elevation around two thousand, five hundred. Thus the road builders proved three hotly debated points: the road *could* be built along the selected "C" route; it crossed divides at a much lower elevation than critics conceded possible, and it was completed as a pioneer truck road in one short season, ready for military service in the winter.

As fall snows commenced to blanket the mountains, and the land took on the austere garb of approaching winter, the pioneer highway was rapidly nearing completion. Like a streak of lightning it weaved through the matted pine forests of British Columbia, over the rugged mountain terrain of the Yukon and Alaska where it ended in a forked tongue, one branch serving interior Fairbanks and the other reaching out towards Valdez.





*Courtesy Department of Public Education.*

Trains rush trucks and road-making machinery to end-of-steel at Dawson Creek.



*Courtesy National Film Board.*

Barge load of bunk house frames and trucks leaves Fort Smith for Norman Wells.

To fittingly celebrate the completion of the first stage of this great engineering accomplishment arrangements were rushed ahead for a formal ceremony to commemorate the official opening of the highway. A gap of some three hundred miles, which still remained but a temporary tote road, was fixed up to enable the first trucks to make the through trip. Where to hold the ceremony became the next question. After a trip over the road Colonel W. T. Essig selected Soldier's Summit, a hundred miles east of the Alaska-Yukon boundary; a picturesque stretch of highway fifteen hundred feet above the magnificent reaches of Kluane Lake which spreads out like a vast inland sea, surrounded on all sides by eternal peaks, glaciers and dark crags that towered like silent sentinels into a sky of beaten copper,

appropriately symbolizing the fastnesses which “guts and tractors” had mastered.

Accompanied by photographers and reporters participants in the ceremony drove out from Whitehorse on an ideal day, the low-lying sun tinting the white world with a smoky red radiance and the thermometer crowding fifteen degrees below. Those clinging to boots instead of the moccasins and mukluks of the Silent Places were kicking their feet to restore lost circulation when at last the spruce log barracks of Kluane Lake, nestling in a grove of spear-pointed pines, eased into view.

Already programmes had been printed. Mimeographing being too drab, and no printing press available, the P.R.A. blueprinting machine was pressed into service, John Ewen making appropriate drawings and Gay Pinkstaff running off programmes that might actually have been engraved. Since the supply problem complicated the question of furnishing distinctive food for the banquet Major Dick Lucknow sent out his hunting parties. They returned with trout from the mountain streams, caribou and moose from the forest, mountain sheep from the peaks and a gaunt black bear that had been routed from his winter hibernation. “Dawson Creek crackers,” “Fairbanks cheese,” and “Slim Salad” of winter-grown Alaska tomatoes and lettuce, were to round out the menu.

As programmes were distributed, and autographs exchanged, a Negro soldier, inspired by the spirit of the occasion, invaded General O’Connor’s sleeping quarters for his autograph. Accommodatingly the General climbed out of his sleeping-bag, donned his glasses and signed the delighted darkie’s programme. Bob Bartlett, veteran secretary for Alaska, grinned at the Honourable Ian MacKenzie. “Well,” he chuckled, “if that isn’t the epitome of democracy!”

The party retired, a little apprehensive over the non-arrival of Major-General G. R. Pearkes, V.C., a former Mountie who’d mushed his dog-team over Yukon river ice and valleys, who, with General Ganong of Canada’s Eighth Division, was to represent the Canadian armed forces. Around midnight Lieutenant Neuberger, awakened by a gentle padding on the lumber floor, peeked cautiously out of his sleeping-bag to see Colonel K. R. Bush emerge, sleepy-eyed, from his bedroll and General O’Connor, in long underwear, his fur cap pulled about his ears, and parka over his shoulders, tip-toeing to the door. “Hello there,” echoed a lusty voice as it creaked open on frost-rimed hinges and into the room strode red-tabbed General Pearkes and Ganong, delayed by bad flying weather. Looking like animated union suit advertisements, and exuding what dignity was possible under the circumstances, Bush and O’Connor did the honours and escorted their visitors to their bunks.

On the bright cold morning of November 21st, 1942, seven months and twelve days after those first troops had piled from their train to be welcomed by a thirty-below blizzard at Dawson Creek, the highway opening ceremony proceeded under dramatic and colourful surroundings.

In traditional scarlet and gold Mounted Police stood side by side with parka-clad troops of the U.S. Army Engineering Corps as speakers stressed in glowing terms the historic importance of the occasion. Colonel Bush paid tribute to Donald MacDonald as the pioneer advocate of the land route to Alaska, and to the fortitude and courage of the men who'd made it possible. Ian MacKenzie spoke eloquently for Canada, bringing an inspiring message from Premier Mackenzie King, then Bob Bartlett presented the Alaskan flag—the silver dipper and north star emblazoned on blue—expressing the wish that this standard, designed by a thirteen-year-old Eskimo lad, should grace the headquarters of the Northwest Service Command.

With a pair of gold scissors engraved by William Osborne, Juneau pioneer whose daughter is the wife of Joe Crosson, veteran Alaskan flier, MacKenzie and Bartlett stepped forward. The crowd tensed. As the red, white and blue ribbon parted an American army band sent the stirring strains of God Save the King and the Star Spangled Banner ringing through the towering cliffs. Hardly had the notes died on the frosty air than the first through Fairbanks-bound truck rolled forward, driven by Corporal Otto Gronke of Chicago and Private Bob Rowe of Minneapolis, to the tune of The Washington Post and The Maple Leaf Forever.<sup>[8]</sup>

With green boughs festooning the walls and ceilings of the log barracks, and the air redolent with the aroma of sizzling wild meat, the participants in this historic occasion sat down to a sumptuous meal amid good-natured banter and laughter. Without the aurora borealis lighted the silver and ebony of the Arctic world with scintillating shafts of dazzling brilliance, throwing a ghostly phosphorescence about the encircling peaks that tusked the diamond-dusted sky. From the windows piercing the black-shadowed walls of unbarked logs slanting streamers cast rosy rectangles on blue-white snowdrifts.

“The crimson tunics of the Mounties mingled with the sombre khaki of their American allies,” wrote Lieutenant Neuberger to Tony Dimond. “We ate moose meat and mountain sheep, cigar and cigarette smoke hung beneath the beams. The band played Johann Strauss’ Tales from the Vienna Woods and The Blue Danube, lilting memories of a land which may soon be free. It was like some scene from a Graustarkian operetta. . . . My own most vivid memory is the playing of our National Anthem by the band at Soldier’s Summit. As the music faded away and I looked around me at the stern faces of the American soldiers and the grim countenances of the

Mounties I felt sure that in such a scene as this lay the future of the United Nations—that in the ability of us all, Canadians, Americans and Alaskans, white and black, civilian and soldier, to fuse together our efforts in such a project as the Alaska Highway rests the hope of free peoples throughout the earth.”

Speaking on the completion of the pioneering phase of the highway Major-General O’Connor remarked:

War’s urgent demands have impelled us to build this first land link with Alaska. In doing so we have been actors on an historic stage. In the past the fierce compulsion of war has been responsible for many of mankind’s greatest strides.

The barbarians shoved the Anglo-Saxons out of Europe, but the English then proceeded to establish a vast empire on the seven seas. The barbarians of our own era, the Nazis, have pushed far into Russia, yet the valiant answer of the Russian people has been to organize an immense industrial and agricultural commonwealth behind the bulwark of the Ural Mountains. The brave citizens of China, harried for six years by Japanese savagery, have put their factories on their backs and reared new cities in the rocky recesses of their mountain gorges.

Who can now prophesy what profound developments the Alaska Highway will make possible? Perhaps a new shift is taking place in the focus of world transportation. Anthony J. Dimond of Alaska has urged that the Alaska Highway be extended to the shores of the Bering Sea. Perhaps this will be the new Northwest Passage, the land and air route linking America and Asia across the roof of our planet. Who knows but that Fairbanks, Alaska, or Whitehorse, Yukon, may become the great Union Station of the world?

The initial construction of this land link with Alaska was a frontier job in the most liberal meaning of the term. I have heard people say that the youth of the present generation is soft and weak and flabby. Yet I think the boys who pushed through the Alaska Highway were every bit as rugged and resourceful as the men who thrust the first railroads across the North American continent.

The spirit of these boys was the spirit which motivated the Americans who followed Lewis and Clark and Kit Carson and Fremont, or the Canadians whose leaders were Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser. I think the photograph most typical

of the building of the Alaska military highway is one showing a bulldozer shoving over two pine trees in the forests of British Columbia; the trees are just toppling to earth. The picture symbolizes the pioneer aspects of the undertaking. . . . We of the American Army are deeply grateful to the people of Canada . . . whose men and women have always treated us with the greatest kindness and consideration. The friendship is but the eternal projection of the eternal alliance between the United States and Canada, an alliance once again fighting in a common cause.

The pioneer work completed, the maintenance, relocation and the construction of steel bridges to replace many temporary trestles was turned over to the Public Roads Administration under Commissioners Thomas H. MacDonald and J. S. Bright. In this the bridge work alone presented many new and intricate problems since many streams were glacier fed, with glacial beds which freeze from the bottom up—the top water flooding wide areas instead of confining itself to stream beds, the ice churning out piling and floods often overwhelming and swallowing up the temporary structures.

But frigid blasts from the Pole overcame temporary obstacles, freezing the muskets to steel-like hardness and cushioning the rougher parts of the trail-like highway with a glistening winding sheet of snow. With rough relay stations of lumber and unbarked logs every hundred miles along the route the rip-roaring town of Dawson Creek, shattered by the explosion of an army dynamite dump, was cleaning its charred and blackened face and realizing its new phase of importance as the jumping-off place and relay station from steel to truck and highway. Crowded with khaki-clad troops, Mounties, military police, red-tabbed officers and overalled truck drivers; with buckskin-coated trappers and dark-visaged Indians mingling with the throng, this erstwhile hamlet of four hundred had become the Independence and Fort Leavenworth of a new Twentieth Century Oregon Trail. A hundred boom towns and army camps rolled into one, it was a bedlam of activity, the noise of trucks and the honking of horns blasting the sylvan silence till old-timers didn't know whether they were coming or going. Miles of new sidewalks lining new streets of lumber and tarpaper-covered shacks resounded day and night to the tramping feet of men from Kansas, Iowa, Oregon, Virginia and every quarter of the continent, while water, hauled three miles by truck, was almost as precious as gold; a tarpaper-covered shanty was a king's palace, and rooms, as a wrathful Texan angrily declared, "jest ain't to be got." Above all, rippling gracefully in the frosty air the colourful folds of the Star Spangled Banner mingled with those of the Union Jack—true emblem of democratic unity.

Instead of white-canopied prairie schooners and lumbering covered wagons five thousand sombre trucks, their metal snouts curtained to protect them from biting frost, covered the snow-blanketed prairie in serrated lines as far as the eye could reach, coughing and snorting their anxiety to commence the long 1,600-mile haul through the forest fastnesses to the heart of awakening Alaska. While cowed men with frost-rimed faces crouched over steering wheels a parka-clad officer, looking like an Eskimo, raised his mittened hand to give the signal. Trucks thundered by in a cascade of scintillating snow. Jeeps leapt around corners and scuttled to army camps dotting the hillsides. A staff car roared ahead. To a staccato artillery of explosions other trucks warmed up. Drivers waved good-bye to blonde and brunette sweethearts. The Stars and Stripes seemed to unfurl in a triumphant salute. The advance guard, two hooded figures in the driving seat, rolled forward to the roar of open throttle and shouts of badinage and picked up speed to be swallowed in the trailing white plume of its own exhaust.

At five-minute intervals, day and night, the snorting units of this modern covered wagon caravan uncoiled its long, unending, snake-like tentacles from the massed parking lots of Pouce Coupe's once virgin prairie; twisting, trailing, snorting down steep grades and roaring over frozen culverts, with silent, hooded men bending tensely over wheels, their knuckles white in moosehide mittens, plucking icicles from eyebrows as each white plume of breath whistled from their lips to condense in scintillating crystals on fur-trimmed hoods and shoulders. The first overland consignment of gas, munitions and weapons of war was under way—hurtling northward to safeguard the threatened shores of Alaska and carry a foretaste of future chastisement to the slant-eyed Sons of Heaven.

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[8] General O'Connor had thoughtfully insisted that rank and file soldiers who had done so much to make the road a success should be represented. The ribbon was held by four enlisted men: Corporal Refines Sims, Jr., of Philadelphia, and Private Alfred Jalufka of Kennedy, Texas, representing the Whitehorse sector; and Master-Sergeant Andrew Doyle of Philadelphia and Corporal John T. Reilly of Detroit, representing the Fort St. John sector. Both Negroes, Sims and Reilly, symbolized the coloured troops who had laboured so manfully on the 1,671-mile project and earned so many good conduct medals.

## CHAPTER XVI

### Pipeline to Victory



Meanwhile the scope and drama of this overland Northwest Passage to Asia had been submerged beneath another mighty and long-censored undertaking which was projected into the limelight through the controversy that broke on the floor of Congress in November, 1943—the hundred-and-thirty-million-dollar Canol Project which was to pipe oil from Fort Norman, near the Arctic Circle, five hundred and fifty miles across the Yukon-Mackenzie divide to Whitehorse to furnish an assured flow of fuel oil for the tanks, jeeps and planes of the American army.

Brigadier-General Billy Mitchell had stated as axiomatic that: “The United States is in a far better position than Japan to prosecute an offensive campaign by air. We own islands within striking distance of Japan’s vitals. An aerial campaign against Japan could be pushed to best advantage from Alaskan air bases,” a view confirmed by General Buckner who expressed his opinion that the Alaska Defence Command should be called “The Alaska Offence Command.”

To defend Alaska, and subsequently carry an offensive to the heart of Japan, an abundant and certain flow of fuel oil would be essential. Tankers were urgently needed elsewhere, and there was, at the time this enterprise came under consideration, the ever-present threat of enemy submarines in North Pacific waters. Not only would there have to be a military highway, but an assured supply of oil as well. Alaska had oil, but the fields were, so far, undeveloped, and nature, at Fort Norman in the lower Mackenzie basin, seventy-five miles below the Arctic Circle, and only four hundred air miles from Whitehorse, had provided enormous potential stores of oil that had been tapped by Theo Link of the Imperial Oil Company when I was down the Mackenzie back in 1920, and where I staked oil claims at the time.





*Courtesy National Film Board.*

### Levelling and enlarging the Highway.

This enterprising organization had also introduced the first aeroplanes into the North, and I shall never forget my surprise upon returning to Fort Simpson by dog-team from an inspection of the Hudson's Bay Company's posts late in March, 1921, to find two damaged planes spread-eagled in the

snow-filled Mission field. Piloted by Alma Fullerton and Captain Gorman, they were on their way to Fort Norman when they made a crash landing, breaking both propellers.

Around the Carron stove in the mess room at the post that evening the aeroplanes became the sole topic of conversation, the rather doubtful performance of these machines having convinced Fred Camsell, the factor, and other old-timers that you couldn't beat the old canoe and dog-team. The fact that Sergeant Thorne of the Mounted, who'd accompanied the party in, had accomplished in eight hours a journey that had occupied eight weeks of soul-searing toil by snowshoe and dog-team on his out-going trip, meant nothing since the party was now marooned till the steamer came along the following July. There was however one dissenting voice, that of Walter Johnstone, general handyman around the post who, years before, had been an expert cabinetmaker in England. "It shouldn't be such a hell of a job to make a new propeller," he grinned, "and I've yet to see the woodworking job I couldn't handle."

Next day Walter examined the props minutely. Each was composed of nine laminated strips of black walnut glued into a solid block and cut to shape by the most accurate machinery ere being finished off by trained workmen and tipped with copper.

"Well, Walter," I inquired, "what's the verdict?"

"I still believe," he eyed me dourly, "I'd be able to make one if only I had the proper kind of wood."

"How about using some of those oak sleigh boards of mine up in the fur loft?" I suggested. "If they're O.K. we've lots of mooseskins that could be boiled down into glue."

To the aviators the idea of a sleigh-board prop seemed ludicrous. Only Hill, Gorman's mechanic, greeted the suggestion with even grudging enthusiasm. A few steamer clamps, an auger, a ship's adze, axes, planes and crooked knives were all the tools available. Undaunted Walter went ahead. Day after day I watched him saw and plane and chip away at the oak toboggan boards until the home-made propeller assumed the regulation form and shape.

On April 15th Alma Fullerton adjusted the moose-glue sleigh-board propeller to one of the stranded planes, slipped into the cockpit and slowly opened up the throttle. Breathlessly we watched him circling for altitude, the sunlight flashing from the home-made blur in front of the nose. Would the propeller disintegrate and send ship and pilot crashing to the frozen earth? Pale and tense Gorman stood beside me, his knuckles white, watching the Junker climb in ever-widening circles. At last it circled and skimmed in for a landing, not on the bumpy Mission field but on the level ice of the channel

behind the post. Fullerton was exultant, the new prop responded as though it had been turned out on a factory lathe. Six days later Gorman and his party climbed into the cockpit. The Junker zoomed into the sky to alight safely, four hours later, at the town of Peace River, carrying with it the first air mail ever flown from the North—mail I sent to my wife, and Hudson’s Bay headquarters, in Winnipeg which ordinarily would not have reached there till late the following August.

Since the scope of the Canol Project embraces the whole of the little known Mackenzie-Athabasca region, and since for many years I covered this entire region from Fort McMurray to the Polar Sea by dog-team, canoe and sternwheeler, a few words about conditions there will not, perhaps, be amiss.

At that time the entire Athabasca-Mackenzie country was still dominated by the Hudson’s Bay Company. During the first Great War the twin ribbons of steel of the Alberta and Great Waterways Railway had bitten through forest, muskeg and tundra, outflanking the rapids below Athabasca Landing, and tapping the two thousand miles of arterial waterways that stretch northward like a silver chain dotted with emerald jewels until they debouch through the many-channeled Delta of the Mackenzie into the Arctic Ocean. With the railroad came the million-dollar American Lamson and Hubbard Company of New York to challenge the age-old rule of the “Gentlemen Adventurers.” Clinging like birds’ nests to river bank and lake shore one hundred and fifty miles apart were the fur forts, the commercial centres of the land; each in a small clearing surrounded on three sides by primeval forest and fronted by the wide reaches of the Athabasca, the Slave or the Mackenzie. Each fort consisted of a triple huddle of log buildings within encircling pickets and the inevitable flagpole flaunting its red ensign emblazoned with the white initials of the firm it represented: the Hudson’s Bay Company, the Northern Trading Company, and the hated new rivals—the American-born Lamson and Hubbard Company; these latter concerns succumbing later to the voracious appetite of the pioneer fur company.

A couple of sternwheelers hauled freight down the Athabasca and Slave rivers two hundred and eighty-five miles from Waterways to Fort Fitzgerald, where all goods had to be portaged eighteen miles around the Rapids of the Drowned and the Pelican Rapids to Fort Smith. From there the hundred-ton sternwheeled *Mackenzie River* plied the thirteen hundred mile reaches of the Slave, Great Slave Lake and the Mackenzie to Fort McPherson, and later Aklavik<sup>[9]</sup> near the rim of the Polar Sea, making only one trip to the Arctic and two as far as Fort Norman annually. In those “good old days” the people at these posts were often on the verge of semi-starvation when the boat put

in its first appearance, being boarded by famished and emaciated traders and their children who were often crying with hunger.

To the exiles at these wilderness forts the arrival of the annual steamer with trading outfits, long-awaited mail and the yearly liquor permits constituted a red-letter day; a day of conviviality when bushed trappers and rival traders momentarily forgot the feuds of the long, hard winter. Its departure signalled a return to the comatose conditions from which they'd momentarily emerged, old feuds were renewed and life went on in much the same old way.

Across Smith Portage, the eighteen-mile bottleneck in the two thousand miles of navigable rivers, a string of rickety carts drawn by shagannapie cayuses and driven by buckskin-coated Indians made heavy weather of hauling the freight consigned to down-river posts along the trail that skirted the rapids. In those days the total quantity of freight required for the entire white and Indian population 'twixt Fort Smith and the Arctic Sea amounted to only four hundred and twenty tons for the three companies, and old Brabant, the penurious, uncrowned Hudson's Bay king of this vast commercial empire, employed his own peculiar methods in handling these Indian freighters.

Usually he took care to own at least one essential part of each man's equipment: a wheel, a horse, a pair of whiffle-trees or the harness, and if any misguided redskin undertook to haul freight for an opposition trader, or failed to heed his demands, old Angus was over like a shot, took away the wheel or his horse or his harness—and usually won the day. Old-timers maintained that when ox-teams still hauled freight across this portage the presence of beef on the Company's mess table indicated the demise from old age or overwork of some ancient and decrepit ox. Again, when horses supplanted oxen tough beef for many months thereafter became the *pièce de résistance* at the mess tables of Fort Fitzgerald and Fort Smith, the meals being known by the names of the defunct animals supposed to have supplied the meat.

It wasn't until the American Lamson and Hubbard Company instituted heavy-duty gasboats and built the two hundred and twenty-five-ton sternwheeled *Distributor* at Fort Smith in 1920-21 that transportation commenced to emerge from almost Stone Age conditions. The following year I dispensed with the angry Indians and their haywire outfits and arranged for Mickey Ryan of Ryan Brothers to handle the Smith Portage freight with heavy work teams and modern equipment, which led subsequently to a franchise, the widening and improving of the portage road and the handling of a peak tonnage of ten thousand tons during the Great Bear Lake radium mining boom.

Consequently there was little use for the oil when first brought in at Fort Norman since the steamers used only cordwood, so the Imperial Oil capped their well and pulled out. In 1932 a new chapter in the history of Norman Wells opened with the finding of radium ore at near-by Great Bear Lake, followed in 1935 by the gold discovery at Yellowknife. River traffic mounted, mining machinery and the rapidly-increasing flotilla of motor tugs required fuel oil. The wells and refinery were re-opened and production was resumed. In 1941 the Imperial Oil, operating in the summer season only, distributed from Fort Norman field only eighty thousand gallons of aviation gasoline, a hundred and twelve thousand gallons of motor gasoline, and two hundred and thirty thousand gallons of fuel oil, though this increased business enabled them to reduce the price of gasoline at the Norman refinery from over two dollars a gallon to thirty cents.

The proximity of this potential fuel supply to the Alaska Highway wasn't lost on the American War Department. Late in April, 1942, Imperial Oil Company officials were summoned to Washington. There the Army outlined a plan for building a pipeline from Norman Wells across the Mackenzie-Yukon divide to Whitehorse where it was proposed to build a refinery for processing the oil. The question was how much oil could Norman Wells produce—and how soon? The results weren't encouraging, since the actual potential of the Norman oil field wasn't known. In the conservative judgment of experts the chances of meeting the Army's requirements of three thousand barrels a day seemed only fair. About the only firmly-established favourable fact was that Norman oil, having a paraffin and not a bituminous base, would flow at a temperature as low as seventy below, which meant that there would be no serious obstacle to all-year operation of pipeline distribution even under the rigours of Arctic winter.

On May 1st the United States Government signed a contract with the Imperial Oil and Standard Oil of California which included the drilling of new wells and the early quantity-production of oil; the Army to receive oil at prices comparable with those in the United States. No time was lost since the sub-Arctic season was short. Before the end of May Colonel Theodore Wyman, Jr., supervising officer of the U.S. Corps of Engineers, with construction heads and engineers, had arrived in Edmonton, the base of operations. A few days later two thousand, five hundred coloured troops of the Engineer Corps were being jolted aboard the slow-moving *Muskeg Limited* to the end-of-steel at Waterways, three hundred miles north of Edmonton. The design for the pipeline and other angles of the project were to be worked out by T. Gordon Turnbull, Sverdrup and Parcel, while the actual construction had been assigned to Bechtel, Price Callahan of San Francisco, one of those dynamic, result-getting organizations that had

teamed up with the Henry J. Kaiser interests in the huge West Coast construction jobs.

Workers, clerks, draughtsmen and employees descended in an avalanche on the already over-taxed city of Edmonton. Many were forced to find lodgings in basements and garages. Office space was at a premium. Every square foot left untouched had already been taken over by American highway contractors and administrative groups. Bechtel, Price Callahan promptly requisitioned every remaining bit of space in the city: the show-rooms of the Dominion and Edmonton Motors, the curling rink, and even the basement of the First Baptist Church being converted into offices and draughting rooms. Another contracting firm installed floors and offices in the Empire Theatre. Meanwhile the American army was forced to rent thirty-five acres of land, rear three six-hundred-foot warehouses and bring in prefabricated houses to house additional staff. The population of the boom city of Edmonton was said to have increased twenty thousand in nine months, which is probably only about half the story.

To lay a pipeline half a thousand miles might not ordinarily be a particularly complicated task. But the starting place for the Canol pipeline was separated by nearly sixteen hundred forested miles of wilderness from Edmonton, and you can't transport steel pipe weighing ten and a half pounds to the foot, and cast in twenty-two-foot lengths, by air. Transportation, and the short sub-Arctic navigation season, became the number one problem. On the walls of the construction companies' offices in Edmonton soon appeared the following call for workers:

### THIS IS NO PICNIC

Working and living conditions on this job are as difficult as those encountered on any construction job ever done in the United States or foreign territory. Men hired for this job will be required to work and live under the most extreme conditions imaginable. Temperatures will range from 90 degrees above zero to 70 below zero. Men will have to fight swamps, rivers, ice and cold. Mosquitoes, flies and gnats will not only be annoying but will cause bodily harm. If you feel you are not prepared to work under these, and similar conditions, do not apply.

Despite this somewhat exaggerated general picture men flocked in and the first consignment of two hundred carpenters was rushed to the end-of-steel at Waterways to awaken the solitudes with the incessant tattoo of hammers, riveters and saws as they completed camp and loading facilities.

Overnight the erstwhile sylvan waterfront became a madhouse, a seemingly hopeless jumble of endless piles of pipeline, sections of prefabricated steel barges, tunnel boats, scows, pontoon rafts, bulldozers, trucks, carry-alls, tractors and coloured U.S. Army troops.

With troops operating pontoon rafts the freight started to flow northward past the McMurray tar sands, estimated to contain 100,000,000,000 tons of oil, and on down the magnificent wooded reaches of the Athabasca, the virgin wilderness broken only here and there by some lone Indian tepee or trapper's cabin. No lilting chansons of old Normandie awakened the sylvan stillness as these modern *voyageurs* pushed northward over waters that had first been parted by the painted bark canoe of the path-finding Connecticut Yankee, Peter Pond, back in the summer of 1778 when he crossed the height of land to the southward and established Fort Chipewyan near the shores of Athabasca Lake.

No soft lapping waters, or crackling star-like campfires lulled them to rest at the end of the day. Instead the only song they heard was the staccato bark of heavy-duty motors as barge and raft flotillas chugged incessantly through the night. For these Twentieth Century *voyageurs* had little time for the picturesqueness of old in their race to help slay the dragon of barbarism which had reared its ugly head to spread desecration and devastation throughout the world.

Across the blue, island-studded waters of lovely Lake Athabasca the rafts and barges, with their dusky crews, chugged past the towering rocks crowned with the red-roofed, white-painted buildings of Fort Chipewyan, reared when the city of Chicago was still unthought of and Spain still ruled the Mississippi. There was something unutterably tranquil and commanding about this historic spot that had witnessed the last chapters in the bitter warfare 'twixt rival Nor'Westers and Hudson's Bay men for supremacy in these fur lands. From Old Fort Point, five miles away, Alexander Mackenzie and his *voyageurs* had set out in their four flimsy bark canoes on just such a June day in 1789 in search of the "Great River of the North"; traced the Mackenzie (which he called River Disappointment) to its mouth, and observed the burning coal and oil slick at Fort Norman. From the same spot Mackenzie departed in October, 1792, on his successful overland journey to the Pacific via the Peace. Squat skin lodges of tawny Chipewyan Indians dotted the shoreline along with up-turned bark canoes and hordes of slat-ribbed dogs; braves and squaws gazing with grim malevolence at the spearhead of this new invasion of their age-old hunting grounds.

Beyond the mouth of the in-flowing Peace wild buffalo occasionally greeted the amazed eyes of dark-skinned *voyageurs* from Dixie, part of the ten thousand herd that roamed at will over the 17,300 square miles of Wood

Buffalo Preserve which stretched through forest and salt plain to the westward. Two hundred and twenty-eight miles from the end-of-steel the roar of the Rapids of the Drowned caused them to pile ashore at Fort Fitzgerald with its driftwood-littered waterfront and sprinkling of squalid Caribou Eater cabins. Here warehouses and wharves were rushed ahead and huge two-hundred and three-hundred-ton barges were lifted bodily from the river and trundled across the eighteen-mile portage to Fort Smith, diminutive capital of the Northwest Territories, with its three hundred whites and Indians, its white-picketed Mounted Police barracks, fort-like Hudson's Bay post, Roman Catholic Mission, its golf course and its huddle of Indian cabins.

Fort Smith is one of those puny little settlements that is unfortunate enough to boast a social background, where a handful of marooned ladies ape the ways of Ottawa with their white gloves, French heels, visiting cards, pink teas and other absurdities as out of place in the North as a buffalo coat would be in the South Seas. In fact ever since the time that Mrs. Hatchet, local *demi-mondaine*, had shocked the sensibilities of hoary old-timers by using *two* enamel teapots, one for tea and the other for coffee, the place had acquired the reputation for being decidedly "snooty." This was in no way lessened when, during the Fort Norman oil boom, the Government sent in Major Burwash with a large administrative staff to cope with the oil rush. But another department had effectively killed the boom by enacting regulations that prevented the small holder from retaining his claims. Thus, when the Major and his cohorts arrived at Fort Smith they discovered there was no one to administrate but a handful of nomad Indians, half-breeds and traders. Gradually there arose in the centre of the settlement an ugly, sprawling log building honoured with the name of "Government House." Then Mrs. Card, wife of Gerald Card, the Indian Agent, let it be known in no uncertain terms that *her* house was Government House. It had been Government House for many years. And *Government House* it was going to remain!

With two Government Houses in a settlement of a few sprawling Indian cabins, a couple of picketed trading posts and a Mission, with half a dozen cliques all warring with each other, Fort Smith became the subject of ridicule from the end-of-steel to the Polar Sea. Scandal was rife; gossip spread like wildfire, and the North stood aghast at the monstrosity that had been thrust upon it, a condition that has more or less survived to the present day. To really get places there you have to come from Ottawa, have a string of letters after your name, or be an official of some kind or other, since the ordinary run of humanity is decidedly *de trop* in the log-walled "drawing-rooms" or round the pinewood tea tables of the socially elect ladies. By



unappreciative Northerners it is still referred to with deep feeling as “That hell-hole.”

At the vastness of this almost unpeopled land into which the hand of Mars had thrust them American doughboys and coloured troops stood aghast. Already they'd travelled six hundred miles out of Edmonton, with primeval wilderness about them on every hand. Now, at Fort Smith, situated two miles beyond the 60th parallel they learned that they were only on the threshold of a still vaster extent of wilderness known as the Northwest Territories. A million and a quarter square miles in extent, it reaches in magnificent isolation eastward to the eternal glaciers of ice-girt Baffin Land; westward to Alaska's saw-toothed Endicotts, and northward beyond the mist-enshrouded Arctic archipelago to the very Pole itself. A region one-third the size of the United States that, according to the 1941 census, boasted a population of only 12,028 souls—some ten thousand Indians and Eskimos, and a couple of thousand white traders, trappers, miners, prospectors, priests, missionaries, Mounted Police and Government officials.

Along its northern rim, living in a modern Stone Age, dwelling in dome-shaped snow igloos lighted with flickering blubber lamps of stone, fur-clad Eskimos hunted the caribou, polar bear and white fox, and harpooned the walrus, as did their ancestors before the white man came. In the forests fringing the mighty Mackenzie river and its tributaries skin-clad Dog-Ribs, Chipewyans and Indians of a dozen tribes toiled on webbed snowshoes in winter through silvered aisles of snow-mushroomed spruce in quest of the pelts of beaver, lynx and silver fox which they bartered with the factors at the picketed fur posts. Here, too, scarlet-coated men of the Mounted sallied forth from their red-roofed barracks on long and gruelling winter patrols. With capote-clad Indian guides breaking trail on snowshoes they'd lope behind their dog-teams, urging on slant-eyed huskies with snapping lash, the frigid winter air ringing with the merry tinkle of sleigh bells. As night descended, and trees burst asunder with biting frost, they'd dig a hole in the snowdrifts, build a roaring campfire, thaw out grub and dog-feed and crawl, shivering, into their eiderdown robes, at all times keeping vigilant watch over trapper, trader, redman and Eskimo alike.

Across the blizzard-flailed Barrens to the northeast mighty herds of caribou migrated across the treeless tundra—a living sea of dun-coloured bodies, an ocean of tossing antlers that swayed like saplings in a storm, furnishing meat, and skins for clothing to the tribes who preyed upon them. Save for its short three-months' season of navigation and its climate it resembled in many respects the trans-Mississippi territory in the days of Lewis and Clark, even to the roaming herds of buffalo.

At the foot of Fort Smith's frowning bank more wharves and shipping facilities were reared since everything had to be hauled or dragged across this eighteen-mile bottleneck; motor tugs, barges, the endless miles of heavy pipeline; and the vast stores of equipment, lumber, tents and food supplies for this new "army of occupation."

Everywhere was hurry and bustle, the slogan "Beat the Frost, Beat the Cold, Beat the Ice—Beat the Japs." The motive echoed in the everlasting twenty-four-hour cacophony of sound played by the maddening orchestra of trucks, jeeps, cranes, cats, D'8's and barges, to which the sirens of river steamers and tugs played the refrain. The waterfront was bedlam. Dominating everything was a huge black oil tank brought in in sheets from the United States and welded here. Piled high were wooden skip-boxes filled with everything from needles and camera film to hydraulic machinery, false teeth and oil drills—all northward-bound to the pipeline.

Here at Fort Smith happy Negroes joined with redmen, half-breeds and trappers in tripping the light fantastic to the tune of squeaking fiddles, swinging their aboriginal partners to the guttural intonations of the coppery-visaged caller-off:

"S'lute your ladies. All together!  
Ladies opposite, the same—  
Hit the lumber with your leathers,  
Balance all and swing yer dame.

Bunch the moose-cows in the middle,  
Circle stags, and do-se-do—  
Pay attention to the fiddle,  
Swing her 'round and off you go!"

In return coloured troops—the *kuskitayweasuk*, or black meats, as the Indians called them—reciprocated and dusky hep-cats entertained their redskin hosts with an open-air concert by their fifteen-piece Negro band.

Here constituted authority, as represented by the Mounted Police, mixed with that of the invading army. When the Lieutenant in charge ordered his coloured troopers to set up camp on a certain spot, and the owner complained, a scarlet-coated Mountie stood astride the disputed site. Behind the wheel of his heavy army truck the Negro Corporal was pleasant but firm. "Mah Loo'tenant," his eyes rolled dangerously, "mah Loo'tenant he done say I'se to use this hyar road. Outta mah way, Mountie—outta mah way," he stepped on the gas, "fo' I'se a-comin' through!" And even the red-coated representative of the law retired before the onrushing vehicle.

As barges, freight and men hurtled across this slash through the swamp and jackpine the flotilla flowed on northward a hundred and ninety miles down the pine-walled Slave to the depressing delta of Great Slave Lake. Pushing past Fort Resolution, gateway to the land of the caribou and the prehistoric musk-ox, its low shores dotted with squat tepees of Yellowknife and Dog-Rib tribesmen in from the Land of Little Sticks to trade their fox and musquash skins and obtain King George's treaty money from the Indian Agent, they crossed the hundred and twenty-five mile stretch of this great inland sea to be caught in the onrushing flood of the Mackenzie.

Borne between the yellow, spruce-crowned walls of this Mississippi of the North the Canol crews were swirled past Fort Simpson; on past the mouth of the North Nehannie with its jagged spur of ranges, abode of bighorns and mountain goat; on past the craggy outthrusts of the Rockies till the bold escarpment of Bear Rock towered ahead and they slipped past the picketed fur post of Fort Norman, backdoor to Great Bear Lake and the sealing grounds of Stone Age "Blonde" Eskimos. From this lonely little trading post Inspector Denny La Nauze of the Mounted Police had made his memorable ten-thousand-mile patrol to the haunts of these Polar Eskimos to run down the killers of Fathers Rouvier and LeRoux; and at this same spot I had bid Corporal Doak good-bye in the summer of 1921 when he departed to arrest two more Eskimo murderers, only to meet death by the bullets of these same bloodthirsty Cogmollocks.

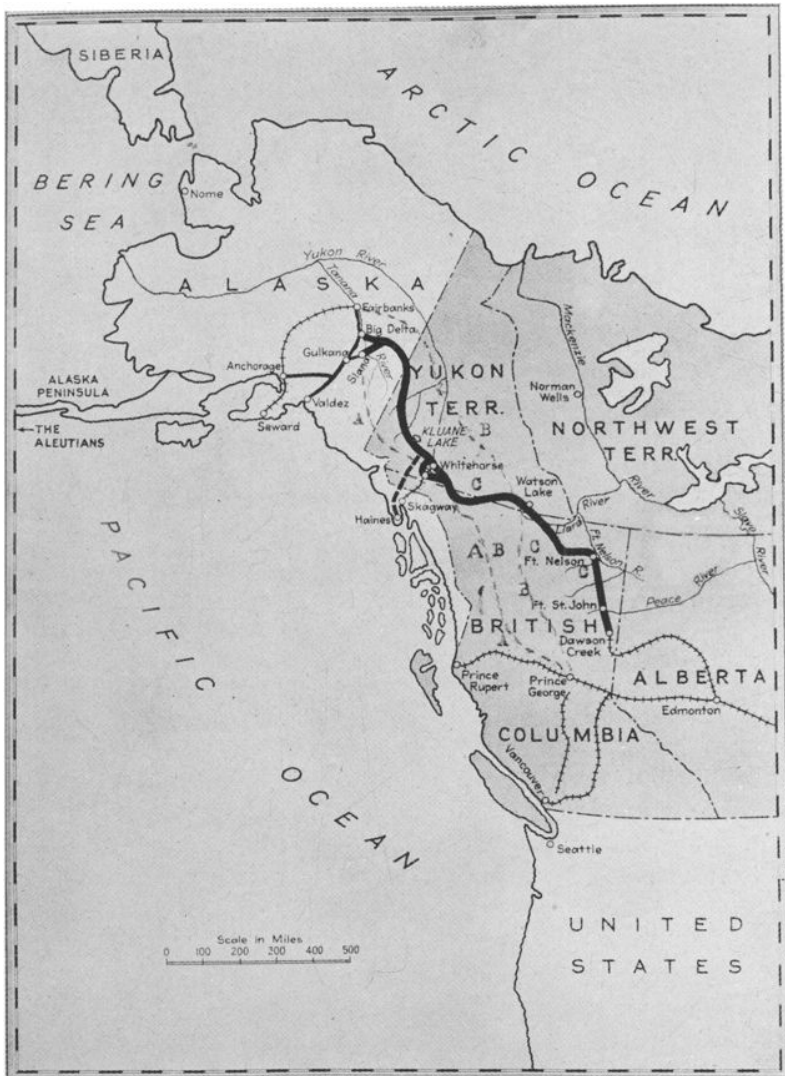
On August 14th men and supplies were piled ashore sixty miles below Fort Norman on the swampy west bank of the Mackenzie, with its stunted pine forests, opposite the Discovery Well. Everything began with chaos: forest, muskeg, untrained men, untested tools, supplies piled into an apparently unravellable jumble upon the shore, the white-capped peaks of the Mackenzie Mountains looking down austere and defiantly from the westward. More men and supplies winged their way in by air. More men and machines poured steadily in by barge, boat and sternwheeler. By the end of September an underwater pipeline had been thrown across the Mackenzie from Norman Wells to the tented town of Canol Camp, sprawling in the gloomy muskeg, and six hundred white and coloured troops, with a couple of hundred civilian workers, were preparing to wrestle with Arctic winter. From freight handling coloured troops turned their hands to swinging axes, cutting firewood and rearing log cabins. Across the river more than a dozen new producing wells had been drilled, and huge black, ugly storage tanks and derricks rose above the spiked pines. By the middle of October a fleet of tugs, barges, tunnel boats and scows were berthed where the *Mackenzie River* and *Distributor*, caught in the fall ice, had been beached high above ice and flood level on the river bank.

While pipeline and troops were beginning to flow in ever-increasing numbers down the Northland's two-thousand-mile "main street" an exchange of notes occurred between the American Minister, Pierrepont Moffatt and N. A. Robertson, Canadian Secretary for External Affairs, in which an agreement was reached for the development of the Norman oil wells and the construction of a pipeline to Whitehorse, officially named the Canol Project. In view of the heated controversy concerning this enterprise the section dealing with the subsequent disposal is quoted verbatim from Pierrepont Moffatt's letter No. 710 of June 27, 1942:

My Government further proposes that the pipeline and refinery shall remain its property, and shall be operated under contract with it or its agents or representatives during the war. It further proposes that at the termination of hostilities the pipeline and refinery shall be valued by two valuers, one of whom shall be named by the United States and one by Canada, with power, if they disagree, to appoint an umpire. The valuation shall be based upon the, then, commercial value of the pipeline and refinery, and the Canadian Government shall be given the first option to purchase at the amount of the valuation. If the option is not exercised within three months, they may be offered for sale by public tender, with the amount of the valuation as the reserve price. In the event that neither the Canadian Government nor any private company desires to purchase the pipeline and refinery at the agreed price, the disposition of both facilities shall be referred to the permanent joint Board of Defence for consideration and recommendation. Additionally, it is proposed that both Governments agree that they will not themselves order, or allow, the dismantling of either the pipeline or the refinery, nor will they allow any company which purchases them so to do, unless, and until, approval for dismantlement is recommended by the permanent Joint Board of Defence. It is understood that if the pipeline and refinery are at any time used for commercial purposes they will be subject to such regulations and conditions as the Canadian Government may consider it necessary to impose in order to safeguard the public interest.

As all flying in the Northwest Territories since I prepared the first rough landing places at Fort Smith and Fort Fitzgerald for the pioneer planes of the Western Canada Airways in January, 1929, had been confined to skis in winter and pontoons in summer, it now became necessary to build airfields

to accommodate the large cargo aircraft required to supplement this Canol Project. Again U.S. Army engineers and contractors got busy with bulldozers and scrapers, hacking out landing strips from Edmonton north to Norman Wells.



Map of Alaska Highway showing alternate routes.

Reconnaissance trips were already under way between Canol Camp and Whitehorse to locate the pipeline route. Little was known of this region despite the fact that for countless generations there had been an aboriginal movement to and fro between the Yukon and Mackenzie, which probably

dated back to those dim days when the spearhead of the Asiatic invasion that peopled North and South America with the Indian tribes of today pushed up the Yukon valley from the Bering Sea, crossed this divide and swept down the Mackenzie and Athabasca valleys to spill out over the plains and continue their wanderings southward down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico and along the Rocky Mountain chain to South America. By the Rat River, near Fort McPherson, and between Fort Good Hope and the headwaters of the Yukon, there is a constant movement of Hare and Louchoux Indians. At Fort Norman the Mountain Indians, or Nehannies, ascend the Carcajou on regular hunting expeditions, returning down the Keele, or Gravel River each summer in rough oomiak-like boats of raw moosehide. The only survey of the divide had been made in 1907-08 by Joe Keele, a Canadian Government surveyor who'd crossed by the four-thousand, five-hundred-and-twenty-five-foot Christie Pass.

It soon became obvious that the construction of a road and pipeline through the domain of the mountain goat and grizzly was going to be a tough job, and that it would have to be started simultaneously from Camp Canol and Whitehorse, where Skagway, the port of entry, was already clogged. Camps arose at Prince Rupert, Carcross and Whitehorse, further supplies and pipeline were shipped to Skagway and hauled by "Mae West" and other panting locomotives over the White Pass. By October not only was pipe being strung and welded but a subsidiary pipeline had been built along the White Pass Railway, oil being hauled by tanker from Prince Rupert to Skagway and piped across to Whitehorse.

Yet, despite the haste with which the U.S. Army Engineering Corps and civilian construction workers had tackled the task of pushing the immense quantity of supplies and machinery northward over the broad but treacherous rivers with their ever-shifting channels, nine thousand tons of pipe still lay at the delta of the Slave River when navigation ended, to be moved to Canol Camp ere break-up.

Promptly work was commenced on a thousand-mile road from Peace River (formerly Peace River Crossing) to Norman Wells. As the leaves commenced to fall troops were transferred from Waterways and Fort Fitzgerald to an advance camp prepared at Peace River. Already an all-weather road extended eighty-five miles northward, and a tractor trail beyond that to the mouth of the Hay River. Improved and relocated, a cut-off was run from the thundering Alexandra Falls on the Hay River to Mills Lake, below Fort Providence, the pioneer work being pushed ahead by white and coloured troops with construction outfits always pounding on their heels. By December truck convoys and tractor trains were snorting and rattling through the untapped haylands of the Hay River country, only a few

years since the range for roaming buffalo, to be mired at times as warm chinooks turned sparkling snowdrifts to lakes and quagmires of gripping gumbo.

Other road-building gangs meanwhile were working southward from Fort Norman through the unmapped wilderness, keeping ten to thirty miles inland from the east bank of the Mackenzie, through the bitterest kind of Arctic weather, with only frozen "C" rations which had to be thawed over forest campfires. Another army crew was working out from Fort Simpson, and still another civilian crew was hacking northward through the forests in the shadow of the Horn Mountains. On February 24th the plaint of old-timers that the country was getting "overcrowded" seemed justified when a tractor from Fort Norman smashed head-on into a tractor from Peace River, a thousand miles away, at Blackwater Lake. As the machines crashed into each other drivers filled the frosty air with sulphurous invectives. "Why in hell don't you look where you're going?" bawled the driver from the south. "And why in hell don't you learn to run a cat?" roared the driver from the north. A fight was only averted by a hair's breadth, and this was the only *ceremony* attending the completion of the thousand-mile pioneer road from Fort Norman to the Peace!

In tapping the Mackenzie River north of Great Slave Lake this new Peace River tractor road conferred another boon upon the country to the northward. It opened up down-river navigation at least six weeks earlier than formerly when all north-bound transportation was held up by the slow disintegration of heavy ice on that large inland sea until late in June, or even the beginning of July, when the first sternwheelers considered it safe to leave Fort Smith for the north.

Having trekked northward across the prairies and haylands that knew only the moccasin footprints of trappers and Indian hunters, truck convoys continued to snort along the forested banks of the Mackenzie five hundred miles to Norman Wells, and across the river ice to Camp Canol till April thaws made roads impassable. At the same time thousands of tons of pipe were hauled by tractor-drawn sleds over another American-built army road from Fort Smith to Hay River, and across two hundred miles of Great Slave Lake to Mills Lake, to be shipped north by barges as soon as the ice went out in May.

In December the Canol Project was also brought under the command of Brigadier-General O'Connor of the Northwest Service Command, and in March Brigadier-General L. D. Worsman succeeded Colonel Wyman, in charge of the venture. Throughout this time dog-team and tractor parties were working east and west across the divide 'twixt Camp Canol and Whitehorse; and when, in May, the Mackenzie River rent asunder its icy

fetters with monstrous groans and upheavals, and huge cakes of up-ended ice ground and roared their protesting way to the Polar Sea, a satisfactory route had been blazed across the Yukon watershed by that genial veteran of northern surveys, Guy H. Blanchet, of Ottawa, whose effective pathfinding has since been warmly praised by United States authorities.

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[9] Established by the Author and Stuart T. Wood, present Commissioner of the R.C.M. Police in 1923 as headquarters for the Hudson's Bay Company and the Mounted Police.



## CHAPTER XVII

### Trouble on the Trail



Along the western leg of the victory highways slashing a huge V through the heart of the Canadian wilderness truck convoys continued to roar northward during the winter of 1942-43, the Alaska Highway being kept clear by snow removal equipment, spotted at repair shops and rest camps situated at forty-five and ninety-mile intervals, comprising fifty big V-plows mounted on tractors; forty rotaries, scores of truck-mounted blades, and a small army of attendants, workers and mechanics.

To facilitate the work through-trucks were driven by relay soldier-drivers over each hundred miles so that each became an expert over his section of the road while, under favourable conditions, the running time between Dawson Creek and Fairbanks came within the scheduled sixty-six to seventy hours. Yet there were times when blinding blizzards, roaring down from the Pole, or biting sixty to seventy-below weather made it necessary for the convoys to dive for the shelter of the rest camps and dig snow-bound vehicles from mountainous drifts that almost buried them from sight before proceeding.

“The Road” seemed always to hold some new trick up its sleeve to worry harassed drivers. Glacial streams insisted on bleeding across the highway to tangle wheels in slippery slush; chinook winds, roaring through the Rocky Mountain passes, would melt the snow into liquid pools and streams of running water which, overnight, would be converted by another onslaught of the Frost King into glassy ice that would send an unwary driver hurtling into the ditch or down some precipitous embankment. Frozen hair-pin curves became dangerous booby traps, the steep glassy grades the despair of cursing drivers. Yet trucks and Northwest Service Command busses continued to roar back and forth ’twixt Fairbanks and Dawson Creek with surprisingly few accidents, covering the journey under favourable conditions in less than sixty hours’ driving time.

Edmonton, the focal point of all this Northern activity, had long been dreaming great dreams about what the unoccupied empire that lay to the northward was going to do for her. But these were far transcended by the

immense airport and other developments brought by the war boom which caused it to proudly proclaim itself the “Crossroads of the World.” Within ten months its population had been jacked up from ninety-six thousand to a hundred and nineteen thousand, with housing congestion so acute that army officers and American troops were billeted on householders, while building permits for American headquarters, offices and warehouses soared to a quarter of a million dollars. Edmonton could, indeed, see itself becoming one of the principal future cities of the continent as the new territory, tapped by this network of roads and highways, yielded future mineral and oil wealth of untold volume. As these triumphant boastings echoed across the Rocky Mountain ranges Pacific coast cities from Ketchikan to Seattle and San Francisco began to gird themselves for future battle, assured that Edmonton’s gain was their loss.

As “The Road” was rendered impassable in large sections during the spring thaw, and temporary trestles were uprooted by the onrush of streams boiling down in frothing torrents as pent-up snows of months accumulation melted under the torrid rays of spring suns, the Engineering Corps and Public Roads Administration Branch rushed into the breach. Relocation engineers straightened out curves and circumvented muskegs. American steel workers commenced to replace temporary trestles with permanent steel structures that would resist the angry forces of nature. By this time it appeared that the type of road Canada was to inherit was to be a good deal less of a super-tourist highway than originally envisioned. The United States Army wanted a road to Alaska—an all-weather, two-lane track over which truck convoys could proceed with heavy loads. The United States Public Roads Administration wished, according to the talk of army men, to build a road more nearly approaching highway standards in the densely-settled portions of the continent. Speed and the Army won the argument, and the favourable influence of the Midway and Dutch Harbour engagements settled it, reducing the 1943 road standard to a width of twenty-six graded feet. The roadbed, except where muskeg or other conditions required a variation, averaged twelve inches of rock or coarse gravel surfaced for the most part with fine gravel or crushed rock.

The break-up of 1943 galvanized the entire North into a seething hive of activity. While the work of converting the pioneer road—a mere trail in places—into a real highway went on apace, and bridge builders spanned the Peace, the Sickannie and other major streams with magnificent steel bridges, Waterways and Fort McMurray saw themselves converted into enormous shipyards where endless prefabricated steel barges were bolted, welded together and launched onto the bosom of the Clearwater. Loaded with countless miles of pipe, they would disappear around the forested bend

before a diesel-engined tunnel-boat, or pushed ahead of the sternwheeled *Athabasca River*. The shipping end had been placed in charge of the well-known Tennessee and Mississippi authority on inland water transportation, C. C. Cobb, while Matt Barry, famed Canadian bush pilot, flitted up- and down-river in his little pontoon plane trouble-shooting, supervising freight movements and checking supplies.

At Camp Canol, squatted in an ocean of muskeg that at times would almost engulf the tractors, pipeline builders cursed flies, muskeg and torrid heat, and swore the job was worse than the one they'd done in the steaming jungles of Panama. Colonel B. T. Rogers of Buffalo, in command there, made no attempt to minimize the magnitude of the enterprise. "It's going to be tough," he admitted, "but it's going to be done!" A feeling reflected by B. W. Lambright, Project Manager at Norman Wells, across the river, a seasoned oil man who'd been stationed at the famous Ploesti oil fields in Rumania.

Activity literally boiled at Camp Canol. Every day new construction workers arrived from the United States by huge transport planes that winged down out of the sky. Pretty girl stenographers and blonde and brunette clerks tripped ashore, thrilled with the spirit of adventure, adding a touch of life and colour to the dismal background of Quonset huts, mud-encrusted bulldozers, mired tractors and tarpaper-covered construction shacks, as other girl employees had already done at Skagway and Whitehorse. "Just having girls around to look at has raised the morale of the camp," one of the supervisors stated. "Funny thing, a man who's wintered in the sticks here is scared to speak to them. You'd think they'd come from Mars. But don't let anyone try and get fresh with them. These boys all feel like they've got to be big protective daddies to them, and they'll sure stand for no nonsense." A trait that is as old as the North, and has characterized Northernmen from time immemorial.

Chin-whiskered Victor Leval, formerly chef at the Hotel Stevens at Chicago, performed miracles of culinary skill in catering to the thirteen hundred men and fifty odd women in the big mess hall, where the girls' tables were distinguished by having paper napkins. With his assistant chefs, pastry makers and bakers, many of whom had seen service in famous New York and European hotels, the enterprising Leval, also attended to roadside camps and movable bunk houses established every twenty miles along the pipeline that was already wending its way above ground through a narrow chasm in the rocky ramparts twenty miles away, and on, seventy-five miles to the westward, over virgin wilderness thick with spruce trees, and covered with a deep blanket of springy moss. To clear the moss and trees was as simple as along the Highway, a snorting bulldozer would push them over

like feathers. Instead, however, of coming to firm earth engineers and cat-skinners reached perpetual ice, a legacy from the retiring Ice Age.

After wallowing through Camp Canol mud the pipeline streaked through the sub-Arctic forests and tundra, forded the Carcajou River and plunged into a canyon that forms one of the most picturesque spots on the route. About fifteen miles long, its walls rise sheer from a hundred to a thousand feet, culminating in jagged battlements and rocky pinnacles that pierce the sky like cathedral spires. Vividly coloured, the walls in the sunlight are golden brown mottled with great patches of scarlet, purple, grey and green. The canyon twists and winds its upward way towards the pass, embellished here and there with sparkling waterfalls, smaller canyon fissures, defiles and formations that assume the most fantastic shapes. The floor is marked with the tracks of moose and grizzlies, while from the peaks above bighorn sheep gaze down in curious aloofness at the trucks, jeeps and bulldozers that pound along its length, awakening echoes that shatter an ageless silence save for the roar of floods through countless springs.

But laying a pipeline through this picturesque canyon wasn't as easy as admiring the scenery. The creek flowing through it uses the canyon to find its eventual level in the Mackenzie and the Polar Sea. A footloose stream, it has the habit of rising swiftly and changing its bed overnight. The original road passed over the floor of the canyon which forms the creek bed. In late summer the creek is a mere trickle, but in spring, like all mountain-fed streams, it roars down the full width of the gorge. Going up, or down, stream entailed fording it at a score of places, often hub-high in icy water, but the semi-dry creek bed formed the only travel road in many a weary mile, and U.S. Army engineers were hoping to divert its course and rid the road of its many capricious crossings.

Instead of being buried the pipeline lies on the surface since Norman Oil's pour-point causes it to remain fluid in all weather to which this region is normally subjected, while winter snow provides an insulating blanket. Apart from the welders, many of them from Oklahoma and Texas oil fields, one sees few labourers on the pipeline, the ubiquitous "cat" being the master tool of the engineers, moving earth and rubble, levelling surfaces and spreading gravel. As you jolt westward towards the pass over a road that's little more than that in name the air becomes keener and the clouds seem to hang lower. A final grinding climb of a mile and you top the first summit, forty-five miles from Camp Canol, and see, stretching out ahead, a verdant valley with a backdrop of snow-crowned peaks—the Mackenzie Mountains which tusk the sky to a height of eight thousand, five hundred feet.

Somewhere on the other side of this range another company of U.S. Engineers and contractors are blazing an east-bound supply road. Sweating

men, plagued by mosquitoes and torrid heat, with their tractors, trucks and the inevitable bulldozers, are working out of Whitehorse. Some day, somewhere, they will meet and the roads will have become one, converting the V highways into a snub-nosed triangle enclosing one of the finest, and least explored, game countries on the continent. The laying of the pipeline will be completed, and with the completion of the Whitehorse refinery, the Canol Project, of magnificent conception, will have become an accomplished fact.

As you gaze from the head of the summit down the green valley you can see bulldozers bucking the trees and moss, and others sweeping the pines aside like great prehistoric monsters twenty miles away. Hutments mark the spots where cat-skinners, surveyors and engineers eat and sleep. Through your glasses you can see the men move and work. Then a mist, chill and eerie, drifts down the valley from the mountain peaks like a gossamer curtain, closing the scene from view. Now and then an errant drift of cold breeze brings to your ears the distant rumblings of the mechanical monsters that are doing so much to crack open the ageless isolation of the rugged and unfriendly Northland that, from time immemorial, has exacted the last drop in sweat and toil for every inch surrendered.

There were other rumblings, as yet unheard up here in the heart of the wilderness where men sweated and toiled, and thought only of getting on with the hard and exacting war job. Those rumblings, growing daily louder, echoed through the halls of Congress in distant Washington to become vocal on November 22, 1943, when Secretary of the Interior, Harold L. Ickes, demanded that the project be unceremoniously scrapped, "without spending another dime," and implied that Uncle Sam was playing Santa Claus to Canada in a great big way with the Canol enterprise.

Briefly, Mr. Ickes' complaint, under cross-examination by Harry S. Truman of the Truman Senate Investigating Committee, was that, as Secretary of the Interior, he hadn't been consulted by the War Department on the project, and that information had been refused him on the grounds that it was a military secret. Among the numerous faults found by Mr. Ickes with the use of American money to develop the Canol Oil Project were these:

The United States would have no proprietary rights in the Norman oil fields, or in the oil supply after completion of the contract. It would have been much cheaper to have had the oil shipped from California to Skagway and piped to Whitehorse. That there was no reason why the United States should spend money to build a refinery at Whitehorse on the Canadian side of the line; that it would have been preferable to have had it erected on the Alaskan side. Finally, that the United States had been committed to prospect

for oil in six hundred thousand miles of Canadian territory, right up to the Alaska border, and spend seventeen millions in prospecting and drilling up to a hundred wells, while Mr. Ickes had been able to persuade the Army to drill only one measly test well on the Alaska side. He went on to say that now the danger of a Jap invasion was over the War Department and experts of his own staff should re-examine terms and conditions of the contractual arrangements.

“Does that mean,” demanded Senator Ralph Brewster of Maine, “that you’d make these contracts a scrap of paper? Even if they were imprudent?”

“I think,” asserted Mr. Ickes, “we might give the other parties to the contract a chance to do us equity.”

The Honourable P. Patterson, U.S. Under-Secretary for War, rose next day in angry rebuttal, stating that the U.S. Army developments of the Canol Project near Fort Norman had not only assured an oil production of twenty thousand barrels a day, but uncovered an estimated oil pool of from fifty to one hundred million barrels, adding that the project was amply justified on military grounds, and that its success might be a determining factor in an air offensive aimed at Japan. It was, he admitted, a bold undertaking, and its success “had far surpassed our hopes.” For the first time the existence of an established and busy air-ferry route through Alaska, over which thousands of combat aeroplanes had been delivered to Russia, was disclosed, the Under-Secretary of War citing the fuelling and servicing of Russia-bound lend-lease planes as one of the factors influencing the expenditure of one hundred and thirty million dollars on the project. Furthermore, he informed the committee, the joint chiefs of staff had re-reviewed the criticized project as late as October 28th, and determined that its completion was necessary to the war effort since Alaskan air and naval bases should be made self-sufficient with regard to oil. He was not disturbed, he said, over the fact that the development was likely to revert to Canadian ownership after the war. “Canada is our friendly neighbour, united with us in this war,” he added. “The defence of Alaska, Canada and the United States is *one* problem, not several.” The total cost of the project, he concluded, was equal to the cost of the war for one day. If it shortened the war by one day it would have been financially justified.

Mr. Patterson’s defence of the Canol Project was preceded by lengthy testimony by James H. Graham, expert adviser to Mr. Patterson, and General Brehon V. Sommerville, Chief of the U.S. Army Supply, who stated that the whole project was strictly a war measure conceived when the Japs were threatening to cut water communications along the Pacific coast, and invading the Aleutian Islands. The question of dollars and cents did not enter into the picture. Nevertheless, Mr. Graham, an aged engineer of long

experience in the last war, predicted that ere many years were past it would be necessary to construct, in addition to the present four-inch pipeline, another, and possibly two, eight-inch pipelines to serve the requirements of Alaskan defences.

Dumbfounded by Mr. Ickes' unfair presentation of the picture, and his desire to tear up a friendly international agreement because he was irked in not being consulted, Canada thought a lot but said little. But the *Winnipeg Free Press* was goaded into commenting editorially:

### UNCALLED-FOR REMARKS

Harold Ickes, United States Minister of the Interior, recently agreed on the title page of his autobiography that he was a curmudgeon. He was living up to the reputation he had thus given himself in his references to the expenditures by the United States Army on the Canol Project by which it is planned to carry oil from Fort Norman to Whitehorse, creating reserves at that point for servicing the United States Fleet in Alaskan waters.

One would think, from reading Mr. Ickes' remarks, that Canada had lured the United States War Office into making expenditures for the advantage of this country and a Canadian oil company. As the evidence given yesterday by United States Under-Secretary for War, R. P. Patterson showed, the plan of finding oil in the Fort Norman district and piping it to Whitehorse was, in inception and in execution, exclusively American; and that it is the judgment of the War Department that the project should be carried to completion.

Canada's part in the transaction has been to agree to what the United States Government asked, and to co-operate in every way possible with the American war authorities. Some better recognition of Canada's participation might reasonably be looked for than to be dragged into one of the never-ending battles that go on between the different branches of the United States Government: in this case between the Interior and War Departments.

Up along the pipeline, where American soldiers and construction workers faced a second winter of Arctic severity, toiling and freezing in fifty and sixty-below weather to push the work ahead, parka-clad men, their clothing sheathed with icy breastplates and faces blackened with frost-bite, growled caustic and sulphurous invective as they stumbled in from biting

cold or howling blizzard to hear over the radio Mr. Ickes' armchair attempts to belittle the work they were doing and scrap the unfinished fruits of their bitter toil.

While the battle went on in Washington, and the tenuous strings of pipeline daily pushed farther towards each other through the snow-bound wilderness, the Alaska military highway was declared completed in November, 1943, one month ahead of schedule, save for a certain amount of bridge construction. From the pioneer stage of the year before it had been developed to meet the standard requirements of a military artery capable of handling a flow of vehicular traffic from Dawson Creek to Fairbanks with little interruption. While it was admitted that seasonal thaws and flood conditions would produce periodic maintenance problems it was now felt that the reconstruction that had gone ahead without let-up through 1943 would eliminate the serious hold-up experienced during the previous spring and summer. Of a total of seven hundred bridges, varying from a few feet to the magnificent two-thousand-one-hundred-foot bridge spanning the Peace near Fort St. John, only fourteen temporary structures remained to be replaced by permanent installations.

The strategically important Haines cut-off from Haines on the Pacific coast, over the coastal range to the highway between Skagway and Juneau, a hundred and eight miles west of Whitehorse, had also been completed, eliminating the exclusive use of the White Pass and Yukon Railway. Following the Chilcat Pass of the halcyon Klondyke days, and the old road over which Jack Dalton rose to fame and fortune driving in cattle and selling them at astronomical prices to hungry gold-seekers, trucks are now able to roll off in-coming vessels and proceed right through to Fairbanks.

The "impossible" had been accomplished. But not to the liking of those Puget Sound interests who had violently opposed route "C" from the start. Now, as the Canol Project came under fire, it seemed that the completion of this other unique hundred-million-dollar engineering feat was also to be mired under an avalanche of vituperation. Already ominous clouds of battle seem to be rising from the Pacific coast and rolling in ever-darkening clouds towards the corridors of Congress, demanding the scrapping of the Fort St. John link in the Highway, and the construction of an alternative one from Prince George that would switch trade and traffic from Edmonton to Seattle.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### The Highway Views the Future



What does the future hold for the Alaska Highway, the much-abused Canol Project, and for the vast territory raised to new heights of opulence and expectation by the impact of Uncle Sam's friendly invasion army upon its settlements, mountains, lakes, rivers and primeval forests? Are these projects to succumb to the lassitude of post-war inertia—to the lack of vision of penurious, small-minded politicians? Is the Northland, with its enormous potentialities for taking care of a post-war population crying for work and elbow room, to fall into a state of atrophy, a condition so frequently experienced by Alaska in the past, and by certain sections of the Canadian North in more recent times? Will the Alaska Highway, built with such an enormous outpouring of wealth, imagination, engineering skill and labour, be permitted to be reclaimed by the wilderness through lack of maintenance, or quarrels over the route, and go to grass like the disused tote road of an abandoned lumber camp? Will the countless tons and miles of pipeline, carried to the rim of the Arctic Circle and strung across the Yukon divide at such a tremendous cost in wealth and sweat, be allowed to rust in wanton abandonment when, as Harold Ickes himself recently complained, the United States is using up a major oil field every day without adequate replacement? Will paucity of imagination, and the petty bickerings of commercial interests that are not getting the lion's share of the spoils, hold back the future progress of a quarter of the continent of North America which shrieks for population to safeguard itself from future foreign aggression?

Already opinion is widely divided as to the future of the Alaska Highway when, in due course, it reverts to the possession of Canada and needs to be nursed to maturity with maintenance dollars so that it can send out feelers and explore and develop the domain through which it winds its way.

On one point, however, there is no disagreement. While the future of the highway may perhaps be dubious, according to certain views, the airway—the Northwest Staging Route—that it follows has an assured and certain

future. Transport planes will fly passengers and high value light freight to, and through, Alaska and the Northwest, linking their cities, towns and settlements with Asia and the Orient, and with the major capitals of Europe through a possible strategic Union Air Station at Fairbanks, the hub of these trans-Polar air routes.

Today the North is no longer a land of dog trails but a vast undeveloped region in which Canada and Alaska retain sovereignty over an air-ocean astride trunk air lines to the U.S.S.R., and Asia, and an east trunk route via Labrador, Greenland and Great Britain to Europe. Canada and Alaska hold the key position in the map of the future trunk air lines that is already commencing to unfold. A glance at a global map will disclose that all the great industrial countries of the world lie in the northern hemisphere, grouped around a central ocean, and that the shortest air line routes to Europe and Asia lie across either the Canadian North or Alaska. The shortest way from New York to London is over Northern Quebec and Labrador, and from Chicago to Vladivostock, or Chungking, is via Whitehorse and Fairbanks, Alaska. Edmonton, at the south end of the Northwest Staging Route, or bomber road, is on a direct line from the Industrial East to Fairbanks. And Fairbanks lies like the hub of a huge air wheel amazingly centrally located to the largest aggregation of world capitals. From Fairbanks it is 3,270 miles to New York; 3,500 to Tokyo; 4,100 to Moscow; 4,200 to London, and approximately the same distance to Berlin. The time will undoubtedly come when great airliners will roar down onto the erstwhile military runways of Fairbanks, and Asiatic, Oriental and European travellers will hop off as casually as present-day trappers, traders and fur-buyers climb from the small single-motored Stinsons and Bellancas.



*Courtesy National Film Board.*

United States troops and Canadian civilians were forced to depend on old-time dog-team and sled when work had to be done off the main highway.



*Courtesy Department of Public Information.*

Dawson Creek, 1942. American Army troops and supplies arrive at end-of-steel.

It is less than a couple of generations ago when a United States Senator gave it as his opinion that “after we pass the Missouri River, except on a few streams, there is no territory fit for settlement.” At the same time Joseph Howe was observing at Ottawa that he wouldn’t give an acre of Eastern Canada for “all your bleak and frozen Northwests,” referring to what are now the wheat-producing prairie provinces of the Dominion!

The same kind of hind-sight is prevalent today in certain influential quarters. Since those distant days when the first swarms of people emerged from their hive in Western Asia the movement of the human race has been westward. For seven thousand years this original movement has continued until there is no longer any West for humanity to swarm to. Henceforth the natural trend of civilization will have to turn northward, a fact already discovered by realistic Russia in her scientific development of her Arctic regions. Up to now prejudice against climate and geographical conditions has impeded this natural movement, but with education, and the mass urge to migrate and look for larger and freer fields of endeavour, Alaska and the

North must inevitably come into their own, and migrating humanity, with scientific aid, must devise a means of adapting itself to sub-Arctic conditions, grossly misrepresented in the past as a land of eternal ice and snow. Actually the Canadian North is not a great deal colder than certain parts of the agrarian West, and the winter climate compares favourably with that of North Dakota. Alaska's record low winter temperature of seventy-six degrees below is only ten degrees lower than that recorded at Wyoming's Riverside Ranger Station, while the southern coast of Alaska, bathed with the warm Japan current, though haunted with fogs and drenched with rainfalls, shows average winter temperatures of 11.2 degrees at Anchorage, 29.8 degrees at Kodiak, and 32 degrees at Dutch Harbour.

This does not, however, mean that the Arctic is as friendly as some modern writers, desirous of being sensational, would have one believe; and the Arctic traveller who writes that he has never known what it was to be cold is guilty of a flagrant misrepresentation of the facts, as any real Northern traveller, or resident, will tell you. There is nothing friendly about an Alaskan williwaw, or a screaming blizzard howling down from the Pole, a fact attested by the graves of eighteen out of twenty whalers who froze to death on Herschel Island, Yukon Territory, playing baseball only a hundred yards from their ships when overwhelmed by one of these sudden, "friendly" Arctic blizzards. The present generation of Alaskans and Canadians, reared under Northern conditions, have learned instinctively to adapt themselves, and consider the disadvantages of sub-Arctic cold all part of the day's routine. Clothing has much to do with the situation, and your Northerner, by adopting the right type of light, windproof clothing, mukluks and hooded capote, can face the bitterest weather in comparative comfort where his brother in civilization, wearing almost three times the weight of clothes, would quickly freeze.

A glance back over American and Canadian history shows how vital and necessary roads are to the opening up and development of a new country. Sooner or later the river route, with its sternwheelers, canoes, scows and motorboats, must give way to actual road construction into the heart of an untapped wilderness for real and lasting development to take place.

The Wilderness Trace afforded employment for post-revolutionary soldiers in opening up the magnificent reaches of Ohio and Kentucky. It was the Oregon Trail, with its ceaselessly-rolling covered wagon caravans of exactly a century ago, that opened up America's Last Great West, brought the firewagon to a land laid aside as a permanent preserve for buffalo and roaming redskins, and established lasting settlement and prosperity along the Pacific coast. It was the thousand-mile Big Trail from Fort Garry—now the city of Winnipeg—to Fort Edmonton that laid the groundwork for

converting the plains of the Northwest from a hunter's paradise supporting a handful of nomad *Métis* hunters and scalp-hunting Indians into a vast granary supporting millions, and feeding millions more. History shows that only a small migration follows the river route—that real and lasting migration and settlement begins for the masses only when overland routes have been opened and people can travel independently, taking their own time. Now another Big Trail has been slashed through the heart of another almost untrodden Northwest, rich with potentialities for enterprise and post-war employment.

That the Alaska Highway will have to be nursed into a state of productivity when peace time freight flows again by the far more economical ocean route to Alaska goes without saying. The post-war annual maintenance has already been estimated at figures as high as six million dollars, and as low as a million dollars, with the major visible revenue to be derived from tourist-motorists drawn to the highway by reason of its wide publicity and its scenic and sporting possibilities. Before, however, regular tourist traffic of any magnitude can be expected there is a four-hundred-and-seventy-five-mile link that still remains to be filled in. This is the Edmonton-Dawson Creek highway that loops around by way of Lesser Slave Lake and a low-lying swampy region till it reaches the firmer soil of Grande Prairie and Pouce Coupe, and is at present only a fair-weather highway that would be entirely inadequate to handle any appreciable amount of traffic.

While Secretary Ickes envisages the Alaska Highway as “the little man's road of the future,” where John Doe can go excursioning in his own flivver, officials at Ottawa are already receiving applications for hamburger, barbecue and filling station concessions along the highway when the war is over and the tourist business gets into its stride, and are somewhat perturbed over such optimism, feeling that much of the ballyhoo concerning the highway's post-war possibilities is premature and overdone, and that before the Canadian stretches of the road can become a realization of the rosy dreams of many a great deal of additional money would have to be spent.

Along the road from Edmonton to Dawson Creek, and for six hundred miles beyond, the highway, it must be admitted, runs through long, unending stretches of dreary, dull and uninteresting territory, with steep grades and slides, and no hotel accommodation or conveniences, the dust being so terrific that truck drivers are often driven to wearing masks, while years will probably elapse ere the surface can be oiled.

Distances, too, are enormous and when the tired tourist finally reaches Fairbanks he'll be faced by a two-thousand-mile return journey over the route he has already travelled. Against this is the picturesque and awe-

inspiring scenery after one leaves Watson Lake and heads towards the Yukon; the thrill of penetrating the heart of the erstwhile impenetrable North to the land of the famed tropical valleys, and the opportunity for hunting moose, caribou, mountain goat and grizzly. United States Army officers waxed enthusiastic over the hunting. They told of troops' rations being supplemented through the shooting of deer, moose, caribou and bear, and the weight of trout they boasted of taking from these Northern lakes and streams would give the disciples of Izaak Walton high blood pressure. In the heart of the Yukon, in a hunter's paradise, tusked by white-capped peaks whereon sure-footed mountain goats and bighorns skip from crag to crag, ten thousand square miles have been laid aside for a prospective national park that will provide a sub-Arctic resort for tired business men and tourists, and furnish employment for forest rangers, guides and roadhouse-keepers, while helping to stimulate subsequent tourist traffic over "The Road."

The highway will also bring nearer the day when the mighty water power of the thundering thirty-mile Peace River Canyon,<sup>[10]</sup> sixty miles west of Fort St. John, can be developed along with the enormous deposits of coal that lie buried at the foot of Bull Mountain. Deposits which Seattle mining engineers, who recently made a survey of their possibilities, consider sufficient to supply all the needs of the west coast of Canada and the United States for many years to come. Incidentally, this vast coal bed is no modern discovery since Peter Pond, the Yankee fur trader, wrote from his Athabasca post in 1788 that Indians brought in reports of bitume being found in what they called "The Subterranean River," obviously the Peace River Canyon. So far inaccessibility has prevented its development.

Neither has settlement exhausted the possibilities of this area since along the verdant valleys of the Blueberry, the North Pine, Nig Creek, the Sickannie, the Fort Nelson, the Liard and the Toad rivers, lie extensive areas of virgin soil where, long before the highway was dreamt of, I met trappers and traders raising their small gardens and producing magnificent vegetables in luxurious and unfailing abundance. North of Fort St. John, on the high plateau watered by these streams, there exists a rich land of brush and prairie over which buffalo roamed until the last of them were slaughtered by Beaver Indians in 1906. Along the first three or four hundred miles of this new artery there will be room for a new race of hardy pioneer settlers to rear their log cabins and draw a living from their farms, gardens and the woods, as an earlier generation did in the once much-abused Peace River country to the southward. One hears much of the impassable muskegs that presented one of the major problems to the U.S. Army Engineering Corps yet I've seen forest fires bare similar muskegs south of the Sickannie, leaving sun and wind to dry them and convert them in a few years into arable patches of prairie

whereon wheat and oats, dropped from winter sleighs, ripened swiftly under summer suns. In 1911 much of the Fort St. John country was similar terrain till clearing dried out the erstwhile impassable muskegs, giving birth to an extensive settlement where grain, livestock and garden produce are now raised in abundance. To the eastward the ungrazed and untrodden haylands, drained by the Hay River, extend east almost to the shores of Great Slave Lake, and would furnish an even more fruitful field for farmer-settlers, hunting and trapping on the side.

Under the auspices of the joint economic committees of Canada and the United States it was decided to sponsor a project involving a systematic study by the two countries of the resources opened up by the Alaska Highway. The undertaking, known as the North Pacific Planning Project, is being carried out in collaboration by groups in Canada and the United States. The Canadian sector is headed by Dr. Charles Camsell, Minister of Mines and Resources, who was born at Fort Liard, and whose father, Julian Camsell, was for many years Hudson's Bay overlord for the Mackenzie River District.

The forest resources of this region have been classified by this group into three main categories: the central forests of British Columbia, holding great possibilities for pulp and lumber operations on an immense scale, the same applying to the forests between the coastal section north from Prince George to the Parsnip and Finlay Forks, which only await roads for their development; while the stunted spruce forests adjacent to the highway are considered valueless save for local needs.

Turning to mineral possibilities; the rocky interior of British Columbia and the Yukon present an excellent prospecting field for gold, zinc, lead, copper, mercury, tin, tungsten, barium and other minerals once considered museum curiosities but now urgently needed for war purposes.

Over on the Mackenzie side are the vast untapped, and as yet inaccessible, copper deposits of Great Bear Lake region, first discovered by Samuel Hearne a century and a half ago, to say nothing of unreported oil formations between Fort Norman and the Arctic coast that promise large additional pools of subterranean fuel oil. Around Great Slave Lake mines are already producing considerable quantities of gold, with future possibilities in zinc, radium, uranium, silver and lead. Enormous potential oil and gas areas exist near Fort McMurray, three miles from Waterways, whose twenty thousand square miles of bituminous tar sands are said by geologists to contain not less than 100,000,000,000 barrels of oil. For a long time efforts to extract the crude oil from the tar sands proved vain since the oil globules adhered so closely to the grains that machinery was worn out. Due to the untiring efforts of determined men a method has now been evolved and the



small Absand Oil Company of Fort McMurray is already processing six hundred barrels a day. And throughout the land, at Hudson Hope on the Peace, at Fort Fitzgerald, at Alexandra Falls on the Hay River, at the Ramparts below Fort Norman, and Virginia Falls on the South Nehannie, and on the Liard and other rivers are prolific sources of hydro-electric power that one day will be harnessed to bring electricity to towns and cities that the development of wealth, as yet undiscovered, will cause to rise from these silent forests.

Government planning in opening up and developing this territory will be essential since nobody with a grain of commonsense would expect the region cracked open by these colossal war projects to blossom like a rose after the stimulus of war development is removed. The objective should be to develop both the Canadian Northwest and Alaska so that they can make their maximum contribution to national economy and open wide the door of Opportunity to thousands of returning war heroes and civilian workers.

That there are difficulties in the way of developing this vast empire of the North goes without saying, but they are not difficulties which should daunt men of strength, courage, enterprise and vision. No need to worry over physical difficulties since they are only a challenge to real men, and can be met and overcome. The only difficulties with which we need concern ourselves are those grounded in fear, misconception, ignorance, misunderstanding, defeatism and paucity of vision. Canadians don't know enough about Canada. They huddle too close to the 49th parallel and gaze too often and too long towards the south. The vast northern areas of their country have received scant attention. It took the American doughboy with the tractor and bulldozer to interest Canadians in the possibilities of their North. Furthermore, many far-sighted Americans, including oil prospectors, land speculators and adventurers are today seeing more prospects in the North than Canadians themselves.

Siberia, a country less well endowed with natural resources, remained in a similar state of neglect and undevelopment in the days of the Czars, and continued so until subjected to intensive scientific investigation by the Soviet Government to locate and discover not only its hidden riches, but the appropriate means of translating its latent resources into physical wealth. In regions having a similar climate to Alaska and the Canadian Northwest the Soviets have long since established immense factories, producing mining machinery, rolling stock, engines and aircraft motors, while three far eastern cities: Khabarovsk, Ulanude and Komsomolsk, where oil wells and refineries have been established, boast a joint population many times in excess of the combined regions of Alaska, the Yukon and Canada's Northwest Territories. No doubt the Soviet Union could give both Canada

and Uncle Sam a few pointers on the development of their own sub-Arctic regions. As an example of Russian ingenuity cucumbers and salad greens are being grown beneath the ice at Polar stations in the Soviet Arctic, the beds being heated electrically and lighted by three-hundred candlepower bulbs from current produced by windmills erected above the ice. Thus Arctic blizzards have been harnessed for the expansion of the habitable area of mankind.

As for long-neglected and awakening Alaska, its place in the future was aptly described in a recent statement by Brigadier-General O'Connor:

With the construction of the Alaska Highway the Alaska of gold rush days, the Alaska regarded as an indefensible and almost valueless outpost is gone, forced into maturity by the red heat of war. And in its place there is emerging an Alaska destined to take its place in a front rank role in national defence and national affairs, and in the peace to follow this war this territory will be the great pivot of the Great Circle air route to the Orient.

In the post-war period Alaska will draw farmers from the drought areas of Canada and the United States, its forests will attract lumbermen from the west coast, engineers and technicians from the East. It will hum with business, with industry and with commerce.

Alaska can supply one-third of America's newsprint needs without depleting its forest resources. Salmon and other fish will remain a major industry; gold will be mined; furs will flow into world markets, and in addition there will be other important mineral industries centring around the known coal, oil, nickel, tin and asbestos deposits. A network of territorial highways will connect up with the Alaska Highway through Canada. There will be motor and rail links with this highway with Siberia and China, and possibly a shining ribbon of railway will connect Alaska to the United States and Canada. In the post-war period Alaska will be a major military, naval and air establishment commanding the North Pacific. It will constitute a police station for maintenance of international peace and order.

Since the beginning of this war Alaska has become a "dagger pointed at the heart of Japan." It is the most central place in the world for aircraft whether it be to Europe, Asia or North America, and is possibly the most strategic place in the world.

What Gibraltar was to Britain in the last century Alaska may be to the United States in this one. Here is the base of operations

from which Japan can be attacked by long-distance bombers or, with Russia's help, by short-range bombers. The great objection to Alaska as a base of military operations has been removed by the construction of the Highway.

And, to bear out General O'Connor's words, the blast of bombs delivered from Aleutian Island bases have already furnished a foretaste of what is in store for Hirohito by crashing down on Japan's outermost island base of Paramushiro, while the boys who drive the trucks, and hacked the war trail to Tokyo through the wilderness, voice in The Song of the Alaskan Highway their own unswerving confidence and prophetic insight into its future.

Along the flanks of the course I wind  
Are many a valuable mineral find.

Strategic ores and oils are seen,  
So vital to our war machine.

Those trucks and guns and tanks and men,  
Can follow through my deepest glen.

Across the top of the world and so  
"Straight to the Heart" at Tokyo.

And after all the grief and strife,  
When men return to peaceful life,

Along the ribbon of my way  
Will come those pioneers who may

Make for themselves a farm, a home.  
Or find rich ore as the hills they roam.

Or build beside some mountain lake  
A place where tired souls may take  
Their leisure in the Land of God.

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[10] On the floor of this canyon were to be seen dinosaur tracks embedded in the rock, as fresh as though made yesterday. Recently, however, they were removed by the Canadian Government and placed in the National Museum at Ottawa. P. H. G.

## ADDENDUM

Following the hearing regarding the Canol Oil Project before the Truman Senate Investigating Committee it was decided that, since one hundred million dollars had already been expended, and the work was nearing completion, the United States Army should finish the job.

On February 17, 1944, the much-criticized project was unceremoniously completed with the welding together of the two length of oil pipe near MacMillan Pass, astride the Arctic continental divide.

## Appendix I

The following item referring to the future of the Canol Oil Project was reported from Ottawa, Ontario, under date of February 24, 1944:

### FUTURE OF CANOL OIL OBSCURED BY REPORT UNITED STATES TO WITHDRAW

Negotiations between Canada and the United States regarding the future of the great Canol Oil development in the Canadian Northwest Territories have not yet reached a conclusive stage, it was learned today following reports from Washington to indicate that American plans to abandon Canol and transfer oil development and drilling activities to Alaskan territory were actually under way. Decisions on the Canol Project have recently become a crucial issue in the future of the Canadian Northwest, Ottawa observers believe.

There was some reason to believe the Canol Project, in which the U.S. War Department poured \$134,000,000 and earned severe criticism from the War Expenditures Committee of the U.S. Senate may become a pawn in the new struggle for oil reserves. The U.S. Senate Committee, headed by Senator Truman recently issued a report urging the U.S. Government to approach the Allied Governments, especially Great Britain, to transfer proven oil reserves to the United States in compensation for the war drain on U.S. oil wells.

The concession in Canol, centring around Norman Wells on the Mackenzie River, is held by Imperial Oil Company, Canadian subsidiary of Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, and all wells drilled by the U.S. War Department will revert to Imperial Oil. Neither the Canadian nor American Government wants to enter the oil business directly, but a powerful Congressional drive exists in Washington to obtain United States oil reserves throughout the world. They would be held by private companies.

One possible point of issue between Canadian and U.S. authorities is seen in the American desire to leave oil reserves, on which they are paying options, in the ground. The Canadian Government, it is believed, is anxious to promote the economic development of Northwest Canada, and it will undoubtedly

consider its position if the United States walks off the Canol Project. Whether Imperial Oil, or some agency more closely related to Government control, undertakes further developments in the Mackenzie River oil field, is a matter of speculation.

Imperial Oil Company, it is understood, now wants to take over all drilling and exploration work. Originally the company's advice to the U.S. War Department, as shown in the Truman Committee report of January 8th, 1944, was that Canol would hardly have a commercial future.

The Truman Committee recommended that the U.S. Government secure a new agreement with the Canadian Government, and with Imperial Oil, regarding its rights to recover its expenditures in Canol and exercise control in future. Canadian Government policy has firmly opposed granting U.S. post-war rights to any development in Canada at American expense. No reason exists to believe this will change, but Canada has been prepared consistently through the Permanent Joint Defence Board to work out problems of oil reserves and military work in full collaboration with the United States.

## Appendix II

The future of the Northwest Staging Command, official title for the "Bomber Road" to Alaska, was reported by Canadian Press from Ottawa under date of March 1, 1944:

### CANADA WILL PAY U.S. FOR AIR ROUTE IMPROVEMENTS

Munitions Minister Howe announced yesterday in the House of Commons that Canada will pay the United States for all permanent improvements of Northwestern Canadian air routes, making them entirely Canadian property.

The total cost of the Northwest Staging Route from Edmonton to Alaska to the end of 1943 will be about \$46,000,000. The total cost of war-time development of Northwestern Canadian airways, including the staging route, will be about \$58,500,000.

"In arranging for the post-war use of the Northwest Staging Route the Government of Canada will pursue a liberal policy of co-operation with other nations," said Mr. Howe.

"We hope that the right to use the route will become part of a general scheme of international co-operation in air transport matters, which will provide greater freedom of movement of aircraft and of air traffic within a suitable international framework."

Mr. Howe termed the Northwest Staging Route one of the "most important" routes in the world, "both in relation to the war against Japan, and, subsequently, as part of an international air route."

Mr. Howe traced the development of the Northwest Staging Route by Canadian pilots prior to the war and the subsequent projects undertaken by the United States after the outbreak of war with Japan.

While the Canadian airway facilities were in operation at the time of Pearl Harbour, it soon became apparent war traffic would require substantial additions to the original programme along the route from Edmonton to Whitehorse, Y.T., the Minister said.

The larger project arose almost entirely out of requirements of the United States forces and involved longer landing strips,

improved hangar facilities and extensive living and office accommodation.

When the United States proposal for extensions were reviewed in 1942, the Canadian Government said it felt Canada should properly pay for the construction of new landing strips and other permanent works of continuing value, while the United States should pay for such additional facilities as were required by U.S. forces over and above Canadian standards and requirements.

“Recently the Canadian Government has reviewed the probable future requirements of air transport in this area and has come to the conclusion that the standards required for a permanent installation are very substantially above those first considered necessary,” the Minister said.

“In consequence, the Canadian Government had recently informed the United States Government that it will not expect payment from the United States Government for the construction of any permanent facilities or improvements, which have been carried out by the Canadian Government at the request of the Government of the United States, and for the account of the latter Government.

“Further, it has been decided that the Canadian Government will reimburse the United States Government for its expenditures on construction of a permanent nature, carried out and paid for by the United States Government, on air routes in this area.”

Mr. Howe said this decision applies to all air fields on the Northwestern Staging Route, including work in the 1943 construction programme undertaken by the U.S. Government, using its own contractors and its own labour. Early in 1943, it was decided that to complete the project in a manner that would satisfy U.S. requirements both equipment and labour would be needed.

“The decision to pay the United States for all permanent improvements built by that Government also applies to the fields and landing strips on the Mackenzie River Route, and all other air fields, landing strips, and permanent air route facilities constructed by the United States Government in Northwest Canada, in accordance with arrangements made from time to time, between the two governments, for the joint defence of this continent,” Mr. Howe continued.

In addition to the \$46,000,000 for the staging route other war-time developments for airdromes in the Canadian Northwest cost about \$8,000,000 of which \$6,000,000 covers the cost of flight



strips along the Alaska Highway and \$2,000,000 covers the cost of flight strips along the Mackenzie River route.

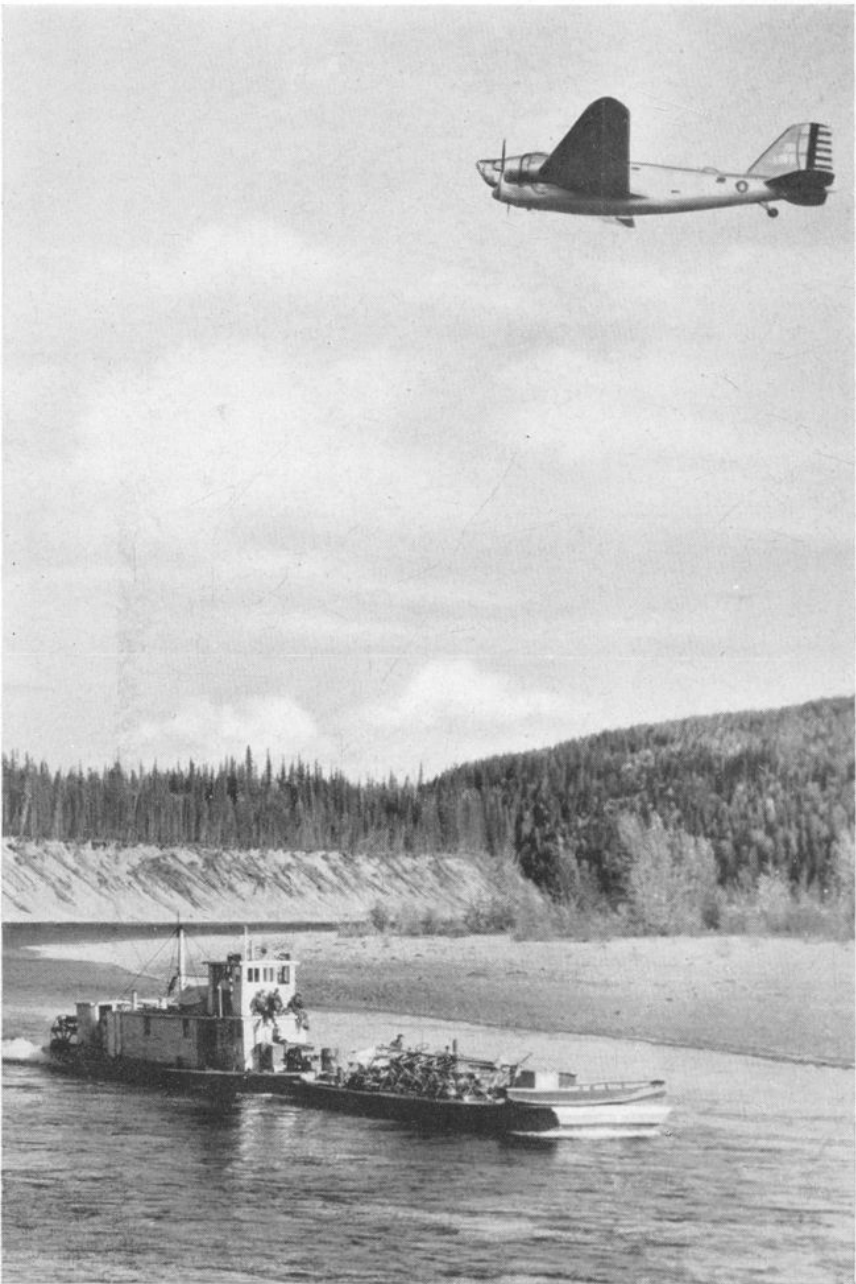
Referring to the landing fields along the Mackenzie River B. T. Richardson reported from Ottawa on March 7th as follows:

“Recent purchases of American installations on the Northwest air route to Alaska has included twelve new landing fields in the Mackenzie River area which will form part of a future secondary air route to Asia. It has already become known as The Low Level Route and it lies along the Mackenzie River Valley, well to the east of the Northwest Staging Route which links Edmonton and Fairbanks, Alaska.

Survey parties of the Royal Canadian Air Force and the Department of Transport are in the field this winter selecting sites for the future extension of this route to the mouth of the Mackenzie River and Northern Alaska. Landing facilities were built by the United States Army as far down the Mackenzie as Norman Wells, site of the Canol Project. Surveys expected to be completed this winter will provide for five more landing fields further north.

The Mackenzie River air route was strictly a bush pilot route in pre-war years, suitable only for planes using pontoons or skis. Development of fields suitable for land planes will inaugurate a new era in Northwest flying, comparable to the opening of the staging route through Alberta, Northern British Columbia, across the Yukon Territory to Alaska. The new Low Level Route was started in May, 1942. It takes in two former landing fields at Peace River and Fort McMurray.

New landing fields were constructed at Embarras River, near the west end of Athabasca Lake, at Fort Smith, Fort Resolution, Hay River on Great Slave Lake, Fort Providence, Mills Lake, Fort Simpson, Fort Wrigley, Norman Wells, and Camp Canol. Between Peace River and Hay River two fields have been constructed at Métis and Upper Hay River post. All these fields are suitable for twin-engined transport planes, and Canadian Pacific air lines operates a daily schedule from Edmonton to Norman Wells. The fields are also used extensively by the United States Army Air Transport Command.



*Courtesy Department of Public Education.*

Freighting supplies for Watson Lake airport. American bomber overhead.

Possible sites of air fields further north along the Mackenzie River include Fort Good Hope, Arctic Red River, and Fort McPherson, near Aklavik. From that point the route would swing westward towards Alaska and Asia with fields in the Porcupine River region.

The value placed on United States construction on the Mackenzie River air route by Mr. Howe, in his announcement that Canada would buy out the project, was only \$2,000,000, this figure indicated that little construction in modern air field standards has yet been completed. But in its present form the route represents an important Canadian shortcut on future world air routes leading to Asia.”

No doubt the branch to Alaska would follow the route taken by the Author to Fairbanks, Alaska, by dog-team in the winter of 1924, only a little south. From Fort McPherson it would follow the short divide, long a highway for fur traders and Louchoux Indians to La Pierre House; follow the Porcupine River to Old Crow and Rampart House at the Canada-Alaska border, thence to Fort Yukon and Fairbanks.

## Appendix III

### UNITED STATES OBTAINS VAST OIL RESERVES IN CANADIAN NORTH

The inside story of concessions given to the United States Government by the Canadian Government in respect to the oil resources of Northern Canada is contained in a release from Ottawa, dated March 10, 1944:

“The Canadian Government has set aside the entire Yukon territory and a vast bloc of the District of Mackenzie in the Northwest Territories, as a reserve for oil exploration and development solely by nominees of the United States Government under an agreement covering the Canol Project. In addition the Government of Canada has declared that one-half of all oil production and development in this enormous reserve area shall become its property six months after the war ends. The reserve covers nearly one million square miles.

“These disclosures are found in official documents relating to the famed Canol Project in the Canadian Northwest. As far as the printed report of the Truman Committee of the U.S. Senate, which discounted the Canol Project heavily, shows, these and other significant features of the project never came to the notice of the Committee. Official notes exchanged between Canada and the United States from time to time, since the Canol Project originated in 1942, disclosed that Canadian action was taken to protect the interests of its ally, the United States Government, and its own interests, against nuisance staking in the Canadian Northwest oil area.

“These features of the Canol Project have come into prominence in view of current negotiations between Canada and the United States which may decide the fate of Canol. The Truman Committee recommended that the U.S. War Department consider whether the project should be abandoned. Another recommendation urged re-negotiation by the War Department of its contract with Imperial Oil Company Limited, its nominee for oil exploration and development in the Canol region. Meanwhile, the position in the Canol Project is that the pipeline to Whitehorse

was completed last month, that three times as much oil has been discovered as the pipeline and refinery at Whitehorse can handle, and further oil exploration and drilling has stopped on the Canadian side of the Alaska border, though it is being pressed in southern Alaska and possibly in other parts of that territory.

“The U.S. War Department spent \$17,000,000 in exploration and wildcat drilling in connection with Canol, which cost it \$134,000,000. Its contract with Imperial Oil in no way involved the Canadian Government. The contract provided that the War Department would pay expenses of prospecting and drilling. It would pay Imperial Oil \$1.25 per barrel for oil. After 1,500,000 barrels were delivered, the U.S. Department would receive a credit of 75c. a barrel out of the \$1.25 price, until it was repaid for drilling and exploration expenses. Thereafter, Imperial Oil would credit itself with 75c. a barrel out of the \$1.25 price, creating a fund with which to buy U.S. installations in the field. The Truman Committee argued that payment of \$1.25 per barrel on 1,500,000 barrels was really a royalty to the company that was not warranted, since Imperial Oil’s previous development consisted only of five wells, two of them dry. It added: ‘Ironically, Imperial Oil will still thereafter “own” the field.’

“Under Canadian regulations, the old leases held by Imperial Oil provided that the Canadian Government could take possession of the field, if it decided to do so. All oil development outside the Imperial Oil’s leases at Canol are subject to new regulations which allow the Canadian Government possession of one-half all oil discovered in the Northwest Territories and Yukon six months after the war ends. These regulations will place the Canadian Government in direct control of a strategic reserve. One need only recall the working agreement of the permanent joint board on defence between Canada and the United States to judge whether the Truman Committee’s fears are valid, that future defence requirements would be endangered by the lapse of its post-war rights in the Canol Project. The Committee argued, at one point in its report, that the pipeline and refinery at Whitehorse must depend on Canada and Imperial Oil for sources of oil, ‘and the price of the oil will be whatever they decide to charge.’

“Circumstances which led the Canadian Government to reserve merely one million square miles of territory in its Arctic region for the exclusive war-time oil exploration and development by the U.S. Government are disclosed in notes exchanged between

Ottawa and Washington. At one stage, the United States asked for exclusive rights in almost twice as much territory as the vast bloc that was finally set aside. How much oil exists in the reserve is pure guesswork at present. Imperial Oil reported eight million barrels in reserve in its small virginal Norman Wells development. It drilled twenty-six more wells for the U.S. Government and found oil in twenty-three of them. By July 1st, 1943, enough oil had been proven to produce 3,000 barrels a day, the flow required for Canol. By January 1st, 1944, the established flow was 7,500 barrels a day. At that time Imperial Oil claimed a proven reserve of 35,000,000 barrels. Most of this, of course, lies within the old leases held by Imperial Oil. Under the old regulations the Canadian Government could take possession of this oil at any time. Latest reliable Canadian estimate is that about 60,000,000 barrels of oil have been discovered.

“In May, 1942, Canada reserved all oil rights within fifty miles of Norman Wells. Its regulations governing Northern oil reserves were published in *Canada Gazette*, February 20, 1943. They were extraordinarily rigid, establishing full control of all permits to be issued to prospectors, requiring permit holders to commence drilling within twelve months, and allowing the Government to decide directly where wells may be drilled.

“Meanwhile in December, 1942, the United States asked for more oil, raising its 3,000 barrel figure to 20,000 barrels a day. This note asked for the right to explore and drill all over the Yukon and Northwest Territories west of the 112th meridian—a region including about 2,000,000 square miles. ‘No plans as yet,’ the note said, ‘have been worked out for refineries, storage and distribution of this much oil.’ This proposal was accepted by Canada on January 13, 1943, and five days later Canada asked the United States to indicate definitely the particular districts in which it was interested. ‘These districts,’ said the Canadian note, ‘could then be reserved for exploration by nominees of the United States Government.’

“Finally in March, 1943, the Canadian Government set the limits of the oil reserve region as outlined by the heavy broken line in the map below.<sup>[11]</sup>

“To Canada it is obvious that much more than a re-negotiation of contracts between Imperial Oil and the U.S. Government, which the latter may regard as improvident, as the Truman Committee did, is involved in decisions on the future of Canol.

The Canadian Government, while it has co-operated with United States in giving priority to strategic defences of Northwest Canada, must face the problem of future economic development in that region.”

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- [11] The western boundary follows the line of demarcation between Yukon Territory and Alaska, follows the 60th parallel along its southern boundary to a point opposite Fort Providence, while its eastern boundary follows a line paralleling the Mackenzie River, running through the centre of Great Bear Lake to the Arctic coast.

## Transcriber's Notes

Spelling and punctuation have been changed silently to achieve consistency and to correct obvious typographic errors.

[The end of *The Romance of the Alaska Highway* by Philip Henry Godsell]