

An Old Company—250th Anniversary

THIS is the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Hudson's Bay Co.—the oldest trading company in the world. As the activities of the company have centred in the territory now known as The Western Provinces, it is interesting to review the history of the organization from the time the charter was granted in 1670, to the time of its surrender in 1867.

When the French settled along the St. Lawrence they were not slow in developing the fur trade. The governors were exceedingly jealous of their rights, and private parties were prohibited from trading, except under conditions that were almost unbearable. Nevertheless, some bold spirits took a chance, and pressed away into the hinterland, making such bargains as they could with Indian tribes, and shipping out their furs as best they might. Two of the most adventurous of these early explorers were Radisson and Grosseilliers, who came west as far as the head of the great lakes. Their knowledge of the Indian life and the Indian language enabled them to find out many things that were unknown to the French in general. Among the things, they learned of a great sea away to the north-east, and they determined to make an effort to reach it from the Atlantic, and divert the trade in furs from the St. Lawrence to this new body of water—Hudson's Bay.

The two Frenchmen could not find any one in Canada, the British Colonies or France who would back them in their venture, but they were fortunate enough to find an interested listener in the adventurous Prince Rupert, a cousin of Charles II. The Prince granted them two vessels, and one of these was successful in reaching the bay. Forts were erected on the southern coast, and trading with the Indians began. When the boat returned to London laden with valuable furs, the King was no less interested than the Prince. Little difficulty was experienced in getting a charter for the new company. "The Governor and Company of Adventurers from England, trading into Hudson's Bay."

The company had wonderful success. Forts were opened on the west side as well as on the shores of James' Bay. Furs began to come in from points further and further west. It was easier to get down the rivers to Fort Nelson, than to get the furs overland to Mon-

treau and Quebec, or even to the head of the great lakes, and the English company was always honorable and upright in its dealings with the red man.

It was a great time when, in the summer months, the canoes began to come down the rivers leading to the bay. The various tribes timed their coming so that they arrived on the shores of Lake Winnipeg at about the same date. Then, with sometimes as many as five hundred canoes, they began their tiresome journey down the river to the bay. No wonder that often half the furs were thrown away! No wonder that few Indians were willing to take a second trip;

When the canoes came within hailing distance of the fort they fired guns to announce their coming. The fort responded by discharging a cannon. Then came the formal reception of the chiefs, the smoking of the pipe of peace, the long silence, then the announcement by the head man of the number of canoes and the character of the furs.

After this, the chief presented the factor with skins of great value and in return the company presented him with a new suit. Then came the formal trading. The women and the younger men brought the skins to the exchanging office and the reckoning began. On one side it was beaver, fur, muskrat, mink, otter, and buffalo, on the other it was beads, trinkets, blankets, knives, guns, powder, shot, bullets and tobacco. It was a wonderful meeting on the shores of the salt sea, and it speaks well for the company that the Indian tribes remained friendly through all the long years of bartering and bargaining.

It was only to be expected that the French would be jealous of this new company, and the jealousy finally worked over into open warfare. In 1687, Des Troyes, with a band of eighty men, made his way up the Ottawa, and overland to James' Bay, and captured the forts, one after the other. Ten years later D. Iberville attacked Fort Nelson from the sea, and the company's affairs

were in serious jeopardy. In 1713, however, the treaty of Utrecht restored all the territory to Britain, and the company was happy in its old relationships.

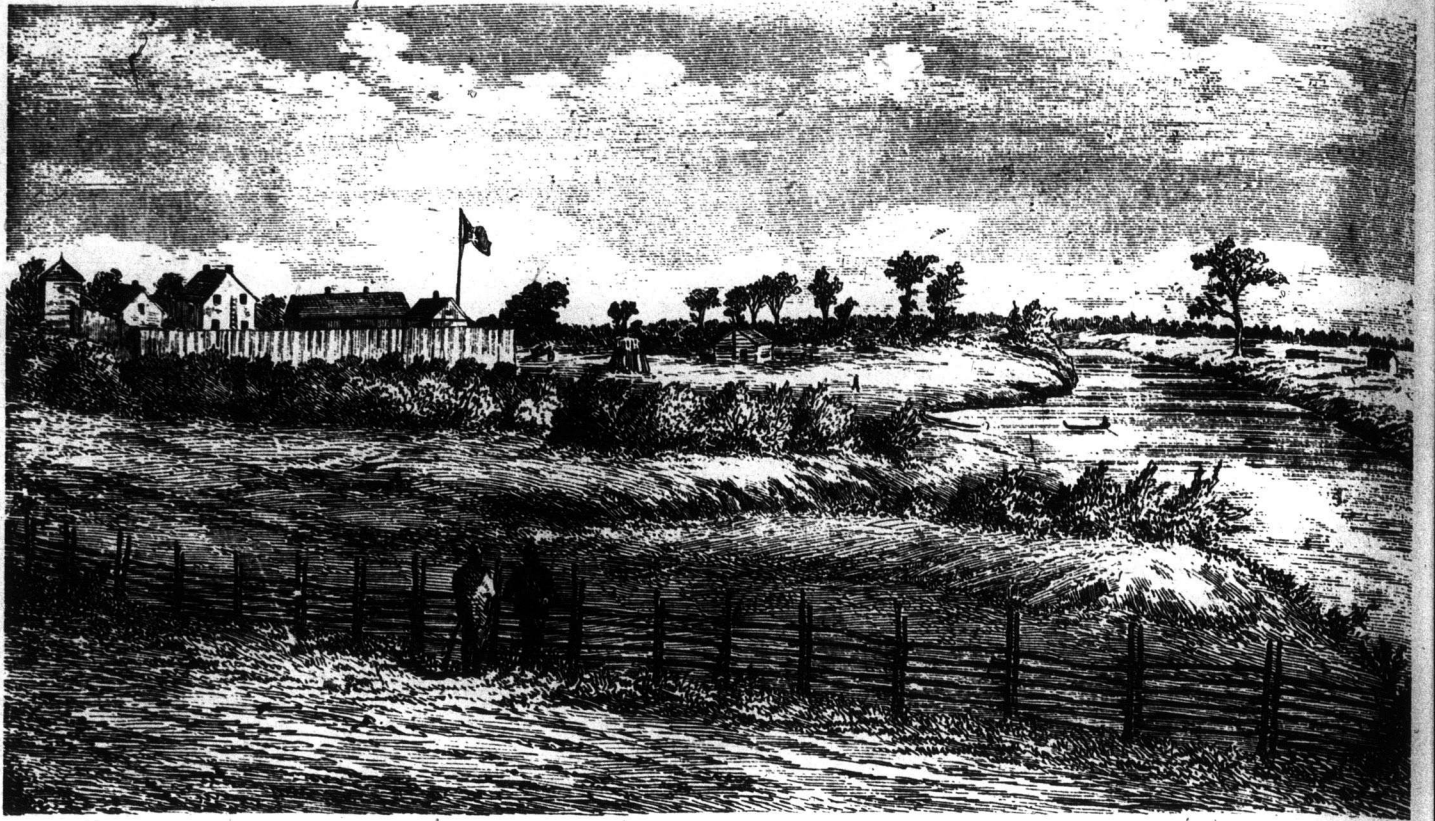
Though the French traders in the district were powerless, and though many of them went back to the St. Lawrence, and others united with the Indian tribes, it was not many years before new rivals to the Hudson's Bay Co., appeared.

French traders working up the Ottawa and towards James' Bay, tempted the Indians with trinkets, and sometimes with liquor, but this had, on the whole, the effect of standardizing trade. The Indians began to sell to the highest bidder and a unit of value was agreed upon. When, however, after 1763, the Scotch traders from Montreal organized into the North West Company, and began to reach farther and farther west, real trouble had to be met. Agents of the two companies met as far west as the Saskatchewan. Then began the building of inland forts. The most important of these was Cumberland House. The erection of this fort on the Saskatchewan, no doubt preserved the trade for the Hudson's Bay Company.

On the Red River, where Winnipeg now stands, each of the companies had a fort, and the rivalry was extreme. In 1812, Lord Selkirk, interested in the Hudson's Bay Co., bought land in the Kildonan district and brought in settlers to cultivate it. The rival company saw danger in this movement, and there was long, and bitter feud.

On the death of Selkirk, the companies found it advisable to unite. This they did in 1821 under the name of the older company. This was the last of the great difficulties until 1867. Then the effect of the company on the newly formed Dominion had to be considered. The arguments both at Ottawa and London were all in favor of the surrender of the charter, and so an arrangement was made, according to which the company received £300,000 and a title to one-twentieth of the land south of the north branch of the Saskatchewan, and west of Lake Winnipeg. It was no longer a fur trading company with a monopoly, but a great commercial concern with a chain of stores reaching from the Great Lakes to the Pacific.

During the long years of struggle between 1713 and 1821, the rival companies sent into the west many great explorers. Hearne went out to the Coppermine River and worked his way down to the Arctic Sea. McKenzie discovered, and worked his way down the river that bears his name and later crossed the Rockies. Fraser and Thompson gave their names to the great streams that



Hudson's Bay Company's Fort, Pembina



Indian Chief making a speech to the Governor of Red River, 1825, at Fort Douglas

Continued on page 48