

## fourth front

# Camel experiment not a big success

VANCOUVER (CP) — Strange tales abound of the foibles and follies of British Columbia's early entrepreneurs, but the story of Frank Laumeister and the Cariboo camels ranks among the best.

Laumeister was a merchant who brought supplies by pack animal into the B.C. Interior during the 1860s when the Cariboo gold rush peaked.

It was a profitable business, with freight rates running about 50 cents for half a kilogram. Laumeister's mule trains couldn't keep up with the demand.

Being an enterprising sort, he looked for ways to expand his capacity and increase his share of the fortunes being made in the Cariboo. That's how the camels came into the picture.

Laumeister had heard of successful experiments with dromedary (single-humped) camels in the southwestern U.S. and he thought he could put these "ships of the desert" to good use.

He had heard the camels could carry up to 360 kilograms at least 65 kilometres a day. His pack mules could carry only 225 kilograms over 25 kilometres a day, so Laumeister didn't have to be a mathematical genius to see where fortune lay.

He formed a syndicate with Adam Heffley and Henry Ingram to import 23 bactrian (two-humped) camels from Manchuria.

An advertisement in the Victoria Colonist waxed eloquent on the camels' attributes: "Their greatest ability lies in their long legs which will enable them to breast deep snow drifts, the merest sight of which would disturb the equanimity of the strongest-nerved or best-conducted jackass in British Columbia."

However, the newspaper itself was more skeptical and quipped that camels were only the first of a variety of strange beasts to be employed in

British Columbia: "We learn that a number of trained whales will be placed on the route between Victoria and the Stickeen (sic) River, carrying freight and inside passengers — a la Jonah — at reduced rates."

The syndicate ignored such criticisms and the camels arrived in Victoria April 14, 1862.

Laumeister got his first taste of the trouble to come when they were unloaded. In an April 15 item, The Colonist described the arrival: "They are singular-looking animals and when driven from the steamer, frightened the horses at Esquimalt out of their propriety and a week's appetite."

Camels have a rather pungent aroma, one whiff of which would panic any horse or mule in the vicinity. This created widespread chaos on the Douglas-Lillooet road where mule trains carrying supplies to the mines bolted every time the camels approached, scattering valuable loads.

Laumeister quickly realized his mistake. After a very short career, the camels were retired. A few were sold, some were killed for food, but most were turned loose in the wilds. Camel sightings were still being made 40 years later.

Ingram, a syndicate member, took several back to his ranch near Grande Prairie. They were sheared along with the sheep in the spring and the farmers' wives used the hair to stuff pillows and mattresses.

Ingram's young daughter made a pet of one camel and rode it around the ranch, presumably avoiding any horses or mules in the area.

Laumeister, discouraged by his part in what The Colonist called "the failure of the season," left B.C. in 1867 for San Francisco where he died a few years later.

A memorial to his folly stands in Lillooet, where the Highways Ministry has named a bridge over the Fraser River the Bridge of the 23 Camels.



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## today in history

by Canadian Press  
Today is Thursday, June 16, the 167th day of 1983. There are 198 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:  
On June 16, 1784, one of the largest groups of United Empire Loyalists settled at Adolphustown, Ontario. An official list of United Empire Loyalists was drawn up in 1789 by Lord Dorchester, Governor-General, and only families included on the list can properly describe themselves as United Empire Loyalists.

On this date:  
In 1846, Giovanna Mastai-Ferretti was elected Pope Pius the Ninth. His 32-year reign was the longest in papal history.

In 1874, Arthur Meighen, ninth prime minister of Canada, was born.  
In 1891, Sir John J. Abbott became Canada's third prime minister, re-

maining in office only 17 months.

In 1897, the Alaska Gold Rush began.  
In 1899, the Caledonia mine explosion in Nova Scotia killed 30 miners.

In 1903, the Ford Motor Company was incorporated in Michigan.  
In 1917, the first all-Russian congress of Soviets was convened.

In 1920, the council of the League of Nations held its first public meeting at St. James Palace in London.

In 1963, the world's first woman space traveller, Valentina Tereshkova, was launched into space by the Soviet Union.

In 1972, Prime Minister Trudeau officially opened Newfoundland's Churchill Falls power project in Labrador.

In 1977, German-born rocket and space pioneer Werner Von Braun died.

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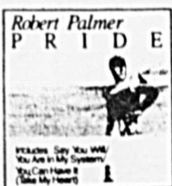


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