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**LIFE**  
IN THE  
**YUKON**



*A Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer  
and his wife, a nurse.*

*To honor their memory  
we present their descriptive writings.*

*Mark & Myra Ryder*

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Claude Britiff Tidd was a teacher in England living near Sandringham. He left home in 1910 and tried many jobs in Canada. He joined the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1914. The following year he was sent to the far North.

Claude traveled all over the vast Yukon Territory—from the Arctic coast to the northern border of British Columbia (all behind a dog team)—from the most easterly to the most westerly extremities.

Claude was a musician, an excellent photographer, knowledgeable on nature, keeping well-organized notes on his activities out on the real frontier.

Mary Ryder Tidd was a missionary nurse. The Episcopal Church sent her to Fort Yukon, Alaska in 1924. On her trek to her new assignment she met Claude. A year later, in 1925, she and Claude were married. For 23 years they lived in the Yukon—many are the tales they had to tell!

Claude was born in England and came to Canada as a very young man. He joined the R.C.M.P. in the year 1914 and was later assigned to a post in Dawson City in the Yukon Territory. Claude was a talented young man, a good musician, and excellent photographer and an all around outdoor man.

Some years later Mary, a Red Cross nurse, learned through her Church that there was a serious flu epidemic among the Indians in Ft. Yukon, Alaska. Their Mission Hospital there was in dire need of a trained nurse. Mary volunteered for the job and was soon on her way North.

Enroute, her Yukon River boat stopped for fuel and repairs at Dawson City. It was there, quite by coincidence, that Mary met Claude. A romance developed but Mary continued on to Ft. Yukon, altho they knew they would meet again—and they certainly did! The following summer they were married in Ft. Yukon. And what excitement! A Red Cross nurse from the U.S. marrying a R.C.M.P. from England in this tiny settlement in Ft. Yukon, Alaska!

Mary's family sent her a wedding gown, complete with veil, made by the family's dressmaker, even to the wax orange blossoms for her hair! Altho flowers that far North are rather scarce, the little church was decorated beautifully for the wedding, including some flowers left over from a funeral which had been held in the church the previous day! The newly married couple then left for Dawson.

During the following years they served in various outposts in the Yukon Territory. In a number of cases Mary was the only white woman in the settlement. Those days travel in the summer was by river boat only and in the winter by dog team. Mary and Claude had their own dog team much of the time, which Claude used for patrol work.

When Claude finally retired from the Force they did not immediately leave the Yukon. Claude was asked to take over a Trading Post as a fur trader at a remote outpost, 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle, known as Old Crow on the Porcupine River. They served there 2 years and then Claude retired completely, and they moved to England.

In a short time, unfortunately, Claude died suddenly from a heart attack. Mary returned to her original home in Lancaster, where she, too, passed away a few years later.

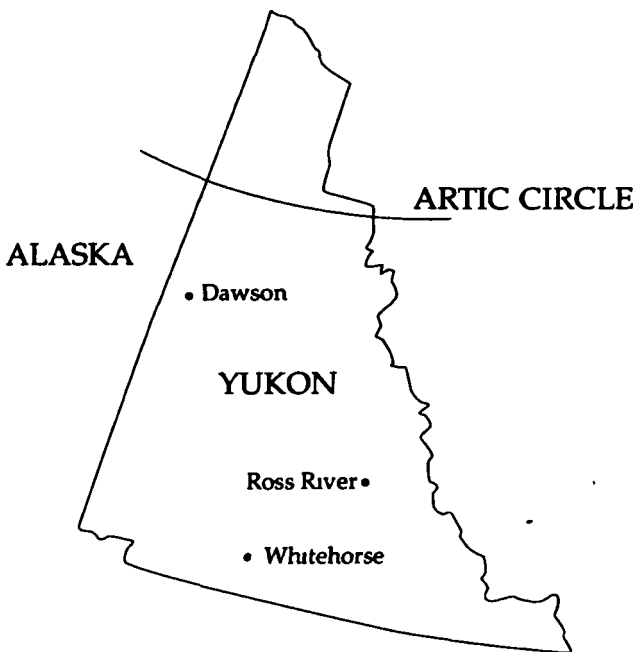
*This belongs on page 10.*

This is a true story written by my twin sister Mary, who, with her husband, Sgt. Claude Tidd of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, lived in the Yukon Territory in the 1920's.

They lived in Dawson City, but longed for an assignment in the wild interior. To their delight, Claude was finally assigned to take over an area at Ross River.

This is an account of their thrilling and exciting traveling to, and living at Ross River.

Mark Ryder



## NOTES FROM MARY'S LETTERS.

Fort Yukon, Alaska

Aug. 22, 1924

How shall I start? First of all I must make you understand that frontier life is so vastly different from anything in my experience—or yours—that you must not think hard of me if my letters are short and probably giving you little more information than my state of health and spirits—for we are very busy with the affairs of the day. My life and job are here—and I am to be happy—I must put my best into it, which means virtually, the sacrifice of personal interests.

Sept. 2, 1924

The other day several of the white people who live here, (and very fine people they are) went with me to a gorgeous hike through the woods and over *really* and *truly* Indian trails. We saw lots of wild duck and rabbits and muskrats. We had several dogs with us for protection.

There were also some little native girls with us who *packed their dolls on their backs* in true squaw fashion. It was the cutest thing. One of them had a new "mamma doll"—which a friend had brought from outside; every time the youngster would lean over to pick a flower, we would hear that plaintive little cry of "ma—ma".

In this country one is "out of it" if he does not know how to "rise" a gun. We are going to have target practice every night—it may come in handy some time to be able to go out and shoot some rabbits for breakfast in case the food supply runs low. I am not fooling about that—really—always remember that this is frontier life.

I went visiting in the village this week—you'd be fascinated by the queer cabins—we always carry a whip with us on going about for the dogs belonging to the natives are very fierce and resent white folks.

Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful country. I only wish you could enjoy it with me, it is an enchanted world.

I have come thru some truly wonderful country and am

living in one of the finest spots in the world. Cold—yes, but we are prepared for it and the climate is so fine that we just can't help staying well. Of course that doesn't sound consistent, considering that I am stationed at a hospital—but it is the one hospital in hundreds of miles—and people from all over the North Country come to us. Due to the extreme hardships on the trails there is a tendency to Pulmonary Conditions. Then, too, youngsters will have trouble with tonsils and adenoids and we have a variety—really covering most of the ills "this flesh is heir to."

Most important of all, we are always an example; there are comparatively few white people in the town—all the rest look to this handful of folks for guidance. The natives imitate like parrots.

Oct. 22, 1924

From my window I can see from the table at which I am writing—huge icicles (several feet in length and several inches thick) fringing the upper ledge. Water is very scarce as I have told you, so I often just reach out and eat an icicle to quench my thirst—they really are purer than the water packed from the river. The river water is very hard—full of minerals and we do not like it, if we want to wash our hair or take a bath, we usually put a large kettle of snow on the stove to melt it.

I fairly gasped at the river several days ago—the most marvelous sight I have ever seen. Think of it, Papa, tons and tons of floating ice—jamming and cracking. For several days there was floating ice on the river—and then—all in a few hours—the great Yukon was sealed, tight as a drum. Just a few short weeks ago it was beautiful, the water rushing by—boats, launches, rafts travelling—and now it is dead—frozen—still.

I had a gorgeous dog-ride this week, my first one (with the exception of a short one in which the dogs headed straight for the river over a steep incline—and I vacated in great haste, for the sled upset and it was a regular up set the fruit basket.) But the first *real* dog ride I had with a Canadian lad,



tall and handsome—whose name was *Jack Frost!* Isn't that lovely to go dog riding, fourteen miles within the Arctic Circle with Jack Frost?

He looked the part too with fur top boots and tassel cap bobbing in the breeze as he hopped out to straighten out the dogs or as he ran along at the back of the sled.

We had five handsome dogs in the team (if conditions are good, and the dogs in fine trim—one dog can manage 200 lbs.—tho under some conditions, 50 lbs. is too much of a load)—I wore so much clothing that I scarcely could sit down. Before we were gone a half hour I discarded half my wearing apparel so as to run with ease, back of the sled, with moccasined feet, like a regular Indian. It was all so different from anything I have ever experienced, that I can't help giving you the details of it. The trees were so soft and pretty sparkling with snow and the big, wonderful moon making it light as day. The dogs seemed to go like lightning and the tinkle of the bells—when I closed my eyes, made me feel just as though I was out with old Santa Clause and his reindeer team!

Last evening I attended the funniest birthday party I ever heard of. The last birthday party was the most tragic (the night of the fire)—and this one last night—well let me tell you about it. It was in the form of a picnic—imagine at about 8:30 P.M. when we left—there were three dog teams of us—four Indians and three white people. The white people consisted of Curly Wells (our mail man) who is married to a squaw (his wife was with us)—the other two white people were Jack Frost and myself. We drove about four miles and then got out, tied the dogs and proceeded to "make ready" for the picnic. It was bitter cold. The men took axes and chopped down a huge pile of trees and we built a big fire. The funny party of this birthday party is, that it was given for little Jim-Jim—son of Curly and Elizabeth, who was left at home, in the cabin, sound asleep while we did the celebrating—and ate all the grub! And what grub it was too! Roasted duck (the men said a few of the birds they found dead—but they were mixed in with the others, so we didn't

know which ones they were)—anyway it didn't hurt our appetites, we eat anything when we're hungry—raw fish—head—eyes—everything! No, I'm not kidding—*really* you'd never know me.— Things are so different up here and the greatest part of it is, that I just love every minute! But to go on with the menu—we had lovely fruit salad (canned), coffee which we made over our fire—melted snow for the water—homemade bread which I toasted on a stick, olives, candy, and birthday cake. There were three candles on it, so I lighted them and blew them out for poor Jim-Jim. I thought he ought to be honored with at least a thought. I took one of the candles and I am sending it to you to prove that this is a true story.

After eating, the party got somewhat warmed by the fire and the guests grew hilarious—in a spirit of jovial fun. I didn't care to get mixed up in it so I played the part of stoker and went about in the snow (knee deep) to gather wood. I did a very foolish thing then but it was a good experience—my one moccasin had a hole in it and snow got inside. Then my feet got cold and I warmed them by the fire—this melted the snow, leaving all my foot gear wet. There was not time to dry it through so, when we were out on the trail again, homeward bound, the skin froze again and I thought my feet would too. I told Jack Frost they were so cold that I wasn't enjoying the ride much—so I got out and *ran*. When they got over the numbness, they began to tingle and ache. Jack said I must never get into a fix like that again, that I came near freezing them. You see, I'm still very much of a "Chee Chakokali" which means, "New in the Country."

Dec. 15, 1924

We are having snappy weather. Last night I was out for a short walk and it was 64° below zero. One does not mind that cold *if* there is no wind—as much as 20° or 30° below, *with* a wind.

The reason people freeze so easily is that one does not realize the cold because they do not feel cold. The only way you can tell it is by the breath. One has to take short breaths

and it makes one cough for the warm air literally freezes at every inhalation. That is why it is against the law to have a dog team out if its more than 40° below—they would freeze their lungs. The colder it is, the prettier. The atmosphere is so clear and always clearer as it gets colder. When there is a drop in temperature, it is invariably cloudy. We have practically no daylight at all now. Just a few hours of twilight—or greyness.

You would be interested to see people walking about in their fur parkas—just their eyes and nose exposed—and eyelashes white with frost. We have to keep a scarf over our mouths—always at 60° below.

Feb. 24, 1925

This has been the severest winter Alaska has known in years. It has been 40° below at the warmest for two solid months and often—oh very often, it has been 60° below! They tell us we can expect a dreadful break up—the ice is so thick. I'm glad the hospital is far enough back—that we won't go into the river. All the people along the river bank move out when the ice begins to move.

So you think the dogs are rather savage, it's worse than that—they are half wolf you know and you'd think they were all wolf to hear a malamute howl or see the hair fly and hear the growling when they fight!



# Ross River

Written by Mary Tidd



*Mr. & Mrs. Claude B. Tidd*



In the attractive log house on Pingpong Alley, Dawson, Yukon Territory, my new china and silver glistened. The bread was rising on the back of the wood stove where the dog meal was bubbling for Queenie's puppies. It was three o'clock on a March afternoon, but the sun was already back of the Moosehide Hills, and the only light was the reflection of the moon on the sugary snow. As I plumped a beaded mooseskin cushion and glanced through the frosted cottage windows, I could catch a glimpse of the uneven chunks of ice on the frozen Yukon River. Closer to the house, our huskies—Nuts, Soup, Coffee and Spud—were straining on their tethers outside their shelters, and only Queenie's nose could be seen at the door to her house where she was caring for puppies.

I saw a flash of the red of my husband's coat as he dashed across the road from the R.C.M.P. barracks and burst into the room his dark eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Sweetheart, we are to be sent to the Ross River Outpost—the O.C. signed the order of transfer this morning. We are to go with 'The Thistle' on her Pelly River trip when navigation opens in June."

I was wild with excitement, too. Ross River! It was our dream, our chance for an adventurous life of our own, free from the artificial demands of the too highly organized social life in the semi-"ghost town" of Dawson.

My thoughts flew to all the incredible things I had heard about Ross River. Claude had once been stationed as a single policeman in this most isolated outpost of the whole Yukon Territory. It is the nucleus of hundreds of miles of wild trapping country with irregular boundaries which include the valleys of the Ross and Pelly Rivers. But now, I was to try to transform the small log cabin which had served as a bachelor police barracks, into homelike married quarters for two, and to give the natives their first sight of a white woman!

The entire area has a population of less than a hundred people, all of them native Indians, except for a half dozen white men. They are all trappers—nomads—and so widely scattered that many of them come into the Post but once a

year to sell their furs, report their game and purchase their supplies. Roy Buttle, the manager of the trading post at Ross, would, with ourselves, form the entire permanent population.

There were no schools in the community—no nurses, no churches—no doctors! The natives never left the country, never saw a white community, never lived in houses. They were back in the dark ages as far as beliefs and customs were concerned!

The next few months were filled with careful preparations and the making of endless lists. Since the supply boat could make but one trip before the river closed for another year, we had to calculate all that we might need for the winter.

After seeing a picture of the cabin, I made plans to dispose of all heavy furniture, excepting the piano and anything even remotely resembling an electric appliance.

By June first all was ready, including Christmas boxes from home, to be kept until next December.

Our outfit was on the paddle wheeled Yukon River boat, enroute from Dawson to the mouth of the Pelly, where we would meet the supply boat for the interior.

It looked a strange outfit indeed. Apart from the ordinary furnishings and innumerable boxes of supplies, there were—laundry tubs, a water barrel, a portable bath tub, an ironing board, window shades, gasoline mantel lamps, stacks of books, bales of dried salmon for the dogs, guns, ammunition, skis, skates, snowshoes, tents, eiderdown sleeping bags, dog sled and harness, a toboggan, medical supplies, a typewriter, mosquito bars, cameras and tripods, a poling boat, a saxophone, a trombone, a piano, a canary, and last but not least, our seven husky dogs! Our Dawson dogs were left behind, except for Queenie whose puppies were now ready to break into harness and would make a fresh intelligent team for the unbroken trails in the Pelly River country.

Our sendoff from Dawson was a bright one. Our friends showed some concern for me, but I had none for myself. We were in the best of spirits, and who wouldn't be—chugging up the Yukon River in June with all the splendor of the sky



and its reflections, a beauty such as only the midnight sun can produce.

In a few days we arrived at Selkirk, at the mouth of the Pelly River, where the clumsy old "Thistle" was waiting to take us the two hundred and fifty miles upstream to Ross River. She was too big for the river, as the Pelly's channels, excepting in high water, were too shallow for a boat of her size. Her barge was loaded to the hilt as it carried the trader's supplies for the whole Pelly country as well as our own.

At last we were off—at 2 A.M. and broad daylight! From the deck I could see Malt, Hops, Yeast, Ross, Pelly, Queenie and Jack chained disconsolately to the barge. From the stern I could see the little line of people on the river bank waving us off as we pushed forward.

Jack, who was chained near the edge of the barge, in his excitement at barking farewell to the dogs on shore, fell overboard. He was rescued after being dragged several yards, and never fell off again. We had added a black cat to our freight at Selkirk (an order from the trader at Ross) and his tail was thick most of the time. The poor canary's feathers were often ruffled, too.

Our adventures had begun. We toiled up the river for eleven days and nights. (I think that was the number)—we lost count once because of the continuous daylight. Every six or eight hours the crew and passengers went ashore to chop trees for fuel. We burned wood and could not carry it with all the heavy freight. The business of sawing and carrying in the wood took about four hours each time, and should have been a welcome break except that when we were tied up, the swarms of mosquitoes in the brush nearly drove us mad.

As it was so hot during the day, we were concerned about the cases of fresh eggs—a rare treat at Ross. As there was no refrigeration, the fresh meat did not keep and the crew had to take time off to go hunting for moose and mountain sheep.

No rains came. The river dropped lower and lower and we stuck on sandbars, had to unload the heavy freight and

then portage the freight to the boat after we had pulled off. This happened many times and I was always afraid that the heavy piano would have to be left behind. We went through swirling rapids, and once a fallen tree trunk, under water, struck and broke our propeller. It took twenty-four hours to repair it. No wonder it took us eleven days to make a trip that should have taken five!

There were good moments, too. In the cool of the evening the wide open silent country was indescribably beautiful. We had an occasional glimpse of moose, caribou, bear or coyote, and once a great bald eagle soared across the sky. It gave us a sense of freedom and peace that was almost intoxicating.

At noon on the eleventh day, they told us that "Ross" was just around the bend. From the pilot house, Claude and I viewed it for the first time together. A few log cabins irregularly dotting a bar along the river bank, skirted at some distance by a long low bluff—a wide sweep of the river where the Ross flows into the Pelly—a handful of white men grouped together on a log bench,—a string of shy, curious natives, their immobile faces showing nothing of the excitement this one event of the year surely must have meant to them—that was all—excepting the Union Jack which fluttered from a tall pole before a little log cabin with the letters R.C.M.P. painted above the door.

The business of unloading and sorting the freight was soon accomplished. The outfit for the trading at Pelly Banks was separated and piled by the river to be taken by scow later, the seventy-five miles of the upper Pelly waters, through gorges and canyons, impossible for the Thistle.

It was with intense interest that I met the little company assembled there, knowing they were the only human beings I would see for a very long time to come. The natives, particularly interested me. These childlike people, unspoiled by white man's influence, were very shy at first with the only white woman they had ever seen.

They called Claude "The Government," (which indeed he was) and later they came to call me "Government Wife," and sometimes "Gatanya Gaza," which means "little woman,"

the latter, probably because I was so very thin. The Indian women are rather rotund because of the large amount of suet in their diet perhaps.

Only the children, and a very few of the younger men and women could speak very broken English. The women carried their babies on their backs in gorgeously beaded baby straps, and their mooseskin moccasins, gaily decorated with colored braid and beads were works of art.

After two days the boat left and with it went the only contact with the outside world we would have until the next June.

I was eager to see everything. My first look at the cabin did not discourage me, in spite of the fact that our dashing young predecessor had papered the walls with pictures of beautiful young ladies. I could see the infinite possibilities, and visualized bright paint on the walls and shelves, gay chintzes at the windows, and even a frieze of stenciled blue birds around the living room. Claude had more practical thoughts of a corrugated tin roof instead of the mudded log one, and even of building an addition to the cabin to make more room for our furnishings and books.

Roy had a huge vegetable garden with enough carrots, peas and lettuce to feed us all until the frosts came: The long hours of daylight produced wonderful vegetables in the northern summer and I was pleased to find them in this remote spot. We had brought seeds and would start them in boxes indoors and hoped for our own garden next summer.

Several days after our arrival, a timid wrap brought me to the door to find about a dozen native women and children, my first Ross River callers! They filed in and the place was filled. I asked them to be seated and they ignored the chairs and sat on the floor in true 'Indian fashion.' I tried to talk to them, I passed oranges, I played with the children, but got no response. They sat and smiled and looked. Hours passed. Finally, in desperation, I used the one Indian word I knew. It was magic when I said "cola," they got up at once, and still in smiling good humor, filed out. "Cola" means enough.

Their response to the strange miracles we brought was

delightful. A jig tune on the piano set their moccasins in motion until the beads on them fairly twinkled. When we set up a first aid tent with the medical supplies the Indian department had given me, they were overcome with curiosity and every native in the lot soon found some reason to be treated. "Me finger sick," "Me need pink pills." The pink pills were a sugar coated confection to them and very popular because of the sweet taste.

As soon as the trappers had their outfits packed, they left by boat or on foot with pack dogs. The tents disappeared one by one, and in a week the place was silent and deserted.

There was so much to do! There was our home to be fixed, and there was all outdoors to be explored. The trails were a delight with a profusion of wild flowers, and the brush was lively with birds of all descriptions. When we explored the river with our poling boat we surprised the wild creatures on the banks. We hunted only with camera and field glasses. The gun was carried for protection.

The appearance of fresh snow on the mountains and the sharp frosts of early August, sent us hurrying to begin preparations for the long winter. The weak places in the logs of the house had to be chinked up with moss. Trees were chopped for firewood, to be hauled in by dog team when the snows came. There was dog harness to be repaired and freezable supplies to be brought in doors.

Early in October, slush ice formed on the river. The current slowed down, and in a week or so it stopped. The freeze up had come. We were locked in for the winter! The days were shorter and shorter. The snow had come to stay. The mercury dropped to below freezing and then to below zero, and there it would remain for many months to come. The long arctic winter had begun, but instead of locking us in, it really set us free. We could cross lakes and rivers at will and go anywhere the dogs would take us, which was everywhere.

The trapping season had begun and we loved to read the tracks in the snow. We knew them all—the weasel, the moose, the rabbit and sometimes wolf tracks, not to be confused with dogs, because of the sharpness of the claw marks.

The tracks drove the dogs wild. At the scent of the smallest weasel, they would leave the trail and tear off across country, sometimes upsetting the sled and ending in a snarl of harness and a terrific fight. All of the dog trips were not for pleasure. It was Claude's duty to check on the lonely white trappers in their cabins if there was too long an absence from the post. There are sometimes terrible tragedies in this country. However, this first year at Ross, there were no major ones.

Christmas meant nothing to the natives, but a few of them happened in at the time and we had a celebration. We brought in a tree by dog team, trimmed it with beads, painted egg shells and bits of cotton. We had brought a few ornaments from Dawson and there was enough tinsel to make it glitter. When the first Indian saw it, he clasped his hands before him and with an indrawn breath said, "Oh - - -, all same star!"

During the winter I made huge batches of bread, pies and cakes and put them outdoors, together with the meat and fish to keep in the world's largest freezer.

In the cold days of January, we stayed indoors and enjoyed our books. Richard, the canary, was happy and cheerful company for us. Poor Richard—one day when it was 60 below outside, he lost his little life from too much heat as he hung in his cage above a wood burning heater which suddenly rose to red hot temperatures.

By the end of February we were ready for the required Police patrol to Whitehorse, the nearest headquarters. It meant three hundred miles by dog team as the crow flies across wild uninhabited country and unbroken trails. We decided that I should go too, as it was more hazardous probably for me to stay alone.

What preparations we made—the very lightest load on this trip might be too heavy. We counted our rations for every single meal, allowing for an extra two days in case of mishap. After weighing our rations, dog feed, camp equipment and clothing, gun, snowshoes and repair kit, we found it necessary to still cut down, and decided to leave our tent

and camp stove. This meant brush camps, in the snow, cooking by open fires in true Indian style.

It took us fifteen days. Fifteen days of glorious adventure, and then seeing people—white women—tea in a living room, instead of outdoors by an open fire tasting of spruce needles and campfire smoke—and best of all—mail! I was almost afraid to open it. So much can happen in eight months! I opened the very latest letters first, and then settled down happily to all the rest. World news meant so much too. I was glad to know who was President of the U.S.A. as it was an election year.

The return trip from Whitehorse was ever so much quicker and easier, for now we had a trail. When we pulled up to our little cabin door, Claude said, "Who lives in *this* nice little house?" Our cabin had really become a home.

The early spring days in April, before the snow begins to go, are the very best. The bright sun shining on the sparkling whiteness, relieved by exquisite shadows, transforms the whole world into fairyland. We must remember however, to wear dark glasses in this dazzling beauty to protect us from snowblindness.

*Notes From A Yukoner's Diary*

# **The First Cold Snap**

Written by Claude Tidd





That's what the real Old-Timer calls it: but somehow it doesn't seem quite appropriate to me; it doesn't convey enough.

It is mid-December at this isolated Northern Yukon home of ours, and during the past week the temperature has been around ten or fifteen below Zero, which, without wind, isn't uncomfortable. This morning however, I was scarcely out of bed before I was greeted with a dull 'Cr-r-rack' which seemed to shake the whole house.

"What's that?" asks a muffled voice from the bed. I knew at once that it was the cracking of the logs forming the walls of our cabin; I'd heard it before. "It means my dear, that the Cold Snap has arrived at last."

I shivered as I groped around for the flash-light, but it wasn't in its usual place on the bedside table. Then in my wanderings in the darkness for a match, I stubbed a sore toe on a chair, then almost fell over our pet dog, but finally I got the candle lit—it was just after seven o'clock—and shivered my way out to the kitchen where I soon had a fire crackling cheerfully. In continued cold weather I am always sure to make up a good fire in the big 'heater' in our living-room, but as the previous night had not been very cold I had not done this before going to bed. As a result, the fire was out; the heater stone cold, and the room like a barn. So, more shavings and dry wood and soon a cheery roar was going up the stove pipe. It usually takes but a few minutes to warm our kitchen stove, so I don't waste much time pulling on a few of my clothes.

Before I was able to fill the kettle I had to break a thick covering of ice on the drinking-water barrel near the back door—another sure sign of unusual cold. After a brisk wash and brush up I start to prepare the morning's coffee. In a few minutes I think the appetizing smell of this must have entered into the bedroom—our cabin isn't very large—for it wasn't long before I heard a muffled voice calling 'How's the coffee pot?' and I knew that the other half of the family was awake.

"Bo-o-oh" she dithers with just her face peeping from

under the eiderdown, "How cold is it?" "I don't know yet, but—and I hesitated a little—but I'll go and have a look if you say so." "Alright" she encouraged with a steaming cup of coffee in her hands, "go and take a peep." So, armed with the torch and a good resolution I shuffled out to the woodshed to look at the thermometer. And it said—Now, what *did* the mercury register? Ah, there it was, hiding down in the bottom of the tube—55 below Zero! With this cheerful piece of information, I hurried back into the house. "So" said I, "the Cold Snap has really arrived."

By the time I had fortified myself with my bacon and eggs, coffee and marmalade, it is just about light enough to see things through the window. And what do I see? Not very much. Our neighbour's cabin belonging to the bachelor member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, is just visible about a hundred yards away through a thick haze, and about all I can really see is a black shape with a snow-covered roof with dense clouds of smoke coming from the stove-pipe. Evidently he's just up and moving around too. From the other window I look out across the broad Porcupine River. There is little else to see. At any rate I haven't much time to spend admiring the scenery as there is plenty to be done with the advent of the Cold Snap. And I'd better get on some more clothes before going out of doors in this temperature.

But in 55-below weather dressing for outdoors isn't the simple or speedy matter that it is in kinder climates. It is a serious business. First comes an extra pair of trousers, or perhaps better still a pair of drill overalls. The next thing is the footwear. Ah, the Footwear! This is *very* important: there must be plenty of it, but it must on no account be too tight to hinder proper circulation. Now in ordinary cold weather, two pairs of heavy woollen socks with a pair of felt 'insoles' are sufficient, but it so happens that just now I am a little short of skin moccasins: one pair is on the small side while the other pair is—well, rather too big for normal use, and in order to fill them so that they won't curl up too much in front I now use what is known to the trapping and

dog-driving fraternity and other 'backwoods' individuals as 'foot-rags' or duffles. It requires a certain knack to get these squares of blanket material neatly wrapped round the feet, and although it doesn't sound much perhaps, yet is quite a feat to get such a bulkily-clad foot into a skin moccasin. Then comes a woollen sweater; over that again a drill parka with fur-trimmed hood to go over the head; blanket-lined mittens and fur cap. It is quite a business this dressing up, but at such temperatures one must take no unnecessary chances. And so, finally, I am ready to venture out.

Fortunately I have on hand a good supply of cook-stove wood in our lean-to shed all ready sawed and split up into sixteen-inch lengths. So it takes little time to fill the kitchen wood-box which will last all day—I hope! But heater wood must be three feet long and anything up to about eight inches in diameter. There isn't so much of this on hand, so I shall have to saw up more later.

'Perhaps you had better bring in some more meat for tomorrow,' suggests my wife; 'and we need more bread in the house too.' Our meat which is principally caribou-meat, we often have given us or buy from the Indians a whole leg at a time, and it is kept in our foodstore or 'cache' as it is called. So now with the use of a stout saw and axe, I cut off a joint. The bread, home-baked of course, is also rock hard and must be brought in to the house to thaw out before it can even be sliced. If it is frozen immediately after being freshly-baked it can safely be kept a month or much longer if necessary, and still be perfectly fresh after being thawed out.

Now the house water-supply must be replenished. We have no pump here; nobody in camp has. The business of installing a pump has been tried but with no success. So at this season we have to depend on ice—there's plenty of it! So, armed with axe, shovel and two empty five-gallon petrol cans, I make two or three trips to the river about a hundred yards down the bank, and chop out what is necessary. What our water system lacks in convenience is amply compensated for by its simplicity. All waste water is emptied by hand: there are no worries with frozen pipes. Across the river I

notice an Indian muffled up in his caribou-skin parka and trousers with his team of four dogs and sleigh hauling in a load of dry spruce wood, a long cloud of 'breath' from his panting dogs stretches out behind him in the thin cold air like a mist, yet another sign of 50 below or worse. Even at 40 below one can distinctly hear the 'cracking' of one's own breath caused of course by the freezing of each individual drop of moisture.

The next thing is to get busy with the cross-cut saw and axe and get in a further supply of dry wood for the two stoves. I soon discover that my axe requires sharpening, but to take my hand from a mitt probably damp from exercise, and feel the bare steel would be only asking for trouble. As the poet Robert Service aptly puts it 'the careless feel of a bit of steel burns like a red-hot spit.'

It may seem rather strange perhaps that in spite of all this exertion any part of one's face should be frost-bitten, but this often happens to me. I admit that my nose is rather a prominent part of my face and suddenly, like the jab of a needle I feel it, right on the tip of my nose. I knew quite well what it was; I've felt it a good many times before. It must be attended to. I hold my bare hand over the injured member for a few moments to restore the circulation. A neglected frost-bite can be, and often is, a serious business; even a mild frost-bite will result in a badly peeling cheek or chin; a serious case may develop into something far worse—gangrene, and the loss of a toe, or foot or even a leg.

Well, this has been something of a busy morning, and I am beginning to wonder rather anxiously when dinner will be ready when, sure enough, just as I am about to make another onslaught on a log of wood with the saw I hear a familiar and very welcome 'Yoo-Hoo' from the kitchen. I knew what it meant; I've been waiting to hear it for half-an-hour or more. So after brushing the snow from my moccasins and dusting the icicles from my parka hood and my moustache, I make tracks for the house.

In these latitudes, the sun on a clear day in mid-December is above the horizon only for an hour or so around mid-day,

so there is little time to do much out of doors during the afternoon. By the time dinner is over, the dishes washed; the house lamps filled and lit, the brief sub-arctic daylight is over, and although it is quite snug and warm inside our cabin home as we settle down for the rest of the day, we do wonder how long the Cold Snap will last.



*Notes From A Yukoner's Diary*

# **With a Dog Team**

Written by Claude Tidd





In that far north-west corner of Canada bordering on Alaska and the Arctic Ocean, known as the Yukon Territory, the only method of travel during the six months of winter is by dog-team. Although the new Alaska Highway, built during the recent war years crosses the Territory from East to West, it touches merely the outside edge of that vast Territory, and although it is an easy matter to fly from the town of Whitehorse in the south to the Arctic Ocean in a few hours the fact remains that thousands of miles are travelled every winter by dog-team. Mail is still carried in many of the remote districts; members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police still make many patrols from their isolated posts; prospectors haul their supplies; and there are hundreds of trappers, both Indian and white, who depend solely on this means of getting about the country.

Preparations for a trip that may take at least ten days through this vast un-inhabited country, and the loading of the toboggan for such a trip is a matter calling for much care and forethought; nothing must be overlooked; there is frequently nowhere to stay the night after a hard day on the trail nor is there any possible chance to purchase anything that may have been forgotten. Perhaps the old Yukoner's favorite of bacon and beans is still the staple article of food: the beans are usually cooked before leaving home; drained of all moisture, allowed to freeze and then packed in small cotton bags. This is excellent food, economical, easily packed and easily prepared at night on the trail. Bacon is usually carried in the slab. Rice is also another favorite stand-by as it too, is easily prepared at night. Fresh meat or canned fruits are seldom carried; the former is too bulky and requires too long to thaw out and prepare when needed. Other foods such as tea, sugar, flour, dried fruit are bettered carried in small cotton sacks for the simple reason that they diminish in size as the trip continues, and are thus easier to pack. The amounts of each that will be necessary comes of course with practice. The bedding will in many cases consist of an eider-down robe which is both light and warm. A small tent measuring eight by ten feet will be large enough for two men,

though this may be dispensed with in the less cold days of March and April; a small stove; extra clothing with plenty of heavy woollen socks; a pair of snow-shoes and lastly the dog-feed for the team. Wherever possible this latter will consist of dried fish, preferably salmon, which are caught locally and sold for this express purpose. The usual type of toboggan to hold such a load is about eight feet in length and about sixteen inches wide. Everything is carefully packed into a sack-like wrapper made either of moose-skin or stout canvas, and the whole being securely lashed to the toboggan with rope. Snow-shoes and axe are usually tucked in at the top to be handy when required.

On such a trip the intended route will of course, be planned beforehand. Often the course of a river is followed wherever possible; it is the line of least resistance. Where, as is frequently the case, the river is very crooked, 'short-cuts' known as portages may be taken. If it is necessary to leave one river to get across country to another, it is advisable to know the easiest place to cross over.

The actual start from home is often an exciting moment. The dogs are anxious to get away: hurried 'goodbyes' are said with a snappy 'Mush on boys' from the driver, the travellers are off—down the bank and on to the river in a wild flurry of snow—dogs all on the gallop, tails in the air. This dog-driving especially with a team of young dogs, is certainly no old man's business. It requires considerable agility to keep a heavily-loaded toboggan right side up sometimes. However, after the first thrill is over the dogs will soon settle down: they won't gallop far with a 400-lb. load! For a few miles out of the settlement the trail will most likely have been used a great deal and the toboggan will slide easily on the hard snow, nor will it be necessary for the driver to wear his snow-shoes.

There is usually but little wild life to be seen on the trail in mid-winter. Birds in these latitudes are very scarce though a solitary Canada Jay, an occasional chickadee or a Northern Raven may be seen at times. In some districts the traveller may catch a glimpse of a moose, or a herd of caribou or

maybe a stray fox or coyote.

By about noon the hungry traveller will be wondering if he'd had any breakfast that morning and will be looking around as he travels for a suitable place to stop for lunch. There must be dry wood for a fire as well as green branches to stand on. When such a place is found each man will take his axe and cut down what is needed. This is always the first job to be done particularly if the weather is very cold. A small place is then cleared of snow—a snow-shoe makes a useful scraper for this—and green branches are laid down. Loose snow is carefully dusted off one's feet and legs before working too near the heat, otherwise moccasins will become wet and freeze later in the day possibly resulting in frozen feet. The 'trail' tea-pot, often a discarded tin to which a wire 'handle' has been added, is filled with snow and melted, successive fillings being added until the tin is full of water. So that it may not be necessary to unlash the whole load at noon it is handier when loading up at the beginning of the day's trip, to pack the lunch in some part of the load where it is easily accessible. Any foods that are frozen may easily be thawed out near the fire. The dogs are seldom fed during the noon stop: they appear to be quite content to curl up in their harness and rest. The whole meal will take about an hour, and we are off again.

The travel is never by any means monotonous; there is always something cropping up to make it interesting, to say the least, to the dog driver. A squeaking squirrel will often start a tired team on a brief mad rush through the woods; even a fresh moose-track in the snow will cause a momentary flurry of excitement.

If there has been no previous travel over the route to be followed then snow-shoes must be worn. In this case one man must go ahead of the teams to 'break trail.' This is by no means an easy or pleasant task. A 12-stone man, in soft snow, and wearing a 3-foot snow-shoe, will sink in perhaps eight or ten inches at each step, and as a snow-shoe cannot be 'slid' along with the same motion as in ski-ing, but must be lifted each time, the movement, after a time, becomes

extremely wearying. It isn't quite the same thing as a four or five-mile hike with a pleasant party on a Saturday afternoon. By no means—not when it has to be kept up for hour after hour and day after day. It is a man's-size job, and one is usually relieved when the other fellow's turn comes to go ahead of the dogs.

Yes, there is usually something happening to prevent winter travel with dogs from becoming monotonous. To climb the steep bank of a river, which may be anything from twenty-five to fifty feet high is another strenuous job. With a heavy load the dogs cannot make such a pull unaided, so the driver will have to lend a hand; lug, push, and heave and a 'Mush on boys' a few feet at a time to the top. But perhaps even more exciting is a run down such a bank. I recall one such occasion that might have had serious results. There were three other teams besides my own—including two Indian teams—twenty dogs in all—and I might add that Indian and white man's dogs aren't on very friendly terms usually! We had all had rather a tiring day. It was almost dark but we knew there was a native village a few miles further on where we could be sure of a warm welcome—if we could get there. Unfortunately, we lost the trail in the dim light, which fact delayed us badly and we reached a precipitous bank down on to the Yukon River where we hoped to find a used trail. It was at least a fifty-foot drop and very steep. The first team made it safely and got clear; my own team also reached the bottom without mishap, but the dogs in the third team—an Indian's—got badly tangled in their harness and started fighting at the bottom amongst themselves. This was too much of a temptation for my team and they swung around and rushed pell-mell into the fray. To make matters yet worse, the other team came rushing down the bank to join in the fun. Fifteen snarling, fighting dogs all mixed and tangled up in their harness makes quite a mess to get straightened out, and to make matters worse, we were all wearing our snowshoes: it was a wild few minutes, but finally we managed to get the dogs separated, and a sorry-looking crowd they were, several of them with lacerated feet.

Needless to say, we did not make our goal that night, but had to make an 'open camp' under a big tree; we had no tent on that particular trip. I remember that the beans, bacon and tea tasted specially good on that occasion.

Many other irritating and unavoidable delays are met with on the trail. After a fresh fall of snow, or if the temperature becomes comparatively mild, some dogs' feet, particularly a dog with a very hairy foot, will pick up the soft snow which soon becomes hard and 'balls up.' This, if not attended to at once will cause a sore foot, and finally a limping and useless dog. Then again, for various reasons, water, perhaps only an inch or so under the snow, will be encountered, especially if crossing a shallow creek. This is perhaps one of the most exasperating conditions the traveller can meet with. One may be jogging along a fairly good trail when suddenly without any warning one feels it and the question immediately arises—shall we go ahead, or shall we turn round and try another spot. But the chances are that whatever we do we shall get wet, so maybe the toboggan runs through two or three inches of water and what is still worse, one's moccasins will get wet through. This means that as soon as possible one must pull in to the nearest wood supply and stop to make a fire and change footwear: wet moccasins and socks will surely result in frozen feet if neglected. Ice also forms on the bottom of the toboggan which must be scraped.

I remember too on one trip when passing the mouth of a tiny mountain creek where the water had overflowed and frozen. Successive overflowings and freezings had built up a wall of ice nearly four feet high and the dogs could get no firm foot-hold. The other member of the party finally had to crawl up on his hands and knees and help pull the lead dog to the top where the footing was less slippery, and after removing half my load we succeeded after much slipping around in getting the whole thing to firmer footing. We were late having supper that night too.

Another condition that can be the cause of much grief is a used trail that has been drifted half full by the wind. This can be worse than no trail at all especially if the load is

heavy and a high one. The whole thing will slide and turn either partly or wholly on its side causing the dogs to stop. This isn't so bad now and again perhaps, but to have this happen with a heavy load about every hundred yards or so for two or three miles is annoying, to put it mildly, even to the best of dispositions.

Then again one will occasionally run across a dog known as a harness-eater. I remember I once had a young dog in my team and was out for a day's run to give him a trial. I stopped for lunch and made a fire at some little distance away. When I returned and had repacked everything ready to go I gave the team the usual 'Alright boys, mush on!' and to my amazement the three dogs in front started on down the trail—alone! My busy little pup, the third dog in the string had spent a pleasant time chewing both his moose-skin traces in two. Fortunately I had dog-chains with me and was able to improvise with these. He evidently liked the taste of the moose-skin and never got over the evil habit. I always had to use chain traces with him afterwards.

Another cause of delay which the traveller must carefully guard against, especially during the sunnier days of March and April is snow-blindness which is caused chiefly by the glare of the sun and reflected by the snow. Danger from this painful experience is greater when travelling in treeless districts. To prevent it one must wear snow-glasses, which in effect are goggles with dark or amber-coloured lenses. A serious case can be very painful indeed and cause temporary blindness.

It is usually an easy matter for an experienced dog-driver to follow a trail over which an earlier traveller has passed even though it may be partly or even totally obliterated by later snow falls or wind. Sometimes however, even the most seasoned old trail veteran will go astray. I once had occasion to make a short trip with a native Eskimo, and our trail for a whole day led across a low pass in the Northern Rockies. A bright clear morning gave way later to a dull cloudy day with a light snow-fall as we were almost to the summit of the pass and we lost the trail on the hard snow. My

companion had been over the same route with the same team often, yet he noticed that his 'leader' wanted to bear off to the left—to go 'Haw' in dog-driver's lingo. He corrected him several times but he still wanted to go his own way. It wasn't long, in the bad light before the Eskimo realized that he was wrong. 'All right,' he shouted to his leader, 'have it your own way; Mush on!' Immediately the dogs started swinging sharply to the left. In a few minutes we were lower down the slope, and there, showing up distinctly in the softer snow of the lower ground was the trail he had used on his outward trip.

In making a trail through a wooded country the trail breaker will often carry a small axe and 'blaze' a tree—on both sides usually—to guide anyone who may come in the same direction later on, or to help him on his return trip. Or when crossing a lake of any size where wind and snow will quickly obscure his trail he will chop off and carry on his load a bunch of small green branches which he will stick in the snow at intervals on the open lake.

I think one of the oddest of my experiences in following a trail came during my earliest days as a 'dog-musher.' My guide on my outward trip of two hundred and fifty miles had to return unexpectedly before I had completed my business. My companion on the homeward trip was a young man well used to dog-driving but not familiar with the country through which we had to travel. It was also my first experience over this route. The only treacherous part of the trip was a half-day's travel across a low treeless 'divide' through the mountains, but we both felt confident that we could make it safely. Before he left me, my guide had promised that he would 'blaze' the trail for us over the divide. He kept his word. For some distance he had 'planted' green branches in the snow, which were easily followed. Then abruptly they ceased; he had run out of material evidently. We kept on, now guided by scratches in the hard snow made by the dogs claws, and then—what was that black splash on the snow? Well, we knew at once what it was; there were lots of them as we went along; our guide

chewed tobacco—and a tobacco-chewer SPITS!

A night camp involves much the same preparations as for noon. It takes two seasoned travellers but a few minutes to set a tent and have a cheery fire roaring in the camp-stove. Each man will unhitch his own dogs, chaining each one to a small tree—they are never allowed to run loose—and the considerate driver will cut off a few green branches for them to lie on. This will be appreciated and after a few turns this way and that to smooth their bedding they will curl up and soon be resting until feeding time after the other camp jobs have been attended to. One man will usually act as cook while the other cuts enough wood to last the night. The dogs will enjoy their feed more if it is placed near the fire to thaw out a little; it seems to be more tasty that way evidently. On a long trip, and after a few days on the trail there is always some part of the travelling equipment to be repaired and the veteran dog-man rarely goes far afield without his 'sewing-kit.' A set of harness needs a few stitches perhaps or something has gone amiss with a snow-shoe or the toboggan needs attention. Then too, moccasins will get damp from working around a fire and must be dried.

In the less severe temperatures of March and April an 'open camp' is often made without tent or stove, to save weight and space on the load.

And so a dog-driver's days go; there is rarely a dull or idle moment from before daylight until the final piece of wood is tucked into the stove at night. The young traveller will suffer discomfort at first from a variety of causes; a frozen nose or cheeks or any exposed part of his face. He will, for a few days at any rate, suffer from sore and chafed feet due to long hours on showshoes; the mere walking of anything up to twenty-five miles a day will make him think sorrowfully, perhaps, of the nice easy job he left behind him in town or back on the farm or some other civilized spot. Bacon and beans are good food and tasty enough once in a while perhaps, but maybe he will think of other things he likes better after he has lived on them every day for a month. A bed of spruce boughs in an open camp, or even in a tent at 40 below



zero isn't always the most comfortable place to sleep; even a tent doesn't stay warm long after the fire is out.

However, in spite of all this there is a wonderful glamour and fascination about the life. The members of the famous Royal Canadian Mounted Police still rely largely on their dog-teams for making their long patrols in winter; but rarely is a volunteer lacking for these arduous trips. And again, some trappers and prospectors are not young men who try the life as an experiment—just for the fun of it. They keep at it—many of them as a life's work in spite of the long months of dog-team work. It isn't however always a matter of fighting the bitter mid-winter cold for days on end nor of wearisome mile after mile of trail breaking. By no means. A trip over a good well-beaten trail with not too heavy a load and a good team in the gloriously bright sunny days of March or April, with the thermometer around the zero mark, can be, and very often is, a thrilling, enjoyable and never-to-be-forgotten experience.



*Notes From A Yukoner's Diary*

# **The Ice Break-up in Spring**

Written by Claude Tidd



Probably nine-tenths of the six thousand population of the Yukon Territory, better known perhaps as the Klondike, live along the banks of a river, either the Yukon River itself or one of its tributaries. For six months of the year these waterways, the main arteries of the country, are frozen over, and the break-up of this ice in May is an event looked forward to by all Yukoners alike with much interest. Let us, for a few minutes look at that far corner of Canada and see what happens.

The time is about the end of the first week in May and although the snow has disappeared the river Yukon is still covered with ice. The little town of Dawson, famous half a century ago as the centre of the fabulously rich Klondike gold-mining district, stretches for a mile along the bank of the mighty Yukon river which is here between four and five hundred yards wide. Along the Front Street bordering the river on this warm spring morning little knots of men may be seen intently looking river-wards. Several women, housewives apparently, have found a comfortable seat and are actually knitting, pausing occasionally to glance out across the broad expanse of the River. Further along, down in the business section of the town, more groups of men may be seen. There seems to be an air of expectancy pervading all these groups. Suddenly there is a loud report as if caused by a long-drawn-out rifle shot; the knitters jump hastily to their feet, and the other watchers point towards the river. What is the reason for all this excitement? For the past six months the Yukon river has been ice-bound but now at almost any minute under the influence of the warm May sun, this ice is expected to break up and go out. As so much of the scattered population lives along the banks of a river, this going-out of the ice means much to everyone no matter whether he lives in Dawson; in one of the other small towns, or in some isolated fur-trading post; whether along the Yukon river itself, or along the banks of one of its numerous tributaries. It is at this period that there is much speculation and wonder as to what kind of break-up it will be. It is one of the main events in the calendar of every Yukoner. It is the gate-way leading

from winter to summer. It is the main topic of conversation wherever men—or women—meet; in the hotels, the cafes, stores and in the home, and the oft-repeated question "When is the ice going out?" is heard everywhere.

But why should such an event as this cause so much interest and concern?

I spent many delightful years in the Yukon, not only in Dawson itself but also in several of its smaller towns, as well as in some of the more isolated settlements, and during that time I have seen the Spring break-up on many of its streams. I have seen these northern rivers overflow their banks at the break-up, flooding homes and ruining furniture and other belongings: log cabins lifted bodily and carried away, and riverside docks and warehouses wrecked by huge cakes of floating ice, and there is always an ever-present fear that these things may happen anywhere. In Dawson after a comparatively mild winter, it may come as early as the first of May, or again after a more severe season, not before the middle of the month. No-one knows. There is usually but little noticeable difference in the appearance of the river for some days after the snow on the higher ground has melted. But this melting snow finds its way to the river, finally causing the ice to rise, and huge cracks will appear. Such a state may last for several days with little visible change in the appearance of the ice. Then suddenly there is another loud 'Cr-rack' and someone shouts 'It's going; the ice is moving!' There is a slight, very slight, almost imperceptible movement at first; then the whole frozen surface moves in one solid mass which, as it slowly gains speed, cracks and breaks and in a few moments the whole river becomes a tumbling, grinding, crushing mass of enormous ice-cakes six feet thick. The pressure of the current is tremendous, jamming much of the ice up on to the bank and tilting it on end. At this stage there is little to be seen of the muddy surface of the water except as it is churned up between the broken ice.

If the break-up meant simply that the ice was carried on un-interruptedly downstream by the current there would be little danger; but it rarely happens so.

I spent one winter in a small settlement about fifty miles below Dawson along the Yukon river. In this tiny outpost the 'break-up' was a matter of more than usual concern as all the cabins were quite close to the edge of the bank which was not more than six feet high and easily flooded in high water. We had all watched with much anxiety the actual break-up: we had watched the gradual and slow movement of the ice for an hour or more. Then there came a slowing-up and finally it stopped. We all knew what that stop meant. We knew that somewhere downstream the ice had jammed, either at a sharp bend in the river or where the channel narrowed between high banks. This was what we feared. Gradually, inch by inch, the water rose. "How long will the jam hold?" "Will the water run over the top of the bank?" These were the questions we anxiously asked each other. There wouldn't be much chance for our frail cabin homes if the ice came over the top of the bank. We watched with some anxiety; there was little else we could do. The water did actually run over in some of the lower places. Then—there was a slight movement which gradually quickened and then, to our relief, the whole body of ice slowly moved on, and we knew that the danger was past. Many of the huge blocks, many tons in weight, were left stranded as the water subsided, but we knew that so long as the ice kept moving there would be no cause for further alarm.

The danger however, does not always arise from ice jams: it is not always the ice that causes destruction to riverside property. A few years ago I was living in the small mining town of Mayo on the Stewart River, one of the tributaries of the Yukon. There had been an unusually heavy snowfall during the winter, but the spring break-up had passed off uneventfully. Shortly after the river had cleared, the weather turned abnormally warm with the result that the snow still remaining in the mountains near the source of the river melted more quickly than usual. In two days the river at Mayo was overflowing its banks and next day the still rising water was rushing through the main streets. All furniture of my own that I was able to move was placed up on tables or put

out of danger as far as was possible but finally my wife and I with a neighbour—an old widow of nearly eighty—were compelled to abandon the house and walk knee-deep to a nearby empty building, taking with us what food we could. After being marooned here for two days we succeeded in hailing a passing boat and were moved some little distance out of town, where, in company with another family of three, we took possession of a empty prospector's cabin. Here we stayed until the water subsided. Although this flood caused no actual loss of life, yet damage to homes and property was considerable. Broken articles of furniture with a summer's supply of firewood was scattered everywhere. In some homes in the low-lying areas the water had risen to the height of six feet, and it was weeks before many of them could be used again.

Serious though all this may be however, the annual break-up is not devoid of some pleasure-getting excitement. Practically every settlement along the rivers—from Dawson City itself down to the smallest Indian trading-post—has its Ice Pool. The guessing is of course on the exact time of the break-up. Many of the local merchants conduct their own pools. One will give a prize of a silver fox skin: a cafe may present a free Meal-ticket for a week and so on. Some of these are Minute Pools; with others the guessing may be on the hour. Two weeks or so before the expected time of the break-up a stout pole is erected near the middle of the river. This is connected by means of a rope to a clock in one of the nearby hotels, sufficient 'slack' being allowed in the rope to permit the pole to be moved some distance before it tightens enough to stop the clock. This is recognized as the official clock for all pools no matter by whom they are run. It is all conducted on very business-like lines. Each ticket purchaser has his guess entered on his ticket and again on the Stub: there is little fear of any mistake. The pools are closed well ahead of the time of the expected break-up. Nowadays the usual price of a ticket is one dollar. So in the case of an Hour Pool, if all tickets are sold—and they usually are—the prize for the winner would be twenty-four dollars. In a Minute



Pool the prize would be sixty dollars. The best-known pool in recent years has been conducted at Fairbanks in Alaska, Yukon's American neighbour. Here the winner must guess, not only the exact minute and hour, but also the exact day of the month. Tickets for this famous pool are purchased not only in Alaska and the Yukon, but also in the United States itself, as it is widely publicized. The reward here runs well into five figures, which, in the event of more than one correct guess, is divided. In contrast to all this, smaller pools are run in many of the isolated villages along the rivers. I once spent a winter at a small camp where the total population was nine, including two ladies, but we ran a pool in the orthodox manner, the local member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police acting as Treasurer. The prize was fourteen dollars only, but we had lots of fun over it. The interest in the various pools is universal. In Dawson itself, the instant the clock stops, the local fire whistle screams the news all over the town. Excited faces peer from windows and doors and on every side street leading to the river may be seen boisterous crowds of school children as well as adults all intent on one thing—to watch the ice go out. As further evidence of the general interest displayed, I have known trappers, before leaving for their distant cabins in the early winter, to give instructions to a friend to buy a couple of tickets in the Ice Pool.

In Dawson, during the last war, some of the bigger pools were conducted by the Independent Order of the Daughters of the Empire, (the I.O.D.E.) a well-known Canadian Women's Patriotic Association. In these a percentage of the receipts was devoted to War Relief, the winner taking the balance.

Almost everyone in Dawson buys at least one ticket, though there is nothing to hinder him from buying as many as he wishes. I remember one enterprising and optimistic young man who bought a ticket in every Minute Pool in town, with the same time on each ticket, and—he held the lucky number!

With both Minute and Hour pools the possibility of a win

may perhaps extend over several days. If, for instance, a guess is for the 27th minute, then there are twenty-four chances to win in every day the ice holds. So the interest is maintained over a longer period than with the Fairbanks Pool.

Although it is almost an unheard of thing for any hitch to occur in the proceedings I have recollections of one instance that brought disappointment to some ticket holders. There was the usual crowd of expectant onlookers on the bank at the time the ice did actually move and many watches were hastily snatched out of pockets. 'Hooray' shouted one of them, '11-36, that's my time.' But his triumph was short-lived. His face fell, for the ice stopped again; the pole had moved only a few feet, and not far enough to take up the slack in the rope to the clock. A few minutes later it moved again—and kept on moving, but this time of course, someone else had guessed the lucky minute.

On yet another occasion after the ice had moved some distance there was the usual excited rush to the clock, but it was still going! A careful examination through binoculars showed that the rope had been torn loose from the pole, and further inquiries revealed the fact that a huge piece of ice had been seen to turn over and tangle the rope, thus severing connection between the pole and the clock. On this unfortunate occasion, it was decided, after a consultation, that all ticket-holders might keep them until the following year and they would still be good.

For perhaps twenty-four hours after the first movement the river may run 'bank-full' of ice. There may be more than one jam although the danger to riverside property grows less as the water drops. Huge trees are carried down with the ice, uprooted when a jam is forced into the soft earth banks. One luckless individual had neglected to pull his boat out of harms way the preceding Fall. Unexpected high water in the spring carried it away. Fifty miles down-stream it was seen surrounded by ice, with no possible chance of getting out to it.

During another break-up I saw half-a-dozen bewildered

caribou being carried down-stream on the floating ice. They had evidently been attempting to cross at some point further up the river when the ice moved and were unable to reach the bank. What ultimately happened to them I never discovered, but I am afraid there would be little chance for them to make a successful landing; no living thing would stand any chance of surviving in that crushing unsteady mass.

In a few days the surface of the river will clear sufficiently to allow small boats to travel, although great care must be taken to avoid any stray ice if one is travelling up-stream. The force of the impact between a piece of ice weighing a ton travelling on a five-mile-an-hour current and a small motor-driven boat going in the opposite direction at, say, five miles an hour, is sufficient to be bad for the boat to say the least.

It is an interesting sight to make a trip on the river soon after navigation opens. Where the channel of the river narrows up between rocks or high banks it is no unusual thing to see the enormous blocks piled twenty feet high above the water. Under the influence of the sun these chunks often assume fantastic shapes as if some giant carver had been at work.

Contrary to expectations, the ice is not always a bluish-green. Much of it is white with the snow crystals. Again, ice that has been frozen to the bottom of the river in shallower places carries stones, gravel and earth embedded in it. Much of the cleaner and more solid blocks can be, and often are used for cooking and drinking purposes for a week or two after the break-up. This is indeed often the only means of securing clean water for many who live away from the towns, as it is quite impossible to use the muddy water from the river itself for some time after the break-up. Ice that may be necessary to use over an extended period during the warm summer must be cut in the early winter when it is only from one to two feet thick, and clean, clear and solid.

Usually by the end of May all signs of the ice have disappeared, and in a brief fortnight the transformation from winter to spring is almost a magical one. Under the warm May sun all Nature seems to awake as if in a hurry to make up for

lost time. Spring comes with a bound in these latitudes. One pleasant and noticeable feature especially to those living near a river, is the sound of the rushing water, as if it were glad once more to have thrown off its winter shackles. Welcome signs of returning life are seen and heard everywhere. The crocuses, those colorful harbingers of Spring, are already blooming on the hillsides; the willows are in bud; each day the warm air thrills to the sound of returning birds, and even those not-so-welcome little pests, the mosquitoes, are here again. Soon too, the familiar deep-throated whistle of the stern-wheel steamers will be heard once more booming their welcome as they come around the bend carrying their freight and passengers. Then we shall know that Summer is really here at last, and the Ice Break-up becomes yet another memory.

*Notes From A Yukoner's Diary*

# **A Year with a Fur Trader**

Written by Claude Tidd



A glance at a good map of Canada will show in the far north-westerly corner one of Britain's most northerly possessions known as the Yukon Territory, better known perhaps as the Klondike. It is bordered on the west by the American territory of Alaska, and on the north by the Arctic Ocean. By following the course of the Yukon river on below Dawson City one may discover the small Alaskan settlement of Fort Yukon at the point where the river changes direction and flows to the south-west. Here the Porcupine river flows into the Yukon. Three hundred miles upstream on the Porcupine lies the small Indian village known as Old Crow, the most northerly log-cabin settlement in the whole Yukon Territory. This isolated village at the time of which I write, was the home of some one hundred and fifty native Indians, a young English Church missionary and his wife, the fur trader, the married Royal Canadian Mounted Police corporal and his wife, a young Police Constable, together with a few white trappers.

In the spring of 1944 I was offered the post of manager of the trading post at Old Crow. Both my wife and I were accustomed to life in the northern Yukon. I had been a member of the Mounted Police for twenty-one years, twenty of which had been spent in the north. We had spent a year out in civilization in Vancouver in British Columbia, but were both anxious to get back to the old life, and the prospect of living amongst the natives once again sounded like going back home to us. We left the busy town of Whitehorse on the first leg of our thousand-mile trip by comfortable stern-wheel steamer and in a day-and-a-half reached the famous old town of Dawson, the centre of the Gold Rush days of 1898 and the early home of the poet Robert Service. Here we spent two or three days revisiting old friends and purchasing a few personal supplies for our new home. A further run of another day or so landed us at Fort Yukon in Alaska. From here the final run of about three hundred miles upstream on the Porcupine river was made by powerful motor-boat loaded with supplies for the trading-post. Six days later, after a more or less uneventful trip we landed at

Old Crow, rather relieved I must admit, to be able once again to stretch ourselves after our decidedly cramped quarters amongst the freight on the boat. The entire bank of the river was lined with natives all eager to greet the new 'Store man' and his wife. Not the least conspicuous among those there to welcome us were the Police corporal and his wife and the missionary and his wife, these two ladies being the only white women in the settlement. Twenty or more years before this, as a young member of the Mounties I had been stationed near here so there was much hand-shaking and greeting of old friends as well as getting acquainted with some of the younger set.

Getting into our new home was no simple matter; not by any means. My predecessor, who had owned the store for many years, was an old bachelor who had lived in the rear end of the log store building, a small room about fifteen feet by ten feet wide, the entire furnishings being an ancient wood-burning cook-stove; an equally ancient heating-stove; a kitchen table and a wash-basin. Into this we had to move with what personal belongings we had been able to bring with us, and manage our domestic arrangement as best we could.

From now until the end of October when navigation closes on the northern rivers, our boat made several more trips to Fort Yukon for supplies and we were able to ship in enough household necessities to make ourselves fairly comfortable for the long winter ahead of us. Fortunately I was able to secure a small three-roomed log cabin near the store and with the cheerful and able assistance of our young missionary who was an excellent amateur carpenter, and the Mounted Police corporal who very efficiently superintended the installation of a radio set, we were able to move into fairly comfortable quarters by the first week in November when it really began to get cold. There were new beds and bedding, a few comfortable chairs, a new wood heating-stove, and finally what I think was my wife's pride and joy, a new, up-to-the-minute modern wood-burning cook-stove, a thing of beauty indeed with its cream enamel back and shiny



fittings. Later on during the winter, not only did this prove most efficient but it evoked many gasps of admiration from the native women-folk, as well as more subdued remarks of approval from the few bachelor trappers.

In this latitude in winter, when it is no unusual thing for the temperature to register anything between forty and sixty degrees below zero for a week or more at a time, the question of heating is a vital and serious one. One of my first cares therefore was to have my supply of wood replenished, and it was here that I ran up against one of my first 'snags.' For many years there had been a large native population living at Old Crow: consequently the supply of dry wood—for cooking and heating purposes—in the immediate vicinity of the Post was becoming scarce and increasingly difficult to obtain. Each year it became necessary to go further afield to get what was required. Knowing the natives as I did I felt sure that I should have some trouble to get any of them to bring in what I knew I should need to last me for at least six months. They had plenty of excuses: they were anxious to be getting off to their trap-lines: they were already too late and didn't want to wait in Post any longer: or—the water was too low in the river to float a raft of wood downstream: or—they just KNEW there wasn't enough dry wood for miles handy to the river bank. Finally however, after some haggling over the price, which I had quite expected, and considerable discussion and mutterings amongst themselves, four of the young men decided to go. They set off up-stream, and in a few days they returned with a good raft of logs, enough to last me well into the following summer. Secretly I thought, as they carried the wood up the bank, they had well earned their money, as it is by no means a pleasant task breaking up and handling a raft, with ice running in the river, carrying the logs up a steep bank and piling it fifty yards inland.

I found the first short northern Fall, from September the first to the end of October an extremely busy time. The whole native population of Old Crow depend solely for their living on their fur catch: there is nothing else for them to do. Many of our Indian families had their trap-lines about a

hundred miles still further on up the Porcupine river. Most of these bought the bulk of their winter supplies at the store, enough to last them until the ice broke and navigation opened in the following spring. Many of them are more than a little improvident, and rarely does an Indian have enough money left in the Fall to pay cash for his winter outfit. It is therefore usual to allow them to take a reasonable supply of goods 'on credit.' I use the 'reasonable' advisedly here, because some of them will be inclined to take advantage of a new 'Store-man' and get as much as they can—on credit. As I was new to the business I knew that I should have to trust to luck to some extent, and hope that the fur season would be a good one.

In this district almost every trapper reaches his final destination by means of a small motor-boat. If there is a family, or if more than one travel together there may be an extra small boat or scow, which is securely lashed ahead and pushed upstream. Loaded with their outfits of flour, tea, sugar, rice, ammunition, tobacco and other essentials it is indeed an interesting sight to watch them as they set out on their four-day trip. There is the final mad scramble over the loaded boat to get the dogs—perhaps six or eight of them—securely chained: there is the tucking-in of the very small children likely enough, even at this season, to be bundled up in their cosy caribou-skin parkas: all this, to the more than probably accompaniment of many squealing babies. Yes, it is a typically native scene, essentially northern and 'backwoodsy' with an atmosphere not to be felt perhaps in any but the most remote places.

They are, for the most part, a happy and care-free people, and usually, so long as they have plenty to eat, they have few worries as to the weather they may encounter on their long trip home. If the weather turns too stormy, or at night, they tie up their boats at the nearest river bank and set up their tent. If they need meat for themselves or for their dogs, and it must be remembered that no matter how much 'store-grub' they have, they are never really content for long without meat, then the men will take their rifles and try their luck

in the woods while the women prepare the camp.

After the last of the up-river trappers had left, I soon learnt that this did not mean that I should have little to do. Many of the older men and women remained at the village all through the winter months and set their traps anywhere within a radius of fifty miles and make their rounds every week or so. Then in addition to the actual running of the store, there are, in a post like Old Crow, countless odd jobs to be done which I had to do myself owing to the difficulty of securing adequate and efficient help. One of these was the 'beaching' of the boat and heavy scow which had to be done after the last trip in the Fall, and before the ice starts forming in the river. With this unusual task, as with many others, I was lucky. With true Yukon willingness to help the other fellow, the Mounted Police corporal, who had had considerable experience in this work, took charge, and with my own efforts and with what casual help I was able to secure from the natives and white trappers, we managed, after a few strenuous days to have all our 'floating stock' hauled about a hundred yards from the water's edge, and, we hoped, safely beyond any possible danger of flood at the spring break-up. I might add that I breathed a deep sigh of relief when that job was over.

The next month or so was spent in more or less routine work with special attention to the preparation for the long dark winter months ahead. The store itself, built entirely of logs, had to be chinked with moss to make it as near weather-proof as possible. Extra doors and windows, known in the north as 'storm' doors and windows, had to be put into place. It is of course easily understood that with temperatures ranging anywhere to 40, 50 or even 60 degrees below zero, it is most essential to see that any used buildings are made as airtight as possible. I soon found out too that it does not necessarily have to be that low in temperature to be very uncomfortable. Not at all. We were about a hundred miles from the Arctic Ocean with not much in between to break the force of the biting winds which frequently hit us with considerable force. Then, if the thermometer registers only a

mere Zero, it meant Discomfort with a big "D" if a building had even the tiniest hole anywhere: those winds would be sure to find it.

So, just as it is in more civilized communities, Christmas was almost upon us before we realized it. This is unquestionably the most colourful time of the whole year amongst the natives, and a period of a great deal of merry-making. As early as mid-December, with typical native disregard of such problems as catching fur, the men and likely enough some of the women too from their remote traplines will arrive at the post. On a quiet very cold day the cheery jingling of dog-bells may be heard long before there is any sign of an approaching team. An excited voice, more than likely a childish voice will shout 'Dog-team' and within two minutes everyone in camp is out of doors and there is much hand-shaking and welcoming the travellers. Within a week practically everyone was in post, and from now until Christmas I found my hands more than comfortably full, buying fur and generally attending to their wants.

Perhaps one of the most serious considerations is the question of the meat supply. There is of course no butcher's shop: every man is both his own hunter and butcher and the meat is either caribou or moose which has to be hunted, cut up and hauled in to camp by dog-team. The choicest joints are cut up and saved for the Christmas feasts: the question of refrigeration presents no difficulties in these latitudes at this time of the year.

There is an atmosphere of much excitement everywhere, particularly in the store. A few days before Christmas my wife and I with the willing help of some of the younger women, dressed up the shelves and show-cases with festoons of brilliantly-coloured papers, candles of every imaginable hue, sparkling tinsel ornaments and other appropriate dressings, all drawn, I strongly suspected, from our own private supply. The girls entered into all this business with unbounded enthusiasm and much childish eagerness to the accompaniment of many 'O-o-ohs' and 'A-a-ahs' and 'We never see that kind before.' And I am quite sure that it was

all new to some of the smaller children, judging from their wide-eyed looks of bewildered astonishment. Unexpected catches of fur came to light in exchange for which extra supplies of tea, coffee, sugar and evaporated milk, with some luxuries such as canned peaches, canned apricots or other fruits were purchased in readiness for the expected feasts to come later. The women were thrilled with the inevitable coloured silk handkerchiefs for use as head coverings; the brighter the colours the more they were in demand. Also for the women there were bright woollen sweaters, stockings and gayly coloured dress materials. For the men there were fancy socks, ties, handkerchiefs, plenty of pipes, and—yes, believe it or not—plenty of cigarettes, though I admit that these latter were not all bought by the men.

And so our first Christmas Day at Old Crow finally dawned clear and bright with the thermometer down to thirty below zero. By eleven o'clock the church bell had called every available person in the village and the little log church was crowded, the men all grouped on one side of the aisle, the women on the other. The grown-ups in their best Sunday suits and new dresses; the bright scarves and handkerchiefs; the fancy beaded moccasins and mittens; many of the women with their babies on their backs; and the children with their caribou-skin parkas all made a never-to-be-forgotten sight in that little northern log church. As I was the only one able to do it, I had volunteered to play the tiny organ for the service. And HOW they all sang! What harmony was lacking was more than compensated for by the earnestness and enthusiasm with which everyone entered into the singing. They all enjoyed it so much, and there was no-one there to criticize. With much vigour we all sang 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful' and many other of the old tunes with which most of us are familiar. But I think that the picture that will remain in my memory for a long time is the one of that row of small children standing wide-eyed in front of the organ singing 'Jesus Loves Me.'

The week between Christmas and New Year's Day, and often beyond, is devoted wholly to merry-making. They are

all exceedingly fond of dancing. They sleep almost all day, but the entire village resounds all night with their stamping feet, the sound of the players with their fiddle and mandolin and their enthusiastic cries of childish delight. Every night is truly a genuine 'Old-Time Dance' and the Dance-Hall itself is indeed a never-to-be-forgotten sight. What does it matter if there is a broken pane of glass or two in the window? Or who cares if the door won't shut by a couple of inches or so? A little fresh air, irrespective of out-door temperature is blissfully ignored. In one corner the huge pot-bellied wood 'heater' roars out a cheery welcome and is usually surrounded, sitting cross-legged on the floor, by the old folks who do not dance, or the women with babies who may not always be able to join in all the fun. The younger ones will, when they want to sit, do so on wooded forms around the room. The bright dresses; the gay scarves and handkerchiefs of the women form a happy contrast to the soberly-dressed males who may be wearing a bright new tie, but most certainly will be wearing a pair of new hand-made, beaded skin moccasins. And last, but by no means least the crowning touch is added to this already gay scene by the scarlet serges and yellow-striped breeches of the two members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The popular dances are waltzes, one-steps, fox-trots and square dances, the latter being somewhat similar to our English Lancers. A substantial lunch is always served by the women about midnight. No dainty, light 'snack' is this either. Everybody is hungry, and the lunch is a real meal. After all, what *would* an Indian Dance be without something to eat? Many of the women are very good cooks and huge stacks of fresh caribou-meat sandwiches from the best 'cuts'; mountains of dough-nuts (real luxuries these!); real Christmas cake; an assortment of tempting pies with plenty of steaming hot coffee all disappear like snow before the spring sun, until one wonders if they will ever be able to dance again. But the evening's enjoyment would not be complete without at least two or three of their native dances. In this, the dance is started by one couple, the lady often selecting her own partner. On a clear space they

face each other, the women moving around in a circular movement; the man always facing her. Her step is a slow graceful one in time with the music: the man's step can be likened to a modified form of a 'step-dance,' and *how* he goes at it! Soon another women, steps up and continues the dance while the first one resumes her seat: then another man relieves his predecessor then yet another woman, and so on. Unlucky perhaps is the man who is allowed the floor too long; for him it is quite a strenuous performance and requires considerable 'staying power' to hold out for more than a minute or so. And *HOW* they perspire and enjoy it all, their usually stolid faces are wreathed in smiles, while the efforts of a specially agile male dancer, particularly if he can display a few extra-fancy steps, are greeted with much laughter and acclamations from the side-lines. Perhaps a final word should be added in praise of the 'fiddler' who is, without doubt the most important individual in the whole assembly. No 'music' sheets are necessary for him: he has a good memory, and all he needs in addition to this, is a good physique and good 'staying powers.' I well remember an old Scotch Canadian friend of mine—a hardened old veteran of the winter trails and trap-lines—who used to play all the local native dances until he was well over 70 years of age. His bow-hand was badly disfigured by axe cuts and his frost-bitten finger stumps could scarcely hold the bow, but his enthusiasm and his energy were boundless: he never 'ran out' of tunes, and could keep the most energetic crowd of native 'jig-gers' in the best of humour for hours.

And so the round of merry-making continues: just so long as there is someone willing and able to supply the music, just so long will they dance and make merry. By mid-January however, they rather reluctantly decide that they must return to their work and after a fresh outfitting at the store, they once again leave and the camp assumes its normal mid-winter comparative quiet.

Contrary to the general impression that it is always dark in these latitudes for at least three months; I must explain that although during the months of December and January

there is very little sunshine, yet as everything is entirely snow-covered, and so reflects what little sunlight there is, it is not actually as dark as might be supposed, and by the end of January the days are lengthening noticeably. As an instance of what little actual sunlight there is on the 21st of December, the shortest day of the year, I might explain that my wife and I have sat down to our mid-day meal with the sun just rising above a distant hill, and by the time we had finished, it was disappearing below the horizon.

During the next month or so outdoor activities have definitely slowed down, and there will be little fur coming in to be sold. Temperatures are still quite likely to drop very low, and at 50 below or worse, it is definitely NOT pleasant to be outside. But as the days rapidly lengthen in these latitudes, although there is but little warmth, yet it is more cheerful. By the end of March, the next general topic of conversation and interest to trader and trapper alike is the rat-trapping possibilities and the prospects for a good season.

About two or three days of dog-team travel to the north of the camp at Old Crow (it is not often that one speaks here of a place being so many miles away but—three days or 6 days as the case may be) lies a vast region covered by literally hundreds of small ponds and lakes and known locally as Crow Flats. This is the breeding-place of countless number of musk-rats, the catching of which constitutes the harvest of all trappers, both white and Indian of this district. These little animals are easily caught; no special skill is needed that may not readily be acquired in a few days. I have known old men and women of at least seventy years of age get together their food supplies, tent, stove and other equipment and set out on a trip of fifty miles to the Flats with perhaps only two small dogs hauling their toboggan. The trappers from up river all return to the Post to outfit anew for the Ratting season, and for a month the store is the scene of much renewed activity. In addition to the usual demands for such staples as tea, flour, sugar, etc., there is much to be purchased. Old traps must be examined and new ones bought—there is a big demand for heavy canvas to be used as covering for their



small canoes when the ice breaks on the lakes in May: then there are fur 'stretchers' to be bought—or made—.22 ammunition for shooting and a hundred and one other small articles, even including such seemingly unimportant things as tacks to fix the skins to the drying stretchers, as well as to be used in the making of their canoes. Nothing must be overlooked.

Each trapper has his own special district—his by right of continued usage each spring; his own private 'line' as it were, and although there is no law here to prevent him trespassing on another's domain, it rarely happens that there is any trouble due to this. One of our Old Crow trappers was a white man with a native woman wife and a family of nine boys and girls ranging in ages from a big buxom young woman of eighteen to an infant of one year. To transport such a family to a temporary home, with the necessary clothing, even by modern methods would be something of a concern. But to our trapper friend it was merely routine work and nothing to be worried over. Clothes, food, bedding, stoves, tents, rifles and enough dog-feed to last until trapping commenced; all this in addition to at least two of the youngest children who must ride, makes quite a respectable load to be moved over a winter trail by dog-team and toboggan. Not all at once of course, but in relays; enough of the essentials are taken on ahead, the tent set up and the camp prepared. Then home again and out with another load until everyone and everything is ultimately established at their destination which may take ten days.

During the earlier part of the season when the lakes are still ice-bound the rats are principally taken in traps, but later on when the ice has melted and there is plenty of open water on the lakes, most of the killing is done with a .22 rifle. Small canoes are constructed with a framework of green willow branches which is covered with heavy canvas and painted to make it waterproof. These canoes are about 10 or 12 feet long and just wide enough to sit in. This period is indeed the trappers' harvest and work goes on at high pressure. Everyone is busy: the women and older children are

often quite as expert at handling the flimsy canoes and a rifle as the men. The days are now 24 hours long, so there is no need to cease for lack of light. No more time is spent in resting than is absolutely essential, nor is there any need to hunt for meat. The rats are good food, usually very fat and tender though a stranger has to become accustomed to the usual 'gamey' flavour. The carcasses are skinned and the hides tacked on stretchers to dry and finally tied in bundles, and sacked ready for easy checking at the store. A lone worker is under some disadvantage at this time as he has every operation to perform himself, whereas a married man can devote his entire time to the actual trapping, his wife being equally expert at the other work as he is. The season is a comparatively short one, and closes in the Old Crow district on June 15th. The catch will of course vary considerably depending not only on the supply of rats, but also on the ability and industry of the trapper himself. A good lone worker may perhaps bring in five hundred skins; a family man anything up to two thousand. Prices will vary from year to year from fifty cents to three dollars a skin. By the middle of June all trapping equipment is taken to the nearest bank of the Old Crow river in readiness to float down to the Post. Usually a large canvas boat is built similar to the small ratting canoe but large enough to hold everything. And what a sight it is to see them land again at the Village: what a heterogeneous collection it is to be sure! Tents and toboggans, stoves, snowshoes and sacks of skins, bedding, chained dogs and crying babies that have been tucked away—all are now unloaded on the bank and the whole camp is again a scene of much hilarity and strenuous activity.

In the meantime although the village had been practically deserted for some weeks, I still found plenty to do. Although I was familiar enough with northern life and natives, having spent several years in similar isolated posts as a member of the Police, yet in my new role as a fur trader and storekeeper I had to view life in general from a different angle and there were many things to learn. The winter fur that has accumulated—mink, marten, lynx, wolf, coyote and fox—had to be

prepared for shipment, checked and sealed by the Mounted Police. Requisitions for supplies for the coming year had to be made out and in an isolated post like Old Crow such a matter calls for more serious thought and attention than would be necessary perhaps at a post within easier reach of the source of supplies.

Here at Crow, where almost every pound of goods has to be shipped a distance of over two thousand miles by coast boat, rail and river steamer, it requires no small care to see that nothing is omitted. For instance, shall we need twenty tons of flour during the summer or will fifteen be enough? Or again, how much .22 ammunition will be required: will three cases be enough with what we have left over? Many similar questions will arise. It would be little short of a disaster indeed to find ourselves out of flour, tea or sugar in the middle of March. It would be possible to ship in, say, half a ton by plane from Fort Yukon but freight charges even from there are equal to a shilling a pound.

The ice in the river usually breaks up in these latitudes about the middle of May and for a few days this is an anxious time as there is always some danger of the river overflowing its banks and flooding the immediate vicinity. Owing to the naturally milder temperatures in this month the melting of the snow causes the water under the river ice to rise: huge cracks appear due to the pressure underneath and in a few days the whole frozen surface of the river moves in a solid mass: more cracks appear and soon the entire surface of the river becomes a boiling, seething torrent with immense ice cakes floating down-stream, up-ending and turning over, crushing, grinding and breaking up. If all goes well and the ice continues to move there would be no need for alarm. The danger comes, however, from the possibility of the huge cakes, three to five feet thick and weighing several tons, jamming and causing the water to 'back up,' when the heavy pressure will lift and throw the enormous blocks on the top of the bank. In view of the possibility of the water itself rising and overflowing into the village, several available small boats are usually kept in readiness to move

anyone who may be threatened. Fortunately however, during my time at Old Crow, nothing more serious occurred than a few cakes of ice being tipped over on the bank: there were no serious jams, though one never knows when it might happen. We had a few anxious moments but each time the jam broke away below us and the danger passed.

The launching of our boat and scow, though not attempted until the actual danger of high water had passed, proved a somewhat arduous business. I managed to round up a few stray helpers—there usually seemed to be someone around—and between us we literally chopped a passage through the ice cakes to the water's edge, the river by this time having subsided to some extent. Here again, as in the Fall as well as on many other occasions, I received invaluable help from the Police corporal and the constable and after a few days, and with no series mishaps, we once again had all our floating equipment securely moored in its usual summer quarters half a mile upstream near the Store in readiness for the first trip of the season—six hundred miles return to Fort Yukon in Alaska. Once again I think I may unashamedly admit that I breathed another sigh of relief when it was over.

Finally what about our social life in this remote spot so far from the usual amenities of civilization? The only other white women besides my wife, as I have already said, were the young missionary's wife with her first baby, and the wife of the Mounted Police corporal. Much could be written on this perhaps, but briefly it appears to me that one either loves this kind of life for what it is, and has no wish to try life elsewhere, or on the other hand one dislikes it intensely. To me, there can be no half-way, lukewarm feeling about it. One can in the first place be as happy and contented here as anywhere else in the world perhaps, or on the other hand one can be infinitely miserable. In my own case, on two separate and distinct occasions after my retirement from the Police my wife and I have tried to make a home in civilization, but each time the 'Spell of the Yukon' proved too strong and we returned north. I have met many other Yukoners

who have had the same experience. Although the greatest friendliness existed in our tiny circle of three white families yet there was little actual visiting between us. Each of us seemed pleasantly and profitably occupied with our own affairs. With the single exception perhaps of the radio set our amusements were largely those of our making. We derived infinite pleasure from our radio programmes and usually had good reception from the large Western American stations. Occasionally, though unfortunately all too infrequently, we heard the voice of the B.B.C. I well remember the thrill we experienced when we first heard Big Ben's deep-throated voice, and the extreme pleasure we had in being able to hear, on two separate Christmases, the King's Speech from Sandringham. Neither of us were card players but we had a fairly good library of books of our own and read a great deal during the long winter months. And we were usually inundated with a satisfying variety of books, magazines and letters when the monthly mail came in by plane. We had a wide circle of friends throughout the north as well as in other parts of the continent, and our personal correspondence kept us both quite busy. During the spring and summer a study of the northern wild birds provided me with another unending source of pleasure. Finally I was a photographic addict of the most violent type and spent many pleasant hours with my camera and what little photographic work I was able to carry out in our small home.

We had our difficulties and troubles of course—who doesn't—but on the whole we enjoyed the life tremendously, and the memories of our experiences at Old Crow and in the Yukon generally, will, I'm sure give us much pleasure for many years.





