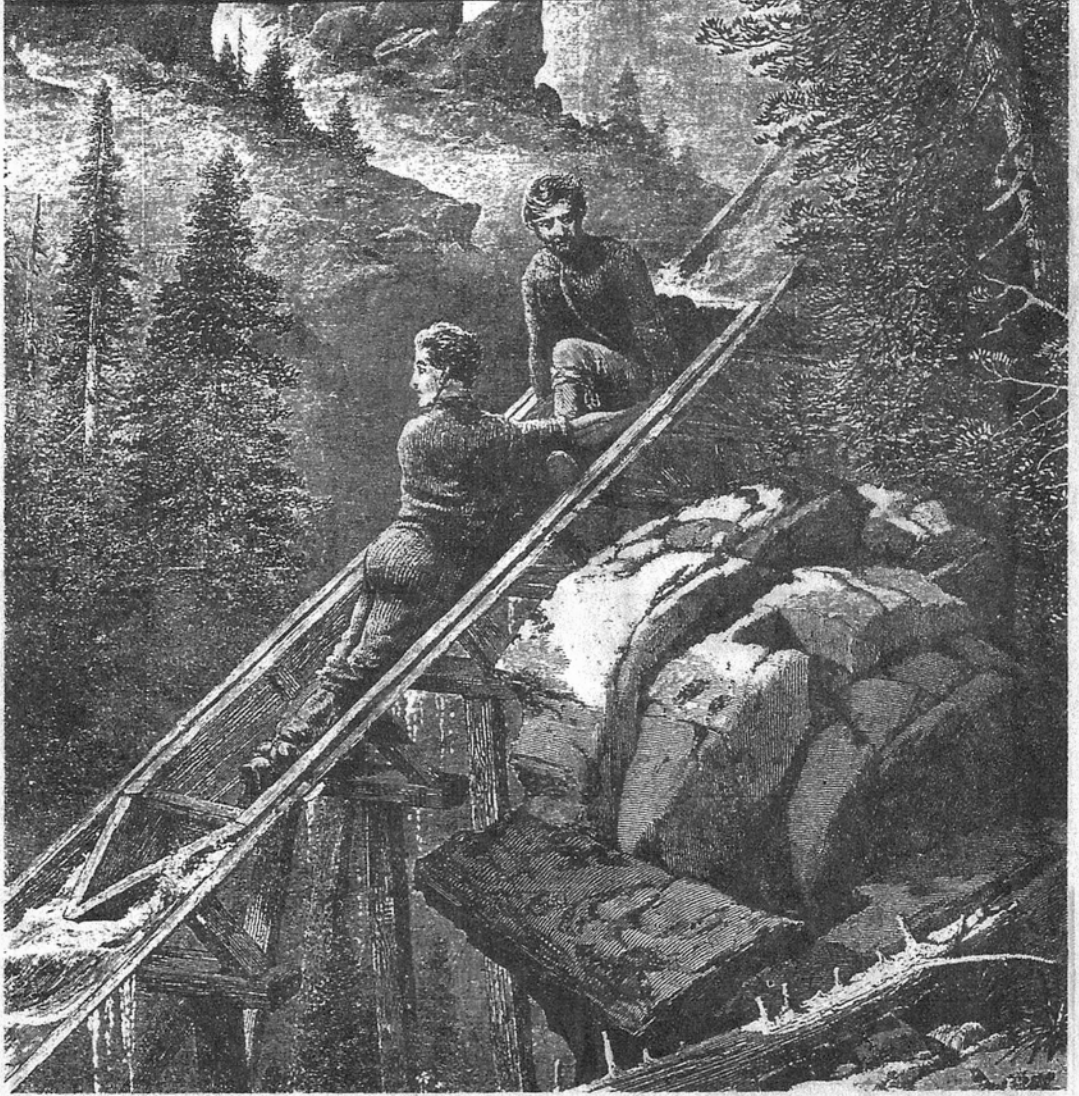


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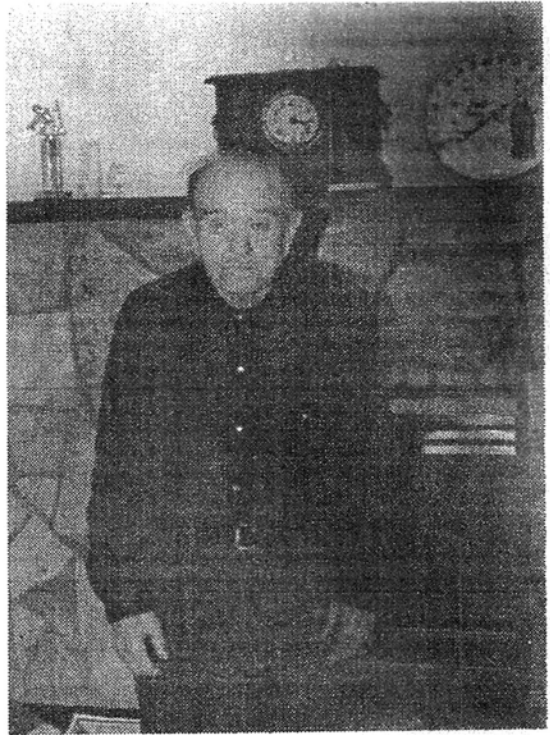
"A wild ride down a log flume"

A Conversation with Archie Abbey

by Gary Montgomery

I called Archie Abbey late one afternoon in Fernie where he lives with his son, Lewis. I explained who I was and why I was calling, namely, that I wanted to interview him for the Journal. "I don't know what I'd have to say," he said modestly, "and you'll have to talk loud, I don't hear very good." I assured him that if he could hear me over the phone, he should be able to hear me in person. I arrived the next morning to find him sitting in the living room with the radio blaring and the announcer going on about Canada's recent elections. I asked him if he had voted to which he answered rather matter-of-factly, "Oh, yes." He added that he was less than pleased with the outcome in that the Liberal Party got too strong of a vote. It's not that they won, it's that they won by too much that concerns him. He figures things work better if there's a balance of power.

If the Liberals screw up, I'm betting that next election he'll be voting against them. Next time around, he'll be coming 99. Archie is Mary Roo's brother. Mary, who lives in Grasmere, was interviewed for these pages in May of '92.



Archie Abby at home in Fernie.

TPJ: How long have you lived here in Fernie?"

Archie: Ummm, 24 years."

TPJ: "And where did you live before that?"

Archie: "Down in the south country down at Newgate. I used to have a ranch down there."

TPJ: "So you had to move when they put in the reservoir?"

Archie: "When they put in the Libby Dam I had to get out. (A rueful laugh) It flooded my place."

TPJ: "You probably didn't think much of that, did you."

Archie: (Slowly and thoughtfully) No...No...I was just getting started to be independent, you know.

I was right on the mouth of Gold Creek. Six miles above the border - according to the survey."

TPJ: You were born in 1899. Is that right?"

Archie: "Yeah."

TPJ: "Weren't you born in Flagstone?"

Archie: "No...No...I was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. We moved west in 1905" (It's interesting to note that Archie and Clara Fewkes were both spent their earliest years in Saskatchewan, less than 100 miles apart and born, a little over one year apart. Clara was interviewed in Vol. I, No. 1 of the New TPJ. and turns 94 in this coming January.)

TPJ: "Came on the train?"

Archie: "Yep."

TPJ: "And what did you dad do?"

Archie: "At that time he was working for the CPR. He run a steamshovel on the railroad, you know? We first come to Wardner. That is, the family and my dad was working there at Hope on a piece of new line they were puttin' in. In them days they put the steamshovel on a car and took it wherever they wanted. And...finally, he got tired of that job and he had steam engineer's papers and he went to work in a sawmill...for a few years. And we moved to Flagstone and was there for about 30 years. Fella there by the name of Dan Hayes had the mill first and they got into trouble with the Great Northern. You see they shipped lumber on the Great Northern to Fernie or Elko 'til they hit the CPR, You see. (*The two railroads were joined with a spur line between Rexford and Fernie in those years.*) I guess maybe the freight got too expensive. Too much switchin' around. Near the end a fella by the name of Jim Joyce had a mill there at Flagstone. Well, he bought the old mill out and built it up new and operated it for oh...15 years."

TPJ: "When did you quit school?"

Archie: "Oh...19 and 15-16. Somewhere in there."

TPJ: "What grade would that have been?"

Archie: "Well...we didn't go by grades then, we went by readers - third reader. There was about five years there was no school. Not enough pupils to keep a school open. There was only three families in Flagstone there when the mill shut down."

TPJ: "Did you go to work then when you quit school?"

Archie: "Just on odd jobs, you know. Didn't start to work on my own probably 'til 20."

TPJ: "That was during WW I. Did you get have anything to do with that?"

Archie: "No. I was too young for that. War I was in 14, eh? You see I'd only been 15 then."

TPJ: "Yeah, I forgot that Canada got into it earlier than the United States did. When you started working steady what did you do?"

Archie: "Around the logging camps, sawmills - drove horses, cant hook man."

TPJ: "Do you know Stan Wilkenson?" (*Stan, among other things, is a cant hook man.*)

Archie: "Yes. Very well."

TPJ: "I went out with him a couple weeks ago and he showed me three different logging camps around Elko. (*see related story p__.*) Did you ever work around a flume?"

Archie: "No. Only the Kootenai River. Sometimes they used to send a lot of logs down to Bonner's Ferry on the Kootenai."

TPJ: "They'd send them right over Kootenai Fall. That'd be something to see."

Archie: "Yeah...could be."

TPJ: "Was the Kalispell - Ft. Steele Trail still in use when you were a kid?" (*The Trail predates recorded history insofar as it existed first as a game trail that was enlarged by Indians that trappers followed that freight wagons appropriated. Even though U.S. 93 follows parts of the Trail, any obstacle that it once went around, has now been filled in or removed.*)

Archie: Oh yeah. When they built that new Customs house there they went around it." (*Archie is not referring to anything that exists today, but rather, to a time when Customs was several hundred feet west.*)

TPJ: "What was Eureka like then?"

Archie: "Course, it wasn't like the traffic now...(he laughs) very few automobiles. Everything was horses."

TPJ: "Do you remember your first car? Seeing your first car?"

Archie: "Yeah...oh, I don't know just exactly (*In the background we hear someone saying, "Bye Arch." He waves and says, "That's the home cleaner."*)

TPJ: (*The housekeeper leaving distracted him as he tried to recall his first car*) "Do you remember where you were when you saw your first car?"

Archie: "Yeah, it was at Flagstone. Sixteen. About 1916. My Dad got a car in about 1916. Ford. Model-T Ford."

TPJ: "When did you get to drive it?"

Archie: "Not too long after."

TPJ: "So you were probably one of the first teenage drivers around there."

Archie: "Pretty well, yeah."

TPJ: "Did you ever drive crazy like a lot of teenagers do?"

Archie: "No. No. No, in them days you didn't have the roads to speed on. There wasn't much speedin' because the roads was so rough...and, crooked. They had to make the roads where the easiest place was to make 'em. Tisn't like now where they use all these bulldozers and that, they can make a road anyplace. It twasn't like that then."

TPJ: "Did you ever leave this country and travel anyplace else?"

Archie: "Oh yes. I was down in the States. Went down all the way to Los Angeles. Just to see what the country was, you know. It was right after the war (*about 1921*). There was lots of work and you could get a job anyplace. Just work a couple of weeks and get a few dollars and move on someplace else. I worked all the way down. Went down to Seattle first and Portland and all the way down. Worked at jobs here and there and got enough money to go on. Lot's of time we used to take the freight train...boxcars. I went practically all of one summer."

TPJ: "Where did you meet your wife?"

Archie: "She used to work at Waldo...at Roosville for Bob Reid. She was a house-keeper, cook. You know where the Bob Reid ranch was?"

TPJ: "I think so. It was the one immediately over the border, right?"

Archie: "Yeah, well, there was one small place between the border and there. Belonged to Chief Paul."

TPJ: "Do you remember Chief Paul?"

Archie: "Yeah. Yeah he was...I don't know if the house is still there or not, but, it was about 200, 250 yards from the border."

TPJ: "Did you ever talk to him?"

Archie: "Oh yeah. Yeah. I used to talk to him. He had a brother that was called Big Joe. David. Their name was David (*last name*).

TPJ: "I've seen a few pictures of Big Joe. Did you ever have much to do with the Indians?"

Archie: "Oh yes, quite a bit, in the later years. I worked on a big ranch there one full year, I guess. On the Reid place."

TPJ: "How does it feel to be approaching 94? That's a long time to live."

Archie: (He laughs) Oh well, it starts to tell on you. I don't get around very good. I don't get no place new by myself. I go everyplace with my son. I'm a diabetic. I've got to be pretty careful what I do."

TPJ: "Did you ever smoke or drink?"

Archie: "Oh yes. Both."

TPJ: "Do you still smoke?"

Archie: "Yeah. But, it's...the reason I smoke now, I just smoke cigars, small cigars, it keeps these flies away. (*I looked around at a very new, clean, flyless house and concluded that Archie's method must work.*)

TPJ: "And, I suppose being a diabetic you have to be pretty careful drinking."

Archie: "Oh yeah. Well...not so much from the diabetic, course, you can't drink too much, you know, maybe once a day."

TPJ: "Mostly wine?"

Archie: "No...mostly liquor."

TPJ: "My granddad would have a glass of wine everyday when he came in from milking the cows."

Archie: "Oh yeah. It's all right."

TPJ: "Well, I guess you're old enough to decide what you want to do. (he laughs) So you went out and voted yesterday."

Archie: "I voted Saturday. Ahead of time."

TPJ: "You're a little worried about the Liberals getting too much power this time around?"

Archie: "Well, it's not good, you know. Too much one sided is..., I don't think it's good for a country. There's no opposition then. I think it's going to be bad. Course, you don't know the whole thing yet."

TPJ: "Did you ever do much hunting?"

Archie: "Oh yes. All my life. Course, I don't now. I can't go anyplace now. It's been 15 years now that I've done any huntin'."

TPJ: "Did you hunt for the sport of it or to have meat for your family?"

Archie: "Well, both. Specially down in that south country there, you had to get meat some way, you know. Back then, there was plenty of deer. You didn't have to go out for a week... like you do now."

TPJ: "How was it growing up in Flagstone?"

Archie: "Well, you see, we were a big family. There was 15 of us. Nine boys and six girls."

TPJ: "Where did you rank in that bunch?"

Archie: "Let's see. Around eight, I guess. My oldest brother was in the first world war."

TPJ: "Did he come back?"

Archie: "Yeah."

TPJ: "You were a boy at about the time the Indians were being pushed north. Do you remember anything about that?"

Archie: "The Tobacco Plains Indians were

pretty peaceful. They didn't go looking for trouble."

TPJ: "How did that happen? I mean they lived there and now they don't. Something must have happened where someone said, 'You can't live here anymore.'"

Archie: "Oh, I don't think so, no. I think the biggest move was the people crowded in and crowded them out. They had a different way of living, you see. The Indians, they lived mostly off the game where the whites worked (*on the land*). They just moved in and crowded the Indians out. Take the game, when people crowded in the game went out too. The Indians had to go out to get the game."

TPJ: "Do you still like to read, Archie?"

Archie: "Well, I like to read, but, I'm not able to cause I can't see right."

TPJ: "Do you watch T.V.?"

Archie: "Yes. I like to get the news every night. The six o'clock news from Calgary and then I get the news from Spokane at seven. Well it helps out a lot because when you can't read too much...I can read alright if the light is right, but, on a dull day I can't read nothin'."

TPJ: "Do you ever stop and think of all the changes that have taken place in your life?"

Archie: "Oh yes. You've got to go with the times if you want to have a decent livin'. Because, when new things come out, well, that's going to come anyway, eh? If you don't go with it, you're going to be left out, that's all."

It's always a pleasure to sit and talk to the oldtimers and pick their brains about the early days of the Tobacco Plains Country. Archie was, of course, no exception. Some of us tend to accept aging all too easily. It does me good to be with someone who has far exceeded what has come to be the "allotted years." I left Archie to fix his own lunch and enjoy yet one more Indian summer day.

end