British Columbia
FOREST HISTORY NEWSLETTER

JAMES H. PARKIN - PORTABLE SAWMILL PIONEER
by Tom W. Parkin

The city of Cranbrook (incorporated 1905) has long been the primary distribution centre for the East Kootenay, and lumber was its earliest raison d'être. The heyday of logging was the mid-1920s when its population is estimated to have reached 3,200, but decreasing accessibility to timber and frequent forest fires soon reduced the annual cut. In the surrounding region, large mills, often with their own satellite communities – even their own railroads – began to close. And what local economics didn't change, the Depression soon did.

Most such mills produced finished lumber, but a parallel market existed, often consisting of seasonal workers who worked in bush mills producing railroad ties, poles and cordwood. Such small mills added strength to the economy in that a larger proportion of their cash flow was distributed as wages than was the case for any other wood product.

The heyday of the tie business in British Columbia extended from 1920 to 1929, with production usually over 3 million, and peaking at 3.8 million in 1921. In 1933 it had dropped to less than half a million.

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In 1929, tie output for the B.C. southern interior was 1.2 million pieces, comprising 10.3% of the dollar value of that region's total timber operations. The *B.C. Lumberman* lamented the state of the market, but maintained its perennial expression of hope for improving prices and production by 1930. Better times didn't come, of course.

But despite low demand and low commodity prices, there was money to be made. Producers began to experiment with ways to maintain profits despite low commodity prices. The 1930s became a decade of paid-by-the-piece operators, usually cutting ties for the Canadian Pacific Railway or lumber for planing mills and remanufacturers. The C.P.R. had ongoing need for replacement wood for trestles and ties, so formed a Tie and Timber Branch to run its logging and milling operations. Under the management of Edgar S. Home, it also let contracts to independent lumbermen.

One of these was James (Jim) Herbert Parkin, an owner/operator from Cranbrook. He and his extended family were employed continuously in this industry from 1927 to 1942 – using a portable sawmill. Such mills played an important transitory role between the end of the logging railroads and the use of trucks as movers of logs to mills.

Jim Parkin owned or managed several stationary mills in East Kootenay. By 1923, he owned a steam-driven mill at Ta Ta Creek, northwest of Kimberley. Horses pulling vehicles called "Big Wheels" were the primary method by which such small mills brought timber to their saws. They hauled logs suspended below their axles, and could be used on slopes as steep as 25% -- far beyond the agility of railway locomotives.

Big Wheels were remarkable devices, and well suited to the gyppo logger. Simple, functional, and inexpensive, they raised logs so grit was kept out of bark crevices (which could dull or damage saws), and they reduced friction when dragging.

There was no braking system for some styles of Big Wheels. The teamster walked alongside his horses, and if the team had to run to keep ahead of their load on a slope, he did likewise. Horses were frequently killed in runaways. During the 1920s the use of animals was largely superseded, however. Crawling tractors had been in use for decades by this time, and competing in the growing market for logging business, the Caterpillar Tractor Company offered machines especially equipped for logging.

Jim Parkin's first purchase was a 10-ton Caterpillar in 1926. Later he also bought new gas Cat models 60 and 30. The iron horsepower displaced the animals and the wheels they drew, and coincidentally seemed to precipitate Jim's thinking about how to work other timber limits. By this time, the power of such "portable" engines had become sufficient to drive small saws, and soon they out-maneuvered their steam-driven predecessors in the woods.

Toward the end of 1926 Parkin's crew tore apart the Big Wheels and used the wide iron tires as runners on the bottom of log skids. These logs formed a foundation for an Oxford mill which was alternately belt-driven by his 10-ton 70-H.P. gasoline Cat, or pulled by it to new locations.

Though portable mills were in use elsewhere in B.C., Parkin's idea predates by several years any receiving remark by the province's primary trade publication. A number of manufacturers were advertising portables in the 1920s (E. Long of Orillia, Ontario; Weir Machinery of Vancouver, B.C.), and Cranbrook Foundry was producing custom mills for local customers by 1930. However, Parkin's design is credited as being the basis for virtually every portable mill subsequently operating in the East Kootenay.

Bill Parkin worked for his uncle Jim for 22 years as a cat skinner, mechanic and foreman:

"Years ago, you skidded everything you could reach with horses. Well, then you moved the mill. With the Cat. It was on runners 55 feet long. Shod with half by six inch (iron) shoeing. And that was the first lumber mill. He had everything on it; head gear, and tie trimmers and all this kind of stuff."

"Stuff" included an edger, necessary to make smooth sides on boards.

"Flexibility to meet the variety of uses to which the mill was applied was the keynote of the design, with the carriage constructed for cutting ties, lumber, or a combination. Operators followed the same basis, and in cases where lumber was being cut, the mill was designed as a single unit with edger and cut-off saw. In a second case, it was found advantageous in moving through timber to build the mill and edger in separate units. The Sash and Door applied this in their operations and departed from the established precedent of moving their mill with tractors, when they installed a hoist on the frame of the mill and used snatch-blocks for moving with power supplied by the mill unit" (Nancy Miles, *Cranbrook Courier*, 1938).

Jim Parkin didn't conceal his experiment from competitors. Nephew and employee John R. Parkin remembered the Cranbrook Sash and Door examining the family operation. The Sash and Door subsequently adapted two units for lumber production on Baker Mountain at Cranbrook (where John later worked). The C.P.R. Tie and Timber Branch soon had six portables of their own, and the Cranbrook Foundry eventually marketed their own design, called a "Standard," having done many adaptations for inventive operators.

Indeed, friend, fellow bachelor and business competitor Pat A. McGrath built a portable mill right in Parkin's mill yard at Fairmont Hot Springs, B.C. Perhaps Parkin's confidence came from knowing he had the largest mill (able to take 38-inch logs as opposed to the standard 32 inches), and possibly from his efficiency. Bill Parkin recalls:

"We got contracts for a hundred thousand ties a year. And then, we would finish our contract, lots of times, and help somebody else finish up theirs. One time, the Crow's Nest [Pass Lumber Company] – they were loggin' same locality we were. They were 40,000 ties short on their hundred [thousand], when the time was pret'near up. So we took that contract from them – 25,000 ties. Those 25,000 ties, the average, I think is 520 ties a day."

To minimize production costs, a plant is operated by a sawyer and his helper, who manually move logs along the infeed deck, onto the carriage, and through the saw, and the tail sawyer and his helper, who move and stack the ties and discarded slabs cut from their sides.

Overall, such an operation would employ 20 men, and sometimes their families, who needed accommodation. Parkin first set up his portable to cut Douglas-fir in the Columbia Valley across from Fairmont Hot Springs. He took over nearby abandoned ranch buildings for housing, an office and shops in the spring of 1927. Bill Parkin recalls those years of labour:

"Oh yeah, it all hadda go out by rail. There was no big trucks them days, you know. When he first started at Fairmont, we went back into the bush about – well three miles I guess, was the furthest. There was no way of gittin' your ties out of the bush, only usin' the Cat that you were usin' to power your mill.

"So we bought three Athey wagons. They've a track on the back, and wheels on front, you see. They're supposed to be 10-ton wagons. I spent all my Saturdays and Sundays haulin' ties out of the bush! I never got a Saturday or Sunday off. It was all just straight time, you know."

In July of 1931 a large forest fire burned 14 800 hectares up the west side of the Rocky Mountain Trench – it started near the present-day airport near Kimberley and went north to Dutch Creek. Canal Flats was evacuated, but the wind changed at the last hour, and only a few homes on the outskirts of town were lost. Parkin's crew helped fight it, but the fire didn't burn out until fall. The Forest Branch wanted to get that timber out "before the bugs got it." Thus the mill crew moved to the so-called "Black Camp," above what is now locally called Thunder Hill.

In 1933, the mill was moved again, this time to Mud Creek, south of Canal Flats. Bill Parkin recalls: "We put up just a rough camp. You could build a bunkhouse in a day. We built it outta what we used to call a snow fence – the side lumber off the ties. Maybe 15, 20 per cent of it would be edged, you see. It would be square, but most of it still had the bark on it. And we put up a frame, and stood that all on end, and with two ply of [tar] paper in between it, that was a bunkhouse.

"Heck, I always built a shack for myself, too. Oh, I say for myself – after I got that foreman job, the crew built my house. It'd only take a coupla days to build one of them things. The only dressed lumber in them was the floor! And the doors. The rest was all rough lumber. They weren't too bad. We didn't notice the cold so much, you know."

Here the crew cut ponderosa pine, fir and tamarack. Bill Parkin: "When we first moved onto that limit, they [the C.P.R.] wouldn't take pine for ties, so we left all of them. Then they changed their mind as long as you pickled [creosoted] them. But they changed their mind after a year and a half. They would use pine in sidings, but not on curves, as the wood was so soft the spikes would pull out."

Nothing was wasted. Even the slabs cut from the logs was hand-loaded into boxcars and shipped to the Prairies for use as snow fence along the C.P.R.'s rights-of-way. Payment was $100 per boxcar, loaded.

"With them little mills that Jim had, it was all contract work," says Bill Parkin. "It had to be. We were puttin' number two ties, per 32 cents; number one, 42 cents; we were puttin' them in the car for that! Plus payin' expenses. You had to know where you were standin', you see. So we run all through the Hungry Thirties, and never missed any time at all."

Despite narrow profit margins, Parkin managed to stay in business and attract good workers. Success in part depended on retaining men by having a good cook. Nephew Dave Parkin was 16 or 17, and a flunky at that time: "We had the best food money could buy. We couldn't pay much, but old 'Monk' [Albert Urbanks] was one of the best in that country. He used to cook for Otis Staples." Staples Lumber Company was formerly a large operation at Wycliffe, where Jim Parkin likely met Urbanks while managing their sash and door factory. It was abandoned in 1927.

By the late 1930s, J.H. Parkin was prospering. Earlier in the decade, diesel engines had been added to tracked tractors and were shown to be cheaper to operate than their gasoline contemporaries. In 1937, Parkin bought two new diesel Cats: a D-8 to power the mill and a D-6 for skidding. The D-8 became internationally synonymous with power – it weighed 53,665 pounds and developed 113 horsepower.

In 1939, their timber limit exhausted, the Parkins moved to Donald, an abandoned divisional point of the C.P.R. mainline. They ordered two flatcars. On one they raised high sides and loaded all the equipment, including the mill, minus its runners. On the second, they loaded three Caterpillars. The latter car was known to be overloaded, but they hoped to avoid the expense of a third.

Hearing that a C.P.R. inspector was due the next morning, they rose early to take one machine off and hide it in the bush… then loaded it again after he left. Fortunately, the journey to Donald was without incident.

Donald lies on the Columbia River, and the ingenuity shown by the mill men to solve two problems at this site demonstrate the ingenuity, risk-taking and resolve which made their enterprise successful.

Some of the timber limit was on the opposite side of the wide river. To reach it, they waited until winter, when they built a bridge of logs and four-inch planks on top of the ice, held in place by two cables fastened in either embankment. For some reason, their departure in the spring of 1940 was delayed, and the ice began to break up, threatening to take the bridge with it.

Bill Parkin: "Jimmy Crowe was driving the Chev 'Maple Leaf' across with the D-8 motor on the back when the deadman [a buried log to which the cables were attached] pulled out behind him. He opened the door, but kept on comin'." The bridge drifted downstream, still attached to the side he was headed too. Crowe made it safely with his truck, but the incident left 3,000 ties, the mill and the D-6 on the far side of the river.

So they tried to pull the bridge back with the winch of the Cat, but at a certain point the current caught the bridge and began pulling the Cat backward to the river. Dave Parkin was forced to hurriedly cut the cable with an axe.

Then bushman Gilbert St. Amant had an idea. He had recently worked on the Big Bend Highway, and had constructed reaction ferries on that route. These are cable-stayed, non-motorized ferries which use the power of the river to propel themselves. They agreed to try the idea.

Cable was obtained from an oil well in Alberta and strung across in the air. A trolley was hung from it, with two lines hanging down to a raft which they built of dry logs. In this manner they floated the remaining equipment back to the railroad side of the river, though admittedly, the raft was submerged under the weight of the D-6. The mill itself was "swum" across, floated by its log runners.

Ownership of this family operation passed when Jim Parkin died in 1942, but it was nearly the end of the portable mill era as well. By then, the trend was back to plants centralized near larger communities, and a reliance on trucking of logs. This change was largely facilitated by new vehicle technology, and the allowance of log transport costs as a factor in stumpage charged by the Forest Branch.

Jim Parkin is buried at Golden, and most who worked with him are gone too. But the portable mill operators of the East Kootenay may claim some credit for the survival of their industry during the lean years of the Depression and the invigorated position which lumbering occupies in that region today.

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NEW PRESIDENT OF THE FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY

Steven Anderson has been elected president of the Forest History Society, headquartered in Durham, North Carolina, effective June 7, 1997. He succeeds Harold K. Steen, who held this position since 1978.

Anderson earned a B.Sc. degree in forest management from Rutgers University in 1977, an M.Sc. in forest soils from the University of Washington in 1979, and a Ph.D. in forest economics from North Carolina State University in 1987.

Since 1987, Anderson has been on the forestry faculty at Oklahoma State University. He began as assistant professor of forestry and state extension forester; as of 1995 he has been professor of forestry and program leader for the extension forestry, wildlife, and aquaculture program.

Anderson has received many awards for his educational and outreach activities, and he has been successful in attracting numerous grants in support of those activities. He has authored or co-authored 90 publications and is a member of the Society of American Foresters' Council.

BOOK REVIEW: "HOME FROM THE HILL – THREE GENTLEMEN ADVENTURERS"
by Geoff Bate

Peter Murray researches the life and times of three men, Warburton Pike, Clive Phillipps-Wolley and Martin Grainger. All three were born and raised in England. They arrived in British Columbia independently but they all knew each other and were involved in joint business ventures. They made a lasting contribution to British Columbia history.

Pike published two books based on his wilderness expeditions, Phillipps-Wolley published numerous articles in his tireless promotion of British Columbia in England, and Grainger was the author of a famous and popular novel about early B.C. logging.

Warburton Pike and Clive Phillipps-Wolley arrived in B.C. in search of adventure in the mid-1880s. Martin Grainger, after graduating from university, arrived in 1897. All were involved in the Klondike gold rush. Pike, enlisting the aid of British investors, commenced to build an 80-mile railroad from the Stikine River to Dease Lake. This failed but lead to the development of the Casca Trading and Transportation Co., of which Phillipps-Wolley was one of the financial backers. In 1898, Grainger and a partner, having run out of money before getting to the Yukon, were hired by the Hudson's Bay Company to row a scow from Dease Lake to Lower Post. Grainger was then hired by Pike to cut mine timbers. Pike, with Phillips-Wolley, at that time, were developing a mine at Thibert Creek, near Dease Lake.

All three men left the north in the fall of 1899. Pike and Phillips-Wolley returned to Saturna Island and Victoria, respectively, and Grainger went to South Africa to enlist in the Boer War. Pike remained in British Columbia until 1915 when he felt a compelling need to assist in Britain's war effort and found he was too old to enlist in the Canadian armed forces. He died in England that same year.

Phillips-Wolley settled in Victoria and undertook various occupations including being appointed B.C.'s sanitary inspector and, briefly, acting editor of a Victoria newspaper. He successfully invested in real estate and was involved in many business opportunities. On two occasions he ran for election in the provincial legislature but was never elected. He died at the age of 65 in his home at Somenos, just north of Duncan, in 1918.

Grainger returned to B.C. in 1901. He worked in logging camps on the coast until 1908. He then moved to Victoria and soon thereafter wrote "Woodsmen of the West," undoubtedly his best-known accomplishment. He undertook any job available to him, from road labourer to mathematics teacher. This was followed by his appointment as secretary to the Fulton Royal Commission on Forestry in 1907. After the creation of the Forest Branch in 1912, Grainger was appointed Chief of the Records office. He was appointed Chief Forester in 1916. He resigned this position in 1921, and from then on was involved in the lumber industry. He died in 1941 at the age of 66.

These men shared a love of the outdoors and a great interest in adventure and exploration. They also had a strong commitment to their adopted province, British Columbia. This book is recommended to anyone interested in our history during the early part of this century.

Murray, Peter. 1994. Home from the hill - three gentleman adventurers. Horsdal & Schubart Publishers, Ltd., Victoria, B.C. x + 214 p. ISBN 0-920663-30-3.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE
Geoff Bate

To meet the need for increased accommodation and warehouse space after World War II, the Forest Service constructed the "Cape Cod" style buildings at most Ranger Stations throughout the province. In the early 1950s I asked a senior forester from Victoria why this type of building was selected. He said that the wife of the Chief Forester, C.D. Orchard, came from the east coast and had a sentimental attachment to this architectural style. All were painted white with green trim and were easily recognizable.

A three- or four-car garage and a small fuel shed were added and, in more isolated areas, accommodation for staff as well. When district staff increased in the late 1960s and 1970s an office was built and the office/warehouse became the warehouse.

In the late 1970s the Forest Service went through a major reorganization. The position of Ranger was done away with and larger Forest Districts under the direction of a District Manager were formed. While Vancouver Island once had ten Ranger Districts, it now has three Forest District offices and some sub-offices. The old Ranger Stations have been sold or taken over by other agencies.

Vern Hopkins was a Forest Ranger at Beaverdell, Invermere, Lumby and Dawson Creek and retired from the Forest Service while working in the Protection program at Prince Rupert. He recently purchased his old Ranger Station at Lumby. While other developments are taking place on the property, he plans on making sure that the old hip-roofed office/warehouse building remains an integral part of the complex.

This got me wondering about the status of other old Ranger Stations around the province. I would ask that our members determine the current ownership or use of the old stations in their areas and advise me of your findings. We could summarize and publish this information in the newsletter.