

May, 1905.

## The Jasper Trail

By D. W. and A. S. Iddings.

Edmonton, the now semi-modern hub of the North Country, on the high bluff banks of the mighty Saskatchewan, swift-flowing from its not distant source in the Canadian Rockies, presents an interesting spectacle of varied activities. For a hundred years or more, since the daring traders of the old Northwest Company founded it as "New Fort Augustus" ("Old" Fort Augustus has often been confused with the "New" Fort Augustus which was built by James Hughes for the Northwest Company on the site of present Edmonton, and maintained by it until the fusion of that Company with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, and since maintained by the latter Company. The "Old" Fort stood on the opposite side of the Saskatchewan, near present Fort Saskatchewan, about 20 miles as the crow flies northeast from Edmonton, and was destroyed in 1810 by marauding Blackfeet, all trails have led to the site of the present Edmonton, and it has been the greatest raw fur mart of the world. The old fort, with its bullet-scarred log walls, is yet standing and in use as the forwarding depot for the North trade of the Hudson's Bay Company, while, on the other hand, the tidy little city has a brisk new metropolitan air that contrasts strangely with its oldest and still conspicuous industry. Here to this day the smoke-dried Northman comes with his train of lumbering pack ponies, or huskie-hauled sledges, as the season may be, carrying each its heavy pack of the pelts of the marten, mink, beaver, and now and again the costly silver fox, to be bartered to the Hudson's Bay Company for the flour, bacon, tea and sugar, which the Indians and halfbreeds of the North cherish as luxuries against their staple diet of the fresh and dried meats of the fauna. With each of such trips to town the traders, of course, renew their acquaintance with "Scotch" and "rye," and in the hotels, the stores and on the streets many a husky native, bolsterous from recent excesses, may be met, dressed in his fringed suit of buckskin and with



Throwing the Diamond Hitch.

moccasin-clad feet. Profits of a year's privation and toil are frequently and freely debauched away in a single night, and now and again a wilder bacchanal stops alone when his outfit is gone and, oftentimes, when hatless and coatless, no further advances can even be begged on his probable profits of another long year of privation and toil. Edmonton is an ideal outfitting point, as we had learned from former trips. Therefore, prompted by recurring longings for wilderness wandering, fairly starving for bacon and bannocks camp-cooked, and feverish for the sport or adventure rightfully to be expected on an overland "voyage," we had determined to make through a big and small game country to that portion of the Rocky mountains away to the north which yet maintains its virginity against the wiles of railways and the gawking of tourists, we bent our hurried steps Edmontonward and arrived there one rainy August evening.

A day spent at dickerings with exasperating horse-traders convinced us that the wisest plan was to place ourselves completely in the hands of our friends, the Hudson's Bay people. On their advice we engaged Sam Baptiste, a picturesque French half-breed, and a buffalo hunter of the by-gone days, and his son, who were at the Fort with some wagon-loads of furs, to freight us and our outfit sixty miles by wagon-trail to the post at Lac Ste. Anne. There, we were told, the Jasper pack trail began, and trail-tried horses, guides and packers could be readily had.

We were two days and nights on the most wretched excuse for a wagon-trail that it has ever been our discomfort to travel, and we've hit a good many in our time. They were jolly good fellows, these halfbreed freighters, laughing all the time, and when anything struck them as so funny that laughter would not express their merriment, they would roll the ground in their glee. After the first few hours out we became fast friends, all pulling together with the horses when wagons were stuck in the mud and muskeg, oftentimes unloading and carrying the flour, bacon and blankets to vantage ground on our backs. Tired of such travel and worried by the myriads of flies we pulled into Lac Ste. Anne amid the welcome barking of dogs. It was a Sunday evening, and we were soaked to the skin by a drenching rain which had been falling for some hours. Our "slickers" had been packed beyond ready reach in the bottoms of the wagons.

Peter Gunn, the officer in charge of the post, and his family gave us a hearty Scotch welcome, in which the several engages warmly joined. The word soon spread among

the halfbreeds and Indians about the lake that a couple of Montyas (Englishmen; by adoption, any strangers, "tenderfeet"), had arrived with an outfit and were looking for packers and ponies with which to hit the Jasper trail.

After two days of bickering and hiring we were ready, with a halfbreed guide, Alexi, a white packer and seven horses. It was fine travelling through the tall grass of the lowlands and across the tall grass of the Popina watershed, and although the precipitation had been heavy the Sturgeon and Pembina rivers were forded with comparative ease. Beyond the Pembina there is a goodly stretch of miserable muskeg, and muskegs mean trouble, and lots of it for both man and beast. First the trail becomes muddy, then mucky. Next the horses flounder in a wabbling mass of watery vegetation, while sickly willows, waving here and there, beckon you on, mirage-like, to even worse stretches, where mired horses must be cursed, beaten and finally unpacked, then cursed and beaten again before firm ground is once more reached. Time and again our horses would sink into the stuff up to their shoulders, seeming to float around in it as a body might in water after having displaced a quantity of it equal to its own weight. We crudely bridged the more impassable places with logs and fresh-cut spruce boughs, but now and again a horse, frightened by slipping a foot between the logs, would jump the contrivance entirely and sink into the mire almost out of sight, so that an hour's hard work was often required to fish him out. It was on such occasions as this that our white packer's feigned rheumatism was principally in evidence. However, if eating too much sugar generates uric acid and that in turn superinduces a rheumatic condition, it may have been real rheumatism. His great ability seemed to lie in bossing the job. We had one horse in our string that was possessed of traits of character quite similar. He would invariably lie down whenever a difficult part of the trail required extra exertion.

So we came through muskeg, bush and savannah, the tall running just north of the entire length of Buffalo Dunes lake, a large rambling body of water, the haunt of countless wild fowl, of which we winged enough from our horses' backs to fill our pots and frypans. Grouse, too, were plentiful in the prairie and spruce bush. One morning Alexi in great excitement returned with the horses, which had wandered away some distance to graze among their favorite pea-vine. "Chicken, his dance! Chicken, his dance. Hurry, you see, too," he exclaimed. We tumbled out quickly and were off, for a sight, if possible, of the queer quadrille in which the grouse of the prairie frequently engage. Coming to the place Alexi indicated, however, we found that only a few of the ceremonious little dancers remained. But they were still hopping about, so rapt in their singular exercise as to permit us a close survey of their antics. Soon the revellers began to disperse, and it was then our presence became known. So, as they flushed, we bagged several.

At length we came to the burnt-timbered banks of the River McLeod. Swollen to flood height and still rising, it rushed along bank-full, with a current known only to North Country streams of glacial origin. Sullen and dismaying in the shades of the falling night it swept before us, forbidding persuading a camp on the near side. Next morning we arose early, in a drizzling rain, only to find that fording was impossible. We must raft. Huge logs were felled from the fire-blackened forest about us and hustled to the water's edge. These we tied together with the cinch ropes from the pack-saddles, making withal a rude but serviceable craft. The pack-bags, saddles, guns

and other impedimenta were placed aboard. Then the horses, which in this country are never picketed, and seldom hobbled after several nights out, were driven in from a nearby meadow where they were feeding. They were led down the bank by their neckropes and, amid shouts and hurrying of sticks and stones to prevent their turning back, fairly pushed off into the water for their long swim to the opposite shore. Once we saw them safely across and quietly browsing the strange nutritious reeds, so relished by them, which grow on the west shore of this river—the like of which we have seen nowhere else—we prepared for our own embarkation, first fitting ourselves with long poles, hewn paddlelike at one end. We poured off into the swirling waters and were carried into the mid-current before having time to work our paddles. By keeping the raft broadside against the stream its displacement was alone prevented. By almost superhuman efforts the current toward the other shore was finally reached and all was then smooth sailing until we grounded on the sand where the water was knee-deep, about a hundred yards from the shore.

We were now in the favored haunts of Ureus horribilis. We had been warned several days before by some Stoney Indian hunters, upon whom we happened, to avoid using any expletives when referring to the grizzly, else, they said, he would surely catch us that night. Accordingly on coming within his confines, to test this native assertion, and incidentally, if possible, the shocking power of a new .35 calibre rifle, we let the woods ring with challenges to musqua (bear); nor were we to be disappointed with the results. We had no sooner hit the trail again than we ran onto the fresh tracks of a grizzly of considerable size. But although we saw other tracks now and again for several days as the trail led along the high banks of the river, it was not until we were ascending the divide between the McLeod and the Athabasca, and had camped in the burnt edge of a dense forest, after a frightful day's travel through muskeg, actually running uphill, that we came upon the game we were seeking. They were not so dangerous as we had been led to believe.

Our camping place was most desolate. The dull grey of the morning was just rending the sable shroud of night, and Alexi alone was astir, gathering wood. The rest of us were still inanimate in our sleeping bags, when our slumbers were disturbed by a vigorous but noiseless shaking. It was Alexi, and in a low voice he muttered, "Musqua, musqua." In an instant we were on our feet. Having slept in our clothes that night as usual, no time was lost. We followed the halfbreed's lead cautiously to a little knoll some hundred yards or less behind the camp, whence, sheltered, we could command a view of a swale, well-walled about by forest, and some twenty-five or thirty acres in area, the lower end of which was luxuriant with those ripe red berries so loved by bruin. Fortunately the wind was in our faces, and as we peered down through the half daylight we saw two voracious berry-eaters peacefully munching their breakfasts. A well directed shot from the .35 laid low in her tracks the smaller of the two, a female grizzly. With the other, however, whose hind quarters were alone presented as a target, the first shot from the .30-40 failed quite naturally of as good results. Maddened by the pain of a hind leg shattered at the femur, the grizzly turned toward us, and with a terror-spreading display of froth-dripping ivory, advanced, growling, till another shot sent him to keep his mate company. He was a magnificent specimen, measuring probably five feet eight inches along the vertebra. How the natives dare to face such dangerous monsters with



Old Fort Edmonton, Hudson's Bay Company.

the scant protection afforded them by their ancient muzzle-loaders—the standard firearm of the North—is hard to understand. Taking with us enough fresh meat for several days, we anchored the hides, which we had time to but ill prepare, and were off again.

"Wah, wah, wah, Arabiscow si-pl," hallooed Alexi, who was riding in advance, as the murky green waters of the glacial-born Athabasca came into pleasing sight through a rift in the dense sub-arctic forest, and we knew we were nearing the shack of Jack and Gregg, free traders, on the banks of Prairie creek, a mountain-torrent tributary. Some forty Indians, hunting within a radius of several hundred miles, trade their furs here—for flour at \$10 a hundred and bacon at a dollar the pound. These prices are steep, but it is hard work packing in supplies. While we boiled the kettle and chatted pleasantly with Jack Gregg, one of the few precursors of an age of commercialism which a few decades will surely bring to that far country, an untoward incident occurred. Prairie creek's banks are high and quite perpendicular here, where it flows through a beautiful upland, a choice pasture to which our always hungry horses eagerly trotted, once saddle free. One of the horses, too venturesome it would seem, fell into the stream, and unable to clamber up its steep sides, remained perforce some hours in the chilling waters of the snow-fed creek before his predicament was discovered. We finally succeeded, by a well-placed lariat throw, in encircling his neck, whereby he was literally yanked out, seemingly more dead than alive. Saddling another horse we soon restored his limbs to their erstwhile activity by pulling him about until he foamed with event.

Up the Athabasca river from Prairie creek we pursued a trail treacherous with abundant woodland muskegs, the while winding about the bases of the tall peaks, rugged, sheer and snow-clad, that guard the Jasper or Yellow Head pass through the mountains. As the river, widening into Burnt lake, encroached upon the lowlands, we climbed higher and higher, till the blue sky seemed but a few thousand feet above us as we threaded the narrow shale ledges amid the clouds. A half-mile below us, reflected in the glassy waters, were the cerulean colors also. Green islands dotted the



Jack Gregg.

saury lake, and dark woodland wrapt its shores, jutting out at its up-stream end, where Jasper House once stood. And so a green gateway is formed through which the rushing river comes; let out from Jasper lake above, into which it first broadens as it comes from its nearby source.

Above Jasper lake, with its sand-duned beach, the passage of the river was made in a dug-out, cached there, and we pushed on past Henry House, an abandoned trappers' lodge, step by step up the giant stairway of plateaus to the summit of the pass, where we made a permanent camp for few days' hunt for goats and big-horn sheep. The first day we were acquainted in our topees, though comfortable with the lounging furs and green wood fire.

The second day breaking clear and cold, we crept up and over the crags to the stark as only moccasin-clad feet can, our rifles serving as Alpine-stocks. It was slow work and hard. Coming to an especially bold pinnacle we ascended and scanned the surrounding rocks through the glasses. Across an apparently unbridgeable chasm, on a hogback below us fully a half-mile away, we descried a band of goats, seven in number. We had found our quarry, but the question of getting within gunshot seemed a grave one. Roping ourselves together, owing to the unquestionable dangers of the approach, we descended. But we narrowly escaped a glissade at the bottom. We finally reached the gorge safely, and labored up the opposite scarp. This brought us to the uppermost end of the hogback upon which we had seen the goats, and there they still were, some six hundred yards away. Flat on our stomachs, we crawled closer and closer, keeping the ridge between us and the game. Hidden by this natural breastwork we soon were within an easy and unobstructed range. Our rifles spoke simultaneously, and again and again independently; the thin vapor of the smokeless powder vanished, and three fine goats lay prone. We had picked off the three having the best heads; the others, two ewes and their kids, with mingled curiosity and awe stood transfixed a moment or so, then scampered away over the cliffs. The getting the game to camp was almost as difficult as securing it. We often literally dragged our trophies over the rough rocks.

While we scoured about the remaining few days of our stop at the end of our trail we saw several other bands of goats, but got within range of none. Unfortunately we saw no bighorns. Their tracks were plentiful, though never in localities where goats were to be found. These mountain ovids seem to have nothing in common,