

New Chums in the Cariboo

by Sherry Berger

During a trip to BC in July 1968, we fell in love with and purchased a large log cabin and ranch property on Roe Lake. Within three months we had sold our home in Illinois, Don had put his career as an art teacher behind him, we had said our painful goodbyes to family and friends, and headed northwest to Cariboo Country.

We were grateful few people in 100 Mile knew us as we first arrived in 100 Mile that mid-October morning, as we hurried through necessary shopping before heading out to our new home. We must have resembled some raggle-taggle circus caravan, our Ford van carrying Don and myself, the three children, Brandy the collie dog, and six purebred milk goats plus numerous boxes of clothing and camping supplies. Hitched behind the van, a huge 8 x 16 foot rental trailer housed our remaining four goats and seven semi-suffocated Hampshire sheep plus an odd assortment of hay, pitchforks, milk pails, water buckets, blankets and a guitar. We had travelled some 2,300 miles (milking twice a day of course at roadside stops) and I'm sure we looked it! We headed out of town as soon as possible, but it was late afternoon before we neared the ranch.

We had been racing the calendar for the much-needed time to get things in shape before the snows came, and the day of our arrival I was sure we had lost.

As we rounded the bend and our new home came into view, I suddenly realized that I was seeing this long-awaited vision through large white flakes which joined the fast fading light in making it a singularly dismal scene. Not at all the way I'd pictured our homecoming.

"Had no idea it got dark so early," Don fretted as we pulled into the driveway. "We'll have to hurry. I don't think the sheep can stand one more night in that trailer!"

The moment had come. We stepped out of the van, onto our own land and into our new life. We were home! Children scattered in all directions, Brandy bounding after them. Don headed for the barn to make ready for the sheep, and I guess I just stood there being grateful. My reverie didn't last long.

"The barn's packed to the brim with someone's hay!" Don was coming toward me looking half angry and half desperate. "We've got to get the sheep out of that trailer, and there's no place to put them!"

Darkness was descending rapidly now, and an icy wind was blowing the snow down our necks and into our eyes. The children were beginning to shiver. This was definitely not how the first moments at our new home should be! Summoning up the courage of our pioneer forebears, I gathered my children around me, looked up at my husband and said confidently, "Don't worry. I'll just brew up a pot of coffee and some nice hot soup and everything will be fine!"

Everyone brightened.

"But Mommy, we don't have any water!"

Faces fell.

"And the snow's made the wood all wet."

It seemed darker than ever, and I'm sure the temperature dropped 10 degrees along with those little faces. We tried to dip water out of the old dug well, but it came up a deep, dirty yellow and smelled foul. To make matters worse, the big log cabin was unbearably cold, as much of the chinking was missing. The small 16 x 24 foot cabin, equally unlivable, was alternately layered with chains and rusty car parts, old newspapers, and a sooty, greasy scum.

This was not only NOT the way I had visualized our arrival; it was little short of disaster. We all stood there, held motionless by a kind of mutual disappointment. For a moment I felt lost.

"I'll get some water from the creek," Don broke the spell.

"I'll get you a pail from the van," Stewart joined in.

"We can sweep the cabin and get the beds ready," Carole caught the spirit, reaching out a hand to young Holly.

Everyone scampered, pulling together, and in no time at all we did sit down to hot coffee

and steamy soup. We chose to set up in the small cabin because, though dirty, it had tight walls and a heater, and before long air mattresses were cheerfully blown up, children tucked in, kerosene lamps turned low, and Don and I were sharing a last cup before the crackling fire.

“The sheep have made it this far, one more night won't hurt,” he assured me.

A little difficulty didn't really hurt us either, did it? I thought aloud, “I liked the way everyone worked together when we realized we had a problem.”

“I have a feeling the children enjoyed knowing their help was really needed,” Don smiled. “This way of life may have even more to offer than we realized.”

That little cabin became our first home in the Cariboo, as it was more than a month before the large cabin was chinked tightly and made ready for family living.

When we arrived, our new abode contained one rickety table, a rusty bedspring, an old airtight heater, and a disassembled wood-burning stove. The table was put to instant use, as was the heater. Shortly thereafter, one lucky child tossed his sleeping bag on the springs and started a ritual that was to last over a month (i.e. “He had the springs last night so it's my turn tonight, and she has them tomorrow night,” etc. etc.) The wood stove remained useless (I didn't know how to work one at that point, much less assemble one!) until a former owner showed us how to put it together and make it work. Then it became my delight.

Our furniture left Illinois three days before we did, but somehow it was two weeks after our arrival before the huge van lumbered into view. As I look back I am amazed at how well we adapted to living without furniture. What we missed most, I think, was being able to sit down and *lean back*.

Our first move was to place bales of hay around the table. Then we could at least sit down. These were soon replaced by crude benches, fashioned by nailing a long board onto two log sections set on end. Not infrequently, however, several children would suddenly disappear in the middle of supper, only to be found lying on the floor draped over the fallen bench, complaining quite bitterly about the homespun carpentry.

Water, carried by hand the 200 yards from our creek, was separated into three pails: one for drinking, one for washing, and one for Brandy – the trick being to keep the children from washing their hands in Brandy's drinking water, while keeping Brandy (especially in the middle of the night) from drinking out of our pail. You must remember we had no high surface other than the tabletop, and our belongings hadn't arrived. Shelves were soon made out of boards and a few bricks, and once water, groceries and books were off the floor life became much simpler.

We slept on air mattresses (though several refused to retain their inflated state through the night) laid dormitory style on the cabin floor. By day they were stacked neatly in one corner, that is until one or more children, unable to resist temptation, took a running dive on top of the pile, causing mattresses to shoot out like bars of wet soap in all directions.

There was only one window for light, and half of that was broken and had to be boarded up when we arrived, so the two Coleman lanterns burned by day as well as by night. To my joy, however, I discovered that kitchen curtains which I had foolishly (I thought) forgotten to send with the mover, fit that lone window to the inch. With ruffly white curtains and a new pane of glass the place began to look like home.

Hot water was a mighty precious commodity, our water supply limited as it was and our heating utensil amounting to one set of nested camp pots and a metal bucket. We washed the dishes and some clothes in pans on the table. We washed our hair in a bucket set in one of the tippy benches (no mean feat!). And as for bathing, that old hack about the Saturday Night Bath is no joke to a family of five living in a one-room cabin with two towels (how we wished the moving van would come!) and no bathtub.

Adapting to this new way of life was rugged at times, but always fun, and everyone revelled in their ability to cope with and solve minor problems as they appeared. Had we been able to see ahead to the more serious problems in our near future, however, we might not have been so gay...