

Westward Ho in 1880

An account in two installments of the trip made by Mr. and Mrs. A. M. Morden and their three children to Western Canada in 1880, by the late G. W. Morden, their eldest son, who was seven years old at the time.

SHORTLY after midnight on Hal-low'een in 1879 three children, in their nighties gazed out across the Northern Railway from an upper room of their home near the railway station of Craigvale, six miles south of Barrie, Ontario. The great glare of a burning mill lit up their faces and that of their mother standing behind them.

By morning all that remained of the mill was the brick chimney, the blackened boilers and engine among the smoking ashes.

Conditions at the time did not warrant rebuilding the mill and this bit of misfortune, combined with the pioneer spirit of Father and Mother, led to our trek of three thousand miles to the western border of the Great North West Territories in the following year.

The Sibbald family associated with the late Rev. John MacDougall, Methodist missionary to the Stoney Indians at Morleyville, now Morley fifty miles west of Calgary, were related to mother's family by marriage, and it was on their advice that our party hit the trail for the west. There were ten in the outfit, father, mother, we three children, T. W. Mullholland (mother's brother), Dr. Brunskill of Troy, his wife and two infant children, Fanny and Percy. My brother Fred was sixteen months younger than I and sister Adelaide was three years of age.

We started our journey early in the spring of 1880. The Northern Railway now C.P.R., ran from Toronto to Collingwood on the Georgian Bay and it therefore afforded the first stage of the trip. At Collingwood we embarked on the old sidewheel steamer "City of Owen Sound" for Duluth at the head of Lake Superior. We passed in plain sight of Manitoulin Island up through the Sault Canal and the locks and out into Lake Superior, which having its rough reputation to sustain, gave us our share. After passing Silver Island our trip became more enjoyable. We then passed Thunder Bay and Thunder Cape and docked for a short time at Port Arthur and proceeded to Duluth, which in those days was a very lively town during the summer navigation period of the Great Lakes. All sorts of supplies were transferred from the boats to the Northern Pacific Railway for the states from Minnesota westward, and for even the southern portion of the North West Territory. The North West Mounted Police of Macleod and Calgary were supplied over this route. Here we left the churning paddle-wheels of the "City of Owen Sound" for the rhythmic roar of the railway, which carried us on to Bismark on the Missouri River.

The stern paddle-wheel river steamers, the "Key West" and the "Far West", alternated in the tortuous 1,300 mile trip up-river to Fort Benton, the head of steamer navigation. Our train made connection with the "Far West" and the tedious fortnight trip commenced up the

meandering muddy old Missouri. However there were lots of diverting scenes and incidents to break the monotony, and there was much more room to move around on the boats than on the crowded trains. To all Canadians the colored waiters on the U.S. railways and the "Far West" were quite a novelty, with their suave pallaver and cheery banter and their capacity for supreme enjoyment in their leisure hours. Sometimes when the boat stopped, one of them would throw out a fishing line baited with a piece of raw white bacon and catch some of the big catfish in which the river abounded. Their long feelers must have been a help in discovering the bait in the muddy river. They were anything but inviting in appearance, but they added a bit of variety to the menu.

The stops at the wood cutters' camps were quite interesting, because of the excitement of hustling out the headlines to make fast to a tree or stump and swinging in against the make-shift wharf, if there happened to be one, or thrusting the gangplank out onto the bank, the crew "all on the jump" to get "wooded up" as quickly as possible. One could often sense the gratified feeling of the wood cutters as they received their supply of grub and cash for their cords of four-foot cotton-wood and balm of Gilead.

Usually at these landings there would be a bunch of curious Sioux Indians, ready to do a bit of chance trading for anything they could get in exchange for their furs, tanned skins, buckskin gloves, moccasins and shirts ornamented with beads or stained porcupine quills. They were all in their old time glory of paint and feathers.

Some had small braids of their long coarse black hair hanging down over their temples, the lower ends being run through large brass or colored glass beads and a weasel tail hanging from the extremity. Their dress consisted of a cotton or buckskin shirt hanging either inside or outside of a light belt around the waist, and a cotton breech-cloth

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drawn up inside the belt and the ends hanging down over the belt before and behind. Their leggings were separate, running up to a point on the outside with an attached string to tie to the belt. Those of the bucks were fringed behind and rather loose, while those of the squaws were more close-fitting and did not sport any fringe. By this difference we always knew the bucks from the squaws. Over all they wore a blanket, the more gaudy the more prized, thrown over their shoulders and around the waist with a heavy belt hung with a knife-sheath containing a butcher knife. The broad belt and knife-sheath were usually ornamented with large furniture tacks, "Squaw tacks" in western vernacular, driven through the leather and clinched in all sorts of patterns, according to the fancy of the owner. Most of the bucks had rifles, though some still had the bow and arrows.

It was years after this that they humiliated themselves by wearing white man's clothing, the innovation of forming an Indian Police dressed in blue denim uniform being the principal factor in converting the Indian to our mode of dress at a later date.

To us, these Indians were of special interest as the Custer Massacre had occurred only a few years previously. Any fears we might have had were allayed by the presence of two of three families returning to their homes in Montana after a winter's visit "back east".

The trees along the banks for miles and miles cut off our view, and even a solitary old bank beaver away ahead, taking a header down his slide, and the white stripped willows where he had been feeding, afforded a pleasant break in the monotony. Sometimes we would get a glimpse of a herd of antelope on

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the river banks making off at the noise of the approaching boat.

With interest too, passing through the weary bad lands of Dakota, we observed the numerous clay "hoodoos" standing out from the cliffs, some still bearing their erosion preventing boulders, while others, more pointed, had long since lost their crowns. Once on the crest of one of the high bluffs we saw outlined the heads and shoulders of a bunch of mountain sheep, gazing at the great white boat with its trail of foam in the water and smoke in the air, paddling along the river far below.

One day, for miles, the river was of two distinct colors; the southern side to our left was almost an orange tinge. We discovered the reason for this when we passed the mouth of the Yellowstone River, pouring in from the southwest. There must have been a heavy rain on its upper reaches, making it much muddier than even the Missouri.

Then, another day, we ran into one of the last great herds of buffalo, hundreds of them, swimming down on our right. We were hugging a twenty-foot gravel cutbank on the left. One great bull, which had crossed just in front of us, was madly plunging up the yielding gravel; his eyes were bloodshot with fear and he struggled desperately until we passed him. From far in front a line of undulating brown humps, one behind the other, came trotting along and plunged headlong into the river. It was an unforgettable sight. We were told that on a previous trip one had been roped with a lariat from the low prow of the boat. Shortly after seeing the buffalo, the boat steward procured a supply of buffalo steaks and roasts. Later we had antelope meat, which has its own peculiar, though rather nice flavor. It was noticeable that the ladies did not take to these new viands as readily as did the men.

We had a few experiences of running into sand or gravel bars, but none of them serious. Many of the river boats had a pair of spars hanging vertically, one on either side of the prow, which, by means of pulleys and tackle, were used as a pair of legs to hoist the prow off the bars.

As a precaution, when the river channel was uncertain, a deck hand was stationed with a sounding pole and called out the depth to the captain. Some of the calls were most frequently "no bottom", then "one fathom", "four feet" and "mark time", the last being abrogated by Samuel Clemens, the noted American humorist, as his "nom de plume", all of which recalls the story of the big Swede who, sounding away assiduously, landed his pole in a "jump off" in the river bed and over he went head first, but he bobbed up again, pole and all, still on the job, and called out "Blenty vater hyar, Captain".

Settle in Montana

An aggravating experience of the river was to travel around some great horse-shoe bend, and find yourself returning to a point very little in advance of a point which had been passed some hours before. Sometimes, too, it would take hours and hours to reach and pass some prominent point that had seemed in the clear air to be but a mile or two away. The tediousness of this seemingly endless struggle against the current was greatly relieved by the cheery friendli-

ness of the passengers, mostly Americans, and all alike in anticipating a happy future in this great new western country. We became especially friendly with a couple of families who were returning to their homes in the Judith Basin country, and they persuaded us to change our destination and come into their neighborhood, which was a great deal nearer than Morleyville. Accordingly, on reaching Fort Benton, we had our outfit carried south over the Missouri on a big cable ferry-boat, and down into Montana we went. We purchased a buckboard and heavy wagon in Fort Benton, also two teams of horses and a saddle horse. Father had brought along a good wagon from Ontario; unfortunately the western wagons were all "wide track", four inches wider than our Ontario wagon, but it had been fitted out with bows and canvas as a prairie schooner or covered wagon. The other wagon was loaded with our heavy trunks, boxes, etc., and other freight, and we youngsters were piled in with the bedding and rolled tents in the schooner. The wheels on one side would run along in the wagon rut on that side for awhile, then swerve and down the other side they would go, so that our prairie schooner generally had from four to eight inches of a list as the wagon tracks often cut that deep in the prairie loam. The mothers could take turns in the buckboard and so get a change, but as for we youngsters, well, they finally rolled the tents and bedding more loosely so that things were a little easier for us. When the weather was dry the canvas could be rolled back so that it was less hot and stifling, and we could stand up and hang on to the wagon-bows for a change.

There was considerable sheep ranching along this trail. We saw some of the canvas corrals which held the sheep safe at night. They were generally circular in shape and had guy ropes running from the tops of the stakes to which the canvas was fastened, sloping out to short stakes. These corrals could be easily taken down and rolled up in scroll fashion and carried in a wagon to a new location.

In a few days we reached our destination and chose a location. Near this spot there was a creek called the Daisy Dean which entered the Mussellsell River, and we had decided to make our home on a nice level flat, with the river branches rising just a few hundred yards behind our camp. It was a fine section of country and we were well pleased. We set up the big cook tent not far from the covered wagon, in which the two mothers and we children slept, and the smaller tent, which the men occupied, not far away.

The next day the men went off to the mountains twenty-five miles away, taking the team and wagon to bring back logs to build a house. Someone in Fort Benton gave us a dog, half collie and half Newfoundland, a splendid fellow but he was young and had a lot to learn. We called him Major. He, of course, had gone off with the men. It was a lovely day and we youngsters waded around in a slough until we discovered a number of leaches flattened out on our feet, gorging themselves. We got them scraped off, and then turned our attention to chasing gophers. Throwing stones at them was fine sport.

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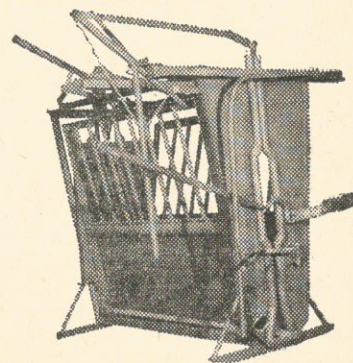


Just at dusk a beautiful big skunk strolled majestically down the hills to the slough about one hundred feet away. After supper we children were stowed away safely in the wagon; our mothers were sitting in the cook tent, with supper all ready waiting for the return of the men. By lantern light they discovered the skunk marching in. They climbed up on the table and stood there very quietly. The visitor went deliberately all around the tent, carefully examining everything and trying to get into the grub box.

That afternoon a man who owned a ranch on Daisy Dean Creek had called on his way home from Helena, the capital of Montana, and had told them we could not locate there as he had leased the land from the government. Altogether they were not feeling very happy. It was about nine-thirty when the skunk came in and about ten o'clock when the

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WESTWARD HO (Continued from Page 23)

men-folk, with their load of house logs and Major, arrived. Major led the way into the cook tent and promptly pounced upon the skunk. We did not like Montana any more and a party of disgusted Canadians packed up their belongings and headed back for Canada.

On to Canada

Recrossing the Missouri to Fort Benton, we landed in an epidemic of measles and I think we children were all victims. This piled up another delay on top of the Judith Basin episode, but we finally got away on the Fort Macleod trail. The Fenton River, not far out from Fort Benton, was running high and the covered wagon was swept around in the current and almost capsized. However, Uncle Willie rode in to the rescue on horseback and we got out all right. A larger river, the Marias, we crossed on a cable ferry. A big bull snake about three feet long swam across the river just above us. Bull snakes are harmless and have the reputation of killing rattlesnakes. We ran over one or two of the latter lying in the wagon tracks. We have learned that the antelope have a trick of jumping on a coiled rattler with their sharp hooves and away again before it can strike back, circling around one after another until the snake is mincemeat.

By this time the weather was getting very warm and the prairie dry. The dense heat waves off the bunch grass have a magnifying mirage effect and at first we saw what we conceived to be a herd of trotting buffalo, till we learned better. A rider on horseback half a mile away appears to be about twenty feet high.

One hot day when we stopped at noon, the sheet iron camp stove was set down on the grass, without having its legs put in place. Engrossed in our meal, about twenty feet away, no one noticed that the grass was afire and suddenly we discovered that the flames were running in all directions from the stove. There was a great hustling to get everything across the trail. Luckily nothing was badly burned and the horses were taken safely away. It was a close call, and a good lesson for all of us. There was but a light wind so the fire did not jump the trail but roared off to the south and all that afternoon we could see and smell smoke.

One day we passed a big bull train just as it commenced to descend a long hill. The "bullwhacker" was standing and hauling down on the brake rope of each wagon as it passed just enough to let the wheels slip. On steep inclines they set the wheels hard but slipped them now and then so that the tires would not be worn on one spot. These bull trains were quite a sight. They consisted of six or eight teams of great strong oxen lumbering along with the pull chain strung along over them and attached to each yoke, increasing in size and sections to a point where it was attached to the wagon. The heaviest pair of oxen, the "wheelers", as they were called, had the additional weight of the tongue to bear while the lightest pair, the "leaders", had the head of the string. There were generally two of the great freight wagons piled high with goods beneath their canvas covers and a third lighter trail wagon carrying, be-

sides freight, the bedding and the "grub box". The real bullwhacker usually dispensed with a tent or stove. A square canvas and a frying pan and a camp fire were much handier. They generally had a saddle horse too. The standard food in those days was bacon and beans, flapjacks, stewed dried apples and other dried fruit. A bullwhacker could always get away with his share of food. As a rule he was a big husky fellow, with a husky voice and a lustful vocabulary and a healthy outdoor appetite. He was an artist at swinging his bull whip, made up of a stout hickory handle twenty-five or thirty inches long, and a lash eighteen to twenty feet long, an inch and a half in diameter at the butt end and tapering off to a point ending in a popper of soft tanned hide, an inch and a half wide and about twenty inches long, which he could pop with a noise like a pistol shot. Each ox had his name and knew it. He knew too what would happen if he failed to keep up with his end of the yoke. The crack of the whip was a warning and the bullwhacker could lay it on with a nicety just where he wished. That and his vocabulary were the artistic highlights of his job.

We also encountered one or two mule trains. They were a bit more complicated on account of the harness and doubletrees and a long "jerk-line" running from the wagon to the lead team, which the mule-skinner used along with his "Gee" and "Haw" in guiding the mules.

We saw no more buffalo. Once in a while we sighted antelope. A common way of hunting them was to tie a bandana to the top of a seven or eight foot sapling, like a flag, then lie down in a buffalo wallow with a rifle ready and, when curiosity brought them within a good range, pick out the most likely one and bring him to the ground. Coyotes too were common and of course the gophers were everywhere, both the yellow ones and the smaller striped-back variety. It was amusing to watch them munching away at the grass, looking more and more comical as their jaw pockets distended. There always seemed to be something comical too about the prairie dogs as they sat up on their mounds in front of their burrows, the old ones and their half grown family in a row. Then, as we approached, those near the trail would dive down into their holes with a flip of their funny little tails, while those further back in their villages, which sometimes were an acre or two in extent, would sit up and stare at us until we were out of sight.

The flowers of the prairie being different from the eastern wild flowers were of new interest. The Arctic Anemone, or prairie crocus, had passed the flowering stage, but its glistening hairy seed vessels were everywhere, and the lupin, the elecumpane, and the yellow peavine and buffalo-bean were plentiful. We certainly were wised up concerning the latter.

It was our intention to hoist the Union Jack when we crossed the international boundary into Canada, and had left behind us Montana with its skunks and measles, etc., but Montana had one more stroke of bad luck for us. One day we camped at noon in a coulee with an occasional water hole in it (I think it was called Red River). There were nice little curly pods on the buf-

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falo beans and ripening seeds in them, and we youngsters had a feed while lunch was being prepared. But we did not need any lunch. Buffalo beans are a good cattle food but for human beings a powerful emetic. It was a repetition of our experience on Lake Superior. Instead of the flag hoisting in front of the wagons, it was white-faced youngsters leaning over the tail-board, with their mothers holding their heads and hoping that there would be no further consequences. We never again indulged in buffalo beans.

We went through many other experiences. At some of the camps the only procurable water was alkaline. We had a little keg for drinking water, but it did not last long with such a party. Some of the lakes were surrounded with wide rings of alkali, like hoar frost over the dry mud. Alkali water may be all right for buffalo, deer and livestock, but with its insipid sweetness in tea or coffee it was a wretched substitute. It was of little use in washing too, as it curled up and refused to form a lather and chapped and cracked one's epidermis.

We ran out of fuel a few times and had to resort to "buffalo chips" and what a disagreeable flavor this fuel imparted to tea or coffee. The combination of tea or coffee brewed in alkali water over a fire of buffalo chips was anything but ambrosial and so we learned to lay in a large supply of firewood.

In those days the bunch grass had not been eaten down and the mosquitoes, black ants and bulldog flies were far worse than in later years, so we had our full share of them. Smoke smudges made the tents almost as unbearable as the mosquitoes, but it was a change of torments and that helped a little. The horses would stand right over the smudges to get relief, often singeing their fetlocks. Some ranchers had four posts with a strong rail around them to keep stock off the smudge fires, which were built to give them relief from the pests.

(To be Continued)

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