

# People of the Trench



When the dam on the Peace River at Hudson Hope was constructed in the mid-1960s, it flooded an absolutely fabulous area. A huge block of land below the dam site, extending far into Alberta, was well known as the famous “Peace River block.” The vast region upstream from the site of the dam was simply called “the Upper Peace.” This was the area the officers of the Northwest Company traveled through when they established the first white settlement in British Columbia west of the Rocky Mountains. Built on a far-away tributary of the Peace, this historic post was named Fort McLeod. What the establishers of the post found was a great inland empire, all connected by waterways. A land of rugged mountains, many with icy summer caps, thousands of creeks and streams with sparkling clear water, green forests and hundreds of miles of flat valley bottoms all linked by rivers.

This large network of rivers that provided tremendous access to such a huge and unique area had a strange quirk. Once into this great land there were hundreds of miles of relatively quiet water on the rivers, allowing easy navigation by small boats. But on every major river giving access to the area, except one, there was a wicked canyon or gorge. Was this Mother Nature’s way of only grudgingly allowing people to see her intricate handiwork? Was it to further test their mettle by forcing them to first get past a formidable river canyon?

Nevertheless, hardy adventurous souls were not long in coming to the region to harvest the wild fur from the bush and the alluvial

gold from the river bars. Others spent a near lifetime scouring the hills, picking at rocks, blasting and digging holes, determined to find the illusive rich mineral deposits they were so certain that nature must have hidden somewhere deep in the wilderness. And right along with the trappers and the prospectors came the people who would create the trading posts to accommodate them.

Besides the Upper Peace, the Lower Finlay and Lower Parsnip, the main valleys drowned, the dam flooded the lower reaches of no less than eleven other waterways designated as rivers. One beautiful stream, about thirty feet wide and well known locally for its excellent trout and grayling fishing, the Carbon, was just registered as a "creek." I can attest to the excellent fishing quality of the pretty stream.

In the late 1950s I had the job of flying an aircraft belonging to a forestry company in Prince George. I flew B.C. Registered Foresters and their crews to mostly remote lakes and rivers throughout much of northcentral British Columbia. They were doing inventory work on available timber, as well as preliminary work on road locations that have since developed into a great network of forestry roads. We landed on rivers and lakes with floats in the summer and on the frozen waterways on skis in the winter. One of the principals in the company was Bob Darnall. His folks, old-timers from the Fort St. John area, had two cabins on a bench near the mouth of Carbon Creek.

This was a popular resort spot for Peace River people, thus there was also a well-used camping area among the tall, great, canopied cottonwood trees. This was a few miles west of a once-permanent trading post, complete with a post office bearing the tantalizing name Gold Bar. Over the September long weekend it was a ritual for a group of people from Fort St. John to gather at the Carbon. There is no better time than this to be in the outdoors in northcentral B.C., and these people would tell you there was no finer place to be than the Peace River at the mouth of Carbon Creek.

For at least two different years, Bob asked me if I would fly him there, stay with them in one of their cabins, then fly him back to Prince George on the Monday evening. The plan called for me to forgo my regular, rather generous, flying pay and just go for the trip. No arm twisting was required to make it a deal, but the first year there was a catch. These people were all fly fishermen and Bob said

I would be laughed out of existence if I showed up with my spinning outfit. I had never fished with a fly rod before, but I borrowed an appropriate outfit, got some flies along with five minutes of instructions and then we were away.

Bright and early the next morning Bob, his brother and I started up the Carbon. They said that further up the river was better fishing, so we walked two miles before we wet a fly. I soon had quite a variety on my catch list—such diverse articles as my hat, willows, rocks and a fine specimen of a spruce tree. However, before the day was out I lost track of how many fat, solid, fighting trout and colorful arctic grayling I had caught and released from the clear, cold water of Carbon Creek. This beautiful mountain stream certainly lived up to its reputation.

Mother Nature went all out in forming her obstacle to access of the Upper Peace from the east. She constructed an exceptionally wicked gorge fourteen miles long that became known as the Peace River Canyon. I have flown just above the rim of the entire gorge, staring at the formidable scene below. I can't find words to properly describe the terrifying way the water would pour through a narrow shoot, then smash against a solid rock wall, sending water and mist high into the air. Equally awesome were the vicious whirlpools, the speed of the water and the constant crashing of it against rock walls. Common opinion was that the canyon had never been navigated by boat. But the history books tell us that in 1828 a crew of rivermen of Chief Factor McDonald of the Hudson's Bay Company actually made it up the gorge, in very low water, in a large canoe with the men doing lots of lining. (Lining was achieved by having men on shore or rock shelves pull the canoe along, while a man or two stayed in the canoe and guided it through the water by means of a long pole.)

Even though the HBC's rivermen made the trip, normal access to the Upper Peace from the east was by way of a portage road around the canyon, then by riverboat. A minor rapid, more like two or three little rock shelves extending most of the way across the river and named the Ne Parle Pas, was located about forty miles farther up the river. There was one more set of rapids just short of the junction of the Parsnip and Finlay, the two rivers that together formed the Peace River proper. These rapids were more a boulder-strewn, wider stretch of mostly shallow and fast water that created

a roar heard for miles. Experienced rivermen took either of these two rapids in stride without giving them a second thought.

From early fur-trading days a supply post of sorts operated intermittently at the junction of the Parsnip and Finlay. From HBC records, it appears they had a store there in 1824. After World War One the post at the junction, then operated independently, was given the services of a government wireless communication station with an operator. In 1925 a trading post was established about four miles up the Finlay on the west side on a large, flat bench near the head of Pete Toy's Bar. This long gravel bar in the river that gave the new trading post sheltered moorage in all but very high water, was named after the prospector who had earlier taken a small fortune in gold from it.

In 1926 the owner of the new post left for a period of time, so he arranged for Roy MacDougall to operate it in his absence. However, the owner of the post never returned and Roy MacDougall stayed on. The old settlement at the junction of the two rivers faded away, while the new post lived on, receiving a post office with the name Finlay Forks. The government wireless communication station was moved there and at one time a B.C. game warden was stationed at the new Finlay Forks. The MacDougalls operated the post continuously, right up to the time they were bought out when the area was flooded.

This area is part of the great Rocky Mountain Trench that runs on the west side of the Rockies from Montana north-northwest to the Yukon. Finlay Forks was near the center of the very distinctive northern section. The Peace River is unique in that it is the only river between the Northwest Territories and New Mexico that flows east, straight through the Rocky Mountains!

The earliest explorers made their way from Finlay Forks up the Parsnip to the Pack River, which took them to McLeod Lake, then up the Crooked River to Summit Lake. This southerly route was the only entrance into the area not obstructed by a major river canyon. From Summit Lake early travelers could traverse a portage of only about ten miles to get to the Fraser River, crossing from the Arctic to the Pacific watershed. In the late 1920s, a road of sorts was built from Prince George to Summit Lake, a distance of about thirty miles. River travelers to the north could then easily start from Summit Lake though the outlet, Crooked River, was only a twisting

creek first with shallows and rocks, later becoming slow moving, wider and deeper except for some chutes.

A rather large river, the Omineca, coming from the west joined the Finlay a few miles north of Finlay Forks. This river provided excellent navigation for boats from the west for something like 130 miles. But before the Finlay was reached, one had to get past the wild gorge, known as either Pete Toy's Canyon or Black Canyon. The name Black was not given because of color or shade; it was named after an early explorer of that name. It also was known as Pete Toy's Canyon in memory of the hardy prospector of that name who was drowned in it. This canyon was second only to the Peace River Canyon in ferocity. A tributary, the Mesilinka, had navigable water once one was past Dog Canyon, near its junction with the Omineca.

The Nation River system afforded limited access from the southwest, but it had a bad canyon. From the northwest came the Ingenika, entering the Finlay north of Fort Graham. It, too, had a bad gorge, but otherwise provided quite a bit of navigable water. Its tributaries, the Swannell and the Pelly, added many more miles of water access. Dick Corless, the dean of the river freighters, soon to be introduced to this narrative, used to take freight a considerable distance up all these tributary rivers for the trappers. He also took in mountain hunters.

A riverboat service to the trading posts and others in the trench started prior to 1930, with Summit Lake as the southern terminus. Dick Corless from Prince George worked on it and then purchased the outfit in 1931. He operated a fleet of boats on the rivers, right up to the time they were flooded by the dam. For many years a second commercial riverboat service was operated by Art Van Somer. Their boats were more than forty feet long with pointed nose and wide, flat bottoms with a slight slope up at both front and rear. They were made from spruce boards; the rivermen themselves built new boats during the winter months. Powered by one Johnson outboard motor of either twenty-two or twenty-five horsepower, they could haul more than six tons to a load. The boats were completely open, so perishable freight had to be covered by a well-tied tarp for protection from the weather.

Two men operated each boat. One stayed at the rear to run the motor, or "kicker" as they were known, while the other man stayed

in the bow with a paddle and a pike-pole. The bowman would use his equipment to help control the boat in difficult water, as well as to “read the water,” including measuring the depth of the water with his pole. This was particularly important in the silty water of the Finlay, and some others, where the bottom couldn’t be seen. Among the items of spare equipment they carried was an extra outboard motor.

From Summit Lake the boats had to be only partially loaded until deeper water was reached further down the Crooked River. Thus, two or three relay trips would be required for each load. A round trip to Fort Ware could take well over a month. In 1952 the gravel-surfaced Hart Highway, passing close to McLeod Lake, was completed to Dawson Creek, so river travel could then start at Fort McLeod. Without the shallow, small and twisting little Crooked River to navigate, they not only saved time and work, but could now use larger boats and haul heavier loads.

My means of travel “up the trench,” was by air, beginning in 1953. After leaving Fort McLeod the aircraft was headed for Finlay Forks, and eight minutes later when the dusty Hart Highway (now Highway 97) faded from sight under the right wing, all evidence of mechanized man was gone! From there on the Rocky Mountain Trench was completely devoid of roads, air strips, mines, logging or any other activity involving machines, right through to the Alaska Highway. The only exception was a small sawmill, which at one time had been set up at Finlay Forks. This was a huge land, sparsely settled by hardy, neighborly people in a large, close-knit society. It was a land of riverboat travel in the summer and dog teams by winter, with bush planes occasionally dropping by either winter or summer. It was a land of endless freedoms and independence, virtues so deeply cherished by the people living on the banks of its beautiful rivers and among the scenic mountains.

There was so much history in that country. And so much drama, some of it of life or death severity, while other events just made great stories to be told and retold in warm log cabins on cold winter nights or around evening campfires deep in the wilderness. The following incident fits the latter category.

Lou Strandberg had a trapline in the Finlay Forks area. Having more than one cabin, he would be away from a cabin for a few days at a time. One very cold January late afternoon, he returned to one

of his cabins after dark and was surprised to find the door open. Walking into the cold, dark hut to get a candle for some light, he bumped into something big, furry and hard. Even in the dark he knew the place was a mess, but when he finally found candles to get a light going he was shocked to see not only that his cabin was indeed a shambles, but a large, frozen grizzly bear was actually lying stretched out on his bunk! Grizzly bears will, the odd time, come out of hibernation in the dead of winter—and when they do, they are hungry. This bear had eaten everything in sight in the cabin, including a full can of baking powder, which has been credited with killing him.

Lou had an awful night in the approximately minus forty-degree temperature. He had to get that heavy, stiff bear off his bunk and outside before he could even get a fire going, then start clean-up.

I had heard this tale from several sources, but in more recent years, after Lou was gone, I asked his wife to again tell me the frozen bear story. Ida, a sister of Dick Corless, spent her last few years near the town where I live in southern B.C. She enjoyed coming into the office where I worked to visit; she said I was the only one she could talk with about the north. The day she refreshed my memory of the frozen bear was the last time I saw her before she, too, suddenly passed away. And, oh, how many more stories of the north were gone forever?

As one flew above the Parsnip River heading north a large cabin with an upstairs, very elaborate for the bush, would come into view across the river from the mouth of Scotts Creek. That cabin itself was shrouded in mystery and intrigue. Located on a long, straight stretch of the river, it had observation ports in the gable ends, allowing anyone approaching on the river to be observed well before they arrived. It was built in 1912 by a man named Scott, who, it was rumored, had to leave Montana in a hurry because he had killed a man. Before long, Scott was feuding with a trapper named Weston, who lived about thirteen miles further north, near a creek named for him. Weston left a note in his cabin one winter day saying he was going to Scott's place and "...if I don't come back, you'll know where to look for me." He never came back, nor was his body ever found!

In 1949 this cabin, six smaller "line cabins" and the huge trapline that went with them, were purchased by Milt Warren and

his brother, Bob. The Warrens came from Geraldton, Ontario. As a young man, Milt joined the RCAF, completing a full tour of duty in bomber command as a wireless airgunner, for which King George VI personally pinned a medal on his chest. Before getting the trapline, he, along with his dad and brothers, had operated quite a large hydraulic gold mining operation on Germansen River. In 1952 Milt got married, sold the trapline, then joined the B.C. Game Department in their newly established predator control branch. Milt Warren was definitely among those who knew the area of the Rocky Mountain Trench country and its people most thoroughly.

Over a period of about the next ten years Milt Warren and I went on more trips together than either of us could ever remember. We used a Jeep pick-up to get to hunting areas, then we sometimes used horses but often went on back-packing trips, usually into some mountain range. We prospected together, sometimes on trips involving flights into very remote areas in the winter time, where we would camp in a tent with a fire out front for cooking and sitting around while we told stories. Sometimes I flew him on his official government work. Today, in British Columbia, it is impossible to get as far from any road as were some of the wild and beautiful valleys at the time we left the ashes from our campfires and the tracks from our snowshoes in them.

There are some things I remember very well about all our trips together. During all our camping together on all of those trips, Milt made the morning fire and cooked breakfast every single time! In the dead of winter he would roll out of his big warm, down sleeping bag with his long wool underwear and socks on, slip into his shoes, then make the fire. He would cook breakfast, but not until after we had finished eating would he get dressed! And remember, all of this happened outside the tent around a campfire, often on the packed snow in a frozen north! I usually didn't get up until that wonderful aroma of coffee brewing in a campfire-blackened tin pail over the glowing coals permeated the cold morning air. But I guess I must have done something right to get all that service, because on all our trips together we never had a single word of disagreement.

As mentioned, the large trapline owned by Milt Warren and his brother was eventually sold. The buyer was a trapper named Roland Skog. One time he failed to show up when he should have, so a search was started. Roland was found outside one of the line cabins;



he had been killed by a bear. At that time in history bears had a great fear of man and attacks on people were very rare. Thus, it was extremely unusual to find that the man had been killed by a bear, especially right beside his cabin. It was not determined whether it had been a black bear or a grizzly. But the trapper was in his night attire! This would indicate he went out of the cabin at night, probably to have a pee, when he stumbled onto, maybe right into, a very surprised bear, which quickly killed him.

Continuing the trip north, the Finlay River, with its silty-colored water, appears from the north. It meets the clear water of the Parsnip from the south. Together now, they turn east, circle north, then head straight east. This happened right at the foot of spectacular Mount Selwyn, which stood as a great, silent guard watching over the mixing of two historical waterways, as together they made up the beginning of the mighty Peace River. Four miles farther north we circle over the buildings of the trading post of Finlay Forks. We check the wind and look for driftwood in the river, then come in for a landing on the smooth, straight stretch of the Finlay and taxi into the dock. Roy MacDougall will already be there to help with tying up the aircraft.

Finlay Forks was by far the finest of the three trading posts that once graced the Finlay River. Built on a nice, level bench, the trading post with post office was in a separate building from the house, both neatly built of logs with some lumber add-on rooms on the house. All buildings were spread out, connected by cute paths and little fields. By the time I appeared on the scene, the wireless station and the game warden's house were just vacant buildings. With the departure of the government communication radio station some years previous, the entire Rocky Mountain Trench area was left without any type of electronic communication. But what set Finlay Forks apart from the other trading posts was the feminine touch, embodied by Roy's wife, Marge. They had a granddaughter whom they called "Margie," but everyone else referred to her as "Little Marge." Little Marge spent her early years at Finlay Forks, then later she came for all of every summer holiday until the post was closed by the flooding.

I used to look at her and think what a great place it was for a girl to spend her holidays. It was so wonderfully quiet and serene, with the Finlay River flowing smoothly by, the great Mt. Selwyn staring

down at them from across the river and on a still summer evening one could hear the distant roar of the Finlay Rapids just below the junction on the Peace River. And it was isolated. In the fall of the year there would be at least two months without contact from the outside, until nearly Christmas time when ice would be thick enough to land aircraft on. Some people may think this would be lonely and desolate, but the occupants of this post certainly didn't think so!

It was the remoteness of the area, completely devoid of land access, other than the river, that made it so attractive. Road access, with the masses flocking in, plunks all areas into the same melting pot, and no area with a road connection can be considered really unique from any other place. At the time I knew the Rocky Mountain Trench almost no adventurous visitors ever came in by their own boat, just for the trip and to see the country, or to fish for fighting trout or the beautiful grayling that frequented so many clear streams emptying into the Parsnip and the Finlay. "Little" Marge Donovan has recently told me that she never knew of anyone coming in his own boat from the south just for the trip! She said a very few came up the Peace River from Hudson's Hope. R. M. (Raymond) Patterson, author of several books, traveled the south route on tours in his canoe, largely to gather material for books. A doctor from Dawson Creek used to holiday for two or three weeks every summer all by himself somewhere up the Finlay River or its tributaries. He would come up the Peace, starting of course above the portage, traveling in a good-sized Peterborough freight canoe. These very efficient craft were constructed with light, thin wooden narrow planks over wood ribs, then covered with canvas, just as most canoes of yore were made. Only the freight models had nearly flat, rounded bottoms and a square stern. It took only a very small outboard motor to drive them up rivers, even with a considerable load. I never saw the doctor up there, but I had been at Finlay Forks when the MacDougall's said he was somewhere up-river.

Of course, Marge and Roy were delighted to have their granddaughter with them in the summer and it was easy to see they simply doted on her. One time I landed at Finlay Forks about 2:00 in the afternoon to fuel up, then carry on. Marge was away and Roy, Little Marge and her mother, Florence, were there. They asked me to come in and have lunch, but meal time was over and I didn't want

to bother them. But Florence insisted I needed something to eat, and it was not easy to leave the MacDougall's without first eating! So we went to the house and Florence made me a very delicious sandwich, along with fresh coffee. When Roy and I returned to the dock, Little Marge was sitting in the pilot's seat, "flying" my aircraft. Roy looked at her, then with a deep voice that was supposed to sound tough, but was actually dripping with affection, said, "Margie, get out of there." He couldn't quite hide the little grin that slid across his face!

Most of the people in the isolated north were of splendid character, but the MacDougalls were outstanding. Marge had a long serving table on the edge of her kitchen and every traveler that came along sat at it and ate. And she never charged anyone for a meal. When Milt Warren was trapping he said that as many as twelve trappers would come and have Christmas with the MacDougalls! However, while the trappers were there for Christmas they would cut and split enough firewood to last the MacDougalls a full year, until the next Christmas. Roy had horses and before Christmas he would skid in a bunch of dry logs for the trappers to saw into firewood. When I talked to Roy about his horses, he said each was over twenty years old and they had never been in a barn! Finlay Forks was in a light snowfall area and the horses pawed through the snow for most, if not all, of their feed. What a wonderful country it was before the human dam builders discovered it!

I have experienced firsthand just how thoughtful and caring were the MacDougalls. One winter day Milt and I were flying north. We went over Finlay Forks a thousand feet in the air and made no effort whatsoever at recognition. We didn't waggle the wings or change engine speed—nothing. Several days later on our way south we landed at Finlay Forks. When we stepped inside the house Marge looked at me and said, "Where have you been? We were worried about you, we saw you go over last Tuesday and thought you would be back to spend the night with us. Then, when you didn't come the next day, we got real worried!" They had recognized the aircraft I flew and were looking out for us. What terrific people.

But the great benevolence and popularity of Marge didn't prevent her from bearing the brunt of the oldest trick in the trapping trade. Some black, domestic house cats, with a pelt worth nothing, look very similar to a female fisher, which is one of the higher-

priced furs on the market. Since time immemorial an inexperienced fur buyer in the hinterlands has been sold the hide of a hapless tom-cat, the trapper saying it is a fisher.

While Marge was still an inexperienced fur buyer and Roy was away, a trapper brought in some fur, which she purchased. Among the pelts was this nice “fisher”! This happened twenty some years before I was in the country, but I still heard the story from more than one source, how old so-and-so (I forget the trapper’s name) sold a tom-cat to Marge MacDougall! This really went the rounds on the “moccasin telegraph,” and poor Marge couldn’t begin to remember how many people had come in and asked her if she had bought any cats lately or what exactly was the price of black toms now?

Not everyone made it in the north. One fall day, with a passenger, I landed at MacDougall’s while southbound. Roy told us that earlier that day they had had a visit from a new pilot from Prince George. He said who it was and we both knew him, but didn’t say anything. Then, Roy looked at me and said, “I didn’t like him!” Thus, the word would go out on the moccasin telegraph that Roy MacDougall, the most respected man in the north, didn’t like this particular individual. And the poor soul would never know the full, human warmth the north was capable of exhibiting. Actually, this particular person had a much worse fate. He did not survive a crash he had in his aircraft a year or two later.

These northern posts received mail once a month, nine times a year. Two months were allowed in the fall for freeze-up and one month in the spring for break-up. Air service was started in the 1930s and changed very little over the years. On the morning of the day the mail plane was due, the bench below the trading post would have about a dozen Native tents set up. Everyone in the family always came to the post on mail day, winter or summer. When the mail came they would cash their monthly government checks, stock up on food and supplies, along with a few treats for the kids, then the following day they would be gone, appearing again the next mail day.

Summer time, especially after high-water in July when most of the driftwood would clear from the rivers, was a very busy time for the river freighters. All the trading posts would be stocked with everything they expected they would need for the next year. Major customers for river freight were the bush airlines. They would have

hundreds of forty-five-gallon drums of aviation gas stored at the posts for their use throughout the year.

One fall when the rivers were low I came to Finlay Forks. As soon as I landed Roy asked me if I had seen Art Van Somer on the river. When I told him I hadn't, he said Art was eight days overdue from Fort McLeod and asked if I would look for him on my return trip. I said I would, but that I wouldn't be going south until the next day. The next day when I landed at Finlay Forks, Roy said Art had come in a short time after I had left the day before. Art had a load of thirty drums of aviation gas, and on the many miles of shallow water and shifting sand bars on the Parsnip River, he said numerous places were too shallow to float the load. Art said he couldn't remember how many times he and his bowman had to unload most of the drums, float the lighter load through the shallows, then roll the barrels to the boat and reload! Each drum of gas weighed 400 pounds. Northern life wasn't always fun and adventure.

Dick Corless sometimes guided people, usually nonresidents, on a sort of adventure and fishing trip. One of his favorite places to take them was where the Wicked River joined the Peace. The little Wicked was crystal clear and in the mini-canyon near its mouth were pools twelve or more feet deep. Large grayling fish would lie on the bottom. Cast a small, black dry-fly on the surface and the fish would come to it right from the bottom. As a bonus, this was virtually in the shadow of beautiful Mount Selwyn.

Fifty air miles (at least twice that by water) north of Finlay Forks was the oldest and most historic post on the Finlay River—Fort Graham. In 1897-98 the members of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police who were attempting to cut a trail to the Yukon gold fields on the Klondike River wintered there. Early in the new century it had a Hudson's Bay store, police, church, quite a few residents and later a government wireless communication station. For two or three years after about 1912, the famous pioneer surveyor Frank Swannell used Fort Graham as his base. Trails fanned out in all directions from the post, especially to the west, making it a favorite base for prospectors and trappers. Graham was built on a bench just above the river on the east side. The bench kept steadily eroding into the river and the flood of 1948 washed away the bank from under many of the old buildings. That site was then abandoned and what was left of Fort Graham moved to the west side of the river.

When I knew Fort Graham, there was, on the west side of the Finlay, just one long log building with a partition near one end. Ben Corke lived in the smaller end and had his trading post and post office in the other part. One summer day I had supper with him, listened throughout the evening to stories, then rolled my sleeping bag out on the floor in the trading post for the night.

Ben said that in the 1930s there were placer miners on every bar on the Finlay River. He bought their gold using a balance with beans for counter-weights until the government made him get a proper scale. From then on he said he never made any money buying gold! He probably got most of the money paid for the gold back through purchases from his post, anyway.

Some Natives came from as far as 125 miles to Fort Graham for their mail. Again, every member of the family would come. The infants were carried, but from the age of about three years, four at the most, they had to walk! Here, too, their tents would appear like magic on the morning of the day the mail plane would arrive. Ben Corke claimed they had a sixth sense and knew if the plane would be delayed. Weather plays a major role in bush flying and it was not uncommon for the mail plane to be delayed for one or more days. Ben said on the morning the mail was due he would look at the clearing near the post. If the tents were there, he said the plane would come; if there were no tents, he just went about his regular business knowing the mail plane wouldn't arrive! He said he never knew them to be wrong over many years of observation.

If the Natives brought in wild fur, the pelts would be purchased before the plane arrived. Then when the mail came, Ben would sort it while his store was packed with people. The Natives would then take their government checks and turn them over to Ben in exchange for clothes, supplies, ammunition, tobacco, etc. The next day the mail would go south.

About seventy-five air miles above Graham was (is) Fort Ware. Most of the river en route was excellent for riverboats, but there was one serious obstacle—Deserters Canyon. This was a nasty, crooked gorge complete with huge standing waves and a “hole in the water,” caused by a vicious whirlpool, as well as a jagged rock sticking up in the middle of the river. The river freighters often had to split up their load and relay it through the canyon. Over the years they hauled a tremendous amount of freight through the canyon, partly

because the airlines maintained a major fuel cache at Fort Ware. That none of the freighters were drowned just proves what great rivermen they were.

The HBC started a post at Ware in 1927, built a new store about 1947 and then abandoned the place in 1953. Ben Corke ran it off-and-on from 1956 until 1963, the year before he died. I was at Fort Ware twice during the summer of 1955. The first time there wasn't a single soul present and the other time there was one Native family. Ben Corke was operating the post from the old HBC store, when I landed there one February day just after lunch. Ben sliced a huge steak from a fresh haunch of moose for me. I was thinking that a moose shot at that time of year wouldn't taste very good and I was afraid I wouldn't be able to eat it all and would be embarrassed. But it was delicious and I saved my integrity by eating the whole thing! At that time Ben actually alternated between Ware and Graham. Sometimes he would operate one post, other times the other one. This set the stage for a dramatic event.

During a very cold spell one January, Merve Hesse, flying for Pacific Western Airlines, had to make a trip to Ware. It wasn't a scheduled flight, Ware wasn't getting mail then, and I think the build-up to the flight went something like this. Milt Warren heard Merve say he had to go to Ware one of these days and Milt said, "Go tomorrow and I'll go with you."

So just after daylight they left Prince George on a clear, cold morning. About half way between Graham and Ware, Milt spotted a person sitting in the snow on the river ice, frantically waving at them. Merve landed the old Junkers airplane beside the hapless soul and they discovered it was Ben Corke. Ben had been at Fort Ware and, for some long-forgotten reason, decided he had to go to Fort Graham, so he set out on snowshoes! Now, a snowshoe trip of about 100 wilderness miles during a very cold spell in the dead of a northern winter and the short daylight hours of January is no mean feat for anyone. But Ben was over sixty and had lost a leg below his knee in World War One, thus he walked on a wooden leg. Part way into the trip the stump got sore. He carried on, but by the time the fellows landed beside him, it was so sore and swollen that he couldn't put any weight on it. It was unlikely that he would have survived one more night.

But fate decreed that the trip to Ware would be made that day.

Fate also ruled that Ben would be on the river ice where he could be seen and not in the bush, where the snowshoe trail was located for much of the way. And fate had the aircraft over the twisting river where Ben sat, virtually helpless, while Milt in the right-hand seat was able to observe the helpless man.

That tale is typical of the many dramas enacted in the hinterlands. The story of two trappers murdered on the ice of the Lower Finlay and the apprehension and hanging of the murderer is told in a book of B.C. police stories with game warden Alf Janke, then stationed in the area, playing a major role. But, alas, so many anecdotes will never again be told and no one will ever know of them because so many of those who could tell the stories are gone. How much history went with Dick Corless and Art Van Somer?

When the northern trappers and prospectors came out to so-called civilization, Prince George was the usual destination. And for some unknown reason, it was always the old Canada Hotel that became their home away from home. This place was not known as an up-scale, high quality establishment and it would never appear in a tourist brochure. However, it seemed to suit the trappers and prospectors just fine.

Milt Warren knew all the northerners and always seemed to know when any of the them were in town. He would tell me, then we would go to the Canada in the evening and assist the men from the north in wetting their whiskers in the foamy, which by the way, cost ten cents for a large glass full. What a shame we didn't have a tape recorder, which could have put so many stories into permanent history.

We always had a very enjoyable evening at these get-togethers. I remember one little incident that occurred the first time I met Lou Strandberg. He lived in town when he wasn't trapping, but I had never met him and was just introduced as a friend of Milt's. There was another trapper from the north at the table, so I just sat there listening, saying nothing. Wild mountain sheep inhabited only very few, widely scattered areas in the entire country I write about and very little was known of them, including just what mountains they lived on. The talk got around to wild game, when I leaned over to Lou and said, "There are sheep on XX creek." Lou Strandberg nearly choked on his beer, then he stared at me in utter disbelief. To add to his dismay, the name I called the creek was the local, northern



name for it, not the name of it on the map. After a long, hard stare, he said, "And how did you know there are sheep on XX creek," using the same local name I had used. Thinking I was just another dude from town, he was completely bewildered. My answer, the one I've often used, was just, "Oh, I get around." Of course, that didn't satisfy him and later in the evening he again wondered aloud how I knew there were sheep on XX creek.

One fine summer evening Milt Warren phoned to tell me that a certain old trapper was in town, so we went to the Canada Hotel to see him. For reasons that you will later guess, I will not give his name or the area he came from. He was an outstanding, old veteran northerner of Norwegian descent, like so many of the old-time northerners were. He was of the breed of trappers who came out to any settlement only when they really had to. In his case he may not show up at Fort Graham, the nearest trading post, even once a year. I suppose if he hadn't shown up at Graham for more than two years, someone would say they had better check up on him!

Thus, it was quite an event for him to get to Prince George. And not only was he in that town, but he was on his way to Vancouver! He said he had a sister there whom he hadn't seen for nearly forty years. This fellow was also a prospector, as many of the trappers were. Since they were only interested in commercial minerals, I would always ask if they had come across any crystals of any kind. This old prospector drew me a map of an area where he said there were lots of crystals, clear quartz and other "colored ones."

During the evening Milt asked him if he had just left his cabin as it was. He said, "I left my rifle at Fort Graham." Out of the clear blue I said, "How about the other gun?" He looked at me, showed with his hands that "the other gun," which of course I didn't know existed, was a revolver. He then said he had greased it, put it in a pail with a lid and buried it near his cabin.

When, late in the evening we said our good-byes, it was the last time that any of us would ever again see him. Word came that he had died in Vancouver.

I know exactly where his cabin was. After all these years I think it would be a terrific memento of the north to have his pistol that has been buried near his cabin for all that time. And after the metal detector locates it, I may just spend some time looking for those crystals!

The saga of the area I write of even includes suspected buried treasure of commercial value. It has been calculated that Pete Toy, in the 1870s, mined \$70,000 worth of gold from the bar named after him when gold was probably \$16 an ounce. He never left the area or sold the gold, but was soon drowned in the Omineca River. His gold must have been buried somewhere nearby but now would be ensconced under two or three hundred feet of water.

The people of the north talked about the trader who made big money over the years, wouldn't put it in a bank because he never trusted banks, then died. These people were certain there was a buried cache of wealth from him. If this horde exists, it will certainly be above the water level!

In 1958, British Columbia's centennial, the committee in charge of provincial celebrations built a huge canoe to be paddled from Fort St. James to Fort Langley by a group of men to emulate Simon Fraser's early, historic deed. Dick Corless was chosen to be Simon Fraser. He asked me if I would be one of his paddlers. I said I couldn't make because of the time away from work, but he asked me a second time. I still didn't go, though often wished I would have just taken the time, but I considered it an honor to have been asked.

Eventually, the flood from the dam came and ended everything. Not only was the land gone and the people moved from the area I write of, but the time coincided with the ending of an entire way of life in the hinterlands. A great era was over; passed into history. So gently and so unobtrusively did it go, that mainstream life never blinked or even noticed! Even the historians have for the most part largely ignored this great segment of our past. And the vast majority of those great people of the north were men who never married or left heirs to perpetuate Grampa's stories.

Gone forever, gone with little trace that he ever existed, was the independent prospector with his dog, his single-shot .22 rifle, a large pack on his back and a maze of stories he would gladly share with you, if he liked you. Gone were the old-time trappers from their neat and cozy little log cabins that once adorned the banks of the beautiful rivers and sat silently and lonely among the evergreen trees beside so many, often unnamed, picturesque creeks. Departed are the hardy souls who sometimes only came out to a settlement once a year. Gone are those splendid people from the trading posts and from the bush who would help you in any way possible, if you need-

ed help. The flooding ended everything so abruptly and so permanently. And those of us who were there will have to put it all into memory. From time to time we'll try to relate it to those souls unfortunate enough to have missed it. But in spite of our best effort, we will never be completely successful in our endeavor.

How do you describe the feeling when you look at the fancy knick-knacks in a veteran trapper's cabin, fashioned by an old Norwegian with just his ax, saw and jackknife, and know that not even a handful of people will ever see them? Or the feeling you get when you land at a trading post two days after the last mail plane of the winter and the first words you hear from the post operator are, "Thank goodness you came. Now I can get that letter sent that missed getting in the mail. You saved me two months on a message I really wanted sent." How do you relate the character of the old trapper that gives you the use of his cabin for several days, loans you his only row boat to get there and then won't take a cent for it! Or the northerner's unique way of giving directions. I asked the old trapper how would we find the spot seven miles up a strange lake, where a path would start, leading a half-mile into the bush to his cabin. He looked at me, then simply stated in his thick Norwegian accent, "You will have no trouble, I blazed a jack-pine tree." End of the directions! Incidentally, we did find the correct blazed pine tree on the first attempt. And half a mile down the path, beside a fast-flowing little creek with crystal clear water, was the finest, cleanest trapper's cabin one would ever see.

Marge and Roy MacDougall moved to Vancouver Island in 1960, right after they sold the post. I went to see them at the airport in Prince George while they were waiting to go on the airliner. It was not a happy occasion. I had never seen them so quiet, and I was completely stumped as to what to say. Actually, I think I felt about as bad as they did. A fabulous country and a great way of life was gone.