

PACKHORSE TRAIN

It was a cool, windless morning in April 1881 when the packhorse train left Batoche, on the South Saskatchewan River, for the new province of British Columbia. Spring was in the air. The snow was melting and creeks and rivers were running high.

André was in the lead, trailing four packhorses loaded with trail goods. He was Métis, mixed Cree and French, a man of the plains. Kate and her brother Robbie followed on horseback, each leading four packhorses.

At first, the horses were wild. Some tried to throw off the heavy packs strapped to their backs. The riders wondered if they could even get to British Columbia before a calamity happened, but once they were on the trail, things settled down. Each horse learned to follow the one in front and became easy to manage.

Kate was sixteen, a young woman in a wild country. She had been on the trail before and knew how to handle horses. Her brother, Robbie, was fourteen and had lived a protected life. He was happiest reading a book. Kate knew they would be traveling through rough country with rivers to cross and mountains, inhabited by wild animals, nomadic people, and a few fur traders and miners. She worried if Robbie could handle the hardships of the trail. But once he got used to being in the saddle all day long and sleeping around a fire in the cold and the wet, he soon became a seasoned trail rider.

Kate was wiry and slim. Her blonde hair came down to her shoulders, and on the trail she let it fly in the wind. She wore a heavy jacket and loose-fitting pants. She didn't like wearing a skirt and never wore a dress. Robbie was slim, about the same height as his sister. His hair was a reddish-brown shade, but it was his blue-green eyes that caught the attention of others.

André shaped how Robbie rode a horse. "Keep your back straight," he said in Michif, the language of the Métis. "Reins in your left hand. Look ahead, behind, to the sides. Study the hills, streams, rivers, animals, sky. Watch everything. Your survival in this country depends on it." That lesson stayed with Robbie the rest of his life.

When the merchant, Pierre Garnot, had first proposed the expedition, Peggy Bains, their mother, rejected it. Garnot

explained that if they could get supplies to the crews building the railroad up the Fraser Canyon, they would get a very good price for the goods. The Métis needed markets for their produce. He said a packhorse train traveling overland would be back home by early summer with money in their pockets.

“It’s too dangerous,” Peggy argued. “Robbie barely knows how to ride a horse.”

But Kate wanted to go on the trip. She was bored living in Batoche. There was nothing to do. Through the long winter, she had tried to stay busy helping to look after the horses and dog teams. But there was nobody she could talk to. Meg, her sister, was busy looking after her new baby. Others her age were already married or working.

“I want to go. I need to go! I can look after myself,” she argued with her mother.

“It’s dangerous out there, Kate, and railway men are tough and difficult. Robbie is too young.”

“He is already fourteen. Most boys that age are working. If he wants to live in this country, he has to get out of his books and learn how to survive.”

Garnot came to talk to their mother. They spoke in French, sometimes using Michif words. Garnot couldn’t speak English. It was the first language of the Bains family. They could also speak French and had some Michif.

This was Garnot's argument. "The trip will take about two, maybe three, months. The trails are well marked and not difficult. My man André will be the leader. He is very reliable and knows the trails, but I need two others to help manage the horses and ride with him. Kate and Robbie will be well paid when they get back to Batoche."

"But it's wild country, and Robbie has no experience," Peggy argued. "He can barely ride."

"He will learn fast. It will change him. You'll see. He will be better for it."

"But Kate is a girl and ... and men ..."

Garnot was quiet for a moment. He didn't want to answer the suggestion in that sentence. Then he added, "André speaks no English, and the people of the railway will be English speakers."

"So the real reason you want them to go on this trip is they can speak English and French and can help in the negotiations."

Garnot had to admit that was true. He was troubled. "Things on the plains are difficult for the Métis. The buffalo are gone. English settlers are coming. Métis have to change so we can survive."

After the talk, Peggy Bains still had not changed her mind, but it made Kate even more determined. "I can't sit around

in Batoche doing nothing. Things are happening in Canada, this new country of ours. If I can't go on this trip, I'll go east to Ontario or Montreal. I can't stay here."

That was the decisive argument. Peggy didn't want Kate to go east. Living in the city sounded even more dangerous for a young woman than trail riding in wild country. Finally, she relented. "If Robbie agrees, you can go."

Convincing Robbie wasn't hard. "This will be good," Kate told her brother. "We'll be out on the trail seeing new country. Mountains! You won't believe how big they are!"

"I'd love to see the mountains."

And that settled it. Once Kate told their mother that Robbie wanted to see mountains and go on the trip, there was no backing down. The truth was that he was still nervous and uncertain, but that didn't matter. The decision had been made.

The trip turned out to be hard work, even harder than Kate imagined. They were in the saddle all day. When they made camp, they had to take the packs off the horses and in the morning load them again. Even staying warm around the fire at night was exhausting.

First, they traveled on the Carlton Trail to Fort Edmonton, a Hudson Bay Company trading post. That took fifteen days. André gave them a day of rest, and then it was back on the trail again. Eight days later, they came to Jasper House.

Robbie got a good view of mountains in Jasper. “They’re amazing, like a huge barrier right in our path.” It was May. In the valley, it was warm, even hot by the middle of the day, but around them were high peaks covered in snow and glaciers.

André went to the fur trading post and soon came back. “The Hudson’s Bay factor only speaks English. Will you come with me to translate?”

The three of them walked into the settlement to the log structure that acted as the fur trading post. The chief trader of the post took time to give them needed information.

“West of here the trail through the Yellowhead Pass is good,” he explained in English. “The divide is not far up the trail. After that all the water flows down into the Pacific.”

“Will the railway go through the Yellowhead Pass?” Kate asked.

“That’s what they say. We’ve had a number of railroad surveyors come to Jasper. They say the railroad is going to run through the Yellowhead Pass and then east to Fort Edmonton, on to the prairies and all the way to Canada, but I don’t believe it. They are havin’ so much trouble getting up the Fraser Canyon, they will never get here.”

“What trouble is that?” Kate asked.

“Mountains, canyons, the railroad crews have to blast their way through rock with dynamite. From what I hear, the whole

dream of a railroad across Canada is finished.”

André knew nothing about railroads, but Kate and Robbie knew a little. A few years before, they had traveled on trains from Ontario through the United States to Manitoba. They both remembered the trip well. The railroad traveled fast, thirty miles an hour, maybe even faster. It carried a lot of people and goods, far more than a packhorse train.

Robbie had even read books about railroads. “They say the railroad is going to bring a revolution to this country. End the isolation. Bring an end to the stagecoaches, packhorse trains, and wagons.”

The next few days, they traveled west through the Yellowhead Pass. They were in British Columbia now. There were mountains on both sides, but the valley was broad at the bottom with an easy grade. It looked like a good route for the railroad.

They saw bear, elk, deer, mountain sheep, and mountain goats. The animals had come down from the high country in the fall to feed on the grasses in the valleys. They would go back in summer.

For five days, the trail took them west, and then they came to a big river swollen from the spring runoff. André consulted a map that he carried and told the others that this was the North Thompson River. They would follow it south.

Three days later, they passed two miners who were on foot, trailing mules loaded with mining gear. One of the miners held up his hand, signalling they wanted to talk. André stopped their packhorse train.

They spoke in English. Kate rode up so she could translate. When the miners saw this young, blonde, attractive woman, they soon forgot about mining.

“Who’s this good-lookin’ thing?” said one.

“Why don’t you travel with us, sweetie?” the other said with a leer. “If we make a big strike half of it will be yours!” He laughed.

“We’ll pay your weight in gold,” said his partner with more laughs.

Robbie rode up to protect his sister. The horses milled about. André was confused. All three of them were on edge. They didn’t like what the miners were saying but didn’t know what to do about it.

Women talked about things like this in private. Kate had seen drunken men, but she had avoided them, or she was with people who could protect her.

“Don’t talk like that to my sister,” said Robbie. He tried to look confident, but he was still young, uncertain, and confused.

“Who are you to tell us, kid?”

“Take the horses and go on ahead,” said André to Kate and

Robbie in Michif. It was an order, not a request. His hand was on the rifle he carried.

The miners were shouting now. Were they drunk or just high-spirited? It was hard to tell.

Robbie kicked his mare, and his line of horses moved ahead. Kate followed. André watched the two miners without moving.

“Can’t a man have a little fun in this country?” said one of the miners.

“Not often that we’ve seen a good-lookin’ woman in this godforsaken place.” They laughed again.

Then, as if he saw this could lead to trouble, one of the miners yanked on the lead of the mule train and began moving north up the trail. The other was uncertain what to do for a moment, then he followed. André waited until they were a good distance away before he moved himself. He found the others waiting for him in a grove of trees a little ahead.

“Will they come back?” Robbie asked.

“They’ve got other things on their mind.”

Kate was shaken. The men were gone. Nothing had happened. No one was hurt. But this was wild, lawless country with hard, lonely men. She brooded. What should she do?

She took out the small mirror that she carried and looked at her image. Then she realized it was her long, blonde hair that had attracted the attention of the miners. All night she

struggled and worried. By morning, she had made a decision.

She rummaged in her things and found scissors. Swiftly, she began hacking at her hair, cutting big chunks of it at the base of her neck, on the sides, and the top.

“What are you doing, Kate?” Robbie was startled. Still, she continued. “Stop! You’re ruining your beautiful hair!”

But she kept cutting until her long, flowing, golden locks were gone and her hair was as short as Robbie’s. It was an uneven mess, but she was determined that she would not be abused again. After she finished, she placed her hat on her head and made an announcement first in English and then in Michif.

“From now on you will call me Kirk. Not Kate. Kirk.” With that, she stood up, ready to work and to face the day.

Two days later, they came to another river flowing out of the east. This was the Thompson River. The North Thompson flowed into it. Where the two rivers merged was the town of Kamloops.

2

MAKING A DEAL

This was farming and ranching country. They made camp in a grassy area beside the old Hudson's Bay Company fort by the river. The fort looked abandoned, but they could see the buildings of a town up the hill a short distance away.

After the packs were taken off the horses, they were hobbled and let out to graze. The three of them made camp and lit a fire. It was afternoon, with a warm, light breeze coming down the valley. André suggested that Kate and Robbie go into town to look around. This was an English-speaking settlement, and he felt uneasy and out of place.

It was a short walk up a hill, and the two of them found themselves on the main street of Kamloops. Most of the wooden buildings had been put up not long before. Already the streets had been pounded into dust by horses and wagons.

There were hotels and saloons, along with a general store and houses. A few people were on the street, women in long skirts, children, farmers, ranchers, and teamsters. The better-dressed men appeared to be merchants or hotel keepers.

Kate noticed a young Chinese man. Or at least she thought that's what he was. She had never met a Chinese person before. He followed close behind them.

André had given them some coins and said they should buy fresh vegetables and fruit, if they could find any in the stores. They went into the general store and found an amazing number of things for sale. The best find was a table with fresh potatoes, carrots, apples, and some baked goods. They made a selection and took them to the man behind the counter.

The young Chinese man had followed them into the store and was listening.

"Is the railway coming this way?" Robbie asked the storekeeper. André had told them to gather information about the railroad.

"That's what they say, but it sure is taking a long time. They're blasting through the Fraser Canyon with dynamite. No one knows if they will ever get to Kamloops, let alone across Canada."

Robbie thanked the shopkeeper, scooped up what they bought, and the two left. On the dusty street, Kate looked

behind again. The Chinese man was still following them.

“Keep walking,” she whispered to her brother.

“What’s wrong?”

“He’s following us.”

“Who?” Robbie turned around. The man was a few steps behind. “He’s just walking down the street, same as us.”

“Why is he following us?”

“What are you scared about, Kate?”

“I’m not scared!” But she was a little unnerved.

Robbie stopped and turned around to face the man. “Are you following us?” he demanded bluntly.

The man stopped. For a moment, he seemed shy and confused. “I am a railroad man. We should talk?” His English was accented, but to Robbie one thing was certain: he wasn’t dangerous. He looked even more vulnerable and out of place than they did.

“We’re going to our camp down by the river. Come with us.” Robbie saw it as an opportunity to talk to a railway man.

“Why did you invite him to come to our camp?” Kate whispered.

Robbie was impatient. “What’s wrong with you? Are you scared of every person who wears a pair of pants?”

“No, it’s just ...” Only Kate wasn’t sure why she was so nervous. It wasn’t like her.

When they got to the camp, tea was boiling in a pot over the fire. Robbie motioned for the man to sit with them while Kate explained to André that this strange man had followed them. Tea was offered as they talked.

The Chinese man spoke good English. He explained that his name was Lee. He worked for the railroad and for Mr. George Misner. "He is a very big man in the railroad, the Transportation Superintendent."

Lee was slight, a little taller than Robbie and Kate. He was perhaps twenty years old, wore canvas-coloured work pants, a jacket buttoned up to his chin, and a hat that came over his forehead to his eyebrows. There was not a trace of a beard on his chin.

"Do you have things to sell to the railroad?" Lee asked.

"Yes," said Robbie.

"That's good. I will be back," Lee said simply. Then he left, climbing the hill into town.

A short time later, he suddenly reappeared. With him was a tall, heavy-set man twice his size and twice his age. He was dressed in business clothes with a broad-brimmed fedora pulled low, giving him a sinister, inscrutable look. "My name is George Misner," he said in a deep, powerful voice. "Lee, my coolie boy, tells me that you brought stuff to sell on your packhorses."

Misner was talking directly to André. Kate explained, “He’s Métis and doesn’t speak English. I can translate.”

She had adopted the role of Kirk. The railroad man didn’t seem to suspect that she was a female. That was a good sign. Maybe all railroaders would accept her as a male in his early teens.

Misner remained standing as if he didn’t want to sit in the dust in his good clothes. “The railway’s lookin’ for goods. What are you carrying?”

“Flour, oats for the horses, barley, pemmican, some smoked meat.”

“And what about the horses? Are they for sale?”

Kate turned to André and translated. The Métis man didn’t know how to reply. He had never thought of selling the horses.

“The railway’s lookin’ for horses. Especially good packhorses. If you want to sell, I need a complete list of all the goods, the quantity, and the price that you want. I also want to know how many horses you have and the price. I’m stayin’ at a hotel in town. Lee here, my coolie boy, will show you the place.” With that, Misner strode across the field and up the hill, leaving Lee behind.

Selling the goods was André’s business. Before they left Batoche, Pierre Garnot had provided a list of all the items they were carrying, the weight of each, and the price, but these were

Saskatchewan prices. This was British Columbia.

They talked about this in Michif. André said if they could get the price of flour, he could estimate the price of the other goods, but he had no idea of the price of the horses.

Kate could see André didn't know what to do, so she took the lead. "Robbie, go back to the store and talk to the shopkeeper. He'll know the price of flour, and try and find out the price of packhorses." Robbie left at a run.

In the store, the price of flour was clearly marked with a sign, but the cost of good horses was a problem. "Sir, do you know the price of trained packhorses?" Robbie asked.

The shopkeeper laughed. "Are you goin' into competition with me?"

"No, nothing like that. The railway wants to buy our packhorses, and we don't know what they are worth here in British Columbia."

"If it's the railway you're sellin' to, boy, you'll get a good price. They have been buying up everything in sight. In these parts, a horse brings a lot of money, and a trained packhorse will bring a pretty penny. Try out twenty-five dollars. I know that's the price of packhorses on the Oregon Trail."

When Robbie told André and Kate, they could hardly believe it; twenty-five dollars was a lot of money for a horse back home. Kate did the arithmetic. They had twelve packhorses to

sell. At twenty-five dollars a horse, it would total \$300. The three horses that they were riding were not for sale.

“Maybe we should cut it back to twenty dollars a horse,” suggested André.

“No,” replied Kate. “We’ll start with twenty-five. We have well-trained packhorses. They will be worth a lot.” She was getting excited by the prospect of negotiating with a railroad man. They had deep pockets.

Lee took the three of them to the hotel. When they arrived, he disappeared and in five minutes was back with the railway man, George Misner.

“Now, who is it that I’m gonna be negotiating with here?” asked Misner.

“With André, but I will translate,” Kate replied.

They sat at a table in a small room. “Did you figure out what you want to sell and the price?” The railroad man acted like a tough, no-nonsense bargainer.

André brought out the list of the food they had to sell and pushed it over the table to Kate. She went over it item by item. After each item, she concluded with the price they were asking. Misner said nothing and gave no hint whether the price was acceptable or not.

Kate had a mounting feeling of unease. The whole purpose of their expedition to British Columbia was to sell these goods

and make a profit. What if their prices were too high?

“What is the total cost of the food?” Misner asked when she finished.

Kate made a quick calculation, wrote it down at the bottom of the piece of paper and slid it across to him. The price on it was \$250.

The railway man glanced at the figure without showing any emotion. “And what about the horses?”

Kate glanced at André. He had not spoken a word since the negotiations began. She could tell that the horses were the key to the deal.

“We think twenty-five dollars a horse is fair. We have twelve packhorses to sell. The three lead horses belong to us.”

“Twelve horses, twenty-five dollars a horse comes to three-hundred dollars, a lot of money.”

“These are trained packhorses. We trailed them from Saskatchewan to Kamloops without a problem. They are strong and can carry heavy loads. We think twenty-five dollars a horse is fair.”

“The railway will pay five-hundred for the whole lot. Twelve packhorses and all the goods they carry. That’s my top price.”

Kate was shocked. She turned to André and repeated the offer. “Accept it,” he said in Michif.

She turned back to the railroad man. “We want

three-hundred for the horses and two-fifty for the other goods. That's that's five-fifty, but we'll split the difference, five-hundred and twenty-five dollars."

"All right. Five hundred-twenty-five. You're a hard bargainer, young Master Kirk. But there's one thing more."

"What's that?"

"Not only do we need packhorses, but we need experienced trail riders to manage the horses. I want you and the others to bring this packhorse train to Yale in the Fraser Canyon. And I want you to work for the railroad after you get there."

"We can't do that. We have to go back home."

"If you can't do that, then the deal is off. We need packhorses and riders. You work for the railroad beginning tomorrow. Trail the horses down to Yale, and you work for us. We pay each of you a dollar-fifty a day. Good wages in this country. Either accept that or the deal is off." Misner was firm and hard. He meant every word.

Kate felt cornered. The people of Batoche and Pierre Garnot needed this money, but to get it, they had to work for the railway. Misner had set a trap, and she fell into it.

"We have to talk about this and get back to you tomorrow," she said.

Misner stood up. "All right, we'll meet here in the hotel tomorrow morning." The negotiations were over.

When they got back to camp, Robbie and Kate sat around the fire, talking. Robbie was upset. "We can't work for the railroad. We have to go home. Mother is waiting for us."

"But, Robbie, you heard what Misner said. If we don't work for the railroad and run the packhorse team, the deal is off, finished."

"But what about our family?"

"The wages are good; a dollar-fifty a day is great. Most workers in this country earn half that. If we work, we can save some money, and we don't have to work for them forever."

"What about André?"

"He needs to go home. He's got a family."

"Then it's just you and me, Kate, working for the railway."

"Yeah. You and me and the horses." She laughed.

But Robbie wasn't satisfied. "What if they discover you're a girl?"

"Nobody has figured that out yet. Even Misner and Lee accept me as Kirk."

"The railway doesn't hire girls or women. If they ever found out, you would be fired or something worse."

"They'll never find out unless you or someone else tells them! We can't let this deal fall through, Robbie. Pierre Garnot and the people of Batoche need the money."

"What if Misner won't agree?"

Kate smiled. "He'll agree. He needs us."

The next morning, they gathered in the same hotel room with Misner. It was all business and no small talk.

"Are we going to do this deal?" Misner asked confidently.

"Yes," replied Kate.

"Thought so."

"But it will be a little different. André has to go back to Saskatchewan. He's got a wife and children. My brother Robbie and I will work for the railway and look after the horses."

"Think you can look after all them horses, just the two of you?"

"We can handle the horses all right."

"Men, are you?" Misner gave a mocking laugh.

"We're old enough to work for a living and look after horses."

"All right then, I'll put the two of you on the payroll. And I've been thinkin' that Lee, my coolie boy, will ride down the Fraser Canyon with you. I need to get back to Yale. There's a stagecoach leavin' at noon today, and I'll be on it. Let's go to the bank and get the money."

When they had been paid, Kate heaved a sigh of relief. The deal was done. André hid the cash in his bag, where it would be safe until he got it back to Batoche. The railway man touched his hat to say goodbye and strode across the floor of the bank to the door. Then he stopped.

“I’m leavin’ you two with Lee. I need him ’cause he’s the only one of the Chinamen who speaks decent English. Bring him down to Yale with you.” Then he was gone.

They headed back to the camp. There was much to do and plan. Lee trailed a few steps behind. Later that day, André bought a new horse from the livery in town. He explained that he would leave the horse he had been riding for Lee.

Before André left, Robbie and Kate both wrote their mother notes saying that the trip had been a success and that they were going to work for the railway for the next few months. Robbie hoped that she would accept this as a good decision, but Kate didn’t apologize. She had already told her mother that she wanted to do something different. André put the letters in his pocket alongside the cash. He promised he would deliver them as soon as he got to Batoche. Early the next day, he mounted up and was on the trail back home again.

Kate was feeling good about the negotiations, very good, in fact. She had got a better price than what André was willing to settle for, and every dollar was important for the people of Batoche.

The railway men never suspected that she was a girl. She liked playing the role of a male. She even felt like swaggering a little. Now she was confident that she would be accepted by all the railroaders.