
ON THE ALASKA HIGHWAY

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WHEN the proposal to visit some of the relatively little known Indian groups in Northern British Columbia first arose, there was the question of travel to discuss. Hitherto travel in that region had been both difficult and time-consuming. At least until the advent of airlines, that region had been practically isolated from outside contact. Now, however, there was the Alcan or Alaska Highway. Could civilians use a military road for something called anthropological research?

Most questions regarding travel in a distant country are seldom fully answered until the traveller has actually arrived in that country itself. The Canadian north is not an exception to this rule. The Alcan is big enough to accommodate even so esoteric a thing as an anthropologist. At the same time, and this is something that was soon realized, it is, in the sense that it is exclusively focused on the urgency of the present, exceedingly small. If vision is necessary to prevent future disaster, the Alcan offers many problems for thinking people to consider.

The pulse of that great artery feeding a vast stretch of virgin territory with the lifeblood of outside contact is felt beating as far south as the border. There an assortment of burly men from Minnesota and Wisconsin begin to stand out among the train passengers. Conversations in the smoking car reveal their business is also in the north; they are the men who have been hired through newspaper ads by the American contractors who are finishing the Highway.

Calgary is relatively stable under the impact of the things going on up north, but Edmonton is a town figuratively "sitting on its ear". American soldiers, officers, laborers, stenographers and secretaries throng the streets, restaurants and hotels, making the visitor from the States feel very much at home, if a trifle pressed for lack of accommodations. Overhead the drab olive craft of the American army compete to split the air with their din, matched up against the yellow planes of the Canadians and the aluminum torsoes of the commercial airlines. Edmonton is a town where fantastic things can happen, like the American telephone operator at U. S. Army headquarters who may have plugged in and greeted a Canadian major-general with the salutation, "U. S. Army of Occupation"!

To-day much of Canada faces north, to greet the promise of new country being carved out of the bush by human energy and human will. It is from Edmonton that the pioneers will depart when they go to build their homes in that new country. Already there is a constant exodus of human traffic and freight flowing north from Edmonton. Each evening, shortly after five, the somewhat antiquated blue cars of the Northern Alberta Railroad slip out of the terminal to begin their northern run—five hundred miles in not less than twenty-four hours. The Northern Alberta creaks under its unaccustomed burden of passenger and freight traffic, but it is the vital link; some day it will have a place in history.

Dawson Creek, the end of the line, is fashioned after a boom gold-rush town; only the omnipresent khaki-clad American soldiers lend it a more serious atmosphere. Here, loitering between the crowded post-office, which is housed in a tunnel-like galvanized hut, and the miniscule bus terminal, which has no choice but to conduct its business in the street, the visitor from the south sees his first bush Indians. They are visitors from the north who have come to see this confused, bustling teapot. Their stolid faces stare. Perhaps through fear of what it portends they do not believe it will last.

The *Greyhound* busses that travel the "line" from Dawson Creek to Whitehorse and Fairbanks are not to be boarded for a bit of pasteboard costing so many dollars and cents. They are run by the American army, and to travel by them requires the appropriate priority, which will not be issued until the traveller can obtain a pass to enter upon this military highway. There is the customary difficulty with spelling "anthropologist", and the trip is begun.

From Fort St. John to Fort Nelson, a distance of about 300 miles, there was time to think. Where once only a pack-horse trail had wound its leisurely way through mosquito and gnat infested bush, there was now a highway being constantly improved. No longer did supplies for these outposts require ferrying up the Mackenzie, up the Liard and down the Fort Nelson River. What, then, is the future of this spruce and poplar wilderness through which the army engineers have literally cut their way? Behind these speculations was the frank assumption that this *would* last; this gateway would not be allowed to crumble, the invitation it extended would not be declined. The north was open; from now on, its rate of development would only be accelerated.

Vast new regions are open for business. What kinds of business can move in? Rich mining and oil resources are promised by the geologists. The oil wells at Norman far down the Mackenzie are a promise of what may come. Radium, gold, iron, coal, these are some of the treasures the earth may conceal. Resources in fur-bearing animals still exist in comfortable abundance, but these are destined to disappear as that "ambivalent" force called Civilization establishes its new home here. What problems this outlook promised for the Indian population, offered food for a whole summer's thinking.

Farming yet remains to be considered. When the timber is down and the bush is cleared, will the valleys of the Beaton, Prophet, Muskwa, Fort Nelson and other rivers become Peace River blocks, rich in wheat lands? In parts such a development depends upon whether the projected railroad is put in from Prince George along the Rocky Mountain Trench. But potential fertility can already be gauged from the existent Fort Nelson gardens (and equal abundance is at hand from the valley of the Mackenzie). In Fort Nelson beets, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, radishes, lettuce, cabbage, corn, turnips do remarkably well in the short summer. No doubt they benefit from the long days of June and early July. We ate the season's first potatoes, small ones but extraordinarily good they were, in mid-July. Root crops do particularly well here in the north. From small patches of cleared ground the people get enough potatoes to last them through the winter and spring. With hardier strains of seed the north may pour bumper crops into the granaries and on to the dinner tables of a nation.

It is typical of our day that when we speak of the wealth of a country we somehow mention first its material resources. There are some people who cannot even conceive of a country's human resources as wealth (except, perhaps, with an eye to potential labor power). An anthropologist is interested in human and cultural resources—in the people, and in the life that they have shaped for themselves. In the north those people who have a culture distinctive from the whites are the Indians.

There are no Indian reservations above Fort St. John and the Peace River. North of the Peace the Indian still lives largely as did his forefathers, except for his greater dependence upon the white man's flour, butter, tea, coffee, sugar and canned goods. To the anthropologist who came here to study the Indian community this dependence could not obscure the fact

that culturally the northern Indian still retained an affinity with his environment that makes him far more independent and self-reliant than his southern contemporaries who are segregated on reserves.

The development of the fur resources of the north has for over a hundred years been largely in the hands of Canada's northern Indians. The significance of this fact may not occur to the visitor who sees these somewhat shabby, furtive, wondering, dark-skinned people for the first time. When encountered on the Highway they will, for a quarter or a half dollar, stand patiently to be "shot" by an elated convoy driver's Kodak. In their settlements of log cabins and tents their furtiveness vanishes. Here they reveal themselves an animated, friendly community possessed of radios, Kodaks, outboard motors, sewing machines and cast iron cook stoves. Their language, long regarded as one of the most difficult, is spoken with only slight variations from Alaska to the Peace River. Theirs is the Athapascan tongue: the tribes, Chipwyan, Beaver, Grand Lakers, Slavey and others are all culturally as well as linguistically related.

Aboriginally the cultural organization of these tribes was never complex. People lived primarily by hunting, and meat was the staple food. The bush was difficult to traverse in summer. Then rivers were the main arteries of travel for people who used birch and spruce canoes as well as temporary boats made of moosehides. In the winter snowshoes and dog-sleds took, and still take, the hunter to his game. The family was the basic social unity, but sometimes a few families merged in a band where tense individualism allowed little leadership to develop. Only the best and the oldest could advise, and then only when their advice was sought. War with other tribes was chronic. Illness and death were feared, and to control them *shamans* used "medicine" that involved much ritual but little dosing. Education was centred in the family. The father taught his son to hunt; the mother taught her daughters to sew and cook. These were the basic requirements for existence in the stern environment where these people lived. There was another environment, however, the social. Children grew up and had to live with other people, and so the family transmitted those attitudes and values that had dominated inter-personal behavior for many centuries. The child was taught to be watchful of his individuality, proud of his successes, ashamed of aggression toward his companions, and afraid to steal. Other teachings

related him to non-human forces, and provided the religious substructure of the Indian's way of life. These inculcated a belief in spirits who controlled the external world, and appropriate attitudes toward the animals that permitted themselves to be killed for food. In this family "school" the culture was passed on from generation to generation. The pattern still continues, for the white man's class-room is rarely seen by the Indian youngsters.

Economically the war has benefitted the Indian. High prices for fur have increased his earnings to the point where a family may now come through the winter and spring with \$2,000 to \$3,000 worth of fur on the trader's books. There is little enough to buy with money, but prices are still high, despite the Highway, and a summer is often long enough to see even \$3,000 disappear—especially when there was a part of last winter's outfit still to pay off at the trader's. Other ways of spending money are being learned. At Fort Nelson last summer five young Slave men took the plane to Edmonton and from there went to Calgary for the Stampede. The mail order catalogues lure the young women into ordering wardrobes of dresses and coats that must do far more for morale and comfort than the aboriginal moosehide dress which was one of the first cultural elements to disappear with the coming of the white man. Shoes are increasing in frequency, but many people still favor the comfortable moccasin and, until cement replaces the grass and dirt footpaths, this will probably retain a valued place in the natives' lives.

How the money is spent is not so important as the fact that money and work give these people an independence which may, in ten or twenty years, be sharply threatened.

Anthropologists, who are currently concerned with the application of their science to the healthy adjustment of colonial peoples in Africa and the Far East to changed conditions, will never be able to accomplish the miracle of the north. Here the Indian did not go down before white culture as he did, for example, in the United States. Conditions in the north attracted no great number of Europeans who would have deprived these tribes of their land and despoiled the country of its game. The white men who did come offered the Indian work similar to what he had always done. He had always lived off the bush for food, clothing and shelter. Now with guns and traps and Hudson's Bay tea and flour he could do so far more comfortably than before. The missionary may have been somewhat

of a difficulty at first, but eventually the people made the best adjustment possible to a new religion—they absorbed it into their own way of life. They looked upon the church rituals as good "medicine" destined to make their traps and game bags fuller than ever before.

Underneath the superficial trappings of guns and clothing the way of life of Canada's northern Indians was little changed. But the population declined. Whether this resulted from changes in diet, clothing and housing, or from lack of immunity to the white man's diseases cannot be definitely stated. Colds, flu, pneumonia and other introduced diseases took their toll. Medical attention was lacking; at only a few widely separated posts did the Indian Affairs Branch place agents who were also doctors. There is one such at Telegraph Creek, then not another for 550 miles till Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie is reached. South, the nearest to those two places is 400 miles away at Fort St. John. Perhaps some of those deaths could have been avoided.

If the population decline is successfully arrested, what future can the Indian expect? If his game vanishes, as it has largely done in the east, there are two courses open to him. He can live off the last few small animals of the bush together with treaty rations, or he can go on a reserve. Treaty money and rations mean so little at Fort Nelson that last summer almost a majority of the Indians of that settlement were not even on hand to receive them. But to reduce them to dependence on these, or to move them to a reserve, is inadequate substitute for freedom, independence and active cooperation in the economy of the dominant white culture. These things have brought the Indian in the north self-respect. When Indian officials think of the future, they must also think to preserve these things.

Gardening or farming will not be a successful solution. The anthropologist can point out why. Some of the Indians in the settlement of Fort Nelson plant a few potatoes, but such men are in the minority. Their interest in gardens is weakly rooted. It is important for the Indian administrator to remember that these northern people are meat eaters. Six men can consume a large part of a freshly killed moose overnight. When there is meat, the elation of the village can be felt; it is like a charge of electricity in the air. When they have been several days without meat, the people become moody; inter-personal relations proceed in a minor key. These attitudes belong to the Athapascan personality, and are transmitted in the family situation

which, it will be remembered, is the primary educational and socializing factor of their society. Such people will never look kindly on the vegetable. Nor is there much hope of easily overcoming such attitudes. Long years of persistence make such traits deeply rooted. They are not in any sense organic, but they are complexly interwoven with the process of child-rearing. Where farming prevails on the southern reserves, agents and farm instructors alike confess of the inability of the Indian to apply to his work the methods of white agriculturists, who indeed regard the earth and its bounties in quite a different light. The romanticism with which our religion and literature endow grain and growing things is exactly contrary to the steadfastness with which the Indian clings to meat as the proper food.

The whole problem may be brushed aside because it lacks immediacy, and because there are more important things to be done. The anthropologist would agree there are things to be done that are equally important, but the dignity and self-respect of our last primitive folk is also important.

Cultures are ways of solving problems posed by living together and by the physical environment. A culture, including all its component parts, religion, art, tools, language, skills, and attitudes toward life, is created and has the same verity as a work of art. Paintings and architectural masterpieces are preserved from destruction in war, but the past few hundred years of European expansion have seen no such regard for the preservation of the values of human cultures. The cultures of primitive peoples have been trampled under foot, in the infatuation that the white man has had with his own greatness. That the primitive might have something in his way of life which he could teach us, or something with which he could contribute to our own way of life, was of course not even to be thought of. That the primitive personality had certain rights which were entitled to respect occurred to remarkably few people who believed in democracy for themselves.

The results of these attitudes are deplorably evident in the waste, suffering and disorganization that followed European conquest and civilization. Human cultures created from a people's experience in answer to characteristic problems were destroyed without a qualm. The people who remained were left culturally and spiritually homeless and naked, deprived of any values, traditions and a faith that they could call their own. Sometimes even their language was prohibited to them.

When such people reacted from the depths of frustration with understandable aggression, they were shot down.

The cultures of the northern Athapascans have already been partly dissolved, but hitherto that dissolution, as we have seen, has not been accompanied by wholesale disorganization. The identity of many of these people as communities remain. This is a phase of culture that is most important, for it ensures the transmission of cultural traditions and values.

Inevitably the anthropologist is asked what *he* would do. Without attempting a "blueprint", it is possible to state certain minimal requirements for any altered picture of the way of life of these northern people.

(1) The community of Athapascan speaking families must be allowed to persist; the use of the native language must not be discouraged.

(2) The family must not be broken up by taking children from their parents and sending them to live in school.

These first two points promise to insure the verbal transmission of cultural values between the generations, and the reinforcement of those values by having them shared with other people who speak the same language.

(3) Economic activities must be such as to give the people independence from white supervision, and must not require more than a modest investment of capital. They must not require skills radically different from those now possessed by the people, and should preserve such skills as have been developed during the course of centuries.

Trapping is done by the Indian on his own, and calls for the preservation of all those ways of the forest that have characterized the Indian in fact and fiction. His traps are bought once. His outfit for the season is bought on credit and paid for in the spring with the proceeds of his work. Hence the personalities of these people have never had to absorb values of foresight.

(4) A diet abundant in meat should be available.

(5) Economic activities followed by the Indians should be largely outdoor.

(6) The work must not be routine or sedentary.

This is the prescription of the anthropologist. It rests on the belief that there is some contribution that these people can make to the world of which they are a part. It is not for the white man to tell them what the contribution must be, although he may make them aware of desirable opportunities. The breaking down of the conditions to which these people

have been accustomed is going on all the time. The Highway and the opening of the north will hasten that breakdown. If we can learn to respect these minimal requirements for the preservation of Athapascan culture, we can help to maintain these people as uniquely active groups within the world society. We shall have made possible a healthy adjustment of a folk culture to a changing world, and shall have put into action some of the most deep seated principles of democracy.
