

Fort Langley, Historic H. B. C. Post in British Columbia

Famous Fort Established in 1827 by Simpson Drove Boston Traders from West Coast and Helped Introduce British Institutions

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TO many of the people of British Columbia, Fort Langley is merely a name. The sum total of their information concerning it usually amounts to this. It is an abandoned trading post of the Hudson's Bay Company, situated on the Fraser river about thirty miles from its mouth. In reality it is one of the most interesting historic spots within the province; for some decades it was one of the most important—indeed the most important—of the Company's forts in British Columbia.

Almost everyone knows that the Hudson's Bay Company was founded in 1670 and that for about a century of varying fortunes in peace and war, in good times and bad times, it had a monopoly of the fur trade of British North America. But in 1783 the desultory opposition which consisted in individual efforts with their inherent jealousies and consequent weakness was combined into a strong and aggressive association or partnership called the North West Company of Montreal.

Then began a long, hard, increasingly bitter, and constantly broadening struggle between the old Company and its young and vigorous rival, which after twenty years culminated in the battle of Seven Oaks, near Winnipeg, in which Governor Semple and some twenty others were slain. Out of evil frequently cometh good, and out of this bloodshed came the fusion of the two warring companies, which were united in 1821 under the name of the Hudson's Bay Company. This union was clearly an amalgamation, not a conquest; the name of the Hudson's Bay Company was retained by the unified interests because of the rights, vague and indefinite though they were, which were granted by the charter of King Charles the Second.

George Simpson, a young man from the counting house and who had been but a few years in the West, was placed

in command of its interests in America, as Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company's Territories. It was, despite the disparaging remarks and opinions of the older and more practical men, a wise choice, for Simpson soon showed a complete grasp of the situation, not only as regards the daily routine and internal management of its affairs, but also on the broad lines of policy and development.

To unify the interests of the two concerns, now become one, and to rid the Company of the double equipment of forts and men (for in almost every place east of the Rocky Mountains wherever one company had placed a fort there its opponent had also built one) was a work requiring diplomacy and determination, which occupied him for about three years.

Thus, in 1824, Simpson had leisure to give attention to conditions west of the Rocky Mountains. At that time there existed some half a dozen forts or trading posts, on the headwaters of the Fraser and the Columbia; but on the coast there was only one, Astoria, or, as it was then called, Fort George, at the mouth of the Columbia river. From that point to the Russian settlement at Sitka, in Alaska, a distance of about seven hundred miles, no trading post existed; the whole of that great region, including the involved shoreline of our province, was exploited by the itinerant trading vessels from Boston—"the Boston Peddlers" as they were sneeringly denominated.

Simpson resolved to end this condition, to drive the American adventurers from the field, and to absorb into the Hudson's Bay Company the whole trade of that immense coastal area, which was then not British, as is so often stated, but only a sort of "no-man's land," to become the property of any nation that entered upon and took possession of it.

Having no trading vessel to flit from

place to place in opposition to the American vessels, he resolved to establish a fort in some well situated, central position which would draw the trade for miles in every direction. The first outward and visible sign of this inward intention was the dispatching of an expedition in the Fall of 1824, under James McMillan, to examine the vicinity of the mouth of the Fraser river for a suitable site.

It would be wandering too far afield to sketch the movements of this party from the time they left Astoria. The record of the journey has been preserved and is published in the Washington Historical Quarterly. No one can read of the way they portaged their boats—and they were each large enough to hold twenty men and their provisions and outfits—from the Columbia river to Shoalwater bay; how they dragged and poled them along the Pacific ocean shore to Gray's Harbour; how they pulled and hauled them by sheer brute strength from the Chehalis river to Puget Sound; how after ascending the Nicomekl river they dragged them eight or ten miles across Langley prairie until they struck the little stream we now call the Salmon river; without a thrill of pride in their courage and daring and a feeling of reflected glory in belonging to a race that could produce men capable of such things. Truly there were giants on earth in those days.

McMillan and his forty companions reached the site of the future Fort Langley in December, 1824. They record, with feelings we can well imagine, the downpour of "weighty rain" that greeted them as they neared Old Father Fraser. They navigated the river for a few miles beyond Mission and then made their way back to Puget Sound, sailing their boats out of the river, the first of white men to pass out of that river and the second to float on its waters. The report of the expedition was placed by Simpson before the annual council at Norway House, and, after some delay, instructions were given to build the fort.

Accordingly in the summer of 1827 the *Cadboro*, a trading vessel which in the interval had been sent out as a part of the design to combat the Boston traders and which was the first vessel to enter the Fraser, cast anchor at the site of the future Fort Langley

and began its construction. The stolid Indians stood around looking gravely upon the work and discussing amongst themselves the various strange movements of the white men, as day by day the palisades grew into lines and then into an enclosed square, within which rose gradually the log walls and cedar bark roofs of the various buildings. Finally the post was completed and the trading goods landed; the *Cadboro* weighed her anchor, doffed her ensign, and saluted the latest born of the Company's forts; the guns from the fort's bastions thundered forth a response, the flag with "H. B. C." in the field broke forth to the breeze and was lowered in salute; and the *Cadboro* sailed away leaving Fort Langley to sink or swim.

We can imagine McMillan and his associates now left to their own resources; a sort of civilized island in an ocean of savagery. Their nearest neighbours to the southward were at the Columbia river about three hundred miles away; to the eastward their nearest neighbours were at Fort Kamloops, also about three hundred miles distant, but separated by the barrier of the Cascade mountains; to the northward the nearest habitation of the white man, the Russian trading post at Sitka, with an unchartered intervening region filled with savage tribes and with all sorts of unknown dangers; to the westward the rolling billows of the Pacific for thousands of miles. It was a situation calling for strong and resourceful men; our *de luxe* pioneers of today would perhaps not find it to their taste.

Langley prairie at that time was good beaver country; its sluggish winding streams were dammed by them and flooded the adjacent lands. The elk and the deer, the bear and the wolf roamed over its pathless solitudes, and found safety in the surrounding forest; while the marten, the fisher, and the mink hunted along the river banks. Trade in their peltries commenced immediately; and soon the Indians from Fraser mouth, from Vancouver Island and the islands of the Strait of Georgia, from Puget Sound, and the coast to the northward began to flock to the new post to exchange the produce of their winter's hunt for the white man's goods. These lynx-eyed traders had not, as many have supposed, their eyes

blinded by beaver skins; they could recognize wealth in other forms. Soon they developed the riches of the Fraser fisheries which lay before them. In the rear was the magnificent Langley prairie, one of the garden spots of the province; there the first real agricultural work in British Columbia was done by the Hudson's Bay traders of Fort Langley.

One day in the latter part of October of the next year (1828) after the early darkness of the winter's day had settled down, a strange, weird sound was heard, a sound such as the hills and rocks of the land had never heard before. The traders were astonished; the Indians amazed. It came nearer; it became more distinct. 'Twas the sound of the bag-pipes skirling out the notes of the "Cameron Gathering;" and nearer still and nearer still, and now at length 'tis "Auld Lang Syne;" and presently through the darkness and the mirk appeared a canoe bearing Governor Simpson on his famous express voyage across the continent.

A day or two spent in rearranging the work, in making promotions, in settling difficulties, and deciding disputes, and the Governor sweeps out of sight around the point as he continues his journey to the Columbia river posts; and Langley, deprived of the stimulus of his presence, relapses into its monotonous fur-trading life.

Year by year, with assistance and with increasing fortune, Fort Langley struggled against the Yankee "peddlers." The advent of the steamer *Beaver* in 1835 and her buzzing from place to place and from tribe to tribe—a sort of ambulatory trading post—the building of the first Fort Simpson in 1831, the building of Fort McLaughlin on Milbank Sound in 1833, and the building of Fort Victoria in 1843, all assisted Fort Langley in the fight. In the letters that are still extant one can trace the gradual overpowering of the itinerant maritime traders; at the same time each of these factors which aided in killing the enemy aided also, strangely enough, in killing Fort Langley itself as a fur trading post.

But though the main business of fur-trading steadily diminished, the auxiliary businesses just as steadily increased. Fort Langley soon produced salted salmon sufficient to support her own people and the people of the Com-

pany's posts up and down the coast, with a surplus for export to the Sandwich Islands. So, too, her agricultural activities grew yearly. On the prairie behind the fort cattle and sheep and hogs were raised for the other posts and for export; but that which gave the great impetus to Langley's agriculture was the lease by the Company in 1839 of the "pan-handle portion" of Alaska. The rental was to be paid in farm produce; and this produce was soon obtained in great part from Langley.

Thus by the early forties the nature of Langley's return had changed greatly; furs were still included, but they had become quite secondary, fish and agricultural products assuming the more prominent positions. Then in 1846 came the Treaty of Washington, which drew the boundary between British and American possessions west of the Rocky Mountains. Though the Hudson's Bay Company's right to navigate the Columbia river was preserved, yet the red tape of custom's regulations and, probably the unrest amongst the natives owing to their difficulties with American settlers, induced the Company to look for a new road to their forts in the interior of British Columbia.

Up to this time all goods for these forts had been carried by *bateaux* up the Columbia river to Fort Okanagan, near the mouth of the river by that name, and thence by the "brigade" to Kamloops and on to Fort Alexandria, and thence again by water to their destination; and all returns from these posts had been taken out in the same way.

The Company determined to utilize a route entirely within British territory and selected the Fraser river. Fort Langley then became the point of transshipment. The *Beaver* brought the goods from Victoria to Langley, where they were loaded into *bateaux* and freighted up the river to Fort Hope, to which point came the "brigade" bringing out the winter's furs and returning loaded with the trading goods for the following season's business. Thus Langley assumed a new importance as a shipping point and every June saw it one of the busiest spots in all the Company's wide domain.

The goods for Kamloops, Colville, Alexandria and the northern posts are taken from the storehouses to the ba-

teaux, and the strife is keen as to how many of the ninety-pound packages can be carried at once, how many in an hour, and so on. Loaded at last the flat-bottomed bateaux with sails and oars, poles and lines face the swift current of the already freshet-swollen river. Slowly, but surely they ascend; the work is so heavy and constant that there is no singing and the primeval forest on either hand gives back no echo of "*A la claire fontaine*" or "*En rouland ma boule*," so commonly heard on the eastern rivers.

Arrived at Fort Hope the bateaux await the coming of the "brigade." Frequently it is late, for the Hudson's Bay Company's trail from Fort Hope to Fort Kamloops led over a considerable elevation, and the snow was sometimes an impediment even in the month of June. A fine sight indeed was this "brigade"—this western caravan—with its hundreds of horses, "with," says Malcolm, "no broken hacks in the train, but every animal in its full beauty of form and color, and all so tractable."

We can see them, in single file, following the leader with his tinkling bell, winding and twisting along the narrow trail through the thick woods of the coast, in constantly changing light and shade; or again upon the open country of the interior where from a distance the moving "brigade" seemed some vast dragon of old tamed to do the work of man. And then the meeting of the two parties at Fort Hope! The exchange of news! The eager enquiries after friends! And the constant *regale*!

Imagination runs riot as one thinks of these yearly meetings, and one is tempted to linger filling in the details of a picture which few, if any, people now living have ever seen. But the end comes; the loaded "brigade" departs with the trading goods for the interior; and the loaded bateaux return to Fort Langley with the furs.

After the arrival of the bateaux from Hope, Fort Langley continues to be a bustling place for some weeks. Everyone is busy. in the counting, checking and sorting of the furs; in the beating, cleaning, and airing of the furs; in the final examination, listing and carrying of the furs to the press house; and then in the baling and packing of the furs into solid bundles for shipment to England; and all of this to be done



LOWER FORT GARRY, on the Red river, sixteen miles from Winnipeg, in the winter of 1903-4. The view was taken just after the arrival at the fort of several dog trains with fur from Norway House.

against the daily expected arrival of the *Beaver*.

So runs the life in Fort Langley for years and years. Then suddenly the news goes out to the world of the existence of gold in the bars of the Fraser, and, into the unorganized territory, which later became the colony of British Columbia, thirty thousand adventurers rush pell-mell, not like rational creatures but rather like creatures being controlled by some outside influence—just as though Aladdin had rubbed his lamp and bidden the obedient Genii to people the land.

Langley, being the only habitation of the white man on the lower mainland, was naturally the Mecca to which these pilgrims came, first by means of their own boats and canoes, and later by the passenger steamers that soon made their appearance. Thus Fort Langley obtained added prominence as a starting point in the great gold rush. It was the one fixed spot in a community in a state of flux. It became a centre around which were grouped the ephemeral buildings and the tents of this moving, mutable mass of humanity.

The imperial government at once, on the suggestion of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, the secretary of state for the colonies, determined to constitute the mainland into the colony of British Columbia; the colony of Vancouver Island had then existed for about nine years. The act of parliament forming the colony was passed in August, 1858; and on 19th November, 1858, an historic ceremony took place in connection therewith, which entitled Langley to be called the *birthplace of British Co-*

lumbia; it was the formal launching of the colony of British Columbia. There Chief Justice Begbie was sworn into office; he then administered the oaths to James (later Sir James) Douglas as the governor of the colony; and thereafter certain proclamations by Governor Douglas, which were necessary for the complete formation of the colony, were promulgated. It was the greatest day in the history of Fort Langley. Rear Admiral Baynes, Chief Justice Cameron, of Vancouver Island; Captain Prevost, Captain Grant and many other and lesser notabilities were present to grace the occasion.

Governor Douglas, it is said, desired to make Fort Langley the seaport town of British Columbia, and actually considered the desirability of creating it the capital of the colony. He did not, however, do this; though it is probable that, if left to his own devices, he would have done so. At this time the laws of the colony were made by the governor alone, and he was accustomed to issue these laws from time to time as he moved about the land and found conditions requiring them; many of his early proclamations, as these laws were called, were promulgated from Fort Langley.

The mining inrush ended the period of barter and brought the period of sale; it therefore spelled disaster to the little fur trade still remaining at Fort Langley. The termination of the lease of the Alaskan strip ended the *raison d'etre* of its large farming operations; the advent of farmers and the growth of general farming in the colony caused the Company to abandon this line of operations. The celebrated Hudson's Bay Company farm at Langley Prairie was soon afterwards subdivided and sold in blocks of about one hundred acres each, and, thus laid the foundation of that rich and prosperous farming community.

So too the fisheries. Having shown to the people the wealth which lay at their door, the Company seemed contented to leave its further exploitation to private hands. Thus shorn of its two adjuncts, Fort Langley entered upon its last phase—a mere shop for the sale of goods to all comers. And so it continued until the middle nineties, when it was decided by the management to abandon the spot.

Fort Langley as a Hudson's Bay Company's post had reached the allotted span of life; it was almost three-score and ten years of age; and it sank into its grave full of honours and after a life well spent. It had during its existence driven the Boston traders from our shores; it had shewn the wealth of the region in river and farm; it had aided in keeping British trade within British dominions; and as its crowning glory, politically, it had assisted in establishing British institutions in our land.