

.... In the beginning

On a dark October night in Wyoming, two men pored over a series of maps set out on the floor of a ranch bunkhouse, lit by a single flickering lamp. Rich Hobson, who had worked hard to save money to buy a ranch, lost all his savings in the the financial crash of 1929 and was now a destitute romantic trying to make a living as a cowboy. 'Wild Horse' Panhandle Phillips was an excellent horseman and an infamous prankster.

By the light of the kerosene lamp, Pan showed Rich a map showing a huge expanse of nothing. An area stretching from the Fraser River to the Ocean showed only one lonely river winding its way across the paper, a place unknown, a place of mystery, a place of wide open spaces and untracked wilderness, with no roads or highways, towns or cities. The thought of a last frontier for herds of cattle, where there were few ranches and no barbed wire, fascinated both men and in 1934 they set out for Canada where they would follow their dream to try to build the biggest cattle ranch in North America.

Strangely, that map hasn't changed a lot. Look on any large map of British Columbia and you will see a large area from the Fraser to the Ocean that still looks pretty empty. Starting from Bella Coola on the coast, you can follow Highway 20 east over the Coast Mountain Range into the Chilcotin and toward the grasslands of the Cariboo, stopping here and there at small communities along the way where the local General Store or Trading Post still holds a place of pride and importance and the Post Office is the main gathering place.

First Nations peoples had occupied the Chilcotin plateau and coastal valleys and islands for thousands of years before their first contact with Europeans in 1793 with the arrival of Captain George Vancouver by sea, and the trans-continental trek by Alexander Mackenzie. Following this contact, the Bella Coola Valley, a natural route through the Coast Mountains, served as a corridor for the occasional fur trader, and later for prospectors lured by the Cariboo gold fields in the 1860's. A Hudson's Bay post was established in 1867.

The first large contingent of settlers into the area were actually Norwegians who came from Minnesota in 1894 to settle in the valley. The Inlet was reminiscent of the fjords of Norway and the people fell into a familiar way of life, even constructing their buildings in the traditional Norwegian manner. In the meanwhile, ranchers trickled into the Chilcotin from the Cariboo side, as early as the 1860's, when the influx of gold miners encouraged ranchers to take up homesteads to raise beef for the miners at Barkerville and later, the Klondike.

While the Chilcotin is best known for its ranching industry, hospitality and willingness to cater to tourism, the Bella Coola Valley has a rich history and diverse economy. In addition to the present day industry of ocean fishing, farming, and arts and culture, authentic wilderness tourism has become a part of every day life. Highway 20, part of the Coast Cariboo Circle tour, provides the only road access to the Great Bear Rainforest and begins at a deep sea port providing docking for yachts, cruise ships and BC Ferry's Discovery Coast Passage.

This guide was designed to lead you along Highway 20 from Bella Coola over the Chilcotin Plateau to the South Cariboo, showing you the activities the regions have to offer. However, the guide is color coded and can also be followed in reverse, from the Cariboo, through the Chilcotin, to the Bella Coola Valley.

Join us on this adventure and make this your very own Great Road Trip!

