

# IN THE PEACE RIVER DISTRICT

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ALL fall, since I had come to the Peace River district as a hobo harvest hand, I had been hearing about the wonderful "Battle River Country." I remember particularly one night during the threshing season, when the men on the gang on which I worked were talking about this district within a district. It was after supper, and we were gathered around the little box stove in the bunk car. The usual evening poker game had not yet started. The halfbreeds of the company were lounging in the upper bunks, talking in Cree, while they rolled their cigarettes.

"It is just like it is here," Ed. Hart said. "Pretty nearly clear, no breaking your back chopping down poplars for ten years. It's good soil too, the best in the country."

"Just like it is here." "Here" was the little town of Waterhole, a place in the Peace River district which has been profitably farmed for a number of years, and which is the north-western end of steel of the railroad from Edmonton. Although darkness had fallen, we could all see in our minds its big grain fields, with only little patches of scrub bush here and there. There was no thick bush to wear out a man's spirit, clearing, clearing, clearing. Instead of that just a little cutting to do, here and there, and then the plow!

"How far North is it?" someone asked.

"Oh, some say sixty miles, some say eighty. What's the difference? There'll be a railroad there by the time that a man is able to produce much crop."

Then there was more talk. Eyes gleamed. Free land up there! Land which would grow good grain!

"I'm going up after threshing to see it," I said. "So am I." "So am I." The affirmation ran round the circle.

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The Peace river has its source in the Rockies, and for the first few miles of its course rushes tumbling and foaming through rocky gorges. It flows in a general easterly direction some two hundred miles or so, and gradually assumes that placidity from which comes its name. It is then a shallow stream with very high banks. After flowing east, it changes its direction and flows almost due north for about two hundred and fifty miles. The town

of Peace River is situated on the elbow formed by this change in direction. After flowing north, it turns eastwardly again, and finally flows into Lake Athabaska. Generally speaking, the district known as the Peace River district is that area which this river drains, from its source until it starts to flow eastwardly for the second time. For present purposes, this district may be roughly divided into two parts. The first lies along the southern part of the district, and is served by a railway from Edmonton. In this area practically all the available farm land is settled. The soil is of excellent quality, and one of its farmers has won the world's championship for both wheat and oats. The general crop record is splendid. As a farming district, it compares most favorably with any other in Canada. It is prosperous, and progressing rapidly. The other part of the district is all that huge area extending to the north and west of the first. Despite its tremendous potential value, its settlement is attended with well recognized difficulties. In the first place, it does not all consist of good farming land. There are many square miles which are not suited to growing good grain, either because of inherent deficiency in the soil, or because the heavy fires, which have visited the wooded sections through the years, have burnt away the rich black top soil, without which consistent success is impossible. Other sections are still covered with heavy spruce or scrub poplar, which is difficult and expensive to clear off. One saving feature about these areas is that their clearing is made much easier and cheaper by means of heavy tractors which push or pull heavy knives, and cut down the scrub. Plans have been proposed to clear the land in a wholesale way by means of controlled spring fires. A spring fire is not so likely to do damage to the soil. Of the possible success of this method I am not qualified to speak.

Thus, with the exception of the country around the railway, the land which is available for immediate farming lies in patches of from one hundred square miles upward in extent, through the district. One of these, which is so large that it deserves a much better name than "patch", is the country around Fort Vermillion, in the north-eastern part of the district. At the present time it cannot be successfully farmed, because of the lack of transportation facilities. Reasonably cheap transportation is essential to a grain growing country, as the farmer must be able to market his grain at a reasonable cost. River transportation has been tried, but because of the difficulties of navigating the Peace river, it has proved too expensive. It is hoped, however, that with the development of the farming land between Fort Vermillion and the

railroad to the south, and the development of the mineral resources in the north of the Peace River district itself, before many years Fort Vermillion will also have railroad connection.

One of the farming districts between Fort Vermillion and the railroad is the Battle River district to which I referred at the outset. The Battle river flows into the Peace river about sixty miles north of the town of Peace River, and it is about as far from the railroad. This part of the Peace River district was becoming very well known, and was the chief topic of conversation on many a threshing gang besides the one on which I worked. Its great attractions were that it was quite clear of scrub and bush, that the soil was of excellent quality, and that it had a remarkable record of freedom from crop destroying frosts.

So very soon after the threshing season was over, I was at Grimshaw, which is the starting place of the Battle River trail. I had gained a companion—a partner. He was a middle-aged German, of wide experience, whose last employment had been that of operating an elevator in the city of New York.

We had considerable difficulty before we were able to leave the beer parlor at Grimshaw, but managed to get away at last. Inside the beer parlor it was warm and filled with the expansive good fellowship stimulated by the ready flow of beer, paid for with newly earned threshing wages. Outside it was cold, and the northern trail led into the unknown.

We started out with a group of halfbreeds. I will never forget the novelty of that first trip. We were nearly three days on the way. It was cold, but beautiful and sunny. Each of us drove a team of "cayuses" hitched to a hay rack. The wheels ran along on the hard frozen ground, which was covered with about an inch of light, powdery snow. Sometimes we would tie the reins, and walk or run behind in order to keep warm. At night, we would pull into some settler's cabin along the way and stay till morning. These places were called "stopping places", and their owners made a business of supplying food and shelter to the travellers on the trail. Everyone carried his own blankets, which were simply unrolled on the floor.

It was just before twilight on the third day that we came to the top of the last hill and looked down into the valley of the Battle. The golden light of the setting sun seemed to give it a warm and compelling ripeness. Here and there a few small cabins and a few small grain fields could be dimly seen. It was like a place that had been, except for these few, set aside and forgotten. And that was practically the case. The good features of the place had

been realized for a long time; but because of its distance from the railway, it was not considered as a farming proposition. The few who lived there were practically all trappers. But now conditions were changed. There was a prospect of a railway, and of mineral development still farther north. The Battle River swiftly became known from Vancouver to Winnipeg. The stage was all set for the great settler's rush which was to come in the spring.

Next morning, after a good breakfast of hot cakes and syrup, we started out to look the country over. I saw a piece of land that I liked very much two or three days after. As I knew little or nothing about farming, I chose the place because of its looks. The land was a little rolling. It was quite clear, except for a bunch of magnificent spruces over in one corner, and a little scrub bush along the south half. A little creek, with several beaver dams across it, ran through the middle.

After selecting a homestead, it is necessary to "file" on it at the nearest land office, which in this case was at Peace River town. I was in a hurry to get back to town, as the district was even then being rapidly taken up, and one day's delay might, and often did, mean that someone else would file on the place which you wanted before you got there. So I started out at once, walking, because there were no outgoing teams on the trail just at that time. My partner had not yet found a place which he liked, so he could not come back with me. We saw each other only once again, as he finally decided not to take up a homestead. On the way out I met several parties of new settlers coming in, bringing their goods so as to stay for the winter. Some of these were men that I had met on the threshing outfits, and two were fellow Nova Scotians.

At Peace River I was able to file on the place which I wanted, and this pleased me very much. In my eagerness to start homesteading as soon as possible, I did not wait for a team, but started to walk back in, pulling my few belongings behind me on a toboggan. It was not necessary to take in any great quantity of supplies, because there was a good store in the district, at which practically all one's needs could be filled. This store maintained its connection with the railroad by team.

When I got back, I found a place to stay with one of the "old timers." The winter was very pleasant. Most of the farm work was over for the year. Except for the daily feeding of the stock, there was nothing which required immediate attention. In the winter the homesteader does his work in the woods, getting in his year's supply of firewood, and cutting logs and poles for his buildings. The logs he may have sawn into lumber, or else he may use

them as they are. Because his building materials are readily available, and because he does his own labour, his buildings are erected at a comparatively cheap price.

The winter is also the great social season. It is quite common to go visiting and sit down and talk all day and all night. Most of the settlers who were in the country at that time were bachelors, who depended on trapping for a living. They were men who were content to spend their lives far from the limits of civilization. In them the hunting instinct was strong. As a rule, they were only indifferent farmers, for farming requires an application which they were unwilling to give. A few of the advance guard of the new settlers, like myself, were spending their first winter in the country. These were of a different type from the great body of new settlers that came the next spring and summer. They were all Canadians and Americans of several generations, and generally were of that type which has followed the harvest in western Canada for years. They were labourers and yet skilled men. They could do anything which has to be done on the farm. They were independent, free and easy, and of splendid physique. It is hard for a man like that to settle down; but when he does, he makes a good settler. The others in the district were halfbreeds. Most of these were married and had children. Two of the new settlers also had families.

There was one characteristic common to all these people, and that was a love for the outdoors, and with the newcomers more especially, even a love for farming. Farming seems to have a certain elemental fascination. Despite the fact that it is hard, heavy work, it has an appeal which for many is inescapable.

We provided all our own entertainment. Every now and again someone would give a dance, and some house would tremble to the thunder of feet in a square set. The waltz, fox trot, and one step were equally popular. A few knew the Red River Jig. The Highland Schottische, Russian Polka, Jack of Tar Polka, and the French Minuet were well known. The music was provided by two experts, one with a violin and the other with a banjo. It was fast music, but the time was splendid. The conclusion of each selection would be greeted with shouts for "more," "more", and the musicians, pleased with such appreciation, generally obliged. One dance might last an hour, and the party keep up till dawn. These dances were exceptionally well conducted, and provided good uproarious fun. Besides the dances we used to have an occasional game of poker, which is a sort of standard north western amusement. This was a little better than the dances, and might last all day as well as all night. Stakes were comparatively low, not because of any innate caution, but rather because our money was scarce.

Occasionally some successful trapper would go to town to sell his fur, and return with a few bottles of liquor. This might be consumed by any number from two to a dozen men. I used to enjoy those parties, particularly because of the talk. Some of the fellows were overseas men; all of them had done considerable traveling in one way or another, and could tell many interesting stories. One man was keenly interested in politics, and the talk often turned to that field. He was a man of good education, of wide experience, and he had a deep knowledge of human nature. Sometimes the discussion would turn to such unexpected topics as good English, or the correct pronounciation of words, and all one night we fought about whether or not Robert Service was a great poet. Of course, the social spirit of such a gathering would not be fully expressed in talk alone; there was plenty of singing, and some of it was good.

All the time, that first winter, I felt that I was seeing a life, or rather a way of living, which would shortly cease to be general in that section. For the settlers coming in were not trappers, but farmers. They were men who would build homes and have families. They were of the type that is expected to "make" the country. They would not be greatly concerned about the price of fur, but they would await the coming of a railroad with eager insistence.

The winter passed. It was with the spring, after I had started to build my own log house with the logs that I had cut and hauled in the winter, that I saw the first of the great change which was to come over the country. Riding one evening, down a few miles south, where I had not been for about a month, I nearly rode into a fence, blocking the trail, before I saw it. I cut across, in the gathering darkness, to another trail. It, too, was blocked. From then on, traffic was to follow the surveyed lines. The farmers were beginning to fence their farms.

As yet, only a small part of the prairie was occupied. The great bulk of the settlers came that spring and summer. There, from on top of the ridgepole of my half completed building, I saw them come. They came singly, in twos and threes, in groups. They were walking, on horseback, with teams, even finally in automobiles. In the settlement of Canada another frontier was falling.

The people who came were for the most part of foreign extraction. Many of them, particularly the younger men, had been born in Canada, the sons of foreign born farmers of Saskatchewan; and they had come up into the north where land was free, in order to make a start for themselves. Others had been in the country just for a few years. In that time they had been working on farms in other parts of the West, and in that way had gained sufficient

Canadian knowledge and experience to enable them to develop a homestead. In their homes they still spoke the language of their fathers, but they nearly all spoke English as well, and being of different nationalities, they generally used it in their everyday dealings with each other.

To this new district they brought everything they had, both in goods and in money. They made this investment in the hope that the ultimate success of the country would render them an adequate return. Not only that, but they worked hard as well, and still do. Often their resources were not sufficient to provide living conditions of standards comparable to those in the older and more settled parts of Canada. For some, food itself was not too plentiful.

They were ambitious, and eager to see the place progress and develop. The fact that there was a keen demand for the establishment of schools is evidence of this. The district had hardly become settled when school districts were formed, and plans made to erect schoolhouses at a considerable financial sacrifice. Canada owes them a debt of gratitude. They have gone into a new district, a district which formerly produced nothing, and which added nothing to Canadian wealth, and by their hard work and their willingness to put the best they have into the country, come what may, they are making it beautiful and productive. As they win, as their effort returns them a reward, just to such an extent is Canada a better and more stable country.

The pioneering conditions which exist in that district are very different from those which prevailed in Eastern Canada. Modern pioneering is an out and out commercial proposition, and the reason pioneers go into a new district is because they hope for financial advantage. There are two very noticeable consequences of this fact. The first is that pioneering is no longer a "lonely" business, in so far as the new settler generally finds himself surrounded by other new settlers. A community social life develops very quickly. The other consequence is that a whole district, extending over two or three hundred square miles, undergoes a very even and rapid development, as contrasted with a scattered and slow development under conditions as they were in the older parts of Canada. The use of modern machinery also has a tremendous effect. Even in a pioneer country, heavy tractors roar and pound over the fields on all sides. For many people go there with considerable capital, which they have decided to invest in the new country rather than elsewhere. This tends toward a very rapid development, and to a need for an immediate extension of facilities

for transportation and communication. A good start has already been made in regard to these things. Last summer (1929) a good motor road was built from Grimshaw, the nearest railway point. A steel bridge was built over the Battle river. The mail which was formerly delivered once a month now comes every week. There is also a telegraph office.

So at the present moment of writing, there is but one thing for which the settlers are waiting. It is the all-important thing. It is that which will guarantee their success, and without which their investment is lost. It is a railroad. When it arrives, ready to carry the golden grain into the markets of the world, the last chapter of the winning of this part of the Dominion may be written.