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B.C.'S BEST SAWMILL

by Tom Barnett

Sometime in the 1950s I found myself having coffee with a senior official of the B.C. Forest Service, whose duties carried him across the province, and two quite senior executives of major coastal forest companies.

As the conversation progressed the Forest Service man asked "Which is the most efficient sawmill in B.C.?" The company men suggested, in turn, various well-known major coastal mills. Each time the answer was "No." Something in the growing smile of the Forest Service man prompted an inspiration so I said "Roy Spur's mill at Giscombe?" The amused looks on the faces of the company men changed to surprise when the Forest Service man said "Yes."

Having more or less grown up with coastal sawmilling, I was somewhat surprised myself. I shared with my coffee drinking companions the ingrained belief that anything in the industry "east of the Cascades" was two-bit stuff, hardly worth counting. This view had been only peripherally offset by seeing the Giscombe mill in operation. What added to the surprise of the others was that I even knew of the existence of a mill at Giscombe. To them I was just "that CCF'er from Port Alberni" who represented Comox - Alberni in the House of Commons. But there had been a life before that.

At the turn of the 1940s I was with a lumbering outfit in the gold mining part of the Cariboo. We really were a two-bit outfit by coastal standards, but we did turn out some pretty good spruce lumber. As wartime demands on manpower and materiel pushed the Depression-prosperous gold mining economy into decline, the near-dormant forest products industry along the "Old Grand Trunk Line" to the north sprang back to life. I was moved to Prince George to look after opening a branch operation.

The "Old Man" bought some private timber and a bush mill out on the Summit Lake road, and we became a patron of what later became known as "planermill row" when there was only one little planing outfit next to the railway tracks, near the Nechako bridge. At the other end of the "row," near the Fraser, was Stroms sawmill - complete with its own planing facilities.

So, on some long-forgotten business I came to visit Roy Spur's mill at Giscombe. I was much impressed. It epitomized modernity!

A shotgun carriage moved the logs through a double-cut band headrig so quickly that the carriage crew changed off several times a shift, and some men couldn't stand to ride at all. It had the first gangsaw I had ever seen, steadily chuffing through two cants at a time. Most logs were on and off the carriage, with two slabs removed, in a wink. Edger, resaw and pony edger, mainstay of any big mill I had seen on the coast, seemed almost incidental to this operation.

Outside, a well-ordered yard had the capacity for air-dry piling a year's production. What came out of the sawmill one year went through the planermill the next. Anyone familiar with the difference in weight between green and dry spruce, traditionally sold FOB destination, can appreciate the savings in rail freight charges. Over near the planermill were substantial dry kiln facilities for use as required.

The planermill was something else again. What were then the latest in high speed machines were set up in tandem: first the rough dressing and then a final skimming to produce the ultimate sheen and smoothness. Of course all the planing stock had been cut scant, the product of precision equipment and slim saw kerfs. An extra board from every cant! No wonder Roy Spur's name was spoken with some reverence all along Canadian National's north mainline from Tete Jaune Cache to Terrace.

ROY SPUR GETS HIS COMEUPPANCE

By 1941 logging and sawmilling in the Prince George area was going all out. For bush mill operators the problem was not market but price. When custom planing and freight were deducted from the delivered price of dimension and shiplap the net was manageable but tight. Everyone was looking for a more lucrative outlet. An exciting prospect for one appeared from the U.S. Atlantic seaboard.

We had been receiving orders through an Edmonton broker. One day he advised us of a demand for scaffold plank. Would we be interested in a trial shipment of three cars?

The quoted price seemed the answer to a dream, but, as he explained, the specifications were very strict, and a rejected car after paying remanufacturing costs would net scarcely more than the freight bill.

Wartime shipbuilding had created an insatiable demand for scaffold plank. They were wanted in two sizes: 2 x 9 - 13 and 3 x 11 - 15 as rough-sawn spruce. No reference to the Pacific Lumber Inspection Bureau or any other grading rules, but descriptive specifications made it clear the equivalent of select structural was demanded (for rather obvious reasons). The thickness specifications were the toughest for bush mills: a maximum of 1/16 under and 1/8 over. After hashing it out, we decided that quality was not a problem and that a little extra time and care in sawing would be more than made up by the price. We agreed to ship three cars; and so did a number of other small operators. Our cars were accepted and repeat orders followed.

In the meantime, Roy Spur's famous mill at Giscombe had also accepted a trial order for scaffold plank and also noted the specifications on thickness. To ensure the exactness of every plank they were run through the planers on a hit and skip setting. All three cars were rejected! Rough sawn meant what it said - obviously for safety against the workmen slipping on the wood.

The news spread west to Prince George like wildfire. Roy Spur's shipment was REJECTED! Elaboration of the story was not hindered by the fact that Prince George at that time had the highest number of beer parlours per capita in the province and was the major weekend rendezvous in the "north."



EX-FOREST SERVICE VESSEL SQUADRON NEWS

Interested in seeing ex-Forest Service vessels? If so, plan to attend the 1994 rendezvous at Newcastle Island, off Nanaimo. It will be held from July 1 - 3.

Don't forget about those great historical photos that you have of Forest Service vessels! Arrangements have been made to receive, catalogue and store them as part of the squadron's archives at the Vancouver Maritime Museum. See the October 1993 newsletter for more details.

Enquiries regarding the squadron's archives should be directed to:

Mr. K. A. Morley
3470 Yellow Point Road
R.R. # 3
Ladysmith, B.C.
V0R 2E0



HISTORICAL NOTES

OUR FORESTS - OUR WEALTH

"I do not believe that the people of this province yet realize the influence of our forest on their livelihood. Time and again statistics have been presented showing that in the matter of employment, of government revenues, of car-loadings, of water-borne freight, and in many other ways, the forests far exceed every other natural resource in importance. Many of our agricultural communities would cease to exist if it were not for the farmers being able to earn money through work in the woods. Every year over \$300,000 is distributed along the CNR east of Prince Rupert for hewn ties and cedar poles alone. Just think what this means to the farmer and small storekeeper."

Chief Forester E.C. Manning addressing the Forestry Committee
of the B.C. Legislature, November 15, 1938.

DAVID DOUGLAS - FIRST NON-NATIVE DISCOVERER OF B.C. GOLD?

"In 1833 Douglas planned returning home through western Canada, Alaska and Siberia and he came up the Columbia to Fort Okanagan from which point he followed the Fur Traders' trail north, passing Osoyoos Lake in March of that year. While it is not pertinent to Osoyoos it is of interest to note that at the mouth of a stream near the head of Okanagan Lake, Douglas panned for gold and picked up sufficient with which to make a seal. This was the first discovery of gold in British Columbia and, was over twenty years earlier than any reported discovery elsewhere in the Province."

WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WAY

"Over thirty-five years ago, Porter Brothers, an American firm, put in a sawmill at Sidley, on Nine Mile creek which they operated for many years cutting many millions of feet of the best timber on Anarchist (Mtn.) which they exported to the United States. At that time rough lumber could be exported free of duty but a duty was imposed on the dressed article. To meet that situation Porter Brothers erected their mill straddling the International Boundary. The lumber was cut in the Canadian section of the mill and planed on the American side. The Great Northern Railway had a line in operation between Oroville, Washington and Nelson, B.C., during the years that the Porter mill was in operation and thus they had convenient transportation."

The above two items are from:

Fraser, Geo. J. 1953 (?). The story of Osoyoos - September 1811 to
December 1952. n.p. 212 p.



MORE ON THE 1948 KITIMAT CRUISE

by R.K. Vivian

Toward the end of the summer, four members of the cruising party were dispatched to Terrace. From there the upper Kitimat valley and contiguous areas would be more readily accessible. Even so, it would involve driving to Lakelse Lake, boating the length of it, and hiking a substantial distance on a good trail - skirting Onion Lake before reaching the Kitimat River. Obviously it was not the end of fly camping.

Believing in the old adage that a change was as good as a rest, Bill Bradshaw and I were not displeased at being selected as the compassmen. So, one fine August morning, we left Prince Rupert in a pick-up truck that had been written off by the Prince George Forest District (the equivalent of a region today) as being unreliable and unserviceable. Before the month was over we were to come to an identical conclusion. On one occasion we had an itinerant Forest Service mechanical inspector look over the truck. He concluded that only the horn was performing well enough to pass inspection.

Up front in the cab were the two cruisers, with Mickey Pogue, who did the driving because of his seniority. Room for the two compassmen was created among the packsacks, camping gear and assorted supplies in the open cargo box behind. To get to Terrace involved 90 miles of potholed, single-tracked gravel road. We made very good time nonetheless, largely because of the prevailing belief that if one drove quickly enough it was possible to fly over the potholes and avoid touching bottom. The sensation of being once again conveyed by a form of transportation capable of a speed greatly in excess of eight knots was nothing less than exhilarating.

I do recall commenting before we left Prince Rupert that if we had to ride in the open it would be nice if we could look forward to a shower upon our arrival in Terrace. The assurance was that we could look forward to more than a mere shower as the whole Skeena River would be at our disposal. It is unlikely that we pursued this option because, after three months on forest surveys, cleanliness was no longer one of our stronger virtues.

In any event, within a matter of hours we were relocated in downtown Terrace, sleeping on bough beds in our reflector tent erected in a clump of trees behind the Ranger Station. The rewarding part was its location - within convenient walking distance of the Silver Tip Cafe where we purchased our breakfasts and dinners on most days.

It was while we were based in Terrace that an opportunity materialized to experiment with supplying a survey party using weekly air drops. It seemed that the Protection Division was experiencing a fire season that did not require all the flying time secured by contract for fire suppression purposes. It was to be my good fortune to be assigned to the delivery end and not the receiving end since the experiment was to leave much to be desired.

There was very little time to give the matter much thought or get organized. We recalled that as kids we had constructed parachutes from four short pieces of string, a cotton handkerchief and a small weight. For the purpose at hand we used 54" squares of unbleached cotton, cotton clothesline and a carton of groceries for the weight. We could not have been overly-confident because each cardboard carton was generously bound with more clothesline to minimize the dispersal of the contents in the event of a hard landing.

Messrs. Bradshaw and McMinn were dispatched to the upper reaches of the Kitimat and a week later the first of a series of a least three air drops was undertaken. The first drop was made from a Central B.C. Airways Junkers, with its distinctive fuselage of corrugated metal. The subsequent weekly drops were made from a DH-2 Beaver. The significance of these events was not to be appreciated until years later. The pilot was Russ Baker, who would go on to establish Pacific Western Airlines. The aircraft was the first Beaver ever produced and after passing through the hands of two subsequent owners, by May of 1980 it was installed in the National Museum of Science and Technology in Ottawa.

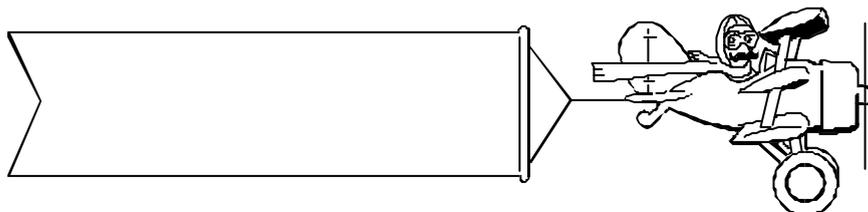
Russ Baker was very impressed with the performance of the Beaver, which had been acquired only that spring of 1948. His wife, who accompanied him on that particular day, during the course of conversation informed us that Russ was confident that "it could land on a puddle of spit."

The opportunities for riding in an aircraft were infrequent in those days so Bill Grainger and I looked forward to the break from cruising that these trips provided. We would meet the aircraft weekly at Lakelse Lake, take to the air, then locate Bill and Albert. Usually they were looking up expectantly from a gravel bar adjacent to the river. Since the packages had to be dropped through a small hatch in the floor of the cabin, upon the command of the pilot, one could only assume that each package had floated safely to earth on its makeshift parachute on each successive pass.

Unfortunately, as we later learned, only about half of the packages ever made a safe descent. The remainder plunged to the ground with a useless parachute streaming behind, to crash on the gravel bar, hang up in the alder thickets or even land in the river. Those on the receiving end were not impressed and were of the opinion that it was a most unsatisfactory manner in which to be kept supplied.

An amazing thing was that on the one occasion when we made an air drop to a topographic survey crew atop a mountain, each chute opened and floated down picture-perfect. This was in complete contrast to the air drops to our associates. That was a source of disappointment as the welfare of our friends was a greater concern and we further sought their favourable, rather than critical, comment. One could only assume that the difference in success was a consequence of a slower airspeed and greater distance to the ground when using an alpine meadow as a drop zone.

As it turned out, when we reunited, several incidents were foremost in our minds. One involved a resident female grizzly with a cub and the other a hair-raising crossing of the Kitimat River on a makeshift raft. The weekly ritual of filling all the cooking pots with the contents of split cans of fruit and being confronted with what was assuming the proportions of an inexhaustible supply of rye crisp were by comparison only minor discomforts.



THE MONETA AFFAIR

by W. Young

Part One of Two

Probably the best known lumberman during British Columbia's colonial period was Captain Edward Stamp. This was the same Captain Stamp who built the pioneer sawmill complex near present-day Port Alberni following the first major timber allocation by the Colony of Vancouver Island in 1860.

"The Moneta Affair" involves another of Captain Stamp's sawmills - the Hastings Mill on Burrard Inlet. It all started when the beautiful sailing barque *Moneta* entered Burrard Inlet to take on a load of lumber at Hastings Mill. In addition to Captain Turpin and his crew, the beautifully appointed ship was home to Captain Turpin's wife and her black maid, Susannah.

On May 26, 1868 fire broke out on the *Moneta*. In spite of efforts by the ship's crew and mill workers, the fire could not be contained. To save the ship, Captain Stamp's steam tug *Isabel* was ordered to tow the *Moneta* to the beach. There she was scuttled by mill workers using axes and augers.

Almost immediately it was alleged that the sawmill workers who were supposedly fighting the fire had broken into Captain Turpin's cabin, stealing liquor, expensive fittings and generally making off with everything that was moveable. Of course, the media picked up on the allegations as this report in the *Victoria Colonist* of June 1, 1868 indicates:

"It appears that while efforts were being made to save the *Moneta* from total loss from fire at Burrard Inlet, the men at work (on the dock) made free with the liquor and a disgraceful scene ensued. The men, overcome by liquor or avarice, or both, appropriated everything of value that could conveniently be carried and destroying in a most wanton manner what they could not take."

This news item was quickly followed by a letter to the editor in the June 3 edition of the same newspaper. It was signed "One of the Sawmill Men." Since the accusation of disgraceful practice also appeared in the *New Westminster Columbian*, our correspondent directly referred to that newspaper in his letter. In refuting the charge of disgraceful conduct by sawmill workers, he stated:

"I take it upon myself to inform the Editor of the *Columbian* (New Westminster) that no such acts were committed by any of the people belonging to the sawmill; they used every exertion to subdue the fire, and it was mainly owing to these men and the exertions of the crew of the *Isabel* that the *Moneta* did not sink in twenty-five fathoms of water.

I do admit that disgraceful conduct did take place, but by the crew of the *Moneta* only, who I am sorry to say, failed to do their duty on this trying occasion."

While this controversy raged in the media, an inspection of the beached *Moneta* revealed bad news. The June 10, 1868 edition of the *Victoria Colonist* reported:

“...the damage done to the vessel by the fire and by the scuttling, proves far more serious than anticipated.”

Now, matters became even more strained when, to the disgust of the local shipwrights, a decision was made that the *Moneta* would undergo temporary patching only in Burrard Inlet. Full repairs would be done in San Francisco. Many thought that the *Moneta's* owner simply wanted the vessel to reach San Francisco, anticipating that an inspection by the insurance company would call her a “write-off” - with due financial compensation of course.

While this debate was going on, a dispute arose concerning salvage costs. These were incurred by Captain Stamp's *Isabel* and his sawmill workers in fighting the fire, along with the beaching of the *Moneta*. Captain Stamp submitted a salvage bill of \$10,000. This was rejected by Captain Turpin and the owner of the *Moneta*, who then offered \$3,500 in compensation. This counteroffer was, in turn, rejected by Captain Stamp.

Captain Stamp appealed to the Admiralty Court. The *Isabel* was sent to Victoria to “fetch the sheriff” in order to arrest Captain Turpin and the *Moneta*.

While the *Isabel* was away from Burrard Inlet, Captain Turpin and his patched-up *Moneta* decided to make a run for it.



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