

Mary Gibson Henry Expeditions

By Ross Peck, President of the Hudson's Hope Historical Society

Pioneer amateur botanist Mary Gibson Henry, from Pennsylvania, made four long-distance horseback expeditions through the northern Rocky Mountains and adjacent eastern foothills between 1931 and 1935. Her interests in northern British Columbia were sparked by a conversation with a trapper on a trip to Jasper in 1930, when he related a story about a "tropical valley" up near the Yukon border.

With her husband, Dr J. Norman Henry, a prominent Philadelphia physician, they gathered what little information was available on the area and, in 1931, embarked on what would be the first of her four trips to the area.

On June 30th, 1931 a train delivered the Henry family, Mary Gibson Henry, Dr Henry and their four children aged 14 to 21 (Howard, Norman, Josephine and Mary) to a station at Pouce Coupe, BC. A 58 head horse outfit organized by outfitter Stan Clark and surveyor Knox McCusker was waiting north of Fort St. John. After a trip over rough roads and a ferry across the Peace River they arrived at camp at 1 am on July 1st. Later that same day, they were on the trail north and some 40 days later arrived at the Toad River hot springs.

The "tropical valley" may have been a bit of a disappointment, but Mary Gibson Henry made an extensive collection of plants en route and the family fished and hunted, and enjoyed the adventure of a lifetime. Mary Henry made the three subsequent trips to northern BC, accompanied by her daughter Josephine.

Records of Henry's considerable botanical work in British Columbia during the early thirties are housed in the archives of the Henry Foundation for Botanical Research in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh and the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. Those records now provide an important benchmark for scientists studying the native plants of BC's northeast.



Mary Gibson Henry (centre) with her husband, Dr J. Norman Henry, their four children and some of the 1931 British Columbia Expedition crew. Photo courtesy of The Henry Foundation for Botanical Research.