

Traveling by Pipeline

By ARTHUR L. PRICE

IN WINTER TIME, when there was snow on the ground, the record for coasting down Stump hill from the Tamarack company's "upper flume" to the reservoir was one minute for the 200 yards.

But in summer, when one had to take the trail through the deep dust and among the ugly stumps and loose boulders, the time was about 10 minutes and one second. At that rate, too, there was a great risk of neck and tremendous damage to one's boots. Nor was it nearly so much fun to go down the trail in summer as in winter.

When coasting there was always the broad, snow covered meadow, over which one might glide for a half mile before bringing up in the snow bank that formed the end of the course. There had been some talk of building a summer dirt slide down the hill, but the course was not practicable, and there was not much occasion to make the trip. The flume tender, of course, followed the flume, which clung to the side of the hill for half a mile farther on before it turned suddenly and dropped its water into the reservoir which was in the canyon above the power house. It was at the power house that the energy of the falling water was generated into electric energy which illuminated the homes miles away in the North Fork valley and supplied the industries of the place with power.

When Tom Humphrey was set by his father, the superintendent, to watch the upper flume, he wished that he had a chute to drop from the hilltop to the reservoir, for his post was a mile from the ladder that led to the reservoir, and he was always too impatient to go that extra distance.

His duty was to guard a section of the wooden flume that the company was replacing as rapidly as possible with 16 inch cast iron pipes. The Tamarack flume company was not alone in the business of supplying electric power to the North Fork valley. There was the North Fork water and electric current company, known as the "syndicate," which took its power from another watershed and wished to grab up all the business within reach of its long wiry arms—and fingers. It had tried to drive the Tamarack company from the field by business methods, by ruthless competition and by underselling its power, but had failed, for the people of North Fork were more than usually loyal to the first company which had come to serve them, and could not be weaned away.

There are other methods of fighting in the mountains than by competition, and one of those methods is of the ax. That is what Superintendent Humphrey of the Tamarack company feared. He knew to what lengths his rivals might go to injure his plant, and on that account he had rapidly been substituting cast iron pipes for the wooden flumes, which had served well in the peaceful days when the enterprise had first been undertaken. All the strong men that he could secure in the Sierra district he had set to work on his pipe line, and to act as watchman during the night he had to employ younger boys and older men. To his son, Tom, he had assigned the section of the flume as it crossed Stump hill, just about the spot where the winter toboggan course started, and a mile from the inlet to the reservoir. Tom went on duty at 6 o'clock in the evening and stayed at his post until 6 o'clock the next morning. For many nights he had built a fire to discourage the mountain chill, that even in the summer months settled on the top of Stump hill. But his father advised against the fire. While it served to inform any marauders that the flume was being guarded, it also afforded them an opportunity to locate the watchman. It would not be difficult for them to see where the guard was and to go to some other place along the flume to commit their mischief. Therefore Tom had to watch in the dark, for the greater protection of the property.

It is very fine to be on the night shift



"HALT BEFORE I SHOOT," COMMANDED TOM.

and to sleep in the day time, if there is nothing more interesting to do than to sleep. For instance, it is more interesting to sleep than it is to whitewash the power station stables, and far more pleasant than to work in the pond below the station. But baseball is more fascinating than sleep any day, and particularly on Sunday, when baseball would be played in North Fork between the home team and the Tamarack boys.

It was on a Sunday that Tom went to the ball game instead of to bed, and when it came his turn to go on guard that night his mind was too excited with the recollection of the victory of the Tamarack team for him to realize how tired his body was.

It was not until the early moon had set and he was left alone with the stars and the tamaracks and the drone of the dynamos far below on the pond that he realized that he had not slept for more than 24 hours. The warmth of the afternoon in the valley was forgotten now by the boy on the mountainside. He could not remember when he was ever warm before. His cheeks were so cold that the barrel of his revolver seemed almost warm to them when he fondled the weapon.

From his station on the hillside Tom could see the country a mile beneath him along the trail and could locate the reservoir below him by the reflection of the stars. He could see no one in sight, no moving shadow. And he was cold.

Walking up and down did not help matters much, for the wind was blowing and the trail was too narrow to make walking a pleasure even in the bright sunlight. But at his feet were a number of lengths of 16-inch cast iron pipe which were soon to replace the wood flume which now carried the water to the reservoir. These pipes were meant for wind breaks. Tom reasoned that by putting his body into a pipe and letting his head protrude, he would survey his field as carefully as if he were on his feet and pacing up and down like a sentry. He would be out of the wind and could, furthermore, rest his body without the ignominy of going to sleep.

Into the tube the boy crawled—poor sleepy, cold, careless Tom.

Yes, he went to sleep.

He awoke later. It was still dark—probably 2 o'clock in the morning—and he was in the cast iron pipe, out of the wind and warm, with all his youthful animal warmth concentrated to make him comfortable. He was powerfully sleepy, so sleepy, it seemed, that every drop of blood in his body was a sleeping drop. His eyes were glued closed, but his ears were open and alert. He heard a strange sound coming from below him—not the sound of the droning dynamos nor the murmur of the wind in the tamaracks or the cool rush of water in the wooden flume by his side.

Tom heard the voices of men coming up from the trail below, the trail that led to the reservoir.

It was too dark to see more than the silhouette of the two men as they crossed the clearing and the meadow

and walked rapidly in the direction of the reservoir outlet.

Tom reasoned a moment and then made his conjecture. They were men sent out by the rival water company to destroy property of the Tamarack company. The boy knew that by firing his revolver in the air he could frighten the men away. He could save the property for that night. But, he thought, they would escape; they could come back some other night and possibly be more fortunate in their scheme. If only he could reach the meadow and the reservoir while they were still there he could capture them, by the menace of his revolver.

He could run down the hill, the dangerous trail over the boulders and through the soft, sliding ground, but that would take him valuable time at best, and if the men did not hear his coming and run before he was anywhere near them, they would fight back at him with their guns if they wished to. Tom regretted that it was not winter, so that he would merely have to fling himself on his sleigh and drop down upon them like a flash. If he only had some means of sliding he could effect his purpose of capturing the miscreants.

He was still lying in the cast iron pipe, and as he craned his head and shoulders to get a better glimpse of the two men below the tube rocked.

There was an idea! He might be able to roll down hill in the pipe. It would make a loud noise, a commotion, a tornado of sound, but it would mean quick action—if the tube did not turn on end and dump him out and possibly crush him under its heavy rim. But it seemed to the reckless boy his only chance to accomplish what he was set there to do. He acted quickly. For greater safety he removed the chamber from his revolver and wrapped it and its full cylinders in his large handkerchief. He put the cylinder in his pocket, but retained his revolver, fastened to his belt, in its holster.

Then he began to rock the pipe. It was heavy and stayed well in its cradle, but at last a momentum was gained sufficient to start it on its way.

There was a lurch, and Tom found himself rolling down hill inside the tube—down hill—fast.

First he felt a bump on his head as the pipe started to revolve. He was turning with it. Round and round he turned, his head and shoulders and hips striking, striking, striking against the rough iron surface of the tube.

There was a tremendous concussion that almost jarred the life out of the boy, and then a whirl of the pipe, end for end. It had evidently struck a stump and had turned quickly on its course. Now it was rolling, sliding, bouncing with increased momentum. There would be minor jars when it would strike a stone or boulder or a low stump and be tossed in the air like a leaping ski. Tom felt himself sliding head first in the tube. He stuck out his elbows and his knees and pressed them desperately against the surface of the tube and checked his own course, but he could not save

himself from the terrific pounding. His upper lip was wet and he knew that his nose was bleeding.

The noise of the flight was horrible. Never had he heard such a continuous dinning in his ears. He thought that the whole world must hear the noise and be rushing pell mell to the foot of Stump hill to see what the excitement was.

Round and round his body turned with the tube. Other stumps were struck and for a space the tube described a circle of turns from end to end. At one spot it stopped with a most awful sound and jar. Tom was sure that now the pipe had reached the bottom of the slope, crossed the meadow and struck against the trees in the tamarack forest beyond, half a mile past the place where he had sighted the two intruders. If that were the case his terrible journey in the pipe would be worse than useless, all his bruises and soreness and pain would go for naught.

But again the pipe started off, as if it had merely paused for breath and for new energy, to devise and execute new tortures for the presumptuous youth who had essayed to journey within its sides without its permission.

Now it rolled easier. It still turned and bounced and tossed its inner cargo, as the most historic of all whales must have bounced and tossed Jonah on his perilous but famous adventure at sea. Then the pipe stopped. Tom waited, waited, waited. It had really stopped.

At first Tom was ready to let it go at that. Now it was the most infinitely comfortable place in all the world. He would rest there forever. The din was over, the buzzing was going out of his ears. Then he could hear a fresh sound. It was the sound of running men.

Tom remembered now why he was in the tube. He had rolled down hill to catch two trespassers. With his body sore and bruised he crawled out of the pipe, but ever so gingerly. He did not want to start this Jonah whale on another expedition. It was still dark, with only the bright stars to give light to the place, but he saw that he had stopped just at the foot of Stump hill, and in the starlight Tom saw two men running near him, alarmed by the terrible noise of the rolling pipe.

"Halt!" he called, and held them with his chamberless revolver.

The men paused.

"Halt, before I shoot!" commanded Tom, and he clicked the futile hammer menacingly.

The men stopped.

"Throw up your hands!" ordered Tom, at the same time deftly slipping the cylinder back into the weapon.

The men obeyed.

Tom heard the cheerful sound of other running feet, coming from the direction of the power plant. Soon he was joined by his father and several husky workmen. The trespassers were bound and taken to the dynamo shed to be held until the sheriff could come.

"There's one thing I want to know, kid," said one of the prisoners. "How did you ever get down to us?"

"By the pipe line," said Tom, as he washed his bloody nose.