The Forests of Southeastern Labrador*

Some Information Concerning the People and Customs of Canada's Eastern Neighbor

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In two parts—Part two

THE shores of Lake Melville are bordered by a considerable area of relatively flat or slightly rolling land on which the best timber is found. This extends up the Grand River to Muskrat Falls 25 miles above the mouth and beyond. On the mountain slopes much smaller trees occur.

Grand Lake which lies northwest of Lake Melville and empties its waters into it, is without any lowland border, the mountain sides descending precipitately on the west and by gentle slopes on the east. This lake, which is about 30 miles long, was transversed in rainy weather when a constant fine mist caused the great forest clad hills to appear and disappear like huge grey ghosts through the fog-like canopy which hung over the lake. At Cape Blanc, which is a steep-sided mountain rising abruptly from the lake, the scars of old avalanches are plainly visible. In some of these the timber and soil have both been stripped completely from the mountain face. In others a belt of birch in the midst of a black spruce forest, bounded sharply by perfectly straight lines, tells the story of an old avalanche.

On the Nascaupee river and the Red river the broad sand and clay terraces support a better forest growth than the Grand Lake basin. My own observations in this valley extended up to its junction with the Red river and a day's journey up the Red. Mrs. Hubbard, who traversed the entire length of the Nascaupee, reports one of the trees seen to have a circumference of nine feet. She states that "the valley is mostly well wooded with spruce and balsam as far as Mabelle Island and here the spruce reaches splendid size."

Bryant and Turner have explored parts of the region south of the Lake Melville basin which my expedition did not enter. Some of the comments of these explorers on the forests seen by them follow. The rivers traversed by them enter the Gulf of St. Lawrence between the Mingan Islands and the Strait of Belle Isle. Townsend writes of the timber along the Natasquan valley, nearly opposite the east end of Anticosti Islands, as follows:—

"The forest trees gradually increase in size from the coast where in places, as on the plateau back of the little village of Natashquan, they are nearly prostrate, to this point where they appear to have reached about their maximum, and attain a height of 50 or 60 feet. Black spruce and balsam fir are the predominating trees, but white spruce are not uncommon. White birches are scattered here and there and often form pale green patches in a sea of dark spruces and show where a fire has swept through. Mountain ashes are few and far between as well as aspens, but, on the borders of the river, alders and dwarf willows are common. Of larches only a few remnants are left of this once abundant tree. Some years ago a devastating worm—the larva of a sawfly—swept through the country and the larches were nearly exterminated. At Rigolet, on Hamilton Inlet, I had seen in 1906 the larches covered with these worms. Fortunately in this region of the Natashquan, at least, there are enough scattered veteran larches left to perpetuate the race, and vigorous seedlings are growing up, and I saw nothing of the worm.

"The largest balsam fir I measured at this place close to the 5th Falls was 64 inches in circumference three feet from the ground. A black spruce was 43 inches, a white birch was 72 inches. The white birches are rough and lichen-stained,—gray and green and black—and the bark peels off in great rolls and hangs all over the trunk in rags."

The observation of Townsend that the trees on the Gulf coast can survive only as prostrate dwarfs corresponds with the conditions which may be observed further east and north.

The St. Augustine river which enters the Gulf of St. Lawrence 150 miles east of the Natashquan river was ascended to the Height of Land in 1912 by Henry G. Bryant. Concerning the forests observed on this expedition Bryant writes as follows:—

"Referring to the timber resources of the region traversed, it may be of interest to mention that for the first twenty-five miles above the mouth, the hills rising from the broad valley of the river are covered with a thick mantle of firs and spruces of small size and growing in the close formation so characteristic of the Laurentide landscape. These growths of the lower valley are suitable for pulp manufacture; but aside from this, possess little commercial value. For the next twenty-five miles to the vicinity of the first falls, the size of the two varieties mentioned improves and many scattered groves of birches are observed. Beyond this for about twenty miles, a noticeable increase in size and quality of the spruces is apparent, while the first have become a less important element in the forestation. While the best timber is not continuous here, many tracts may be seen containing trees which measure three feet from the ground, something over two feet in diameter.

"In the neighborhood of the Height of Land, the country is more open, while the tops of the ridges are often quite bare. Some of the finest spruce timber encountered on the journey was found in small groves in sheltered localities within a few miles of the lake sources of the river."

Examination of the map of the distribution of North American forests will show the very important role which Labrador will probably play in supplying forest products for the world market of the future. The Lake Melville waterways are of peculiar importance in this connection because they afford about 200 miles of navigable waters which are usable by sea-going vessels. These waterways include Lake Melville, Grand Lake, the Double Mere and the Back Way. This penetration of the heart of the best of the Labrador forests by deep waterways must become an important element in keeping transportation costs at a low figure.

Canada is destined by its geological and geographical features to remain permanently the great forest country of North America. Compared with the area of the great forest belt extending from the Labrador coast to the Pacific, the widely scattered forest areas to the south of it appear insignificant in size. Lake Melville may reasonably be expected to become in the future one of the important eastern outlets for the forest products of the eastern portion of this vast forest zone.

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