

A.H. Phipps Memoirs
of
Charles E. Bedaux Sub-Artic Expedition 1934

After six years of travel and exploration of the innermost reaches of the Peace River country, one gains some measure of understanding of the beauty and magnitude of its vast mountain ranges, picturesque lakes and streams, timber resources and miles of rolling wheat lands. not forgetting the vagaries of climate in all its moods. They defy description.

The most memorable of these ventures into the north country occurred in 1934 in the form of the Charles E. Bedaux sub-artic expedition in which he proposed to drive five Citroen half tracks from Edmonton across the northern interior of British Columbia to Telegraph Creek, thence down the Stikine River to Wrangel Alaska.

Various articles have been published regarding this extraordinary man of French origin but a naturalized American citizen who had already made two hunting trips in British Columbia in 1926 and 1932.

Questions arose as to the motives of some of his undertakings.

Well known in international society he was host to the Duke and Dutchess of Windsor at his Chateau in France.

Later during the war he became involved with high German officials in a pipe line venture in North Africa.

When the Allied Armies invaded that country he was arrested and brought to Miami Fla. where rather than face indictment for treason, committed suicide by an over dose of sleeping tablets.

In the writers opinion having served him as assistant surveyor on his expedition, joined his International Co. and was employed for over two years in the gold mines of Johannesburg. South Africa, found him ~~as generous~~ ^{A man generous} to the extreme to those he employed and one who loved to make money regardless of who it came from and enjoyed spending it lavishly on unusual jaunts.

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On July 3rd. 1934 I arrived in Edmonton to find some fifteen members of the Expedition assembled at the McDonald Hotel.

In the Bedaux entourage was Mrs. Bedaux, her companion a Madam Chiesa from Paris, Josephine their Spanish maid, John Chisholm a Scottish hunter from Bedauxs' estate in France and M. Balourdet his French mechanic.

J.B. Bececk a geologist now living in South Africa who took a part prominent in the P.G.E. Resources Survey in 1929-30 was second in command. A well known B.C. land surveyor F.C. Swanell as geographer.

A Swiss guide who carried a pair of skis some 400 miles and never used them.

Floyd Crosby a top level photographer from Hollywood and assistant, and a camp cook.

The five Citroen tractors each approximately 3000 lbs. capacity with a top speed of 18 kilometers per hour and a compound low gear for mountain grades were being loaded with an incredible amount of Safari equipment, movie cameras, tripods and crates of film, especially designed tents for the ladies, an arsenal of guns and ammunition, one pack horse load of expensive boots and shoes purchased in Paris and New York, cases of Champagne and a generous supply of canned Devonshire cream.

On the day of departure following a Champagne breakfast at gaily decorated tables, this oddly assorted cavalcade set out via Jasper Ave. to Government House for a grand send off by the Lieut. Governor of Alberta, then a drive of twenty miles to the predominantly French village of Morninville to shelter for the night from a violent thunder storm and downpour of rain.

A cold depressing rain was falling in the morning. Clouds were low on the hills and the world seemed shrouded in mist as we travelled some 50 miles over slippery roads to reach the town of Athabasca at 7.30 P.M.

The country seemed drab and colorless as road conditions became worse. There seemed to be no friction between ground and rubber as we slithered from one side of the road to the other, but without mishap we

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reached the town of Slave Lake where the entire population turned out to greet us. Some youngsters led us to a reasonably good camp ground on the shores of Lesser Slave Lake.

At Kinuse our loads were weighed and found to be over weight so the first lot of surplus equipment was shipped back to Edmonton.

Then on through rolling hills and grass lands to High Prairie where a small cafe turned out an excellent lunch on short notice.

The roads improved a little as the weather turned intensely cold for July. Crossing the Little Smoky River southward to Valley View, thence along the south shore of Sturgeon Lake and through the rich wheat lands in the Valley of the Peace to Grand Prairie at 10.30 P.M.

Pioneer conditions are still apparent here although many settlers had passed through in earlier years, a few were still travelling Westward in wagons well loaded with all their worldly possessions with even the family cow tied on behind.

After a speech of welcome from the Mayor of Grand Prairie we moved on through Wembly and Hythe to enter British Columbia at Topper Creek. The unreasonable rains had turned the roads into a nightmare of sticky gumbe mud causing stops to clear tracks of mud and make repairs.

Bedauxs' car broke down and a two day halt was called at Gundys ranch for a general overhaul.

The cars in shape again an early start was made and we arrived in Pouce Coupe for a good breakfast at the Hart Hotel, and as usual the population turned out to greet us.

The tri-color was in evidence as we set out to cross the Peace River at Tayler.

Crossing the five cars on a small ferry propelled by the force of the stream gave us some anxious moments as the cars were heavily loaded and the river unuaually high.

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A drive of two hours brought us to Fort St. John, in those days a small straggly town of muddy streets in which we were met by a group of youthful cow-boys, waiting for us with one hundred and thirty pack and saddle horses.

World wide publicity came to the Peace River country through this unique expedition, also a bonanza of cash to the many settlers who had been through some lean years of the depression, through the sale of horses and equipment, and to the cow-boys, the prospect of being on a generous payroll for the next three or four months brightened the situation.

A large pack train loaded with supplies and fuel for the tractors was made up and sent ahead in charge of Commander Geike an ex naval officer who had settled near Pouce Coupe in earlier years and often referred to as the odd ball, as on the coldest days he wore nothing but kaki shorts a sleeveless shirt and a black silk bandana around his head.

Some years later he was murdered by bandits in the Durango Mountains of Mexico presumably while hunting for gold.

A telegram was received from Mr. C.W. Lemarque, a veteran B.C. land surveyor who had left in April with a crew to locate and cut out trails beyond the Prophet River, advising that he with one man and four horses had made a quick trip to Dease Lake and Telegraph Creek.

The party had now grown to forty members and chaos reigned in Fort St. John as loads were re-arranged and packs made up for the horses. Heavy showers and violent winds had created a sea of mud to make things more difficult.

At night a banquet was held at the old hotel with the usual speeches from the prominent citizens.

In a wild west atmosphere the departure from Fort St. John was a scene long to be remembered. Nearly two hours were lost putting on a show for the cameras, a miracle no one was hurt in the melee of

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excited and restive horses. Several packs were bucked off and scattered in the mud, but finally got away followed by the five half tracks which now faced a country that would put them to the supreme test and prove too much for them.

With no roads to follow now progress was slow over undulating country through Indian reserve, the leading car almost capsized in a flooded creek bed. After hauling it clear an old ungraded wagon track led us to the little town of Montney.

Leaving Montney the last village we were to see for some time, the route became soft swampy ground. All cars were bogged down at times and were hauled out with block and tackle. A train of thirty horses passed us, churning up the ground and adding to the difficulties, but after much profanity in English and French the exhausted crew made camp after travelling three miles in seven hours.

Two more days of continual struggle cutting off stumps, filling in bad holes, with trees and brush, watched by an amazed group of Indians from an open hillside.

On the second day after long hours getting the cars through bad stretches of muskeg it was midnight before a suitable camp was found.

Tempers were stretched to the limit and moral was low until M. Bedaux produced a bottle of what he called his special liniment for sore and tired muscles. It proved to be an excellent brand of Scotch and taken internally eased the tension considerably.

July 28th. was declared a day of rest, all hands repairing the tractors while the Indians did a brisk business selling mocasins at seventy-five cents a pair. Chief Sam of the local Indian band was invited into camp and presented with a .22 Automatic pistol by M. Bedaux.

The radio operator had been fired and sent back with his heavy equipment, also a rider went out with despatches for New York and Paris

with a report of our progress.

A partially washed out bridge was patched up enough to cross the cars over Cache Creek then a steep climb to an open grassy ridge to have lunch and enjoy a feed of wild raspberries picked by Madam Chiesa and Josephine. A magnificent view of the Halfway River valley opened before us, of grassy hills, groves of shimmering poplars and the deeper green of jack pine and spruce.

Along this ridge we found unexpected good going which led to the Stan. Clark ranch, then to a higher ridge with a steep descent to the Cameron River where deadmen were sunk in the ground with cables attached on which the cars were lowered down a 35 degree slope 1150 ft. to the river bank.

At 11 P.M. the pack train arrived to make camp in the dark 607 miles from Edmonton.

Our mechanic Monsieur Balourdet a Frenchman of high calibre, in his late thirties, with a splendid war record, winner of the ^{CROIX} cross de Guerre, Chevalier de l'Ordre Etoile Noire and two other decorations in the first world war.

He came to B.C. from the Citroen Co. in Paris with the five tractors for the expedition, was devoted to the half tracks and worked long and weary hours keeping them in shape, was very indignant when his car got stuck and cables run out to pull him out of a bad spot, he realized that the cars were not suitable to the rough terrain of the north country, but never ceased to remind us of the Citroens fine performance in the Central African jungles and in the Sahara Desert.

Through a park like valley of rich bottom land and luxuriant vegetation to arrive at Westergaards ranch, a Danish family who had settled here ten years earlier and who supplied us with vegetables and 500 lbs. of fresh meat.

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Climbing from the valley into beautiful rolling range land which took us to the Hunter Brothers ranch, two very hospitable chaps dressed exactly alike. It was difficult to tell them apart as they rode with us over good trails to Iron Creek.

It is fitting here as we leave all signs of settlement to make reference to the settlers and homesteaders with whom we came in contact on our trek through the country. The pioneer spirit remains strong in these kindly, hospitable people these kindly, hospitable people always ready to help in every way and their knowledge of the country they loved so well was of great help to us.

A move of five and a half miles brought us to the junction of the Graham and Halfway rivers where final plans were made to abandon the five half tracks.

A large raft of dry spruce logs was built and inflated rubber floats set between the logs. A winch and cable set to haul the raft across the river and back again.

A road leading up to a 150 ft. bluff was built, up which No. 1 and No. 2 cars were driven to the edge, the drivers jumped clear as the cars rolled and crashed into the river. Cars No. 3 and 4 were stripped and abandoned on the river bank.

Meanwhile camp equipment, pack saddles etc. were ferried across the stream then the horses were herded to the edge to swim the 100 yard crossing. One unfortunate beast was caught in the swift current and drowned before help could reach it.

A charge of dynamite was placed behind a mass of loose rock about 200 yds. down stream, while car No. 5 was put aboard, swung into mid stream and cut loose to drift down and hit the rim rock dead centre but the charge failed to explode and the raft floated on to pile up on a gravel bar undamaged.

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A battery of cameras placed at strategic points on the river bank, used some 1500ft. of film photographing this incredible job of destruction while our French mechanic M. Balourdet looked on broken hearted at the loss of his "leedle tractors."

Still plagued by continual bad weather the job of re-arranging the loads for the pack train was a difficult one as we are now entirely dependant on the horses for the trip onward.

Finally with horses scattered along nearly half a mile of trail kept the packers busy but gradually each horse learned to find its place in the line as the trail led through ever changing country, through park like valleys of jack pine, spruce and poplar, treacherous willow swamps and muskeg where the horses floundered to their bellies in the soft ground.

Progress was slow as the trail led us through patches of windfall and scrubby balsam, skirting the east shore of Marion Lake to enter a badly fire scarred area to reach the banks of the Sikanni Chief River a swiftly flowing stream of icy cold water fed from the snow fields of Mount McCusker and the rocky mountains to the west.

High water forced us to move up stream 8 miles before finding a suitable crossing which we forded without mishap.

The mountains are getting higher as we move on through heavy timber and burned country to camp at the west end of Trimble Lake a picturesque little body of water nestling beneath 6700 ft. Trimble Peak. Thence following the Besa River north to a trappers cabin where we camped for a few days rest.

Our first accident occurred here as Walter Tomlinson one of the packers was thrown from a bucking horse badly injuring his knee and had to be sent out to hospital, a long and painful ride on horse back.

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Leaving Keilly Creek to start a long steep climb of 13 miles through scrub spruce and balsam to reach timberline where we found enough wood and water for the nights camp.

From here 3 pack horse loads of camera equipment went ahead to photograph the pack train make the grueling climb of 6250ft. altitude to cross the summit of Caribou range in a bitter cold wind which chilled to the bone, then a steep descent to Richards Creek where the horses began to show signs of exhaustion.

From Richards Creek a poor rocky trail and another heart breaking climb over a 4000ft. divide to camp on the banks of the Prophet River and give the unfortunate horses a three day rest.

Mr. Bedaux deserves some measure of credit for wanting to be the first man to traverse this fabulous north country by tractor but will learn a hard and expensive lesson as his tractors have already failed and been abandoned, now his horses are beginning to feel the strain of carrying heavy loads and insufficient food to keep them going.

A few days in camp after many long days of travel gave us a chance to meet one another.

Madam Bedaux a tall gracious person who took a keen interest in all that went on and would sit by the camp fire at night among the cowboys, getting personal glimpses for her story of the trip. From a large Japanese box she would hand out cigarettes, tobacco and chewing gum to the crew.

Madam Chiesa spoke very little English and kept pretty much to herself.

Josephine gained the deep respect of us all as her task was an arduous one looking after her ladies who who demanded as much service in the woods as they would in their 5th. Ave apartments.

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This was a sore point with the packers as they were up at 4A.M. wrangling horses and at times it was nearly noon before the ladies decided what clothes they would wear for the days travel.

John Chisholm our Scottish hunter was always good for a laugh as he donned his kilt and tamoshanter to go forth with his rifle to hunt for moose or caribou which were very scarce, frightened no doubt by the large number of horses and people moving through the country.

Leaving the Prophet River a march of twelve miles took us to the Muskwa Meadows where for the first time in many days the horses found food in abundance in meadow country which appealed to them.

Moving on to enter the main valley of the Muskwa River, a truly wild and beautiful country which few white men have entered before, the river follows many channels as we crossed and recrossed beneath 300ft. cliffs on either side the stream some 40 yards wide, deep and gray with glacial silt.

Some 75 pack horses spread out along the open gravel bars was a sight long to remain in ones memory.

Twenty miles of the roughest trails so far encountered brought us to Fern Lake (named after M. Bedaux) where in a perfect setting of Spruce meadows camp was established on the north shore of the lake, a green glacial pond below massive glaciers sloping to the alpine valley below.

Far beyond the bounds of any known surveys and conditions created by civilization, a combined mountain climb and hunt was organized.

Edgar Dopp one of the cowboys volunteered to help me carry a transit and tripod to a prominent peak west of camp in an effort to locate some distant survey monuments which might help us plot our true position on the map.

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On the way up Edgar shot a young grizzly bear, later as we set up our transit on the peak the country appeared to be a paradise for grizzlies as through the telescope numerous bears could be seen among the glaciers.

After building a cairn of rocks we were reluctant to leave this fabulous view point where in all directions lofty peaks rose 8500ft. above the glaciers, an awe inspiring sight in the heart of the Rocky Mts.

On our return to camp we found that the hunting party had shot two grizzlies but found no sign of moose or caribou.

At night the stars shone clear and bright as we established a station to take observations of the North Star.

A subsequent topographic sketch map of this country by Mr. Swanell B.C.L.S. named many of the prominent peaks after members of the expedition, (Bilou Pk. after Mds. Chiesa) (Mt. Josephine Mt. Crosby) Beduax Mt. etc.

Leaving Fern Lake to cross the Muskwa-Kwadacha divide (now Bedaux Pass) heavy squalls of rain blew down from the glaciers as we descended westward over rough rocky trails to Chesterfield Lake approximately five miles long then on to camp in what we named Champagne Meadows. That night our Hollywood photographer, Crosby schemed up a movie of a simulated forest fire aided by magnesium flares ending in a wild stampede of horses caused by a fusillade of rifle shots.

Madam Chiesa allowed herself to be carried to safety by a handsome cowboy, after which the nine remaining bottles of champagne were finished.

A cold rain was falling as we left Chesterfield Creek to pass along a chain of three lakes and descended to the Warneford River to some Indian cabins at Kwadacha Forks. On a steep slippery trail one horse slipped and fell into the river with the result a barometer and survey equipment were soaked. That night Geike walked into camp with his saddle horse packed as three of his pack horses had completely played out and had to be shot.

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On Sept. 14th. four inches of snow fell during the night and the horses were cold and cranky as we loaded wet packs and struggled on over a moraine ridge and sandy benches to enter the main Findlay River Valley and the Rocky Mountain trench to reach shelter at the Hudson Bay Post at Fort Ware (White Water Post).

The cook was hard pressed to prepare a meal for 30 odd people who had gathered there but a large kettle of hot strong punch came forth and spirits rose as the ^{LEVEL THE} bowl of punch went down.

James Ware the Hudson Bay factor made us comfortable in a log cabin where over the radio we listened to the first news from outside since leaving Fort St. John.

Four days were spent discarding loads of surplus food.clothing etc. and the last case of ~~Dewenshire~~ Cream, all distributed among the Indians.

The horse roamed far and wide in search of food when finally rounded up, two cases of dreaded hoof rot was found and the poor beasts had to be destroyed

Light snow was falling as we travelled North up the Fox River into the pass of that name, then on to Fox Lake through dense spruce, open meadows and swamp land where Tommy Wild shot the first moose we had seen for weeks. The fresh meat was welcome after a steady diet of canned foods. Although the lakes and streams teemed with fish other other game was very scarce.

The situation was becoming a bit desperate as the horses were in bad shape after a steep trail to the summit of Sifton Pass and a few were too weak to go on.

Crossing the Liard-Findly divide to the junction of Drift Pile Creek and Kechika River where four inches of snow fell in the night and three more horses turned up with hoof rot and were destroyed immediatly.

An icy wind from the north warned us that an early winter was approaching.

As two hundred miles of little known wilderness lay between us and Dease Lake, Mr. Bedaux decided to go no further and ordered a return to Fort Ware after having travelled 964 miles from Edmonton.

The return trip was not a happy one although to the packers it was a relief as most of them were men dedicated to the land, and had handled stock all their lives and loved their horses and hated to see them suffer.

One such man, Bob. White who in 1928 with his partner Bob. Godberson left Maple Creek, Sask. and travelled some 1400 miles on horse back leading pack animals via Edmonton crossing the Peace at Peace River town then following old cattle trails north of the river to Fort St. John and Hudson Hope later to operate a trap line at the headwaters of Cameron River. He now lives on his cattle ranch in the Cypress Hills of Saskatchewan.

Retracing our steps to the wide plateau of Sifton Pass to take a series of movies ⁿthe back to Fort Ware to swim our faithful horses across the river and to drive what was left of them down the Findlay to meadows near Fort Graham where they could spend the winter.

The half tracks abandoned, now left without horses, an urgent call went out for boats.

Within three days Carl Davidson a veteran river man with several trappers arrived with five boats, one 40 footed had a tent and stove rigged up to keep the ladies warm on the trip down river. It looked like a river boat of the 1800's with smoke booming from a chimney sticking three feet above the tent.

After the slow travel by pack train the flotilla of boats fairly flew with the current and outboard motors roaring to pause at Deserters Canyon on the Findlay River while cameras were placed at points in the Canyon.

Halfway through a tragedy was narrowly averted as Bedauxs' boat struck a rock and nearly capsized. Half full of water they managed to get to shore with three wet and terrified women. A bon fire was lighted to dry them out and make hot coffee as the weather was miserably cold.

Pushing off again to make a quick run to the Findlay Rapids, more pictures were taken as the boats shot through the rapids into the Peace River as it flows through the back bone of the Rockies with scarcely a ripple then through the Ne Parle Pas rapids to stop at the Beattie ranch, where we found the true pioneer spirit in Jim. and Mrs. Beattie who had settled here years earlier, raised a family and owned one of the finest ranches on the Peace.

Mrs. Beattie was delighted to have the whole expedition visit them and put on a wonderful dinner for the crowd.

A run of twenty miles took us to the Rocky Mountain Portage where to-day the great Peace River Dam stretches across the canyon producing power from its mighty waters.

Six wagon teams met us here and freighted the outfit over the fourteen mile portage to Hudson Hope.

Taking to the boats again to make the final run of fifty miles to Tayler where a large tractor with two cars in tow pulled us through mud up to the axels to Pouce Coupe arriving at two o'clock in the morning.

Boarding the Northern Alberta Railway the same day arrived back in Edmonton on October 24th after four months and \$250,000 dollars spent covering some 2000 miles and failed to reach our objective.

The failure due firstly to continued bad weather which plagued us all the way:

The half tracks proved totally unsuited to the terrain of

the North country.

The horses were the only ones to suffer great hardships as they were unable to forage enough food to sustain themselves and carry the heavy loads of unnecessary equipment.

And here we say good bye to the strangest undertaking the Peace River has ever seen.