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THE MIGHTY MACKENZIE RIVER

EXPLORATION of the Canadian and American West was done by fur traders who, like the Indians, knew no boundaries between the two nations. They made the pathways over which pioneers travelled to tame, settle, and develop a rough, cruel land into a productive and prosperous empire.

It was the astute fur trader, John Jacob Astor, who had an important role in opening the Pacific Coast to commerce and settlement by establishing the Pacific Fur Company. With headquarters at Astoria, inland posts were soon built on the Columbia and its tributaries.

When Duncan McDougall, the partner whom Astor had placed in command at Astoria, heard that the War of 1812 had started and that a British gunboat, the *Raccoon*, was on its way to take the fort, he decided to sell the Pacific Fur Company to the North West Company. Whether or not this was wise and whether Astor received proper and full consideration for the assets of his company have been the subjects of extensive debate. The fact remains that the dream of Astor came to a sudden and exasperating end as the North West Company took over all the fur business west of the Rocky Mountains. Astor's employees, all trained men that he had hired in Montreal, took service with the new proprietors. The North West Company was in turn absorbed by the Hudson's Bay Company, whose domain extended from Hudson Bay to the mouth of the Columbia River.

Fur trading opened the wilderness door to the Mackenzie Basin, in which the United States has a tremendous interest. It became a life line for her national defence during World War II. Today the United States has a partnership in the radar warning system that guards the entrance to the Mackenzie Valley, and thousands of Americans have investments in the mines that now flourish there.

It was the discovery of oil below Fort Norman in 1920 that awakened the Canadian North from its long slumber, when drillers were sent "down north" from Oklahoma and Texas. Ten years later the entire Mackenzie Basin was opened by the bush pilots who unlocked doors to a domain that had

been closed to all but a very few men since time began. A couple of men in an airplane with a camera could do more exploration in a few days, and do it better, than it formerly took many men on the ground months and years to do.

Today there are producing mines, small fast diesel-powered river craft have replaced the puffing wood-burning paddle-wheel steamboats, radio has almost eliminated the "moccasin telegraph", and new railroad lines and highways are constantly being pushed into the bush as new finds are made.

Although there are modern communities with electric lights, running water, indoor plumbing, and daily plane service, the Mackenzie Valley for the most part has changed very little since the first white man moved in. The great river is still the chief link of the fur trade and will continue to be so as long as there are wild animals and the adornment of furs is fashionable. There is a blending of the past and the future in the furman: he wants to be left alone to trade with the Indians, yet the opening of every new mine creates another thriving community and more customers for his business.

The river was called *Disappointment* by Alexander Mackenzie, the first white man to travel its full course from Great Slave Lake to the Arctic Sea. At that time, in 1789, Mackenzie was looking for a northwest passage to the Pacific. Though he was only twenty-six years old, Mackenzie was a ten-year veteran of the fur trade and already a partner of the North West Company. He soon realized the abundance of wealth in furs that the region possessed.

Mackenzie had arrived in Montreal from Stornoway, Scotland, ten years earlier and had joined one of the three Canadian fur companies challenging the authority of the Hudson's Bay Company to the monopoly of the expansive domain between Lake Superior, the Rockies, and the Arctic. As they were continually fighting among themselves, it was not until they united, in 1787, as the North West Company, that they became a real threat to the Company of Adventurers, who considered the interlopers from Montreal mere poachers.

As a member of the North West Company, admitted to partnership when only twenty-two, Mackenzie had seen service in Detroit and Grand Portage at the head of Lake Superior before moving west to Fort Chipewyan, where his cousin Roderick had selected the base for the new company's operations in the northwest. It was from Chipewyan, on Lake Athabasca, that Alexander set out in search of the northwest passage, bringing back reports of coal seams and petroleum deposits in the sub-Arctic. Later, in 1793, he became the first white man to cross the Rocky Mountains and reach the Pacific, twelve years before Lewis and Clark blazed their historic trail across America.

The North West Company established posts on the Mackenzie River,

transporting their trading supplies westward and their furs eastward through the chain of rivers and lakes by canoe to Montreal. The Bay Company had their centre of operations on Hudson Bay, and their ships came there directly from England. Moving across the country, the North West traders were often able to cut off furs intended for the Hudson's Bay Company by buying them from Indian traders heading for the Bay headquarters.

In the thirty years of strife and bloodshed that ensued between the two fur-trading factions following Mackenzie's voyage down the big river, the Indians enjoyed undreamed-of prosperity, as they could barter with the traders who vied to outbid each other. Competitive traders ambushed one another and loads of furs were taken in that period of two-way piracy. Profits from both companies dwindled, and it is quite possible that they would have collapsed in financial ruin but for Lord Selkirk, who had no interest in the fur war but who wished to establish British settlers in the Canadian West.

As settlers were the last thing the fur traders wanted, Selkirk's pioneers, in what is now Winnipeg, brought about clashes. The last was the Battle of Seven Oaks, the bloodiest encounter of all in the fur wars that resulted in the consolidation of the two companies on March 26, 1821, with the Hudson's Bay Company continuing to be the name of the new company. The days of "dog eat dog" were over, and the Indians, who had become accustomed to competitive bidding, now had a monopoly to deal with as the fur traders cut rates for profits to make up for the lean years of warfare. When the fur war was at its height no dividends were earned. By 1825 the dividend rate was 10 per cent. It doubled in 1828 and by 1838, the peak year, shareholders were receiving 25 per cent dividends.

It was George Simpson who put the Hudson's Bay Company back on an even keel and kept it there. Appointed governor of the northern division of the reorganized company, young Simpson ruled an area of a million square miles in which his word was law. The fur trade was removed from Montreal and, until the rail line was completed north from Edmonton, all supplies came from England and the bales of fur were sent there through Hudson Bay.

The "Little Emperor", as Simpson was called, introduced the use of dogs for carrying mail and emergency items between the trading posts during the long winter, and he supervised the construction of York boats that replaced the 30-foot canoes of Mackenzie's day. About forty feet in length, with a 10-foot beam, the York boat was shallow-draft and carried oars and a sail. Going upstream it was "tracked", the crew hauling on the line as they walked along

the shore. These boats travelled in brigades of a dozen or more and remained on the rivers until the advent of the steamboat.

The lush years of fur trading ended in 1869, two years after the Canadian provinces federated and became a nation. Civilization had caught up with the Hudson's Bay Company, and it had to make terms with the new era or be swept away. When this monopoly was smashed, the entire north was wide open for competitive fur trading.

The first of several Roman Catholic Missions along the Mackenzie was built in 1847, and in 1890 a patrol of Royal Canadian Mounted Police (known as the Royal North West Mounted until 1920) reached Hudson Bay. Missions, police barracks, and trading posts formed the nucleus of every settlement. There was a flurry of excitement in 1898 when gold seekers heading for the Klondike travelled down the chain of rivers to Fort McPherson, then went up the Peel River to hike over the Divide to the gold fields. That same year Captain Haight took a party of young Indians familiar with white water to Egypt to operate river boats there during the siege of Khartoum.

White men and Indians left the Mackenzie Basin for France during World War I, some of them under the command of "Peace River Jim" Cornwall, who won that sobriquet for his efforts in settlement of the Peace River district. Despite the movement of men, there was little change. The Mackenzie River continued to be a fur-trading country exclusively until 1920, when oil was discovered just below Fort Norman, close to the Arctic Circle. The railroad from Edmonton to the Clearwater River had just been completed, but it was the heyday of the steamboats.

Ten years later mail was being carried by plane as the North took wings, with prospecting parties being flown to remote areas that had been inaccessible for exploration. The northwest passage Mackenzie had sought in forty days of arduous travel from Fort Chipewyan to the sea became an aerial passage. Then, in May, 1930, Gilbert LaBine, prospecting thirty miles south of the Arctic Circle, along the south shore of bleak and forbidding Great Bear Lake, discovered pitchblende (radium ore). Eldorado Mine was soon in operation. It broke radium monopoly of the Belgian Congo and gave scientists the rare element U-235 that made possible the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima.

A stampede of fortune hunters followed in the wake of LaBine's strike. Soon gold mines were being developed at Great Slave Lake, followed by uranium mines at Lake Athabasca. Fast diesel-powered boats were quickly built to haul equipment and supplies.

When the lakes farther north are finally clear of ice, navigation at the

end-of-steel gets under way. Each boat, having been moved far back on the river bank before "freezeup" the previous year to prevent being crushed by moving ice at "breakup", is slid down the greased ways and launched. From Waterways and Fort McMurray they operate down the Athabasca River, across Lake Athabasca, and down the Slave River three hundred miles to Fort Fitzgerald.

Because of rapids in the Slave River, rapids which drop 109 feet in all, everything has to be moved by truck across the sixteen-mile portage from Fort Fitzgerald to Fort Smith, just inside the Northwest Territory. From Fort Smith boats operate down the lower Slave River, across Great Slave Lake, and down the Mackenzie River 1,580 miles to the Arctic Coast.

Sandbars are built up in the rivers when the ice goes out at breakup. A constant rise and fall of the rivers causes sandbars to disappear and form elsewhere throughout the short summer season. River pilots become expert in "reading" water and keeping their craft in the ever-changing channels.

In a general analysis, the Mackenzie Valley is an immense forest. The trees become shorter as one goes north, until there is only brush and tundra. The timber limit is the boundary line between the Indian and the Eskimo.

The last of the Canadian Indian treaties with the northern bands was made in 1921. It guaranteed hunting rights, and granted free schooling, hospitalization, food and clothing when necessary, and aid to the aged. Every year the Indian Agent reaffirms the treaty by paying five crisp new dollar bills to every man, woman, and child.

In the Hudson Bay and the northern islands the Eskimo lives a very primitive and frugal life, but in the Mackenzie Delta industrious Eskimo families make ten thousand dollars or more a year selling furs to the highest bidder. Captain John Matheson of Edmonton made a number of auxiliary schooners for the more prosperous Eskimos. Hauled three hundred miles by rail to the **end-of-steel**, the schooners were sailed down the rivers, with a sixteen-mile portage, to the Mackenzie Delta.

The Indian and the Eskimo lived very well without civilization but, with the coming of the white man, they are now trapped by it. The irony is that, although the numbers are decreasing, they cannot go back to the old ways of life.

Great herds of buffalo, supplemented by excess numbers from the range at Wainwright, Alberta, roam freely below Great Slave Lake, their movement checked from a helicopter. Eastward from Great Slave Lake, the forbidding Barren Lands extend to Hudson Bay, and in the heart of this immense waste,

around the Thelon River, caribou and musk oxen roam undisturbed. There is an ever-increasing herd of reindeer at the Mackenzie Delta.

Though the rivers run through a vast forest, there are many scenes of magnificent beauty. The falls, rapids, and cascades of the Slave River, with Cassette Rapids dropping twenty-nine feet, are breathtaking. The Ramparts between Fort Norman and Good Hope are rock walls that rise straight up and extend for seven miles on both sides of the Mackenzie like fortresses. As the Mackenzie flows north it moves closer and closer to the Rockies which, nearing the Delta, fade away into the Arctic aurora borealis. Because of the long hours of sunlight, vegetables and flowers grow rapidly in early summer; the gardens in full bloom at every settlement are, perhaps, the most unexpected sight in all the Mackenzie Valley.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States became vitally interested in the Mackenzie Basin. Canada had built a series of airfields which became the staging route for lease-lend American planes that were flown to Russia. From the assembly plant in Great Falls, Montana, planes were flown to Edmonton and then to Fairbanks, Alaska, where the Russians took over. Between August 31, 1942, and the end of 1944 six thousand planes were sent northward to save Stalingrad and keep Russia in the war.

Linking America's northland, a 1671-mile highway through the Yukon to Alaska was built by the U.S. Army Engineers and ready for use in eight months. Canada had agreed to its construction on the understanding that the 1200 miles of it that traverses the Canadian solitudes would revert to Canada after the war.

To assure military forces of a supply of fuel if the Japanese invaders, who had reached the Aleutians, succeeded in cutting the sea lanes, the oil wells at Fort Norman were taken over by the U.S. Army. From the wells of Imperial Oil Company (subsidiary of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey), which had been supplying the mines and river transportation, a pipe-line was run through the trackless hills to Whitehorse, where a refinery had been installed after being moved lock, stock, and boiler from Texas. Later, lines for refined products radiated from Whitehorse to Skagway, Watson Lake, and Fairbanks. Overnight, new wells were drilled at Fort Norman, and men who had run pipe across burning deserts worked in temperatures 60 degrees below zero. Food and supplies were hauled to them on a newly-constructed road.

Throughout the war years the paddle-wheel steamboats performed meritorious service. The old *Mackenzie River* had been retired to rot at Fort Smith years before. Renovated and converted from wood to oil for fuel, she

was put back to work. She and her younger sister, *Distributor III*, packed thousands of tons downstream to the CANOL project at Norman Wells. That was the twilight of the stern-wheelers. They crossed Great Slave Lake in storms that would not have been faced in the easy-going days. Giving way to the fast diesel-powered boats, the stern-wheelers faded from the northern scene gloriously.

After the Americans pulled out, leaving their pipe-line behind them, the bank of the Mackenzie at Norman Wells became a mammoth junk yard of abandoned bulldozers, jeeps, and various types of mechanized military equipment, because to have hauled it south would have cost more than the material would have brought on the open market.

The refinery was trucked down the Alaska Highway to a point near Edmonton where crudes from Canada's fabulous Leduc field are now being processed. The CANOL road of 520 miles from Norman Wells to its junction with the Alaska Highway soon fell into disrepair. And the pipe-line? The engineers had laid pipe incapable of carrying enough oil to make a commercial operation feasible. Anyone who wanted to run the line would have to replace the small-diameter size with larger pipe. The CANOL project was simply written off as a \$434,000,000 blunder.

Interest in the Mackenzie Basin was widely aroused by "Exercise Musk Ox" when Canadian troops made a 3,000 mile trek by snowmobile during the late winter and spring of 1946 from Churchill, on Hudson Bay, to the Alaska Highway. Going by way of Baker Lake, Coronation Gulf, and the Mackenzie Valley, they traversed the last few hundred miles over the road made for the CANOL project.

Though the Mackenzie Valley had become a highway to the top of the world for defence, the military leaders of Canada and the United States realized that it could also be an airway for enemy attack. As a safeguard against that extreme possibility, there are now three lines of warning systems at the northern entrance, built by the joint efforts of both nations. It is expected that these warning systems will be phased out eventually with the perfection of a satellite system.

Partly because of competition but more because of reduced fur values and the increase of fur raised on farms, the Hudson's Bay Company's main source of revenue in recent years has been from its retail stores in the cities of western Canada. The romantic and highly profitable days of the fur trade have drawn to a close.

A rail line now links Edmonton with Great Slave Lake, and mining com-

munities are hives of activity. Nevertheless, the country "down north" below Fort Norman has changed little since Mackenzie first saw it. There, along the lower Mackenzie, canoes with kickers (outboard motors) are used by whites and natives, and dogs make winter transportation possible. And in some ways the twentieth century has clearly come to the region. Wheel-equipped air liners carry passengers and express throughout the year as far north as Fort Norman and to the mining community of Yellowknife on Great Slave Lake. Smaller pontoon or ski-shod planes operate into the hundreds of lakes of the back country where prospectors carry on a constant search for buried treasure, while geologists insist "the country hasn't been scratched yet." In winter, with the river boats hauled to safety, giant tractors pull sleighs loaded with freight over the ice and snow. The Mackenzie Basin, once the world's greatest fur route and now tied closely to the United States for northern defence, has also been transformed to a waterway and airway for gold and other minerals that flow from the mines.