

Monday, Aug. 31, 1942

Barracks with Bath

The Army occupies 212 U.S. hotels, a total of 30,000-odd rooms, 2% of all American hotel rooms. Its biggest hotel patronage is coastal: 150 hotels at Miami Beach, 29 at Atlantic City. Its biggest single concentration: in Chicago's 3,000-room Stevens (world's biggest hotel). More will be occupied.

Northwest Passage

"This is the Law of the Yukon, that only the Strong shall thrive; That surely the Weak shall perish, and only the Fit survive." —Robert W. Service.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had one of the biggest and toughest jobs last week since they built the Panama Canal. They were both surviving and thriving on it. There was no fanfare. Almost no outsiders had penetrated the vast, still, endless wilderness where the engineers are wrenching and hacking a great military road 1,500 miles from Fort St. John, B.C. to mid-Alaska.

This was a job for Paul Bunyan; to wrest an all-weather road from the jealous Northland between early spring and autumn; to span the fierce, death-cold rushing rivers, the black custard quagmires; to cut switchbacks across the Great Divide, to make the way between the Arctic and the U.S. for a highway which some day may be as common as the Boston Post Road.

In February the land was deep in snow. At the railhead three Americans swung off the twice-weekly train 500 miles up from Edmonton. They paused for hot coffee in one of the Chinese restaurants and headed north. They were Fred Capes, construction expert for the Public Roads Administration, and Colonels William Hoge and R.D. Ingalls. Jamming down fur caps, they slogged through snow drifts, checking grades, rivers, elevations. Rumors spread by the "moccasin vine" that at last the Americans were going to build the Alaska highway.

The Job. Then came the first Engineer troops. Their job was to drag supplies and equipment up the line to road depots before the thaw. On March 9, they tumbled off the train at dingy Dawson Creek station, staked stiff canvas tents under the northern

lights. "Jeez, it was so cold," a Bronx private remarked, "that every time we had hot stew for chow, the goddam stuff froze before we could eat." Behind the troops came trucks, road machinery, supplies, gas, diesel fuel and planks from torn-down CCC camps.

Within a month the ice would break, the mighty Peace River, the Sikanni Chief, the Buckinghorse, the Fort Nelson would be crackling torrents. There were never enough trucks to move up the stuff. Farmers, garagemen, merchants, traders piled in with their own vehicles. All the short days and long nights the trucks mired down in slush, were dug out, pushed on.

In April the effort seemed not enough. A sudden thaw set the river ice groaning and cracking like pistol shots. Trucks crossed only in the middle hours of the night. Came a late hard freeze and the last truck was over. Weary drivers looked at the big Peace River and grunted: "Go ahead and bust wide open, you old bastard, we've licked you." The stuff to build the road was through to Fort St. John, to Fort Nelson. But the road was still to be built.

As the snow slopped off the warming land, survey parties hacked the bush. Army photo planes roared overhead. Soon the first few miles were laid out and the "cat company" bumbled on grinding treads up the road to Charlie's Lake, six miles from Fort St. John, and jumped off into the wilderness. The "cats" clawed at the soft soil, bogged down, sank almost to the driver's seats in the black muck. The engineers sweated and swore, dug out the cats, clawed on. Every day it rained. Every day they sweated and swore.

Gradually, steadily, doggedly, the snorting cats-drove the forest back. Woodsmen logged the spruce, pine and aspen for corduroy roads over the bogs. "Mister, I thought we'd never get through those first 15 miles. We'd get so damn tired we could hardly drag home, but every afternoon when we got to the store at Charlie's Lake, the lady there'd have a cake for us. Boy, those cakes were good."

When the rain retreated, there was the muskeg—spongy, orange-black decayed vegetation covering mudpits. Sometimes the road was detoured. Sometimes the corduroy planks were bridged across to support the traffic. On soldiers' pay (plus 20% for foreign duty) the men worked in two ten-hour shifts seven days a week. With

no time to wait for steel or concrete, they built wood culverts, pushed ahead. Always they moved on.

The days got longer, the weather warmer. Now came the black flies, horse flies, deer flies, the tiny "no-see-ums" that announce themselves only by a sting, and the mosquitoes. ("Why, over at Watson Lake, a mosquito landed on the airport and they put 85 gallons of gas into it before they realized it wasn't a bomber.") The insects made sweating, swollen hands look like grey fur. The engineers slapped and cursed till they got head nets and gloves.

Captain Hampton Green's bog-busters chewed switchbacks down a steep hillside of ice-hard dirt in a day and a half, ferried a river, scratched up the other side. Right on their heels, Lieut. Colonel Heath Twichell set his Negro engineers to bridging the tumbling water, singing as they sawed. Wading waist deep in the fast icy stream, they put the bridge across in 36 hours, sang hymns at a Sunday service down by the riverside after the job was done.

Far to the north engineers, with equipment from the Alaska coast, hit troubles of their own. The cats, seeking a roadbed, tore off the top moss, exposed sheer blue ice. Sun-melted ice sucked down the roadway. The engineers scraped the moss back, over the ice, put a corduroy planking on top and let nature freeze a solid roadbed. Pushing out of Whitehorse and Slana, one group paused briefly one afternoon on the shore of Kluane Lake at the foot of 19,000-foot peaks. Beside the log cabin of Trapper Hayden and his half-breed Indian wife the Engineer band played. A young private rose and sang the marching song of the road: Squaws along the Yukon Are Good Enough for Me.

The Men. Not many soldiers have fewer comforts, less to do on Saturday night, less discipline from above than these bearded, weather-tanned engineers. There is little saluting. A worker accepts a captain's order with an "Okay, Ham." More than 40% of the engineer workers are Negro. As men on a battlefield, these engineers are challenged to fight it through or lose. Against the mountains they work too hard to be restless. There is little talk of women. "But," laughed a colonel, "I'm sorry for the first town they hit when they get away from here."

Out in the bush the only recreation is hunting and fishing—on special rights given them by the Yukon territorial government. Doughboys hunt to vary meals of corned

beef, potatoes, lemonade, carrots, preserves and dried eggs, by adding moose and bear steaks, lake trout, spruce partridge, ptarmigan, grouse, venison. At Swan Lake, for lack of regular tackle a Signal Corps man made a line from telephone wires, hammered a fishing spoon out of a tin can and brought in strings of fat trout over the side of an assault boat. Others knock the heads off the foolish spruce partridge (Yukon chicken) which doze on the lower tree limbs in the summer twilight.

Soldiers near enough to hit the few towns find expensive beer, and little else. In Fort St. John they mill around on the dusty or muddy main street with lumberjacks, trappers and "dirt stiffs" (construction workers), looking over the waitresses and dumpy Indian girls. Sometimes they get a haircut in Joe's tent barbershop, or go to the hospital, which has the only bath and running-water toilets in town. Average Saturday night consumption of 50¢-a-bottle beer is 3,500 bottles. At the Inn in Whitehorse the jampacked soldiers sometimes push the 11 o'clock curfew up to 2 a.m., ending with a mouth-organ duet and fine, boozy soldier harmony. Checks are cashed at the only bank for 460 miles around—the same one in which Poetaster Robert Service clerked in the gold-rush days.

The Boss. In a 26-foot square house at Whitehorse lives the boss of the road, quiet, firm William Morris Hoge, now a brigadier general. At 48 he has been engineering 26 years for the Army. But his biggest job began the day he stepped from the train at Dawson Creek on to the crunchy snow to start surveying the route. His was the big worry when scores of cats were bogged down in the slush, and the rains seemed never to stop. Impatient, Hoge steamboated up and down the road in Bush Pilot Les Cook's seaplane, watched the men slogging it through. He said little, eyeing the tremendous job, but every mucker and cat driver knew the general was on the job. "A tough guy, but square," they said. "A regular guy too. He sure likes that Yukon chicken."

In his little green-painted house Hoge likes to slump his square shoulders in a chair and sit with the wife he met in a Lexington, Mo. kindergarten—planning the week ahead. Pretty, brown-eyed Mrs. Hoge knows how to live the frontier life. As a general's lady she still does her cooking and washing. When the general is in town they take a short evening stroll on the board sidewalk with their fox terrier—Hoge puffing a favorite pipe. Nettie Hoge has led frontier life before. In the Philippines her

husband built the main road on Bataan. But she has waited behind the lines, as when he won the D.S.C. for driving a bridge across the Meuse under fire in World War I.

When Hoge's party rode and munched up to Fort Nelson in the winter snow the citizens wondered why he had come. After all, there was nothing to see but a trading post. But Hoge had other ideas. Alaska was a transportation island linked with the U.S. by a moving bridge of ships—ships now needed desperately elsewhere. Hoge knew that Fort Nelson could be one of a string of airports connecting Edmonton to the Aleutians. He knew that with such a string and with a road to supply them, Alaska could be held; knew also that with Jap islands blockading Vladivostok such a route might well be the only way to send adequate help to an attacked Siberia. The Army road would do for that and later the Public Roads Administration would grade and realign the rough highway. Then, after the war, the people would come. The small dirty towns would have a new reason for existence, and out of fabulous Alaska could come minerals by the truckload for the factories of the future.

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