

Yukon Fifty Years Ago

Building of Fort Selkirk. An Old Timer's Recollections of the Yukon and Liard Rivers.

"I know the Yukon well!—no man better, I think, for I spent twelve years of the best part of my life in that country," said the veteran, Jno. Flett, as he lay on his sick bed in the house of one of his sons, not far from the town of Prince Albert. Frequently spasms of coughing racked the gaunt frame of the gray-headed old man as he lay there calling to mind the various thrilling experiences of the years spent in that far-off region. "I was a young man then, a mere youth in fact, and ready and able for any hardship, but what I went through in those years has brought me to this."

And looking at the magnificent proportions and massive frame before me I could well believe that this had once been a noble specimen of physical development. Born in the Orkney Islands over twenty years ago, Jno. Flett had, at an early age, come out to the service of the Hudson's Bay company in the far northwest, coming by way of Hudson's Bay and thence to the McKenzie river country by the very route I have been describing in this number.

"I think I am the only man now living," resumed Mr. Flett, "of the squad of men who went to the Yukon and built Fort Selkirk at the junction of the Pelly and Lewis rivers in the year 1848, under the late chief factor, Robert Campbell."

"We went up the Liard river from Fort Simpson in the fall of '47, taking with us our supplies in York boats. These boats were 32 foot keel and large and heavy as they were, loaded with 100 'pieces'—a Hudson's Bay Co. 'piece' for packing or freighting—in the north country weighs from 90 to 100 lbs—the consummate skill of the boatman born of long practice, enabled them to handle them with great dexterity, a few sweeps of the long oars make the boat spin round like a top."

"The Liard is a hard river," continued the veteran, "tracking and poing much of the way on the upper reaches. There are five portages, the worst one of which, the Devil's portage, requires a double block to pull the boats up. At Portage Brule, the same was true. One advantage we had, was that there is good ground to travel on in making each of the portages. Above Portage Brule is Moncton portage, where the boat is

just out of the water and then in again almost directly. At Lying Wood portage, we lowered our boats into a bay and passed safely."

"Arrived at the head of the Liard, Lake Frances, where there was then a post, we transported our supplies and stores up the lake to the opposite extremity, twenty-five miles, and cached them there until winter set in when we portaged seventy-five miles to Pelly Banks post at the headwaters of the Pelly river, where we spent the winter in preparing rafts, etc., and in the spring we went down the Pelly to the junction with the Lewis, which had been selected as the site for the fort. Here we built Fort Selkirk. This was in 1848."

"I remained at Fort Selkirk under Chief Factor Campbell for five years. In the fifth year a band of the Chilcat Indians, twenty-seven in number, came across the mountain, and finding Mr. Campbell alone, pillaged the fort. The men, of whom I was one, were down the Yukon to Fort Yukon for supplies, and Mr. Campbell came down to meet us and turned us back. We all went down to Fort Yukon, where I afterwards remained seven years with Mr. Hardisty. My companions went on snowshoes up the Porcupine and across to Macpherson, and eventually up the Mackenzie. Chief Factor Campbell returned to Fort Yukon after meeting us, and made his way across to Frances Lake and down the Liard to Fort Simpson."

Mr. Flett spent twenty-one years in the Mackenzie River district, and was in charge of Fort Macpherson twelve years where he opened up the trade with the Esquimaux. Later on he was transferred to Fort Liard, about half way down the Liard river. He thus had a chance of renewing his knowledge of the river. When he was at Fort Liard, mining was going on he said, on the Dease River, not far from the Pelly river headwaters. He met one of the men, Fr. Lepine, after having left the Liard, Washing and prospecting could be done on the bars on the way up the river.

Replying to my query as to the practicability of the Liard river for parties wishing to go up, Mr. Flett said: "We did it fifty years ago, why should not the others do it now? At Fort Simpson are many halfbreeds and their families who would engage at reasonable wages to accompany a party up the river."

It was a strange experience to listen to this hardy old-timer, the sole survivor of the pioneers of the Yukon, and to realize that as long as fifty years ago, the Liard and Yukon rivers were as an oft-told tale to him, while to-day they are only coming to notice and one at any rate has yet to be re-explored. Probably no other living man can give such accurate details of the Liard and his opinion is of greatest value to any who wish to try that stream.

Mr. Flett left Liard in 1880. It is almost startling to think that he and his companions have, without thought of gold, passed by the creeks of the Yukon that have since yielded fortunes to so many.

Thus, Scott, whom I have mentioned elsewhere, says that when he was stationed at Fort Simpson, a miner named Nicholson, who was stopping there took him out to show how they panned for gold. This was right at the mouth of the Liard and at random and Mr. Scott says they got a number of colors to the pan, which Nicholson said would be at the rate of \$3.00 per day.

DOWN MACKENZIE RIVER AND UP THE YUKON.

To those contemplating going all the way to Dawson City or the Klondike region, the following details of the trip down the Mackenzie river from the personal experience and observation of Capt. Smith will be found invaluable:

Parties require no guides in going from Fort McMurray to Fort Chippewyan, which is situated on the southwest angle of Lake Athabasca. The latter is to be approached by taking the left channel, which enters the lake about seven miles from Fort Chippewyan, and by looking N. N. W. is easily discerned on a clear day.

"From Chippewyan a guide should be employed about half a day to pilot into Reck river, which joins the Peace and from the confluence of which is called the Slave river to Great Slave lake. The first obstacle on this river is the Smith portage, which must be approached on the left bank, and is sixteen miles long. But the boats can be taken down the rapids by making three or four portages, one of which boats and cargoes must be portaged, but this portage is in excellent condition, and is kept so by the H. B. company. If this mode of procedure be adopted a guide must be employed. Men are easily procurable who thoroughly understand the management of boats in such places. If parties prefer crossing the portage by team, they can be accommodated, as there is quite a settlement, together with a H. B. post established where assistance can be easily obtained.

"From Fort Smith down to Fort Resolution, on Great Slave Lake, there are no obstacles in the way, and by taking the channel, which is the shortest and about four or five miles from Fort Resolution, also to the left, where a Roman Catholic mission is passed before reaching the Fort. At this fort parties will be