

Acres of Memory

BY D. A. CAMPBELL

The tenth line of Redtrees was a rock strewn ribbon of sand which followed the contours of the rolling land, until it blended with the sky on the horizon. Where the road ran between the embankments at the crests of the ridges, the rains of countless seasons had washed the soil from the surface roots of trees, so that they appeared as knarled fingers probing into the earth.

To climb those steep hills in Molly, my '39 Dodge, was a daily endurance test. In bottom gear, and with the gas pedal pressed to the floor, I sometimes wonder how I managed to travel back and forth between the newspaper office and the "Hungry Hundred".

"She's seen better days", the man who sold her said in all honesty, "but you can't expect much for seventy bucks!"

If I can ever afford to drive a Cadillac, (and I never will), I won't feel the affection for it that I felt for Molly! We rode through some tough times together and over roads which never led to the palaces of my dreams.

One day, I discovered another car in even worse shape than Molly. It looked as if it had escaped from a junk yard only to die in a cloud of steam, in a last desperate attempt to climb a hill. Its owner had his head stuck inside the bonnet, whilst his wife and four pretty children watched him helplessly from the shade of roadside trees.

"Indians," I told myself, as I chugged and wheezed my way past them - to stop on that hill would have been fatal for Molly. When I reached the top, I placed the old girl in a position for a rolling start and walked back to the stranded travellers.

"Problems?" I asked the man. It was a stupid question - like asking a drowning man if he could use a life jacket!

He looked at me and smiled, friendly brown eyes appreciating my concern. His hair was black and sweaty and his hands caked with grease. He pointed to a large hole in the bottom of the radiator from which a few drops of scalding water still dripped.

"Too big to fix - 'ave ter leave it 'ere today." My many years in military service had taught me to size up men quickly. I liked this man instinctively. He was proud and independent - he would not ask me for help.

"I guess I'd better take you and your family to where you were going," I said, taking the initiative. "Where do you live?"

"Blue Lake Reserve, it's a long way - 20 miles or more." For a moment he examined my face for my reaction, and when he spoke again, it was with a tone of embarrassment.

"Couldn't even pay yer for the gas - haven't made a nickel today!"

Three of the children came shyly towards us, perhaps seeing me as their rescuer. The smallest child was crying in its mother's arms - it was past supper time and the baby was hungry.

"You'll have to walk back to my car," I told him apologetically. "I'm not exactly driving a winner myself - if we're lucky, it might get us to Blue Lake!" I packed six more people into Molly - we were sardines in a tin can - a tin can on wheels! Going down hill was easy. When I let in the clutch, Molly came to life and we headed down the road in a cloud of dust.

As I passed by the "Hungry Hundred" I caught a glimpse of Angus standing by the fence line with a scythe in his hand. He looked at me in amazement, hobbled on his painful legs and almost fell, as I sped past to gather speed for the next hill.

It was a miserable journey to "Blue Lake". We were cramped, it was hot and the youngest child cried all the way. I was glad when I pulled into the reserve - a cluster of wooden buildings in a clearing of the bush.

I kept the engine running and let my passengers out of the car. The man paused for a moment and thanked me. I cannot remember what prompted me to pull out my one and only bill - two dollars.

"If you can use this - you're welcome to it," I told my new friend. A friend in need is a friend indeed!

I was an hour late for supper when I arrived back at the farm. Angus was waiting for me like a grand inquisitor.

"Saw yer drive past 'ere with a bunch of Indians. Thought you'd more sense - askin' for trouble, so y'are. They'll be back ter git yer, an yer'll be sorry - so yer will!"

"Did you ever talk to an Indian?", I asked in exasperation. I was hot, tired and in no mood for old women's (or old men's) tales.

"Nope", he said, "but I 'eard plenty about 'em - so I 'ave."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked angrily, "keep a shot gun handy?"

Angus limped away muttering to himself. Something about Broncos and Limies being big headed like mules and "can't tell 'em a blasted thing."

During the course of the next week I drove past the stranded car on my way to and fro. Then one day on my way home I noticed it had gone.

When I arrived home there was a wholesome smell of baking in the summer kitchen and hot, blue streaked pies on the table. My wife was all smiles and happiness.

"Guess what?", she said excitedly, "somebody left a basket of blueberries in the porch - and this! She handed me a grubby envelope with a two dollar bill inside. "No message - not one word. What does it mean?"

There was a message but she just couldn't see it at that moment. Life is like that - we often just don't try to get the message.

"This gift is from a Canadian, a real Canadian. These people can communicate without speaking or writing. They were doing it long before the white man came to Canada."

"But what is the message?" she asked again. I was trying to formulate the answer when Angus came through the door!

"See yer got a letter from the Indians. Saw 'em leave, so I did. What does it say?"

It was my moment to triumph and I gave him both barrels.

"It says 'never point a shot gun at a friend. One day you might need him!'" © 10

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