

ARRIVAL – or Building the Corduroy Road – The Odyssey from Southampton to Grande Prairie

It was 1955 and the Mathesons – Torquhil, Heather and four children from 8 months to 8 years old, were emigrating from Yorkshire, England to Grande Prairie, Alberta. Torquhil had gone ahead in January, to be greeted by 40 below weather. So he had been living and working in Alberta for 4 months.

Southampton docks, May 1955 – Granny Matheson introduced herself to many other passengers, (to the great chagrin and embarrassment of her 8 year old grand-daughter). Granny was concerned that her daughter in law, Heather, would need a lot of help and support with the four children and some 44 pieces of luggage during the steamship voyage! All four grandparents were at the Southampton docks, Granny and Grandpa Webber, and Granny and Grandpa Matheson. The send off was complete with streamers thrown from the deck of the boat and many arms waving farewell to loved ones heading across the Atlantic Ocean for a new life in Canada.

6 days on the SS Homeric, including dressing up for dinner every night, they arrived in Quebec City. The strongest memory of that entrance to Canada is the image of cliffs and grey stone buildings in the old city. Then a train ride from Quebec City to Edmonton. Whew, finally in Alberta – Dad met the train, and they are all together as a family again. But little did they know there was more adventure in store.

Following is a transcription of the 10 page letter Torquhil wrote to his parents about the rest of the trip. Seems more like a pioneer story, although it was many decades after pioneer days.

“P. O. Box 249 Grande Prairie
16 June ‘55

My Dear Mummy & Daddy,

You must by now be wondering just when some of your expatriate children &/or grandchildren are going to write to you. Ann started a letter to you some days ago – in reply to your letter, Dad. It wasn't the first – G. Webber got across the line first by a short lead. She hasn't finished yet, I regret to say, so here I am trying to fill the breach. I left here on Saturday the 20th for Edmonton. The trip took me 14 hours – there were some very bad stretches of road along Lesser Slave Lake. I took a bacterial swab to the University Hospital and plated it at about midnight & then got to bed in a hotel room near the station for 5 hours sleep. The family's train arrived on time at 5:45 A.M. Sunday & it was grand to see them again. All except Geoffrey looked just as I remembered them & all looked very well and not at all jaded. (*Geoffrey was the baby, 3 months old when Torquhil last saw him, and now 8 months old*) We went back to the hotel room & they bathed. My plans were to go straight off as soon as we had had breakfast, but the registered luggage (11 pieces, weighing 1000 lbs) was not all on that train, and since Heather had sent the excess "C.O.D." & it was only registered to Edmonton, the luggage office would not release it (what had come already). We then went out to the McCartens & had lunch and washed the car. It was a glorious day, & Edmonton – a beautiful city – looked her best for

us. On the afternoon train the pieces containing the bedding & crockery etc. had arrived, but not the biggest piece of all, which the railway had "tagged" for the C.O.D. charges. Apparently they select the most valuable looking piece (usually the biggest) & 'tag' it with the C.O.D. charges, refusing to release any until the charges have been paid.

The last and biggest piece arrived on Monday morning – we had spent the night with the four children with the McCartens & Heather & I at the Airlines Hotel at the airport. We did some shopping & left for the North at about 2 p.m. We had supper at Athabasca, passing through a torrential rainstorm just before reaching the town. It was still raining when we left Athabasca & I knew then that we must expect some tricky driving further on if it had been raining as hard further West. After supper – about 6 p.m. – we proceeded West and the "rough breaks" (places where the gravel overlay has given way & the underlying earth has been deeply rutted by heavy trucks) proved easier to negotiate when softened by the rain than they had been when hard & dry on Saturday. My hopes for the really bad bit further West were (falsely) buoyed. We stayed the night at a very nice new hotel I had noted on the way south, at Canyon Creek, right on the shore of Lesser Slave Lake.

Next morning we went on. We had a considerable part of the luggage in the trunk (boot) – (which really is enormous on our Plymouth), but only the pram on the luggage rack I had borrowed from John Nelson. We got about 10 miles West of Faust – about ½ way along L.S. Lake – when we met a car coming east with its luggage strewn around it. I stopped to see if he needed help, but he said "We just had our luggage rack come off. It's broken & we have jettisoned it & are repacking the luggage we had on it." As we drew away I said to Heather "That makes me feel I want to stop & check that ours is secure." Three hundred yards further on, in a very rough break, our rack, with pram securely attached, slid gently into view in the upper half of the windshield. It did virtually no damage as it careened off the hood (bonnet) onto the road – only a couple of minor "1st degree" scratches – and it & its hood* were undamaged. We decided that was a good place to stop and have our picnic lunch, which we did (it was still raining. After getting the rack in place again (I got completely soaked in the process) we carried on until about 20 miles further on (we had noted the virtually absent traffic start) we got onto a long line of stationary trucks & cars. We sat for a while & heard that it was no use passing the line (the road appeared clear) because there was a bigger block further on. We didn't know that we were part of the biggest "traffic snarl-up" in the history of this highway – one that is already a part of history, with repercussions in parliament. After about 10 minutes, while we were wondering how long it would be before we moved on, a few cars ahead of us in the line pulled out, reversed, and went back. We guessed what they were up to & quickly joined them to get one of the few remaining hotel rooms at Faust. It was still very wet & the kids had only the open sandals they travelled across Canada in. I tried to get them to go for a barefoot walk in the mud, but they decided that was much too cold & clammy. They were needing the exercise by this time and were quite a handful in the small hotel. They all slept sideways on in a collapsible double bed known as a "Winnipeg couch." Geoffrey was very comfy on a pillow on the floor & we had a?.... game in the room.

** the pram was a large black English pram with big wheels and a big hood – never before seen in Canada and now travelling on top of a car with a very English family of 6 on this mud road in Northern Alberta.*

By Wednesday afternoon we had spent quite a lot of money – the room was only \$4 but every time the family went into the restaurant for a meal it cost us \$5 - 6 & I was wishing we had used the train or plane. What was planned as the cheapest way of getting the family from Edmonton was turning out to be more expensive than chartering a private plane! The sun was out by now & the mud was warm but the kids still wouldn't go barefoot till I took my shoes off & rolled my trousers up & showed the way. Then they loved it, so we went for a walk to the lake & to a nearby sawmill. At the lake I bought 3 ½ whitefish for about 70c & when we came back Heather went out and bought a frying pan. We had collected some dry wood on the way home with the fish & we went a few miles down the road for the best meal we had had yet – fried fish hot from the pan. The kids loved it. The fish, by the way, was ready cleaned & gutted when weighed – so that was quite a lot of fish. We decided that night to have a go at it, although the roadway was still officially closed & from all accounts still in very poor shape. We had an idea that some of the heavy transport might try too, so got up at 5.A.M. & managed to get away by 7 A.M. In fact that wasn't early enough, and about 30 miles further on we came [sic] on one of the trucks that had been with us at Faust. Thee [sic] driver had left at 4 A.M., & he was sitting – very much an outcast – in his cab, blocking the fairway. The other half of the highway was churned up like a battlefield & quite impassable. These trucks up here are about four times the size of lorries at home & carry, I am told, about 10 times the weight. They are responsible for most of the damage to the road, & they also make it very hard for the cars because when the road is bad, but not impassable, they make deep ruts. If you get into one of these ruts at slow speed you are stuck on the crest between with your wheels hanging free, You either have to go gingerly over the rough breaks in the "crest" – or if they have already been used by a few other cars & are therefore a bit chiseled & greasy, decide rapidly between either stopping and going out with a shovel to fill in the ruts or else increasing speed & taking it as fast as you can so that you will slither through.

After a short time a few more cars came up behind us. One that came up about ½ hour behind us reported that a few miles back (where a river had been half way over the road) the water was now over the road & only just passable – and still rising rapidly. There was now no going back. Just then a road grader came up. This is a vehicle which makes the roads in summer by scraping the earth up towards the centre & keeps them open in winter by clearing the snow. It has 8 wheels & can rock them from side to side to get out if it gets stuck in mud. It stated [sic] to clear the mountains of mud from the clear side of the road but the surface was so bad that the relatively hard top was crack [sic] & revealing liquid mud below – about the consistency of the cream on the top of a bottle of milk. It went off to the West again to try a more likely looking spot & we all started to collect timber to fill in the ruts & then layer crossways to make what is called a "corduroy" road. Before we had finished it came back – presumably having found that it couldn't do much good at the next bad patch to the West – & had another go. This time it too got stuck, right beside the truck, & despite our work with shovel & wood, couldn't budge. It is almost unheard of for a grader to get stuck. They can usually dig down to firmer ground, rocking their

wheels & manipulating their blade, which can turn in any direction & also move up or down so that it can be used to jack the rest of the machine up once it gets to solid ground. The driver got down from his cab high on the vehicle & investigated the trough his driving wheels were in, to find that they were on a hard bottom of ice – he had dug right down to frost level. I don't know whether it was perma-frost – in the still higher latitudes the ground never thaws out, even in summer, but I had never heard of that here. Anyway, this apparently meant that he would have to wait until a tractor cam [sic] to pull him out, so we all looked around for another way to get on – we knew we couldn't go back because of the water over the highway. A few venturesome souls (probably not owning the cars they were driving in) tried some fields on the North side of the highway. There was a long stretch of swamp & by getting up to about 40 m.p.h. on a hard stretch before it (they had pulled out the intervening fence poles they all managed to get about 4/5 the way through it. The last bit they were manhandled through, one being pulled by a couple of horses. Meanwhile the rest of us found hard ground to the South, but there there [sic] was a wide ditch to be bridged before we could get onto the road again West of the block. There was some cut lumber to hand so we built a bridge & got away after about 2 hours work. About 5 miles on we came to the hard core of the obstruction – heavy trucks that had been stuck for 3 days. The drivers were pretty fed up at seeing the private cars go through & some of them were pulled out to block the highway & were determined to stay there until they were towed through. They get paid \$40 for the trip from Edmonton to the Peace & have to pay their own expenses en route – there are no restrictions on working hours for lorry driver in this country & the speed limit for trucks is 50 m.p.h., but of course they exceed it whenever they can. We decided to have a meal & cooked the rest of the fish. It was quite a nice day & it was only a three mile walk to Enilda – the next town (or village), so we weren't unduly worried. I had earlier tried to talk them into letting us through but just when we were getting onto friendly terms a French Canadian cam [sic] up too & mad [sic] some disparaging remarks about the truck drivers, which made them so angry I gave up & went to cook the meal.

After the meal, Heather walked by with the baby & this apparently shamed them into letting us through, in fact they all came & gave me a shove when I got stuck in a particularly bad patch just past the head of the column. By the time we got to the worst patch of all it had been worked down to be almost passable. The fourth car ahead of me was the last one to be towed through by a tractor. After that we all managed to get through on our own. This was a good thing, for to be towed through an impassable stretch of road by a tractor plays havoc with your car. After that it was plain sailing & a nice run in home. We got there at about 9 P.M. that Thursday & stayed the night with the Nelsons.

The kids are now at school, well adapted & making friends & eating like horses. More of this in my next – it is after midnight & my ½ day is ended.

Much love from us all,

Torquhil ”