

CHAPTER ONE

Going North



It was early September in 1932 when we left Portland with the little Studebaker coupe' piled high with camping equipment. Its rumble seat was open and filled with everything we would need for spending the winter at Ralph's, except for food, foot gear and woolen underwear. We would get these in Vancouver after we reached British Columbia.

"People in the north all wear woolen longjohns in the winter," Earle advised me.

I never questioned him. After all, he had lived there and should know.

As we crossed the border in Blaine, the customs official looked askance at the size of our bulging load, covered snugly with a tarpaulin and lashed down securely with rope. After asking a few perfunctory questions, he waved us through.

It was the immigration official who held us up. He had the fixed idea that I wasn't married to Earle and he wanted to see our marriage license. Without thinking, I had packed it in a suitcase which was buried somewhere in the load, along with my British birth certificate, Earle's Canadian Naturalization papers and his honorable discharge from the Canadian army in 1918. The gold wedding band I was wearing, engraved with

our names and the date of the wedding over six years ago, didn't count. We had to unload everything.

Earle released the knots he had tied so securely, then pulled the rope free and dropped it to the ground. Next came the heavy tarpaulin, followed by the folded tent. Then came the mattresses and bedding, followed by dunnage bags and suitcases of clothing. Light-weight camping gear and feather-weight winter apparel hadn't been thought of in those days. There was also a portable, hand-winding phonograph and some records, a carton of books and a typewriter, tools, a gun and axe, and on the bottom, a sheet of metal to make an air-tight heater when we reached Ralph's.

It was an impressive pile and I began to wonder how we had been able to get it all in to begin with; but we produced our wedding certificate!

Burning with mortification as we exposed our worldly goods to public gaze, I marveled at Earle's self-control. However, we weren't finished yet. Now came the questioning.

"Where are you going?"

"To Lonesome Lake."

"Where is that?"

"At the head of the Bella Coola River."

"Where is that?"

"In West Central British Columbia." We produced a map.

"There aren't any roads marked into Lonesome Lake," the official commented.

"There aren't any," Earle replied.

"Well, how do you expect to get in there?"

"Hike." Earle was getting irritated.

"You'll get lost," was the observation.

"Not very likely," Earle rejoined. "I'm an experienced woodsman and have trapped furs in that country."

On and on it went. "What do you intend to do when you get in there? Are you going to work?"

"Well, I don't intend to sit around and watch my brother do everything."

"What does he do?"

"He has a farm and goes trapping in the winter." Earle's voice was getting a little edgy. I wondered if the official was becoming interested in the people who lived so far away from roads and wanted to hear more about them or whether this was a routine interrogation.

By this time the customs official had sauntered over. He

began to inspect the pile of things lying on the pavement, curious about why we had a portable typewriter, a record player, and a rifle. Were we bringing them in to sell? Where did we get the rifle? Why did we need it?

Earle answered him as best he could, saying these things were part of our equipment. The rifle was needed to protect us from bears and it had been bought from a sporting goods store. It was an 8mm Lebel made by the Remington Arms Company for the French army, near the end of the First World War. The armistice was signed before the rifles were delivered and they were now being sold as army surplus. Earle had remodeled it into a sports gun.

"Military guns are not allowed into Canada," the official told Earle, "It will be necessary for you to take the rifle to the chief of the Customs Bureau in New Westminster for inspection and possible confiscation."

They finally finished with us and we reloaded. We drove to New Westminster in silence and outside the customs building I waited in the car, slumped down in misery, wondering how much a new rifle would cost if they confiscated the Lebel.

The wait seemed interminable as I sat in the car, imagining the worst and it was almost a shock when I saw Earle bouncing cheerfully down the steps carrying the gun. He smiled as he opened the car door and gave a chuckle, "Nicest chap, in there. No problem. Nothing to it. Our rifle is a sports gun."

We spent a day in Vancouver and went shopping for the underwear and boots. Parking the little coupe' outside one of the large general stores in downtown Vancouver, we closed and locked the rumble seat but forgot to lock the car doors.

The clerk in the men's department had the woolen underwear we wanted and after Earle had ordered his he asked for some for me.

We were informed that Stanfield's didn't make one-piece woolen longjohns for ninety-five pound women, so we ended up by holding the garment in front of me and guessing whether it would fit or not.

Then we found the leather shoe packs, made by Palmer, which Earle insisted were the best foot gear available. They were beautifully made but had stiff, slippery leather soles. Earle said they were made that way so they could be fitted with screw-caulks, so we bought some of them too to take with the boots. Earle said he would attach them later.

The car was not there when we came out of the store with

our purchases.

"We must have come out of the wrong door," I suggested, so we walked around the block. Still no coupe'. It was a sickening feeling.

Numbed, we found a policeman who directed us to the police station.

The officers were sympathetic, and after asking a lot of questions they told us to go back to our motel and wait until they phoned.

"What will we do if they don't find the car," I asked Earle.

He made an unconvincing joke about the mounties always getting their man. However, two hours later there was a call. The coupe' had been found undamaged, and the rumble seat was still locked and intact. Could we come to the station and pick it up? Could we!

We thanked the officers profusely and taxied to the station to claim our car. It was scarcely believeable but everything was as we had left it in the locked rumble seat. It was as if someone had played a bad joke. Secretly, I wondered if a guardian angel wasn't reaching out a staying hand; but Earle's enthusiasm was undiminished. He thought that as long as our shopping was finished and the afternoon was still young we might just as well pack the car and begin the journey north.

Going out the highway we drove behind a truck full of mounties in their scarlet uniforms, seated upright on benches on either side of the open vehicle. I was thrilled and for a while thought this might be an escort provided as an extension of the marvelous courtesy the police had shown us. But they turned off on a side road and we were alone heading for the wilderness.

Out we drove through the rich farm lands of the Fraser River Delta, warm in the late afternoon sunshine. Mile after mile we were surrounded by this peaceful beauty with its backdrop of snow-capped mountains. But I sat there with the gnawing recollection of that roadless map of Lonesome Lake.

"Do you suppose Ralph knows we are coming?" I asked Earle.

"Probably not. Very likely he's still busy getting in the last of the second crop hay or harvesting the garden," he replied.

Possibly Ralph hadn't made the long trip out for his mail in a couple of months so would have no idea yet that we had accepted his invitation to spend the winter, or that we might come in by any other way than up the coast by steamer

from Vancouver to Bella Coola. The Union Steamship made a weekly trip north from Vancouver carrying mail, passengers and freight to the isolated hamlets, canneries and logging camps that dotted the rugged coast. This was the only contact Bella Coola had with the outside world except for the pack-horse trail from the interior which followed a branchline of the Yukon Telegraph through the mountains, down from the jack-pine, sloughgrass interior to the heavily forested, verdant valley — the route Earle was planning to take.

I would have preferred the coastal route. While I was still in high school I had made the boat trip and spent two summer holidays with my sister after she had gone to Bella Coola as a bride to live. She had married Vincent Clayton, the first white child to be born in the Bella Coola Valley, and they continued living in the rambling old twelve-room house with its thick log walls and hand-hewn beams where Vincent had lived all his life. It was part of the fur-trading post his father, John Clayton, had built on the bank of the Bella Coola River.

The house was still filled with Victorian furniture, most of which had come around the Horn in sailing ships, finishing the journey up the coast from Vancouver to Bella Coola in Clayton's own side-wheeler.

It was a romantic holiday for me, but a day's horseback ride up the sparsely settled valley was as far as I had gone and I scarcely knew there was a hinterland or what a long way it was from the sleepy little fishing village to Lonesome Lake.

This is the route we would have taken if my sister had still been in Bella Coola but the year before she and Vincent had taken the children to Victoria to put them in school and the old house was unoccupied.

Back in Portland when Earle had decided on the Cariboo-Chilcotin route, it had seemed easy to plan on getting horses at Anahim to take us down the telegraph line into the valley to where Ralph's trail branched off to the Stillwater. There we could leave our things at Frank Ratcliff's trapping cabin while we hiked up around Lonesome Lake to Ralph's.