

The Old Brigades

By Charlotte Gordon

TRAVELLING over the boundless prairies, penetrating the mountains, crossing the valleys of our broad Dominion, comfortably and luxuriously settled in splendidly equipped Pullman cars, speeding from point to point with ease, it is hard to realize the circumstances and conditions of travel of the prairie hunter and fur-trader. It is not easy to imagine crossing the great frozen, snowy plains and lakes, by sledge, drawn by Eskimo dogs. It is impossible to picture days and weeks of skimming by canoe, the great lakes and rivers, delivering tons of merchandise. Flights of imagination could not place one in these days of speedy and elegant motor cars, in a Red River cart, drawn by Indian ponies or oxen. Where the long train of creaking, greasewood, Red River carts slowly crawled along over the trails, with their loads of buffalo robes and dried meat, there now dash the well equipped trains of one of the great railroads of the world. Where, up the rivers, over the portages and across the lakes, in rude native-made boats, manned by human muscles, the limited traffic of the country passed, now steam boats are to be found, their whistles awakening the echoes, amid the solitudes of centuries.

The various modes of travel and communication were by sledge, with husky dogs, by canoe, by Red River carts, with the service of Indian runners, by pack horses.

On the great prairies of Rupert's Land, communication with the interior was reduced to a system. The great event at Red River was the leaving of the North-West packet, early in December. By this agency, every post in the Northern department was reached and was accomplished by means of sledges and snowshoes. The sledge or toboggan was drawn by "huskies" and these dogs of the North West played a prominent part in the life

of the lonely settlers. They were swifter and more enduring than horses and could go where horses would soon perish. The skillful guide, with his unerring intelligence, ran ahead on his large snowshoes, making all the road required as there was not a surveyed road or beaten trail. It used to be commonly stated that to drive these dogs successfully, a driver must be able to swear in English, French and Indian. Mid-winter packets were confined chiefly to transport of letters and newspapers, an annual file of some well known newspaper being sent to the various posts. With this mode of travel, about forty miles a day was accomplished.

All of the Hudson's Bay Company's supplies for the North-West territories were shipped from London to York Factory on the West Coast of Hudson Bay. Heavy boats, manned by Indians, delivered the goods into the interior. Four to eight of these crafts made up a brigade. So wild and rugged was the country, that as many as seventy portages sometimes had to be made in a trip of five hundred miles. The skill and rapidity with which these boats could be loaded and unloaded, carried past a portage or guided through a rapid was the pride of the tribesmen. The secure packing of bales, each weighing from sixty to one hundred pounds, was most necessary. It is stated that a good crew of nine men could load a boat and pack securely in five minutes. Each boat carried three or four tons of freight. The boat's crew was under the command of the steersman who sat on a raised platform in the stern of the boat. He was responsible to the commander of the brigade, who held a position of much importance.

The route from York factory to Fort Garry, being a long, continuous waterway, was a favorite course for the York brigade. The great waterways have meant much to those old fur traders and to the Indian hunters. These natural highways, which

never needed repairs, were horses, motors and steam engines to the dwellers of the great forests and plains. A great part of the furs were carried to Fort Garry and thence to York factory. From there a load of general merchandise was brought back, and the return with supplies for the settlers, was eagerly awaited. So vast is this country, that some of the interior posts were two thousand miles away from where the goods landed on the coast. Records state that sometimes, as long as seven years elapsed from the time the goods left London, ere the furs obtained for them, reached the market.

Parties of runners, Indians, fleet of foot, travelled certain routes, deposited their packages, and received return mail and parcels.

The departure of these great Northern brigades, were the event of the year, having in the eyes of the fur traders, something of the nature of the Caravan for Mecca, about them. Distance was counted by the voyageurs, by the smoking of a pipe, counting a pipe to a league, which was two or three miles.

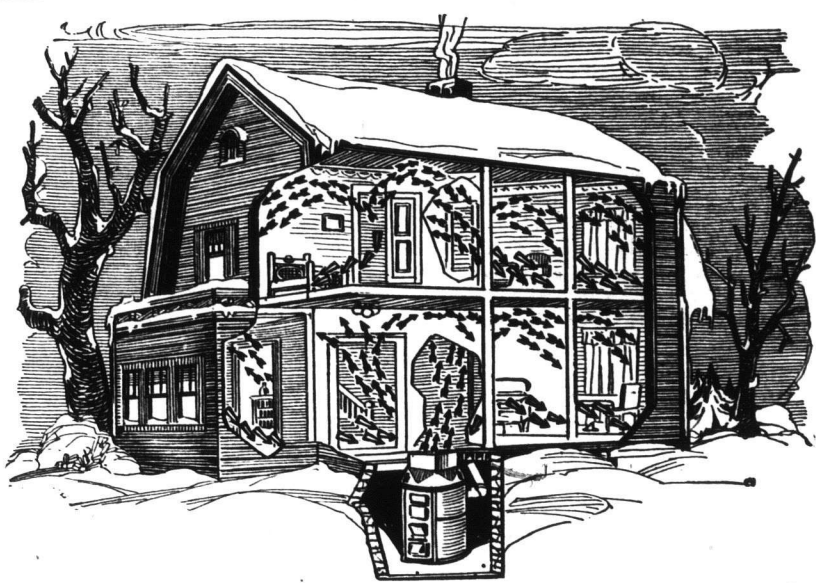
Many of the Red River settlers commanded these brigades and such were the means of transportation over the vast water systems of Rupert's Land in the early days.

Montreal was one of the great centres of the fur trade of this New World, and from Lachine, at the head of the rapids the departure of the voyageurs, on the long journey to the distant fur country, was an event. Heavy canoes were used for freight, and light canoes, sometimes manned with ten or twelve men, took the officers, at great speed along the routes. In the governor's or chief factor's brigade, each voyageur wore a feather in his cap, and the brigade swept on, keeping time with their paddles, as the old French boat songs were gaily sung. After the hardships of hundreds of miles of journeying, Fort William, the goal of the Montreal voyageur was reached. Around the walls of this fort, a great encampment was made. The East and West met in rivalry. Then followed days of waiting, unloading, loading and feasting and the Montreal

voyageurs turned their faces homeward. Land as well as water transport was necessary and the Red River Cart, drawn by Indian ponies or oxen, served this purpose. These carts were made entirely of wood and an Indian pony, with a load of five hundred pounds, travelled about fifty miles a day. A brigade consisted of ten carts, in charge of three men. Five or six brigades were joined in one train and all placed under a guide who travelled on horse-back and was responsible for all the details of camping. In addition to the primitive appearance of these carts, they were never oiled or greased, and the discordant music made by them, attracted much attention.

A notable cart trail and freighting road was that from Fort Garry to St. Paul, Minnesota. Every season, about three hundred carts employing one hundred men, departed to St. Paul, carrying huge bales of choice furs. Great loads were in this way conveyed from one post to another.

Trade and communication between the Pacific coast and the interior Mountain Country, was carried on with pack horses and some of the old trails of the great fur brigades are still well beaten roads. The old Hudson Bay trail around Okanagan Lake is still of service and a trader, Tom McKay is credited with blazing it in 1824. These brigades contained as many as three hundred horses and a large company of people. A couple of expert hunters travelled ahead, choosing camping grounds and the brigade filed down the trail with merchandise or furs, camp pots and blankets. First came the factor or chief trader, dressed in his suit of broad cloth with white shirt and collar to his ears, wearing on his head the tall beaver hat of that day. His position demanded an impressive appearance and he had rather a hard time riding under some of the trees, with that stove pipe hat. He carried the old fire bag, containing flint and steel, tinder-box, touch wood and tobacco. This kit carries even to the present day, by the fur traders and mail carriers, in the North Country. The factor's tent is always first to be erect-



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