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OLD MINER KNEW THE END WAS NEAR

DEATH DIDN'T HURRY DAY OF DECISION

BY CECIL CLARK

It was about 3 o'clock on a November afternoon and it was snowing.

It had been snowing for days in that mile-high wilderness that marks the timberline source of Stave River, near wild and lonely Homestead Glacier, high on the south slopes of Garibaldi Park.

Beside a stunted, snow-covered spruce tree is an almost equally snow-laden pup tent. In it, in a dilapidated patched sleeping bag lies a tall, emaciated old man. The man sheltering from the blizzard is called Brown; the year is 1931.

Once, long ago, he was dubbed “Crazy” Brown. Later it became “Volcanic” Brown, and later still someone called him “Sunset” Brown. You could take your choice. The only sign of grub around his makeshift camp is a small piece of smoke-blackened bear meat, wired to the branch of the spruce tree outside. Beside him in the tent is a small cooking pot, a hand axe and a single barrelled shotgun, for which there are no shells. Days before the last vestiges of his meagre supply of flour, tea and tobacco had gone. Now his strength is going, and he knows it. Even if it quits snowing, which is doubtful, the gruelling trip back across the glacier to the hatchery at Alvin on Pitt River is beyond him.

For one thing he has no grub, no shells and no matches. For another he's minus the toes of his left foot, and for another... he is 82 years old.

Maybe in these final hours, as he watches vagrant snowflakes twirling in occasionally through the tent opening, old “Volcanic” Brown has thoughts of other years, of other occasions when he matched his wits with Fate, and somehow managed to make out. This time, however, it's too late. Trapped in the mountains without food or fire, there's only one decision he can make. He can wait in his sleeping bag until drowsed by soft and languorous sleep from which he'll never awake. Or he can get on his feet and for the last time fight the wilderness in one hopeless but defiant gesture.

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Old miner knew the end was near: Death didn't hurry day of decision

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Courtesy Michael Collier

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The old man who lay in the freezing solitude that November afternoon used to sign his name "A.R. Brown." But few ever knew what the "A.R." stood for. If you mentioned "Volcanic" Brown, especially among miners and prospectors, everyone knew him.

You would have known him as a 10-year-old boy if you had lived in the village of St. Martin's, New Brunswick, 100 years ago. He was the seventh son in a family of 17 born to Dave and Nancy Brown (of good old Nova Scotia Royalist stock) who farmed in sight of the wind-swept Fundy. His ship-owning grandfather had chosen the King's side in Boston, back in 1776, an act of allegiance that cost him seven merchant ships and property along the Charles River, valued today at \$200,000.000.

At 10 young Brown was working on his father's farm, and at 15 was out trapping with an Indian band. Later he fished from tops'l schooners out of Fundy and later still helped build the Intercontinental Railway at Mafapedia. For a time he trapped in the Shickshock Mountains, then rafted logs on Quebec's river Lorette.

He must have been a vociferous young fellow in his 20s full of new fangled ideas about capital and labor. Maybe that's why at 32 he formed a union in the Michigan woods and led 15,000 loggers out on a two-week's strike for a pay increase. In after life he often was heard to mention that banks should be abolished and the government should take their place. Somewhere along the line he turned his back on religion, and used to remark that all churches should be turned into schoolrooms. Once he even figured out a cure for tuberculosis by "equalizing the electrical impulses of the body" (whatever that meant), and 50 years ago he shrewdly opined that one day all the forests would be gone and aluminium would be the building material of the future.

It was while the CPR was being built through the Rockies that he first struck B.C., and after prospecting in the mountains made himself a dugout canoe and drifted down the Columbian to Colville, Washington. This was the occasion when construction workers called him "Crazy" Brown. Crazy or not, he came back into B.C. to climb forbidding peaks, checking and sampling ore specimens, until finally he located the Volcanic Mine near Grand Forks in the late '80s.

"A mountain of pure copper," he told gaping bystanders at the Forks, then outlined leviathan plans for a series of tunnels clear into the mountains to bring out the fabulous quantities of ore.

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“We’re going to need half a dozen railroads in here to carry it out,” he said enthusiastically. “And we’ll need plenty of smelters.”

He even laid out a townsite of Volcanic City ten miles north of Grand Forks, and included in the tract plenty of room for smelters. He got capital too, \$20,000,000, they say, but finally came disagreements and litigation which cost him \$63,000 in legal fees. He got the money trapping—trapping a hundred square miles of country.

Finally came complete disillusionment when the Volcanic Mine failed to live up to its promise.

He was no sooner down than he was up, for in 1888 he discovered the Sunset Mine on Copper Mountain near close to Princeton, which developed into one of the biggest copper properties in the province. It, too, needed capital, so Volcanic sold his interest for \$45,000 and celebrated the deal by getting himself a set of solid gold false teeth!

It took close to \$4,000,000 to develop the Sunset Mine, but under the wing of Granby Consolidated it was a terrific producer for nearly 40 years.

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The light was waning in the November sky as the old man thinks of his mining ventures, of money made and lost. Maybe he thinks too up here in the snowbound solitude of Stave Glacier, of the decision he is soon to make; which reminds him in turn of other decisions in his long, adventurous career. Perhaps he’s reminded of one he had to make in Grand Forks seven years before.

It all started when Bill Brown, a shock headed tie cutter and saw mill worker went on one of his periodical razin’, tearin’ drunks. Bill was a fairly reasonable individual when he was sober, but a living terror when liquored up. He’d only been a couple of years in the Similkameen, and the year before had married a widow with three children.

It was on May 9, 1921, that Bill cut loose. Most of the morning he’d been drinking around Grand Forks, then around noon (armed with a couple of bottles) he got in his rig and headed back to his cabin at Volcanic City.

On the way home, somehow he managed to pick a fight with Carl Jepson at Lynch Creek. After disposing of this opposition, a little later he tangled with a big Doukhobor called Pete Andressof. Pete was no match for him, and finally when Bill arrived home he started to threaten his long-suffering wife with a club. He would have used a gun, only his wife had the

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forethought to hide the shells.

Afraid for her life, she fled indoors to barricade the house against Bill's violence. He didn't see any satisfaction in beating a locked door, so turned his attention to his three stepchildren outside, the oldest about 12. He didn't like them, and never had, and when he was drunk all his pent-up dislike surged to the surface. Yelling curses and threats, club in hand he chased the screaming kids to the only sanctuary they knew; Volcanic Brown's place. There they rushed in on the 75-year-old bachelor, filled with breathless terror.

"It's all right, kids," comforted the old man, "He can't hurt you here. Stay as long as you like Stay all night if you want to."

Just as he voiced the invitation, through a window he spotted the drunken bully, heading straight for the door. Old "Volcanic" quickly stepped over and slammed it shut, then snapped the bolt.

He was just in time, for a minute later the drink-inflamed Brown threw his bulk at it. It held, and as he banged and yelled threats, the terrified youngsters huddled in a corner of the cabin.

Again and again his weight hit the door, then in a lull his leering features were glimpsed at the window. He still had his club, and in no time the glass flew in fragments. Then as the children watched in fascinated horror, the sash flew to pieces. Finally his leg came over the sill.

If old Volcanic had made some decisions in his life, this was among the more important. Calmly he lifted down his trusted Winchester from the wall, and slowly levered a shell into its breach.

"Get back!" he growled as Brown lurched inward. "Get back out of there or I'll let you have it!"

The only answer was drunken laugh as Brown squirmed the remainder of his bulk through the broken sash, and it was then the room shook to the .30 30's thunderous blast.

For a second the intruder swayed, glassy eyed, then crashed to the floor on his face. The bullet had drilled him clean through the heart.

Word of the occurrence, of course, soon reached Grand Forks where Provincial Constable G.F. Killam promptly arranged an inquest, and laid a charge of manslaughter against Volcanic Brown.

"Justifiable homicide," was the way the coroner's jury

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phrased the verdict, and after Attorney-General Alec Manson had studied the inquest dispositions at Victoria, he wired Magistrate McCallum to dismiss the charge.

While old man Brown awaited the court's opinion he had what might be termed the time of his life. It would be almost fair to say he was locked up; rather he made the little local police station his headquarters, indulging in an occasional walk down town to greet his cronies, and returning at night to be locked up. He seemed to have dressed up for the occasion, too, in rusty black, old-fashioned cutaway coat, black trousers, a high-winged collar, black string tie and his broad-rimmed black Stetson. While he occupied his cell, townspeople flocked in to wish him well, bringing him candy, tobacco, books. Flowers and fruit.

Fred Russell of the nearby Russell Hotel had one of his waitresses deliver special meals to the old boy. Far from being regarded as a lawbreaker, it seems the town of Grand Forks looked upon him as a sort of public benefactor.

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It's darkening quickly now in the lonely snowbound mountainside camp as "Volcanic" Brown glimpses again in memory the faces of the old Grand Forks friends, the people who rallied round him after his moment of decision at Volcanic City. Still faced with his immediate problem, maybe in retrospect it puts him in mind of other occasions when he needed quick judgement.

There was such an occasion after he left Grand Forks to come down to the coast, where he busied himself every summer in the mountains back of Pitt Lake, always looking for the pot of gold at the rainbow's end. He was 77 now, but still pretty spry. Every spring he'd head up to Alvin to check in at the Dominion Government hatchery, the head upriver to his beloved mountains. Every September he'd return, check through the hatchery, always keeping his own council. Some of the more curious checked the mining record's office at New Westminster but got no satisfaction. Volcanic always came out with a poke of gold, but never staked a claim.

In June, 1926, he went in as usual, checked at the hatchery, then headed up to the Pitt branch off at Seven Mile Creek. When September came and he failed to show up, fear was expressed to the B.C. Police at Coquitlam that perhaps old Brown had met with mishap.

They waited a while, then in mid-October Provincial Constable G.F. Elliott and trapper McMartin went searching for him.

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It was a tough trip but eventually they found the old fellow in his cabin at the head of Seven Mile Creek, 20 miles from the head of Pitt Lake. He'd been forced to stay in his cabin when he got his feet frozen crossing Stave Glacier. He tried his best to get circulation back in his left foot the noticed as the days went that his toes were becoming strangely black and swollen. It dawned on him that deadly gangrene was setting in, and he had a dim idea of what this might entail.

It was another moment of decision. Dipping the sharpened blade of his clasp knife in boiling water he calmly amputated his toes!

It was a tough job bringing him out in October to New Westminster but the policeman and the trapper made it.

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That was five year ago, now again he was in the mountains and again had stayed too late. In his dilapidated snow-covered tent perhaps came the realization that the sands of time were running out. He was over 80 now and out of grub, when the snow came. With the last of his grub went his matches and his fire. Little chance now, in his enfeebled condition, of tackling the glacier route back to Pitt River. Perhaps it was in the face of these inescapable facts that old "Volcanic" Brown made his last earthly decision. Climbing out of his snow-laden tent into the soft whirling blizzard he must have braced his shoulders for his last bout with adversity. Then with his curious, awkward, limping gait, walked off into eternity, never to be seen again.

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With us today here in Victoria is one of the men who made the final search for old "Volcanic" Brown: ex-Game Inspector George C. Stevenson, who retired in 1956 after 28 years' service with the game department. It was at his home at 1403 Ryan Street that we talked the other afternoon of the last days of one of the province's most colourful characters.

When word came to the police in the fall of 1931 that the old prospector was missing in the Pitt Mountains, the search party included Game Warden George Stevenson, Provincial Constable Gene Murphy, and the trapping brothers Leroy and Bill McMartin. Halfway in, Const. Murphy fell victim to injury and Bill McMartin took him out.

Stevenson and Roy McMartin continued on up the Pitt River, to the headwaters of Seven Mile Creek, then across a divide to Homestead Glacier. After they crossed the glacier the searchers struck what the trappers term "Porcupine Valley," and

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finally above timberline had the gruelling task of crossing seven-mile-wide Stave Glacier. It was up here on the glacier rim, where the Stave River is born, that the pair came across Volcanic Brown's tent in the snowy waste.

"There was plenty of snow on the ground and plenty in the air," is the way George Stevenson described it.

He claims he never saw such a snowfall in his life. On their 12 by 19-inch snowshoes they sank to the knees at every step, and often couldn't see a yard ahead of them. At one spot, he told me, they were snowbound for three days and on the Homestead Glacier it took the pair all day to make 1,200 feet. Returning they slid down in five minutes.

It was at the glacier edge that Stevenson noticed some whiskey jacks squabbling over something in a snow-covered stunted tree. Yanking the branches loose they found a piece of bear meat wired to a branch. Probing around in the snow they came upon fabric, the remains of the collapsed pub tent. Underneath its icy folds was a cooking pot and an old single-barrelled shotgun; and one other object caught their eyes—a little screw top jar containing about 11 ounces of coarse gold. Gold that had been hammered out of a solid vein, for it still bore traces of quartz. It gave him the idea that perhaps old "Volcanic" Brown had made some sort of healthy strike. But of old Brown there wasn't a sign, although they searched for days occasionally firing signal shots. They even crisscrossed the glacier probing crevasses.

"What do you think happened to him?" I asked the veteran outdoorsman, before I left.

"He might have gone down a crevasse," said George, "That's the only thing I can think of."

He paused for a minute, then added, "One thing I do know..."

"What's that?"

"He was a mighty tough old man...to the finish."