

WAR'S IMPACT ON OUR NEARING NORTH

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TO-DAY Canada and the Empire are again at grips with a bitter foe. Again the resources of the Dominion are being marshalled to resist the forces of aggression. And not a living soul, no matter how obscure he may be, or how distant his retreat, will fail to be affected in some way or other by the holocaust that rages four thousand miles away in distant Europe.

Even the vast Northland, that stretches from the frontier to the Polar Sea, will not escape. Neither will the redmen and the trappers tramping on webbed snowshoes through the silvered aisles of the forests, or the wide-faced, grinning Eskimos in their dome-shaped igloos amongst the Arctic ice-fields. So intricate is the pattern of the commercial and political fabric out of which our so-called civilization is woven, that there is no longer any dividing line. No distant degree of latitude beyond which life proceeds along the even tenor of its way, regardless of wars and the ambitions of paranoiac dictators!

What will be the effect of this latest conflagration upon our rapidly developing Empire of the Snows? Upon that two million square miles of forest, mountain, lake and tundra that rolls northward in majestic grandeur and isolation from the end-of-steel to the white infinity of the Polar spaces? What will be the effect on the game, the forests, the mining settlements—now springing up like mushrooms where, only a few years ago, was nought but Indian tepees—and on transportation, which transcends almost everything in the economy of our vanishing frontier?

First let us turn back the pages of Time a quarter of a century—to that epochal and tragic month of August, 1914, the time when the world went mad.

Just back from a trip to England, I had taken up my duties at that picturesque Hudson's Bay post of Lac Seul in Northern Ontario. Nothing could have been more peaceful than the green countryside of England when I left there, and Lord Roberts was being soundly berated by leading papers for warning a disbelieving public that Germany was preparing to make war. Then, one day, I paddled out to Hudson, boarded the train

for Sioux Lookout and learned, with amazement, that the war was underway, that German legions were blasting their way through Belgium, and that friends with whom I rubbed shoulders but a few short weeks before were flocking to the colours.

The days which followed Great Britain's declaration of war were days of panic. Overnight fur values dropped to practically nothing; lynx from twenty-five to three dollars; marten from fifteen and twenty dollars to seventy-five cents; and other furs proportionately—a net drop of eighty-three per cent on former values.

At first it was hard to imagine that the glossy pelts which constituted the backbone of the Northland's commerce were barely worth the cost of transportation. The very life blood of that vast inland empire had, figuratively, dried up overnight. From London, Leipsic, and the fur markets of the world, panic swept swiftly through the North. Fast-speeding canoes, manned by wirey paddlers, sped day and night down the rivers of the land in a race with the Frost King, to carry to the fur posts and settlements word of the tragedy that had enveloped Europe and, most important of all, of the collapse of fur prices. For the days of radio and wireless were still far-off, and the country beyond the railroad was dependent upon the mysterious moccasin telegraph and infrequent Hudson's Bay packets for communication.

In many respects the "Interior", as the North was called in those days, had changed but little since the days when the Adventurers of England first reared their bastioned forts around the dismal shores of Hudson Bay. True, a network of picketed trading posts now dotted the land, and the redman had forsaken the warpath for the trapline. But the methods of trading still remained unaltered. The canoe, the York boat and the dog-sled were still the time-honoured modes of travel: the tempo of life had changed little through the centuries. Aeroplanes were unthought of, and even the motor engine had not yet been introduced to the North to oust the tawny *voyageurs*. Life, it seemed, would continue its casual, sluggish pace for untold years to come. The white trapper had not yet put in an appearance to despoil the woods of game. And the Indian, ever a casual hunter, never made any serious inroads into the foundation stock of the fur supply. He didn't want a "stake", all he wanted was sufficient furs with which to pay his fur debt and purchase ammunition, fish-nets, clothing and a few supplies.

The first effects of the war dealt a body blow to the natives. Two hundred years of dependence on the white man and his wares had made it impossible for them to get along without them. Now the factors were forced to refuse the customary credit. Cold, ragged and hungry, they haunted the trading posts in the vain hope of wearing down the resistance of these potentates of the wilderness. Reluctantly, with unskilled hands, they turned at last to bows and arrows and snares, and makeshifts of their ancestors; and while poverty stalked through a land of plenty, the fur-bearers, given a new lease of life through the low price placed upon their heads, increased rapidly in numbers.

Suddenly, without warning, the price of furs commenced to rise. Unskilled labour had come into its own in distant England. Factory and ammunition workers were suddenly projected from poverty to affluence, and daughters of Billingsgate fishwives, at a loss as to how to dispose of their new-found wealth, bought grand pianos, painted them a ruddy scarlet, and swaggered forth like movie queens in glossy mink and throws of silver fox.

As money flowed in an ever-widening golden stream, fur prices rose by leaps and bounds. With Russian furs out of the market, pelts from the Canadian forests found an ever-growing demand in London and New York. Profits were unprecedented, and the longer furs took to arrive at these markets, the higher the price they brought. No longer was the Indian something to be brushed aside imperiously. Once again he found himself an important cog in this commerce of the wilds, and traders vied with each other to secure his favour.

Lured by the prospects of acquiring easy and sudden wealth, traders of a dozen sects and nationalities pushed their squalid stores into the bushlands of Quebec, Ontario, Northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan in a mad scramble for the spoils. Barbers, clothiers, railroaders, and ex-bartenders turned "fur buyers" overnight. Their pockets bulging with greenbacks, they crowded the frontier trains and trading posts, all bent on making a "clean-up" on the rapidly rising market. At Fort Chipewyan, on the fir-fringed shores of Athabasca Lake, J. H. Bryan, a local trapper with ideas, commenced to bargain with the natives, buying fur for cash. Soon he had acquired sufficient stout bales of peltries to send him to New York. The rest is history.

Having succeeded in interesting American capital in the possibilities of the North, he returned to Edmonton, head of

the newly established million-dollar Lamson and Hubbard Company, and throughout the Mackenzie valley and Northern Saskatchewan the factors found that the weak and insignificant opponent, whom they had laughed at around Fort Chipewyan, was the dominating figure in an aggressive enterprise that was going to burst wide open the ancient solitudes and challenge old monopolies throughout the North.

What the Lamson and Hubbard Company lacked in experience, they made up for in swift and dynamic action. Cheek by jowl with the picketed posts of the pioneer fur company arose the log posts of the new concern, bringing a new order, up-to-date prices, and new methods to a section of the North that was stagnant as a mill-pond. Whites and Indians alike flocked to the scarlet banner bearing the white letters "L. & H. Co."

But the new company was not depending entirely on the trappers in the North. Taking a page from the history of the old American fur companies of the days of Astor, Jim Bridger and Manuel Liza, they brought scores of American trappers from across the border, "grubstaked" them and scattered them along the *Athabasca*, the *Mackenzie*, and all the tributary streams. On their heels swarmed a tatterdemalion horde of half-breed trappers, attracted to the swampy deltas of the *Athabasca* and *Great Slave Lake* by four-dollar muskrats.

The American company's next move was to bring to the North the benefits of modern, up-to-date transportation. Indian-manned scows, and the hundred-ton *Mackenzie River*, which made one annual trip to the Arctic, comprised the entire transportation equipment of the vast Mackenzie valley in those days. Soon the keel of a palatial, two hundred and twenty-five ton sternwheeler, the *Distributor*, was laid down on the stocks at the Fort Smith waterfront. White men, imported from Edmonton, did the work, and staged for the benefit of local natives the first strike witnessed beyond the end-of-steel. The food was bad, they said. Yet, from the standpoint of us traders, used to thawing frozen beans and bannock beside the campfire, they were living in the lap of luxury, rarely lacking such delicacies as fruit, eggs, fresh vegetables and meat. Indians and half-breeds alike watched this new manifestation of the white man's ways with interest, and promptly staged a strike themselves, jacking up the rate for haulage across the eighteen-mile Smith Portage from a dollar to a dollar and a half a hundred pounds.

The launching of this new Leviathan of the North was followed by another adventure in modern transportation, when the high-powered gas-boat, the *Lady Mackworth*, negotiated the turbulent *Liard*, sounding the death knell of the scow and *voyageur* in still another area of the Silent Places.

Meanwhile the post-war migration into the wilderness, and the necessity for a railway to link its vast waterways system with the source of supply, sent the steel tentacles of commerce groping northward till the A. & G. W. Railway reached the head of navigation at Waterways, sending still another surge of humanity northward to invade the ancestral hunting grounds of the Yellow-knives and Slavies. In the valley of the *Peace* the F. D. & B. C. Railway uncoiled twin lines of steel, while, to the eastward, the much maligned Hudson Bay Railway was also creeping with spasmodic jerks towards the projected port of Churchill, giving birth to the now prosperous mining town of Flin Flon and disproving the popular belief that the entire country was good for nothing. Moulded and perfected in the crucible of war, the aeroplane made its commercial *debut* in 1928, scattering gold-seeking prospectors throughout the land, and breaking down forever the age-old barriers of the North.

Nothing will better exemplify the vast change the stimulus of the last war worked upon the once isolated and lonely Mackenzie valley than the following figures.

In 1920, when I first entered that region, less than six hundred tons passed over the A. & G. W. Railway for that entire section for a year. Seven years later, four thousand tons crossed Smith Portage for the Mackenzie basin alone. In 1938 twenty-five thousand tons were carried North from the end-of-steel by watercraft; eleven thousand five hundred passengers travelled back and forth by air, and three million pounds of express was whisked through the Northern skies by aeroplane, thanks largely to the development of mining.

So much for the effects, direct and indirect, of the last war. From the frontier to the Polar Sea, the North is taking the new war in its stride. No panic accompanied Great Britain's declaration of war this time. There has been no disorganization of commerce. Furs have actually struck a firmer tone on the London and New York markets. The land is adapting itself swiftly to meet the new conditions, thanks to past experience and improved transportation and communication.

As adventure-loving Northerners flock to the colours, and courageous bush pilots desert the Arctic air lanes to place their

unrivalled experienced at the disposal of their country, a temporary recession may be looked for. But the end can hardly be in doubt. Increased demand for gold and base metals which lie dormant in the rocks, and the fact that Governments now have to pay cash on the nail for war supplies, should bring a tremendous up-swing to Canada's mining industry, while intensive aerial training will make still another generation air-minded and stimulate an even more determined assault upon the secrets of the vanishing frontier.