

The Mails to the North

By Aubrey Fullerton

ABOUT the hardest piece of public service in Canada is the mail delivery to the Arctic coast. It is made, at intervals, over the longest postal route in the world, and for the sake of a mere handful of people who have chosen to live in the far Top Country. What the Arctic mail-carriers go through to get His Majesty's mails up there somewhat nearly on time would give a city postman's busiest day the appearance of a pleasure jaunt.

One of these carriers, a man of many years' experience in the Canadian wilderness, is known along his beat as "Dutch." When asked some time ago for a really candid opinion about his work on the northern trail, Dutch answered, frankly enough, "If I could get my hands on the fellow that wrote 'Beautiful Snow' I'd wring his neck."

In other words, there is a good deal connected with the mail service to the north that isn't pleasant.

The summer delivery is made very comfortably by water, down the Athabasca and Mackenzie Rivers; but in winter there is no road but the snow road, and no way of going upon that road but by dog-train. To drive a string of dogs, pulling a heavy toboggan or sled, is worse even than mushing over the trail alone, and dogs plus snow are a wicked combination which only a man of nerve and muscle can master.

Dutch is of uncertain nationality, but most of the northern postmen are Indian halfbreeds, wilderness-born, and inured to wilderness hardship. They deal, as mail-carriers, not with the postal department but with the Hudson's Bay Company, which has the mail contract and which entrusts the northern packets to them, with orders to rush them through. Company orders are law in the north, and are obeyed in this case at whatever cost.

The usual dog-train carries a load of eight hundred pounds. About two hundred and fifty pounds of this is mail matter, and the rest is food supply for man and beast. Sometimes two men go with each train, but very often one man drives alone, running beside or behind the loaded sled for hours and miles on end. It is a long way to go, and relays of both men and dogs are kept at certain points along the route. Between these stopping-places the mail train camps at night on the open plain or in a bit of woods, be the weather what it may.

The mail-carriers of the north have to their credit a long record of faithful service, with not one case of theft, default, or failure, in the face of the greatest difficulties. There have been accidents, of course, and mails have been lost. A few years ago an old mail sack was found in the bush in the Peace River country, it had been lost two years before, and no one knows how or why. In northern Ontario, near the Manitoba boundary, where the same kind of mail service is given, but on shorter runs, two carriers were killed and eaten by wolves. Even the mail sacks were devoured. There is always the danger, too, of freezing to death at fifty or sixty below, which is no unusual thing in the sub-Arctic; and a sudden plunge through the ice, at some river pitfall, is not infrequent.

Dutch, who of late years has been driving dog-trains in northern British Columbia, tells a story that gives a hint of what dog teaming means, and at the same time suggests that there is a humor of the trail.

"I was coming down a long hill on the mountain trail," he says, "with a heavy load that was about all I wanted to handle, when my rough lock broke and away we goes, me yelling to the dogs to go, and trying to keep the sled from running over them. All at once I sees one of them glass-eyed Englishmen, with a fore-and-aft cap, standing right in the middle of the trail, and in spite of all my yelling he never makes a move to get out of the road. When I get close to him, I yells 'Gee!' to the dogs, and nearly breaks my back throwing the sled out. The dogs made the turn, the sled stayed upright, and we got by all O.K. I

turned to tell him what I thought of him, and as the dogs whirled me away, I heard him say, 'Well! That was quite clevah!'"

At Fort McPherson, the nearest settlement to the Arctic coast, there are two mails a year, and the traders, missionaries, and police thereabouts are glad enough to have even that connection with the outside world. The winter delivery is made about the end of January, and is restricted to one-ounce letters only. Some time in July the summer mail gets through, and then the people up north receive the papers, catalogues, and other second-class matter that not infrequently are as eagerly read as the letters.

As far north as Fort Smith, which is about one thousand miles this side of the Arctic coast, nine round trips a year are made from the head of rail in northern Alberta. Fort Smith is already becoming a subsidiary distributing point, and the Dominion Post Office schedules now list the sub-Arctic mails as leaving from that point, beyond which is the region of two mails a year and six-months-old war news.

The distributing points for the far-north mails are gradually moving up. Winnipeg used to be the sorting office, then Edmonton, and now Athabasca; and the new railroad into the Peace River country will presently carry the mail service still farther north. In the top parts however, the dog-team and mail-driver will always remain: there is no possibility of a railroad into the sub-Arctic,

and at least the winter delivery will continue to be made on foot.

Canada pays some \$50,000 a year to give its far north a mail service. That is more, of course, than it pays back in postal revenue, but the volume of mail both in and out is fast increasing. An important item in the northbound mails is always the papers and parcels from the Old Country, and in particular the boxes of English plum puddings from the folks at home for the lads on the frontier.

It is the mail-carriers, however, who furnish the chief interest of the northern mail service: the men who really do it, weather, wilderness trails, and dogs notwithstanding. There are not a more faithful, more enduring, or more persistent body of public servants in Canada, and the work they do is the kind into which real courage goes.

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