Articles by Western Canadian Pioneers

Through the Boiling Waters of the "Little Canyon" on the Skeena River, B. C., in 1894 in a Paddle-Wheel Steamer.

(By C. H. French, District Manager for British Columbia of the Hudson's Bay Company.)

Many years before the building of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway through British Columbia, I was engaged on transportation work for H. B. C. on the upper reaches of Skeena River, which sweeps down through the Atna Mountains to the northeast of Hazelton and debouches into the Pacific at Prince Rupert.

We had puffed laboriously upstream in our tubby little paddle-wheel steamboat until the Little Canyon came in sight. Here we found the water hurling through narrow and precipitous walls—too high and too powerful a current for our engines to master. We lay by for a few days until the waters of the summer freshet had subsided to some extent.

The excitement—the thrill—that one gets when passing through the canyons of the Skeena is beyond word-picturing. It must be experienced to be fully realized. The Little Canyon is roughly a mile and a half in length. During high water it has three channels. The steamer "Mount Royal" was turned over and wrecked in the middle channel during high water, 1907. Six men were drowned, despite the fact that the channel is but eighty feet wide.

Entering the Little Canyon from the lower end, one gets the impression that he is starting through a subterranean passage, because of the towering, straight walls—so high that darkness appears to be gathering.

After proceeding a little further one notes that the "boils" (whirlpools) are getting larger and if you look over the side of the ship you will note that an extra large "boil" has struck the steamer right on the stem, and has caused her to settle until the water is rushing in over the bow. Suddenly the "boil" has careered the boat to one side and has shifted to her quarter. The crew, with large rope bumpers, rush to the side opposite the boil so that in case the captain is not able to straighten the boat up they will be able to swing the bumpers between the guard of the steamer and the rough, jagged walls of the canyon.

Now the "boil" has reached amidships just under where you are standing, and when you look down into it and feel the boat settling under you, you wonder if there is really any bottom to it and whether the boat will be sucked under or whether she will eventually rise.

Probably when the guard of the boat is under water and the decks are actually flooded, the boil will shift a trifle to one side. Then the boat will immediately float up and go along.

Two-thirds of the way through, the channel forks and you come to an island which has a navigable channel on each side.

If you take the north channel it is necessary to put the boat's nose close up under the island so that one of the crew can jump ashore and carry a cable up to a ringbolt, in order to hold the steamer's bow in the channel while the stern is being swung out into the current. With the aid of the capstan the boat is hauled up.

After ascending a little farther, the north side shore becomes sloped at the water edge to about 45 degrees and the boat is dropped over on it where the force of the water is strong enough to force her up at least three feet on to this sloping shore. After cables are arranged it is necessary to put heavy timbers against the shore on which heavy blocks and tackle are arranged, the fall of which is taken to the capstan and only after great power is used is the vessel shoved clear of the rocks, so that she can be hauled up further.

The boat emerges from the canyon over a large gravel bar and in order to pass here an extra heavy cable must be used to hold the steamer's prow until the stern is sufficiently far out in the current to get steering power; otherwise the boat would shoot down and go head first down through the canyon.

On the particular trip that I write about, we had swung out into the river and the signal had been given and the cable cast off. The engines were "wide open" but were not powerful enough to drive us ahead. If we went back, destruction to the boat and death to all on board was certain. The channels were not wide enough for the boat to turn, and bridging the chaannel meant that she would turn over and tear herself to pieces in less than five minutes.

Should we not strike a channel but go on the point of the island, the first shock would be so heavy that the boat would crumple up like a cracker box.

Imagine the dismay and terror that came over everyone when, in this dangerous position, with every pound of power being exerted to keep the boat from going back, the boilers suddenly foamed and the engineer was forced to shut off the engines.

Hair stood on end, sunburned countenances paled. The deluge of boiling water that was forced through the engines and out the smokestacks was scarcely heeded because the greater danger of being smashed to pieces in the canyon so much overshadowed it.

The steamer plunged backwards. Panic was gripping us all when the engines began slowly to turn again, gradually increasing until the down river course towards destruction was arrested and we stood still.