

New Road to an Old Fort

By C. D. LA NAUZE, Calgary, Alta.

FROM the latter part of the seventeenth century the Peace River has been known as a wide and kind waterway. Alexander MacKenzie wintered just above the present town of Peace River and in the following May of 1793 pushed his birch bark canoes up the Peace and across the divide until he discovered Canada's Pacific Coast. The river was well known to the early fur traders and has been used extensively in their changing routes. The Cariboo gold seekers of 1851 shook their gold pans along its headwaters and many an unknown miner's bones lie on the banks of the Findlay, Parsnip, Pine, and Omineca Rivers. The river's deep canyon at Hudson's Hope, B.C., was the barrier to its peaceful waters below where, with one short rapid below Fort Vermilion, it flows 800 miles to its mouth in the MacKenzie basin.

In 1890 that redoubtable sportsman and explorer Warburton Pike almost lost his life and his small party in a terrible, late fall journey West of Hudson's Hope, as he tried to reach the Pacific over the old miners' route. He had come up the Peace from its mouth that fall. The Yukon gold rush of 1898 saw many hopes dashed as the gold seekers from rail head at Edmonton tried to reach the Klondike by the Peace and then go overland.

About 1904 a small body of the R.N.W.M.P. were detailed to cut a pack trail from Fort St. John, B.C., on the Peace to Telegraph Creek, B.C., in order to establish an all-Canadian route to the Yukon. This route was never used and it remained dormant until 1941 when World War II demanded the Alaska Highway and the Peace was spanned near Fort St. John by the fine bridge built by the U.S. Army.

Long before civilization reached the Peace River country the nucleus of settlement was to be found adjacent to the fur trading post of Lesser Slave Lake, Peace River Crossing and Fort Vermilion as traders and missionaries discovered the richness of the soil and the growing seasons. Eventually farmers established themselves around these posts and as far west as Grande Prairie; so actually the country was partly settled a generation before the railhead reached the present town of Peace River in 1915.

Fort Vermilion is, by river, about 350 miles North of the town of Peace River and, up to as late as 1947, there has been no proper road to there. When the country north of Grimshaw, 20 miles by rail from Peace River, started to open up, a Provincial highway was pushed North with settlement, and, by cutting a winter road to it Fort Vermilion was as close as 265 miles from Peace River town. In 1948 the Dominion and Provincial governments put through a continuation of this Northern highway from Grimshaw to Hay River on Great Slave Lake and N.W.T. This road is 400 miles long and makes road connection with the Yellow Knife gold fields with the exception of the 90 mile lake crossing to there. Winter hauling by caterpillar train had been successfully accomplished and the new road

was to be all weather to enable perishable goods to reach Yellowknife and the fisheries of Great Slave Lake. This summer, rains and faulty construction, had just about ruined 40 miles of highway on the Alberta end close to the N.W.T. line. Heavy trucks, too, had done their share and the result has been a bad tie-up in important truck transportation to Great Slave Lake. No doubt these conditions will be rectified in 1950 and the possibility of a railway from Grimshaw to the N.W.T. is not beyond the bounds of improbability. However, this stretch is beyond the cut off to Fort Vermilion as in 1948 the Provincial Government graded this 55 miles. This new road is now passable by motor if it does not rain and in winter it is a good natural road. It is consequently possible for the more daring motorist to motor from Edmonton to Fort Vermilion in summer and see some of the newest and finest farming country in Alberta.

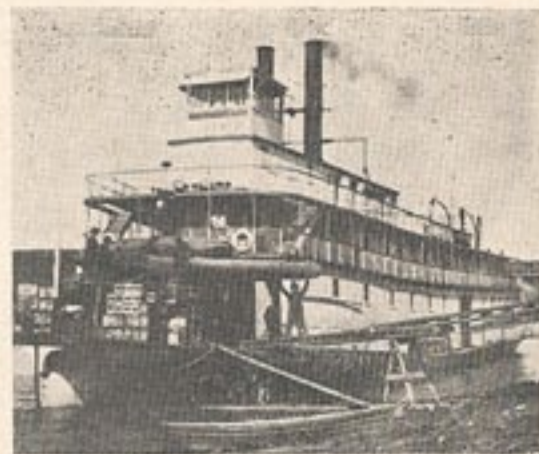
Good Farming Area

It is about 265 miles from Peace River to Fort Vermilion and, for over 200 miles, the road is a good gravelled highway. As one climbs up the hill north of Peace River town good farming country begins to appear and runs 85 miles north until the Meikle River valley interrupts its sequence.

It was pleasant to see that here was a country of first generation farmers. Farm buildings were sound but unpretentious, fields were weed-free and neatly laid out, and summer fallow clean. In early August fine fields of grain were almost ready for the combine and looked beautiful in their ripening gold. The land was unusually level with patches of green timber and everywhere there was sign that this was a bumper season.

There is a fair hamlet at North Star, about 60 miles North, another at Notikewin, 9 miles north of there. Between these two hamlets is the thriving little town of Manning on the Battle River with good stores and a modern hotel and it looks as if the two hamlets will eventually merge with Manning.

From the Meikle River there is a 50 mile strip of non-farming bush and muskeg country until the Keg River Valley is reached, and here lies another fine stretch of farming country. At pretty Keg River Crossing, enterprising Mrs.



The "D. A. Thomas", the last steamer on the Peace River.

Harrington operates a comfortable cabin resort and has high hopes of trade from the N.W. Territories. It is a popular and well-managed little place and this pioneer lady deserves great credit for her enterprise; nor does she "soak" the traveller. Near here there is a road of 9 miles into the Keg River settlement where good crops were reported.

Ten miles north there is a brave attempt on the part of the Provincial Government to establish these much neglected people, the half breeds, and make them self-reliant. This is known as the Metis settlement and covers an area of 20 townships. It is a splendid farming country and the settlement appears to be the making of a prosperous community where individualism is encouraged. The project was started in 1939 and has now a voluntary population of 300 people, including 56 children. It has its own store, school, and saw mill. The soil appears to be rich black loam and the crops looked splendid. The great drawback to this area is the lack of good wells. Attempts have been made to drill but only brackish water, too salty for stock, was struck, so the settlement is dependent on rain water and the run-off. The country is so flat that it is hard to establish good run-off basins. There is a small dam full of stagnant water that did not look very good. The supervisor is a cheerful gentleman named Mr. Cahill, with considerable farming experience, but he needs the patience and sense of humor he apparently possesses to run such a project.

The cut-off to Fort Vermilion from the MacKenzie highway is at a spot known as High Level and about 60 miles North of Keg River. This road passes through a level, park-like, country for about 50 miles until it reaches the Peace River. Here there is the ferry crossing and another 6 miles to the old Fort. One wonders why this fine level meadow land is

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NEW ROAD

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not settled. A couple of abandoned farms were seen on which some haying was in progress but the story is that settlers tried this country for four years and were driven out by early frosts and lack of water, and moved closer to the Peace. Nice looking farms are seen about 15 miles from the ferry and the road was good from there.

While most old places with the title of Fort have now had the "Fort" deleted, it is unlikely that Fort Vermilion will ever do likewise as there is another Vermilion in Alberta. Fort Vermilion was established by the fur trade and became an important post and the most important point between Lake Athabasca and Lesser Slave Lake. It soon came to be known as a land of plenty on account of its farming possibilities which were never overlooked by fur traders as a means of supplementing and cheapening their living. Some time in the 1880's an adventurous farmer named Sheridan Lawrence rafted down the Peace to near Fort Vermilion and established a fine self-contained farm on the north bank of the Peace. The Hudson's Bay Company then saw the possibility of making its own flour to supply its far north posts and save the expense of this heavy freight from Edmonton via Lesser Slave Lake and the Athabasca River routes. A flour mill was consequently established about 1900 but, owing to the early frosts and strain of seed, it was of a dark color and could not compete with the white flour the fur trade demanded. The project was abandoned in 1912. Fort Vermilion had very little outlet for its produce then, except the far north and some small shipments of cattle used to be floated down the Peace to Fort Smith, N.W.T. In 1904 the Hudson's Bay Company built a good paddle wheel steamer at Fort Vermilion which was a great help to the people and connected with another and older steamer below the chutes of the Peace, 50 miles further north. Steamers were no longer used on the upper Peace after 1929 when railhead reached Waterways, Alberta, and now the only water transportation on the river is a diesel barge operated from Peace River town twice a month, which carries general cargo. Now there is the road we had just come over, which is rapidly becoming Fort Vermilion's quickest outlet.

Lack of Water a Problem

About 1926 settlers began to come in from Saskatchewan, most of them second generation Ukrainians looking for free homesteads and an escape from drought. These were followed by Mennonite settlers, so now there are several hundred families in the Fort Vermilion area and room for plenty more. The farming area goes North 15 miles, South 40 miles, East 8 miles and West 8 miles. Their produce is cattle, hogs, and grain. Mr. Edgecome, the former land agent and now local magistrate, says that these people are really getting on their feet and that there is plenty of land left for the hardy. Some people gave up on account of lack of water and frosts but it is generally conceded that the chances of water are better on the south bank of the Peace and the majority of settlers are in there. We met one enterprising Ukrainian from Wakaw, Saskatchewan, who had left the country but could not keep away and was about to commence commercial well drilling with a home-

made outfit. One wonders in this vast country of rich summer pasture that more stock is not produced but the answer is the water difficulty and the long period of almost seven months of having to feed. Mr. Edgecome considers the danger of frosts to be decreasing with cultivation.

The quiet old settlement of Fort Vermilion had not changed very much since this traveller saw it 40 years ago. It still struggles along, the high bank of the beautiful wide river with the dark blue Caribou Mountains off in the distance. It remains about the last of the unsurveyed townsites in Alberta. Its population is about 300 and still has a sprinkling of Metis and nomad Indians. It has a good Hudson's Bay Company store, a couple of traders and a sort of hotel and store combined. The R.C. mission still have a most pretentious establishment and have recently built a fine new hospital which will be of enormous benefit to this new growing country. The Dominion Experimental Farm on the western outskirts of the settlement has long been one of the sights. It is a most beautiful and well-managed place and must be of great value to the district. At the time of our visit the gardens were bursting with fruit and vegetables. The fruit bushes were heavily laden in spite of the fact that frost had almost killed the wild fruit crop. A notice was posted in the little Post Office inviting the settlement to "a-share-and-share-alike" community effort of free picking. The original founder of the farm, Mr. Jones, is living in healthy retirement near the Fort and is a host of information. There is a fair airport just east of the settlement where Canadian Pacific Airways have maintained a weekly passenger and mail service since 1945. There is also a Government Telegraph Office.

Like all other northern places Fort Vermilion has its interesting characters. There is a kindly and informative Mr. Lambert who, with his wife, runs a nice, clean boarding house. Lambert has been on the Peace River since his boyhood and is now 70. He can speak the Cree and Beaver Indian languages and knows the country and its people like a book. Then there is Carl Sanderson, a Norwegian, who came into the country in 1910 with Archie Ponton, the surveyor of the 5th Meridian. Sanderson has been a guide, packer, hunter, trapper and boatman and now is a market gardener. He has four acres of fine vegetables which an airplane from Yellowknife, N.W.T., calls for and he can dispose of all his produce easily. He keeps about 30 head of cattle



Nick Kolstow, saddler at Fort Vermilion.

and can now get 16 cents a pound, live weight, delivered at Peace River, but he finds the winters long for feeding them. He was a guide for the U.S. Army when they were combing the country for extra routes to Canol. Another character is Nick Kolstow, a Pole and the local harness and shoe repair man. When we saw him he was making a stock for a shotgun out of local birch. Nick served with the Canadians in Siberia and, after being all around the world at sea, came to Fort Vermilion in 1928 and homesteaded 24 miles southwest. After a hard struggle when he sold his hogs for 5c per pound and his beef for 4c he sold out to the Mennonites in 1943. He is now the active president of the Canadian Legion, a fine gardener and a general community asset.

Transportation Improving

Transportation in and out of Fort Vermilion is in the throes of improvement and the farmers can now get their produce to Peace River town by independent carrier. The river barge is doing its small best but eventually it cannot compete with the road trucker in its long voyage upstream. Truckers will haul live cattle to rail head for \$10.00 per head and pigs for \$3.00. Grain is hauled loose at 45 cents per bushel. A local taxi takes passengers to Peace River for \$15.00 per head when the road is dry enough and he can get a load. The search for oil continues even in this area. Prospecting drilling rigs for the U.S.A. were met at work on the Mackenzie Highway and drilling is taking place on the farm where Lawrence pioneered in the eighties. Incidentally, this fine old pioneer is now retired and living at Peace River, while his sons are carrying on in the Fort Vermilion tradition.

To travel this new road to Fort Vermilion in August is to see a country where hope seems to have been realized in its

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fine farm lands, bountiful crops and gardens and small numbers of fat cattle. Winter though must be a different picture in its long, snow-bound months, and the struggle for water and feed for stock. It is no country for those who need all the amenities of civilization, but consider the contrast to that of the early settlers who never had the air transport, weekly mail, hospitals, or telegraphs now at the settler's disposal.

This road and year has brought old Fort Vermilion closer to civilization, as we call it, than it has ever been. Yet the fur trade is still right alongside the farmer and the Peace River flows on north emblematic of the beautiful valley it divides and still beckoning to the pioneer in search of a last homestead.

MY RANGE? MY SOIL?

Is this My Range?
I'm forced to laugh—
I own the deed and pay the tax!

Is this My Soil?
I build the fence!
What did I fence—I ask?—

My title is—
A man made thing—
Tho I fence with steel and stone—

I've only "borrowed"
This—"My Land"—
Where I have built—"My Home".

The Boss who made
It all—cares not
For deeds—or Bills of Rights—

It will still be His
When long I'm gone
Tho "courts" may stew and fight.

He's titled me—
No strings attached—
A steward of His Soil—

He loans me Rain—
The Sun—The Sky
And gives me strength to toil—

And—if I'm wise
And hear His Voice
And learn when He would teach

There's nothing
He would hide from me
All things within my reach.

Each nite I kneel
With contrite heart
To ask that He will show—

My Son and me
A little more
That He would have us know.

—BRUCE ORCUTT
Beaverside Ranch,
Miles City, Mont.

E. FULTON THOMSON

Another link with the Old West was broken when Fult Thomson of High River, Alberta, passed away on October 10th. Mr. Thomson, a brother-in-law of the late Senator Dan Riley of High River, came west from Prince Edward Island in 1890 and soon formed a partnership with Dan Riley in farming and ranching enterprises which were not dissolved until 1914. He and his partner owned extensive farm and ranch holdings in the High River and Willow Creek districts, the ranch being known as the TL ranch which in 1914 was sold to Rod Macleay. Soon after Mr. Thomson purchased a ranch property on the forks of the Highwood River which he developed into the Echo Glen ranch, famous for its Hereford cattle. "Fult" was active in livestock affairs, at one time being President of the Alberta Hereford Breeders' Association. He was a prominent member of the Southern Alberta Old Timers' Association and, until retirement with the sale of the Echo Glen Ranch a few years ago, was a member of the Western Stock Growers' Association.

Funeral services were held in High River on October 13th and interment was in the local cemetery. Mr. Thomson leaves his wife Florence, a daughter, Mrs. Kendall M. Bower, of Palo Alto, California, and three grandchildren.

One of the West's oldtimers writes: "I have enjoyed very much the articles on Ad McPherson. When I was a lad fresh from the East, I met Ad McPherson and asked him for a job. He looked at me rather quizzically with perhaps a little scorn thrown in and said, 'Young man, you're too green. You're so green that if you were a fence post the cows would eat you.' Needless to say, I didn't get the job".

N BAR ANGUS SALE

Orrin Hart of Claresholm, Alta., recently returned from the Annual N Bar Angus Sale at the ranch in Big Snowy Mountains near Lewiston, Montana, with the top priced bull of the sale. The N Bar is one of the largest private sales of purebred doddies in the U.S. This year's consignment included some 530 head and buyers from many parts on this continent attended. A landing strip at the ranch has been prepared and the sales pavilion extended for landing and storage of light planes of those travelling by air to the event.

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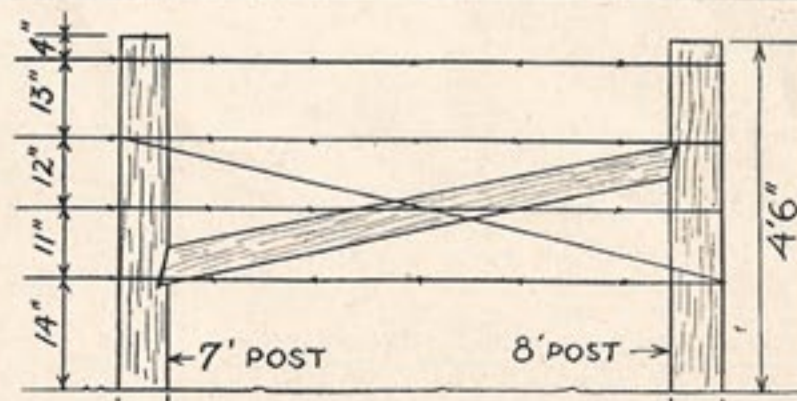
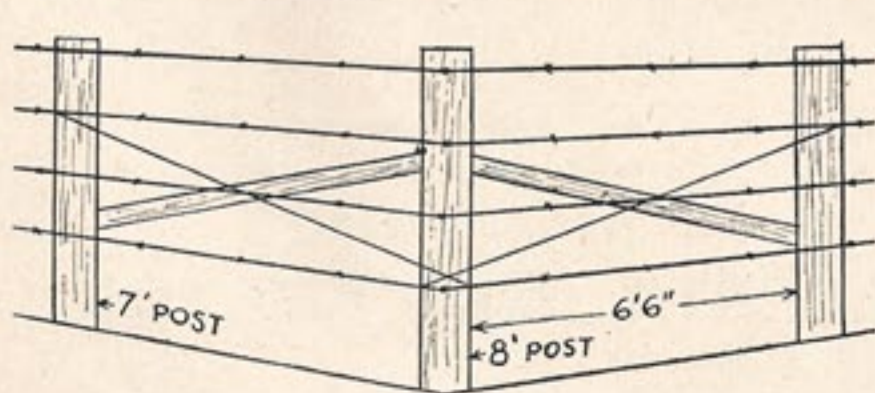
SUCCESSFUL HEREFORD SALE

Alex A. Mitchell of Lloydminster, Sask., with J. W. Durno as auctioneer, again posted a new high average at his annual sale of Herefords at his Battle River Ranch on November 1st. This year's offering, 53 head, sold for a total of \$24,265 and averaged \$457.00 to top last year's average by \$107.00. The sale comprised the following: 12 yearling bulls with average sale price of \$627.00 and a top of \$775.00; 6 bull calves averaged \$420.00 with a top of \$550.00; 28 head of 2-year-old heifers, dry and wet cows, and 7 heifer calves averaged \$401.00.

GEORGE LANE, A GOLFER?

The following excerpt from a letter written in 1922 from Pasadena, Calif., to an old friend in Calgary would indicate that George Lane, the cattle king of Canada in the early days, had at least a passing interest in the game.

"All I am doing here is playing a little golf when the weather permits, and I look around the links all the time to find some fellow that I could beat without too much hard work, and I have had an awfully hard time to do it. So you see where I am. But I follow the ball around eighteen holes and talk to it every now and then. It is a good thing that it cannot interpret what I say to it after it has been in every bunker and out of bounds every time it got a chance. And, when you would look at it, instead of hitting it you would feel like stamping it down in the ground and putting another down in its place."



Showing method used by P.F.R.A. in bracing fence corners of their community pastures. On right is shown method employed in bracing gate posts; corner and gate posts are set into ground 3½ feet.