

FOREWORD

When you're in Banff and you feel like mingling with the quality folks you can stroll across the bridge at the end of Banff Avenue, up to the Banff Springs Hotel and in the bar overlooking the golf course order a cocktail, maybe a Negroni: equal parts gin, Campari, sweet vermouth, and a shred of orange peel, invented, the menu tells you, in 1922 in Florence at the Casoni Bar. You feel slightly decadent, but you tell yourself you have earned it after a hard day in the mountains, or that you will earn it by working harder the next day, though you feel with your Gortex and GPS that you have no link with the early explorers of these mountains.

Yet on your hike up Spray Avenue you will have passed the site of Tex Vernon-Wood's house at number 120, where he lived between 1930 and 1938 while writing these stories, and as you sip your cocktail you will, for the duration of your sojourn in the bar, be closer to Tex's clients than if you were out skinning a bear. There was no middle class in mountain travel in the early twentieth century. You were either a wrangler or you were wealthy.

Reading Tex's stories in context brings this home. The first thing that hits you when you open the bound volume of *The Sportsman* is an ad for Tiffany & Co. Jewelers, and facing it an ad for Marmon Straight 8 Motor Cars of Indianapolis. This is followed by Canada Dry, "The Champagne of Ginger Ales" and we are in the realm of champagne tastes: advertisements for private planes like the Lockheed Sirius, endorsed by Charles Lindbergh—or the Bellaca five-place amphibian, which gives you the "freedom of land, air, and water," enabling you to land anywhere to hunt or fish. See a tempting lake? Just set down your Bellaca and throw out a line. This is February 1930. The stock market has crashed and the Depression is starting but you would

never know it. There is a photo story on skiing in the Swiss Alps, another on deep-sea fishing in the Bahamas (get that swordfish!), and a feature on the National Motor Boat Show, with pictures of the “Consolidated 55-foot all-mahogany, double-cabin, twin-screw express cruiser. Two speedway 180 h.p. marine engines give a speed of 23 m.p.h.” It is this mahogany cruiser that faces Tex’s first story, “Fifth Avenue Pilgrims Amid the Goats.”

In 1895 Georg Simmel, the father of sociology, was provoked by the building of a railway up the Eiger—one of the most fearsome peaks in the Alps—to write, “It is said that it is part of one’s education to see the Alps, but not education alone for its twin sister is ‘affluence’.” He noted that the total number of climbers who had previously scaled the peak on their own could now be brought up in a single day, and though he said, “I disagree with that foolish romanticism which saw difficult routes, prehistoric food and hard beds as an irremovable part of the stimulus of the good old days of alpine travel,” still “the increased accessibility of alpine travels does cause us to question the benefit our civilization draws from it...” A few years later, in his *Philosophy of Money*, he returned to this theme, arguing that our devotion to nature is not the result of our being in nature but rather the opposite: it is not the peasants herding sheep on the mountain slopes who sing the praises of a pastoral getaway; it is the city dwellers. And our longing comes from our distance from nature and the abstract existence that urban life, based on a money economy, has forced upon us. Ironically, the conditions of the alpine sojourn form a link between money and nature at the very same time that it separates them. It is only the possession of money that allows us to take flight into nature.¹

At 50¢ an issue *The Sportsman* was expensive. In large format, with glossy pages and paintings commissioned for the covers (the February 1930 issue pictures a white-bearded gentleman in a brown suit being poled through a tropical swamp by his African servant), it offers Brooks Brothers clothing for polo, or B. Altman’s “Tallyho” hunting attire for women but no ads for fishing rods, much less tents or boats. Tex’s story “This Guiding Game” is sandwiched between an article on “The Real Romance of Steeplechasing” and “Wind and Rain on the Riviera;” later in the issue

1. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), Georg Simmel, “The Alpine Journey,” in *Simmel on Culture, Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), p. 219 [first published as “Alpenreisen,” *Die Zeit* (Vienna), 4, 13 July 1895].



Third day lunch and rest

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On the Simpson River

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there's an article on books: on "the classics of fox-hunting literature." Tex's story "Rams" follows a regular feature of the magazine—"Estates of American Sportsmen,"—which displayed lavish homes in places like the Hamptons, the world of F. Scott Fitzgerald rather than Jack London. And in these pages we occasionally find a full-page ad for "Banff...Social Capital of the Rockies." The text assures you, "you'll meet your peers here": it is the "rendezvous for smart society...dancing with a corking 10-piece orchestra ...Canada's social center, accustomed to pleasing royalty."

Later issues feature advertisements for the Bell & Howell Filmo movie cameras, starting at \$120 so you can record your feats, and there are ads for 20-, 30-, and 60-day Alaska Hunting Expeditions for the Kodiak Bear:

"THE TROPHY OF TROPHIES is a beautiful rug of the KODIAK BEAR, the largest of the carnivorous animals on earth, the king of all big game, and the subject of a thousand interesting fireside tales."

And,

"Hardships are unknown on our expeditions. Bring your wife along and let her enjoy it with you."

Tex's expeditions were grittier, and as we learn in more than one story, he is a bit suspicious of having wives along, but his trips were still about bagging the trophy and generating the heroic "fireside tale."

In a sense these are fireside stories. Part of the appeal is that the reader is placed in the position of Tex's confidant. As with the Pipestone Letters, the stories allow us to laugh at the dudes, identify with the wranglers and guides. It is a time-honoured strategy, one Tex wouldn't even have had to think of as a writer. As we join the conga line of motorhomes ambling like pack horses down the Icefields Parkway we wish we could banish all the tourists, exorcising the thought that they are us. So the readers of *The Sportsman* would have enjoyed chuckling at the British toffs who were so busy with their marmalade they missed a good shot at a bear, and they would have recognized themselves in Doc, the seasoned hunter who is no longer a Pilgrim but a friend, and almost an equal, even if he does bring a wife.

THERE IS ANOTHER ROW of houses between Tex's house and the Bow River, but there would not have been in his day, and Tex would have been able to take his morning coffee out front and watch the sun streaming through the gap between Rundle and Tunnel Mountain. But we don't see Banff

in these stories, that's merely where the train stops. Tex never mentions Tunnel Mountain, in fact he mentions few places by name, and what is remarkable is how little sense of particular place there is in the stories. You might expect Tex to say something about the turrets of Castle Mountain—red, crenellated, standing out from the grey limestone slabs of the Sawback Range that he passed on the way to his camp. Or Glacier Lake, a turquoise oval with a glaciated massif at one end, open to the treed valley at the other end, like a mini-Lake Louise. But he does not; nor does he give us a sense of distance, of how long it took to travel, say, from Banff up the 100 kilometres of trail to Saskatchewan River Crossing, and then over into Glacier Lake. And though we hear about Cliff White it is really the craziness of the newfangled sport of skiing that interests Tex. There are no portraits of locals like his first boss, Fred Brewster, or his contemporary Jimmy Simpson. But that's not Tex's intent. He is not writing local history, nor, as Howard O'Hagan would do at the end of the decade up in Jasper, writing a regional literature. Instead, Tex gives us separate episodes in an undefined mountain West.

That may have been deliberate. The editors of the magazine often blurred the context. The photos with the stories usually are not of Banff (though "Us Winter Sports" does have pictures of skiers and the Assiniboine cabin), and "Tepee Tales" features a cowboy on a palomino—a saddle horse, not a pack horse—posed on a desert bluff mesa that is obviously in the American southwest. Tex is not writing the local because he is not writing for locals. He did not publish in Canadian magazines; his audience is thousands of miles away, and the lack of specific detail gives the pieces a universal quality.

But there is more than editorial direction or commercial constraint at work here. In 1931 Canada's unemployment rate jumped to 25 per cent and something had to be done with the transient men. J.B. Harkin, Dominion Parks Commissioner, had long dreamed of a road from Banff to Jasper, to bring in the new tourists who were turning from the railway to the automobile. During the First World War "enemy aliens" had been used to work on the road from Banff to Lake Louise. Now camps for the unemployed were set up to extend that road. Hundreds of men were assembled in the fall of 1931 at either end of the road, survey teams were sent through to mark the route, and the clearing of brush and stumps began. In 1932 as Tex was beginning his Pipestone Letters, road crews with picks and shovels were hacking through the forest toward Bow Lake. By 1934 they had completed 57 miles (95 kilometres) of road, with another 90 miles to go. In 1938 a

young man who had hiked the trail the year before wrote enthusiastically in *Maclean's* magazine that,

By the end of the 1937 season, there was open to tourists some seventy-five miles of completed road on the Jasper end [to Sunwapta Pass], and about forty-five miles on the Banff end [to Waterfowl Lakes]...It is expected that very soon this great tourist thoroughfare, ten years in the building, will be completed.²

In 1939 the first truck lumbered through and the highway opened officially in June 1940, celebrated in an eleven-minute NFB film. This "great tourist thoroughfare" was a gravel track 18 feet [not quite six metres] wide, but compared to the horse trails Tex had used it would have felt like a six-lane freeway. Even as he was writing, his milieu was already the past. His later stories were published in the *National Sportsman*, which sold for 10¢, and *Hunting and Fishing*, which was only 5¢: much more a middle-class magazine, it had ads for tobacco, guns, fishing gear, outboard motors instead of yachts, and instead of champagne, beer in cans.

By the time Tex wrote his last story, he was preparing to move out of the house on Spray Avenue and out of the valley he had worked in and loved. The wider world was changing throughout 1938 as well: Neville Chamberlain was meeting Hitler at Berchtesgaden; in Hungary Lazlo Biro had invented the ballpoint pen and was preparing to flee the Nazis to Argentina (Tex wrote his stories out in pencil or fountain pen, in a neat longhand); in Winnipeg they were founding the Winnipeg Ballet, and in Orillia, Gordon Lightfoot was being born.

It is always the end of an era, but some demarcations are sharper than others. We are lucky to have these snapshots of life on the trail before the trail became a highway. Indeterminate of place and time, just slightly tinged with nostalgia, they occupy the nebulous zone between reportage and myth.

Ted Bishop

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2. Edward E. Bishop, "Mountain Road," *Maclean's*, July 15, 1938, 24.



Dad (Nello Vernon-Wood) with animal skins

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