

The River Road to the Yukon

By Aubrey Fullerton

THERE is a way into the golden North that, in season, makes good going and leads impressively to the wonders that lie beyond. It is a summer highway, not as much travelled yet as it will be, but already a busy road of commerce and adventure. At the nearer end of it is the town of Whitehorse, and at its other end is Dawson, the goldhunters' capital. Between is a stretch of 350 miles of rugged watercourse, as distinctively northern as the country through which it flows.

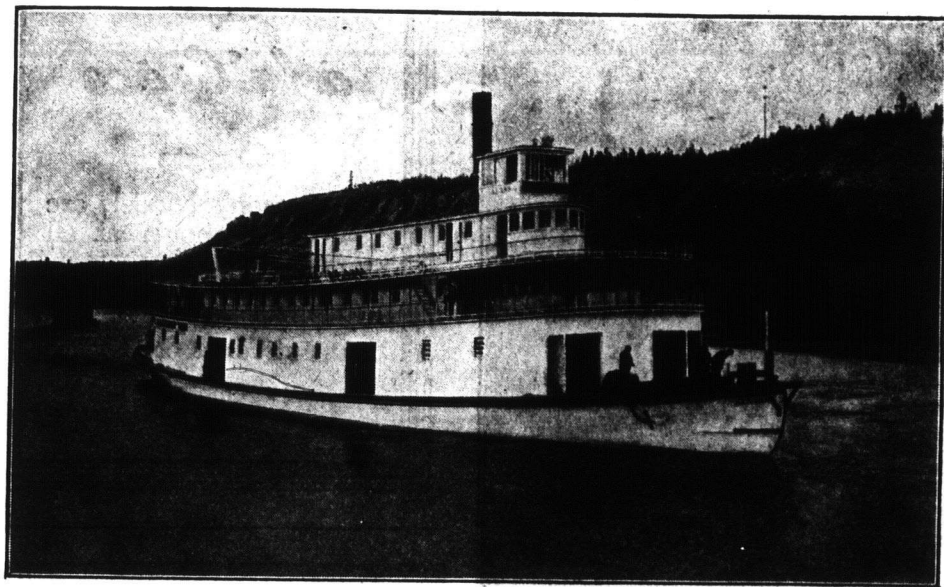
Whitehorse and Dawson are the two northernmost towns in Canada. They are connected in winter by only a stage route over the trail, but during the season of navigation the Yukon River and its branches give an open way for steam traffic to and from the North. The people of Dawson have been complaining of the recent increases in the cost of living, and apparently with reason, but were it not for the summer water route that gives them a freight connection with the outside world they would be much harder hit and would now be paying even higher prices for all they ate and wore. When nature made a townsite away up there in Klondike, at a latitude corresponding with the extreme top of Hudson Bay, she provided also a means of access.

Like everything else in the North, this natural waterway is laid out on a generous scale. It begins in a chain of lakes in the border country of British Columbia and

not as big a thing as on the Atlantic seaboard, for the Yukon boats are flat-bottomed, stern-wheel craft that draw only four or five feet of water. They are capable, nevertheless, of heavy loads. Their cargoes are made up of mixed freight, in which mining supplies always figure largely, and when things get back to normal after the war they will carry an increasing number of passengers, too, for Yukon and interior Alaska are certain to be on the tourist map one of these days.

The miners, it is reasonably safe to say, don't think of it, but a modern, somewhat dapper steamboat, plying on a wilderness river of the far North, is one of Canada's striking contrasts. It is a lonely route, grand, picture-full, and pleasant, but still wild, and a first trip at least will suggest the strangeness of it all. That the traffic of commerce and even pleasure is finding its way over such a route into the country beyond is a sign of the times.

But Whitehorse is also a railway town, and thereby doubly wins its place as a transportation centre. It is the end of the line for railroad traffic from the coast, just as it is the first of the line for the river steamboats. The White Pass & Yukon Railway runs from Skagway, Alaska, to the summit of White Pass and down again to Whitehorse, a distance of 110 miles. It is thus the connecting link between tide-water on the Pacific coast and the head of navigation on the Yukon River, and by reason of that fact opens up to freight and passenger service a



The Alaska, built at White Horse and running between Dawson and Fairbanks, Alaska.

Yukon Territory, where Lakes Atlin, Tagish, Marsh, and Laberge, linked up with short connecting rivers, lead into the Lewes branch of the Yukon River. When the main stream finally gets its pace it goes on, north and west, through Yukon and Alaska, till it runs out into Bering Sea, a total stretch of 2,000 miles. It is easily one of the great waterways of America.

Hundreds of men have followed the Yukon River route in quest of fortune. Before steamboats ran, they went on clumsy rafts, exploring its creeks and examining its sandbars, lured on by visions of gold. Sometimes they met with hard adventures, from which they barely escaped. To-day the goldseekers are not so many, and they go more comfortably, for steamers have largely taken the place of the old log rafts.

So it is that Whitehorse has become an inland port. As the southern terminus of the Yukon River traffic, it has developed an importance it never could have had otherwise, for Whitehorse is essentially a transportation centre. It is a town of not more than half a thousand people, and except for five or six copper mines, as yet hardly past the infant stage of development, is dependent for its existence upon the receiving and re-shipping of freight and the forwarding of passengers for the goldfields farther north. That is to say, Whitehorse is vitally related to Dawson, the town at the other end of the line. If there were no Dawson—or at any rate if there were no Klondike goldfields—it is doubtful if there would be any Whitehorse.

As it is, however, the southern terminal town takes color from its business and its geography. Not only does it dispatch steamboats, but it builds and repairs them. To be sure, shipbuilding in the North is

greater territory than any other hundred-mile road on the continent.

It cost \$100,000 a mile to build the railroad from Skagway to White Pass summit, which is only a little short of 3,000 feet above the sea level, and there were difficulties in the construction that perhaps have never been equalled in railway engineering. On the way to the summit the grade, which averages 2.66 per cent, was cut through solid rock, and often it went up mountain sides so steep that the men were suspended by ropes while they drilled the holes for blasting. At one point a cliff two hundred feet from top to bottom blocked the way, and the whole mass of it was cleared out with powder. Machinery and supplies were packed up the mountain, and even the steel for a cantilever bridge across a 215-foot canon was taken in from Skagway. To all the difficulties of the country itself were added those of bad weather and distance from the supply base.

The railroad was completed to White Horse in 1900, and has since been in regular operation. The trains run daily throughout the winter, with rarely more snow through the mountains than can be taken care of, and connect with the winter stage line to Dawson. The river route is open from early June till mid-October. Whitehorse is thus assured, one way or the other, of a constant traffic, and maintains its importance as a doorway to the North.

If comfortable steamers on the Yukon River are reason for sensations of strangeness or contrast, what shall be said of up-to-date parlor cars attached to steam trains, at a fairly good speed, in the heart of the mountain wilderness? The road is built on narrow gauge, but it is surprisingly well equipped, and does credit to the courage and far-sightedness of its builders.

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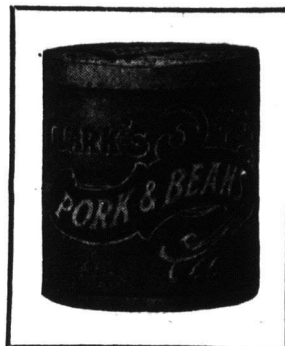
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