Lesson: On-to-Ottawa

Lesson Activity 2: **A Trekker Remembers**

Ronald Liversedge took part in the On-to-Ottawa Trek and was a member of the Communist Party of Canada

We boarded the CPR boxcars and huddled together on top of the cars preparing ourselves for the long, cold ride ahead. We were slowly moving east to the shouted good wishes of the people of Vancouver. At every crossing, there were people to bid us good luck, until Victoria Drive where the train picked up speed, and soon it was goodbye to Vancouver, and that was the start of the trek. After one night in Kamloops, the trekkers headed east again. Their next stop was Golden, as Calgary was too far to go in one stretch.

I was wondering about Golden in the heart of the Rockies. From what I could remember, having passed through a few times riding freight, there was nothing at Golden except a station, a hotel, and a few shacks. Trek leader Slim Evans was very optimistic. He said, “There is a large farming area there with lots of good farms.” What’s more, there was a little white-haired lady living on one of those farms, a communist, and a personal acquaintance of Evans, to whom Slim had sent a telegram from Kamloops telling her the time of our arrival in Golden, and stating, “Please prepare food and welcome for one thousand.”

We pulled into Golden shortly after noon. We very soon marched onto a large expanse of park like land, richly grassed with large shade trees scattered here and there. Under a half dozen of the huge shade trees were cooking fires, and suspended over the fires were various kinds of makeshift cooking vessels full to the brims with simmering, bubbling, thick, heavenly-smelling beef stew. Over one fire (and this is the gospel truth) was suspended a full size bathtub, also full to the brim with beef stew. There were long trestle tables with thousands of slices of golden crusted bread. Around each fire were just two or three quiet, smiling women, salting, peppering, and tasting.

It was incredible, it was heartwarming, it was beautiful. The next day, we left Golden with reluctance, but we had to pass on. There was one bad spot on this lap of our journey, the Connaught tunnel. The tunnel, which spirals through the heart of a mountain, is about seven miles long. It was a nightmarish trip. I think the two locomotives pulling the train were coal burners. The tunnel was filled with dirty, brown, billowing, gritty, warm smoke. The acrid sulphurous stench was overpowering, and gave one a choking sensation. We all lay on top of the boxcars, covering our mouths and noses with handkerchiefs or rags. The trip through the tunnel took about 30 minutes, and it was a wonderful sensation to finally emerge into the fresh air.

After Calgary, soon we were rolling across the lone prairie, where the coyotes howl, and the sheriffs were busy delivering more closure notices to the poor farmers. In Saskatchewan alone during the depression, 5,000 farms were seized for debt by the mortgage companies, the banks, and the farm machinery companies. There was very little in the way of crops evident as we travelled along on the boxcars. What was the use of growing wheat when all the elevators were full to the bursting point? No matter that millions of people in the world starved, along with scores of thousands in our own country. As long as the people didn’t have money to buy, then the goods and food would remain locked away and guarded by armed men.

One entry into Regina was something of a triumph. We had been successful up to now, had built our forces up, and we were a proud little army. As we marched through the city streets, throngs of people lined the sidewalks to give us a rousing welcome. At the official welcome, there were gathered representatives of all the working people’s organizations, communist, CCF unemployed, trade union, and there was a large choir from the Ukrainian Labour Farmers Temple Association.

Hundreds of unemployed workers joined the trek as it moved east. Public support was growing. In a manoeuvre to stop the trek, the federal government invited a delegation to negotiate in Ottawa. They met Prime Minister R.B. Bennett.

There sat Bennett behind his desk, surrounded by officials and guards. There were the press, and in front of Bennett, the eight representatives of the trek. The Prime Minister wasted no time, but went into his diatribe of abuse, condemnation, and threats, his face crimson with hatred.

He then singled out Slim Evans and roared, “We know you down here, Evans! You are a criminal and a thief!” At this, Slim calmly rose to his feet, and looking the Prime Minister in the eye, he said, loudly and distinctly, “And you’re a liar, Bennett, and what is more, you are not fit to run a great country like Canada.”

The offer of negotiations, openly and cynically a trap to get the delegation

to Ottawa, the heaping of verbal abuse on their heads, with no intention

of negotiating, all this, even coming from Bennett, was, in the eyes of

the Canadian people, shameful and inexcusable.

The trek representatives returned to Regina by July 1; plans were made to call off the trek. But at the outdoor meeting to announce the decision, the Federal Mounties launched an attack. Dozens of people were injured, 100 were arrested, and there was much damage in downtown Regina.

What a price to pay for the defeat of a government and extinction of a political party.

Although R.B. Bennett was too great an egotist to admit the fact, he had on that Dominion Day in 1935, signed the death warrant of his government and party for the next two-and-a-quarter decades.

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