

VALLEY HISTORY AND THE WINDERMERE VALLEY MUSEUM

BOX 2315, INVERMERE, V0A 1K0 342-9769 FEBRUARY, 1996

The Trail of 14 Getaway Elephants

By Russell Gore, Staff Correspondent, Detroit News
Date unknown but from a file of papers dated in the early 1920's.

Peru, Ind. - "No wonder I dread elephant getaways!" exclaimed Zach Terrel, manager of the Sells-Floto circus. "I was on the job 22 days in the biggest elephant getaway in circus history.

What is known to be the largest calamity in the way of wild animal escapes that ever happened to a circus occurred at Cranbrook, B.C., a railway center, set in a valley among the Kootenay mountains.

The chase lasted for more than three weeks, and took the pursuers, among them 15 Indians hired for the hunt, over the mountain passes and down deep defiles. Fourteen elephants escaped in this greatest of all getaways. One was killed before the chase ended.

The story was told the other day over the luncheon table in the big dining room in winter quarters here. The talk had turned to elephants and many were the reminiscences of these men who can tell so many colorful stories of circus life.

But getting back to the greatest of all getaways, the stampede of 14 elephants at Cranbrook, B.C.

Only when the delicate nervous system of this largest of the mammals is understood, can one realize that the exciting cause for the stampede occurred many miles away and five days before. What was the exciting cause?

Started by Girls' Toy

Nothing more than the clapperty-clap-clap of a little girl's toy wagon as her pet collie dog pulled it and her over the loose boards of an old-fashioned sidewalk in Edmonton, Alberta.

"The elephants no sooner heard what to them was this unaccustomed noise than they jack-knifed the wagons they were dragging and in one mad scramble took to the woods," said Mr. Terrell.

On this occasion the elephants were recaptured without much difficulty. "Poodles" Hanaford, of the great riding family of Hanafords and probably the greatest bareback horseman in America today, lured Snider, one of the runaways, to the elephant car with a loaf of bread. Mabel, another elephant, was chased through a cemetery, and dodged nimbly in and out without upsetting one of the headstones.

She knocked over Charlie Stewart, one of the circus men, who was waiting for her at the entrance.

The next morning, "Front Door" - a circus boy who is known by no other name - called Mr. Terrell and said, "All the elephants are out in that thicket we passed last night."

Fugitives Surrender

And it was true. The whole troop of runaways huddled up close to one another, and made no demonstration when Tony, a captive, was marched out as a decoy.

"Mary was always very fond of Tony, and she was the first to surrender," says Mr. Terrell. "She came chirping out of that thicket, put her trunk around Tony's neck, and stood perfectly still while the chain was snapped on her."

All the other elephants followed these two to the elephant cars.

But frightened elephants stay frightened for a long time. (In fact, this same Mary who surrendered so easily in Edmonton had to be sold later as an "outlaw" because she never got over the habit of bolting at the slightest noise). The elephants were still nervous when the show reached Cranbrook, British Columbia.

The animals were lined up beside the cars and the actual break came when a "pull-up train," its lead bar dragging, came up. The noise sent every one except the reliable Tony and the equally steady Trilby on the stampede.

These two were the only ones of the 16 beasts that did not get away. And even these "standbys" - leaders in the elephant act and particularly docile with their trainers - were only saved by the presence of mind of "Front Door," the circus boy with the queer name.

As the other animals started to run, 'Front Door' tapped the two nearest him with his cane and shouted the Hindu word, "Belah!" which means "Feet up in air." As it's obviously impossible for elephants to run with two fore feet poised in air, Tony and Trilby did not follow their 14 trumpeting brothers and sisters in their mad dash through the streets of Cranbrook and to the mountains that encircled the town.

Herd Vanishes

"The circus was to show in Fernie the next day," says Mr. Terrell. "I cancelled the date and ordered all hands to stay and join in the elephant hunt. We stayed Saturday and Sunday, and not one elephant had been seen, much less captured.

"We were due to play in Spokane, Wash., the following day (Monday) and the train was all ready to go when through the streets came an Indian woman on a gray pony covered with lather.

"She rode that pony straight over the network of tracks, and to the circus executive car, shouting at the top of her lungs:

“The elephants! The elephants! The elephants are coming! Hold the train! The elephants are coming - all together. You will see them in a minute. Look! Look! Up the mountain side! Here they are all together, just as I said.”

The sun was setting over the little town nesting in a valley among the mountains. It bathed the roofs in radiance, and shed its light over the side of the mountain down which zigzagged the precipitous path.

“Sure enough, there in the sunlight about half a mile away, came the elephants on a jog trot. They were trumpeting and swinging their trunks. They were coming home!

“They had to pass through the town to get to the elephant cars. Did the people in the streets fly? I’ll say they did! They climbed telegraph poles and they dived into basements! They got on top of automobiles, and they scuttled under wagons. They went anywhere to get out of the way of those trumpeting elephants, jog-trotting back to the only home they knew.

“Snider, Virginia and Tillie were in front.

“‘Front Door’ got the hook into Snider and shouted ‘Dako!’ which is Hindu for head down and feet in the air. As Snider automatically responded to his handler’s command Joe Graham, a wild west man with our outfit, lassoed her legs as they stuck up in the air.

Away Again

“If all our people had kept their heads the way ‘Front Door’ and Graham did we’d have had all of ‘em then and there. But they shouted and got the elephants excited. We had Snider, but the rest all ran away again.

“We took Trilby out of the elephant car to chain Snider beside her. The door to the car slides both ways. Snider was so anxious to get in the car with Trilby that he crowded her so close that one-half of the door slid to. And naturally both were blocked in the entrance.

“Tony our other dependable, was inside. But he instantly saw the situation as the two animals tried to pass in a space only large enough for one. He reached over with his trunk, and opened the half door that had slammed to. Then both were able to enter. That meant that we had one elephant of 14 captured.

“It would take me a day to tell you of those three weeks when I and the Indians chased elephants over mountain passes, beside gorges and through defiles where neither pursued nor pursuer had ever been before.

Indians Take Trail

“My mainstay was Jim Ironsides, trainmaster at Cranbrook. I slept in his office. Through a local priest and the Indian woman who had brought word that the elephants were coming I hired 15 Indians at \$1.50 a day to track the elephants on their ponies.

“I later offered \$200 for each animal caught, and the Indians went to work in earnest. But the elephants broke through the rings the trackers formed around them, hurled them from their horses, and finally the Indians got drunk in a body and came one night to where I was sleeping in the

trainmaster’s office and told me they wouldn’t work any longer. Later I got some of them back on the job.

“Sometimes we wouldn’t see those elephants for days, and sometimes we’d catch sight of one or two together. If we dared to come close they acted as though they had never seen us before. I wired for ‘Cheerful’ Gardner, Hagenbeck-Wallace elephant man, to take a plane to us and join in the hunt. When he went near the elephants it was just the same. They’d lift their trunks and act as though they were going to kill us.

“Once I remember stopping at a ranch run by a man named Hamilton. He said, ‘There’s an elephant down by the spring.’ So we took Tony and Trilby, our good old balance wheels, and anchored them by that spring for two days.

“I slept in Hamilton’s hayloft, and he did the cooking. We were up at sunrise every morning.

“I remember seeing Myrtle near the bed of an old lake. Hamilton went up the other way to head her off, and I stalked her for 300 yards. I could see her shaking the reeds ahead, but I couldn’t get a glimpse of her. Then she caught sight of Hamilton, and turned towards me. I had a small pitchfork in my hand, but she came at me worse than a lion and I can assure you that I sure did cover the ground fast getting away. We had some Indians there and after that they always called me ‘Big -boss-run-from-elephant.’ And I’m here to tell you I’ll run from any elephant that comes at me the way Myrtle did. We were then paying the most attention to Myrtle because we knew she was the most nervous in the lot. But poor Myrtle was killed before the three weeks were over.

The Capture

“Each of the other elephants was finally captured. In the end we got them in quite a simple manner. Bradley, of our wild west show, had told me how in the west they hunted wild horses by hanging a noose in narrow paths and driving an animal through it. Most of the elephants were caught that way.

“Of course, we had all kinds of claims for damages. One of the most amusing was that made by a prospector who wanted \$50 for a broken windlass. He said the elephant had come up to the windlass, which was used for pulling up water from the well, and, finding all the buckets empty, went up to the house. A full bucket was standing just inside the door.

“The elephant reached in, drank the bucket dry, then went back to the windlass and smashed it into kindling wood.”

Know Your Neighbour

from The Valley Echo
interview by Winn Weir

Mrs. Dominic Nicholas

The "Neighbour" with the sweetly kind face, her grey hair in neat braids on her shoulders, does not speak English. She sat quietly in the Echo office while her husband translated my questions in English into Kootenay dialect and then her face would lighten and her hands would illustrate what she wanted me to know as she replied in the Kootenay tongue.

She is Mrs. Dominic Nicholas, and her hands are in themselves a picture of this woman's life. Long and slender, they are careworn and wrinkled. It is easy to imagine that they have soothed many a child, worked with axe and buckskin needle, tended many fires and cooked many meals. They are beautiful hands.

Mrs. Dominic Nicholas is the daughter of Sam David and Mrs. Catherine Sam. Her mother was born in the Findlay Creek country near Canal Flat and her father was a local Indian but she does not know where he was born. They were married by a missionary priest at what is now Cranbrook. Eight other couples were married at the same time. They lived at Sam's Landing, at the southern end of Lake Windermere which was named after him. Mrs. Sam lived to be 103 and her daughter cared for her for many years.

Sophia Sam, Mrs. Nicholas, was born in a little log cabin in June, 1888. One of her first memories is of snowshoeing in the mountains while hunting with her parents. She remembers their gardens, three small patches of ground where the earth was broken up with an axe because there was no plough, and peas and corn were planted there, and she remembers how salmon were speared in the lakes and smoked and dried on racks and then put in sacks and hung on racks high in the treetops where wild animals could not get them. She has ridden horseback since she was three.

Mrs. Nicholas, the youngest of six children, was a sickly child so was never sent to the mission school. That is why she does not speak English. But sickly though she may have been then, she has outlived her two brothers and three sisters. She herself has borne seven children, four of whom are dead. There were six daughters and one son, Toby Nicholas. Toby enlisted in 1940 and he was killed in July 1943, in Sicily. His parents have a memorial plaque sent to them

by the Minister of Defense. But it is small solace for the loss of your only son. There is a depth of sorrow in the eyes of Mrs. Nicholas. The loss of a child does something to any woman's eyes. And she has lost four.

Mr. and Mrs. Dominic Nicholas live on the Columbia Lake Reserve near Fairmont. They are Kootenay Indians. The word Kootenay in their own tongue is K'Tunaxa (pronounced Tunaca) and meaning "Strangers" or "people from beyond the hills". They met at the St. Eugene Mission and were married in the Mission Church. Afterwards they returned to the Valley and lived on the farm belonging to Mrs. Nicholas' parents.

I asked her to tell me what she could remember of her childhood. What did she wear? "Mostly buckskin and, of course, moccasins." There were no beads to be obtained for beadwork decoration so they dyed porcupine quills with grasses and roots and decorated their garments with them. I asked her if she had a doll? "Yes, one made entirely of buckskin dressed in buckskin." And boys?

"They played with bows and arrows and a favourite game was to shoot a target with an arrow through a rolling hoop."

"How about birthdays?"

"They were reckoned by the New Year. After every New Year they were one year older."

"How did they know about the New Year?"

"They had watched the Piegan Indians celebrate it with special dances." The Piegan Indians came from Alberta, stole horses from the Kootenays and were enemies.

Mrs. Nicholas recalls a particular "Prayer Dance" that was done also. The prayer was to the Sun God because at that time most of the Indians were not Christian.

The Kootenay Indians have the reputation for doing the best tanning in the world and I asked my "neighbour" why. She described the long, slow process. First the hair was scraped from the skin using a rock scraper. Then the skin was soaked in rain water to clean it of blood. When clean it was hung up and left throughout zero weather, then it was put in rain water again and scraped well. Then the rubbing process began and only the flesh side was rubbed, never the skin side. That she says is what produced the softness for which their tanning is renowned.

Mrs. Nicholas has done a great deal of bead work, too, and has taken many prizes at Fall Fairs.

I asked about the brush piles on the Armstrong Range where a passing Indian, by tradition, always places a twig or branch. She

replied that since childhood she has always done this. It is a kind of superstition, a prayer that they would travel without mishap.

Before Mrs. Catherine Sam died in 1950 I had seen a little paper notebook, kept like a family Bible. It recorded her age in circles representing each year of her life. The months had been counted with beads hung on a buckskin thong, one bead for each moon until it became a year.

Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas celebrated their Golden Wedding in June 1957, with a family banquet at their home. They have nine grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, one of whom lives in the State of Washington where his mother died.

One granddaughter, Joan, who is the daughter of their son, Toby, is a nurse aide at the Windermere District Hospital.

There are, perhaps, few others in the Valley, whose family history goes back farther than Mrs. Nicholas' within the confines of the Rockies and the Selkirks. She cannot recall much of her parents' early life but she knows they were local Indians. Historians tell us that Indians have only lived in this Valley about 160 years. So the parents of our "Neighbour" must have been children of the very early arrivals. It is a close link with history.

=====

What's Happening at the Museum

We will be having our Heritage Day Luncheon at the Invermere Inn on February 16th this year. The guest speakers will be Mrs. Phyllis Falconer, telling about life on the Benches in the early years; Mrs. Olive Mossiman speaking of early-day Wilmer and the Atchison family of Brisco and Barry and Mrs. Berta Moore speaking of the early settlement of Edgewater. These are always sell-out events, with everyone enjoying the informative speeches.

The Museum and Kootenay National Park are sponsoring a Photo Contest so dig into your old albums and find an entry or two. The deadline for entries is March 15, with the judging to be done March 30.

- The categories are:
- Landscapes
 - People
 - Pioneer Activities

-

The time-frame for the contest is photos prior to 1940.

There are many interesting prizes provided by Kootenay National Park and the Museum.

Copies will be made of the entries for the photograph collection at the Museum. The originals will be returned to the owner. We appreciate the value of these old photographs and they will be treated carefully.

The Tuesday evening workbees continue at the Museum at 7-9 pm. There has been a busy group working all winter. If you are interested in learning more about local history here is a good opportunity. At the moment they are cross-indexing the files in the Archives.

+++++

Newsclips from the Past

Golden Star: March 10, 1933

"A book has recently been published called Prairie Trails and Arctic Highways. The author, Captain Henry Toke Munn, was a resident of this part, living about three miles west of Wilmer where he was engaged in horse raising on a 2500 acre tract of land. Prior to this much of his life had been spent in Manitoba, the Arctic Circle and South Africa. From here he went to reside in New Ontario. It is a very interesting work. One of his associates in earlier days was the Hon. Randolph Bruce, ex-lieutenant governor of B.C."

Golden Star: March 15, 1929

Invermere, March 12 - "On behalf of the local company of Girl Guides and the Provincial Command, Miss Marples who is locally in charge, presented Miss Dora K. Bodecker with an emblem known as a Thanks badge. This is emblematic of good work having been done for the Girl Guides by the wearer. It is a handsome circular peice of silver with enamel work about the size of the old Canadian cent, and is pendent from a bar on which is embossed the letters "C.G.G." In the centre of the filigreed emblem is an enamel leaf of Shamrock."

Golden Star: March 8, 1929

"The first number of an excellent little pamphlet dealing with the conversion of the C.P.R. Lake Windermere bungalow camp to a summer camp for girls has just been received. The camp will be under the direction of Miss Mary E. Cutler of Minneapolis with whom Dr. Harriet E. Cook of Chicago will be associated."

"Mr. and Mrs. C.A. Thornton and family who have lately moved from Princeton have taken up their

residence in Miss Brookes' bungalow on Windermere
Crescent."