ALLAN BENSON

Allan Benson was born in Victoria and grew up in Vermillion, Alberta on a ranch. His father was a barber and ran a pool hall. Allan and his brother, George, looked after the ranch. His father would visit his wife and sons every Sunday. Either George or Allan would pick him up and drive him home.

Allan thinks winters were colder then," or maybe we just didn't have the facilities to enable them to keep warm. Clothing wasn't as good, either."

Allan looked after horses from an early age. His mother gave he and George a horse while they were young boys. With stallions running on open range, the mares soon produced many horses. They didn't need the care on the prairie that they do here. "Prairie wool" was plentiful in those days. What is "Prairie wool?" Allan explains.

"You may be too young to remember Prairie wool, but that is one of the finest horsefeeds one can get. It's the natural grass that was growing on the Prairies. That's what the buffalo lived on and one didn't need oats with it. The horses kept in wonderful condition. They would eat this all winter and come in in very good shape in the spring. In every respect as far as I know. It was comparable to the "bunch grass" in the Cariboo Country.

"We learned riding right there because my Dad was in partnership with a conductor on Canadian National. They used to bring carloads of yearling steers and heifers each spring up to Vermillion, so my brother, George, and I looked after these calves for the summer. They were all outside, but we tried to keep them more or less together so we wouldn't have too many strays in the fall to pick up. I'm sure I don't know yet how much it cost to get them up there from Calgary. Not very much I would think."

While a young man, Allan took a job with the C.N.R. First he he was a "wiper" in the shops or round houses, where all the coal burning engines were. Al describes his job as wiper.

"They clean the fires in the engines when they come in, fill them full of coal in the tender and they turn them around on the turntable when they came in so they would go out the other way and prepare them for their new journey east or west, and load up the water tank."

When an adventurous young man, Allan decided to join the

American Army in Seattle. After receiving free room and board for three days, he decided against joining and walked to the train to Vancouver. According to Al,

"We came in on an orange train from California. There must have been at least 50 or 60 bums on that train. The train was from California but we caught it at Grant's Pass, Oregon. There is a tunnel a mile and a half long. It runs under most of the city of Seattle and it comes out at the center of Seattle. They have warnings there not to catch the train there, but you don't pay as much attention to the warnings under those circumstances as you would otherwise. So anyway, I caught it before it entered the town and, of course, when I got on there was no one on at that time. There was certainly a lot of them waiting at the end of the tunnel. Word had got around that there was an army of policemen over at Blaine and they were going to kick every person off. When they kicked them off they probably were treated lightly enough. I knew the watches very well.

"I knew the locomotives very well, you know, where the tool boxes were and everything and I'd crawl in one of these tool boxes. Before they went across the line at Blaine the fireman came up to take water and he kicked around on these boxes to see if anyone was in there, but I never moved, so I pulled into Blaine.

Allan worked for one of the great towing companies in Prince Rupert for a while but didn't really want to fish or do anything on the coast. Allan talks of his adventures.

"There was a lady teacher up, you know the Sheehan place up the valley? That's where Patty Sheehan used to live beyond Smokey Neighbour's old place. Anyway, he had a bunch of daughters and other boys, kids. And there was the Davidson family just beyond. They had a school there and this teacher came to teach them. I don't know whether she grew despondent or had trouble otherwise, but she attempted to commit suicide, which didn't work very well. Her brother came up from down Vancouver way. Of course, by this time I was in the cab business; there were very few cars here and most everyone had to ride by cab. Doctors, the police. They had no cars. So, I took this chap up to see his sister and he decided he was going to move her away from there and she was quite agreeable. She should have been in hospital anyway, which she did. I was working with Imperial Oil here in town, had their agency, and I needed to

go to Vancouver to get some equipment. One of the higher-ups in Imperial Oil said to ride down in one of the tankers which were leaving Rupert all the time empty. So, that was fine and it was about midnight when I got aboard. It was dark, small lighting. I hadn't seen this chap for some 12 or 15 years and I heard this voice beside me and he said "You going down with us, Al?" And I looked and by jove, it was this guy that I see with his sister. I said, "Yeah, I'm going down with you." "Oh, that's great," he said, "we'll talk about old times a bit." He was a mate aboard the boat and decided to go down the west side of Vancouver Island. They had it planned that they would pick up something there on the way down. I still don't know whether they forgot to put this ballast in these tanks, you know. They didn't anyway and we got out there on the west coast and it doesn't take much of a blow out there to turn you upside down. That was quite an experience. They were pumping in as hard as they could. I don't think sea water is the best thing for those tanks but at the same time, it was a case of life and death. As soon as she got the decks almost flush with the sea it quit rolling quite a bit. We were pretty happy after that. It frightened, me, I know, being a land man.

"Then there was the James Carruthers trawler episode, too. There were three of them. The James Carruthers, the W.R. Foster, and the Kelly. And they were all the same. I was watching the cod war between Iceland and Britain on T.V. and they both had their ships out there together and they were identical with those trawlers they had out there. So I guess it's been a model that they've manufactured for years and years and years. They certainly could stand the weather, I'll tell you that much. I went to work at age 17 on one of these trawlers. There were a lot of men on there aboard her. Being a coal burner she powered with steam and that took more men, of course, than diesel does today. Two coal passers and two deckhands; eighteen fishermen, first and second mate, a first and second engineer, the cook and the flunkey. And then the old man, Captain Olstrum, who was one cranky old man. He was half animal, I think. He used to beat that cook around something terrible, and there's one thing I didn't tell you. I couldn't believe my eyes. Three days after we sailed, the cook was well enough to come out of his bunk after his time ashore and that's the

first time I'd seen him. I had done the cooking up to that time and suddenly he came out of this bunk and he had a peg leg. Now that sounds out of line, but he had a peg leg just fastened on at the knee and pointed down there just like the stories we've heard about Long John Silver. A lot of people would say perhaps that isn't true. But it is true and he could sail around the kitchen on that point, spin, get the plates down from there. He was marvelous. I don't know to this day what happened to him, nor do I know what happened to Captain Olstrum. I think I told you that Captain Lawler was a captain in his own right. He was acting as first mate but he brought the ship back to Prince Rupert.

"After the first trip they hired me as flunky and I was to get more money - a dollar a day extra. The fishermen and crew were all going to give me a dollar extra. That was the reason I went out again. The third time we were going out on the way to Kodiak and the captain forbid any of us to go ashore and we didn't mind because we didn't want to go anyway. The village is not very big and we were quite happy to stay on board. Many times I think now the second engineer went ashore, too. I'm not positive over that. The old man never came back, I know that. I saw him go. I also know the second engineer had a revolver because he showed it. It is hard to say what happened to the old man. The third time when we went we had a new cook. That was another reason why I went, because the captain would never be molesting this cook because when he was emphasizing what he would do to the captain if he came throwing his weight around the galley again like he had done before, he picked up this cleaver and said, "Don't worry about him." I was frightened of the captain. On the first night I was out and I had fed the fishermen, the cook was in his bunk, the captain rang for the flunkey. He wanted a glass of water and he drank it. Then he said, "Now get me another one." And, I being a little green, said, "Why didn't you give me that pitcher in the first place and I would have got you a pitcher?" And, oh, brother. Did he get mad. He sort of half lifted me with his foot you know and I'd never been treated like that in my life. I swore that if I ever got the chance he would never move again, that guy. But when I got ashore I forgot all about it.

"I think I chose Hazelton to live in because of it's appearance.

It was just ab t this time of year because we had taken in the herring fishing. It finishes about the middle of April. It was broad daylight and I was riding on top of the car and it looked so peaceful and nice down there. I thought it would be a nice place to spend a few days. I had a few dollars, too, that I had saved. It was 1923 when I arrived here - over 50 years ago.

" The wooden bridge on the pier was here. I went to the Omenica, now the Inlander Hotel. The people all rushed over to read the register to see where I was from.

" Alfred Russel was going out fishing so he rented me his car. It was a Model-T Ford and he didn't need it while he was away so he rented it to me for a dollar a day. I could use it as I liked. I decided to use it as a taxi.

"It began naturally. Every Tom, Dick and Harry would ask you "Hey. Run me over to so and so, will you?" and I would go ahead and the thing began to grow. One thing greatly in my favour was no one ever had to have a license of any description - driving license, chauffer's license, anything. I have every chauffer's license that I ever had in my life.

" The Native people always had plenty of money, you know. They never haggled over money matters. They were a little frightened to ride in cars at that time. They never quibbled at the charge. Very glad to get the ride and you were never in want for people to ride.

" We didn't use the phone much at that time. My headquarters was at the Omenica Hotel. I ran that taxi for 60 days and 60 nights and when Alfred Russel came back I was able to pay him without any trouble. I saved my money. I think I had seven or eight hundred dollars when he came back. An absolute fortune in those days! I thought I had half the money in the world.

Then came the snow. There were no snow plows, nothing so when the snow came we were finished so I decided to go see my mother and sister who were living in Victoria.

I met a lot of wonderful people in Hazelton and so I thought I would come back and buy a car of my own. Taxi car ran only in summer. In winter we had a team of horses.

We did drive for the doctors and the police. I took the doctor up to the Love ranch - his name was Lightbourne, and

he had received a call from Kispiox to get up there. When we went past Kispiox we also passed the person who made the phone call - it was the Father of the Love children, Jack Love. So, the doctor went in and the birth of one of the daughters took place and then he came out from the room and handed me this one and said, "I've got more work here to do," and that was when the twins were born. Someone had to hold the one while he delivered the other.

"And once up at Glen Vowell I went in with two policemen (we went into this end of Glen Vowell) and I gathered from what they said that they wanted this man for a witness the following day. They wanted to make sure that he was coming in. He was an older man and well thought of and I knew him very well. And I knew if he said he would come in he would, but one of these boys was not too familiar with this area. He said he was taking him whether he liked to go or not, and the old fellow didn't want to go. The policeman didn't understand. Anyway, he went to get Peter Barney who lived right close there, as an interpreter because the Native couldn't understand the policeman. Well, he was away. The policeman was inside the house and I could see through the window that he was in trouble because one of these neck yokes that they use with horses - this old fellow had it up like this and he was going to use it. Anyway, the policeman came out and talked to me for a few minutes and wondered what we'd do, but the old fellow followed him out with this neck yoke and, of course, the poor policeman was frightened. He was young and the old fellow swung at him with this neck yoke and the policeman shot at his feet. Later I heard a story that when a Native person, especially the older people, has been shot at like that, then they sort of feel that they are finished. How true that is, I don't know. Anyway, we left him. They were advised by the interpreter that Louis would come in if he said he would. Oh, and at the time the fellow shot at him, the old man ran back into the house and got his 30-30. I saw him going past the window with this and he let fly, you know. And we got out of there pretty fast to the car. We had to turn around ready to go. So that was one time that a bullet came - didn't hit the car nor any of us, but it was pretty close.

"He came in and gave himself up next day. The RCMP felt bad about it. They brought a court charge against the old fellow next

day. I had to go as a witness and I was determined that it wasn't the old fellow's fault. I had it all wrapped up what I was going to tell them and he got off. RCMP were relieved. So was the old man. At that time they had an Indian policeman here as well. I had the taxi business about 20 years."

Allan Benson is a great story teller and tells a number of stories in his own inimitable way.

"I'll tell you a funny little story about another hospital case. We had a matron in the hospital. She was quite an elderly person, English, I think and very talkative. And, of course, whenever they wanted to go downtown they'd phone me. Fifty cents was the fare. She said, "Allan, did anyone ever have a baby in your car?" "No," I said, "never did. I think I've been close a couple of times." And she said, "I hope it happens to you. It couldn't happen to a nicer guy." I was in the theatre that night and they flahsed on the screen with the writing "Allan Benson wanted at the door immediately. Woman going to have a baby at Glen Vowell." So, I made it up there. You know how they are. They all want to go to town, too, with this neighbour and I had visions of the two o'clock trip going back there and I didn't like the idea of bringing these people back. They'd wander around till two or three o'clock in the morning. Probably visit their neighbours and get a drink or two and I'd have to do the midnight run. Well, I talked them into staying home and I took this woman with me and strange to say, her name was Benson, too. Richard Benson's wife. So, we got to the Four Mile Bridge and I wasn't driving too fast, and then she had the baby. "Well," I thought, "I'll make it to the hospital anyway." She said, "I've had the baby, and if it's a boy I'm going to call it Allan." "By gosh," I said, "you'd better not. Better forget that." Anyway, it was a girl and we got to the hospital and they looked after her there. They wrote a great manuscript about 'Dr. Benson'. I still have it. Dr. Murphy wrote it. It was in the Vancouver paper next morning. 'Cabbie loses race with stork'. Barney Mulvane was here then and he picked it up quickly. He was a reporter for the Vancouver Sun.

I've had quite a few horse adventures. Some of them very good and enjoyable and others not too good.

Tony West who was a local policeman here at that time came

bustling out here one afternoon about four and asked me how long I would take to get two or three horses together. He had a horse. We had to go up and get hold of an insane fellow who had gone up the Telegraph Line.

Must have been 10 or 15 years ago. So we had the horses up and away we went. We hired a truck and we put these horses in and we went as far as Marty Allen's. We had a very nice supper there. They were very hospitable and always have been. Went up as far as First Cabin and we spent the night there. We sort of knew that he had left First Cabin, that is this chap we were after. The point was that it was fairly late in November and if they allowed this fellow to get on up the line he would probably perish and during the winter they would have to go up and search and search all over the place to find the body. And I had figured also that if we didn't catch him before we got to Second Cabin that we'd have to swim across this Kuldo Creek. I didn't want to do that because it would be terribly cold and the water was high. We took off at five o'clock in the morning and located this fellow's tracks. He had hobnails in his shoes and we could follow him quite easily. The news had come in that there was a Fishery inspector had gone up to Kispiox for his fall tour and on the way back he met this fellow. Roy MacDonald was the Fishery man. He was very abrupt this Roy MacDonald was. "Where are you going?" he says. "Oh," he said, "I'm going up to telegraph line." "Oh, what are you doing up there at this time of the year?" "Oh," he said, "I'm going over to Russia. The doctors are better over there and I need an operation." "Well," says Roy, "you're going the wrong way. You should have went up the other way." He recognized that this fellow wasn't right. He slept in the tent with him and he sat up all night with him. He wouldn't eat anything but pellets. He had a few pellets with him and when they came to First Cabin, of course, the guy went on his way where Roy had shown him. He said, "You go up that trail." And when Roy came in he reported it. That's how Tony West got in touch with the Attorney-General down there. WE took after him and we could follow his tracks fine.

Roy MacDonald did put him on the right trail. He said, "There's your trail." And he went on his way. So we found the tracks until darkness and then there was a certain amount of wind-

fall , etc., and the trail was poor. They make three logs, you know, and they put them across a beaver dam. Well, the log in the center goes down and sort of lets you into the water, and the ones on the outside, they go down, too, and your packhorses are going this way - down on one side for a moment and then down on the other. So, we came to what they call Big Flat. Used to stop there, pack-train up there all the time when they packed to the cabins. A cabin every 30 miles and then there was a halfway at about 15 miles so the linesman could go in there out of the storm and spend the night there. Then there was also a quarterway. Well, there was this Big Flat. It's not too far but we didn't know where the Second Cabin was. We didn't know where this guy was in the dark. We followed it with a flashlight and then the rain started. Oh, it was miserable. I said to Tony that I would go in there to Big Flat to see if I could find Second Cabin there. I didn't know where it was, I couldn't find it. He said, "You walk along the trail." I said, "I think what has happened is we lost his footprints there, and he's gone in here to look around this Big Flat. Perhaps up a little higher he's hit the trail again." And sure enough, I had this flashlight - we picked up his track again. He had come back. I said to myself, 'if we're going to catch that guy he must be in Second Cabin right now'. We got on the horses you know and the horses could smell smoke or something. They could smell that cabin. And we finally burst out into a clearing, it was pretty rough going, and here's the cabin. There was an old barn or lean-to thing there and Tony stepped up to the door and he hit it with his knuckles, four or five times. And I said, "Tony, you'd better give me your cap," because he had his slicker on, so I tossed the police cap into the bush right there so that this guy wouldn't see it. He had with him a 12 gauge shotgun and 6 shells.

We heard a reply in the cabin and prior to this we had heard that this guy sits up all night and never sleeps. Roy MacDonald told us this. Anyway he called from the cabin for us to come in out of the rain. The first thing Tony did was to go in to look for the shells with his flashlight. He found the shells on the bed. Then we had to get this guy something to eat; he had no food. He said he was feeling tough, that's why he was going to Russia, to get fixed up. While Tony fixed his horse for the night, this guy

and I went to the river to get some water. We each brought up a bucket. He ate ravenously when we made supper. Tony and I had the food on the packhorse and then put it in the cabin. We were hungry, too, by then. We stayed overnight. I was uneasy and slept under the pack horse canvas and tried to stay dry. In the morning, Tony wanted to be on his way and we made breakfast and he got ready to go. He wanted to take this guy with him no matter how much he wanted to go to Russia. So Tony left and before he left I asked him about crossing Big Creek, I think they call it. Up the creek a quarter mile or so is the old cable crossing where they used to run the line. There's a chair to cross over the creek. That was how this guy had come over the creek. I asked Tony to wait at this Big Creek because I didn't know this guy very well. He said he would wait. I never saw him until he was across the water, actually until three o'clock in the afternoon. Tony was like that. He didn't wait for anyone. When Tony left, I felt uneasy and a bit in danger because I didn't know how I was going to get this guy across the creek. There was five feet of water going like crazy. I told myself I could put him on the back of the horse, which I did, then I sat in the saddle. I felt secure because he couldn't pull me out of the saddle. There were a few deep holes in this water and this guy held me with both arms while we were going across. He told me the chair was a long way up the creek so we didn't go up to it to cross. By now I was anxious to catch up to Tony because he had no right to leave me like he had done. We finally caught up to him and he was cooking a nice lunch for himself. He laughed when he saw us. It wouldn't have been so funny if one of us had drowned crossing the creek. Anyway, we all stayed together from then on. I talked to the guy as we walked along. He wasn't an old man and he wasn't dumb. He knew it was me who cooked his meals and felt sorry for him. We started out for Allen's again. Tony got there first because this guy and I were alternating walking and riding so he could rest.

"They took him to Vancouver. He was very sharp, but his mind wandered a bit."

Allan Benson lived in Two-Mile for a number of years. He died in Terrace in 1985. His wife Mary is in Hazelton Hospital and their daughter, Gloria, now lives on the farm.