

NARRATIVE OF THE RED RIVER
EXPEDITION.—PART II.

BY AN OFFICER OF THE EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

(From *Hackwood for Jan.*)

[CONTINUED.]

The construction of this road was under the superintendence of the Public Works Department, the gentleman representing which in the Ministry was a French Canadian and known to be heart and soul with the priestly party in Quebec, and therefore most favourably inclined to Riel. Men of a suspicious turn of mind began to say that the fact of there being no road ready for our advance was part and parcel of a political scheme whereby the departure of the Expedition might be stopped altogether. Fortunately those who had charge of its management were not men to be turned from their plans by any ordinary difficulties; and as the promised road was not likely to be ready in time, another route to Shebandowan Lake was sought out and utilized for the conveyance of the boats, &c., &c.

A large-sized river flows out of that lake, and being joined by two others of about equal magnitude, empties itself into Thunder Bay; it is known for the greater part of its course as the Kaministiquia River. The difference of level between Shebandowan Lake and Thunder Bay is more than 800 feet; and in descending from that great height the water passes over some very fine falls, one of which is about 120 feet high, being one of the most picturesque spots in British North America.

The officials of the Public Works Department who had been employed for several years exploring, surveying and road making in that district, had impressed upon the military authorities, when the plan of operations for the Expedition was being decided upon, that this river could not be made use of owing to the dangerous nature of its rapids and the magnitude of its falls. However, when it was found that the road could not possibly be ready in time, an exploring party of one company, under Captain Young, 60th Rifles, was sent up in boats to ascertain the practicability of using it for the conveyance of boats and stores. The weather was most unpropitious; it poured continuously; the men were never dry, having constantly to work up to their waists in water; the labour was excessive, but the perseverance of the above mentioned officer, capable of overcoming any difficulties, was duly rewarded. This discovery was a happy event, as it rendered us independent of the road.

As numerous portages have to be got over before we land the reader in the Province of Manitoba, it is perhaps better to describe here the mode of crossing one, the work on all being alike in character, and only varying in amount according to the distance to be traversed and the nature of the intervening ground. The bulkiest articles taken with us were the boats, which were all about 30 feet long, and made in proportion. They were built with keels, and in form very much like those used in our navy. Each boat carried eight or nine soldiers, and two or three Indians, or civilians, who had been especially engaged as skilled in managing boats in rapid water. The stores were sixty days' provisions for all embarked, consisting of salt pork, beans, preserved potatoes, flour, biscuit, pepper, salt tea and sugar. The heaviest of these articles was the pork, which was packed in small barrels, weighing 20 lbs. each, the others being in much

lighter and much handier packages. Besides food there was ammunition, intrenching-tools, camp equipment, cooking utensils, waterproof sheets, blankets, &c., &c.; and with the artillery, two 7-pounder bronze guns, and their ammunition, material, &c.

The boats were distributed into brigades of six, to each of which a company was allotted. With each brigade were boat builders tools, and all sorts of stuff for repairs, besides spare oars, sails, &c., &c. Once started, it was known that we should have to rely upon ourselves and the stores we took with us; for such was the utter barrenness of the wilderness through which we were about to penetrate, that nothing but wood, stones and water were to be had there.

Every probable, indeed almost every possible contingency had to be thought of and provided for; and it may be confidently asserted that no expedition has ever started more thoroughly complete or better prepared for its work.

The brigades of boats were to move singly or in groups of two or three, according to circumstances; but three was the largest number that could work together on a portage, two being the best. When one of these detachments reached a portage—which it generally did before the one immediately in front of it had got all its stores, &c., over and had again started—the boats were at once drawn into the shore as close as possible and unloaded, the stores belonging to each boat being put in a separate pile. These were covered over with tarpaulins if the hour was too late for work, or if—as was always the case with the leading detachment, consisting of three brigades—the road over the portage had to be opened out, and rollers for the boats laid down upon it. At other times the men began to carry over the stores without delay, piling them in heaps, one for each boat, at the far end of the road. The ordinary method in vogue with Indians and the regular North American voyageurs for carrying loads is by means of a long strap about three inches wide in the centre, where it is passed across the forehead, but tapering off to an inch in width at the ends, which are fastened round the barrel or parcel to be portaged.

Men accustomed to this work will thus carry weights of 400 lb., and some 500 lb. across the longest portage, the loads resting on the upper part of the back and kept there by the strap going round the forehead. The great strain is thus upon the neck, which has to be kept very rigid, whilst the body is bent well forward.

As it could not be expected that soldiers untrained to such labour would be able to carry loads in that manner, short pieces of rope with a loop at each end were supplied to the boats, by means of which two short poles—cut in the woods at the portages as required—were easily converted into a very efficient hand barrow, of just the dimensions required for the conveyance of the small barrels in which our pork and flour were packed.

After, however, a little practice, a large proportion of the men soon learned to use the common portage strap, their officers setting them the example by themselves carrying heavy loads with it. As soon as all the stores had been conveyed across the portage the boats were hauled ashore and dragged over their keels resting on small trees felled across the path to act as rollers. The labour involved by hauling a heavy boat up a very steep incline, to a height of about a hundred feet, is no child's play. In each boat there was a strong painter and a towing-line by means of which and the leather

portage straps a sort of man harness was formed when required, so that forty or fifty men could haul together. As the portage was a mile long (some were more), and that each man had to make ten trips across it before all the stores of his brigade were got over, he would have walked nineteen miles during the operation, being heavily laden for ten of them. At some portages considerable engineering ingenuity was required—small streams had to be bridged and marshy spots to be corduroyed over. By this time our men returned many of them were expert axemen, and all were more or less skilled in the craft of the *voyageur* and American woodsman.

The country between Prince Arthur's Landing and Shebandowan Lake is wild and rugged. The road between those two places runs W.N.W., and may, for purposes of description, be divided into three sections—the first extending to Strawberry Creek, about eighteen miles; the second to the Matawan River, about eight miles further on, and the third from thence to Shebandowan Lake, about twenty-two miles more.

The first section is very hilly, the soil near the bay being sandy, with a surface covering at most places of from six to twenty-nine inches of peaty mould. In the valleys between the hills are deep swamps over which roads can only be made with considerable labour. The timber has been entirely destroyed in some places by fires, so that every now and then the road emerges from the thick forest into clear open spaces sometimes of many hundreds of acres in extent, where the ground is covered with the burnt trunks of fallen trees, piled up at places one over the other like spilkens, an occasional pine of great height being left standing as it were to show the traveller the vastness of the destruction. These places are called *brûlées* in the language of the country, and in a few years after the fire has passed over them, are so thickly covered by raspberry and rose bushes that it is difficult and trying to cross them on foot. The timber consists of white and red spruce, pitch pine, balsam, cedar, tamarack, white birch and poplar, the latter being at some places along the road in large quantities and of a great size. The rocks are trappean, a hard compact slate, with numerous veins of amethystine quartz and jasper, and jasper conglomerate, running through them in irregular directions. Many silver mines have been discovered in the neighbourhood, and galena, plumbago, and copper in several forms are known to abound; so that no prophetic powers are necessary to foretell the great importance that this country will assume ere long from the development of its mineral resources. About midway in this section is the most rocky district traversed by the road, where it ascends through a rugged and hilly country to a height of many hundred feet above Thunder Bay. This region is also heavily wooded, so road making through it was no easy matter. At many places large sized boulders had to be removed from the road, and at others where great rough rocks cropped up in the way, they were broken up by lighting huge fires around them and by throwing water over them when thoroughly heated. This caused them to split up into pieces, reminding one of the method said to have been adopted by Hannibal in crossing the Alps.

Some half-dozen emigrants had settled along this first section of the road, the *brûlées* enabling them to establish themselves without the labour of felling timber; and their little shanties were, when we arrived, already surrounded by potato gardens, whilst here and there the rich greenness of a