

10/24

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

After six years of travel and exploration to the innermost reaches of the Peace River country, one gains some measure of understanding of the beauty and magnitude of the 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 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.

#1 Well known in international circles, was host to the Duke and Duchess of Windsor at their Chateau in France.

Later during the war he became involved with German officials in a proposed pipe line venture in North Alberta in which he came to a sad end.

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 a man generous to the extreme to those he employed, and one who loved to make money regardless of where it came from and enjoyed spending it lavishly on unusual jaunts.

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

2 copy

entourage was Madame Bedaux, a Madam Chiesa from Paris, Josephine their Spanish maid, a Scottish hunter from the Bedaux estate in France and a French mechanic. J.B. Beceock a well knownggeodologist, and second in command, F.C. Swanell, a B.C. land surveyor, a Swiss guide, a Hellywood photograpgher, and assiatant, a radie operater and a camp cook.

The five Citroen tractors each approximatly 3000 lbs, wāpācāty with a top speed of 18 kilometers per hour and a compound low gear for mountain grades. They were 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 a gaily decorated tables, this oddly assoted cavalcade set out via Jasper Ave. to Government Heuse for a grand send off by the Lieut. Governer. Then a drive of twenty miles to the predominantly French village of Morninville to shelter for the night from a violent thunder stotm and downpour of rain.

Rain was still falling the next day as we travelled North over wet slippery roads some fifty miles to reach the town of Athabasca at 7.30 Pm.

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 mishaps we 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 May. Crossing the Little Smoky River southward to Valley View, thence across the main Smoky River and through the rich wheat lands in the Valley of the Peace to Grand Prairie at 10.30 P.M. 3 copies

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

After a speech of welcome from the Mayor of Grande Prairie we moved on through Wembley and Hythe to enter British Columbia at Tupper Creek. The unseasonable rains had turned the roads into a nightmare of sticky gumbo mud causing frequent stops to clear tracks of mud and make repairs.

Bedaux's 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 Peace Coulee 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 Taylor.

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 unusually high.

A drive of two hours brought us to Fort St. John, in these 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 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

4 copy

generous pay roll for the next three or four months brightened the situation.

A pack train of fifty horses with supplies and fuel for the cars went ahead in charge of Mr. Geike, an ex naval commander who had settled near Pouce Coupe in earlier years and who some time later was murdered in the Durango mountains of Mexico while hunting for gold.

A telegram was received from Mr. C.W. Lamarque 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 some 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 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 new 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 crossing bad stretches of muskeg a suitable camp was found at midnight where Mr. Bedaux produced a bottle of Scotch whisky which cleared the atmosphere considerably.

July 28th. was declared a day of rest, all hands repairing the tractors while the Indians did a brisk business selling moccasins 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 Mr. 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 get the cars over Chache Creek. Then a steep climb to an open ridge to have lunch and enjoy a magnificent view of the Halfway River Valley, its open 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 Stan. Clarke 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 to the river bank.

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

copy 6

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.

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 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 the 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 rim rock

about 200 yds. down stream, while cad No.5 was put aboard the raft, 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.

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 Citroens.

Still plagued by continual bad weather the job of re-arranging the leads for the pack train was a difficult one as we are now entirely dependant on 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 vallies of jack pine spruce and poplar, treacherous willow swamps and muskeg where the horses floundered to their bellies in soft ground.

Progress was reasonably good, skirting the shores of ~~the~~. The weather turned warm as we came to the Sikanni Chief River to find the river very high and forcing us to travel eight miles up stream before finding a suitable crossing which we managed without mishap.

In camp for a days rest the first accident occurred as Walter Tomlinson, one of the packers was thrown from a bucking horse and had to be sent to hospital, a long painful ride on horse back.

A steep hard climb of thirteen miles to timberline on Caribou Range where three pack horse loads of camera equipment went ahead to photograph the train crossing the 6250ft. summit in a bitter cold wind which chilled to the bone. Then a steep descent to camp on the banks of the Prophet River.

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 demanded as much service in the woods as they would expect in their 5th. Avenue apartments.

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, a Scotch hunter was always good for a laugh donned his kilt and tamshant 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 brought us to the valley of the Muskwa River, a truly wild and beautiful country where few white men have entered. The river follows many channels as we crossed and recrossed beneath 300ft. cliffs on either side, the water gray with glacial silt.

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

The wretched horse showed signs of exhaustion as they scrambled over twenty miles of the roughest trail so far, to reach Fern Lake where a halt was called to give the unfortunate beasts a well earned rest.

In a perfect setting of spruce meadows camp was established on the lake shore.

copy 9
A green glacial pond surrounded by massive glaciers sloping to the alpine valley below, well beyond the bounds of any known surveys and conditions created by civilization.

A combined mountain climb and hunt was organized. Edgar Deppenne of the cowboys volunteered to help me carry a transit and tripod to a high Peak above camp in an effort to locate some distant survey monuments which might help us locate our true position on the map. On the way up Edgar shot a large grizzly bear and on our return found that a hunting party had shot two more grizzlies but no sign of moose or caribou.

At night stars shone clear and bright so a station was set to take observation of the North Star.

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 the 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 Geibe walked into camp with his saddle horse packed as three of his pack horses had completely played out and had to be shot.

On Sept. 14th. six inches of snow fell as we struggled over moraine rigged and sandy benches to enter the main Finlay Valley and reach shelter at the Hudson Bay Post of Fort Ware (White Water Post).

copy 10

The trail cook was hard pressed to prepare a meal for about fifty people who had gathered but a huge kettle of strong punch started a clatter of tongues and things went well.

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 canned food, clothing etc. and the last case of Devonshire Cream, all distributed among the Indians.

The horses roamed far and wide ~~in search of food~~ when finally rounded up, two cases of the 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 Tomy 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 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 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 new snow fell in the night and three more horses turned up with hoof rot and were destroyed immediately.

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

Coffey 11

Fort Ware after travelling 964 miles from Edmonton.

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

Re-tracing our steps back to the wide Plateau of Sifton Pass a series of moving pictures were taken, then back to Fort Ware to swim our faithful horses across the river and drive what was left of them down the Findlay to meadows near Fort Grahame where they would spend the winter.

First the tractors abandoned, now left without horses, a call went out for river boats.

After two days Carl Davidson a veteran river man and several local trappers arrived with five boats. The longest one about 40ft. had a tent rigged up and a stove to keep the ladies warm on the trip down river. It looked like a river boat of the 1800 booming smoke from a chimney protruding four feet above the tent.

In this flotilla we pushed off from Fort Ware, with the fast current and outboard motors we fairly flew down stream to Deserters Canyon on the Findly River.

Cameras were placed at various points in the canyon as the five boats started through. The river was low and Mr. Bedauxs boat struck a rock and nearly capsized. It was taking water fast but managed to get ashore with three wet and terrified women. A huge fire was started to dry them out and make hot coffee as the weather was miserably cold.

Quick time was made to the Findly Rapids where more movies were ~~TAKEN~~ we shot through the rapids into the Peace River as it flows through the backbone of the Rocky Mountains with scarcely a ripple then through the ne Parle Pas Rapids to stop at the Beattie ranch at Twenty Mile.