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**CUTTING UP THE FAR NORTH
By John Parminter**

The early economies of northern B.C. were based on fur and gold, as witnessed by the Hudson's Bay Company establishing trading posts near what is now Fort Nelson in 1805 and at Lower Post, Dease Lake and Telegraph Creek by the mid-1800s. Other than the First Nations peoples, relatively few ventured through the far north except to explore, trap, prospect and sometimes homestead. Gold was discovered in 1873 in the Dease Lake area and this attracted the first significant wave of outsiders.

The first concentrated utilization of B.C.'s northern forests resulted from the Yukon gold rush of 1897 - 1898 when tens of thousands of treasure seekers headed for the Klondike. The majority of those who made it over the Coast Mountains in the fall of 1897 overwintered alongside Lindeman Lake and Bennett Lake, in that odd chunk of B.C. between the Alaska panhandle to the south and the Yukon border to the north.



Recycled paper

Starting at tidewater in Dyea, Alaska, the Chilkoot Trail ended at Lindeman Lake and the White Pass Trail from Skagway, Alaska ended further downstream at Bennett Lake. A community of more than 30 000 people was soon established and strung out for 96 km from Lindeman City, B.C. to Tagish, Yukon.

This throng occupied the largest tent city in the world and since the area was at the headwaters of the Yukon River, the most important item on everyone's agenda was construction of a craft with which to float downriver to the goldfields in the spring of 1898. Timber was felled and primarily whipsawn in hundreds of sawpits to produce ribs and planks for boat construction. Additional timber was used for tent frames, cabins, sleds and firewood. Much of this activity was centred around the north end of Lindeman Lake and the south end of Bennett Lake, near the best timber. The white spruce and lodgepole pine forests of the area were largely depleted.

A few small sawmills were broken down, transported over the Chilkoot Pass piece by piece and then set up at Bennett Lake and vicinity. Typically they were powered by a five-horsepower steam engine and could handle logs up to 15 cm in diameter. The rough lumber was sold to the eager boatbuilders for \$40 a hundred board feet.

A total of 7124 boats carried the thousands of people and 13 600 tonnes of foodstuffs from the two lakes and on to the Yukon River during the 48 hours following breakup on May 29, 1898. Mixed in with the assortment of boats were small and large rafts and scows. The largest of these were most often laden with horses, oxen, hay and other provisions. Ten days later the boats started to arrive in Dawson City, more than 800 km distant.

Not far from Bennett Lake, gold was discovered in the creeks above Atlin, B.C. in July of 1898. When word leaked out, many construction workers building the White Pass and Yukon Railway from Skagway, Alaska to Whitehorse, Yukon walked off the job and headed for Atlin, taking most of the company's picks and shovels with them. After the line was completed on July 29, 1900 the Atlin area was easily accessible from the White Pass and Yukon Railway at Carcross, Yukon and then by lakeboat down Tagish Lake to the Atlin Short Line Railway at the eastern end of Graham Inlet. This, the shortest commercial railway in Canada's history, terminated on the western shore of Atlin Lake, with final access to Atlin being by another lakeboat.

In 1899 there were 3000 prospectors in the Atlin area. Most were working the best gravels along a 3 km section of Pine Creek, east of town. More than 4700 metres of sluices were built in that year alone, resulting in the removal of 1.1 tonnes of gold worth \$800,000. Forest utilization was purely local, with small mills producing rough lumber. At the start of the Atlin gold rush two sawmills were established and they worked steadily through the winter of 1898 - 1899. Rough lumber sold for \$150 a thousand board feet.

A building boom resulted in two more sawmills being constructed and by mid-April of 1899 all four were running night and day, cutting lumber to meet the demand. Another mill, located two miles down Graham Inlet on Tagish Lake, cut ties for the Atlin Short Line Railway and provided lumber for construction of a mine on the Taku Arm of Tagish Lake.

Atlin soon included several hotels, saloons and restaurants, six general stores, a hospital, an opera house and the two lakeboats. All of this construction, plus the inevitable structure fires in the town during 1900, 1905 and 1914 produced a constant demand for lumber. The nearby settlements of Discovery and Surprise Lake added to the demand as they relied on the Atlin sawmills.

Since this timber harvesting and sawmilling was going on without the blessing of the government, the Gold Commissioner and Government Agent - Joseph Dee Graham - threatened to shut down the mills in 1899. This did not occur, likely in recognition of the need for timber to support the mining industry and the growing town. The Whitford and Craig report, published in 1918, noted that stands of less than 2000 board feet per acre were being harvested for local consumption in the Atlin area and processed by no less than seven sawmills.

Six sawmills operated around Atlin during World War I, in connection with gold dredging companies, producing planks for flumes and other necessary construction. The lone commercial mill at Atlin obtained its timber from a 5 km stretch of lakeshore, to a distance of 800 m inland. Logs of 60 cm in diameter apparently were standard in the Atlin mills at the turn of the century. At least one sawmill operated as late as 1952 and employed a fair number of the local native Tlingit population.

After the gold rushes subsided, the north was left only slightly more populated than before. Several decades later there were, in addition to the native population, only 300 full-time residents in Atlin, 120 scattered from Telegraph Creek to Lower Post and less than 100 people around Fort Nelson at the time the Alaska Highway was completed in 1942 (although between 1942 and 1946 approximately 2000 U.S. soldiers were stationed there).

Prior to construction of the Alaska Highway, Fort Nelson was accessible only by a winter sleigh road from Fort St. John or by summer navigation on the Mackenzie, Liard and Fort Nelson rivers from Fort Simpson in the Northwest Territories. A pack trail went south and west from Fort Nelson. After completion of the Alaska Highway, access to the northeastern part of B.C. changed dramatically and supplies flowed north with much greater ease in all seasons.

The B.C. Forest Service examined the forest resources of the north in 1944, covering 10 million hectares at a reconnaissance level. This was in response to an initiative of the Canadian and United States governments called the North Pacific Planning Project. That project included Alaska, the Yukon, the western portion of the Northwest Territories and parts of northern B.C. and Alberta – and examined the natural resources of each region.

The B.C. Forest Service report summarized the tree species present - their silvics and distribution - and discussed the extensive fire history of the north. The area occupied by different age classes of timber and non-forested cover such as scrub, barrens, swamps and water was summarized. Estimated merchantable timber volume was 4.3 billion board feet but it was concluded that utilization would be for local needs only.

The abundance of timber in the central and southern Interior and the smaller size of the northern trees ensured that hauling logs any distance out of the north was uneconomical. In any case, a link with the central part of British Columbia was not made until 1952 when the Hart Highway connected Prince George to Dawson Creek. One of the main concerns of the Forest Service at that time was fire protection in the north, in light of the considerable fire history and the difficulties of access, even with the Alaska Highway in place.

Others with different interests viewed this new northern access route as an opportunity to study the natural history of the area. Dr. Hugh M. Raup, a noted professor of botany from Harvard University, reported on the vegetation, ecology and agricultural possibilities along the Alaska Highway from Dawson Creek, B.C. to Whitehorse, Yukon in 1945. Another botanist, Mary Gibson Henry, had previously explored the north by horseback during the summers of 1931 to 1935 and in doing so located the Liard River Hot Springs and collected many plant specimens from the Northern Rocky Mountains. Mt. Mary Henry, just east of Stone Mountain Provincial Park, is named for her.

The northeast corner of the province now has approximately 6500 permanent residents, 80 percent of them concentrated in Fort Nelson, the only incorporated community. Approximately 1000 more temporary residents arrive there during the winter logging and natural gas drilling season. The smaller settlements in the region are Prophet River, Steamboat, Toad River, Muncho Lake, Lower Liard River and Fireside and provide tourist services and highway maintenance.

Westcoast Transmission constructed a natural gas processing plant near Fort Nelson in 1964 and about the same time Fort Nelson Forest Industries began forest harvesting operations. In 1968 Cattermole Timber Ltd. built the Fort Nelson Forest Industries sawmill. The BC Rail line reached Fort Nelson in 1971, resulting in expansion of the local forest industry. The Tackama and Tacfor mills started operations in 1973. In 1979, Omineca Enterprises moved its mill from Mile 238 of the Alaska Highway to Fort Nelson.

The Tackama operations, now part of the Slocan forest products group, consist of a plywood plant and a stud sawmill. The plywood operation produces spruce and aspen sheathing for home construction, as well as sanded aspen plywood for furniture and paint grade applications. The sawmill produces studs for domestic and export markets. Tackama employs 400 people and produces 280 million square feet (3/8" basis) of plywood, 120 million board feet of lumber and 100 000 bone dry units of wood chips each year.

Slocan's PolarBoard mill manufactures oriented strand board (OSB) panels almost exclusively from trembling aspen, with about 90% utilization of each log. PolarBoard was built in 1996 and was among the first to make both 4' x 8' sheets for North American customers and 3' x 6' and 3' x 8' sheets for the Asian market. It can produce 510 million square feet (3/8" basis) in a variety of thicknesses and sizes annually. The mill and woodlands operations employ 700 people, making Slocan the largest employer in the Fort Nelson region.

FHABC AGM 2002 REPORT

The FHABC's 2002 AGM was held on September 21st at the Kilby Store and Farm at Harrison Mills. The main items of business concerned our new federal charitable tax status, the aural history project, forest history submissions to the ABCPF's "FORUM" magazine and forest history activities and instruction at the Faculty of Forestry, UBC.

On April 30, 2002 we were registered as federal charity # 85302 233 RR0001. This means that contributions above the normal membership dues may be claimed as a tax deduction. We are hoping that this new status will prove beneficial to the FHABC in the long run.

Following the business meeting, FHABC members had lunch in the cafeteria and then toured the Kilby store and other buildings on the site.

The current Executive members of the FHABC are

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Members are encouraged to contact any member of the Executive regarding the FHABC's aims and objectives, current activities and potential projects.



WANT TO SUBSCRIBE BY E-MAIL?

It costs \$1.15 to produce and mail a copy of this newsletter to our Canadian members and more to those elsewhere. As many of you have access to e-mail, we are proposing a trial to determine if electronic delivery of the newsletter is a viable option.

If you have a high quality laser or inkjet printer and your computer can read PDF files, then this method should work for you. The required software for PDF files, Adobe Acrobat Reader, is available for all standard operating systems (e.g. Windows, MAC, etc.) and can be downloaded for free from Adobe's web site.

If you would like to "test drive" this option please advise the editor via e-mail and a PDF file of this newsletter will be sent to you. If you find the results to your liking you can then opt to receive future newsletters only via e-mail. This will result in a cost savings to the FHABC and allow us to put those funds to good use on other projects. It will also delay an inevitable increase in membership dues (but don't ask for a rebate!).

E-mails will be sent as "blind carbon copies" so no one else will see your e-mail address and the outgoing e-mail and the PDF will be scanned for potential viruses. Please e-mail the Editor, John Parminter, at jvparminster@telus.net and advise him if you would like to test this option. Complete instructions will be provided.



"SPARTREE" VIDEO AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE

The Pacific Northwest Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture has obtained worldwide distribution rights for video copies of Phillip Borsos' 1977 classic entitled "Spartree." In this famous short film a Vancouver Island high rigger climbs and then tops a spar tree and the process is seen from various angles. It has been digitally remastered and copies are for sale for home use only (no public screenings or sales to libraries, as yet).

For Canadian orders the cost is \$25 CDN + 14.5% taxes (or \$3.63) + \$9.00 for mailing, for a total of \$37.63. Cheques should be made payable to the PNW ISA (Pacific Northwest Chapter, International Society of Arboriculture) and sent to:

Dunster and Associates Ltd
PO Box 109
Bowen Island BC V0N 1G0

Phone: 604-947-0016
E-mail: jdunster@bigfoot.com

For United States orders, copies are available from the PNW ISA in Silverton, Oregon. See "News Releases" on their web site at www.pnwisa.org or call their office at 503-874-8263.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Keller, Keith. 2002. **Wildfire wars** - frontline stories of B.C.'s worst forest fires. Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, B.C. 295 p. \$34.95 CDN ISBN 1-55017-278-6

Harbour Publishing has a new book by Keith Keller (author of the B.C. bestseller "Dangerous Waters - Wrecks and Rescues off the B.C. Coast"). "Wildfire wars" starts with the Camp McKinney fire of 1931 and ends with the Salmon Arm fire of 1998. Between these are: the great Vancouver Island fire (Campbell River - Courtenay) of 1938; the Dean fire of 1960; the Hound fire at Lumby in 1967; the Tee fire near the Liard River in 1971; the Eg fire, also on the Liard (at Fireside), in 1982; the Swiss fire, near Houston, in 1983; the Invermere fires of 1985; and the Red Deer Creek fire, south of Dawson Creek, in 1987.

Keller also includes a chapter on the role of aircraft in fire-fighting; the conflict and/or co-operation between the forest industry and the BCFS; Buzz Kurjata, a "cat" operator on many fires; deaths, injuries and close calls; Percy Minnabarriet - portrait of a fire fighter; and Wayne Langlois' experiences as a fire-fighting consultant in Peru. The book ends with a brief discussion on fire ecology, prescribed fire and the ramifications of a "let burn" policy.

This work is extremely well-researched and well-written, turning an otherwise complicated and potentially convoluted subject into something easily understood. Many people in the book are well-known to those in the fire suppression fraternity. Regrettably, as in all publications of this nature, as many highly credible fire suppression personnel have been left out as have been included. For example, a book of similar size could be written about the 1985 fire season in the East Kootenays alone.

I like the fact that Keller not only identifies many experienced and highly-respected fire bosses but some of the "foot sloggers" as well. This book, in hard cover, at 295 pages (with 100 photographs and 9 maps), is well worth the price.

Reviewed by
Geoff Bate

Invermere Forest District history

In memory of the Invermere Forest District, the staff are putting together a book to preserve and celebrate their years of service. It will be a permanent record of district history, depicting the staff and their achievements. It is expected that there will be hundreds of photographs. The cost is \$10 and they hope to have the book available by November 15.

To order send your name, address and daytime phone number along with \$10 to: Margot Paterson, Ministry of Forests, PO Box 189, Invermere BC V0A 1K0. Phone: 250-342-4202

Please make checks payable to the "Forest Service Social Fund." For additional information please e-mail Margot at Margot.Paterson@gems8.gov.bc.ca

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

I am undertaking research for my Ph.D. and would very much like to contact others interested in the connections between pre-1910 amateur botanical nature study and the post-1912 research in forest regeneration sponsored by the B.C. Forest Service. The amateur natural history societies were great advocates for the establishment of a Forest Service and provide a context for study of pre-Forest Service science in British Columbia. I hope to trace the professionalization of nature study from these earlier amateurs.

Two of the most active individuals in the Natural History Society became quite expert in their fields. The first was James Robert Anderson, the son of a Hudson's Bay Company official, who went on to become the first Deputy Minister of Agriculture. He advocated for some kind of Forest Service throughout the 1890s, and in his off hours collected specimens for his herbarium, housed in the Department of Agriculture. Anderson had a friend, Chartres Cecil Pemberton, who went even further in his hobby, publishing original work. Another was John Davidson of UBC, who corresponded with both H.R. MacMillan and Martin Grainger.

Many thanks for any assistance,

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Membership in the association is \$10 yearly, or \$45 for five years. Please send dues to the Treasurer: Edo Nyland, 8793 Forest Park Drive, Sidney, BC V8L 4E8. Phone (250) 656-9276. E-mail: edonon@islandnet.com

The President: Stan Chester, can be reached at 5686 Keith Road, West Vancouver, BC V7W 2N5. Phone (604) 921-9880. E-mail: stanchester@shaw.ca