

# WHEN CARIBOO WAS IN FLOWER

A Brief Narrative of Events in 1861 and 1862—By D. W. Higgins



THE fall of 1861 and the spring and summer of 1862 were periods of wild excitement in British Columbia, California, Canada and, I may add, on the Pacific Coast generally. Gold had been discovered in far distant Cariboo in 1861 by a band of resolute prospectors who, disappointed by the failure of the mines on the lower Fraser river bars, had pressed valiantly on toward the headwaters of that stream. The country that is now bisected by roads and trails at that time was traversed only by a few narrow Indian paths and the brigade mule trail (as it was called) of the Hudsons Bay Co., which led only to their posts in the interior. In the absence of roads the prospector was seriously hampered. He was forced to travel on foot and carry on his back his blankets, prospecting tools and food. When he turned aside from the primitive trails he plunged into a pathless forest, and the chance that he would find his way out again was often remote. The country was a solemn wilderness. The waving of the tall trees in the wind, the occasional growl of a wild animal, the snarl of the timber wolf, the call of the chipmunk, the song of the wild birds, and the cracking of branches beneath the feet of a lordly cariboo, were the only sounds that broke the awful stillness and relieved the solitude. The underwood, the dense forests and the steep hills presented obstacles that would have terrified the hearts of men less accustomed to hardships than the determined miners who expended time and energy and often lost their lives in opening up the treasures of the new fields that were destined to play an important part in the settlement of the country.

It was in the fall of 1860 that the first news of the Cariboo gold discoveries reached the coast, and nearly all the loose men who then hung about Victoria and the mining camps were attracted to the spot. Antler creek was the first locality that showed signs of richness, some big nuggets being found on its banks. It was called Antler by the miners because they found a pair of cast-off cariboo horns on its banks. The whole district was named Cariboo, because of large bands of that species of elk which the prospectors saw there. The diggings on Antler, though rich, were shallow, and, as it turned out, were only the stepping stones, so to speak, that led to other and richer deposits further afield.

Early in the summer of 1861 there strayed into the Antler creek camp a hungry and tattered German sailor named William Dietz. He was a short, stocky man, of retiring manners; but he was full of the kind of grit that builds up a country and contributes to the wealth of nations. Dietz reported that he had found a creek a few miles distant across the divide that prospectors largely. In support of his story he showed a number of good-sized nuggets which, he declared, he had picked up on the surface. He said that he had named the creek William and that he had staked a claim for himself and another for a friend, and had come in for food. The excitement in the Antler camp was great, and the miners went over to the new creek en masse. The first men in found nothing, and after changing the name from William to Humbug, returned to Antler creek, threatening to hang Dietz up for the crows to peck at for having misled them with his lies. But a few men who remained on the new creek were rewarded for their faith, and in a day or two they had found many handsome nuggets and secured claims. Other miners rushed in and soon the creek was staked from source to mouth, and primitive rockers were worked on the bars with flattering results.

The season's work in 1861 proved inspiring. The ground on William creek was shown to be heavily impregnated with coarse gold almost from end to end and from top to bedrock. In the fall of the year men who had gone into the diggings impoverished began to dribble out to the coast with heavy swags of the precious stuff and gold dust became plentiful in every channel of trade as the only medium of exchange and barter.

William creek and its golden sands, were on everybody's tongue. The truth was good enough; but the stories grew in wealth as they were repeated. In the spring of 1861, a man named Abbott, a poor fisherman who worked at Frasermouth for a fishing company, had left his employment and with scarcely sufficient money to carry him to Cariboo, proceeded to the new goldfields. He and his companions walked every foot of the way from Yale to William creek, packing food, blankets and tools on their backs. The trip consumed five weeks, and when they reached the creek they were sick and sore and hungry and depressed in spirits. "Part of the way," said Abbott, "we walked without shoes, suffering much until our feet became hardened. Our boots were worn out and we had no means with which to get others. Indeed, there were no boots to be had if we had offered \$100 for a pair, and our bloody footprints were left behind us as we hobbled on."

The Abbott company staked claims and when they lifted the first pan of earth and washed it, the result startled them. Abbott rushed up to a rude hut of boughs a company had hastily constructed and excitedly exclaimed:

"Boys, see here! See what I've got! There's twenty dollars here if there's a cent!" The boys crowded around the excited man.

The bottom of the pan showed several nuggets of goodly size and they opened wide their eyes when scales were brought and the prospect weighed \$23.75.

Twenty-three dollars and seventy-five cents to a single pan of earth! If so grand a result could be obtained from a pan of dirt what might not be got from a yard? The men first on the ground had not been idle. Rich deposits had been opened and were being worked with rude appliances. The yield was heavy. The Diller Co., of three men, took out \$500 a day to the hand for many days. On some days the yield was as high as \$5,000 to the hand. From behind a boulder, which had been smoothed by glacial action, they took \$6,500 in a few minutes. The nuggets had been deposited by the swift currents and had reposed there through all the centuries undisturbed.

The Never Sweat Co. divided \$40,000 each for the first season's work. This was the claim into which George Hunter Cary, the gifted first attorney-general of the colony, afterward invested his own and his friends' money on the strength of a large prospect which had been purposely fixed to attract him. Cary Castle was built with money borrowed on the faith that Mr. Cary reposed in the Never Sweat prospect, and he retired to England to die of disappointment.

The news continued to spread. From the coast it reached Canada and the Eastern States. It crossed the ocean to the United Kingdom and the reports from the gold fields grew in size and value, as the intelligence was passed from mouth to mouth.

Soon hundreds of people began to arrive from every quarter of the globe. The Canadian, Australian, American and English immigration was enormous. The steamers that plied between San Francisco and Esquimalt could not accommodate the passengers that offered and Victoria grew rapidly in wealth, population and importance. Those who could not find houses here pitched tents or built huts of boughs and branches on convenient lots.

The winter of 1861 and 1862 was a season of unexampled severity. There had been nothing like it in the recollection of the Hudson's Bay Co.'s officials, and since 1862 there have been no winters as severe. The only way by which the diggings could be reached was by trail from Yale, and these were blocked with snow for many weeks. No wheels of any kind could pass over the trails. A few pack trains carrying food and other necessities traversed the trail to the mines. Nearly all

the miners walked. Many women and a few children managed to struggle into Barkerville, a town that sprang up on William creek, and not a few were laid away on the journey or at the termination of the trip.

At the mines all was bustle and excitement; goods rose to fabulous rates. Food was scarce and many miners unable to pay one dollar a pound for flour and beans and \$2 a pound for bacon, and \$2.50 for fresh meat, often tightened their body belts and went to sleep to forget their hunger. For a pair of stout boots \$50 was paid, and blankets and clothing were not to be had at any price. The daily wage of a miner was \$16, but said one of the workers naively, "It cost us nearly all that to live, for drinks were a dollar a go."

In the midst of the excitement capitalists from California came into the camp. John Kurtz and his company bought into the Point claim and realized a handsome fortune in one season. Steele and Cunningham, who were among the earliest successful prospectors; Hard Curry and Jim Loring made rapid fortunes and lost them as rapidly. Abbott bet as high as \$5,000 on the turn of a single card and lost it without a whimper. I might mention hundreds of other instances, but these will suffice as specimens of all. Diller saved his money, took it to Pennsylvania and died a millionaire. John A. Cameron made \$375,000 in a single season in his claim on William creek and lost it all in bad investments at the east. He returned to Barkerville twenty-five years later and died heart-broken while trying to retrieve his fortune. Hundreds of similar cases might be mentioned.

In the month of October, 1861, Abbott and his partners reached Victoria. The party had hired an armed guard to escort them to the coast. They deposited nearly \$200,000 in dust with Wells-Fargo's agent, whose office was on Yates street, where Mr. Pearson's stove store now stands. Their arrival with palpable evidences of success served to increase the excitement that already prevailed and the intelligence was flashed to all parts of the world.

But with all its wealth the camp was filled with needy men. Some were able-bodied and willing to work, but could find none. Others were delicate and their appearance showed that they were in a state of keen distress, and still others had come to plunder and not to work. The truth gradually forced itself upon the minds of those who had rushed pell mell to the diggings that the mines were rich, so far as they went, but they did not go far

enough to satisfy the needs of a large population. Before the season was over there was as great a rush from Cariboo as there had been to it. The roads were lined with returning miners, mostly stone-broke and starving. The scenes witnessed on the wagon road, which by this time was completed, were melancholy in the extreme. As the struggling, starving, ragged crowds passed along the road, seaward bound, holdups, robberies and even murders were resorted to to fill the pockets and stomachs of some of the unlucky ones. The perpetrators were seldom apprehended and if caught escaped punishment because of the lack of evidence.

In the fall of 1862, an awful tragedy was enacted in the very heart of Cariboo. A French-Canadian packer named Rousseau had disposed of his train of animals at a good figure and had been paid about eight thousand dollars in gold dust. He joined a party of twelve others, all of whom carried more or less gold in their blankets, and as all were well armed they agreed to keep together for mutual safety. They left Barkerville early one morning in the month of September for Victoria. Now it happened that there are an upper and a lower trail, both leading to the same point. The upper trail, which was the shortest, wound over a mountain. The lower trail was longer and somewhat boggy. When the party reached the place where the two trails met, Rousseau, a young German named Lewin, who was a partner in the cigar business of the late Isidor Braverman, and an elderly German, named Wagner, left the others and decided to take the mountain trail, and meet again at a wayside house on the other side of the mountain. The three men were believed to have in their possession about \$15,000 in gold. Not a thought of danger crossed the minds of any of the party. At the place where they stopped for lunch they pledged each other's health, and when they shouldered their packs to continue the journey everything betokened a pleasant and prosperous trip. The weather was lovely. Not a cloud sailed across the bright blue sky and no suspicion of disaster lurked in the minds of any of that gay party. What was there to be feared? All had revolvers; some carried shotguns; others had both. It would be a bold band that should attempt to rob this combination of resolute men, who were prepared to die, if necessary, in defence of their treasure.

As the three men who had chosen the upper trail passed from the view of their companions, Lewin waved his hat and shouted,

## The Riches of Omineca District

In a recent issue of the British Columbia Review, F. W. Vallan contributes the following:

In writing an article descriptive of the Omineca district I cannot begin in a better way than by defining its boundaries. It comprises such portions of the drainage area of the Peace river and its many tributaries as lie within this province, the drainage area of the Stuart river above its junction with the Nechaco river, and the drainage area of the Salmon above its junction with the Fraser. Within these boundaries are thousands of miles of undeveloped and little known country, watered by majestic rivers, dotted with beautiful lakes, broad, fertile valleys and mighty mountains waiting until such time as trail, wagon road or railway shall push its way through and throw open this vast region to the prospector, miner, lumber man and settler.

The history of the Omineca district dates back to about the spring of 1870, when a large number of miners went north from the Cariboo and eastward from the coast by the Skeena river and discovered Vital creek, a tributary of the Silver creek. Here for some years rich diggings were worked. So little prospecting was carried on at this time that it was eight years after the discovery of Vital creek that Tom creek was found to be rich in gold and it was left to a Hazelton Siwash named Tom Alexis to make the discovery and tell the white men about it. Although the discoverer he was denied the right of staking the discovery claim and instead was taken farther up the creek and told he might stake there, which he did, and as luck would have it the claim given him turned out to be the best one on the creek, and is still being worked today.

During the next few years after the discovery of Tom creek, Germansen, Manson, Slate, Lost creeks were found and became the scenes of busy mining camps. Some very rich claims were struck. Holloway's Bar on Germansen, the Golden Hill and many others are pointed out today as having yielded large sums in dust. On Manson, Discovery bar, Mosquito bar, Geo. Kenny's claim, and the Brown Co.'s claim were among those that paid big dividends. Lost creek and Slate creek each had their rich claims and there were over two thousand miners scattered about the different creeks. Even in those early days and isolated as they were from the rest of the world, Germansen and Manson had all the adjuncts that have always been considered necessary to a mining camp from California to the Yukon—barrooms, gambling saloons, dance houses, all were there and Manson even boasted of a theatrical troupe one winter. At that time a large number of men wintered at the mines, some busy drifting, others getting out timbers, some trapping and

many preferring to submit to the long winter's confinement rather than face the many weary miles of hard travel to the coast in the fall and back again in the spring. Pack trains arrived in the fall loaded with all sorts of provisions for the camp, took back the mail and orders for the spring, when they would follow up the feed and generally arrive at Manson about the middle of June. The first pack train in was always loaded with a goodly supply of "spiritual comforts." Flour, bacon and tea came on the later ones.

In the spring of 1873 or '74, in the beginning of March, there suddenly appeared at the door of one of the saloons, about 9:30 one evening, an Indian with a letter for one of the miners from a friend, saying that fabulously rich diggings had been struck in Cassiar and telling him to leave immediately and come out to the coast with the bearer. The news spread like wild fire, word was sent to the different creeks, and within the next 24 hours the Omineca was virtually a deserted camp, for over 1500 men had abandoned claims, outfits, cabins and everything, had rolled their blankets, taken what grub they could carry, and were on a mad rush to the coast, following this will-o'-the-wisp, which beckoned them on to the new diggings farther afield. Some of them did very well, others regretted ever after having left their claims in the Omineca. For years after the district saw very few men. Vital creek was deserted and given over to Chinamen, where successive companies worked the creek and made what to them were fortunes, sold out and went home to China.

A few of the old timers, however, remained, among whom were Jim May, on Tom creek; William Kentyon, on Germansen; Charlie McKinnon, on Slate; George Kenny and Ezra Evans, on Manson, until in 1895, they were practically the only white men left in the district.

Three or four prospecting parties, myself among the number, some Indians either hunting or employed by the miners and about 20 Chinamen, comprised the population of the mines, where a few years before there were thousands.

In the early days travelling was much easier, as the country was then green, the timber being mostly jack pine and spruce. There was very little underbrush and pack horses could be taken anywhere. But since then the country has been swept by fire, the trees are mostly down, lying six and eight deep, and the only way to get through the country is by cutting one's way through everything that is too high to jump a pack horse over or that will not allow him to go under.

Outside the creek already named there has been very little prospecting done in the dis-

trict, principally on account of the great difficulty and expense of getting through the country. The Omineca, Findlay and Peace rivers have been followed and their banks and bars mined in different years. As early as '67 Ezra Evans and Peace River Jack mined the bars of the Peace and Parsnip. Pete Toy, about the same time, worked a bar on the Findlay river, which is yet known as "Toy's Bar," and Jim May, universally known as one of the finest types of the old-time miner, discovered May creek on the Osilina.

The Omineca district, covering the large territory it does, displays a great diversity in its physical geography. Although it must rightly be classed as mountainous, there are along its many rivers beautiful valleys opening out in places to thousands of acres of the richest ground, heavily timbered in parts, and again patches of open prairie are found giving the appearance of a beautiful park-like country. These are more especially seen along the Peace and Parsnip rivers and between Fort McLeod and Stuart lake. Wild grasses, such as red top, pea vine and vetches grow luxuriantly. Wild flowers are seen everywhere and wild fruits, such as strawberries, raspberries, currants, gooseberries are plentiful on all the open spaces. Large deposits of a very fine quality of bituminous coal have been found both on the Parsnip river and on the Peace. Coal has also been found near the Omineca river. Along the valleys of the different rivers in the district are hundreds of miles of the finest quality of spruce and cottonwood of a large size, which are only awaiting the advent of the railway to add to the wealth of the province, by being converted into lumber and pulp. Water power to turn the machinery is to be found everywhere and the rapids and falls of the Omineca district are among the most beautiful in Canada, which is saying a great deal. The climate of the district is healthy and enjoyable; the summers are a succession of warm sunny days with cool nights and just sufficient rainfall for vegetation. The winters, although cold and calm, are much less severe than they are in Alberta or Saskatchewan; the snow fall is moderate and horses winter out and come through in the spring in good condition. Garden vegetables and grains are grown to perfection. At Fort St. James, Stuart lake, and at Fort St. John, on the Peace river, I saw vegetables and grain grown that would compare very favorably with any seen on the market in Vancouver. The miners at Manson, Germansen and Tom creeks all have their little patches of garden, where they grow cabbage, turnips, lettuce, onions, etc., which proves that when population does go in, the district, which is now a wilderness, can be transformed into a farming and ranching community.

"We'll have supper waiting for you when you reach the Forks."

The men who had selected the lower trail pressed on and just before dusk reached the trying place. Their first inquiry was for the Rousseau party. They were told that they had not arrived.

"That's strange," they reasoned, "They should have been here two hours ago."

The night closed down and the men had not put in an appearance. Interest increased to anxiety. Something had happened surely, for the men were not equipped for a night in the bush. Several men, believed to be miners, came down by the mountain trail after dark, and reported that they had seen nothing of the missing trio.

One of these presumed miners was an American named Boone Helm. He had worked as a carpenter on the creek and elsewhere, and was a wild, dissolute man, with an evil record from his own country. He was accompanied by two friends. This party ate supper at the inn and laid down on their blankets. In the early morn they had breakfast and resumed their journey. They apparently had little or no money and experienced difficulty in paying for their meals.

With the first streak of dawn fifty men turned out to scour the mountain trail for the missing men. The day was a glorious one. Again the sky was cloudless, and the warm rays of the rising sun lighted the path of the searchers and led them silently up the mountain steep. The birds carolled their sweet notes amid the sylvan groves and the graceful little spotted chipmunk darted like a ray of light from branch to branch and with its weird squeak seemed to want to tell the searchers if it but could of a ghastly tragedy that had been enacted the day before in the deep recesses of the lonely trail. When half way up the mountain at a sharp turn in the trail the searchers came to a place where the underbrush was trodden down and there were the marks of many feet. A little further on a hat—Rousseau's hat—was picked up, and next a piece of cloth torn from some garment was seen lying in a pool of blood. There was blood sprinkled everywhere on the trail, on the leaves, on the trunks of trees. Next there was a sign of a heavy body having been dragged along the ground. Following that sign the searchers found two dead bodies lying, one on top of the other, in the underbrush at the side of the trail, with wide-staring eyes fixed in expressions of fright and horror. One hundred yards further on the body of Lewin was seen. He had been shot through the head while fleeing from the murderers. The three packs of blankets were next found. They had been rifled of the gold, not a sign of which was found, but a place was discovered where the robbers had apparently lain in wait for their victims and fired the first volley from ambush.

The bodies were taken to the Forks of Quesnel, where an inquest was held. Several persons who had passed over the mountain trail shortly after the discovery of the bodies were apprehended and their packs examined; but nothing was found of an incriminating nature. Among the suspected persons was Boone Helm. He was known to have already done a murder in California, and he was believed to live by robbery. Helm was followed to Victoria and taken into custody at the instance of men who were anxious to earn a large reward that had been offered. When his pack was searched nothing was found therein. Magistrate Pemberton's courtroom on Bastion street was densely crowded one morning when Helm was placed in the dock. He was a well-proportioned muscular man of about forty, with deep-set eyes. He had a soft and gentle voice, and as he had just left a barber's hands that morning he was quite presentable, although his clothes were shabby.

Confronted with the charge Helm denied it. He had passed the spot when the bodies were found an hour after the tragedy, but he knew nothing of it until the following day. If he had done the murder would not his pack reveal the presence of gold? What had the police found in the pack? Nothing, not even a pistol. He was an honest man who worked hard for his living, and he was now hungry and poor.

The chief of police here interposed with the remark: "If you work for a living why are your hands as soft as a woman's?"

"There's different kinds of work, chief," he replied. "Some work with their hands, others with their heads. I belong to the class who use their brains and don't have to work with my hands."

"What is your avocation—what do you do?" persisted the chief.

"Well, I spend one-half my time in figuring how I'm to get into debt, and the other half in figuring how I'm to get out of debt," Helm replied with an impudent leer.

A titter ran through the courtroom at this witty reply. And as, after a rigid inquiry, nothing could be found to connect him with the horrid crime he was discharged with an admonition "to leave the country at once and never return. The murderers were not caught, nor was the gold ever recovered. There are many who to this day believe that Helm was one of the culprits and that the gold was hidden near the ghastly scene, and is there still.

The subsequent career of Boone Helm in Montana and Idaho indicates that he was one of the worst of the many desperadoes who at that time infested the Pacific coast. He will appear again in these chronicles.