

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

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“SEARCH UNSUCCESSFUL!” BUT IT WAS A GLORIOUS NEW TRAIL THESE MUSHERS BLAZED IN THE TEETH OF NOVEMBER BLIZZARD.

BY RALPH MACEY

It has been snowing for sixteen consecutive days—a blizzard still whips down from the north on a icy wind—the trail is buried ten feet deep—snowshoes sink a yard at every step—food has run out—civilization is five day’s march away.

Two men ply a pale fire with frozen wood as they crouch in the shelter of a flimsy wickey of fir branches. In front of them frowns the sixty-foot lip of Stave Glacier. About them, in the haze of falling snow, stretch miles and miles of steep valleys, ridges, gullies and mountain tops.

The date is November 20, 1931—the climax of an unsuccessful three week’s search in the winter’s worse weather over a hundred-mile section of British Columbia’s roughest country for the missing prospector. “Volcanic” Brown of Upper Pitt Lake.

The two men are Game Warden George Stevenson and Guide LeRoy McMartin—on duty.

Already they have tramped for fourteen days in the teeth of the blizzard, explored Seven-Mile and Kennedy Creeks, crossed Homestead Glacier and examined the dangerous crevasses of the twenty-mile Stave Glacier, between Seven-Mile and Upper Stave.

But they are not through yet. On that day, November 20, Stevenson went out for meat. Two porcupines were all he could get. Roasting the porcupine legs, Stevenson immediately planned to go on, over Fire Mountain into Harrison Valley. They attempted to scale the face of the Stave Glacier—the towering lip overhung too far. It was impassable. Only then did they turn back. And they made it—on a handful of rice, a small cache of dried goat’s meat and tight belts.

Searchers blaze new trail

“Search unsuccessful”—that was the word to headquarters. That is all the public heard about it. Even Stevenson’s report adds only a few casual details.

But old mushers, especially those who have been above Pitt Lake after the fabled lost Indian gold mine, know that Stevenson and McMartin accomplished a trail feat in keeping with tradition.

R.A. “Volcanic” Brown was missed in September by the Dominion Hatchery at Alvin. On November 2, Game Warden

“Search Unsuccessful!”

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

Stevenson and Constable Eugene Murphy were sent out by the Vancouver office. At Alvin they picked up LeRoy McMartin and Bill McMartin, two husky young woodsmen, and with bare necessities and no tents, headed for Brown's cabin on Seven-Mile, fifteen miles north. It took them two days over the steep trail and against the driving sleet.

On the second day Stevenson's 30,06 rifle brought down a mountain goat to swell the ration. Constable Murphy wrenched his knee on a rockslide and it was decided to split the party. Murphy, despite his knee, and Bill McMartin commenced on a two-week search of the trails in the Seven-Mile basin. They returned at once to Alvin for provisions, and finally came out on November 16 to leave more food for the other two.

Meanwhile Stevenson and LeRoy tackled the Stave Glacier trail to Harrison, undeterred by the continuous snowfall. To reach the big glacier they had to detour over the mountain, climbing the 2000 foot slope to Homestead Glacier. This climb took them over two days, breaking the one day, and hauling up their packs the next. On the return trip the snow had hardened and they slid down on five minutes.

From tentless camps, east of Homestead they made daily sorties into the hazardous expanse of Stave Glacier, testing their way with long poles and peering into the main crevasses. The blizzard became so severe that they were "holed up" for three days. Then food ran low and they returned to Seven-Mile for more.

Again they climbed to the 6000 foot heights above Stave Glacier, again they were "holed up" for two more days at Kennedy Creek, and again food ran low. Instead of returning they made a dash for Stave Creek, where Brown [used to] pitch camp in summer. It was here that the grub finally gave up. It was here that Stevenson shot the porcupine and attempted to cross Fire Mountain. And it was here that the bulging face of the glacier baffled them.

Five days later Stevenson was back at headquarters, ready for another routine "job."

Back again at headquarters

A slightly-built and youngish man, he has spent twenty years hunting and surveying in Northern Canada, and it is but one of the expert trail mushers in the service of the department throughout British Columbia.

Of his twenty-one-day hike through the Stave snow, he had little to say except to praise the endurance of Murphy and the

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

McMartin boys and to observe that next time he will take up a month's grub.

"It was slow going—three or four miles a day. Our 12 by 48 shoes would sink to one's knees, even without our packs. I've never seen it snow so thick and fast anywhere; we couldn't see a yard sometimes. Cold? Well, at night in the open we couldn't sleep much—had to keep up a fire. LeRoy was great, ready for anything and wouldn't say quit. We hoped Brown was snowed up somewhere and so we fired single shots regularly, but everything was as still as the dead."

"Volcanic" Brown is acknowledged another victim claimed by the inscrutable wilderness of British Columbia. But he was not entirely forsaken. Along the timberline from Seven-Mile to Upper Stave is a new trail of dated blazes, made by Stevenson and McMartin as they battled a blizzard for sixteen days in November 1931.—
