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Cooke's Camp: A Letter and a Song Dear Sir: ?? " I must write about a situation relating to the early thirties, and an event that occurred at Cooke's Camp?-one of the camps with contracts from the government to construct the Trans-Canada Highway. A friend of mine, Tommy Stafford, and I were fortunate enough to be notified to report to Cooke's Camp, where we would get a job. At this time we were residing at Kempt Head, Boularderie. And luckily we had just received a small cheque amounting to \$16.00 each, for some work we had done on the road, under the jurisdiction of John R. Fraser, certainly a well-known name then and now. It being the month of November, the weather was cold, snowy, and windy. We decided to spend our \$16.00 on boots, socks, shirts, underwear, etc. • which we did in North Sydney. Then we headed for East Bay and Cooke's Camp. We hiked most of the way, arriving there late in the evening, reported to Cooke's office, and were sent to the bimkhouse to locate a place to sleep. We slept soundly, and awoke with the bull cook's yell, "Roll out and get at it." We dressed hurriedly but couldn't see anybody washing till we went outside. There was a brook about seventy feet from the back door. And those that did wash were standing in the brook or by the brook with soap and towel, washing their hands and faces. We did the same thing, then we ran to the cookhouse for breakfast. After a fast breakfast, the trucks were roaring their motors and the foremen were holler? ing for their men. We were sent on a truck with about ten other men and rolled or crawled through mud and snow to one of the cuts. Our fore? man was a McDonald from West Bay and he was a driver. He'd have new men every oth? er day. He'd make them work continuously, or fire them. I think Tom and I were the only two to stick it out regularly and we had to keep that pick and shovel moving • and it was no cinch shovelling up and into those big trucks. We were in good shape, and were anticipating a few days off over Christmas and New Year, to get back to Kempt Head and be with our folks for the holidays. But it wasn't to be. A few days ere Christ? mas, Cooke closed the office, without pay? ing the men. All of the men had a month's wages coming. He left word that he'd start up again come springtime. It certainly was a mean trick to pull, and those like Tom and myself who hadn't received any wages so far were pretty well stranded and dis? appointed. Amongst them were Little Dan the Bo, the Mira Bully, Donald from Wash? abuckt, Bob Wadden from the Bay, and oth? ers from outlying places with no money to get home for the holidays. Anyway, about thirty of us had to decide to stay in the camp. What food that was left in the cookhouse was eaten in about a week. Then we had a meeting, and each pair of men were elected for certain jobs. Tom and I being the youngest, we detailed to make a trip to Sydney every other day and go to the bakeries and get a bag of stale bread each. Sometimes we got an odd stale cake thrown in the bag. We did this for about three months. We were fortunate enough to get potatoes from different farm? ers, and the rabbits caught hell for rab? bit stew. Then we had beans without salt most of the time, stale bread and water, no tea, butter, milk, or sugar. Lynch, Gillis, and Gallivan had a camp further up the line just east of Big Pond. Their camp stayed



working all winter. We heard that the timekeeper there was also from Kempt Head, Phil McQueen. Tom and I decided to hike up there and have a talk with him. We did, and he was good enough to talk to the bosses for us. A couple of men were home sick, and one gang was short two men. We were called into the office, were looked over and talked to. They remarked that we looked to be in good shape and healthy, and could start there next morn. We then hiked back to Cooke's Camp, got our belongings, and stayed there at Lynch's Camp till that job was finished. In the meantime I had composed a few verses of song for our experience at Cooke's Camp. There must be some of the boys around yet. I would like to hear from Donald from Washabuckt, if he's still a- round. And say hello to Bob Wadden from the Bay. Maybe he'd like a package of mak- ""* • Alex L. Campbell For Alex Campbell's song about Cooke's Trans-Canada Highway Camp, turn to Page 38.