

MILLIONS IN FURS

THE GREAT FUR BUSINESS OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA AND HOW IT IS MANAGED

(Special Correspondence of the Deseret News by Frank G. Carpenter.)
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EDMONTON, 1906.—I had a chat last night with one of the chief fur buyers of the North American continent. The wild lands reaching from here to the Arctic ocean and from Alaska to Hudson bay, supply the most and best furs of the world. The Hudson Bay company has been engaged in the business for 200 years, and it has sent out millions upon millions of skins to the markets of London. It had until a generation ago a monopoly of the trade. By its charters from King Charles it controlled the whole country and governed it as it pleased. Then Canada bought its political rights to British North America, and now fur trading is free to all.

This town of Edmonton, which lies over 300 miles due north of the United States boundary, is the center of the new fur trade. It has eight firms which buy skins, and their purchases aggregate hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. One of the most important of the traders is the Hudson Bay company, which has recently erected a department store here, and its chief competitor is Revillon Freres, the great Paris furriers, who have establishments also in New York and London, and who supply skins and furs to every market of the world.

MILLIONS IN FURS.

The Revillons are fit competitors of the Hudson Bay company. They have been engaged in wholesale and retail fur trading for 175 years, and they are now carrying on their business with a capital of 70,000,000 francs or about \$14,000,000. They have already established posts all over the northwest, and they are throughout the lands which the Hudson Bay people have always considered their own. They have a central station here at Edmonton, another at Prince Albert and a third in Labrador, with two or three hundred branch posts in active operation. They are buying furs all along the Mackenzie river, up and down the shores of the Arctic ocean, along Hudson bay and in different parts of Labrador; and they are, I am told, getting a fair share of the best skins of the continent.

In addition to this they have, with the opening up of the wheat belt, established a great wholesale and retail department store here, and are doing business with the new settlers. They are, in fact, the Marshall Field company of the northwest, and by far the largest wholesale dealers outside of Winnipeg.

MERCHANDISING IN THE NEW CANADA.

The head of the fur establishment and the department store is a young Frenchman, Mr. Revillon. He is only about 25 years of age, but he has already built up this business and has the sole charge of it. It was while dining with him the other night that we talked about the fur trade and the wonderful growth going on here. Said he:

"I came to Edmonton from New York about four years ago. I had had some experience in our fur houses in Germany and England before I went to the

United States, and the life in New York suited me. When I was told to go to Edmonton I rather objected, but I now like it, and expect to stay here and build up this trade. It seems to me that Edmonton is one of the best business places on the North American continent. We started in here as fur traders, but our wholesale and retail merchandising has so grown that it is eight or nine times as big as our business in furs. We are selling goods as fast as we can get them. We import them by the car load, and they go out as rapidly as they come in. We have sold several carloads of American cotton within the past few months, and have now on hand car loads of hardware and general supplies. There are altogether about 700 retail stores in this immediate territory, and nearly all of them have sprung up in the last five years. The settlers who are coming in have plenty of money. They want the best goods, and are not backward in buying."

THE FUR TRADE.

During our conversation I asked Mr. Revillon to tell me how fur trading is carried on in this part of the world. He replied:

"Nearly all the furs sold are brought in by the Indians and we buy or trade direct with them. We know the goods they most prize, and ship them in wagons to Athabasca Landing, where they go by the different waterways to our various posts. The Indians bring the skins to the posts and exchange them for the goods. It is all a matter of barter. No money passes and each fur is valued at so many skins. The standard of value used to be a beaver, every fur being worth so many beavers. This value was created by the Hudson Bay company, and it is said that sometimes got extravagant prices for their goods through the ignorance of the Indians. According to one story the trader would take a muskrat and stand it on end and then require a pile of furs high enough to reach the top of the gun in payment for it. In that way a thousand dollars' worth of beaver skins might be gotten for a \$10 gun. That kind of trading has all passed away and the Indians now get a fair value for their furs. The skin which now forms the unit is worth from 35 to 50 cents, according to the distance of the trading post from Edmonton, the rate increasing on account of the freight."

HOW THE INDIANS SELL FURS.

"But does the savage understand the value of his furs?"

"Yes, indeed, and he understands how to get it. He is not an easy man to deal with, and he must be handled in his own peculiar way. Some of our traders visit the Indian camps carrying boxes of goods with them. At such times they never mention trading upon their arrival. The white trader tells his Indian friends that he has come out to make a friendly call. He asks after the health of the tribe and of each man's wife and family. He smokes with them and talks about the weather and other things for hours and hours. Indeed, a night often passes before any business is mentioned. The next day the trader may ask one of the Indians if his luck has been good, and if he says yes, it is the sign that he has furs and is willing to trade. If he says no, the white man goes on smoking. After a time the Indian may throw out and pull a muskrat skin from inside his coat



BARGAINING WITH INDIAN FOR FURS.
White Trader and Native Caught by Carpenter's Camera for Saturday "News" While Closing Deal.

and ask the trader what he will give for it. If the price is right he will sell it, but if not, he will bring forth no more skins and the business dealings are ended for that visit. If he is satisfied he may pull out another muskrat, gradually giving up all he has for sale. He has to be treated diplomatically; he is sensitive and suspicious, and it takes skill to handle him.

MONEY IN FUR TRADING.

"Do the Indians make much money in that way?"

"Yes, I have known braves who made two or three thousand dollars a year. The average Indian does well, however, if he nets \$200 or \$400. But much or little, it is all the same. These Indians do not know how to keep money. They never consider the future. They barter their furs for goods as soon as they have them, and they eat up their supplies as fast as they can. They buy the most extravagant things. I know an Indian, for instance, who re-

ceived \$1,000 for some furs. The first thing he did was to send to Quebec for a piano, which cost him, all told, \$1,000 before it was delivered. He did not know how to play it, and after a few days he tore it apart to see how it worked.

"When an Indian receives the value of his furs he always divides with his friends and family. He brings his connections together and they eat until they have consumed the most of his supplies. It is wonderful how much an Indian can eat at such a time. He will stuff himself all day and be ready for another dinner at night. At the same time he is able to go a long time without food. The famine seasons are usually in the summer, when game is scarce."

INDIANS IN DEBT.

"Is much of the trading done on credit?"

"Yes. We have to advance outfits and supplies. The Indian takes these

off into the woods with him, and when he comes back he turns in his furs and pays up for what he has received and usually trades the balance for more goods. The most of the Indians are in debt the greater part of the time and this is so also with the traders. We supply the goods and the traders send in their furs and get more goods in return."

ANY ONE CAN DEAL IN FURS NOW.

"Has the day of monopolies in fur trading in North America past away?"

"Yes, any one has the right to trade with the Indians, and any man or any company can compete in this business if he is willing to spend the money and make the connections. I think we are getting our share of the good furs. We are paying more for skins according to their quality than the other traders do. Many of the Hudson Bay company men do not seem to know that there is a great difference in skins and they pay the same for good and bad."

PLENTY OF FURS LEFT.

"Are not the fur-bearing animals of North America playing out?"

"I think not," replied Mr. Revillon. "There is a vast extent of territory in these north lands, and the animals which inhabit it are not easy to trap or shoot. The Indians are careful in saving the animals. If they find them growing scarce in a certain district they will hunt elsewhere for a season or so and then come back. Indeed, the Indians are intelligent and careful about their own business."

"But that are the most expensive furs caught here?"

"I should say the silver foxes. The black ones are worth most, and a fine skin may bring \$1,200 or more."

In talking with Mr. Secord of the important fur-buying company of Mc Dougall & Secord, I was told that the fur business is now as good as it has ever been, and that it will be a long time before men will freeze for lack of fur coats and women become pillars of ice because they have not fur saques. The skins may continue costly, but there are plenty of animals left, and there will be long before the supply gives out.

Mr. Secord tells me that furs are largely affected by fashion, and also by the supply. In some years the Indians bring in many more of certain kinds of furs than in other years, and, strange to say, the supply of some species rises and falls with the rabbit crop. Some varieties of the fur-bearing animals live largely on rabbits, which breed so rapidly that the animals cannot keep them down. At intervals of every four or five years a disease breaks out which kills the rabbits off by the thousands, and following such years come the lean fur years.

THE PEACE RIVER COUNTRY.

This town of Edmonton is at the northwest corner of the wheat belt. It promises, however, to be the center of a new wheat and grain region, which shall extend hundreds of miles to the north and westward. This region is known as the Peace River country. Civil engineers are now surveying it for railroads, and settlements will soon be springing up here and there in it. The Peace river may some day be one of the most important streams on our continent. It rises in the mountains of British Columbia and flows into Slave river, just above where it issues from Athabasca lake. It is a broad, deep stream, comparing in size with the

Mississippi, and it is navigable for several hundred miles by boats drawing 10 feet of water. There are now two steamboats upon it, and one of them is 120 feet long and is lighted by electricity.

On the upper parts of this river there are practically no settlements except those of the fur traders and missionaries. At Vermilion about 60 farmers are raising wheat for a flour mill established there by the Hudson Bay company. They get \$1.50 a bushel for their wheat, and the wheat is sold to be some of the best grown on the continent. These farmers are chiefly half-breeds and traders. They have but small patches and till their land in a rude way. At Peace River Landing, which is probably 300 miles southwest of Vermilion, there is another flour mill, which is grinding only for local consumption. Vermilion is in about the latitude of St. Petersburg.

A METROPOLIS OF THE NORTH.

It is a question in the minds of many whether a great city may not grow up in the Peace river country. At present Edmonton would seem to be the best site for the trading center of the great northwest, but with the pushing of railroads to the north another center may grow up at the head of navigation, utilizing the vast Mackenzie system as a means of distribution. The Grand Trunk Pacific railroad, which is now being built west from Edmonton, will strike across the southern part of the Peace river country. It will not reach the best lands, which are farther north, although a branch road may be built through them to the head of navigation. This country is not far from the Rockies, and it is affected electrically by the winds from the Pacific, which are heated by the Black cur-

rent of Japan. For this reason the Peace river climate is said to be far better than that of Montreal. Edmonton has a much milder climate than Winnipeg. There is little snow here and no intense cold to speak of. The same is true of Calgary and of most of this state of Alberta.

A GREAT RANCHING REGION.

In addition to the farming possibilities of the Peace river region, it is said that pairs of it will support vast numbers of live stock. The natural grass grows from two to five feet in height, and the cattle and horse ranchers who are now being crowded out of Alberta are planning to send their herds to the Grande Prairie and Peace river. The cattle will be able to run out all winter and they can feed out of doors all the year round. If this is so, the region will be of great value to the new Canada. The lower part of this state of Alberta and a part of Saskatchewan, which, owing to the slight rainfall, have been used for ranching, are now found to produce winter wheat, and a ranching business may be driven out by grain farming. There are in Manitoba and the northwest almost a million cattle, a quarter of a million horses and more than that number of sheep and hogs. The Peace river country, with its grain and grass, would seem to be a good stock-raising proposition, and the cattle may come when the most and best cattle of this country will be raised there.

As for Alberta, it is now going into mixed farming, and its cattle eventually will be kept on the farms instead of on great ranges. A large number of dairies have been established, and butter and cheese are now produced away out here in the northwest.

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