

(October 3, 1921.)

## The Peace River District

BY JOHN M. IMRIE.

*Mr. President and Members of the Canadian Club,*—As a former resident of this city, and as a member of this club for many years, I am in a position to appreciate, and I assure you I do appreciate, the honor of being asked to address this Club.

It is as a native of Ontario and a continuous resident of this Province until three months ago that I would speak to you to-day. When I moved to Edmonton early in July, I took with me the conceptions and misconceptions regarding Central and Northern Alberta of the average Ontario business man. During the three months I have been a resident of Alberta I have travelled 4,000 miles within its borders, including 600 miles by boat on the Peace River and almost as many miles by motor. Ocular demonstration has dispelled many erroneous impressions and given me a new and enlarged conception of the extent, the present state of development and the vast potentialities of Central and Northern Alberta.

There are three matters relating to that territory regarding which I find much interest and some confusion in Ontario. I would like to refer briefly to these matters before taking up the real subject of my talk.

The oil industry in Northern Alberta and farther north on the Mackenzie River is still in the experimental stage. Unquestionably there is oil there, but exact locations with a grade and volume to justify commercial operations have yet to be proven. The larger operators seem to have every confidence in the outcome of their experimental work, but some time may elapse before the field has been commercially proven. Fortunately vast distances and difficulties of operation have been a deterrent on anything approaching a boom or a stampede. From an Alberta standpoint it is fortunate also that exaggeration of accomplishments to date have been more in evidence outside the Province than within it. I am confident that exploratory work will be carried on next season on a more extensive scale than ever, and that eventually certain sections of the field will prove a success.

Of greater importance to Central and Northern Alberta is the crop situation. Regarding that also I find many erroneous-

ous impressions in Ontario. Adverse conditions in other sections due in some cases to drought, in others to late rains, and in others again to snow, have been interpreted in many quarters in this Province as applying also to Central and Northern Alberta. Speaking still as a native of Ontario, I think there is a widespread failure in Eastern Canada to appreciate the vast distances in the Prairie Provinces and the differences between various sections in matters of soil, precipitation and agricultural conditions generally. Edmonton is as far from the southern boundary of Alberta as Montreal is from Toronto. Drought on Montreal Island would not affect the crops in York County. Yet many in Ontario understand Alberta crops are a failure presumably because of reports of drought in Southern Alberta. Many in this Province understand the heavy snow which really fell around Swift Current three weeks ago was general throughout the West. Not a flake of snow fell in the Edmonton district. Edmonton is as far from Swift Current as Cochrane is from Toronto. Reports of snow at Cochrane would not be interpreted as indicating that the farms around Toronto were under a white blanket. I appeal for equal discrimination in forming opinions based on weather reports from the West.

As a matter of fact, except for rains which halted harvesting for a day or two, we had ideal harvest weather throughout Central and Northern Alberta during September. All the wheat is cut and 70 per cent. of it is threshed. It is averaging 25 bushels to the acre. There are corresponding yields of other grains. Taken as a whole this year's crop in Central and Northern Alberta is the best that district has produced.

Everyone in Ontario seems to be greatly interested in the new Farmers' Government in Alberta—not to mention a man named Wood. Without venturing upon that tabooed subject of politics I may perhaps state that while I am personally opposed to class government and several planks of the U.F.O. platform I have a high regard for Premier Greenfield as a man and as a citizen. In appearance he resembles the Premier of Ontario. He has strength of character and the courage of his convictions. He is earnest and sincere and keenly desirous of rendering real service to his Province. He has made a very favorable impression on at least the great majority of those who have met him or heard him speak.

But it is with regard to the Peace River Country that I desire to speak at greatest length to-day. A month ago I made a nine day tour of part of that country with thirty other members of the Edmonton Board of Trade. Although I had

been West a dozen times before locating in Edmonton, that city was the farthest north I had reached. The Board of Trade trip opened up for me a new land and it was indeed a wonderland. No amount of reading or hearsay can convey any adequate conception of the Peace River country. It must be seen to be understood. All I can hope to do to-day is to give you some general idea of the district and to arouse an interest that will not die until you have seen it for yourselves.

The term "The Peace River Country" is applied to the drainage basin of the Peace River. That river has its source on the Eastern slope of the Rockies in the junction of the Finlay and the Parsnip Rivers, at a point about 300 miles east of Prince Rupert and 150 miles north of Prince George. After running 70 miles through the lower mountains and foothills, the Peace River forces its way through a deep canyon for 20 miles and then bursts forth at Hudson Hope and sweeps eastward and northward over a huge plateau extending to Lake Athabaska and the Athabaska and Slave Rivers.

That which impressed me most about the Peace River country was not the accomplishments or possibilities along physical or material lines, remarkable as they are. It was rather the faith, the fearlessness and the fortitude of those who were and are the pioneers and advance guard of settlement. As I listened to tale after tale of difficulties encountered and overcome, of discouragements and renewed hope and effort, of faith that would not die and endurance that would not give up, I felt as though I were almost on holy ground. (The speaker quoted here illustrations of early struggles.)

Together these stories make another illustration of that adventurous, pioneering, conquering and unconquerable spirit that is characteristic of the British race and has made our Empire far flung upon the seven seas. They are evidence also that there is in process of development in the hinterland of the North West a citizenship in which courage, perseverance and resourcefulness will be dominating factors.

Second among my impressions is that of the vast extent of the Peace River country. The river itself is 807 miles long—a distance as great as from Toronto to St. John, N.B. For the first 90 miles it drains a mountainous region, part of which is as yet unexplored. But of the 700 mile stretch from Hudson Hope East, almost all of which is in the Province of Alberta, it may be said that the greater part, varying in width up to 100 miles back from the river, is good agricultural land, suited either for grain growing, mixed farming or ranching.

Authoritative estimates place the fertile area in the Peace River country at a minimum of 30,000 square miles. That is a larger area than is now occupied in all Alberta.

Another deep impression was made by tangible evidence of the remarkable fertility of the soil and the favorable climatic conditions. At Fort Vermilion, 640 miles from Edmonton, in a latitude almost that of the northern part of Labrador, I saw a display of growing vegetables equal in size to anything I have seen in Eastern Canada. Although that latitude is 1,000 miles north of Toronto and over 500 miles north of the shores of James Bay, I saw there a display of growing flowers equal to anything I have seen in the gardens of Ontario. Wheat fields around Fort Vermilion gave promise of 50 and even 60 bushels to the acre. I saw splendid cattle in that district, and was told of equally good herds on the ranges of the Hay and Battle Rivers.

The section west of Peace River town has produced this year by far the largest and best crop in its history. The expected total of nine million bushels of grain is double the yield in the previous record year of 1919. It is as much as was raised in all Alberta during the year the Province was created, sixteen years ago. In several sections of the district wheat yields of 50 bushels to the acre were harvested this year.

The long sunshine during the summer has much to do with the splendid yield of grains and vegetables in the Peace River country. Records of the Experimental Farm at Fort Vermilion show that wheat, barley and oats reach maturity there in from 90 to 100 days after seeding. This early ripening lessens materially the danger from frost. Drought is practically unknown. Sheridan Lawrence, who has been located near Fort Vermilion for thirty-five years, told me he had never seen a crop failure in that district.

The potentialities of such an area, with such fertility of soil and salubrity of climate are beyond estimate. Statisticians have computed that if all the arable land were sown in wheat and produced an average yield of 20 bushels to the acre, which would be very low for that district, the total yield would exceed the largest yet secured from the whole of Western Canada. I would not hazard that or any other estimate. But my memory recalls that it is not so long ago since both Winnipeg and Edmonton were as far from the end of steel as Fort Vermilion is to-day and that any person, estimating then what has since developed in those cities, would have been laughed to scorn.

Immigration is the great need of the Peace River country,

as it is of Canada as a whole. The vast country to the north and east of Peace River town is still practically unsettled. Even in Fort Vermilion district, where arable land stretches 100 miles on either side of the river, there are only fifty white families. At each of the other settlements along and back from the river there are only from six to a dozen white families. This part of the Peace River country is a great reserve of territory for future settlement.

Much of the country to the west of Peace River town is comparatively well settled. Certain portions, as around Grand Prairie and Spirit River, are as closely settled as any part of rural Alberta. The district around Waterhole is rapidly filling up. But the total area under cultivation is but a small fraction of the total arable land.

Transportation facilities have been vastly improved since the C.P.R. took over the operation of the E.D. & B.C. Ry. between Edmonton and Grand Prairie. Much of the roadbed has been ballasted, new equipment has been secured, running time has been reduced and trains are being run on schedule time. But the present lines are all to the south and west of Peace River town. The grade has been constructed for some distance north of the river in the direction of Waterhole. When steel is laid over that grade and its extension it will make much more accessible the vast fertile tracts north of the upper Peace River.

Settlers to the north and east of Peace River town, right up to Fort Vermilion, are dependent on a weekly boat service in summer for connection with the end of steel at Peace River town. They are urging the extension of the railway in the direction of Fort Vermilion. With the sparse settlement in that district and present financial condition they will probably have to content themselves with the steamer service for some time—unless the oil fields of the Mackenzie should develop earlier to a point that would justify rail connection between Peace River and the Mackenzie River.

In conclusion I must pay tribute to the wondrous beauty of the Peace River country. I shall never forget the scene as our train drew near to Peace River town and I looked down upon the Peace River, winding and turning in a beautifully wooded valley 700 feet deep and joined at that point by the Smoky River running through an equally deep valley. The Peace at this point is about  $\frac{3}{8}$  mile wide. Its banks slope gradually so that at their crest the valley is at least five miles wide. From there to Vermilion Chutes the river winds continuously. The sloping sides and crests of the banks and many

of the islands in the River are crowned with trees—much spruce ranging up to 36 inches in diameter. Each bend opens up a new vista of beauty. Gradually the river widens and its banks are lower until at Vermilion Chutes, 300 miles from Peace River town, it is a majestic river one and a half miles wide.

There is a great lure about the north country. I felt it first in this province ten years ago as I stood on the banks of the Matagami west of Cochrane and watched that mighty river flowing on to Hudson's Bay and the Arctic. I felt it again as our boats pulled out of Peace River town and I realized that I was northward bound on a great river whose name had been one to conjure with ever since school days. I felt it stronger still the first night out as I watched the northern lights playing across the sky. But the lure was strongest after a five-mile tramp beyond Vermilion Chutes and as I was about to return to the boat for the homeward journey. Watching that majestic river flowing on to the north I knew that for me it was not the end of the journey. I knew that I never would be satisfied until I had returned and gone down the Slave and Mackenzie, on past Fort Norman into the land of the midnight sun. And I knew that in doing so, and learning at first hand of the vast potentialities of our great northern hinterland, I would be fitting myself to co-operate the better with my fellow citizens throughout Canada in working out the great destiny of this Dominion.