

The First World Wheat King

By ROBERT E. CAMPBELL, 1007 Fairfield Road, Victoria, B.C.

J. GOUGH BRICK was born in Shaftsbury, England. Entering mercantile life, his manner of living and the character of his work soon brought him the notice of his employers and promotion followed. Soon he felt himself in a position to take unto himself a wife. Always his spare time had been in church work that brought him into close touch with the poor and needy of the parish. Gradually he became convinced that his life work should be of a social nature, and that to be successful he should become ordained. But to do so in England was beyond his finances. Moreover, he lacked the influence to procure him a "living".

After consulting his wife, they decided that Canada offered the best opportunity, as he could by application take his examinations in less time, and, during the summer months, employment could be obtained that would help their finances. Brick was a man of decision and, having decided, he lost no time in acting. With wife and small family, two boys and two girls, he took passage for his new land, and on arrival registered at an Anglican college where, by burning the candle late and early, he completed his studies in one-half the time it would have taken in the old land. When ordained, he was assigned a parish at Inverness, on the south side of the St. Lawrence River. It was here that his son Fred was born, who later was to assist in opening up the Peace River region.

As both Mr. and Mrs. Brick spoke French, they were not long in becoming acquainted with their Habitant neighbors, many of them being descendants of the old voyageurs who had travelled in the far west as employees of the great fur companies. From these Mr. Brick learned much of the manners, habits and living conditions of the Indians. His sympathy with the natives being very real, he applied to his church authorities for permission to go among them as a missionary, but it was not till 1880 that he got the green light.

Moving his family to Toronto, he prepared for his departure in the following spring. Arrangement had to be made with the Hudson's Bay Company for transportation and any temporary credit that might be necessary. These having

been arranged, he left home in time to connect with the flotilla that left Ft. Garry carrying goods to their posts up the Saskatchewan River and to the Athabaska region. He would leave the boats at Prince Albert, from whence he would travel by bull train to the Athabaska River, where they would rendezvous with the fur brigade from the north, and transfer cargoes.

From Prince Albert, their route led through a country that has seen little change in the last seventy years. The road consisted of the marks left by the carts on former trips, but the fly pests were probably no worse than at the present day. But they both were an introduction to the life he was about to lead. Perhaps it was because the bulldogs, blackflies, mosquitoes and no-see-ums found less difficulty in obtaining their sustenance from his clean body than the begrimed and smoke-cured breeds that they seemed to swarm over him. No matter what the cause, Brick's face and hands, despite his gloves and netting, soon became a jellied mass.

Not being used to tramping through muskies, fording streams, tumbling over roots and other impedimenta, he became very tired and got on a cart, which he soon found more tiresome than walking. There was another drawback, too. Busy, trying to avoid stumbling, and fighting the pests, he had not noticed the language used by the bull whackers when addressing the animals. He was shocked. Out of respect for the English-speaking parson, they had been swearing in French. He had a brain wave. Around the campfire that night he joined in their conversations in French. The bull whackers took the hint, and the preacher was greatly pleased at the result, until he discovered that his companions were expert linguists and doing their cussing in Cree.

Eventually they reached the rendezvous (the present Waterways). The cargoes exchanged, the missionary took his place in a canoe bound for the upper Peace. Things were now easier. All he had to do was to admire the scenery, fight flies, and keep his heart from jumping out as the canoe flew through the white waters. But he learned to have implicit faith in his Indian boatmen, and to wonder at their consum-

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mate skill in the handling of the craft. The trip down the Athabaska was a most pleasant interlude.

At Lake Athabaska they were delayed by a violent storm, but no sooner had they stopped to make camp, when visitors arrived bearing baskets full of the finest vegetables he had ever seen. Brick was amazed. Where had they been obtained? In a garden close by? Then he learned that a hundred years before Peter Pond had made a garden there, and the natives were carrying on. And this was north of the 58 latitude. The possibilities of the country seized him.

From Lake Athabaska to the Peace river the route lay via the Quatre Forks, a river with peculiarities. When the Peace is in flood it empties into the lake, but when the flood waters subside it empties into the Peace.

After reaching the Peace the travelers had six hundred miles to go against its heavy current and long portages. This mode of travel was another new experience, with its poleing, tracking and tumplines, the loads being carried by tumplines, broad straps that are placed against the forehead and the ends of the strap tied into the sides of the pack, instead of the shoulder straps used by the whites. But his real surprise came when he saw the Indian packers, ploughing through the dense undergrowth, and climbing rocky escarpments with loads of two hundred pounds. The goods were supposed to be put up in bales of ninety pounds, but they were usually the full hundred, and each man had to carry two of them.

At one of their camps Brick was particularly struck with the nature of the soil, and the character of the surrounding country. It is interesting to note that that is now the site of the Dominion

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The river being low, no difficulties other than the hard work of paddling, poleing and tracking, as the nature of the stream demanded, were encountered. On arriving at Dunvegan, the missionary left the brigade to commence his work among the Indians of that region.

One of his first acquaintances was Father Huson, in charge of the Roman Catholic mission, by whom he was warmly welcomed. The two became fast friends, and assisted each other in every way possible.

After making enquiries about the district, Brick set out on a scouting expedition to locate a site for his work that would not interfere with his confrere. Ascending the thousand foot bank of the Peace, he was astounded with the beauty of the scene. Below him ran the great river as far as the eye could reach, from the Rockies on the west to its junction with the Smoky on the east. Across the river, to the south, lay a great stretch of green timber more than a hundred miles in extent before it melted into the serrated snow peaks of the mountains. Turning his gaze to the north, he got his first real view of a prairie land, billowing with the luscious growth of grass, extending from the mountains to the river that had now changed its course to a northerly direction, and extending northwards beyond his vision. To him the whole setting was most marvellous, and his thoughts reverted to the garden at Lake Athabaska, and to his native land with its millions of undernourished and poverty-stricken people. Previously his aim and ambition was to Christianize these natives. Now his outlook was broadened. He resolved to do everything in his power to let the outside world know of the possibilities of this great outpost of Empire.

After some days of exploring, he chose a site about mid-way between Dunvegan and Peace River Crossing, naming it after his home town, Shaftsbury. Being on the river flats, it provided plenty of timber suitable for his needs. His immediate work was to get out enough logs to build his buildings, and a little chapel. To haul out the logs he purchased a strong and well-broken ox. Now we see a man who had never handled either an ox or an axe sallying forth to become a real pioneer in this new and strange land. He was starting from the very grass roots of experience.

- That he possessed capabilities, of which he had never dreamed, soon became apparent. In less time than many of more experience would have taken, he succeeded in cutting and hauling enough timber to satisfy his needs. He built his house and whipsawed enough lumber for its flooring, and for his little chapel. He had never cooked a meal in his life, and one can easily imagine what his stomach thought of his art. But hard manual labor is a great defier of dyspepsia, and he was not troubled. In 1886 he went east as his wife was very ill. While there he busied himself raising funds to build an Industrial school, and it was not until the spring of 1888 that he returned west, bringing his wife and youngest son, a boy of fifteen years, with him.

In Calgary, he outfitted for the North,

purchasing a team of heavy mares and a wagon, which he would drive, and a lighter team and democrat, to make travelling more easy for his wife. This outfit was put in charge of his young son, who had never held a pair of reins before. As these two teams were insufficient to handle all his stuff, he hired a man who had a bull outfit, to go as far north as Athabaska Landing. The trip of three hundred miles was completed in twenty-one days. At the Landing he engaged a breed to trail the horses as far as Grouard. His other goods were put aboard a York boat, on which he and his family were to travel as passengers until they reached the same post.

Travelling by scow was a new experience, particularly to young Fred, who got a great kick out of his association with real Indians, and in helping them to pole and track the scow. While he did not realize it at the time, he was learning lessons of great value to him in the years to come. At Grouard other freighters were engaged and the party reached Shaftsbury without mishap.

At his home he found everything in good shape, and that Allie (his eldest son, who had joined him in '83) had had fodder stacked for the cattle that had increased to thirty head. He was now free to put his pet scheme into operation. He would prove to the world that grain could be grown north of the 56th latitude. He had never held a plough in his life, and he did not know how to rig the hitches. His motor power consisted of his heavy team and a yoke of oxen. In Quebec he had seen farmers ploughing with two horses, and the right hand horse always walked in the furrow. He had never seen horses worked tandem. For three days he and young Fred played hop-scotch on the prairie, but half-a-dozen razor backs would have made a better job. Disgusted but not disheartened, he quit breaking until Allie would return from the mountains. Allie rigged up a tandem hitch and after that they got on as well as could be expected. To break up the sods he cut down a tree, plentifully supplied with branches that he cut off about six inches from the bole. Hitching his team to one end and the oxen to the other, they dragged it over and over the ground until they had the whole ground pulverized. Each year they broke what they could, always sowing a forage crop, and getting very good results.

During the winter of '91-'92 he got a bushel of wheat sent in from Edmonton.

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He knew nothing about wheat varieties, but it turned out to be Red Fife. He had a good stand and the sample was plump and a nice red. He was delighted. He had proved that grain could be grown in that far north country. His next problem was how to let the world know.

The Chicago World's Fair was being held in '93, and he resolved to put his wheat in the show. Thoughts of winning a prize never entered his head. That people would see it was enough for him.

His only way of threshing was by flail, so he made one after the manner of those used by the Habitants. His threshing floor was the floor of the chapel. He had never used a flail, but after several cracks on the head, he learned. He had no sieve, but his Bible told him how they did it in olden times. He made a long ladder and put it up against a tree. When a windy day came Fred climbed the ladder and his father spread blankets on the ground. Fred let the grain sift through his fingers and the trick was done. The grain was put in an old flour sack ready for the Fair. He knew nothing about the Trelle system of weighing and polishing each grain.

To most people the getting of the sample to Chicago might present some difficulty, as Shaftsbury was 400 miles from Edmonton. But that was the least of Mr. Brick's worries. When winter came Allie would take it out on his toboggan. When the day arrived for Allie to start, the mercury showed fifty below. When he reached Edmonton ten days later, it was seventy-two below, and his return trip was equally chilly. But the grain reached Chicago.

The Rev. J. Gough Brick had dropped the atomic bomb of the nineties. Weeks before he knew it, the civilized world knew that the World's Prize Wheat had been grown north of the 56th latitude, and that the Rev. J. Gough Brick was the First World's Wheat King.

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