

Footloose in The Sawtooths

BY ANDREW GIBSON

Part 2

As the last episode ended the surveyors, 5000 feet up in the Cascade Mountains and abandoned by the helicopter, were setting out through the rain and fog, hoping to find the trail to the 7000 ft. level . . .

With the visibility, to start with, only about 30 feet, we zigzagged over the loose rock and boulders. The trail, we knew, was in the pine woods on the other side of the canyon, and even without a compass, direction was no problem. It was only necessary to head at right angles to the scudding rain and fog.

Entering the woods, we spared very little thought for the majesty of the forest, since it was almost entirely hidden from view. We concentrated on looking to left and right every foot of the way, so as not to miss the trail, for we had lots of experience with these trails which are talked up by the natives as if they had four lanes, but which are easily visible only to Hiawatha types, adept at spotting broken twigs. We found it, and after a Te Deum set off up it, wheezing in a manner which boded ill for our arteries.

As we climbed, the trees became smaller, the rain turned to snow, and it wasn't until nearly dusk that we came upon the camp, situated picturesquely on the very edge of a cliff, in the apparent theory that vertigo is a small price to pay for trash disposal convenience. The diamond drillers had just come back from their toil, and we introduced ourselves and mentioned that they were going to have the pleasure of our company for a few days. This was greeted with an admirably restrained enthusiasm, but they perked up at the sight of the Scotch which we had thoughtfully brought along in lieu of beads. From then on, all went merry as a marriage bell.

Our four companions were diamond drillers, and we soon learned that the ones who work in these spectacular mountain conditions consider themselves, with some justification, to be a breed apart, with a special daring skill, like high-riggers and steeple-jacks. The leader was a typical hard rock, who functioned perfectly away from the bars and the bright lights of Seattle; he had waiting for him, when he returned to civilization, nothing more comforting than an ex-wife and her lawyer, chasing him for a fortune in support, and a disgruntled girlfriend, who wanted him to buy a bar and settle down with her, a prospect as sensible as making an arsonist fire-chief.

But up in the Sawtooths this individual was in his element. He could build camps, he could cook, assemble complex machinery arriving in bits by helicopter, locate the drilling sites and find ways to get there, and he could, at last, drill thousands of feet into the mountain, and recognize a bust or a bonanza. The other three drillers were a young Indian, whose specialty was rock climbing, an elderly man, whose specialty was machinery, and a large individual, whose specialty was lifting huge loads and carrying them up mountains.

All of us in the tent had had an exhausting day, and before long we were lying in our sleeping bags in the darkness, separated from the squalls by at least a sixteenth of an inch of quaking canvas. Every so often a gust would make the tent strain at its moorings, obviously longing to be, with its human contents, airborne. We lay there, rigid and pop-eyed for a while, but the raucous snoring of the others was reassuring if dissonant, and we went to sleep.

The next morning, just as we were ready to leave, the helicopter came back through the mist, and landed some distance away, discharging one ancient geologist, who had been retained by the mining company to see if he could find anything to back up the glowing prospectus. He was a small wiry individual, about 80 years old, and he had a white beard, exactly like a mountain goat. He immediately set off up the mountain, and the sight of him, leaping from boulder to boulder, was enough to make one wonder if there could possibly have been a case of miscegenation among the crags, about the year 1890.

With this example of octogenarian agility to make us feel depressed we left camp, together with EDM and theodolite, to tie the drilling sites to the township lot corners which had been established among the precipices. It was a little mind-boggling to look at the map and see the survey fabric laid out so neatly, as if just waiting for a race of human flies to swarm in as settlers. One of the corners, I recall, was noted on the geodetic map, and was visible, if you didn't mind straining your neck, almost vertically over the camp. There were also geodetic stations, and since we were to relate our survey to them too we had data about them. The Coast and Geodetic station reports made fascinating reading — the points had been set 30 years before, and the directions were full of hair-raising detail. It was obvious that the men who set them had been mountaineers of no mean ability. One station was to

be reached via a rope traverse across a rock face, and there was the laconic advice "On no account must the existing ropes and anchors be used, as they have proved unreliable". Just what proof of unreliability, we wondered, was given? We, fortunately, didn't have to reach such eyries, but even to get to the drilling stations was an adventure — the route was festooned with ropes, strung by the drillers.

Mankind, as the Devil remarked while stoking up his fires, can get used to nearly anything. To us, the conditions seemed bizarre if not abysmal — a succession of squalls lashed us rain, sleet and snow, and yet to the drilling crew, in their rubber suits and sou-westers this was a normal working condition. The drill was water cooled, of course, and so much water was thrown around by the pump that there was a perpetual deluge in the vicinity, regardless of the weather. But, taking our cue from the nonchalance of the others who, with water streaming off them in fountains, acted as if these semi-aquatic conditions were normal, we struck off through the trees, looking, as so many surveyors before, for bearing trees.

Did we find them? You must wait until the next issue. Don't bite your fingernails.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Mr. Andrew Gibson,
Editor,
The Ontario Land Surveyor,
Box 32,
Amprior, Ontario,
K7S 3H2
Dear Sir:

30 June, 1977

Thank you for your recent letter concerning our Regional Group activities.

At our last meeting on April 23 in North Bay, our annual elections were held with L. U. Maughan of Parry Sound elected Chairman with L. Miller of Sault Ste. Marie elected Vice-Chairman. A request was to be sent to Council to appoint L. U. Maughan to head a committee to continue the study of re-establishment of original natural boundaries in Ontario.

The Deferred Monumentation Report and current re-organization of M.T.C. survey function were also discussed.

Mr. A. B. McLennan was presented with a cake at the luncheon to celebrate his 69th birthday.

As past chairman, I have recently joined the Communications Committee of the A.O.L.S. and will report to you our group activities. Our next meeting will be a social event in Parry Sound the weekend of October 1.

Yours Very Truly,
T. A. Bunker, O.L.S.