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How Western Resources Have Been Despoiled

H. B. Ames, M.P., Tells How Our Timber Tracts Have Been Administered With Loss to the People and With Great Profit to Friends of the Government.

To us Canadians has been granted the task of opening up and developing "The Last Best West." With a knowledge of the success and failures of our neighbors to the south of us and with their experiences of western conditions gained during the past fifty years, there is no sufficient excuse if we fail in the task. The Canadian people have a right to ask and expect that any government, which seeks their confidence, shall deal with this question in a wise, honest and statesmanlike manner.

WEALTH OF THE WEST

The immense area between the eastern limit of the province of Manitoba and the Rocky Mountains is a country of diverse wealth. It may be roughly classified, as comprising four great areas. On the north lies the great spruce forest stretching from Lake Winnipeg to the Mackenzie basin, a belt of wooded land 300 miles in width, traversed by floatable rivers and containing considerable quantities of merchantable timber, between Winnipeg and Edmonton and east of the Rocky mountains lies the prairie agriculture belt containing 100,000,000 acres of arable land; within and encircled by the agricultural belt lie the grazing areas. Just east of the Rocky Mountains in southern Alberta is a district which has produced excellent crops under cultivation by irrigation. Nor is this all. Along the foothills of Rocky Mountains and still further eastward there are areas containing valuable coal deposits. The northern lakes are full of excellent food fish. Such is the natural wealth of the Canadian west.

WHAT IT COST

In this great western heritage we, one and all, have a personal interest. It has cost us vast sums to acquire and develop. In 1870 we bought out the interests of the Hudson Bay Company, giving them \$1,600,000 and allowing them to retain one-twentieth part of the land. Then in order to keep faith with the people of British Columbia and to open up the country we spent sixty-five million dollars in building a transcontinental railway. Besides this, in order to explore, survey, develop and govern these territories, we have spent many millions more.

REGULATIONS ALTERED

The regulations too have been changed so as to greatly encourage the speculator. Prior to 1905 the Minister of the Interior was under no obligations to renew a license from year to year, if the land was required for settlement or other purpose, but Mr. Sifton altered this and by order-in-council of April 14, 1905, it was decided that "so long as the licensee complies with the conditions of his license and of the regulations he shall be entitled to a renewal of license" from year to year while merchantable timber remains upon the area licensed. This change in the regulations makes the lease practically perpetual, adds greatly to the value of the berth and has doubtless stimulated speculation to a marked degree.

WHO HAVE PROFITED

Within the comparatively short period of three and a half years, between 1902 and 1905, more than 3,000 sq. miles of select timber, that is to say about one-half of the entire area under lease in the western provinces, fell into the hands not of operators, but of speculators. One-half of this amount, comprising 25 p.c. of the timber of the three provinces of Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan was acquired by a group of men, which may be called the Burrows-Fraser combination, of which the brother-in-law of the then minister of the Interior, Mr. Sifton, was the central figure, under circumstances so peculiar as to have excited general comment.

THE TIMBER LANDS.

As is generally known the prairie for the most part is practically treeless. Here and there are small areas of poplar and spruce, but the trees are rarely of sufficient size or quality to furnish building material. The farmer must look elsewhere for the lumber with which to build. Prior to 1900 little was known regarding the great northern forests. Manitoba's demand for lumber was supplied from western Ontario, the Alberta demand from the Rocky Mountains, and there were few settlers between. As the prairies began to fill with population a vast amount of timber was required for railway building and for settlers' houses. A line of railway had been pushed north to Prince Albert, and it was found that there existed immense areas of fine spruce timber in the regions drained by the North Saskatchewan river.

GOVERNMENT'S NEGLIGENCE

Now the government should have explored and valued these areas before parting with them. This is what you would have done had some relative unexpectedly left you a bequest of a stretch of land of which you had no previous knowledge. But the government parted with these timber lands before it had any idea as to their value and now that they are gone has cause to regret its negligence. These limits are today worth from \$1,000 to \$3,000 and in some instances \$5,000 per mile, for the leases are practically perpetual. The men who have secured these areas for a bagatelle have become in consequence multi-millionaires.

PASSED INTO PRIVATE HANDS.

It is customary for the defence of the present administration, when pushed hard to find an excuse for the present government's action with reference to the timber of the Northwest, to declare that under Conservative rule, prior to 1896, a large area was alienated leaving the hearer to infer that these areas passed permanently out of the control of the government of Canada. This was not the case. It is true the Conservatives leased extensive tracts of timber lands, but they exacted such conditions of operation from the grantees that no less than 94 per cent. of the area came back to the Crown. Of all these areas granted prior to July 1896, only 1720 miles were retained by the grantees, and when the present Liberal administration came into office, there were but 1,800 sq. miles of timber under lease in the three provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. This did not, however, long continue. There are nearly 6,500 sq. miles under lease at the present time. A careful analysis shows that about 30 p.c. of the area under lease is being actually cut over, that 20 p.c. is being held in reserve by bona fide lumber companies and that 50 p.c. is in the hands of speculators. The government have leased practically all the good timber south of the watershed, and the reserves of Winnipeg, Prince Albert and Edmonton are in speculative hands.

NO REAL COMPETITION

Whenever the holdings of the brother-in-law of the ex-Minister of the Interior and of his associates are criticised, the argument is always advanced in defence that these limits were obtained at public competition, and that they went to the highest bidder. I propose, in order to test the validity of this defense, to give the history of some of the transactions which have been discussed in the House of Commons, and to show that the so-called public competition was little better than a travesty. Not only was the system wholly bad but there are strong grounds to believe that fraud and imposition were practiced, and the government, in refusing to permit a parliamentary enquiry into this whole matter, has strengthened the belief, wellnigh universal, that these transactions could not bear the light. Let us take up the stories of some of these berths. We will begin with that of the Cedar and Moose Lake limits, which are of special interest since it was in respect of these transactions that the war to secure possession of original documents was waged.

CEDAR LAKE LIMIT

Just north of Lake Winnipegosis there lies a lake called Cedar Lake, on the shores and islands of which there is much valuable timber. In September, 1903, A. W. Fraser, an Ottawa lawyer, not long since president of the Ottawa Liberal association, applied to have put up for sale a timber berth to include 50 square miles on this lake. His request was at once granted. The notices were issued on the 13th of October calling for bids to be received and opened at Ottawa on the 2nd of December. One advertisement, and one only appeared in the Manitoba Free Press, and in the Dauphin Press. Now Cedar Lake lies 100 miles north of a railroad. In order to reach it, one must take the train to Winnipegosis, from which point occasional fishing lugs can be taken for points at the northern end of the lake. But the steamer service comes to an end the latter part of October and the ice commences early in November, to form upon Lake Winnipegosis. Since the advertisement did not appear in the western papers before the 20th of October, it will be seen that it was quite impossible at that time of the year to visit the limit, examine the timber, put in a bid with a cash deposit and have the same reach Ottawa by the 2nd of December. Competition was impossible. It is reasonable to conclude that the authorities at Ottawa intended to make it so. As was no doubt expected there was but one bid, that of the applicant, Mr. Fraser, and this gentleman offered the paltry sum of \$500 and secured the limit. Shortly after its acquisition the area of the berth was increased to 90 sq. miles without additional bonus, so that Mr. Fraser secured his limit at the rate of \$5.56 per sq. mile or at a little less than one cent an acre. Now that limit was acquired for speculative purposes by Mr. Fraser, was placed for sale in the hands of certain Winnipeg agents. Their prospectus offering the property to a prospective buyer was read in the House of Commons. I have the original document issued by J. Haffner & Son, real estate agents, 267 Main street, Winnipeg, which read as follows:

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