



Jasper-Yellowhead
Museum & Archives

Otto's Cache: Another Look at One of Jasper's Oldest Outfitting Company

In 1909, three brothers arrived at Fitzhugh (Jasper), a sparsely populated town, inhabited primarily by Grant Trunk Pacific (GTP) Railway laborers working furiously to lay track that would open up Northern Alberta and British

Columbia to tourists and entrepreneurs. The Otto brothers, (Jack, Closson, and Bruce) a cross breed of adventurers and entrepreneurs, saw Fitzhugh as an ideal location to cater to those looking to experience the wild Canadian Rockies and perhaps bag a few trophies. The brothers had come to Fitzhugh from Field and Golden, British Columbia where they already had a well-established reputation as guides and outfitters.

In 1911, when Mary Schaffer returned to Chaba Imne (Maligne Lake) with a group that was interested in recording scientific features of the region, she requested the help of her old friends, the Otto brothers, to act as outfitter and guide. In order to ensure that the group would have an easier time reaching their destination, Jack guided the group through the often-treacherous terrain and made sure that the group was comfortable at camp. He also assisted in the transportation of lumber that would be made into a river style boat to explore the lake. Meanwhile, Closson and Bruce were sent ahead to cut a trail, which was unexpectedly covered in several feet of snow. This did not discourage the industrious duo. They carved two shovels from a couple of large spruce trees and dug out a trail, leaving the hand hewn shovels to mark the trail head.

It was this type of backcountry survival skill that made the Ottos the first choice of many adventurers. Another well-known client of the Otto brothers was James Oliver Curwood, an author whose novels paid homage to the wild Canadian landscape. Curwood's tales told of bears, wild mountain men, and plucky women who dared to trade the safety of civilized society for the unruly, rustic wilds of nature. Curwood even immortalized Bruce Otto in one of his most well known novels, *The Grizzly King*. The Otto brothers also outfitted for Sherlock Holmes author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, during his highly publicized promotional tour, sponsored by the Grand Trunk Pacific (GTP) to help bring attention to newly completed stretches of track.

Another party, also sponsored by the GTP Railway, in hopes of drumming up publicity for the region, as an exclusive tourist destination, was a group headed by

Dr. Charles Doolittle Walcott, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Walcott had visited Jasper Park before to study fossils embedded in shale rock. This time, he hired Closson Otto to guide the group through the park and across the provincial boundary into the Mount Robson region.

Thanks to funding through the ASA Access to Holdings Grant program, funding was received to process, arrange, and describe some of the archive backlog. Included in this backlog were two boxes of photographs that had been donated by a now deceased niece of the Otto brothers and it was within these boxes that a small envelope containing eight forgotten photographs of Walcott's party and their activities was rediscovered. There was a note with each photograph that gave names, locations and other pieces of interesting information, each one typed by Dr. Walcott, himself. The detective inside me was immediately intrigued and I was interested in finding more information about Walcott's visit to Alberta.

My search led me to numerous on-line databases, including that of the Smithsonian Institute (<http://www.si.edu/>). The site allows access to numerous articles and scientific dissertations, which shed some light on the work being done by Walcott and his colleagues during their visits to the Canadian Rockies. Eventually, the trail led me back to the archives' research library, to the ever-resourceful Canadian Alpine Journal. I managed to locate a volume that contained a couple of articles written about Walcott's visit and his hope to classify new species of flora and fauna:

The expedition was made possible through the co-operation of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, which contributed handsomely towards the expenses...Subsequent co-operation and financial assistance by the British Columbia, Alberta and Dominion Governments made it possible to enlarge the scope of the expedition, and an investigation of the fauna, flora, and geology was added to the topographical work first planned. An attempt was made to interest Canadian scientists in the expedition, but without success, so the matter was submitted to Dr. Charles Walcott, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute of Washington, who collaborated most heartily... (Canadian Alpine Journal (1912), vol. 4., p. 3)

Along with his son, Sydney, his personal assistant and excellent marksman Harry Blagden, colleague Dr. I. F. Burgen, a packer identified as Arthur Brown (possibly provided by the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway) and

Closson Otto (outfitter), the group set about collecting various specimen. The party had been given special permission from the Chief Superintendent of Dominion Parks, Mr. Howard Douglas, and the Chief Game guardian for the Province of Alberta: "*to secure specimens of game and other animals and birds for scientific purposes...*"(Canadian Alpine Journal (1912), vol. 4, p. 3).

However, the most interesting information would not be found through the usual avenues, but arrived at the archives in the hands of a most generous and enthusiastic patron: unaware of the serendipitous nature of his visit, he presented me with a rather tattered looking album, which to my surprise, was filled with professional photographs taken during the Walcott's visit in 1912 (the same date that appeared in the notes I had from Walcott). The album documented the group's extended travels from Winnipeg, along the Grand Trunk line through to Jasper, then later to Tete Jaune Cache, and eventually ending at Prince Rupert; a part of the story that had not been included with the photographs that Walcott had sent Otto. Walcott's photographs have since been processed, described and digitized and are now accessible on the Alberta Society of Archives, Alberta InSight database and thanks to continued financial support from the ASA, researchers now have another piece to the puzzle that is Jasper's history.