

## Chapter 10



# Fort Benton

Once again it was spring and the plants and trees were showing the delicate green that meant the busy season of the year was approaching. David had to face the fact that he was forced to make a trip for the year's supplies. One morning, when he came in after doing the chores he said to Annie, "I think that I shall go to Fort Benton this year, Annie, and see what I can do there in the way of trade and business. The trip would be much shorter than to Fort Garry. Of course, it may turn out that I will have to go to Fort Garry as well, but if I leave for Fort Benton soon I can make both trips, if necessary."<sup>1</sup>

"You have often said that Fort Benton should have plenty of supplies, David," Annie answered. "I think it would be worthwhile taking the chance if you think you will not face too many dangers."

"The usual difficulties, such as swollen rivers and unknown trails will be nothing new. I will only have to be more careful and always be on guard against the Indians."

The rest of that day and the following day David and his men spent loading the carts. There were hundreds of buffalo robes besides pelts of wolves, fox, beaver, marten and other fine skins. David, always particular about his loading, was more careful than ever this time, because going over a new route he had no idea what he might come up against. It could be anything from swollen rivers

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1 [Editor's note] The Kells manuscript, based on oral interviews, diverges from Eleanor's telling. Kells suggests Annie accompanied David to Fort Benton in 1875; and in April accompanied him to Fort Garry, and from there went alone with Georgiana for an 18-month trip to Hamilton, leaving ten-month old Jean Helen back home. Edna Kells, "Those Wonderful McDougall Women," Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies Archives, LUX/II/B5-48 pp. 34-35.

to hostile Indians and thieves. The country, through which he was going, was well known for desperados who took every opportunity to seize anything they could.

Finally, everything was done to David's satisfaction and that evening when he came in to dinner, he said to Annie, "I will be off at sunrise."

The open fire seemed very cheery that night and the flames were reflected in the old copper kettle and pots which sat around. Annie felt once again David was going away and she and Georgiana would be alone with some of the faithful Indians. John went East that summer on a lecture tour, so his wife Lizzie and the girls were without a man also. "Oh well, she thought, "we have done it before and I guess we can do it again." David sitting on the other side of the fireplace, had no inkling of her feelings.

The next morning was glorious with the beautiful sunrise and the time seemed right for leaving.

"You will be as careful as you can David, I'm sure, but do not take any unnecessary chances."

"Now Madam, you know I never take any foolish risks," replied David in a half joking way, but both of them knew only too well that he never spared himself, "I shall be back as soon as possible so you and Old Mary plant the garden and have the vegetables growing by the time I get back."

Annie watched as she so often did when David rode off with Donald Whitford, his right-hand man, and seven Indians to guide the carts. She took comfort from the thought that Donald was along because he and David had made many trips to Fort Garry together. She heard the screech of the carts long after they had vanished from sight. It was a comforting sound to Annie, even though there were those who claimed that it drove them crazy.

As always David was enchanted with the open prairies and he thought that it would be nice to live by the little creek that rushed down the hills to the Bow River. The rolling hills were green and the land looked rich. When times were more settled David felt that it would be a fine ranching country. As he considered the number of cattle and horses he planned to bring back from Fort

Benton, he felt that this would be the place for them to pasture. "This spot," he thought, "would be just the right place for me to build a house and have a store. We could see those glorious mountains in the distance and the animals would have plenty of food."

When he reached the river he looked for a suitable place for the cart horses to ford the Bow. His horse, which was well trained, seemed to try to help him as he rode up and down the river bank looking for a gravelly bottom. Finally he found a spot, then he turned and rode back to the brigade to tell Whitford to come along with him and he would show him where to cross with the carts.

"You can bring them across here, Donald. I'll see how it is going before I ride ahead."

The day passed without any mishaps and they camped that night some 20 miles from home. As the camp was on the open prairies David circled the carts and the animals were kept inside. He posted a guard for the first part of the night. He himself would take the morning watch because that was when hostile Indians might appear. The night passed quietly so they had tea at daylight and made an early start. They would breakfast when they came to a likely spot.

Going down to the Belly River one of the horses got too near a crumbling edge and pitched over some 20 feet. Fortunately, the Indian rider was able to jump clear and was not hurt, while the horse swam ashore below. Crossing the Belly did not prove as easy as crossing the Bow, for the river was exceptionally high and recent heavy rains had not helped. The banks were slippery and the horses skittish, but the oxen took the carts over safely enough. One of the horses in crossing the river was caught in the current and turned over twice. About a quarter of a mile down the river the horse got on his feet and both horse and rider reached shore without harm.

The trip which began in such fine weather was not blessed for long, it rained for days until every man felt sodden. David kept their spirits up with tales of various trips that he had made to Fort

Garry when the travelling conditions were much worse. His Cree Indians were used to hardship and as long as they had plenty of food they were contented.

The next day David met some rum runners, who told him that they had seen parties of Blackfeet on the prowl. David thanked them and they each went their separate ways. That afternoon David, who was riding well in advance of the brigade, saw some Blackfoot scouts in the distance. He wondered when they would be along and kept a sharp lookout. Presently, he saw a band of them moving up from the east. David following his usual custom rode over to meet them. As he drew near he saw they were a group of young braves who might be out looking for adventure or plunder. David dismounted, the Indians did the same and walked toward him.

“Smoke?” David asked as he extended his tobacco. So they all sat down on the grass, smoked and talked.

“Where do you go?” asked the Indian leader.

“To Fort Benton,” David replied. “What are you doing?”

“Hunting, but the buffaloes seem to be far off and we need more horses,” the Indian answered, looking at the long brigade which Donald was keeping moving.

“If I were going home I might trade with you for horses,” David said, “but I need all the horses that I have because I have far to go.”

Finally the powwow broke up. The Indians rode away and David turned to catch up with the brigade.

That night when they made camp, David posted two guards to watch the horses – not without foresight, because twice during the night two or three of the young Blackfeet crept up to the sleeping camp with the idea of taking some horses. Each time they were challenged and could do little except silently and rather sheepishly stand up. After their second attempt failed they decided that this man had spoken the truth. He had not bragged when he told them that he was a friend of all the Indians and know their ways very well.

Fort Benton, when David rode into it, presented a picture of any rough western town in the United States of that day. As well

as the adobe fort it had one street, with a wide variety of stores lining one side, while on the opposite side there were nothing but gambling saloons and, at the end, the sheriff's office with a little bit of a jail attached to it. Long lines of hitching racks were in front of all the buildings. John Healy was the sheriff and he was a good man much as John Hickok had been in another part of the country. Healy did his best to keep killings at the lowest level and he was constantly stopping fights on the street or in the saloons.

When David rode into town the sounds of the hurdy-gurdies and the noise of men in the gambling halls was loud even at that early hour of the day, indicating that there were many horse and cattle dealers around. No doubt there were a lot of miners too, who had brought their silver ore to ship down the river. Business was certainly booming in Fort Benton.

The railway only came to Fargo, so all the supplies for Fort Benton, about fifty miles southeast of Great Falls, Montana, had to be brought by river. I.G. Baker and T.C. Powers had several steam boats, which plied the Missouri River, going as far south as New Orleans, though Bismarck was their usual stopping place.

The other means of transporting goods was by bull train, and David had seen several such trains camped outside of Fort Benton, waiting to load up with furs and other cargoes to go south or east. Later, these same bull trains would work their way into the Canadian North West, in fact the following year there were some of them. Bull trains, also called *Buffalo Skins* because buffalo hides were their chief freight, were peculiar to the prairies. Their drivers were tall *bull whackers* or *mule skimmers* depending on whether the train had bulls or mules. Each team of six to 10 yoke of oxen hauled three enormous wagons, which were hitched in threes, one behind the other, the *Lead*, the *Swing* and the *Trail*. The Lead wagon usually carried 65 percent of the load, the Swing 25 percent and the Trail 15 tons of freight. The wagons were especially built to five-foot gauge which was common at that time as being the most useful on hills. The wagons were covered with canvas stretched over bows, which kept the goods dry and gave shelter to the men as well. The ground travelled by these trains had to be dry

and hard and the river crossings firm, otherwise they sank badly. Their versatility was the reason why Red River carts were used for transport in the Rebellion of 1885.

If the ground was marshy, the oxen were unhitched and taken across the stream, then a heavy chain was attached from the yoke of the lead team to the lead wagon and it was pulled across. This was done for each wagon. Oxen were broken in when four-year-old steers, and after three or four years in service, they were sold as beef. An experienced team was always on the lead. One reason for travelling in brigades was because of the difficulty of breaking the young oxen in for pulling. These trains travelled through country where there was good pasture for seven or eight months of the year because the drivers carried no food for the teams. Travel was in the early forenoon and the late afternoon, so there could be a long noon feed and rest period for the animals.

A wagon train was frequently made up of eight yokes of oxen and 24 wagons. Naturally the rate of travel was slow, and they might go anywhere from 8 to 15 miles a day, the latter being considered a good day. The driver walked beside his team wielding his heavy bullwhip, which exploded like a pistol shot as he swung it over the heads of the oxen. For fast freight, a six-span mule team was used per wagon and the outfit had a driver to each team. In either case the cook with his wagon followed at the end of the train as did the night herders. The horses for herding could be tied to the backs of the wagons or would be driven by the herders.

In later years the bull trains followed very closely the route that David had just taken, roughly 240 miles from Fort Macleod, though that post came into existence after David's trip. They went due east from Fort Macleod to Fort Kipp, then to Fort Whoop Up turning southeast to the Milk River and the Sweetgrass Hills. They crossed the boundary near where Coutts Post Office was to come into being. Then south to the Marias River, southeast to the Teton River to its junction with the Missouri at Fort Benton.

The wagon trains were expensive in outlay, but the freighting paid. The oxen averaged \$300 a yoke and the mules \$500 a span, so it took a long while to pay for the outlay. Generally, the owners

of these were fur traders and with hides ranging from \$2 to \$6 per hide and wolf hides ranging from \$1.25 to \$2.50, it took time to make the initial purchase.

The biggest trading store in Benton was the I.G. Baker. In 1868, I.G. Baker, who traded from Fort Benton outfitted for trades into Canada. The men and wagons moved rapidly across the prairies to avoid both the United States authorities and the Indians; carrying contraband through Indian territory was a serious offense. For many years the authorities were quite helpless against the rum runners, for once they left Fort Benton the country was large and the moonshiners were easily lost. They established Fort Whoop Up on the Belly and St. Mary's Rivers near present-day Lethbridge, then continued up the Belly and built Fort Kipp on the then Old Man River. Fort Slide Out was on the northwest bank of the Belly River; Fort Stand Off between the junction of the Belly and Waterton Rivers and finally Fort Spitzzee (from *Spitzzee* or *Espitzzee*, which means "High Trees") on the Highwood River.

Some of these were forts, some just houses, but Whoop Up was the largest and from 1868 to 1874, when the North West Mounted Police came, rum traffic was heavy between it and Montana. Some of these traders were adventurers and desperados willing to take any chances. Their type of trade was very dangerous because their chief article of trade was liquor which drove the Indians crazy. They brought food, blankets, guns and ammunition, barrels of wine and alcohol, the last being diluted 10 to one, and coloured dark with tea or herbs. The Indians would come in with their furs, whiskey being their chief aim. For a buffalo robe complete with head and tail, the Indian would get two tin cupsful of whiskey; for a good horse he would receive three gallons of the spirits.

The very names of the forts give some idea of the times. *Whoop Up* is a term used in Montana which meant *Rounded Up by the Indians*. *Slide Out* was so called because the Indians planned a raid, but the traders got word of it and were able to slide out before the fight started. Joe Kipp was a notorious rum trader in the early days and the fort he ran he called after himself. The fort was doing very well until the Police came. Later, Joe Kipp settled

down and became a wealthy rancher and a very good citizen. *Stand Off* was where a short pitched battle was fought between traders and Indians, the traders managing to stand the Indians off. In practically every instance, the men who ran these posts became good citizens, married and settled won. They became the pioneers and the farmers of the future. Their adventurous spirits from the old days and their courage stood them in good stead because they were part of the frontier of the day. Their restlessness, their strength, their hardihood – even their rebellion against law and order – helped the building of an empire. These were the men along with the missionaries and fur traders who were the dreamers of the future. They were the builders with vision. They extended nations where there were only wild animals and unknown land.

After the coming of the North West Mounted Police, Fort Macleod and Fort Walsh became the chief trading centres and the bull trains used to come through Fort Whoop Up to Fort Walsh; later in 1876 they used the Gap of the Milk River ridge, along Whiskey Creek to Fort Stand Off and to Fort Macleod. The early forts gradually became a thing of the past, as the rum runners were driven out or taken prisoners by the Police.

In Fort Benton, David dickered for a price for his furs and was finally satisfied, then he bargained for a price on cattle and bought 100 head of part Texas blood stock from I.G. Baker, as well as 50 head of horses. With the business finished, he started to get provisions for his store, as well as some luxuries for Annie.

He found that the groceries in Fort Benton were cheaper than those of the Hudson's Bay Company in Fort Garry. There were the best of canned fruit and canned butter and Rosemary Valley flour. White flour was expensive anywhere and a real luxury, but a sack was worth it for Annie. Finally, he had purchased beans, hominy, syrup, jam, tea and coffee beans. To these he added the list of sundries that Annie had made up for him. Next he stocked the gay prints and coloured blankets that would attract the eyes of any Indian. That night he took Donald and they decided to do the town. Most of the half-breeds and Indians were free for the



night, but David had left three good men on guard. The supplies and livestock were to be delivered to the camp the following day. When these were packed they would start for home even though they only went a few miles the first day.

Fort Benton, a sorry looking place by day, presented a more colourful appearance by night, because there were more cowboys, dealers, miners and Mexicans on the street. The gay colours of their clothing, along with those of the Indians, added to the general atmosphere of merrymaking. David and Donald were to find that everything was not as peaceful as it seemed.

“So, you came in to see the sights, did you?”

David turned to see Sheriff Healy behind him. “Yes, after all I don’t come to town very often.”

“Well, stick by me and I promise you some excitement at least, there is never a dull night around here. Where had you thought of going?” said the sheriff.

“Oh anywhere to some of the saloons, to watch the gambling and the girls and the fun generally. This is my man Whitford.”

“Glad to know you,” answered the sheriff heartily as he shook hands. “How about this place? It usually livens up a little later.”

In the course of the evening, Healy put down four fights and threw two drunks into jail to cool off until morning, then the three men entered one of the larger saloons where an argument ended in a free for all fight between horse dealers and miners. There were several heads broken and it looked as though there would be worse than that when some of them drew their guns. David and Whitford lined up with the sheriff and managed to put down the trouble, but not before two men were wounded and the saloon a shambles.

When David returned to camp he felt certain that he would be glad to see the last of Fort Benton. He was happy that this rough element had not found its way into all places yet. He realized, of course, that it was inevitable that there would be a great variety of people drift in to any outpost from civilization. He sincerely hoped that the Canadian North West would be spared this type of development in its progress.

By the time David and his men were ready the next day, he was glad to see that the cattle were as sturdy as promised. On the trip he found their stamina was good because they did not lose an animal and the calves which they produced later ranged from 800 to 1100 pounds dressed and provided food for the North West Mounted Police.

The horses were fine but there was one which had a very bad name, as well as great beauty, and no man had ridden it yet. When David was talking to a man from I.G. Baker's with whom he was trying to settle the price, a Mexican approached him, "I will ride that horse, Señor."

"If you can ride him my man, I will give you \$10," David replied. Whereupon the Mexican swore by all his saints that he would ride the horse.

The word spread quickly there would be a riding so before long quite a large crowd had gathered around the corral. Betting was heavy, either for the horse or the Mexican. Meanwhile, the Mexican cut the horse out from the rest of the herd, roped him after a real struggle and led him into the next corral, where he tied him to the fence.

He approached the wild-eyed horse whose ears were turned back close to his head, with gentle words. He had picked up a blanket but when he attempted to place it on the back of the horse, the animal snorted and shied off. After some struggle the Mexican managed to get the blanket on him as he gentled him with pats and words. Presently the saddle was in place, then he untied the horse.

With a leap, the Mexican was on the animal's back. One of the men opened the corral gate and the battle was on. For a second the horse stood still, nostrils flaring, eyes rolling, then he broke through the opening. He stopped suddenly and started to buck to dislodge the unwelcome object on his back. He reared, he sun-fished, but he could not get rid of the clinging man. This went on with several variations, while the crowd cheered and yelled, encouraging first the horse, then the Mexican, until the horse gave up.

The Mexican, however, was just ready to start. He forced the horse to run, he spurned him until he bucked again, then he made him run again; eventually the horse stopped lathered and beaten and the Mexican cantered him up to David, stopping in front of him he said, "Do I get my \$10, Señor?"

"Yes, indeed, that was one of the best exhibitions I have ever seen. You have good hands with a horse," David answered.

Naturally the trip home was much slower, because David was not one to run the fat off his stock and made time for them to graze. He had hired more men, so the guard was doubled during the night when they went through Blackfoot country. David never ceased his vigilance as scout. Several times at night Indians were caught by the guards and brought into camp. David treated them well and sent them off with presents, ignoring the fact that he knew they had been planning to steal the animals.

One night they made camp not far from Fort Whoop Up which was about 100 yards square, palisaded and with the buildings facing toward the centre; the bastions at the corner were loop-holed and the fort was the proud possessor of two old-fashioned brass field guns. In 1874 only two or three men were living in the fort. It still was a centre for the rum runners, and later more than once the Police trailed a guilty man there, sometimes, much to their chagrin, to find all trace of him disappeared.

In those days mail from western Canada for eastern Canada, went through Fort Benton, then by boat and train through the States and back into Canada. This outgoing mail carried American stamps. Whenever any traveller was passing through he was always willing to carry mail to any outlying post, because in those days mail might come once a year or twice a year and it meant a great deal to the recipient.

Now David was carrying some mail from Benton to Whoop Up, where he was greeted with pleasure and invited in to have a smoke and pass the time of day. They talked about Fort Benton, about the fur trade and any other subject of interest to them. Finally David returned to the camp.

When the brigade was crossing the Bow River, one of the carts with its horses was caught in the current and swept down the river. Fortunately, the cart swung out of an eddy toward the bank, dragging the horse with it. The cart was loaded to capacity, but well packed and it floated like a ball so little damage was done. The riders who were following along the bank soon had the cart-horse on its feet. Otherwise the trip home was quite uneventful.

