

HELENA, M.T., TO FORT McLEOD, N.W.T., *via* FORT BENTON.

II.

In a former paper I described the journey by the Northern Pacific from St. Paul to Helena. When I arrived at Helena I was the tenderest of 'Tenderfeet'—the greenest of 'Pilgrims,' and consequently was continually being fleeced, and no doubt afforded much quiet amusement to my Western friends and acquaintances. The desire of 'taking a rise' out of an Eastern pilgrim seems to be universal in the West—it rises to the dignity of a passion—and no pains are spared, no details are considered too insignificant when an old-timer undertakes an elaborate 'sell' for the unsuspecting stranger. In St. Paul I had been assured that everyone in Helena carried a revolver and cartridge belt, or a Winchester repeating rifle, and I had accordingly added these necessities to my outfit; I was somewhat disappointed to find the citizens of Helena quietly walking about the streets in a thoroughly respectable manner, and my rifle and revolver about as much needed as they would be on King-street in Toronto. However we have already stayed too long in Helena.

A daily stage—Concord coach—runs from Helena to Fort Benton—one hundred and eighty miles (if I remember rightly), making the trip from one point to the other in about thirty-four hours.

The scenery for the first day is magnificent—the road leading northwards through a broad valley, or perhaps more properly speaking, a plateau, in the mountains, which becomes gradually narrower until the splendid pass known as the Prickly Pear Canon is entered. The canon is some twenty four miles long—huge cliffs tower on either side for thousands of feet, in many places overhanging the road, which is built along a narrow ledge of rock, itself overhanging the river foaming and plunging below. Every few miles a break in the cliffs gives one a view of the snow clad peaks of the main range, and about the middle of the canon, where the cliffs are less rugged, and recede for a considerable distance, a few squatters have settled and make a desperate attempt at farming.

Passing out of the canon, the road bends outward, crosses the Dearborn, and then we begin to ascend a saddle over the eastern range of the mountains known as the Bird-tail Divide. I shall never forget the splendor of the sunrise or the exhilarating sense of freedom as we thundered down from the top of the Divide one lovely morning in July, with four horses galloping to make up time—and all brakes cast off.

From this point into Fort Benton the scenery becomes more monotonous, long sweeps of undulating prairie—dull-sienna coloured grass—blue-gray patches of alkali—an occasional marshy pool—the burning sun beating down on it all with an intolerable glare, combine to make a scene which in its dreary monotony is only too familiar to everyone who has travelled over the Western plains. Mr. Black in his 'Green Pastures and Piccadilly' attempts to work up some little enthusiasm over the scenery on the prairies, but his admiration is forced and his words have the ring of hollowness. I defy any man to travel over the plains for ten or twelve successive days without being heartily sick of them, and without an intense longing for the cool shady woods, or the varied beauties of hill and dale.

At Fort Shaw I saw for the first time a troop of United States cavalry, and must confess was not deeply impressed by neatness or discipline.

We did not reach Fort Benton until after nightfall, but I walked down the main street, along the bank of the Missouri, and saw enough to convince me that few towns can rival Fort Benton in dirtiness, loafers, bad whiskey, gambling hells and all sorts of vice. Its one redeeming feature seems to be the excellent hotel. Fort Benton is almost at the head of the Mississippi and Missouri navigation, and it seemed marvellous to think that from this far-north point one can travel uninterruptedly to the Gulf of Mexico—in the Tropics.

From Fort Benton to Fort McLeod there is a tri-monthly stage—a "Dead-axe" waggon with four mules—which occupies eight days in accomplishing a journey of two hundred and thirty miles.

The monotony of the trip is unexampled in my experience—prairie everywhere—the only objects of interest being in the details of vegetable and animal life. The prairie-flowers, principally composite, are gorgeous,—sun-flowers, ox-eyed daisies of all colours, *et hoc genus omne*. There were plenty of prairie-dogs to shoot at—the results being generally equally harmless to them and our-

selves, and an occasional rattle-snake in the trail would cause a momentary excitement—invariably resulting in a sudden and violent death on the part of the snake, under a volley of revolver bullets. Every morning we started at about five or six—"nooned" for a couple of hours at mid-day for lunch, and to feed and water the horses—and then hitching up again continued our journey until nightfall, when we generally camped by some river or small lake. A glance at the map will show that our road crosses the Teton, Marias, Milk River, &c., tributaries of the Missouri—so that we were seldom without good water, an inestimable blessing on the prairies.

After closing the Milk River Ridge, just north of the Boundary, the road leads by way of Dismal Coulee, Kipp's Coulee, and Fifteen-mile Butte, to Whoop-up or Fort Hamilton on the St. Mary's River. Fort Hamilton is a very strongly built log fort with high palisades and bastions, built some ten years ago by whiskey-traders, who used to reap an enormous harvest before the days of the Mounted Police. But its glories are things of the past, and its walls, no longer needed for protection from the Indians mad with Fire-water, are tumbling to decay. An old whiskey trader said to me mournfully—'If the Government had only left us alone for five years longer, there would not have been a blank-blank Injun alive in the Territory,' and, after tasting the Fort Benton whiskey, I became convinced of the simple candour and truthfulness of my informant. Really, however, the importance of the work being done by the Mounted Police in the North-west Territories, and the pluck and energy with which they have encountered all the difficulties and discouraging obstacles necessarily incident to a wild country and new manner of life, is altogether too little appreciated by us. It is beyond all praise.

From Whoop-up we drove into Fort McLeod in fine style in a few hours. The little town is built under the protecting eyes of the Mounted Police Fort, on the banks of Old Man River. It is far from imposing, consisting of some fifty or sixty log houses, roofed in many cases by turf, on either side of a long, straggling street. But the place is full of life, business, and activity. It is the centre of the large and important cattle ranching business—the market and distributing point for all the surrounding farmers and settlers. J. G. Baker & Co., the Wells, Fargo & Co., of the Canadian North-West, do an enormous business in their general store and banking house. The importance of their banking business can be estimated by the fact that nearly all the capital invested in cattle passes through their hands, and nearly every ranche keeps a banking account with them. Baker & Co. have done much to aid in the development of the country, and are deserving of great credit for their enterprise and generosity. One can purchase almost any article in their store that is required, and, as is almost universal in the West, rely upon getting the best goods that are made. Shoddy and cheap things cannot be sold either in the Western States and Territories or in our own North-West. Cow-boys, miners, bull whackers, mule-skinners, etc., etc., have few wants, but when they do want a thing, they want it the best of its kind.

Fort McLeod is an important police post. Major Crozier is the commanding officer—a gentleman whose kindness and hospitality to strangers is almost phenomenal—and Mr. G. B. Moffatt, formerly of Toronto, is under him as Inspector. The non-commissioned officers and men are a jolly set of fellows, and one meets among them many of those old friends who have disappeared from Ontario.

A new town site, a little higher up the river, was laid out last summer and it is expected that next season the inhabitants of the present town will move into new quarters. A new police fort is in course of erection at a cost (if I remember rightly) of some \$30,000.

C. C. McCaul.

Our Wallet.

CO-EDUCATION.

Listen to the Belles,
Fair-haired Belles!
How their plaintive, pensive wailing
For co-education swells!