

The Bergers Find Real Friends in the Cariboo

by Sherry Berger

The exquisite wildness of the Cariboo lured us from Illinois to our new home in the forest, and we felt we'd come prepared. "How To" books in hand, and brimming with enthusiasm, we tackled our new way of life with gusto ... only to find that the most vital ingredient necessary to our survival was something we hadn't planned at all: the plain old-fashioned native savvy of those who live around us.

We were girded for the obvious natural difficulties one encounters while trying to make a home in the woods, but we found ourselves hopelessly unprepared for the man-made problems which loomed up in fast succession soon after our arrival.

We had been told that the dug well on the place could easily supply our needs once we dipped off the stale surface water. Don daringly built a platform 10 feet down in the well shaft to rest the pump on, and we contacted Orv Gibson and his backhoe to dig trenches for the water pipes as well as a hole for the septic tank. The evening before Mr. Gibson was to start digging Don arrived home from visiting a neighbour, his face tight.

"What's happened?" I insisted, I can never let him tell things in his own good time.

"I just heard a very interesting story about a former owner here going through the ice on the creek one winter."

"No! They got him out, of course?"

"Oh, he got out all right. Any idea why he'd be out on that creek in 10 below zero weather?"

The horrible truth engulfed me like a wave of that icy water we were discussing.

"The well goes dry in winter, right?"

"Right."

That bit of news, coupled with another neighbour's tactful warning that the roof of the lodge, due to a lack of proper pitch, might easily cave in under heavy snow and ice started our first week in fine form.

"We'll work it out," Don comforted me. "In the meantime we can go on using creek water." (This, a day after the Health Department had warned us that the creek water was unsafe for drinking unless boiled first.) "By the way," he continued, "I had to break the ice with a hatchet this morning before I could get a pailful of the precious stuff."

(We did try to use the old well for watering stock, and within two weeks it was bone dry, remaining that way all winter and into late spring when we sadly boarded it up.)

Undaunted, we carried on. We'd been shown in July how electricity had been brought to within yards of the lodge, so upon arrival in October we immediately had preliminary wiring done in the large cabin and announced to the Hydro Authorities that we were ready for the hook-up.

Nothing happened. Don stood poised for days, power saw in one hand, plug in the other, waiting for that all-important juice. There were forms for a septic tank to be made. Boards for barn repair and the 20 x 40 foot loft in the lodge needed sawing, and hand sawing took forever. Besides which, with electricity, we could work on the lodge in the evenings and have a better chance of moving in before the really cold weather hit. And I admit I'd been looking forward to a few of life's sweeter luxuries myself: refrigeration, music, a clock, and children in ironed clothes to name a few.

At last, one day, a nice man from the Hydro company arrived with the news. I could hardly wait for Don to come home.

"You'll never guess who was here today, Sweetheart," I told him when he arrived, "a man from the Hydro company."

"Well it's about time. What did he say?"

"He said," I chose my words carefully, "electricity is ours. All we have to do is pay the \$275 back owing on the bill."

We were hardly delighted by this latest development, especially since most of our "emergency" funds must now be spent on the unexpected necessity of a well, and it would be

months before Don could produce and market his paintings.

Then came the most devastating blow of all. We were suddenly asked to sign a “quit claim” deed: something that as far as we were aware had never been mentioned before.

For the first time I began to feel as if I'd made a mistake. Don had quit his career as a teacher, we'd sold our dear little farm, and left all our family and friends. We'd always trusted people, and now I found myself dangerously close to thinking of that as a mistake too. Fortunately I didn't have time to reach that conclusion, for slowly it was dawning on me that though we were facing situations that we hadn't counted on, we had found something very precious here that we hadn't counted on either: the people of the Cariboo.

Wherever we went in town, people greeted us as if we'd been friends for years. Frank Dobbs gave much of his time explaining what grains and feeds were available (very different from the corn belt we'd come from). Shopkeepers and store clerks always had some cheery greeting, which gave us a wonderful sense of belonging.

Spud Speers gave his all teaching Don the intricacies of pump and water pipe installation, at the same time coaching me in the gentle art of water divining (not only “where” but “how deep”). He simultaneously regaled us with marvellous tales of the Cariboo in days gone by. Apparently a package deal when you purchase a pump.

We never made a trip to town without stopping at the Red Coach Inn for a last cup and a few loaves of that very special bread. Never, when the occasion took us to visit new friends at the 100 Mile Lodge, were we permitted to leave without an armload of goodies: bread, butter, cream or perhaps sweet apples or some tasty berries. The abundant generosity and friendship offered to us proved a sure cure for the occasional twinges of homesickness we experienced off and in in our early months.

As the weeks went by I even began to be grateful for the difficulties we were experiencing, for each one seemed to bring a new and soon dear acquaintance into our mist. If we hadn't needed water we would never have met our well puncher Ray Rosenau, a rugged, towering man with a quick laugh and a bagful of priceless yarns about the country. Our first real opportunity to get to know our neighbours Howard and Eleanor Malm came when Eleanor offered to help us “witch” the well.

Now the term “neighbour” is hardly accurate, for the prevalent feeling out here is one of close family attachment, or perhaps membership in some secret brotherhood. We'd come across the “shirt off his back” type neighbour, but never before had we encountered people who offer you not only their shirts, but their backs as well.

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It was early November and we'd been here only a few weeks when Dan and Mark Caziers, two bachelor ranchers to the west of us, became aware that we lacked heating equipment. Before we knew it they had a huge, heavy cast iron heater from “Sam's,” and with much effort and several hours work manoeuvred it into position in our cabin. (Sam, we later learned, was Sam Huey, a summer neighbour, and the heater had come from his basement.)

“Sam won't mind,” Mark grinned.

“We'll write to him anyway and ask his permission,” Dan assured us, brushing soot from his hands and nodding approval at the “monster's” final resting place.

We raised our teacups to “Sam,” and hoped, whoever he was, he'd understand. (Of course, he did.)

We busied ourselves those early weeks with the projects we felt must be done before winter really set in. With the help of Harold Ellis's cement mixer we hurriedly (the concrete had a way of freezing in the mixer) built a 4 x 5 x 8 foot septic tank, and immediately bought the Amway products to go with it from Hazel Larson.

Several times our friends the Caziers brought up the subject of gathering wood, explaining that the heater wouldn't work without it. We cheerfully replied each time that as soon as the septic

tank was finished and the roofing done and the fences mended, etc., etc., we would get right on it.

Finally, Mark and Dan appeared one day, and, waving aside the usual Cariboo custom of chatting politely several minutes before getting to the reason for the visit, they came right out with it.

“If a man's going to heat with wood, he'd best be getting it in.”

“Oh yes,” came my husband's ready reply, “as soon as...”

[I believe Don was thinking that he could still get the wood in after the snow fell, not realizing how deep it would be, and impassable.]

“He'd best be getting it in now,” Mark politely held his ground.

“We know a place where loggers have left lots of good-sized fir branches. We can use our tractor and wagon to haul them over here,” Dan pressed on. “Then we'll use Rich Buchanan's tractor and the buzz saw to cut 'em up for you.”

Finally, and fortunately, we saw the light. Those men spent the next five days, showing Don “how it's done,” and when they were finished, the mountain of pine logs and fir branches almost hid our cabin. All around the snow was building up at an alarming rate, and we realized at last how very much we needed our new neighbours' help.

When winter really hit, she hit hard. Twice the thermometer dropped to a numbing -54 degrees, and stayed there. But inside our new log house we were cozy as cats before a fireside. Sam's huge heater radiated warmly as our new-found friends wove priceless yarns for us over hot coffee or tea and fragrant home-made bread.

As the months raced by, we encountered again and again a unique, selfless sense of sharing that seems to be the way of life in these parts. Dick and Clara Buchanan brought over a whole pig, explaining that their freezer was too full, and that we could repay them if we liked with one of our pigs next fall. Other friends stuffed our freezer with what must have been at least a quarter of a moose. When we purchased a beef quarter from Kayo Higgins, we found ourselves in a new dilemma. How do you get that hopelessly huge hunk of meat off the hook in your basement and into your freezer neatly packaged? Donna and Ernie Unger came to our rescue, as they so often had before, offering not only moral support but a meat saw as well.

“Aren't you terribly afraid of being there all alone,” a friend wrote, “with no phone, and wild animals all around and that awful cold?”

I could only smile at that, for I knew I could never explain to someone raised in a crowded city the concern the people here have for one another.

I remember one winter day in particular, during the first paralyzing cold spell. For three days no one had been able to get a vehicle to budge. It was about noon when, in the acute stillness you get at 45 below zero, we heard the unbelievable sound of a motor coming in our driveway, I opened our frost-encrusted cabin door to find George Sombart standing there.

“We were worried about you,” he offered. “My wife's not feeling well and I must get right back, but we wanted to let you know you're welcome to our upstairs apartment until this cold snap's over.”

We assured him we weren't suffering and offered him hot tea.

“Nope, I'd better get,” he smiled, and he was off.

As I watched his vehicle move along the road, I realized how easily one wrong bounce could put him in the ditch. He'd risked getting stranded in dangerously cold weather because some newcomers five miles away might be uncomfortable!

We had what we'd come for, all right: A log cabin, fields and forest, a creek and a lake, and the elusive beauty of the Cariboo. But there was one thing the Cariboo had to offer that we hadn't known about, and that we now prize far above the things that brought us here, and that we strive to offer to others now in our turn. “We came because of the country...but we're here to stay because of the people.