

Crossing the Divide: Northern Approaches to New Caledonia

J. Kent Sedgwick
Prince George, British Columbia

European exploration and settlement of mainland British Columbia originated from the northeast, crossing the Arctic–Pacific continental divide. Four aboriginal routes were followed, beginning with Mackenzie’s historic journey in 1793 through a pass on the headwaters of the Parsnip River. Twelve years later, fur trader Simon Fraser developed the McLeod-Stuart Lakes trail, used until 1880. The short portage between Summit Lake (Peace River headwaters) and Salmon River, a Fraser River tributary, was used infrequently until 1872. Finally, Giscome Portage between the Fraser River and Summit Lake was identified by gold prospectors in 1863 and constructed as a government road in 1871. After 1905, Giscome Portage became the primary route across the divide with a road built directly from Prince George to Summit Lake in 1919. After 1952, a highway, railway, pipelines and electric transmission lines were built across Giscome Portage, forming the primary transportation corridor linking northern and southern British Columbia.

Introduction

Historical studies of British Columbia often ignore the fact that the first European exploration and settlement of mainland British Columbia was overland from the northeast. The initial approach was made in 1793 by Alexander Mackenzie of the North West Company. The settlement, which defined the fur trade district of New Caledonia, consisted of four North West Company trading posts established by Simon Fraser in the first decade of the nineteenth century. A few years later, from a base on the Columbia River, other fur posts at Kamloops and Alexandria were additions to mainland settlement.

The northeast approach is overlooked because, prior to Mackenzie, voyages by Spanish, British and American ships had defined the coast and a settlement was established at Nootka on Vancouver Island in 1788 by Captain John Meares, a British trader. Nootka remained an active settlement under the three main players in coastal utilization until 1795 when it was abandoned to the aboriginal inhabitants.

Not until Fort Langley was established on the lower Fraser River in 1827 by the Hudson's Bay Company did mainland settlement begin from coastal British Columbia. Even then, no additional settlement took place beyond Fort Langley until 1848 when Yale and Hope were founded to support a supply route to New Caledonia from the Fraser River as a replacement for the Columbia River connection. Soon after, in the 1850s, many goldrush communities came into existence, leading to the mainland being established as the Crown Colony of British Columbia in 1858. Nevertheless, for half a century, settlement on the mainland evolved from the initial penetration into New Caledonia from the northeast.¹

The exploration into New Caledonia by Mackenzie was a logical extension of the North West Company's fur trading territory. The Company had gradually expanded its trading area in the Arctic drainage basin after Peter Pond crossed the height of land from the Hudson Bay basin to the Arctic drainage at Methye Portage in 1778. From the main depot at Fort Chipewyan, founded by Mackenzie in 1788, traders had ventured northward down the Mackenzie River and westward up the Peace River. By 1790–91, they had established McLeod's Fort near the present town of Peace River, Alberta. It was just beyond this location that Mackenzie began his expedition in 1793 towards the Rocky Mountains and into mainland British Columbia.

The North West Company's fur trade district of New Caledonia came into being when Simon Fraser expanded the trade west of the Rocky Mountains in 1805.² Eventually, the district encompassed a vast territory on the interior plateau between the Rocky Mountains and the Coast Ranges, and from the Chilcotin River in the south to the Skeena River headwaters in the north. New Caledonia was primarily within the upper Fraser River drainage but also included the headwaters of the Peace River. The Peace–Fraser drainage divide in New Caledonia was thus the continental divide between Arctic and Pacific waters.

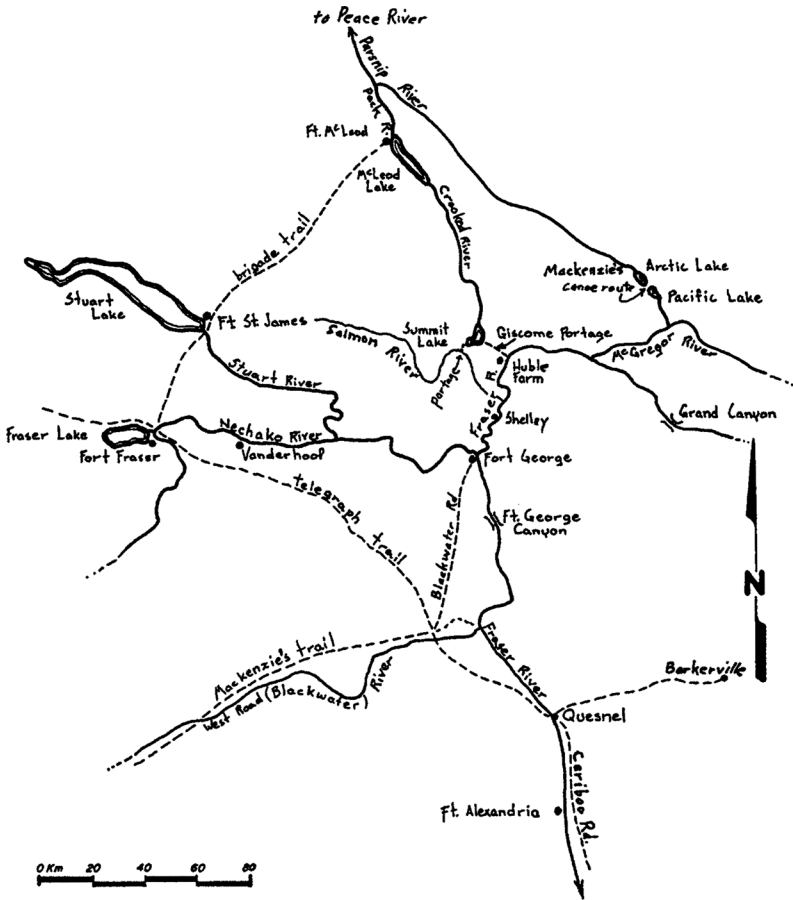


Figure 1 New Caledonia Historic Features

Most of the transportation routes in British Columbia are strongly channelled by the mountainous terrain and intervening valleys. The early entry to New Caledonia was no exception. The route was via the Peace River through the main range of the Rockies in a canyon which was bypassed by a native portage trail. The route then followed a tributary of the Peace, the Parsnip River which flowed in the Rocky Mountain Trench³, to reach the divide.

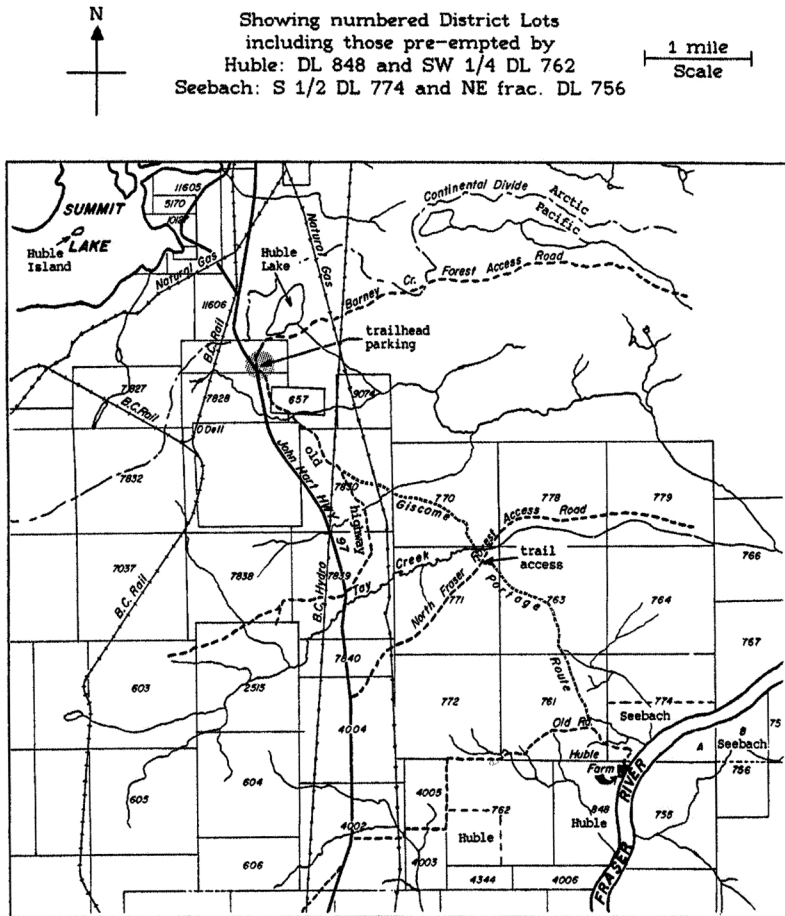


Figure 2 Giscome Portage Area

Soon after the penetration of Fraser in 1805, it was realized by the Nor'Westers that the location of the divide west of the Trench was rather indistinct. It lay on a rolling upland surface (the Nechako Plateau) which provided a number of choices to cross the height of land, an exception to the topographic control that prevailed in most of the province. This paper will discuss three fur trade routes across the divide and will focus upon the evolution of a fourth goldrush route, the Giscome Portage, which became the primary transportation corridor over the continental divide in New Caledonia.

Mackenzie Crosses the Divide

On 9 May 1793, Alexander Mackenzie, with seven other Nor'Westers and two native guides, in a single, twenty-five foot long canoe, left Fort Fork, a winter base camp just upstream from today's Peace River, Alberta. Mackenzie's party toiled up the Peace River, portaged with great difficulty around the Peace Canyon and on 31 May reached Finlay Forks where the Finlay and Parsnip Rivers, confined by the Rocky Mountain Trench, join to form the Peace. This was the first approach to New Caledonia by Europeans.

At this key junction, Mackenzie displayed his intuition for exploration by following the advice of native inhabitants, a practice that he often employed.⁴ While at Fort Fork, an old man had told him that following the Parsnip branch would lead him to a portage "that did not exceed a day's march" to a large river leading south.⁵ Against "his own judgement" and the wishes of his men (Lamb, 1970: 278), he turned southeast up the Parsnip River. Mackenzie persisted in his fight against the spring runoff of the river until, twelve days later and 225 km beyond Finlay Forks, he reached the Parsnip headwaters.

He entered the first of three lakes⁶ and then portaged along "a beaten path leading over a low ridge of land of eight hundred and seventeen paces in length to another small lake." This was the first European crossing of the continental divide between the Arctic and Pacific watersheds (see Plate 1). Later, in his journal of 1801, Mackenzie stated the significance of his traverse. The first lake was "the highest and Southernmost source of the Unjigah or Peace River" and the low ridge was "the highest point of land dividing these waters, and we are now going with the stream (Lamb, 1970: 295)."

North of the divide, the Parsnip River was practicable for canoes but the small stream on the western slope leading to the Fraser was not. Mackenzie followed James Creek whose steep section drops 220 m in 13 km. It was so full of rapids, rocks, and trees that it took them the better part of six days to navigate the sixteen km from the divide to the mouth of the creek. In the traverse, they smashed the canoe and were forced to cut a portage through the heavy vegetation in the valley, experiences duplicated by an expedition tracing Mackenzie's route 200 years later in the 1993 Bicentennial commemoration. James Creek debouched into Herrick Creek, a navigable stream which flowed into the McGregor River⁷, a tributary of the Fraser River. Paddling with the current of

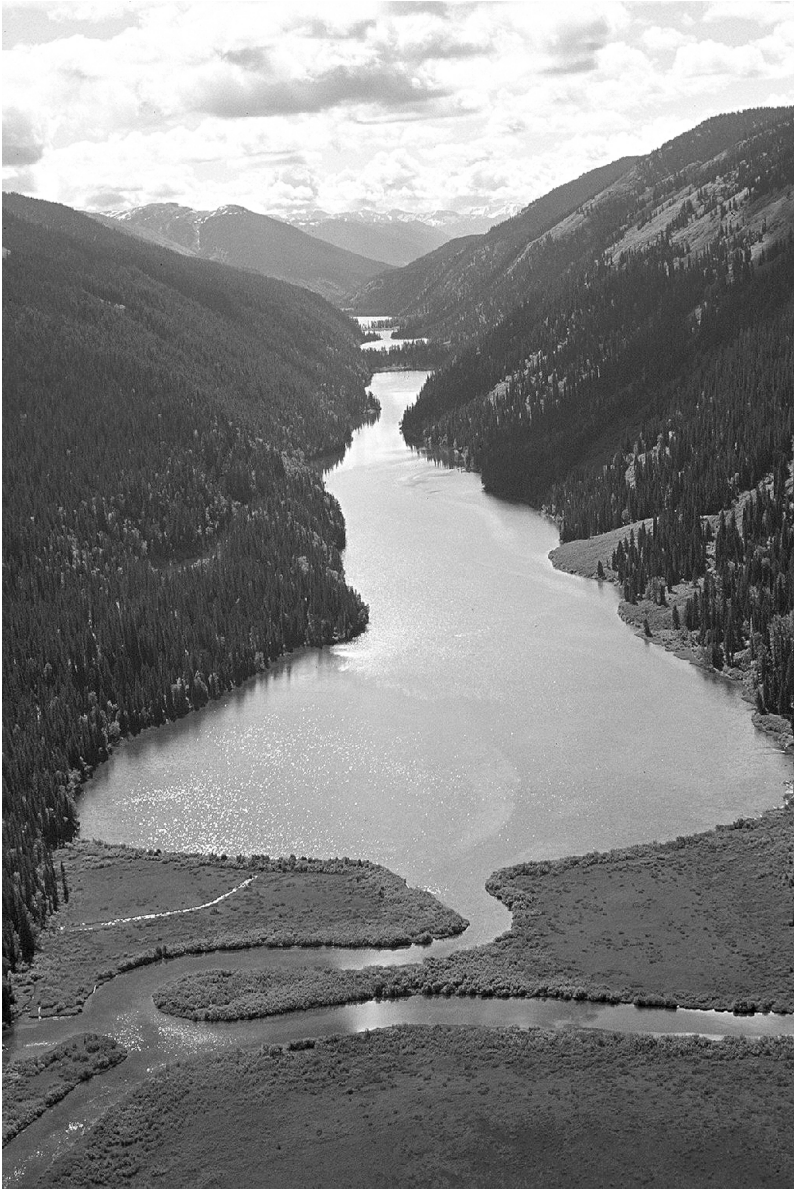


Plate 1 Looking south over Arctic Lake to the site of Mackenzie's first crossing of the divide. The divide is the low, treed ridge at the far end of the lake. Beyond are Portage and Pacific Lakes.

the big rivers on the Pacific slope, Mackenzie's voyageurs covered 130 km the first day after leaving James Creek.⁸

Upon his return after reaching the Pacific Ocean, Mackenzie named James Creek "the bad river" (Lamb, 1970: 400). It took them only two days to haul the canoe up the small mountain stream to the lakes at the divide because they knew the way, had already cut out the portage trail and "the water was much lower" (Lamb, 1970: 400). But the route was never to become other than the first crossing point of the continental divide because it was useless for transporting fur trade goods.

Even today it is seldom traversed by recreational canoeists due to the navigational difficulties. Logging roads penetrate to within about a kilometre of Arctic Lake and the mouth of James Creek, but the three lakes at the divide and the creek valley are still essentially wilderness as Mackenzie saw them. Recent legislation will include the lakes and valley in a 14,000 ha provincial park due to its heritage and habitat values.

Simon Fraser and North West Company Settlement: The McLeod Lake Trail

Twelve years after Mackenzie's voyage, the North West Company decided to exploit the fur country west of the Rocky Mountains. In the fall of 1805, Simon Fraser, following Company instructions⁹, directed John Stuart, his second-in-command, to build Rocky Mountain Portage Post below the Peace Canyon (at today's Hudson's Hope) as a base.¹⁰ Fraser continued with a small group westward up the Peace River, following Mackenzie's route. About 100 km up the Parsnip River, he arrived at the mouth of the Pack River, a small stream Mackenzie had missed. Following up the Pack, he came to a substantial lake some twenty km above the Parsnip confluence. Here, Trout Lake Post, later called Fort McLeod, was established. This settlement, now McLeod Lake, is the oldest, permanent, non-native settlement in British Columbia (Akrigg and Akrigg, 1975: 118).¹¹ It began the European settlement of New Caledonia and mainland British Columbia.

Early in 1806, James McDougall, who wintered at Trout Lake Post, followed an ancient native trail from McLeod Lake southwest some 110 km to a very large lake called Nakazeleh (Stuart Lake). This was the heartland of the Carrier people and became the centre of the New Caledonia fur trade district. The trail, the second northern approach to New Caledonia, became the most important for the North West Company's penetration of British Columbia.

Once Fraser's party arrived at Stuart Lake in July 1806¹², they began the construction of a post, later called Fort St. James. In the fall of that year, Fort Fraser was constructed at Fraser Lake. In the following year, Fort George at the confluence of the Nechako and Fraser Rivers was also established, completing the early European settlement of New Caledonia and British Columbia as well.¹³

For eight years, these posts were totally supplied and the furs removed by the Peace River route to the northeast, utilizing the overland trail to connect Stuart Lake with McLeod Lake. This orientation changed in 1813. That summer, John Stuart left Stuart Lake Post by canoe and journeyed down the Fraser River¹⁴ to a landing¹⁵ about 150 km south of Fort George (Prince George). He then set off southeast overland towards the North West Company post at Kamloops which had a land connection through the Okanagan Valley to the Columbia River. In 1814, the first supplies arrived in New Caledonia by Stuart's overland route from the Columbia. From then on, New Caledonia was tied to the Pacific coast via the overland trail to the Columbia River.

When the Hudson's Bay Company incorporated the North West Company in 1821, the new management experimented with supplying New Caledonia from the Peace River route in the mid 1820s before settling on the Columbia link as the prime access. Even then, express canoes carrying documents and mail, and leather supplies from east of the Rockies arrived via the Peace River.¹⁶ The link between Stuart Lake and McLeod Lake remained the primary route to cross the Arctic-Pacific divide in New Caledonia for at least sixty years.

The overland trail paralleled the topographic grain of the drumlinized, Nechako Plateau, winding between numerous lakes and swampy areas. The route climbed gently from 680 m at McLeod and Stuart Lakes to the continental divide between Arctic and Pacific waters just west of Carp Lake at an elevation of approximately 890 m. The three- to five-day traverse was made in summer on foot and horseback, and in winter on snowshoes and dogsled.

There are few detailed descriptions of the trail. The earliest originated in 1828 when Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Huson's Bay Company, made an inspection voyage from York Factory to Fort Langley via the Peace River route. His trip was recorded as a journal by Chief Factor Archibald McDonald. McDonald's descriptive itinerary, and the explanatory notes of the editor, provide useful knowledge of the route which took them just over four days "for the road is exceedingly bad, no transport of any consequence having gone on here for the last three years,¹⁷ and no

improvement or clearing away made on the road" (McLeod, 1872: 23).

Almost fifty years later, in 1875, Alfred Selwyn, Director of the Geological Survey of Canada, traversed the route from west to east in support of the Canadian Pacific Survey for a railway route.

Selwyn provided his scientific observations of the country and described the trail.

Between Stewart's [sic] lake and Fort McLeod much of the forest had been burnt¹⁸, and the trail was constantly obstructed by large fallen trees, often forming a perfect network of logs, all of which had to be cut through and removed before the [pack]train could pass; in consequence, though we started early and camped late, the distance travelled was comparatively small. (Selwyn, 1877: 36)

Accompanying Selwyn was John Macoun, a botany professor who provided even more detailed comments on the trail in an appendix to Selwyn's report. For instance at the continental divide:

..., we attained the height of land, and could look back on the country we had passed, with Stewart's [sic] Lake Mountain [Mount Pope] in the distance. Pine on the sand hills and spruce in the swamps, with green alder (*Alnus viridis*) everywhere, with occasional clumps of dwarf birch (*Betula nana*)....After attaining the watershed, the country for the next five miles is covered with spruce forest (*Albies nogra*).

Four years after Selwyn and Macoun followed the trail, George Dawson of the Geological Survey of Canada, also traversed the route on a survey from Port Simpson (near today's Prince Rupert) to Edmonton. His observations of surficial landforms contributed to his theory of 1888 that there was a great cordilleran ice mass between the Rockies and Coast Range (Tipper, 1971: 72), the current view today. "At the east end of Carrier lake, are some remarkable ridges which resemble moraines, but are composed of sand." (Dawson, 1881: 31B)¹⁹

Several maps published in the 1860s as guides to prospectors during the Cariboo Gold Rush, showed a trail between Fort St James and Fort McLeod in a schematic way but it was the detailed survey work by Dawson that provided the first accurate map of the trail. Sheet II of his *Map of Northern British Columbia and the Peace River Country*, dated 1879–80 and at a scale of one inch equal to eight miles, accompanied his 1881 report. The map carefully locat-

ed the trail in relation to many of the lakes and streams and contains notations concerning terrain and the width of water crossings.

Use of the trail continued into the twentieth century (Quackenbush, 1986: 20). Today, a forest service road approximately parallels the western half of the trail. Other forest roads intersect the trail at various points and join Fort St James and McLeod Lake communities as the trail once did. Despite the impact on the landscape of extensive logging, remnants of the trail are still visible. In Carp Lake Provincial Park, a section of the trail is preserved as a heritage feature (see Plate 2)

The Salmon River Portage

In the winter of 1805–6 at Trout Lake, McDougall also learned from the natives that there was a water connection between Stuart Lake and the Fraser River via Stuart and Nechako Rivers. In the spring of 1806, Fraser proceeded from his wintering at Rocky Mountain Portage Post upstream to Trout Lake Post. He then continued up the Parsnip, following Mackenzie's route over the divide to the Fraser with the intention of following up the Nechako and Stuart Rivers to reach Stuart Lake to test McDougall's information.

Fraser's journal records that, while he was at the divide, a native drew a map and explained:

...had he been at Trout Lake, he said he would have shown us a more safe and shorter way to the Columbia by which he said we would have been at the Carriers land [Stuart Lake] ere now, and that there was a Portage of a mile and one half at most from one of the Lakes beyond Trout Lake into a fine navigable River, and no Rapids, that flows into the Columbia. (Lamb, 1960: 211)

This geographical description could only refer to a portage from Summit Lake (which drains via Crooked River into Trout [McLeod] Lake) to the Salmon River, a tributary of the Fraser. This was the third fur trade approach to New Caledonia.

Fraser later sent McDougall to investigate (Lamb, 1960: 234) this "middle road"; that is, midway between Mackenzie's route and McDougall's overland trail. However, the middle road was never successful as a canoe supply route. Ice left the route in the spring later than the main rivers²⁰ and it was difficult to navigate the shallow Crooked River. The indirect Salmon Portage took up to three times as long as the overland trail from McLeod Lake to Stuart Lake (Lamb, 1957: 133), an overwhelming factor despite the labour involved in land transport.



Plate 2 MacLeod Lake trail. Trail preserved as heritage feature in Carp lake Provincial Park

The Salmon Portage was first shown on Arrowsmith's 1834 map (Thompson, 1966: endpaper). Later maps often labelled the

waterway as the Canoe or Canôt River, an indication of its use as a connection between Summit Lake and the Fraser River. One of the extremely rare descriptions of the route is by Henry Moberly who followed it in 1865.

...Salmon River, which stream we followed to its source, a small lake on the height of land, out of which the water ran both ways, one stream flowing down to the Pacific, the other to the Arctic via Peace and Mackenzie Rivers. (Bowes, 1963: 67)

However, this topographic situation is dubious. The elevation of the divide is about 50 metres above the level of Summit Lake (706 m) and beaver pondings and seasonal water levels are not likely to overcome such a height differential. In addition, any lake forming the "source" of the river would not be accessible from Summit Lake. Moberly didn't publish his memoir until 1929 when his remembrance of the situation was probably incorrect.

This route remained well-known although virtually unused in the fur trade era. Not until the Cariboo gold rush did it garner recognition as a feasible northern connection between the Fraser and Peace Rivers. In 1868, the Hudson's Bay Company reinvestigated the feasibility of utilizing the Salmon River portage (Quackenbush, 1986: 16). Later, during the Omineca gold rush, fourteen canoes were reported as using the portage in the summer of 1871 (see endnote 28).

During the 1870s, Sandford Fleming (1872–80) directed numerous surveys to find a route for the Canadian Pacific Railway. Route #7 focussed upon the Salmon River portage as a divide crossing. Surveyor Charles Horetzky first recognized the Salmon portage potential in Fleming's 1874 report, stating:

...I am told that, by following down parallel to the Fraser and to the west of that river, across the Salmon or Canoe river, and in the direction of Fort George (elevated 1690) a good line can be found.

Marcus Smith in the 1878 report suggested

...following down the Nechako and the Stewart [sic] valleys nearly to Fort George; thence in a northerly direction up the valleys of the Fraser and Salmon Rivers, and across the low water shed to Summit Lake,...

Joseph Hunter, returning in 1877 from his discovery of Pine Pass on behalf of the Canadian Pacific Survey, described the Salmon portage in Appendix G to Fleming's 1878 report:

From the west end of the [Summit] lake to Salmon River the distance by a good trail is only two and three-quarter miles, and the country is comparatively level.

Several early maps show a north–south route parallel to or connecting two lakes that might be Echo and Haglund Lakes of today (see Plate 3). This alignment would be the shortest and most logical one. However, George Dawson’s map, published with his 1881 report, shows an east–west alignment of the trail again parallel to or connecting two lakes (known as Erickson and Sucker Lakes today). Given that Dawson and Hunter were contemporaries who would likely have been in contact concerning the CPR survey, that Hunter’s description states the trail left the west end of Summit Lake, and that Dawson’s mapping was generally reliable, it is plausible that the portage trail connected to Alford Creek, a tributary of the Salmon.²¹ However, the importance and exact location of this historic route has now been forgotten.

Despite the interest as a railway route during the CPR surveys, not until a hundred years later did a rail line cross the Salmon portage. Today, the British Columbia Railway’s spur line to Fort St. James crosses and recrosses the continental divide at the portage in an east–west direction, passing through the Arctic watershed for a short distance.

John Giscome’s Portage

More than a half century of monopoly use of New Caledonia for fur trading by the North West and Hudson’s Bay Companies ended abruptly about 1860. By that date, gold prospectors, “panning” their way up the Fraser River, made discoveries in the Cariboo region on the southern margin of New Caledonia. Within a year, they had ventured through New Caledonia to the Arctic drainage, finding “colour” on the gravel bars of the Parsnip, Finlay, Peace, and their tributaries (Bowes, 1963: 67).²² In 1863, one of these prospectors, John Giscome, traversed the fourth northern approach to New Caledonia, a route destined to become the most important transportation corridor between the Fraser and the Peace River basins.

John Robert Giscome was a black immigrant, born in Jamaica in 1832, who travelled via the California gold fields to Victoria by 1859.²³ Giscome partnered with Henry McDame, another black prospector from the Bahamas, in a number of business interests. They pre-empted adjacent lots near Quesnel²⁴ and were active in the Omineca and Cassiar gold fields. Giscome died in Victoria in



Plate 3 Terrain between Summit Lake and Salmon River. The exact location of the portage trail is unknown.

1907 and is buried in Ross Bay Cemetery. The demise of McDame is not recorded.

In April of 1863, Giscome and McDame, accompanied by a native guide from Fort George, worked a canoe up the Fraser River with the intention of using the Salmon River Portage to Summit Lake on the headwaters of the Peace drainage.²⁵ The Giscome party was unable to use the portage due to high water on the Salmon. The guide then suggested they continue up river “from whence they made a portage of about 9 miles to a lake . . . and having crossed the lake . . . they went down a stream running in a northerly direction . . .” This description fits the route from the Fraser River to Summit Lake and down the Crooked River to McLeod Lake.

The resultant newspaper account of Giscome’s crossing of the portage appears to be the first knowledge that Europeans had of this northern approach to New Caledonia.²⁶ The newspaper referred to it as a “New Route to Peace River” and noted “a salute of about 30 shots was fired, with firearms, in honour of the arrival [at McLeod Lake] of the party through the route which had never been traversed by any others than Indians.”

Several accounts, with maps showing routes to the goldfields, were published soon after the rush began in 1858 but none show the Giscome Portage. Only the Salmon River Portage is recogniza-

ble on these maps. Even a map compiled by Royal Engineer, James Turnbull, which was published in 1863, shows no indication of the Giscome Portage, although the Salmon River route is readily recognized. Thus it appears that there was no prior knowledge of the Giscome route before 1863 although the Salmon Portage had been recognized since Simon Fraser's time.

Another event in the gold rush era probably delayed recognition and use of the Giscome Portage after Giscome's traverse in 1863. A telegraph line was completed to Quesnel in September 1865 and clearing for an extension of the line was also cut northward to Fort Fraser by July of 1865 (Neering, 1989: 48, 54). From then on, many prospectors heading through New Caledonia for the Peace River used the telegraph trail to Fort Fraser and then the old fur trade route to Fort St. James and onward to McLeod Lake. Not until a rush to another goldfield began did the importance of Giscome's discovery become evident.

The Government Road

In 1869, prospectors who followed the telegraph trail discovered gold on the rivers north of Fort St. James (Barlee, 1972: 61,65). The following year, the Omineca goldfields were proven to be valuable, especially upon Germansen Creek. Consequently, according to a notice in the *Victoria British Colonist*, 12 January 1871: 1, 399 residents of Quesnel petitioned Anthony Musgrave, Governor of British Columbia, for provincial help in improving a route to the Omineca region.²⁷ The petition stated, in part,

1st — That the only cheap method of transport through that country [the tributary streams of Peace River] is by water travel;

2nd — That a point exists where the waters of the Fraser River and the waters which flow to the Arctic Ocean are but ten miles distant, and a low and almost level pass connects the two;

3rd — A waggon road of ten miles in length over which boats and provisions could be carried would enable the miner or merchant to transport his supplies from Quesnelmouth to the mouth of Germansen Creek; . . .

5th — The expense of constructing this waggon road would probably not exceed Ten Thousand Dollars; . . .

The petition concluded with a call for funds to be presented in the next session of the Legislative Council for "the making of a waggon road across the 'Giscome Portage'."

In February 1871, John Trutch, brother of the Commissioner of Lands and Works, was instructed by the Surveyor-General to undertake a survey and construct the wagon road.²⁸ He was accompanied by G.B. Wright, the prime contractor on the Cariboo Road, and Captain John Grant, formerly of the Royal Engineers. Grant became the foreman of the work crew.

In his reports to the Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works, Trutch concisely described the work involved in constructing the Giscome Portage wagon road. Trutch intended to employ forty to fifty men but only about fifteen were available because most wanted to press on to the Omineca goldfields; only lack of provisions forced them to work on the road. Construction commenced on 8 May and, despite "very troublesome" and "terribly bad" flies and mosquitoes, the road was finished about the end of July. The total length was seven miles and twenty-four chains. The width was twelve feet for the first three miles from the Fraser River, then ten feet (narrower due to insufficient labour) from Tay Creek to Summit Lake with turnouts for passing. Tay Creek was crossed with a 100-foot long bridge and there were four other bridges totalling 150 linear feet. The road edges were ditched, there were thirty-seven culverts and 2051 linear feet of corduroy road. Trutch approximated the final cost at \$9070.

Trutch's reports indicate both the Salmon River Portage and the Giscome Portage routes were popular that summer. In May, he cited fourteen canoes and boats used the Salmon route and nine the Giscome Portage despite the rough condition of the unfinished road.²⁹ Trutch assessed the value of the Giscome Portage as follows:

...although this route is at present neglected in favour of the new pack-trail from Quesnelmouth by the Telegraph line, Fort James [sic], and the Upper Nation River Lakes, I am inclined to think that it will be used a great deal in the spring and autumn; and should the Gold-fields extend lower down the Omineca, and in the direction of the Finlay Branch of Peace River, as from the latest reports appears very probable, it would in all likelihood become the main line of travel to the mines.

Although the Giscome Portage was probably traversed occasionally after Giscome's first crossing in 1863, not until the government wagon road was constructed in 1871 did it receive frequent use, probably because it was shown on two important maps pub-

lished in that year.³⁰ Not only miners but government officials used it in the 1870s as the country was scientifically examined as a result of the Canadian Pacific Survey for a railway route to the coast. For example, in October 1875, Alfred Selwyn, the Director of the Geological Survey of Canada, journeyed across Giscome Portage wagon road north to south. He comments as follows:

Some years ago a good waggon road was made across the portage by the British Columbia Government, with the view of this route becoming the main line of traffic to the Omineca gold-fields; but the difficulties encountered in the navigation of Crooked River have caused it to be abandoned for the more direct and certain route to Stewart's [sic] Lake. The Hudson Bay Company, however, continue to use it, sending a waggon and horses up from Fort George, to convey their goods over the six miles of road. (Selwyn, 1877: 66)

Early Settlement at Giscome Portage

With the wagon road and an increasing number of users of the portage, it was a logical location for commercial enterprise. Father Morice, in his history of New Caledonia, states:

To further his ends, he [Peter Dunlevy] established [in 1873 or shortly thereafter] a post at Giscome Portage, a section of land named after a man he had for some time in his employ as a cook. (Morice, 1906: 328)

Dunlevy was a miner who was in the first party to discover gold in the Cariboo in 1859 on the Horsefly River. He became a businessman with many commercial interests including a network of approximately nine trading posts between 1873 and 1896 in New Caledonia³¹ and the Peace River country.

However, no supporting documentation has been found for the existence of Dunlevy's post at Giscome Portage. Selwyn, portaging in 1875, makes no mention of a post, despite compiling a sketch map of the portage area. Other travellers in 1877, 1887, and 1893³² failed to note any signs of settlement. If Dunlevy had a post there, it must have been seasonal or very short-lived.

There is evidence that settlement at the south end of Giscome Portage was made by A. G. Hamilton, a former member in the North West Mounted Police (Walker, 1972: 26). Runnalls claims Hamilton took up land in South Fort George in 1906, after "operating a store as a free-trader at Giscome Portage . . ." (Runnalls, 1946:

83). How soon Hamilton was at the portage before 1906 is unclear; it was probably only several years based upon knowledge of development in the Fort George area. In 1915, he was described as "... almost the oldest pioneer in the Fort George district" and as the "... 'Grand Old Man of the District'." (Fort George *Herald*, 27 March 1915: 1)

The district lots around the south end of the portage were surveyed by J. H. McGregor³³ in July 1906. The surveyor's notes (in imperial units) record A. G. Hamilton as the preemptor of approximately 330 acres comprising the south portion of Cariboo District Lot 744. The north 160 acres was reserved for soldier settlement. The survey plan shows a house and garden just to the east of the portage trail in the southwest corner of Hamilton's preemption which probably included the store. The post was managed by Ah Yee (usually shortened to "I.E."), a Chinese man who was later the manager at Hamilton's store in South Fort George (Walker, 1972: 27). Also on the plan is an old building on the banks of the Fraser River about three-quarters of a mile up river from the house. This may have been associated with Chinese placer miners who were known to have been in the area.³⁴

Later Giscome Portage Settlement: The Seebach and Huble Period

Additional settlement at the south end of the portage was established by Edward Seebach and Albert Huble, probably in 1904 or 1905. These two trappers, homesteaders and business partners were from Ontario.³⁵ Over the next fifteen years, Seebach and Huble built up a trading and transportation company that focussed upon the Giscome Portage and extended into the waterway system from Summit Lake to the Peace River drainage. From August 1909 until the end of 1919, Al Huble kept a daily record (scarcely missing a day through the decade) of weather and events at the homestead which provides a great deal of detailed information about Giscome Portage.³⁶

In November 1905, Huble preempted Cariboo District Lot (D.L.) 848 (approximately 320 acres beside the Fraser River) which adjoined the Hamilton property on the south. McGregor also surveyed Huble's homestead along with Hamilton's in July 1906 and showed "3 Acres Clearing & House Garden" on the plan. The title to the property was finally registered in Huble's name in June 1914.

It appears that Seebach and Huble effectively took over Hamilton's operation after he left in 1906. Seebach filed a preemp-

tion on Hamilton's D.L. 744 in October 1909. In late 1909, they were working on Hamilton's former house to provide shelter for an Indian, probably a hired hand (*Diaries*: 11 December 1909). Then they dismantled the "I. E. store" (*Diaries*: 20 January 1910) to use the logs for a new building on Huble's preemption, a warehouse beside the Fraser River. However, "Hamilton was making trouble about Seebach's preemption" which took a week of negotiation before "Ed Seebach settled with I.E." (*Diaries*: 1 March and 8 March, 1910). Seebach was finally granted the preemption in November 1912. It appears that the preemption of D.L. 744 was a speculative venture for a month later, the property was sold to the British Empire Land Company of Toronto for subdivision purposes.³⁷

Given the sale potential of Seebach's property, the two partners focussed upon Huble's preemption and built cabins, barns, and a blacksmith shop there. They recleared the 1871 government portage road and freighted goods over the portage with horse and wagon (see Plate 4). The entrepreneurs trapped and traded furs from natives and whites, guided travellers³⁸ through the Giscome Rapids on the Fraser River 4 km downstream from the homestead, and supplied passing steamboats with meat and vegetables from the farm.³⁹ In 1911, Huble brought his wife from Ontario to the homestead and began a family.⁴⁰ Huble built a log house for the family in 1912 (see Plate 5) which still remains today. The following year, Seebach and Huble had a frame construction, false-front store built at the Fraser River end of the portage (*Diaries*: 4 August 1913).⁴¹

Following Seebach and Huble, more than 20 settlers preempted land along the portage road between the Huble homestead and Summit Lake.⁴² They formed a community known as Giscome Portage. However, the First World War drained the settlers away and many homesteads were abandoned, a process reflected in the history of the Giscome Portage post office (operated by Huble and Seebach) which opened November 1st and closed December 31st of 1915.⁴³

Eventually, a major change in the transportation route to the north affected the economic viability of the Seebach and Huble operation. By 1916, a road from Prince George connected to the portage road "about a mile from the Fraser River landing..." (Kitto, 1919: 24), bypassing the homestead.⁴⁴ Huble recognized the imminent changes that would make the portage road obsolete and in 1917 he homesteaded the SW 1/4 of D.L. 762 on the road⁴⁵ leading into the portage (*Diaries*: 10 Sept 1917). This location was 4.5 km away by road from the house by the river and only 1.5 km from the Prince George road. By the fall of 1919, the road from Prince George



Plate 4 Wagon crossing Tay Creek bridge on the Giscome Portage, 1914
Source: BC Forest Service



Plate 5 Huble homestead under construction in 1912
Source: I.B. Guest

had been extended directly to Summit Lake⁴⁶, this link forming the precursor of today's Hart Highway (Highway 97 North). Functionally, the link ended the useful life of the portage trail that had been used since 1863.

Huble lived in Prince George⁴⁷ and continued to operate the farm during the summer until 1929 when he sold the land to a business woman from San Francisco, Josephine Walker Mitchell. She added other abandoned preemptions and operated the property as the WM Ranch, a guest resort. After 1957, the ranch then passed through the hands of several owners until it was acquired by the Province in 1975 for a community pasture.

In 1986, 22 ha around the 1912 Huble house was Crown granted to the Regional District of Fraser–Fort George for a regional park. With the support of the Giscome Portage Historical Society, the homestead was restored as a heritage attraction which officially opened in 1989 (see Plate 6). The portage road was again cleared for a recreational trail which received Provincial heritage designation in 1997.



Plate 6 Restored 1912 Huble house in Giscome Portage Regional Park

Later Transportation Links Over Giscome Portage

For three decades after 1919, transportation from the end of the road at Summit Lake into the Peace River drainage was based on riverboats (McKay, 2000). But the road from Prince George was gradually extended past the lake after World War II, and by 1952 the Hart Highway (Highway 97 North) was opened to Dawson Creek (Harvey, 1994: 121). The highway was paralleled by the Pacific Great Eastern Railway (today's British Columbia Railway) in 1958. Within a decade, powerlines from the Bennett Dam and gas and oil pipelines from the Peace River country were constructed across the Giscome Portage route.

These modern transport linkages cross the continental divide almost exactly where the original Giscome Portage road approached Summit Lake⁴⁸. In fact, a section of the portage road was obliterated by the highway and railway construction. The power and pipelines are within two km of where the portage road had crossed the divide and intersect the southern portion of the restored portage road. Today, the Giscome Portage route is the key transportation corridor linking the Peace and Fraser river drainages.

Summary

Following three native routes, European fur traders penetrated and settled New Caledonia from the north after 1793. But only the Stuart Lake–McLeod Lake trail over the continental divide had a significant transportation history. It was used consistently from 1806 to the 1870s. The trail was superseded by the Giscome Portage, an aboriginal trail traversed by John Giscome in 1863 and constructed as a government road in 1871. It served for the next 50 years as the northern approach to New Caledonia. Then, for three decades after 1919, a direct road from Prince George to Summit Lake bypassed the portage road and connected New Caledonia with the northern waterways. After 1952, modern transportation facilities were built across the divide at the same location as the original portage road. This established the Giscome Portage route as the last-remaining, significant northern approach to New Caledonia and the primary transportation corridor linking northern and southern British Columbia.

Notes

1. Akrigg and Akrigg (1975) is invaluable for chronological outlines such as the preceding section. Their work is also relied on later in this paper.
2. The name New Caledonia is attributed to Fraser (Lamb, 1960: 28) who believed the country resembled Scotland from his mother's description. Fraser was born in Vermont and never journeyed to Scotland.
3. Physiographic terms in this paper follow Holland (1964) and Tipper (1971).
4. His second crucial decision based upon native advice was to turn back at Alexandria before entering the Fraser River's canyons and follow the native trail along the Blackwater River to the Pacific at Bella Coola. Perhaps his judgement was coloured by his experience at Peace River canyon when he should have followed native advice to take the portage trail (Lamb, 1970: 266).
5. The term "a day's march" suggests this was probably a portage from Summit Lake at the head of the Crooked River (a Parsnip tributary which Mackenzie missed) to the Fraser River—later known as Giscome Portage. If he had turned northwest up the Finlay River, he probably would have become "lost in various branches among the mountains" as the old native said (Lamb, 1970: 278). The Finlay was not explored until 1824 by Samuel Black of the Hudson's Bay Company (Patterson, 1968), and even today it is a roadless wilderness.
6. The elevation of the divide is approximately 747 m above sea level with peaks on each side of the narrow pass rising to 1700 m. The lakes, only several metres lower than the divide, were named Arctic, Portage, and Pacific Lakes during a traverse in 1910 by T.H. Taylor, a land surveyor (Woollacott, 1927: Appendix B).
7. The watercourses are named for Captain James Herrick McGregor, a land surveyor from Victoria who was killed in the First World War. Captain Creek is just west of James Creek.
8. Mackenzie believed he was on the upper reaches of the Columbia River which Captain Robert Gray, sailing under the American flag, had located in 1792. Not until Simon Fraser ran the length of his namesake river in 1808 was this misconception realized.
9. There is an interesting anecdote about these instructions in Lamb (1960: 15).
10. Rocky Mountain Portage House was the entry point to the Peace River Canyon and was at the most easterly limit of New

Caledonia. Its founding and history is described in Burley, Hamilton, and Fladmark (1996).

11. Akrigg and Akrigg (1975: 118) suggest Fort Nelson may have been founded in the same year although it is located east of the Rocky Mountains. Karamanski (1983: 16 and endnote), in a more definitive study, suggests 1807 is the founding date of Fort Nelson.

12. Fraser followed Mackenzie's route over the divide to the Nechako River then went upstream on that river and the Stuart River to Stuart Lake.

13. In later years in New Caledonia, additional posts added were: Fort Alexandria (1821) on the Fraser; Fort Kilmaurs (1822) at the north end of Babine Lake; Connolly's Lake (1826) on Bear Lake at the headwaters of the Skeena River at the northern limit of New Caledonia; and Fort Chilcotin (1829) which served briefly as an outpost of Alexandria. All except Chilcotin were prior to Fort Langley (1827). They are the basis for native reserve settlements today.

14. It was named by David Thompson in 1813, reciprocating for Simon Fraser's naming of the Thompson River during his descent of the Fraser in 1808 (Lamb, 1960: 28).

15. The location approximated the farthest distance Mackenzie had travelled down the Fraser River in 1793 before returning upriver to the Blackwater River mouth and proceeding overland to the Pacific. The site at the northern terminus of the overland trail from Fort Kamloops became Fort Alexandria in 1821, a tribute to Mackenzie a year after his death.

16. Details of the logistics involved in supplying New Caledonia are available in Cullen (1980) and Gibson (1997).

17. This situation was due to the Hudson's Bay Company reverting to supplying New Caledonia from the Columbia after experimenting with the Peace River route in 1823–25.

18. Selwyn's trip was some fifteen years after prospectors used the route to reach the Peace River and its tributaries such as the Omineca. It was probable that the fires were due to prospectors as much as natural causes.

19. The surficial geology map 1287A included in Tipper suggests they may be glacial lake shorelines.

20. Ice is mentioned as a drawback by Fraser in a letter to Stuart in 1807 (Lamb, 1960: 251).

21. The author has explored the area on the ground, searched the Annual Reports of the B.C. Ministry of Mines, consulted surveyors' notes and examined air photos. However the Salmon portage trail was seldom used after the 1870s so its traces would have largely vanished in 130 years, especially as the area has undergone com-

mercial logging. One possible clue that may or may not relate to the portage trail is a short section of a "pack trail" near Alford Creek shown on a survey made about 1913 of District Lot 8486.

22. The *Victoria Daily Chronicle*, 20 November 1862: 3, indicates these prospectors used the overland route from Fort St. James to McLeod Lake.

23. For some of the background on John Giscome, see Eversole (1985) and Giscombe (2000).

24. This information in the *Quesnel Cariboo Sentinel*, 11 March 1871: 3, is contained in an article which is primarily an account of an assault charge against Giscome that was resolved in his favour.

25. Notice of Giscome's travels was contained in an article in the *Victoria British Colonist*, 16 December 1863: 3. The article was apparently based upon an interview with Giscome after he returned to Victoria from the summer's trip down the Peace River.

26. Eversole (1984) suggests a reference to a "New Road" in Simon Fraser's letters (Lamb, 1960: 248) may mean the Giscome Portage but the author believes Fraser is simply using another term for the Salmon River Portage. The letters refer to a short portage something over two miles in length, not the longer distance of eight miles which describes the Giscome Portage.

27. The one-page petition is available in the correspondence of the Department of Lands and Works (Public Archives of British Columbia, PABC GR 983).

28. I am indebted to Linda Eversole of the Heritage Conservation Branch for providing photocopies of documents in the Public Archives of British Columbia, including two reports by John Trutch to the Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works on the road construction ("Report of the Waggon Road" and "Journal of Exploration", both in PABC, GR 983).

29. The *Quesnel Cariboo Sentinel*, 13 April 1871: 3, reported that most men were going to the Omineca via the Salmon River Portage as the Giscome Portage road was not ready. On 3 June: 3, the *Sentinel* reported that heavy traffic, including cattle, were going to the Omineca via the telegraph trail route. Another article in the *Sentinel*, 24 June 1871:3, stated: "...in the opinion of many parties it would be for the better of the country at large if the amount of money that was granted for the Giscome portage were expended in making a good trail from Quesnel to Germansen creek."

30. *Map of the Cariboo and Omineca Goldfields* by William Patterson, C.E. (Bowes, 1963: 66), intended for the miners and an official *Map of British Columbia* produced by the Department and Lands and

Works (Thompson, 1966: between 284-285) both showed the Giscome Portage.

31. John Trutch obtained supplies for the Giscome Portage road construction from a Dunlevy post on Stuart River in 1871. (Journal of Exploration: 24 March, PABC GR 983)

32. Joseph Hunter crossed the portage from north to south in 1877 after examining the Pine Pass for the Canadian Pacific Survey. This pass was later used by the British Columbia Railway. J. Turner-Turner was a British sportsman who paddled up the Fraser River past the south end of the portage in 1887. R.G. McConnell was a geologist with the Geological Survey of Canada. He crossed the portage in 1893 from north to south after surveys on the Finlay and Omineca Rivers.

33. See endnote 7.

34. Information concerning Chinese miners and Ah Yee was known to Samuel Huble in interviews taped by the author in 1976 and 1977.

35. Seebach was from Mitchell in south-west Ontario; Huble from Oak Lake in south-central Ontario. They probably met at Fort George according to the author's taped interviews with son Sam Huble because both had trap lines some 40 km east of Giscome Portage at Seebach Creek and Huble Creek, draining into McGregor River.

36. The small daily record books have been compiled by the author into *The Huble Diaries* which are published by the Giscome Portage Historical Society (Sedgwick, 1989). From hereon, specific references are noted as *Diaries* with the date of entry. The author also consulted survey notes and records in the Land Title Office.

37. Seebach preempted approximately 337 acres of District Lot 744. The northern portion was a soldier reserve of 160 acres. If, according to the newspaper, the British Empire Land Company acquired 450 acres, some of it must have been the reserve. One of the principals of the land company was James Anderson who was a civil engineer with the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (*Diaries*: 20 December 1912, 9 September 1913; *Fort George Herald*, 21 December 1912: 1). Seebach's brother, Albert, pre-empted Lot B of D.L. 756 on the east side of the Fraser River in July 1912 and was granted it in 1920. References in the Huble Diaries to Bert's property make it clear it was across the river (*Diaries*: 12 November 1913). Ed Seebach seems to have retained some land near the Huble homestead probably in D.L. 744 (*Diaries*: 15 December 1914). Maybe the sale to the land company didn't include all of Seebach's preemption but left him with about 50 acres. There appears to be a total of about 497 acres in D.L. 744.

38. Huble's diaries record numerous visitors to the homestead and travellers published accounts of their visits. Provincial Premier Harlan C. Brewster crossed the portage in 1917, recorded by Huble in his typical laconic fashion as: "Worked on the new road. Brewster and party arrived." (*Diaries*: 6 October 1917). For interesting travellers' accounts see especially Footner (1912: 85-89) and Haworth (1917: 39-44).

39. Paddlewheel steamboats used the Fraser River above Fort George during construction of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. The first boat arrived in 1909 (*Diaries*: 21 October 1909) and traffic continued until the railway reached Fort George in January 1914. In the summer of 1912, the Giscome Rapids were improved for boat travel by blasting some of the rock (*Fort George Herald*, 9 November 1912: 1). After completion of the railway, small boats sometimes transported goods from Fort George to Huble's homestead at the south end of the portage whereupon they freighted the goods over the portage to Summit Lake.

40. Huble and his wife Annie had four daughters and three sons. Huble died in 1947 at age 75. Seebach remained a bachelor and died in 1932 at age 46. The previous year he had fallen from a ladder while extinguishing a roof fire at his post on McLeod Lake and had had a leg amputated. Complications from his injury may have contributed to his death. Pallbearers at his funeral included important businessmen and professionals. (*Prince George Citizen*, 3 March 1932: 4)

41. Store/warehouse buildings were also built at Summit Lake and McLeod Lake.

42. South Fort George *Fort George Herald*, 8 Oct 1910: 1; 28 Jan 1911: 1) and Land Title Office records consulted by the author.

43. Correspondence by the author with National Postal Museum, Ottawa, 1977.

44. This paper was a forerunner to Kitto (1922).

45. The road today is known as Mitchell Road; it leads to a regional park at the original Huble homestead.

46. Referred to in a report by J.F. Campbell, BCLS in *Reports on Cariboo District Made by British Columbia Land Surveyors to the Department of Lands, 1891-1927*, Victoria, (1929:125); Kitto (1919:25).

47. Late in 1916, Huble was working on a house in town. (*Diaries*: 13 October 1916).

48. The divide is imperceptible, being in a low, swampy area about 1 km southeast of the lake. Its elevation is approximately 720 m above sea level. Summit Lake is 706 m.

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