Rediscovering the North

By HAROLD GRIFFIN

Vancouver, B. C.

SOMEWHERE in the northern wilderness, along the highway that now follows the old Indian trade route across the Mackenzie Mountains, the last sixty-foot length has just been welded into the 550-mile Canol pipeline. And from America's first producing oilfield in the sub-Arctic, developed from four wells with a capacity of 300 barrels a day in January 1942, to twenty-four wells capable of producing 20,000 barrels a day in December 1943, oil will start flowing from Norman Wells to the new refinery at Whitehorse and from there to the centers along the Alaska highway.

It is a tremendous achievement, especially to anyone who knew Alaska before the war. To fill a desperate war need, the rich oil resources of a vast territory extending over Alaska, the Mackenzie District, Yukon Territory and some of the Arctic islands of Canada, have at last been tapped. Far from being the useless project depicted by the Truman committee's report, the Norman Wells oilfield will probably be only the first of several major oilfields developed as the search for oil is extended deeper into the Arctic regions.

In one respect at least, the lack of vision, there is a similarity between the opposition to the Alaska Purchase and the Truman committee's report on its investigation into the Canol project. In 1867, after he had concluded the agreement to purchase Alaska from the imperial Russian government for $7,200,000, Secretary of State William H. Seward had a difficult time convincing Congress to appropriate the money. The popular conception of the country as a waste of snow and ice—the legend inspired by the fur traders to discourage popular interest in Alaska—made it easy for opponents of the purchase, contemptuously labelling it "Seward's Folly," to persuade people that the United States was acquiring some 600,000 square miles of worthless territory. And because false conceptions still persist and most Americans and Canadians know little about their own Far North, the Truman committee's report has been too readily accepted by many.

The Truman committee, which recently concluded one investigation to determine whether the Canol project was justified and is now engaged in another to determine whether the money was economically spent, has concluded that the US Army spent some $138,000,000 on a worthless undertaking. And by linking the Canol and Alaska highway projects in its report, it has created the impression that the huge sums spent on wartime development in Alaska and northern Canada were largely wasted.

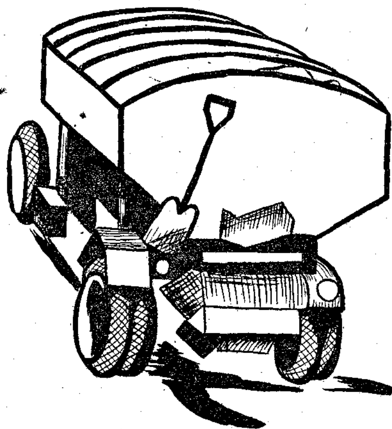
"If the Canol and Alaska highway projects could be reviewed from their conception," states the report, "the committee would be of the opinion that the entire Alaska highway project should be examined most carefully for the purpose of ascertaining whether it should be constructed. . . ."

To this Harley M. Kilgore (Democrat, W. Va.), chairman of the investigating subcommittee, added his own comment: "Thousands of men have toiled through Arctic temperatures on a project that should never have been started and which was continued despite the adverse opinions of all the qualified experts," he declared.

All that was lacking in the report was a frank concluding paragraph to this effect: The committee doubts that Alaska possesses any particular strategic or economic importance and seriously questions its further development in view of the great expenditures involved.

THE men who built the Alaska highway and the Canol project, the American troops, white and Negro, and the thousands of civilian workers, with many of whom I talked last year on a trip that took me from the Mackenzie River to the Bering Strait, do not consider their magnificent accomplishments futile. True, they have seen waste of machines and materials, and inefficiency born of inexperience. But they have also overcome every natural obstacle, every difficulty of organization and supply, and helped to open up a territory that is almost a sub-continent in itself.

For them the Alaska highway, one of the greatest road-building achievements of all time, the Canol project designed to feed it, and the great airports that now space the wilds, have an aspect the Truman committee's report has obscured. For them the Alaska highway is an important section of the long road to Tokyo, whose southern end, the Ledo Road, is now creeping across the jungles of northern Burma. They see their work as part of the preparations for a gigantic pincer movement against Japan from north and south.



What was originally conceived as a defense project in what Under Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson described as "the dark days of '42," has now become an integral part of the unfolding plan of operations in the Pacific which the Japanese occupation of the outermost Aleutians was calculated to forestall. For a time it seemed that the highway to Alaska, if not too little, would be too late. It might have been built in the thirties, as the peoples of the Pacific Coast cities urged and as the Japanese government, which was more awake to the strategic significance of Alaska than most people in the United States and Canada, feared it would be. Instead, while the men of the 35th Engineers Regiment were hauling their road-building equipment over the frozen muskeg trail between Fort St. John and Fort Nelson and thus making construction of the highway in one season possible, the Japanese were invading the Aleutians.

The tide of Japanese conquest was reaching its highwater mark, but the fact was not immediately apparent. Japanese submarines were operating off the Pacific coast and in Alaskan waters. There was a desperate shortage of shipping and no one could say with certainty that the sea routes upon which Alaska depended—the shipping companies in the pre-war opposition to construction of the highway had contributed to this situation—could be maintained. And if the shipping routes were cut, Alaska could be supplied only by air.

It was in this situation, more critical than anyone cared to admit at the time, that the Canol project was planned by the US War Department and approved by President Roosevelt.

It is simple, now that the tide is turning in the Pacific, to look back at a threat of invasion that did not materialize and say that the Alaska highway should not have been built or that it should have followed a different route. It is equally simple to survey the Canol project with a critical eye, to point out that the small diameter pipeline will have a limited capacity of 3,000 barrels a day and be of dubious commercial value after the war, and on this one point insist that the project should never have been undertaken. But this is placing the entire development in distorted perspective.

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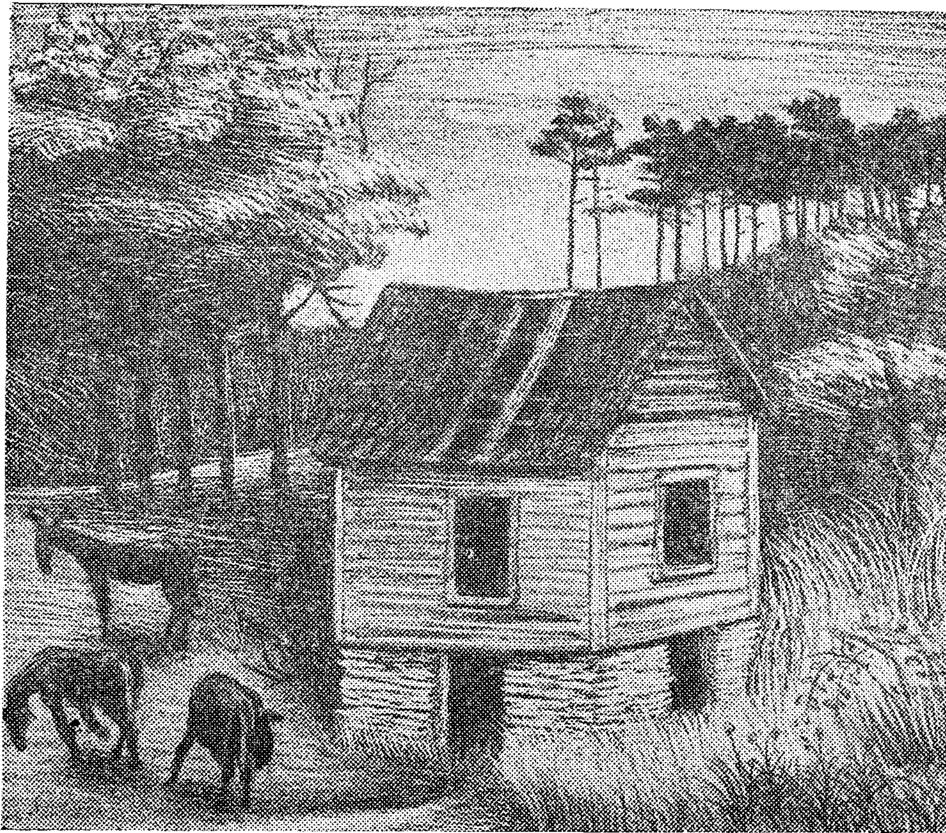

"Mule Pasture," by James North

Criticism of the Alaska highway and the Canol project should be directed, not at those who undertook their construction when the military need could not be denied, but at those whose shortsighted opposition to the opening up of the northern territories led them to block building of road connections before the war.

There are people in Alaska today who denounce the Canol project, not because they are opposed to development of the oil resources of the north but because they believe Alaska's own oil resources should have been developed rather than those of Canada. Yet before the war many of these same people were opposing construction of the highway to Alaska because, they claimed, it would throw the territory open to "paternalistic" developments like the Matanuska Valley project—which today is supplying fresh foodstuffs to the soldiers at Anchorage and Fairbanks. Consequently, when the wartime oil development project was launched, Alaska's greatest known oil reserve, on the Arctic coast, was too remote—lacking the highway connections—to be considered.

Criticism might also be directed against Imperial Oil, not for its wartime enterprise, but for its action in holding its claims at Norman Wells for twelve years after it first proved the field in 1920 without any attempt being made to develop them. Only in 1932, following the discovery of radium at Great Bear Lake—a discovery of such importance that its development could not be held back—were a few wells brought into production to serve local needs.

It is hardly a story of initiative and enterprise, particularly when measured against the development of the Soviet North in these same years.

HAD the development been undertaken in peacetime, the Alaska highway would probably have been built over the route from Prince George, British Columbia, as recommended by the American section of the International Highway Commission in 1938, when it seemed that the highway might actually be constructed and the Japanese government exerted diplomatic pressure on the Chamberlain government to discourage the project.

The route selected for the pipeline might well have been that from Norman Wells to Fairbanks as proposed by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who criticized the Army "for doing the right thing in the wrong way." Alternatively, the summertime water route down the Mackenzie River, across a portage to the Bell and Porcupine rivers and so down the Yukon to Nome, as suggested by Dr. T. A. Link, chief geologist for Imperial Oil on the Canol project, might have been developed.

Only now is the provincial government of British Columbia undertaking construction of a road from Prince George to link its highway system with the Alaska highway and give the Pacific coast cities the direct road connection with Alaska they have long sought. Similarly, the oil development is only now being extended to the Porcupine River area.

These new projects are being undertaken because they are necessary to remedy the shortcomings of the whole development, but their course is influenced by the plan already completed. And that plan was itself shaped by the Canadian government's construction in 1941, of a chain of airfields from Grande Prairie, Alberta, to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. When war came to the Pacific, military needs for maintenance and supply dictated building of a road, over the least favored of the three routes examined by the International Highway Commission, to link these airfields. And when the road was still under construction the Canol project was designed to fit in with the development scheme. The same military need for connecting airfields already built must similarly determine the route of the highway extension from Fairbanks to Nome.

Whatever the shortcomings of a development that has changed the entire outlook for Alaska and the Canadian Northwest, they are the consequence of unpreparedness which obliged the US Army Engineers, without any extensive experience with construction work under sub-Arctic conditions, to undertake projects that should have been started long before and to complete them in record time. These shortcomings detract from but they cannot erase those great positive features which provide the foundation for further planned development in the postwar period.

FAR more even than the development of a major new oilfield has been accomplished. And more has been accomplished than the construction of a military highway which some are already predicting will be too costly to maintain in the postwar period. The north has been opened up. It can never be again, nor would any who know its potentialities want it to be, the neglected frontier it was before the war. The great military airports of today, over which planes fly to the Soviet Union, will become the commercial airports of tomorrow on the Great Circle and trans-Polar routes to Asia and Europe, for the future of aviation is also the future of the north. With planning and enterprise, new mining and oil industries will give birth to new cities supplied by local agricultural developments.

The wilderness that separated Alaska, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories from the rest of the continent has been conquered and northward expansion will demand new highways and railroads. All this is possible on the indisputable record of what already has been done.

The Bering Strait is no longer a barrier but a bridge between the United States and Canada and the Soviet Union. In cooperative efforts to overcome the problems that face all three countries in developing their respective sectors of the Arctic regions they share as neighbors in an opportunity to realize the promise of Teheran.

Mr. Griffin is the author of "Alaska and the Canadian Northwest: Our New Frontier," just published by W. W. Norton.

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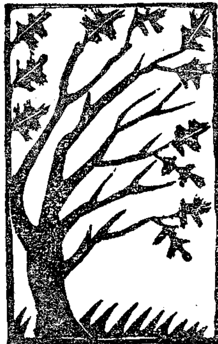
BLOWN SEED

The following is a chapter from an unfinished novel by Eli Jaffe. The setting is Oklahoma and the action is current.

By ELI JAFFE


Helen West Heller

THERE was little joy in Rogerstown that fall. From the Southwest the wind blew strong and its fluting played in the farmers' bones like the one-time plague of dust they could never forget. This had always been a land of high winds sweeping across the vastness of prairie. Sometimes the wind could be kind and gentle like a lover's hand. Or it could be destructive; like now, as it kept blowing and gusting day after day until the sheaves of ungathered grain were scattered over the land. And it blasted the hopes of farmers like Odis and Zack and all those who had ploughed and harrowed and drilled, only to see the mighty winds lunge steadily at the small stand of green wheat, uproot it and level out the furrows so that a man could hardly see where the work was that he had done.

Now over the countryside the cursing could be heard in earnest, against the sun that had baked the land and against the wind that had blown it to hell in a basket.

"This goldang Oklahoma weather!" Odis had shouted at little Alice one evening, peering out at his land. Looking at the mounds of soil, bedded in the Russian thistle, at the barn and fence rows, and recalling the days of the black, dusty plague which had cost him his wife, the gaunt farmer had again become tired and old, wondering how the hell a man could make a go of it without seed to replant and in debt to buzzards like Tom Ramsey or Chuck Tomlinson.

Hank watched the blow of land with a deep personal hurt, and talking it over with old John, the county agent, he asked, "How can we get back at this?"

Puffing his pipe and scanning the countryside, the wrinkled man with the leathery face had said, "It's not too late to replant. That's the only sensible thing they is."

This then was what the council advised all the farming folks who had tasted the bitter fruits of blown seed.

Yet there was another strong wind blowing, threatening to lift Hank himself out of this Oklahoma soil. Mike Terrell was the weathervane.

The carpenters' union leader had come to the neat home of the Stones one night, and sitting outside on the browned grass, his nervous fingers started whittling down a piece of wood, cutting straight and deep. His hands were a carpenter's, knotty and cracked with black lines under the skin as though splinters were always there. Hank liked him. Mike was a simple guy and there was a gladness in him when someone would say good things about laboring folks. Like MacArthur when he said that "labor is the indestructible backbone of the war effort."

This had become a bond between them when the big redhead had come to their union meeting and asked their help in the Pitch-in-Now plan. And Tom Ramsey, too, was a common hate because of his unending jibes in his paper about labor racketeers and farm brain-busters. Mike was proud of the sureness of his hands but when it came to hitting back at Tom that was a different matter. The words were in him for telling the simple truth of what he believed, but they were not easy to say against Tom and his clever way of fooling people. Hank was one guy who knew how.

He cut on the piece of wood while Hank kidded him about this and that and then he said, slowly, "I'll tell you what's on my mind, Hank. Somebody was mighty disappointed you didn't leave out when they tied the can to your job in Washington. Now they're fixin' to make sure you do. If they cain't nail you one way, they'll hammer y' down another. I know."

"Tom?"

"Him and the weasel, Bob Herrald." Mike slashed into the wood.

"They got me canned because of what we're tryin' to do here," Hank said, hitting his fist into the grass. "What more do they want?"

In the light from the moon and the house, Mike's face was a little puzzled. "I don't know whether I should rightfully tell you, Hank. But you're an all right guy and I sure hate like hell to see them termites diggin' into you. You ain't workin' now, are you?"

"Not exactly. I'm occupied—but not employed, you might say."

"Well, old Bob was soundin' me and Charley Knell out about draftin' you. We let it ride till next meetin'." He stuck his carefully-sharpened knife into the grass. "You're tryin' to do a job here in town on that farm deal, I'm thinkin'."

"Thanks, Mike."

"Hell, don't thank me. It's us oughta be thankin' you for givin' us a chance to pull this damn town closer'n seven in a bed. That old Bob is sure slicker'n a barrel-full of eels. If he can get shed of you, and him on your council, he and Tom'll put the sledge to the whole outfit. I ain't smart but I can see that plenty clear and I ain't goin' to he'p build that kinda coffin."

The lanky redhead lay with his face to the moon and the wind, a tuft of grass in his teeth. "I appreciate your tellin' me this, Mike. I'd like to get into that scrap over there, but I'd sure as hell like to finish this one first."

Mike cut. "That's the way it plums to me," he said. "There's talk up yonder about changin' the rules and deferrin' farm workers. I reckon you'd rightfully come under that—if you had you a payin' job."

Hank sat up. "I'll get me one. Let me make you this promise, Mike. Give me six to nine months—till we get the wheat and oats in. Then I'll be as happy as a baby with a tit about goin'." His voice became intense. "You don't think I'm doin' this to get out of goin', do you, Mike?"

The carpenter laughed. "Hell no. Looks to me like you got you a tougher fight right here. No, I can tell those tryin' to dodge. I'm talkin' too much but Bob's son was one of them kind. Hell, the only job he had was ploughin' with the Ramsey gal and all them others he was cuttin' with."

Suddenly remembering the night with Martha, Hank turned away, being silent so long, Mike wondered. "Well, that's the kind old Bob is and if I were you I wouldn't be trustin' him too much on the council." He closed his knife. "I reckon I can git Charley to let the thing ride till the crop's in. In the meantime if us boys can he'p any, let me know. We're busier'n a whiskey glass on a Saturday night, but we're always ready to hammer away."

"Sure thing," Hank said absently as the man started down the path. "Take it easy—but take it."

He heard Mike drive away but because his words remained about Martha, the goodness had gone out of the evening. He couldn't help himself for he believed that a woman ought to have a pureness about her like the earth and give herself to no man except one who loved her.

So he came back to the house, saying nothing to them until he could see Old John watch his restless stridings. "You know anybody needin' a hand?" he asked then.

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