THE BUSHWHACKERS' *Model T*

Alex Monkman had a dream that involved a car, the Rockies – and not a road in sight

by Masa Takei

photograph by Taylor Kennedy

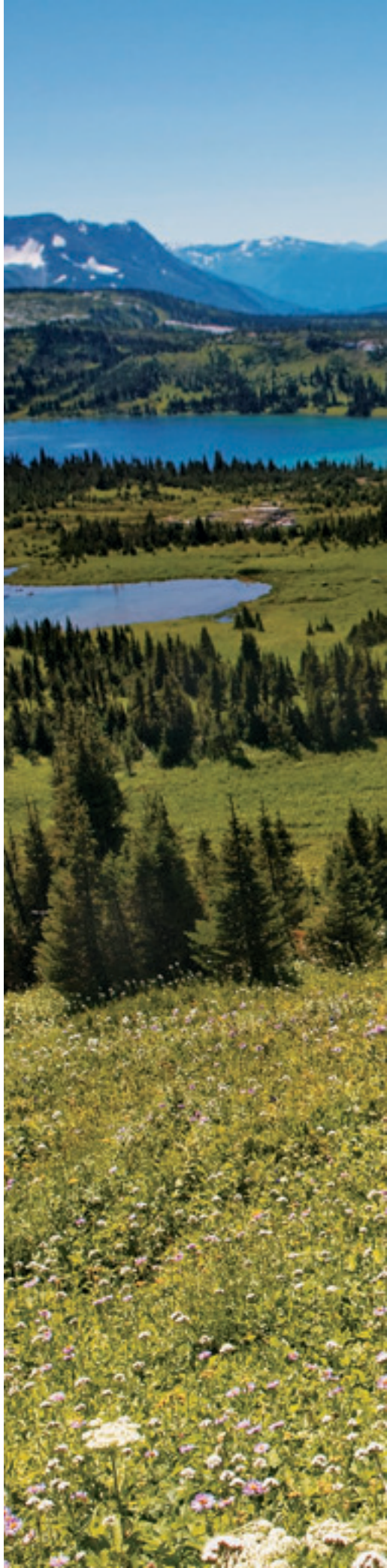
This must be where the Model T took a tumble. Slopes drop precipitously from either side of the metre-wide ridge beneath my boots. Up ahead, a game trail snakes through a field of chest-high devil's club and between Jack pine an arm's-span apart. We're 56 kilometres into a 63-km hike through the northern Rockies, and two of the guides, Josef Villiger and son René, have stopped to screw in a marker a couple of hundred metres back. I dump my 25-kilo pack and wipe a trickle of sweat with a mud-splashed sleeve. Photographer Taylor Kennedy inspects a trail blaze: a hand-size strip of bark hewn from a Douglas fir, the puckered edges around white flesh long healed. Our third guide, Toni Schuler, of Switzerland, points to a matching blaze on the tree's opposite side.

It is the sixth day of this week-long trek. By the same time tomorrow the five of us will have reached Hobi's, a trapper's cabin on the Herrick River and the end of our journey. We've traversed boreal forests, waded rivers, climbed high into sub-alpine meadows then up alpine peaks, and are now alternately slogging through lowland bogs and scrambling across prickly, densely vegetated slopes. Since the expedition started, we've met not one other human soul; the only tracks we've found have been those of moose, elk, bear and the odd wolf. But time and again, we've all uttered the words, "How the heck did they get the car *through here*?"

For despite the distracting beauty that surrounds us, hovering at the periphery of our consciousness are the hardy men and women who first forged a road through this punishing terrain. Seventy years before us, in the depths of the Great Depression, they came: pushing, pulling, sometimes even carrying, a 1927 Model-T Ford.

The most northerly agricultural tract in Canada, B.C.'s Peace River Country is a 365,000-square-km swath that straddles the B.C.-Alberta border, from Grande Cache in the south to the Yukon and Northwest Territories in the north. Roughly the size of Germany, it has less than half a per cent of that country's population. The problem with developing the Peace Country through the early 1900s was not a shortage of farmers and ranchers, however, but the exorbitant cost of transporting goods to Vancouver ports. So with the federal government slow to make good on promises of a railway, the pioneers of the Peace took matters into their own hands.

At the fore of this movement: 67-year-old Alex Monkman, a Metis raised in Manitoba and lured west by the gold rush of 1898 who eventually settled here to farm, hunt, trap



THE TARNS REGION
Descending to Camp 4 by Hugh Lake, the only evidence of our fellow humans is the odd jet contrail above and the Inukshuk-style cairns left as trail markers.

MONKMAN LAKE (above) marks the end of the first 25 km of a well-established path and the start of rougher trails. (right) Monkman's infamous Model T, before it careened off the trail; one of the Monkman Pass "Highway's" hardy 1938 crews.

and trade furs. In fact, it was during a trapping expedition in 1922 that he came across what was thought to be the lowest pass through the Rockies north of Missoula, Montana – a pass First Nations had been using for at least 300 years. Though it would be 1936 before he and a partner launched the Monkman Pass Highway Association and a three-year campaign to cut a 211-km trail from Rio Grande, Alberta, to the railway station at Hansard, B.C. For if no railway was forthcoming, Monkman reasoned, then why not a highway? "If we could cut our way in, we could cut our way out," he proclaimed. Show that a shortcut through the Rockies was possible, and the government would surely be obliged to build a road. And to egg on the Ottawa bureaucrats: dedicated crews of farmers, ranchers and townsfolk would drag a "Pathfinder" Model T over the mountains, then drive it down the main street in Prince George with a symbolic bag of grain to demonstrate the viability and importance of a highway to farmers in the Peace.

It was a venture that, ultimately, would prove unsuccessful. World War II broke out, men were needed elsewhere, and Monkman's vision faded into obscurity. But then four years ago, 30-year-old environmental management consultant Kreg Alde embarked on his own wilderness odyssey with a cadre of modern-day volunteer Peace Country pioneers, some of whom took weeks away from work and families to reclaim Monkman's trail from years of overgrowth. The soft-spoken father of two simply felt, pioneer-style, "that someone should and so why not me?" After all, three generations of Aldes had already left blood, sweat and tears on this land. Kreg's father, Wayne, an avid outdoorsman, had traced Monkman's trail in 1977 and hiked it again with Kreg in 2000. The following year, Kreg's grandfather died in a plane crash on nearby Ice Mountain while flying in to pick up Wayne from a hike through the next pass over. Yet this time, the goal behind the trail would not be a causeway for commerce, but a call to adventure and the chance to build something lasting that would benefit generations to come.

Our feet have succumbed to blisters, our

(top left) Taylor Kennedy

At the same time, it would preserve the spirit of those who first cherished such a vision. And three years and 1,900 volunteer hours later, on July 17, 2008, Kreg Alde stood with tears in his eyes at the trail's grand opening.

But would the people come? A trail unused is one quickly reclaimed by nature. So Alde embarked on yet another campaign of inspiration. Instead of a Model T, three Swiss guides from northern Alberta would convey a photographer and a journalist over the Monkman Trail – in hopes we would compare it favourably to such venerable classics as the Chilkoot and West Coast trails. It was an easy sell. As one, already smitten, journalist wrote in 1937 of the area's highlights: Kinuseo Falls is "50 feet higher than Niagara . . . one of the marvels of the Canadian Rockies"; Monkman Lake is "so similar to Lake Louise . . . that it needs only the poppies and the chateau to be its twin….Yet how many have known these gifts of God, let alone seen them?" Sign me up, Alde, we all emailed back. And so it was, on a warm morning in late summer we found ourselves rumbling out of Tumbler Ridge in Alde's one-tonne pickup for the drive to the start of the Monkman Pass Memorial Trail. Just a half-hour later, I was standing with Kennedy, gaping at Kinuseo Falls where it plunged past vast swirls of limestone into a pool rimmed with logs polished as smooth and round as baby carrots. How is it we'd never heard of this place?

Day two brought the Cascades: 10 waterfalls suspended above a three-kilometre-long section of Monkman Creek, four of them bearing the names of the original trailblazers: Brooks, Moore, Monkman and McGinnis. At Monkman Lake, we hovered over Schuler's shoulder as he painted a perfect watercolour of the icefield-cloaked mountains reflected in the vast, clear lake, the plaintive call of a loon echoing through the gathering dusk. On the third day, after a long climb up to the Tarns to meadows filled with wildflowers (purple monk's hoods, yellow arnicas, red columbines) and a 2,275-metre scramble up Paxton Peak for views of mountains beyond more mountains, including the pyramid of Mt. Robson, we camped by Hugh Lake (named after Alde's grandfather) on the Continental Divide. By day four, we'd descended from alpine nirvana to where the vegetation again thickened, the trail became rougher and we squelched deep into muck that threatened to spill over our boot tops. "You've got to know Wayne and Kreg. They just walk through everything. Brush, water, anything," Schuler offered by way of explanation as we ploughed a direct line through bog until dusk.

(Archival) courtesy Joan Jones

Two days later, our feet have succumbed to blisters, our packs cling to our backs like morbidly obese monkeys and our knees groan loud complaints. In a perverse way we're having great fun, particularly when reminded of those who bore a significantly heavier load up these slopes.

Peering down at where the Model T tumbled all those years ago, I try to imagine the men's exhaustion and panic that day. "We had nearly reached the top when, on one of the shifts, the car jumped its restraining blocks and went careening down the hill. [Then] – just as it was broadside – [it] landed in a clump of tag alder. Its weight and speed caused the trees to bend and, for a moment, we thought the car had stopped. Then, like a springboard, the trees recoiled and flipped the car up and over. It rolled sideways to the bottom." The steering wheel, spoked wheels and windshield were smashed. No wonder the Model T was little more than a battered skeleton by trail's end.

Taking swigs of water, the five of us again plunge onward and downward – until breaking out of the brush we come to the Fontoniko River where it meets the drainage from Ice Mountain, the last river crossing of the day. Flapjack, our second-to-last camp, is just 20 metres away across the river, and boots, socks, shirts, pants – all come off. This is the perfect opportunity to get in a cold wash while there's still daylight to dry us. Once across, we find a steel fire ring and dry firewood (as with the other camps Kreg has established en route), where Josef and René wrestle with the heli-dropped 170-litre bear-proof barrel containing our extra camp equipment and food stash. The rest of us slash ferns, level brush for the tents and build a fire. And as the tents go up, so does a perimeter of twin strands of cord strung between graphite rods – an electric bear fence, developed in Alaska, to keep curious

grizzlies out while we sleep. The bear spray, bear bangers, air horn and, our defence of last resort, a 12-gauge pump-action shotgun, will be kept inside our tents for the night. Meanwhile, Josef, 59, climbs eight metres up a dense fir, sawing away branches with one hand as he goes and winding a length of recycled airplane control wire with a pulley around the trunk. He does the same in a neighbouring tree to create our bear-safe food cache.

The fragrance of wood smoke is soon mingled with more savoury aromas. Tonight: a hearty stew with buns baked by Josef's wife. A cast-iron pan over the flames makes for perfect bannock, eaten with butter and jam. And judging from Monkman's journal accounts, what we're eating is of far superior quality to what the original trail builders could expect after weeks of being "wet to the neck every night": bannock "so hard [the men] heaved [it] into the bushes"; going without meat for 10 days before killing a grizzly for a stew with dried beans – "slim and poor fare for hard-working men doing heavy clearing."

What hasn't changed, though, is the region's abundance of berries – huckleberries, raspberries, Saskatoons, blueberries. Each day we have scooped these up on the fly, barely slowing our pace. And the next morning Schuler again returns after a quick foray with a mug full of blueberries, for flapjacks browned in a skillet over the open fire. We'll need the energy. In this section of the trail, the vegetation has grown primordial: skunk cabbage fronds the size of welcome mats and devil's club of such proportions the plants are spiny caricatures of themselves. Thorns find their way through pants and into hands. Schuler swings his Shweizer Gertel, a cross between a machete and a scythe, to clear a way through the overgrowth. The trail becomes less defined until it's just a suggestion. "Yoy, yoy, yoy," intones Josef in his Swiss, singsong lilt, "Flapjack to here, needs a crew for a month." Then we're fanning out, searching for the next strip of pink flagging that marks the trail.

A couple of kilometres on is the hike's final river crossing: a 50-metre-span with a strong current. Alde had been marooned here three times by high water in what's now dubbed "Misery Creek." Today though, a two-person cable car ensures safe passage. The aluminum-and-wood car runs along a thick cable – an elegant design constructed by Josef, likely vetted by civil-engineer René, then tested over a creek on Schuler's cattle ranch. The tools we've humped in are needed to give it a few more tweaks.

Overhead, an ominous sky threatens. Josef immediately sets about hammering 30-centimetre spikes into the base of the cable car's timber platforms. Thunder growls in the distance. Josef hammers more frantically. All of us then assemble at the cable moorings and, under Josef's direction, attach the cable wrench to take up a few centimetres of slack. As the rumbling comes perceptibly closer, we scramble to get ourselves, and our packs, across the river.

No sooner are we on the other side, underneath a tarp nailed to the opposite platform, than a deep, rolling boom descends, punctuated with cymbal crashes, followed by a flashbulb-pop of lightning. A rain, of downright biblical proportions, hammers down. We huddle and eat a lunch of German sausage and home-baked buns.

We tramp the last couple of kilometres in a downpour, soaked but jubilant – our hike out a far cry from the "hell" the original trail builders experienced – "working

with that car for the last eight miles in nearly two feet of snow with unfrozen bog holes beneath." Instead, we are soon sitting under tarps with a bottle of Louis Latour 2005 Chardonnay, a souvenir from the last barrel-cache, with plenty of time to relax and explore before the riverboat ride out in the morning. Monkman, on the other hand, arrived here a day too late for his crew's pre-scheduled pickup. The boat left with a load of sick men, then was stopped by slush ice on its return trip to ferry out the Model T. After struggling 200 km through the bush over three years, the crew were forced to quit just 85 km short of getting the Pathfinder to Hansard and still needed to get themselves and their horses out over the remaining rough terrain. The Model T was left to rust at Hobi's until its rescue many years later, when it was restored for the Pioneer Museum in Grande Prairie, Alberta. Finally, in 1960, the wilderness encompassing much of the trail was proclaimed a provincial park – a designation that ensures no cars will ever be driven through, or again tumble down, the pass. Still, though Monkman's dream of a shortcut to the coast may have died in its tracks, Kreg Alde and his modern-day adventures have preserved its vision. WW

☐ **ECO FOOTPRINT** Low impact. (Note: the ecologically sensitive alpine meadows of the Tarns region are reachable only on foot; helicopter tours are prohibited.)

☐ **GUIDED BY NATURE** – with Kreg Alde and his knowledgeable guides taking care of logistics. *monkmanexpeditions.com*

☐ **GEAR** Expedition pack; sandals for river crossings; well-fitting/broken-in hiking boots.

☐ **ADDITIONAL INTEL** Tumbler Ridge is well known for its dinosaur "footprints" and skeletal remains. *tumblerridgemuseum.com*

☐ **TAKING ACTION** The Wolverine Nordic & Mountain Society managed trail construction; funds are always appreciated at *pris.bc.ca/wnms*. As for the Peace Country, it has largely succumbed to development, save for the wilderness oasis that is Monkman Provincial Park. But a far larger area still threatened by resource extraction, the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area, lies directly northeast. *muskwa-kechika.com*

☐ **CRITICAL READING** *People of the Pass*, by Madelon Flint Truax and Beth Flint Sheehan – a comprehensive account of Monkman's highway efforts. (Beaverlodge & District Historical Association, 1988). *Exploring Tumbler Ridge*, Charles Helm (*Tumbler Ridge News*, 2008). ☐ *–M.T.*