

Home for Christmas

by Donald Lewes Hings, Laureate Class of 2006

In the summer of 1933, Donald Hings, a 26-year-old engineer who worked for Cominco (then the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company) in the Radio and Geophysical Laboratory in Trail, was sent to Slate Creek, a placer mining site located in a heavily wooded valley in the shadow of Baldy Mountain about 200 kilometres north of Fort St. James in central British Columbia. Don's task was twofold: establish a radio-communications link between the camp and Trail and conduct a geophysical survey over the designated production area. It was early December before Don completed his assignment. He was determined to spend Christmas at home in Rossland with his wife Rakel, but heavy snow was keeping the supply plane from landing and his chances were looking slim. It was then that he and 14 others decided to hike over wilderness trails to Fort St. James. It was a hike that would have taken four days in the summer, but it was 12 cold and harrowing days before the group reached Fort St. James. Here Don recalls the story.

December 8

We set out in fair weather and good spirits to follow the local road that meandered up Baldy Mountain to the south, our Number One obstacle. We had four horses to pull our bobsleigh, which held most of our belongings. It was pretty tough going for us, because only one of the fellows — Jim Dunsmuir, who was a prospector-trapper — had snowshoes. About two-thirds of the way up the mountain, our progress was halted when snow got too deep for the horses. We set to work digging a right-of-way through the snow, but it was awfully slow going; we moved only about 100 yards before we had to take camp for the night.

December 9

Throughout the next day we continued shoveling a path up the mountain, gaining even less ground than the day before. Late that afternoon, we assessed the situation. We had expected to make it over the mountain and out of the deep snow in two days and into Fort St. James in another two days. Yet here we were, with nearly half the food supplies gone and still trying to reach the top of the mountain. We decided I would go back to the camp and get more food supplies. In exchange for my sleeping bag, Jim gave me his snowshoes. All he had was a blanket.

On snowshoes I made good time, reaching the camp at about 9 p.m. Percy Bloomer, the camp foreman, immediately set the cookhouse to work on bannocks (unleavened bread). I also managed to obtain three more pairs of snowshoes.

December 10

Len Stewart, an unflappable young northern packer, was chosen to take an emergency horse team and sleigh with fresh supplies with me to the group in transit. It wasn't until day's end that we reached the place where I had left the fellows. To our surprise, we could see that they had managed to get onto the crust of the snowpack near the large, domed peak of the mountain. Len knew the horses needed rest, so he made camp for the night. I felt that with snowshoes, I could reach the fellows that night. However, after crossing a section of ice in the starlight, could no longer distinguish any tracks. I made my way up to a high point and looked around. I noticed what looked like stars moving about on the horizon and, after a few moments, realized it was sparks from a campfire. The group had reached the other side of the ice and were in deep snow on the south side of the mountain. From that point, it took me almost no time to reach their camp.

December 11

At first light, before Len arrived with the team, it was decided that Dunsmuir, myself and Bill Faith, a packer who worked between Fort St. James and Slate Creek, would take the snowshoes and go ahead of the rest of the group and make a path for the horses. As we walked, each of us would take turns breaking snow. That was tough going. By mid-afternoon we found a trapline cabin belonging to Ed Kosse, a trapper, and made camp for the night.

December 12

Upon awakening, we heard the distant voice of Sam Irwin, the skinner, bellowing at the horses and we knew the rest of our group wasn't far behind. The three of us set out for the next cabin on the trapline, about 14 miles to the south. When it got dark, we used a 'bug' for light. That's a candle jammed through a hole in the side of a jam can. It took us most of the day to reach it. We lit a fire in the stove and settled in for the night.

December 13

We got up fairly early and replaced the wood that we had used. About 9 a.m., just as we were ready to set out again, Walter 'Curly' Neyberg (a high rigger) arrived on the only pair of snowshoes the main group had. He looked all in, and when we spoke to him he just sort of nodded. We guided him into the cabin and when he warmed up he told us that Len and eight of the others had given up and gone back to Slate Creek.

He told us Sam Irwin, Tommy Rough (a Cab Driver) and Gorgon Ogilvie (son of Morley Ogilvie, the camp boss) were still bringing the horses out, but had left the bobsleigh behind. They had tipped the load off into the snow and thrown a tarp over it. One team of horses was pulling flat deck, which was really just the top of the bobsleigh, but it was sliding all over the place. What food they had was on top of the deck.

Bill and I decided to go back to where the load had been dumped. We didn't want to leave some of the more valuable stuff there all winter. Sometime around noon, we came upon Sam and the others. They were just trudging along very slowly, looking dead tired. All they could say was, "How far is the cabin?" Bill and I continued back to the load, finding it about dusk. We hoisted most of it up into trees so animals couldn't get at it, then filled our bags with valuables, bannock, some rice and tea. We didn't get back to the cabin until about 11 p.m.

December 14

We stayed up all night and about 6 a.m., the others climbed out of the bunks and we climbed in to get some sleep. We figured we would catch up with them later in the day. When we woke, about four or five hours later, we discovered that they had taken all the food, at least what little there was. When we finally caught up with them, they said they didn't have any of our food. Well, what could we do? Bill, Jim and I went on ahead.

We got hungrier and hungrier as the day went on. And to make matters worse, it was awfully cold that night. I still remember the popping sounds of the trees. It was about 1 a.m. before we finally came upon Kosse's main cabin. It was large, big enough for Ed, his wife and two boys. He cooked up some moose steaks and gave us some homemade beer. It was like heaven!

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The others arrived one by one through the night and into the early morning. It was bitterly cold, so we decided to stay at Ed's another day.

December 15

We got some supplies from Ed: food, a toboggan, snowshoes, hay for the horses and an Alsatian dog. We put the hay on the toboggan and rigged up the horses to pull it, much like a dog-team would. We started out fairly early, with about 85 miles to go. Bill, Jim, Tommy, Curly and I went out ahead of the others. We traveled all day, stopping every six hours for tea and bannock. By about 10 p.m., we were all pretty tired. We built a big fire to keep warm, but it was so cold that when you were warming up our front, your back would be cold. We couldn't sleep or something would freeze, so we just continued through the night.

December 17

About 8 a.m., I noticed that Tommy had fallen pretty far behind. He was way off in the distance, so I went back to give him a hand while the others continued. Tommy was just shuffling along, making less than six inches to a stride. I whistled for the others to stop, slung his pack over mine and we slowly caught up with them. We built a lean-to for him and started a fire beside it. Tommy just stood there, with a blank look on his face, not comprehending anything. Then he just fell flat on his back, fast asleep. That's what can happen when you're tired and cold — you just fall asleep and die. But he was okay in the lean-to.

Bill, Curly and Jim pressed on. Meanwhile, I headed back to the fellows with the horses, leaving the dog with Tommy. They were just getting ready to break camp and continue. I made arrangements for them to pick up Tommy on the way through and then headed back to the lean-to, stoked the fire and told him the plans. Then I set out to catch up to the other fellows.

About 3 p.m., I rounded a bend and facing me were two white horses, with a bobsleigh behind them. My gosh, I thought, civilization at last! I found Curly, Bill, Jim and two fellows from the fort standing around a fire, laughing. They gave me a tin plate full of beans and a cup of rum. Well, of course, when you're that tired anything tastes great and by the time I finished that cup of rum, I was feeling no pain! Bill told me that the fellows who had given up and returned to Slate Creek had told Percy Bloomer that we had very little hope of making it out alive, so Percy had notified Fort St. James by radio and had them send in an emergency team. Here they were! Sometime around dusk, the others arrived. We fed them, and immediately headed out towards Shoemaker Lake where we would make camp for the night.

I'll always remember waking up in that sleigh, and laying on my back there. The only sound I could hear was the jingling of the chains and harness and I could see the pine trees going by. It seemed like a miracle that I could float past the trees without breaking snow.

We arrived in Fort St. James two days later.

December 20

I was anxious to head south to Rossland, so after spending a night at the Fort, I headed home in my big, black Chrysler. Tommy Rough was with me, while Bill Faith, Curly Neyberg and two other fellows from Fort St. James followed in Bill's Dodge about an hour behind us. The roads were just awful. We had been warned about it at the Fort. Because of heavy snowfalls, there had been no traffic on the roads. It got a little difficult figuring out where the road was at times, but we had chains. Sometimes, we'd just guess and when we were wrong we were off the road! We managed to get to Vanderhoof about 7 p.m. Bill didn't get in until about midnight.

December 21 and 22

From Vanderhoof to Prince George it was the same thing all over again. The road hadn't been used so we had to "break trail." The trip from Prince George to Quesnel was much better. Farmers in the area had kept the roads pretty clear, but Bill ended up off the road about 40 miles from town. We only knew something was wrong when he failed to show up. It was a nasty, bitterly cold night, so those boys would have been in trouble out there. The local telegraph station operator, Louis Labordie (who later became a Member of Parliament) and I decided to double back and look for them.



"It was a nasty, bitterly cold night. We found the car with its nose off the road and the back end sticking up."

We found the car with its nose off the road and the back end sticking up. One fellow was running along the road trying to keep warm, while the others were huddled in the car. We hooked a chain between my car and Bill's, pulled it out and got it going. But it kept stalling along the way, until it just wouldn't move. The four of them piled into my car and we drove back to Quesnel. It was snowing like mad; you could see as far as the headlights shone, then it was just white. It was a nightmare.

December 23

About 10 a.m., Tommy and I got going again. There was a tow-truck in town, so we knew Bill would be along eventually. Well, the road was horrible. The snow was drifting and we had trouble staying on course. We drove most of the way to 100-Mile House in second gear.

December 24

We got going again pretty early in the morning and the further south we got, the better the road conditions were. I dropped Tommy off near Enderby and crossed the border into Washington State in the early evening. Traveling through to Kettle Falls and back up again toward the border was the fastest route. I arrived at the customs office at Paterson, about 10:30 and was told by Mr. Cox, the customs officer, that the road up to Rossland was closed. Well, I'd come this far, so I figured I would try it myself anyway.

I got several miles before the car got stuck. I had a shovel in the trunk, so I made a path across the highway to a runoff road going up the side of the hill. I backed up the runoff and shoveled a path along the highway for a bit. Then I piled some rocks on my rear bumper, got in the car and hit the highway! I had enough momentum to keep me going all the way up to Rossland.

I pulled into my driveway just a few minutes before midnight. There was my wife standing in the doorway. "Oh," she said, calm as could be. "I thought you'd be home for Christmas."