CANADIAN EMIGRANT. 1908

JAMES. H. SMYTHE

The modern methods of dealing with emigration and the facilities enjoyed by emigrants for travelling in comfort and security are in vivid contrast to the rough and ready means of transportation of fifty years ago.

To-day emigrants have all the benefits of a vastly superior system, modern boats, and trains running to a definite time schedule with unfailing regularity. Also nearly all parties of any size are personally conducted by an authorised agent, not as far as the port of embarkation only, but more often right to the ultimate destination.

Moreover, under the watchful eye of the emigration officials, the undesirable element is practically non-existent.

Half a century ago, however, things were vastly different, and the prospective settler had his own way to find and his own battles to fight, right from the time he left his native land until he found his particular niche in the country of his adoption.

The fact that no strict inquiry was made as to one's financial position after landing added to the troubles of the bona fide settler, for it let loose in the country a moneyless set of rogues who lived by their wits and by sponging on their fellows.

On board ships sailing under the British flag things usually ran fairly smoothly, for the British sailor has an effective way of dealing with troublesome passengers - and troubles, which are always present when many different nationalities are

herded together, were promptly dealt with and the cause removed.

On the colonist train, however, there was no such supervision, or, at least, the staff detailed for such duty was totally inadequate and quite unable to cope with the surging, excited crowds which fought and clamoured for places in the train.

The fact that the majority of the passengers could speak little or no English added to the general confusion, and for the time being the place of departure was a veritable Tower of Babel. However, by dint of superhuman exertions on the part of the station officials and with the aid of a squad of police, the emigrants were finally all got aboard, and the train-load of human freight at last got under way.

When one had got settled down and had time to take stock of one's fellow travellers, what a sight presented itself!

Each carriage held sixty people - men, women, and children of all ages and nationalities, and dressed in every conceivable manner and colour of garments - and each and every one hugged tightly a bundle containing part, and in many cases the whole, of their household treasures.

A glance round the interior of the average colonist coach would reveal an astonishing mixture of races amongst those prospective citizens of the New World. Occupying seats on one side were five Russians, thigh booted and sheepskin coated: sombre men, cold and inhospitable as their far northern birthplace. Opposite were a bevy of Cockneys, cheeky and chirpy as the sparrows

of their beloved London. In a corner near the entrance were a party of Italians, olive skinned and garrulous and smelling to high heaven of garlic. A pig-tailed Chinaman sat opposite, clad in voluminous smock and wearing clogs, a bland and imperturbable figure, the wisdom of the ages hidden behind a mask of celestial simplicity.

Farther along a family group of Norwegians were making merry, setting their affairs in order - big, brawny, tawny-haired giants of men; the wives buxom and fresh-complexioned matrons nursing sturdy, flaxen-haired children, prattling miniatures of their parents. Ideal settlers those Norwegians, and in striking contrast to the party of Jews who huddled on the seats behind them.

Dirty, unkempt specimens of humanity, they presented a strange appearance in their motley of garments - coat drawn over coat and cravat over cravat, greasy raiment of every age and colour.. Yet this outward appearance of poverty was but a cloak concealing incipient financiers of the new world.

A group of Finns, quick-eyed and quarrelsome, are the next to meet the eye; an evil-looking crowd we were glad to be rid of after one day's journey. Several more races were represented in our coach load of emigrants, phlegmatic Germans, stolid Swedes, austere Danes, and through all the medley of tongues one could distinguish the burr of Scotland and the Irish brogue. Truly a heterogeneous freight answering the call of

the Golden West and questing, ever questing, for the place where the rainbow ends - Eldorado.

It is not the intention of the author to attempt any description of the country through which our colonist train passed in its meandering towards the Golden West.

The view from a train window is too limited to enable one to pass any opinion on the scenery or geographical features of the different states traversed, though an ever-changing scene unrolled itself in endless panorama before our wondering eyes.

One could only conjecture what lay beyond those vast brooding forests which fringed the iron track for seemingly interminable miles, or how far those green capped waves of undulating prairie rolled beyond the distant horizon.

Romance has little part in a journey such as ours, the more prosaic affairs of eating, sleeping, etc., being our more immediate concern, and the necessity for keeping a watchful eye at all times on our personal belongings.

As regards food, most of the emigrants carried a supply of edibles, cooked and uncooked, purchased ere entraining, though some trusted to being able to buy provisions as required at the various halts en route. Fifty years ago, cooking stoves were part of the colonist train equipment, and were installed along with the toilet conveniences at the rear of each coach on that part known as the annexe or observation platform. Cooking, however, was not a job to be undertaken lightly, for usually a

score or more passengers wished to use the stove at the same time, and in the struggle for possession victory went to the strongest, with the spoils to the victor; that is, the kettle and frying pan. Even then the victorious one could never be sure of enjoying the fruits of his labours, for meals in the making had an uncanny knack of disappearing if one relaxed their vigilance but a moment.

Washing on board was not to be thought of after the first day, as by then water was practically non-existent, the tanks being filled only when the attendant had an afterthought when replenishing his own supply. Water, however, was nearly always to be had, as in those days all passenger and through freight trains had the right of way, with the result that the slow-moving colonist train was frequently sidetracked to ensure a clear line.

The emigrants took advantage of those stops by securing as much water as time and their limited means of carrying permitted, and also, when possible, by scouring the line and neighbourhood for pieces of coal or wood, which were jealously guarded by the owner until he had access to the cook stove, when he could then find good use for the fuel, none being supplied by the railway company after the first bunkerful was exhausted.

Sleep, however, was the biggest problem, though some, like the bland, inscrutable Chinaman or the stoical Russians, seemed to find no difficulty in dropping off at any time, and in

any position.

To provide beds, the seats in the coach had a sort of sliding shelf under them, which, when drawn out, filled the space between them, the seats facing each other in pairs.

The luggage racks, too, were simply great sheet steel shelves suspended on chains, and those, when lowered at night to a level position, also served as beds with your baggage as company, the protesting rasp of iron chains your evening lullaby.

Sleep was nearly impossible, not so much through the unyielding nature of the beds, as by the nightly revels of the unauthorised passengers, of which we carried a full complement - I mean that lively and troublesome insect, the ubiquitous flea, which took toll of all and sundry, making life miserable and the nights one long scratch.

The whole weary, wakeful night through one could hear the frantic scratchings and muttered curses of tortured humanity in the languages of a dozen countries, until with the morning the unwelcome attentions ceased, as the raiders, gorged to repletion, disappeared into their secret fastnesses, until darkness fell again.

So passed the time, pleasantly enough for the men folk, as they could while away the hours, yarning, smoking, playing cards, or such like, but unbelievably wearisome for the women and children, and one could not but admire their courage and the brave spirit which had carried them so far in their quest for

better times.

A three thousand miles train journey comes to an end in time, however, and just when the glamour of the great adventure was beginning to evaporate, our coach one morning finally rumbled to a halt at our destination, Calgary, the threshold of the Golden West, from whence since the far distant past pioneers have set out on the long trail, braving the dangers of the unknown in the endeavour to carve a niche for themselves in the land of their adoption.

Calgary! Western gateway to the wide open spaces; what a thrill went through us when first we read the word on our colonist ticket!

How the magic of the name fired our youthful imaginations and what pictures we drew of the old frontier post! Already we could see the weather-beaten houses, and boarded sidewalks, straggling along either side of the long dusty street, which finally lost itself in the sage blue prairie stretching as far as the eye could see. In fancy we could see the swift gallop of some rider through the town, see him pull up and hear the tinkle of a piano as he opened the door of some saloon. A cowboy, perhaps - that romantic and picturesque figure of the Wild West dear to the hearts of the youth of all nations.

In our dreams we could emulate - aye, even surpass - the wildest deeds of those daring horsemen of the plains and hear men speak of us with bated breath.

But what a disillusionment awaited us when we finally disembarked at the romantic city of our dreams.

No rattle of revolvers greeted our arrival; no booted and spurred figures stirred up the station dust on plunging, wild-eyed bronchos; and no bearded pard annihilated the proverbial fly with a squirt of tobacco juice. Civilisation had taken the place of savagery, and the Calgary of the past was but a memory. Modern buildings, replete with modern comforts, flanked well-made streets, and concrete pavements had replaced the crazy plank paths. The rattle of milk cans instead of the roar of Colts was heard, while the fiery mustang now stood patiently between the shafts of a wagon, and the expectorating, bearded gentleman was now resurrected in the guise of a clean-shaved blue-coated police officer, who was tactfully creating order out of chaos on the crowded platform. Yet, though our fanciful visions suffered disenchantment in the cold light of reality, we found the Calgary of the present more alive, more virile than ever it had been even in the most hectic days of its past history.

Progression was now the keynote and the whole town throbbed like a hive with the nervous energy of thousands of human bees, all eagerly building the foundations of a new home in this, the long-sought-for land of their emancipation.

The drone and the idler found no place in the purposeful scheme of colonisation. "Get out or get under" was the motto,

and success was only attained by honest work and high endeavour.

Of course, though the town claimed many of our emigrant party, by far the biggest majority meant to settle on the land, so the first concern of those was to find out the necessary steps to be taken in order to achieve that end.

No great difficulty presented itself in that respect, however, and, provided one had sufficient money to pay the initial fees and living expenses for a time, the actual possession of a homestead was easy of accomplishment, the expense of bringing your new-found hopes to a state of fruition being quite a different matter. In those days the Canadian Government set aside large tracts of land for settling purposes, and at frequent intervals these were thrown open for homesteading, and the dates of application advertised. The tracts were laid off in blocks, each block being bounded by, as yet imaginary, roads every three miles north and south and every mile east and west, the corners being marked by stakes and number plates. The blocks were then subdivided into sections of 640 acres each, which were in turn cut into homesteads of 160, one corner section in each block being reserved as a township corner and not available for homesteading.

When one had settled on a homestead site, application was made on a form for the purpose, which also stated the terms on which you held the land, and what conditions had to be observed before it finally became your own property. A fee of ten dollars

was charged for a homestead of 160 acres, and only one could be held by each individual settler, as a freehold, though each member of a family had the same privilege. A further 160 acres, called a pre-emption, could be obtained by paying a taxation fee of forty-eight dollars a year for a period of six years, then it and the original 160 acres became one's own property, if the conditions attached to the gift had been complied with.

The conditions were simple and entailed no special hardship.

One was required to show 300 dollars' worth of improvement at the end of three years, reside in continuous occupation for a period of six months each year of three, and plough the necessary five breaks round your holding, and conform in all things to the law of the land.

When the Office for Crown Lands was satisfied as to an intending settler's bona-fides, the actual work of obtaining a homestead was a simple matter of official routine, and presented no difficulties apart from the trouble the foreign element had with the English language, a good deal of explanation being necessary in those cases before the provisions of the land grant were properly understood.

Once those difficulties were cleared away, however, the application filed, duly recorded, and the fee paid, the prospective settler was at liberty to proceed with the business of putting his house in order, and it was now that he realised what starting

on the land really meant.

To begin with, the scene of his future labours might be, and often was, a hundred or two miles from the town in which he made his application, so outfitting from there was not to be thought of, for reasons of economy, very few of the emigrants being over-burdened with too much of this world's goods. It was necessary, then, to proceed to a point as near as possible to the scene of operations, where supplies could be had on the spot or to which goods not locally available could be shipped.

As one can well imagine, the ever-increasing demand for supplies of all sorts made prices soar to unbelievable heights, the local traders being quick to take advantage of both the land boom and the ignorance of the new arrivals.

A team of horses and a wagon were the first consideration, and usually those were to be had locally without much trouble and at a fairly reasonable figure if one were not too particular as to the tractability of the animals - teams thoroughly broken and guaranteed to stay in one place for five consecutive minutes fetching fancy prices. Transportation being thus secured, food supplies and cooking utensils had to be thought of, and a good tent was advisable, though not absolutely essential, if one homesteaded in the spring and had a waterproof sheet and a sufficiency of blankets, a good constitution, and an aptitude for making the best of things under any circumstances.

Lastly, and the most important thing of all, was a supply

of water sufficient to tide over a few days at least for man and horse, as in large tracts of the newly thrown open lands, especially in Southern Alberta, there was absolutely no running water for many miles, and even springs were few and far between. In the author's own case the nearest water was fifteen miles from his homestead, and had to be carried in barrels from there for months before a well was finally located strong enough to supply his needs, and that was only after long search and extensive prospecting.

His arrangements completed, with head a-whirl from innumerable suggestions and conflicting statements as to the best route to follow, the new settler was at last ready to take the trail leading to his own particular piece of the hoped-for future Eldorado. This in itself was no easy matter, for even with the directions fixed firmly in his head, the veritable maze of trails which criss-crossed the prairie in all directions was bewildering to a stranger, and in the absence of a compass very often many weary miles were added to the journey through following a well-defined path which in many cases led no farther than a dried-up water-hole or buffalo-wallow.

Assuming, however, that the homesteader finally arrived at the scene of operations, his troubles were by no means ended, for finding his own section was often attended by unforeseen difficulties.

In those days the big ranchers who claimed the land by right of squattage and long residence, resented the intrusion by emigrants on what they fancied was their private property, and though no actual violent measures were taken, every obstacle possible was placed in the way of closer settlement. One of the most popular methods of hindering the work of colonisation was by drawing the township and section pegs and moving them round so that, say your location was the north-east section starting from the township corner, you might very possibly find after a time that you had driven your stakes in a section south-west. Until strong action was taken and those party to the unwarranted actions suppressed, much unnecessary suffering and hardship was occasioned the settler, and was often the cause of much unpleasantness between him and the rightful owner.

After one was definitely sure of being on his own ground, work commenced in real earnest, much having to be done before winter put an end to all outdoor activities. A shack and a shelter for the stock had to be erected against the winter, a well dug, fencing to be done, and as much ploughing accomplished as possible - and when possible - in preparation for seeding in the spring. So several trips to town were necessary for implements, lumber, provisions, and the hundred-and-one things incidental to a farm in the making.

After a shack and barn had been built, it was essential

to plough fire-breaks around it for protection against the sudden and frequent prairie fires, fires which often travelled as fast as a horse could gallop. These firebreaks were made by ploughing in a circle round the buildings to a width of fifty feet, the centre being 200 to 300 feet from the nearest ploughed edge. A space of 100 feet was then left unploughed, and then another 50-foot break turned over, the intervening grass swath being then burned off, thus giving 200 feet of a fireproof belt - a sufficient check to any ordinary prairie fire.

Fencing the land was a long and arduous undertaking, for the fences had to be of exceptional strength to withstand the onslaughts of the herds of range cattle still roaming the prairies and challenging the intruder for the rights of possession.

One's house, too, had to be well and truly built of sound material, with a good cellar below it for storage, as it was usual in those days for the settler to put in his six months' homestead duties in the winter half of the year, leaving the summer free in which to find employment whereby he could replenish his sadly diminished exchequer. A barn could be more easily constructed, as it was usually built of sods, and cost nothing but the labour; but this, it may be mentioned, was not counted in the 300 dollars improvements at the end of the three years.

With the digging of a well and an adequate supply of water

secured, the worst of the settler's troubles were over, and he was free to pay attention to other matters, such as providing a stock of fuel, and prairie hay for winter use, besides breaking up new ground whenever suitable.

At this point, then, we can take leave of our colonist just gaining a footing in this, the land of his dreams, and envisage him in the future surrounded by fields of waving golden grain, the sage and cactus-covered prairie but a memory, and one can see him stretch out his arm over the land and hear his proud cry, "Mine! all mine! After many days, I have gained me a heritage." Canada to-day owes much to these patient optimistic pioneers.

In these few impressions, from memory, of homesteading fifty years ago, the author has not drawn upon his imagination for any fanciful pictures of danger or adventure, but simply desires to present the colonist as he really was and the conditions as they then were.