

The Big Showing at Corbin Camp

An Impression of a British Columbia Coal Field

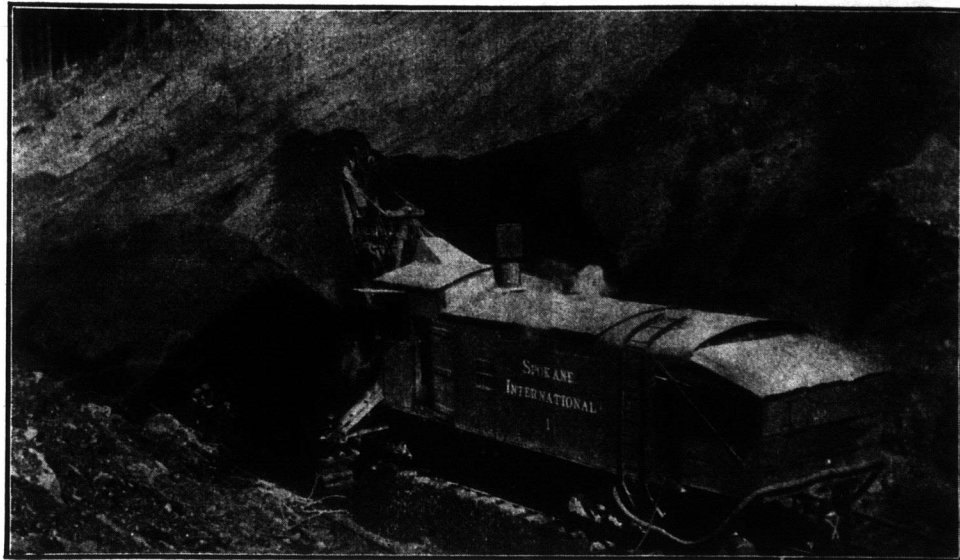
By Robert Halbon.

I shall never forget my first visit to Corbin mining camp; that collection of shacks and huts, hidden away in one of the great valleys of British Columbia. By many a twist and turn the Canadian Pacific Railway finds its way through the Crow's Nest Pass to McGillivray. By lonely lakes and towering mountains the ribbon of steel is laid. Clinging to the cliff's edge it winds in and out, following the river valleys and water courses, until at the innermost point of the famous "loop" McGillivray is reached. From this lonely station the Eastern British Columbia Railroad draws passengers and freight, up yet another lonely valley, to Corbin Camp. Now the long freight train halts with many a jolt and jar at a large saw mill, where between piles of sawn lumber dusky Hindu faces appear, in all their turbaned glory; or the engineer, regardless of the comfort of the few passengers, commences juggling with freight cars at lonely sidings, with the intention of dropping supplies for construction gangs, who find employment somewhere amongst these mountain fastnesses.

It is upwards and ever upwards to Corbin camp. It is a fight with the extremest of grades all the way, until the valley finally widens out, the trees on both sides give way, and long rows of shacks, as much alike as peas in a pod, appear on the left, stretching up the valley in regular rows. Amongst the stumps on the right is a half-finished hotel, which will some day prove a mine of wealth to its owner. With a series of jolts the daily train comes to a halt before the trading company's store, and the passengers climb out for their first view of Corbin camp. Around the store "the boys" are lounging, waiting to inspect the new arrivals. As they lie lazily basking in the warm spring sun before the doors of the store they look a brawny lot, from the big American engineer, who is a graduate from a Southern state university, to the "bohunks" or laboring foreigners, who earn their living in the mines with a pick and a shovel. The Scotch, the English, the Irish and the Welsh, all coal-mining peoples, are well represented. The glorious Scotch burr-r-r, as forceful and as natural as if heard on the streets of Glasgow or Aberdeen, seems well suited to the hill-country. But here, too, is the Englishman, with his ready assurance and almost unbearable conceit, chatting easily to the man from Missouri, who makes a picturesque figure in his big knee boots, with strong dark jeans tucked into them, a working shirt left carelessly loose at the neck, and on his head a straight-brimmed cowboy hat.

The crowd straggles up the high bank from the track to the boarding-house which, with the doctor's home and the pretty cottage of the mine-manager, stand a little apart. From the open windows of one of these the strains, so stately and grand, of Handel's "Largo" come floating. How incongruous are conditions in a mining camp. But the other houses are long rows of shacks, which go angling up the mountain side, with no pretence at variety alternating with stump-strewn paths and rough trails, but over one small place there flutters a Union Jack, which, together with a board over the doorway, bearing the inscription, "G.R. Royal Mail," proclaims it to be the post office. Spanning the valley is a high steel structure called "a tippie," to which come all the little trains of cars or "dinkies" loaded with coal from the mines far up the mountain side. Even now the eye can follow them, and the ear catch the low mumbling sound as they creep slowly down their miniature mountain railways, all of which converge towards "the tippie" where the coal will be picked over and weighed, tested and approved before it finds its way finally to a coal-car on the track below, and passes down the valley to the great world beyond. Far up, some 800 feet, one can see, against the dark background of the mountain side, clothed

with its pine and spruce, faint white puffs of smoke, which tell a story of construction work going on even there, and of machinery literally amongst the clouds.



Untouched as yet except by prospect holes.

Within the boarding-house some fifty robust and hearty men are eating their noonday meal. The great platters of pork chops are emptied as if by magic, and what follows them meets a similar fate, for the keen mountain air does not fail to whet the appetite. Then, too, the sooner the meal is over the longer there is to lounge and smoke before going to work. But in spite of all the haste this is no untutored or undisciplined gathering. Notice the Olympian majesty of the waitress, who is there to supply the wants of those grizzled and silent

men. Notice, too, the mannerly way in which one looks after the wants of another, and in particular the considerate way in which strangers are treated. Fascinated as the stranger may be, by the study of those men of the mountains, he cannot fail to be infected by the vigorous way in which they deal with their food. Unconsciously he finds himself in love with their refreshing strength, and freedom from convention.

"Up thar, sir," said Missouri Bill, one of the most outstanding of the many characters gathered round the doorstep, and whose acquaintance it was not hard to make: "Up thar there's a regular mountain of coal."

So saying, "Missouri," as he was familiarly called, pointed towards the faint puffs of smoke, so far up the mountain side that they might be mistaken for clouds, with the stem-end of his pipe, assuming at the same time a nonchalant air.

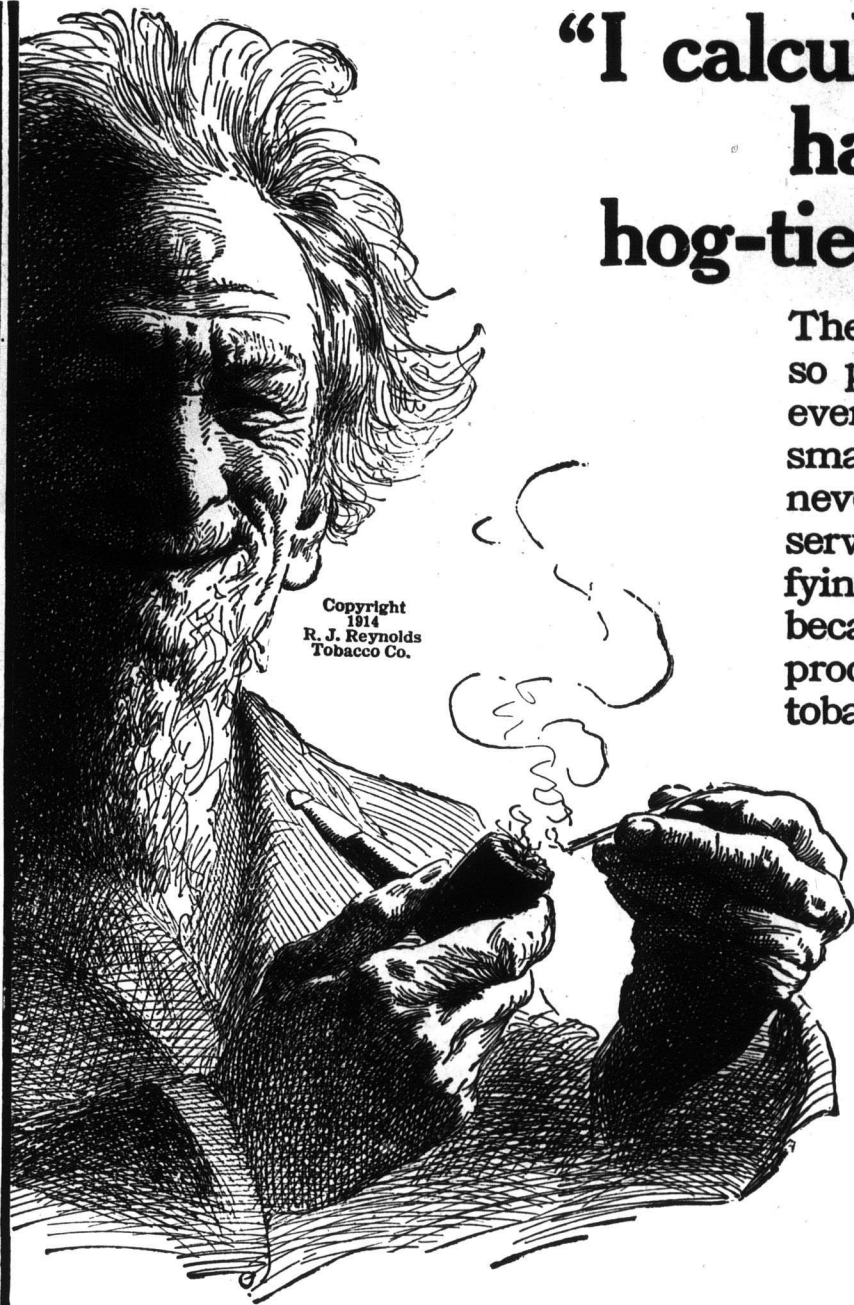
"Never seen the big showin' boss!" said he, looking at me in a surprised and pitying way. "A stranger here, I guess," he added. "Waal! ye've jist got ter see it afore ye leave these parts. Jist 400 tons per comes out of her," jerking his thumb towards the big mountain.

"Ye jist can't afford ter miss it, boss," and with this parting piece of advice the grizzled giant slouched off slowly to his work.

A strange rough fellow was "Missouri." To the people in Corbin camp he had neither beginning nor end of

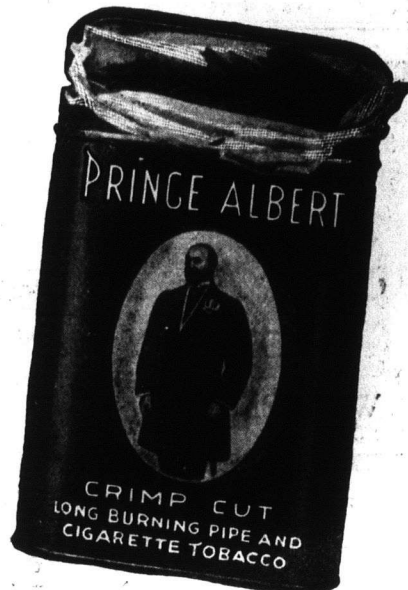
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