

LIFE AT A FUR TRADING POST IN BRITISH COLUMBIA A CENTURY AGO

The fur trade on the Pacific Coast may be sharply divided into two parts, the maritime and the overland. The maritime was the earlier but it left the less permanent impression. It was, perforce, confined to the coast and although some trading posts were built, as for example at Nootka, they were but transitory. The early maritime fur trader was, on the whole, a looter of the coast—here today and gone tomorrow. The overland fur trader on the other hand was operating a long distance from his base and had to bring his supplies half way across continent over a toilsome canoe route or else had to import them by sea round Cape Horn. The maritime fur trader carried his outfit with him, his ship was his depot, and he could trade until his supplies ran out. Then he returned to his home post and outfitted again. The overland trader had to build trading posts and to make permanent connections in the country. As a result it was mainly due to the efforts of the overland traders of the North West Company and their successors of the Hudson's Bay Company that Great Britain was able to uphold her claims to the northern half of Old Oregon.

A century ago what is now British Columbia was part of Old Oregon, that ill-defined region west of the Rocky Mountains from California to Alaska. Although the convention of 1818 allowed both British subjects and American citizens equal trading rights, in practice the Americans had till about 1835 control of the maritime fur trade and the Hudson's Bay Company dominated the overland trade. American competitors by land were as a rule eliminated, most skillfully and, at times, perhaps almost ruthlessly, and after 1835 the English company succeeded in wresting the maritime trade away from the "Boston pedlars."

British Columbia of today bears but little resemblance to the vast wilderness of forests, rivers, lakes and mountains which then constituted the northern portion of Old Oregon. To be sure the physical features have not changed. But the forests have been cut down, river steamers have taken the place of the Indian "dugout" canoes and have in turn been ousted by the railways. The railways are now threatened by the motor roads and airways. These self-evident facts must be recalled when one is attempting to form a picture of what life at a fur trading post was like a hundred years ago.

The first and most obvious fact about life at a Hudson's Bay Company's fort was its isolation. All the territory which is now British Columbia had in 1830 only nine trading posts. Two of these, Fort Langley on Fraser River and Fort Kamloops on Thompson River, were classed with the Columbia District which in addition included all the forts on the Columbia and its tributaries and the shipping on the northwest coast. The other seven were all in New Caledonia and were under the direction of the Chief Factor in charge of Fort St. James on Stuart Lake. Between these nine posts were miles, in some cases hundreds of miles of wilderness through which the native Indians and the fur-bearing animals wandered at will. Communication in the summer was by boat and canoe along the rivers and by pack train across the interior dry-belt. In winter it was by dog sled in the north and by canoes on the coast. The annual brigade from New Caledonia went by boat to Fort Alexandria on Fraser River and then by horse train to Kamloops and on skirting Lake Okanagan to Fort Okanagan at the confluence of the Columbia and the Okanagan. From Fort Okanagan to Fort Vancouver, the depot, the brigade travelled in specially designed boats which had to be strong enough to encounter the dangerous rapids of the Columbia. Communication from Fort Kamloops to Fort Langley was even more difficult. Governor Simpson succeeded in getting down the Fraser with his party in 1828, but the hazards were too great. Even the route from Fort Vancouver to Fort Langley was dangerous at times. In 1828, the express returning from Fort Langley was attacked by the Clallum Indians and Alexander MacKenzie and four men were slain. On the coast the Hudson's Bay Company's vessels came once or twice a year. Thus the men at the forts were left much to their own devices and each fort had to become as self-sufficing as possible.

The forts or trading posts all followed much the same plan. They were rectangular in shape with two corners, sometimes all four, flanked with bastions. The palisades were usually about eighteen to twenty feet high made of split cedar logs fastened together with stout wooden pegs inserted in holes bored through the logs. There is a tradition that not a nail was used in the construction of Fort Victoria in 1843. Within the stockade were the houses of the officer in charge, the clerks, the engagés and the cooper's, blacksmith's and carpenter's shops. Archibald McDonald who arrived at

Fort Langley on October 10, 1828, has left us the following description of that post:¹

"The Fort is 135 feet by 120, with two good bastions, and a gallery of four feet wide all round. A building (blank in MS.) feet long, of three compartments for the men, a small log house of two compartments, in which the gentlemen themselves now reside, and a store of about (blank in MS.) feet are now occupied, besides which there are two other buildings, one a good dwelling house, with an excellent cellar and a spacious garret, a couple of well finished chimnies are up and the whole inside now ready for wainscoting and partitioning, four large windows in front, one in each end, and one with a corresponding door in the back. The other is a low building with only two square rooms and a fire place in each, and a kitchen adjoining made of slab. The outdoor work consists of three fields, each planted with thirty bushels of potatoes, and look well. The provision shed, exclusive of table stores, is furnished with three thousand dried salmon, sixteen tierces salted ditto, thirty-six cwt. flour, 2 cwt. grease and thirty bushels salt."

The raison d' être of the fort was, of course, the fur trade. The beaver skin was the standard until the serious decline in the price of beaver after 1837, caused the introduction of the "made beaver" or M.B., which was valued from twenty-five to fifty cents.² All other peltries were rated in terms of the beaver but in the fur trade accounts were also given a value in the country tariff which was common to all departments of the fur trade.³ Large beavers were worth 32/—, land otters 20/—, black bears 25/3, silver foxes 98/—, wolves 5/6, minks 2/3 and sea otters 144/4. It is interesting to compare with this the tariff used in the MacKenzie River district in 1886, where one large beaver was worth ten "made beavers," a medium beaver traded for eight and a small beaver from three to five "made beavers," ermine two "made beavers" and bears from four to ten "made beavers."⁴

The fur returns from Fort Langley increased steadily from its foundation in 1827. During the first seven months, July, 1827-Jan-

1 Peace River, *A Canoe Voyage from Hudson's Bay to the Pacific*, edited by Malcolm McLeod (Ottawa, 1872), pp. 38-39. From the description given in H. M. Chittenden, *History of the American Fur Trade in the Far West*, (New York, 1902), I, 45-47, it is evident that the American trading posts on the Missouri were very similar.

2 H. A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, (New Haven, 1930), p. 324.

3 The Columbia furs do not seem to have been so valuable as those taken on the east side of the mountains. cf. *The Donald Ross Papers*, (Archives of British Columbia), where Ross claims that the furs of the Western or Columbia Department have been overvalued from twenty-five to thirty-three and one-third per cent and the furs from the Northern Department have been undervalued sixteen per cent.

4 Information supplied by Mr. Charles T. Christie of Vancouver, B. C., formerly of the Hudson's Bay Company.

uary, 1828, James McMillan collected over 1100 beaver and land otter skins. The record years were 1829 and 1831 in each of which 2500 skins were gathered. When we consider that the average yield of all New Caledonia, a monopoly district, was 8,000 beaver it will be seen that Fort Langley early vindicated her existence as a trading post.

The gathering of these peltries required much tact and ingenuity. In New Caledonia where there was no competition the Indians had either to trade at the Hudson's Bay Company's posts or not at all. Conditions were different on the coast and especially at Fort Langley. The Langley area of trade was not only the lower Fraser Valley but also the region of Puget Sound and the Gulf of Georgia and the south end of Vancouver Island as well. American competition was very keen. To be sure the American vessels did not come up Fraser River but their presence off its mouth was very disturbing. McMillan who presided at Fort Langley from its foundation in July, 1827, to October, 1828, set a very high tariff, five beaver skins for a two-and-a-half point blanket. The natives objected and several times took away their furs rather than barter them at such an obvious disadvantage. McDonald, McMillan's successor, had to make several reductions in tariff, bringing the rate down to three skins per blanket, three skins for two blankets and finally after dropping to one beaver per blanket raising the standard to two skins for a two-and-a-half point blanket. The rate on the Columbia and Puget Sound was one skin per blanket.

The natives of the Fraser River and the adjacent coast of Vancouver Island who were of the Cowichan group of Coast Salish, were distinctly intractable. Governor Simpson recognized this when he and Dr. McLoughlin sent McMillan to Langley. Thus McMillan's force consisted of three clerks and twenty-one men. This was later reduced. The Yucletaws of Johnstone's Straits were the dreaded enemies of the Musquiams whose villages were situated at the mouth of the Fraser River and the Kwantlens whose chief village occupied the site of New Westminster but whose territory stretched up the river as far as Hatzig. The Cowichans from Vancouver Island came over to assist their brethren who lived on the Fraser in fishing for salmon during the annual run. They were joined by Clallums and Skagits and other tribes from Puget Sound who came up to trade.

During the construction of the post McMillan and his men

were most careful to keep the natives at a distance. Trading was carried on on the river bank. Even when the stockade was up only Indians with beaver to trade were allowed to come within the fort gate. In the second Fort Langley, built on a new site in 1840 after the fire which completely destroyed the old post, the natives were allowed only to trade through a wicket while an armed guard kept watch from the upper story. This seems to have been in keeping with the company's practice on the plains.

It should be remembered that the Hudson's Bay Company never had any armed force west of the Rocky Mountains and that the British government did not send warships to the coast until the Oregon dispute was at its height in the middle 1840's. Thus the fur traders had to rely entirely upon their own resources for protection. The forts were strong enough to resist attack and there is no case on record of a successful Indian attack on a Hudson's Bay Company's post west of the mountains. But the officers and men had constantly to be on the alert. Dr. McLoughlin in 1828 sent out a punitive expedition to avenge on the Clallums the murder of the Mackenzie party and on another occasion a small detachment from Fort Langley was attacked near the mouth of the Fraser but succeeded after fifteen minutes fighting in beating off its opponents. Once the warlike Yucletaws chased the unwarlike Kwantlen within the walls of Langley but a few well directed cannon shots taught the northern invaders a lesson which they never forgot. There are several instances in the Fort Langley journal where the white men administered beatings or kicks to insolent natives. This was perhaps a peculiar method of winning confidence.

Daniel Williams Harmon in his well known journal records that at Stuart Lake the business of the fur trade kept him engaged for only one-fifth of his time and the remainder was his own. This was probably a correct enough average for a well established post. How, then, did an officer or clerk fill in his spare time? Part of it was of course absorbed in domestic duties for as we shall see nearly all the fur traders took half breed or native wives and usually reared lengthy families which were brought up with a wholesome respect for the rules of the Company. Some fathers spent much time teaching their children to read and write and several of the boys were sent to the Red River Academy.

But even the delights of home life could not compensate the fur trader entirely for his isolation. He was cut off from civilization

and was dependent on the annual brigade which brought the outfit from the depot or upon the arrival of visitors from other posts for news from "outside." As might be expected the advent of a new band of Indians or the visit of an officer or clerk from another post was a red letter day. John McLean tells of joyous days at Fort St. James under the genial rule of Peter Warren Dease when some of the gentlemen in charge of posts came in to visit and the "musical soirees, if not in melody, could at least compete in noise, numbers being taken into account, with any association of the kind in the British dominions."⁶ Dease was a fine performer on both flute and violin. Music was one of the chief diversions of the fur trader. John Tod at Fort McLeod scraped away at his beloved fiddle or played his flute while his Indian helpmeet sang the air. In a letter to Edward Ermatinger, Tod states that the last summer was divided between "books, music and hunting," but he complains in the same letter that the recent changes in the department have made him more lonesome that he is "not now as formerly assailed with the landing of noisy Brigades or Canoes, men, women & dogs clamouring for potatoes and fish—which though certainly attended with some moments of uneasiness Yet afforded me many hours of pleasure."⁷

But music was only one of the diversions. Chess, backgammon and whist whiled away many weary hours. When the fur traders foregathered they spent their time, "smoking, 'spining yarns' about *dog* racing, canoe sailing and l'amour; sometimes politics; now and then an animated discussion on theology, but without bitterness."⁸ For officers and clerks were as a rule well-read and were much interested in the happenings in the great world "outside." To be sure they were usually at least a year behind with the news. Years later John Tod was chaffed for having celebrated the battle of Waterloo four years after it was fought, that is as soon as he heard of it, but defended himself by saying that it was less than three years!

If everything else failed the fur trader could take up his pen and begin a chatty letter to a relative or friend. There was no particular hurry. The mail would not leave for several months yet and some visitor might bring in some tidbit of gossip before it was time to seal up the letter. For even in the remotest region there was some gossip to be recounted or some tale of hardship or adventure to be

⁶ John McLean, *Notes of a Twenty-five Years' Service in the Hudson's Bay Territory*, (London, 1849), Vol. I., p. 244.

⁷ John Tod to Edward Ermatinger, February 27, 1826, *Ermatinger Papers*, p. 3.

⁸ McLean, *op. cit.*

recorded. These lengthy letters, as we shall see, form one of our best sources of information regarding life in the fur trade.

Life at an established post was usually fairly comfortable, always provided that the food supply did not fail, but during the construction of a new post there was no rest for officers, clerks or men. This labour fell heaviest on the engagés or servants who had to do the rough work, land clearing, log cutting, removal of stones as well as the actual building of the fort. These servants were mainly French-Canadian half-breeds, although there were also Iroquois Indians, Sandwich Islanders or "Kanakas," with a few English and Scotch as leaven. At Fort Langley, during construction days, the incessant toil and the wet climate broke down the men. For a time there was a food shortage and even after the salmon commenced to run the men suffered from their change in diet from Indian corn and peas to salmon.⁹

In all the posts west of the Rocky Mountains salmon was the staple of diet. It replaced the pemmican of the plains. Dried salmon was not any too palatable. Thomas Dears, a clerk at Fort Fraser in New Caledonia writing to Edward Ermatinger in 1831, voices his complaint thus: "Many a night I go to bed hungry and craving something better to eat than this horrid dried salmon we are obliged to live upon." According to Father Morice the diet of the men consisted of dried salmon and cold water.¹⁰ The officers and clerks usually enjoyed luxuries such as tea, sugar, bacon, flour, rice and beans, with wines and brandy on great occasions. The hunters of the forts were sent out regularly to obtain venison and bear's meat and a successful hunt brought a welcome substitute for the tiresome fish diet. Whitefish were taken in large quantities during the winter in the vicinity of Fort St. James. Sturgeon fishing was carried on in Fraser River near Fort Langley.

Most of the forts had gardens and cultivated fields. Daniel Williams Harmon was the first farmer in British Columbia. In 1811 he planted potatoes at Fort St. James and sowed barley and turnips.¹¹ At Fort Vancouver, Dr. McLoughlin very successfully carried on agricultural operations on a large scale. There were also farms at Cowlitz Portage and Fort Nisqually and later at Fort Victoria. At Fort Langley, James McMillan planted potatoes and commenced a

⁹ George Barnston notes this fact in the Fort Langley journal. This MS. journal in the Archives of British Columbia is a good source for information on fur trading life, although in some ways Fort Langley was hardly a typical post.

¹⁰ Rev. A. G. Morice, *History of the Northern Interior of British Columbia*, (Toronto, 1904), p. 174.

¹¹ D. W. Harmon, *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America*, (New York, 1922), p. 167.

garden in the spring of 1828. McDonald continued potato farming and in 1830 set out a fine kitchen garden, sowing turnips, radishes and carrots and planting red and white currants. After some difficulty he obtained enough glass to make a hot-bed and seeded it with melons, cucumbers, pumpkins, gourds and cabbages. Then came the spring freshet and wiped out the fruits of his labours. But in spite of its difficult beginnings agriculture flourished then as now, at Langley. In 1840, when James Douglas visited the post the yield was 500 bushels of fall wheat, 250 bushels of spring wheat, 250 bushels of barley, 600 bushels of peas, 500 bushels of oats and "potatoes abundant."

Supplies from Langley and the other posts were sent to the northern forts including the Russian posts in Alaska after the agreement of 1839 went into effect. By this agreement between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian American Company, the English company agreed to supply the Russians with flour, wheat, peas, grits and hulled pot barley, salt beef, butter and hams. In 1838-39 the Puget Sound Agricultural Company was formed which took over the farming operations which had till then been conducted by the Hudson's Bay Company. With this increase in agriculture one may assume that the diet of the fur traders became more varied.

For purposes of comparison the following scale of rations used in the late 1880's in the MacKenzie River District may be found interesting. A clerk was allowed three hundred pounds of flour a year, eighty pounds of sugar, fifteen pounds of tea, a caddy of "T&B" tobacco weighing from seventeen and a half to eighteen pounds, and a quarter of a gross of sulphur matches. The ration of moose meat was four pounds per man per day. Three or four days' rations were given out at a time, the distribution days being Saturday and Wednesday. The whitefish ration was three fish per man per day.

At Fort Langley the salmon trade was from the first an important adjunct to the fur trade. When the salmon run of 1827 commenced, McMillan obtained fresh and dried fish in large quantities. The dried salmon were paid for by vermillion, rings and other trifles. In January, 1828, when writing to his friend, John McLeod, Senior, McMillan makes the following statement in regard to the salmon trade: "We could trade at the door of our fort, I suppose, a million of dried salmon, if we chose—enough to feed all the people of Rupert's Land." This seems to have been rather an exaggeration for a

little later that year McMillan, when writing up the fort journal, estimates the number of fish obtained at 20,000. Between August 10 and 24, 1829, Archibald McDonald traded 7544 salmon at a cost in trading goods of only £13.17.2. These goods included axes, knives, chisels, rings, looking-glasses, cod hooks, files, beads, combs, awls, vermilion and tobacco. Of these the axes and chisels were of local manufacture. In 1830, Fort Langley prepared 220 barrels of salmon and in 1831 nearly 300 barrels. An export trade in salmon and lumber was developed with the Sandwich Islands and California. For a time McDonald was hard put to it to get enough barrels. Suitable wood was found near Fort Langley, and Stave River is said to owe its name to the barrel staves cut along its banks. There was no competent cooper at Langley and wooden hoops proved unsatisfactory. But soon a cooper was sent to the post and barrel making and salmon packing flourished.

It was the custom in the Hudson's Bay Company's service for officers, clerks and men to take native Indian or half-breed wives. There were no white women in Old Oregon until the arrival of the American missionaries and also of Mrs. Jane Beaver, the uncomfortably respectable wife of the Reverend Herbert Beaver, chaplain to the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver. McLoughlin, Connally, Douglas, McDonald, Work—to mention only a few of the prominent men in the company's service west of the Rockies—all had married women who were at least half-Indian. At Fort Langley, James Murray Yale took to wife the daughter of a Kwantlen chief, but the lady was already married to a Skagit and complications ensued. Yale attempted to dismiss his wife, but she refused to leave the fort and eventually kindly "little Yale" took her back. H. H. Bancroft waxes sarcastic at this marriage which, it must be confessed, casts rather a lurid light on one side of fur trading life. The men were not slow to follow the example of their superiors, but usually with less discretion. At Langley moral conditions grew so bad that Archibald McDonald had to take strong means to restore at least outward respectability.

The coming of the Catholic priests to the Columbia in 1838 and their earnest missionary efforts among the French-Canadian and half-breed engagés and the natives had good effect. The Reverend Modeste Demers in 1841 visited Fort Langley and baptized over seven hundred children. The reports of the Missions of the Diocese of Quebec published by the Society of the Propagation of the Faith are full of glowing accounts of the success of the fathers. The

Protestant missionaries in Old Oregon do not seem to have come north of Fort Nisqually and the evangelization of what is now British Columbia was left for the time to the Roman Catholics. One of the chief results of the coming of the missionaries was that marriage now took place according to Christian rites and not according to the native fashion known as the "custom of the country." The Council of the Northern Department of Rupert's Land in 1846 empowered Chief Factors to solemnize marriages in the absence of any duly qualified minister of the Gospel.¹²

The daily routine at a trading post varied greatly from fort to fort and from season to season. In the northern posts the short winter days were employed in hauling and cutting firewood, in Indian trading and in doing odd jobs about the fort. In the summer necessary repairs were made to the post, new buildings constructed and new palisades put in. From the Fort Langley journal one gets a glimpse of the ordinary life of a trading post in the coast region. Here is a sample day from the period of the construction of the fort.

"September, 1827,

"Saturday, 1st.

"Eight men employed at the pickets. Etteu and Ant. Pierrault finishing the flooring of the South East Bastion. Jacques Pierrault carting. Cones and Peohpeoh sawing. The rest digging the trench for the pickets and supplying the sawyers with wood."

Jason Allard, who was born at Fort Langley in 1848, and whose father, Ovid Allard, came to that post as Indian trader and interpreter in 1839, tells us that, in his day, work began at 6 a. m. and ceased at 6 p. m. Saturday afternoon was a half holiday and then the men scrubbed out their own, and apparently also the officers' quarters. At noon on Saturday a rum ration was issued to all, and non-drinkers soon afterwards did a thriving trade in silk handkerchiefs, fancy shirts and tobacco. The daily work was varied enough. Some tilled the land, others were employed in building boats and still others were sent off fishing and trapping. The fort Indians lived in their own encampment near the post. All others had their residence within the enclosure.

No account of the life at a trading post would be complete without a mention of the holidays. These were few enough but were

¹² *Donald Ross Papers*: "Standing Rules and Regulations from 1843 to 1871." The clause reads as follows:

"86th Resolve—That throughout the country in the absence of Clergymen, Chief Factors only solemnize marriage and that no person be permitted to take a wife at any establishment, without the sanction of the gentleman superintending the District."

duly celebrated. New Year's Day was the great festival. The Indians usually came in large numbers and were regaled with tea, tobacco and a generous supply of fresh meat. In the early days they seem to have obtained liquor also, but in later years attempts were made to stop the liquor trade. The native or half-breed wives of the engagés at Fort Langley were invited to the "Big House" on Christmas Day and given a glass or so of wine. They were told to bring their blankets which were generously filled with cookies, cranberries, blueberry jam and ships biscuits.¹³

It is from the fur traders' letters that we glean much of our information regarding trading life. Letters of John Tod, Archibald McDonald, John Work, and Dr. John McLoughlin to Edward Ermtinger and of James McMillan, Archibald McDonald and others to John McLeod, Senior, describe in intimate detail the affairs of the fur trade. The annual express from York Factory to Fort Vancouver brought precious letters and newspapers to the Columbia Department. When all other means of conveying letters failed the fur traders entrusted the missives to Indians who passed them on from tribe to tribe until at length they reached their destination. John Tod tells us that although he was in charge of the post when Governor Simpson arrived at Fort McLeod in 1828 he was temporarily "lost" while he was opening and reading his letters. Archibald McDonald at Fort Langley chronicles the arrival of thirty-two letters at one time. Anyone who has tried to decipher the fur-trading letters now preserved in our Archives will be struck by the care which the writers bestowed upon them. Paper was scarce so they "crossed" the letters, trying to get as much news as they could into the precious pages.

There were libraries at most of the chief posts and packages of books were sent even to the smaller forts. The library at Fort Simpson on the north west coast contained in 1839 the following books, *The Spectator* for 1839, the *Athenaeum* for the same year, one volume of *Companion to Newspapers*, three volumes of *Wallace's Life of George IV*, five volumes of *Blackford's Italy* and three volumes of the *Life of Galt*.¹⁴

John Tod's letters are full of references to his violin and his flute. He also refers to a Red River March which Edward Ermtinger had once composed. So it would appear that the fur traders

¹³ Denys Nelson, *Fort Langley, 1827-1927, A Century of Settlement*, (Vancouver, 1927), p. 21.

¹⁴ *Establishment of Servants, Columbia Department, Outfit 1839*, MS. in the Archives of British Columbia.

found opportunities to develop their musical talent. In the Archives of British Columbia is preserved the rough draft of an essay which James Douglas composed at Isle à la Crosse some time during the years 1825-1830. His letter books dating from Fort Vancouver show that Douglas was constantly cultivating his English style.

To sum up life in a fur trading post in British Columbia a century ago did not differ materially from that at a fur post anywhere in the widespread domain of the Hudson's Bay Company. On the coast and in the Columbia district generally the fur traders did not have to face the terrible winters of the Northern Department. At the chief posts life was comfortable enough but in the early days at Fort Langley the fur trader had to endure privation. There was danger from lurking Indians, from fire and flood and above all there was the isolation. But as the posts developed conditions improved. In spite of their complaints of their hard lot few of the officers or clerks of the Company left the service. When they did retire it was usually to Red River or to Fort Victoria. A few of them after the boundary treaty remained in Oregon but most of them naturally settled near one of the old trading posts under the British flag.

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