

"Something Just As Good"

By P. W. LUCE

TIMES are better than they used to be. I am not old enough to be a pioneer, and I am young enough to escape being an old-timer, but I remember the frontier when it was still almost in a primitive state. I was a homesteader when some of my neighbors could speak a little Chinook, and the outside world was a long distance away.

Those were the days when we were short of almost everything, especially money. We always had to make do with something else. Every little bit of life had a substitute, and we moved in a maze of make-shifts. We did the impossible as a matter of course, and the absence of indispensable materials was overcome by ingenuity.

On the far frontier of Cariboo there were no roads. There were crooked trails, often ankle-deep in mud, and somewhere so narrow that men had to ride Indian file. Miles apart, there would be a few homesteaders' cabins. A government official would happen along at rare intervals.

Today automobiles whiz along a good road, and an airplane rides in the sky. Dude ranches live up the scenic spots, and radios blare their commercials every fifteen minutes. The day's city newspaper is delivered before the sun goes down.

When I went in, we got a newspaper once a week, if we cared to ride out for it. It didn't matter if we skipped a week or two. Television was a worry of the far future, and a shortage of hay wire was a matter of greater concern than a shortage of peace.

One of our most precious assets was the humble tin can. There was a wide range to its usefulness, and some practical purpose had been found for every shape and size.

As a general rule, the bigger the tin the better the homesteader liked it. The large lids that come on round biscuit tins were ideal for dinner plates. They had an edge three-quarters of an inch deep, just right for keeping the soup or stew from spilling over.

A baking-powder tin could be used as a sugar bowl or as a salt shaker, and the homesteader could nearly always tell which was which.

Condensed milk cans, with the top twisted back, could serve for china cups, though this was usually for an emergency which rarely lasted more than a few months.

Very satisfactory saucepans were made of tins which had contained tomatoes and had had the lid twisted into shape with pliers. The brand of the tomatoes didn't matter. A homesteader looked at the bottom of the can to make sure it would sit nicely on the stove.

Glass was almost a rarity in some parts of the back trails. It's a risky material to carry on horseback, and many of us made use of greased or oiled paper instead. Its transparency is somewhat inferior to that of glass, but a crack can be patched with Scotch tape and it doesn't have to be washed except once in a long while. One of its drawbacks is that sometimes it will be eaten by hungry dogs, though it has precious little nourishment.

Because of the transportation difficul-

ties, most of the homesteaders went in with practically no furniture. They couldn't do without a sheet iron cook-stove and they needed a lot of tools, foodstuffs, wire, nails, rope, blankets, and so on, but they didn't bother about beds, chairs, tables, or cupboards.

Stout shipping boxes were used for cupboards or chairs, and a couple of boards would do for a table. The bed might be a bunk nailed to the wall, or, in the higher-toned places, an ingenious four-poster manufactured with young pine trees.

The substitute for a bed spring was sixteen slender jackpines, about an inch thick at the base and tapering to half an inch at the other end. The poles were smoothed at the thick end to assure resiliency, and then nailed down, with the ends alternating. It made a very comfortable bed, so long as the nails held.

An excellent mattress was made of swamp grass in gunny sacks, but this had to be renewed whenever the homesteader had been absent from home for a few weeks. Mice nested in the swamp hay, and made rather a mess of the mattress.

Tobacco was an absolute necessity to the homesteader. I can remember only one or two who didn't smoke, and they were looked on as being in the class of total abstainers.

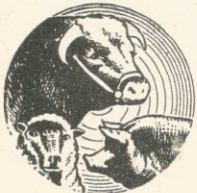
Every homesteader always took in enough tobacco to last him until his next trip to town, and a little over for the boys who dropped in to borrow.

Invariably, his supply ran out ahead of time. Fortunately, there was a local substitute that was very good indeed, if one was not too particular.

This was the weed known as kanick-kanick, a small-leaved creeping plant that is easy to dry and cure. It has a pungent taste somewhat like French tobacco, though this is not put forward as a recommendation.

The inner bark of red willow, well shredded, was also used as a makeshift for pipe tobacco. Certain mosses, mixed with timothy hay, could serve for cigarettes.

The mending of clothes was a serious problem to the solitary bachelor. Fingers roughened by hard work are sorry guides for the dainty needle, and such patches as the homesteader put on his



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pants were decidedly conspicuous.

As for missing buttons, the quick and easy makeshift was the trusty shingle nail.

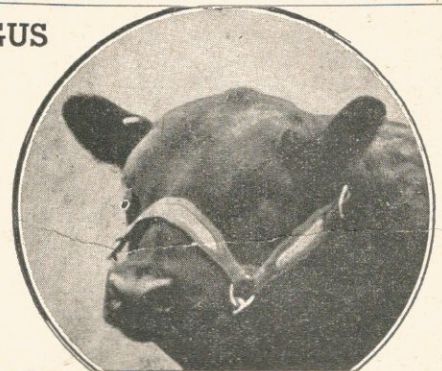
The fashion in clothes didn't change so frequently in the Cariboo as it did in London or Paris. Clothes remained in style until they were worn out, and overalls were correct attire even at dances or other social gatherings. Sometimes the homesteader had no choice; his girth had increased out of all reason in the fifteen years or since he last bought "store clothes."

That's how things were in the Cariboo backwoods fifty years ago. If a homesteader got sick he took an extra shot of hootch, and if he needed tonsorial attention he traded haircuts with a neighbor. His diet lacked variety, but he had a hearty appetite. He didn't have much, but he could do wonders with little. Times were tough, but he made the grade.

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