

Memories of 30 Years Ago.

By Michael Phillipps

The year following the closing of the Hudson's Bay Post on Tobacco Plains were spent by me - the summer in prospecting for gold and exploring the country - the winters in trapping. At that time the company still had posts and forts on the American side of the line in Washington, Oregon and Montana. These posts were however abandoned when the United States government paid the claims of the company. This made the closing of their station at Tobacco Plains necessary.

It was in the fall of 1873 that I paid my first visit to the upper waters of Elk River. It was no easy task getting into the country as there was no vestige of trail, save those made by the Elk, until what is now known as Michel Creek was reached. My sole companion, John Collin's was a trapper and cared little for prospecting, and as the formation of the country, however promising for coal, was very discouraging to the gold hunter, our trip soon became a hunting and trapping expedition. The water in the river was low and using the gravel bars and sloughs, by crossing and re-crossing the river, we got along fairly well with our four horses. We always camped about 3 o'clock, to give time to set our beaver traps before night. Camping out in fine weather and on a fine stream like Elk River is delightful. My companion was a good cook and liked it, but was hard to get out of bed in the morning. I often returned from looking at the traps, or hunting up the horses wet to the skin with the heavy dew, to find **my** companion still in bed.

Game, fish and wild fruit we had in plenty. No fire had then swept through the valley, and but for an occasional difficulty in getting our horses through a trackless country (save for game trails), we certainly did not have a hard time. I remember we camped on the river several days near where the town of Fernie now stands, beaver being very plentiful in a deep pool there. Elk (Wapiti Deer) were very numerous on the west side of the river, but we let them alone having no use for the meat. Passing the hot springs and getting on to the prairie near the mouth of Michel Creek, I told Collins I thought I had been there before.

I had in the sixties crossed over the high range from White River, a large tributary of the Kootenay River, with Pete Boyle, who still lives near Fort Steele. We had no idea that the large river we struck was what is now known as Elk River, but supposed that its course was east. We had prospected north towards the head of the river. After looking round I found the place where Boyle and I had camped some years before.

Collins and I decided to follow up Michel Creek and after some days travel through timber, were surprised to find large trails that certainly were not Elk trails passing out towards the lake.

We found the trees covered with buffalo hair and it was evident to both of us that we had passed through the Rocky Mountains without going over any range.

This certainly was the first trip ever made by what is now known as the Crow's Nest Pass. I saw at once the advantage of a pass through the great Rocky Range without a mountain to go over and I determined to work for a trail.

Years, long years, have passed since then and I never dreamed I should live to see two great railway lines pass through the valley of the Elk River.

Collins and I determined to return by the South Boundary Pass, sooner than work our way back through the timber. There was some risk about it, as there was then no Fort MacLeod and no Mounted Police. The Bloods and the Blackfeet ruled on the plains east of the mountains and they scalped all they came across. The Buffalo herds were far out on the plains at that time of year and the Blackfeet would not be far from them. We kept well inside the Porcupine Hills and along the Foothills until we came to Kootenay Pass.

My next trip up the Elk River was during the following summer: the party consisted of Mr. Woods, owner of the old Wild Horse Creek sawmill; Wm. Sanders; Jim Morrissey, the real old miner and myself. We had riding horses and 6 pack animals with provisions for the summer, our intention being to thoroughly explore and prospect that section of the country. Getting up the Elk River valley at high water was no easy matter and we had some trail making. Our first crossing of Elk River at the point of rock south of the present town of Morrissey gave us some idea of the difficulties before us. Mr. Woods had had some experience rafting and took the bow; as a good boat and canoe man I had the stern. Steering a huge log raft with over a 1000 lbs. of stuff and piled up with saddles and riggings is no easy matter in the wild swift waters of Elk River and we went down stream nearly half a mile before I could make a landing on the East side. The horses swam the river well. We camped at Morrissey Creek - here Jim Morrissey began to growl and kept it up for most of the summer. Mr. Woods and I explored up the creek bringing out some of the coal. We named the creek after Jim Morrissey, who naturally asked if it was coal we were looking for. Proceeding north, we travelled as far as the next large creek; to this we gave the name of Coal Creek. Here we camped several days in the hope that the water would fall a little. Mr. Woods and I went up the creek, the others remaining in camp. Woods and I went over the divide on foot to the Michel Creek waters, but could find nothing but coal and coal everywhere. Returning to camp we decided to raft Elk River again to prospect the creeks on the west side. We gave the name of Lizzard Creek to the first we explored after crossing, owing to a number of little green lizzards on a snow slide near the head of the creek. Two of us went on foot over to the Bull River waters and found iron ore and a better gold country. It was not, however, until some years later that I found gold in paying quantities on Bull River.

The whole country on the west side of Elk River was full of Elk trails, but rain had set in and no one offered to go and hunt them, although we wanted fresh meat. I started out with rifle one afternoon, following one of the Elk trails north, a little south of a creek we afterwards called Clear Creek. I came upon a great band of Elk at a lick; the whole place was trampled like a cattle yard with trails going off in every direction. There certainly was not less than 100 animals standing round and switching flies. They were in their summer home quite unconscious of my presence, and but a few miles from the present city of Fernie: every size from the little calf to several pairs of mighty antlers all in the velvet. I would ever sooner see the living animal than the slaughtered carcass, but I knew they would hardly look at it that way in camp, so picked one that I thought we could nearly get away with. Alas! much of the meat was unavoidably wasted.

We spent many weeks up Elk River, but failing to get out of the coal formation we turned back and went towards the head waters of the Flathead River. On the Elk River we lost all trace of even colors of gold about five miles above where Elko now is.

I spent one winter trapping marten with Henry Krose on Coal Creek and the mountain divides between it and the waters of the Flathead River. Financially the trip was a paying one; It was not my first winter in the mountains, but it certainly was the longest.

Those who dwell in cities know nothing of such a life. When in permanent camp and with a long line of traps and getting plenty of marten, there is some excitement about it but when moving, and in temporary camp after a hard day's snowshoeing with a pack on one's back, it simply means - days of toil, nights of unutterable misery, watching the stars or the camp fire through the long hours of a winter night, often with not even a book to pass the time.

We started above the falls near Elko with a dug-out canoe on December 1. Our dug-out was large enough to have taken all our supplies, but it was made out of a green cottonwood, and we only managed to get it about twelve miles up the river. We then packed forward on our backs, making repeated trips, until we had all our stuff a few miles up Coal Creek. Here we made a cache. It was the middle of April before we got home again. We got beaver, marten, otter, wolverine and fox during the winter in sufficient quantities to give fair returns for our time and labor.

The summer following I tried hard to get the B. C. Government to make a trail up Elk River and through the range. The Mounted Police had come into the North West through U.S. territory and established themselves at Fort MacLeod. We were anxious to get a market for cattle, as the mines at White Horse had gone down to a low ebb. Thanks to Mr. Galbraith, who was then our Member for Kootenay, the Provincial Government voted a small sum to define the trail. I had before sent Dr. Dawson a sample of the coal and a rough pen sketch of the Elk River and the Pass. This sketch he made use of in his book, using the names I put down, and some of which still remain, as Coal Creek, Morrissey Creek. etc. It was sometime before anything was done, as Mr. William Fernie, the Gold Commissioner, opposed the matter, saying the Indians say there was no such pass and that there was no use wasting money. I, however, in company with a Mr. Ridgeway, blazed the road through and the trail was made.

Until the opening up of the main line of the Canadian Pacific, it was during the summer months one of the most used trails in the country, bands of horses and cattle going over from even as far away as Kamloops.

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