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Although oil operations are being carried on much farther north in Alberta and British Columbia than the McMurray district, the latter sounds particularly inaccessible even though it is only 230 air miles northeast from Edmonton. Despite the long time awareness of the vast treasure there, destiny seems only now to have dictated that the time has arrived for large-scale development, and more oil men now refer to it as the “oil” sand rather than by the somewhat derogatory term “tar” sand. Since the early fur trading days to which McMurray owes its origin, even the natives have long realized the “someday, someone” potential of the black sticky stuff, and the town has alternately perked and dozed as fascinated oil people drifted in, carted off tons of samples, and departed.

Operators who expect to do exploratory work on their oil sand permits may find the following general information useful for a smoother start.

For those who expect to make use of barge service for operations in the area, Northern Transportation, a Dominion agency, should be contacted in Waterways. Be prepared for a “so sorry” in May, and perhaps early June, if you want a mere 30 drums of fuel and a geologist dumped off short of Yellowknife. The more distant destinations get priority at the beginning of the navigation season—and, after a typical northern winter who would wish to argue about this principle.

Last year nearly 250,000 tons of freight passed through Waterways (3 miles east of McMurray, on the Clearwater river). This vast pile of sulphur, fuel, plywood, caustic, girders, sewer pipe, groceries, and heavy machinery accumulates during the winter and melts away during the May-October shipping season on the Athabasca-Slave-Mackenzie river system, to reappear in such widely scattered places as Yellowknife, Aklavik and a score of “secret” (ask at the McMurray hotel for details) radar stations.

Such a seasonal glut of goods and activity results in a great fluctuation in population, from about 500 to 1,500, as labor of all types comes in to load barges, pilot river tugs, or to weld together new ones from sections freighted in from Vancouver. Most of the steel barges can be filled with oil and freight to 600 tons during July’s high water and “tows” usually consist of three such barges rigidly cabled to an inadequate-looking, but able diesel tug. Many of these are now radar-equipped but shifting sandbars are a constant menace to the channel.

Local business people are anxious to help operators, and co-operate to the best of their resources. But because of start and stop history of operations in the area their inventories are wisely geared more to stop than start. Essential supplies and services are readily available from two Hudson Bay general stores, a lumber and hardware store, drug store, two theatre cum dance halls, several general stores, two post offices (most operators address to McMurray P.O.), a Royal Bank branch and two major bulk gasoline and diesel fuel agents. A 20-room hotel offers modest accommodation and vast quantities of “all popular brands”. Haulage trucks of about 5 tons can be hired locally, as well as crawler tractors (from Northern Transportation). The latter is especially nice to know as operators frequently must identify, spot and unload their own freight cars.

Rail service is the kind we would more likely associate with Stevenson’s Rocket than our diesel age. Including a bracing all-night stop-over at Lac La Biche, it takes 18 hours of leisurely ambling to cover some 300 miles to Waterways from Edmonton. During this convenient interim, we’re told, even gasoline gets siphoned out of any flat-car cargo which misfortune has placed aboard. Sealed box cars offer more guarantee than vehicles and other major items will arrive in