

# NORTH FROM THE DIVIDE



*– through Monkman Pass with the 22nd Nechako  
(British Columbia) Venturers*

*by Susan Mackie*

**L**ike sleeping giants, the Rocky Mountains lie silent and still, not awakening from slumber even for travellers who seek to explore them. Across their mammoth spine lies the Monkman Pass, beginning where Fontaniko Creek spills into the divide.

From the north, the creek flows through Monkman Lake; then into the Pine River, the Peace, then finally to the Arctic Ocean. In 1937, while trying to find an easier way for local farmers to ship their wheat to market, settler Alex Monkman discovered the pass that would later bear his name. Efforts to arrange a railway link through the pass failed, and work on the area was delayed and all but abandoned with the advent of the war. Years later, the government of British Columbia would finally ensure protection of the area by designating it a national park.

With two of their members graduating that year and not returning to Venturers in the fall, the 22nd Nechako Venturers wanted an adven-

ture to remember. The advisors suggested several routes in northern B.C., but something about the Monkman Pass captured their imaginations to such an extent that there was really no question about which trail they would take.

## **A Site Steeped In History**

The Venturers were interested in the history of the place - the signs of the old road, campsites and relics of days gone by. Deep down inside, they also wanted to show the rest of the community that the spirit of adventure and respect for the memories of the past were still very much alive in the youth of today. With so many stories of teens getting into trouble, they wanted to prove that there is another side to the teenage years. But for the 22nd Nechako Venturers, most of all, they wanted to prove one thing: that they could do it.

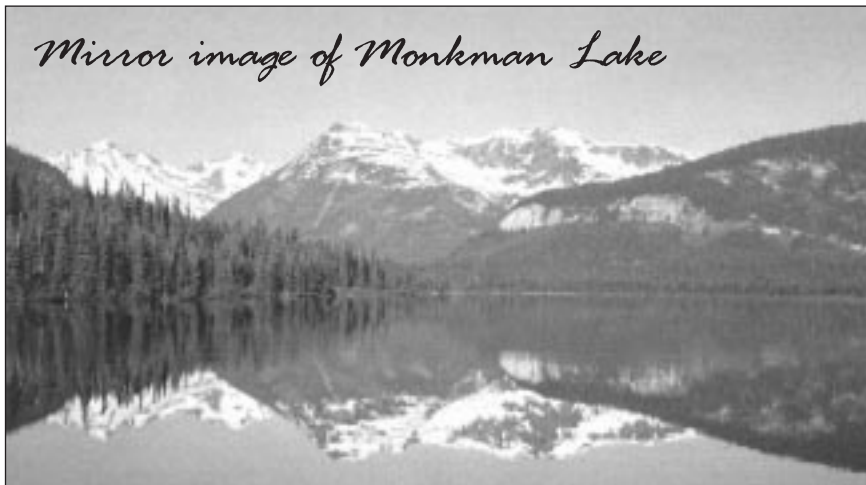
## **Preparations**

Timing was one of the most important considerations in the planning of the hike. There is a window of opportunity between the snow seasons in this area - June and July were by far the best bets. They decided on the first week in July; a time when they were certain the pass would be clear of snow.

Preparations included several practice camping trips; dress rehearsals for the real thing. Gradually, they sharpened their orienteering skills, until they were good at locating their position on a map using different landmarks and topographic features. They were able to obtain a GPS (global positioning system), and got quite a kick out of trying the device.

Since detailed mapping is unavailable for the Monkman Pass area, BC Parks asked the Venturers to assist them with their records of the area,

*Mirror image of Monkman Lake*



*Photos: Courtesy of the 22nd Nechako Venturer Company*

by noting down whatever they saw on their practice hikes. Even their park rangers don't seem to get into that particular area of the park.

They studied standard topographic maps and air photos over and over, until they had a clear idea of the area. It was crucial that they knew exactly where they were going; particularly in the event of an emergency, so others would know where to find them.

Since the Monkman area has one of the largest populations of grizzly bears in the province, the advisors insisted the Venturers complete a "Bear Aware" course. This would arm them with essential information on the physical characteristics and habits of the animals, but most importantly, they would be well trained on vital survival tactics.

They were almost set to go – after a first aid refresher and time spent on emergency locating, they wanted to make sure their location would be known to many others. To that end, they sent a package detailing their route to Canfor, the local forestry company of the Monkman Pass area, B.C. Parks, Prince George Search and Rescue, and the B.C. Ambulance Service. These agencies would know exactly where the company was headed, who they were, and what sort of gear they had with them.

These Venturers left nothing to chance – in the event of an emergency, they would be ready.

Energy would be essential on a hike like this. The group made sure they had energy foods, comfort type foods, and foods that would be simple to cook, or eaten cold. In bear country, all food must be hoisted up in the air, far away from sleeping campers. They each packed a three-gallon plastic pail – great for discouraging bears, and impossible for squirrels to chew through. These could also do double-duty for carrying water, or even for impromptu seats.

### **From MacLeod Lake – to the beginning of adventure**

The morning sun beckoned at eight a.m. on June 30 as the Venturers set out for Monkman Pass, from their base at MacLeod Lake. They would travel to Kinuseo Falls, 300 feet high, splashing over a large rock ledge to a valley below. Beyond this viewpoint stretched the spectacular Murray River.

The Monkman Trail sign provided a photo opportunity to capture the

group on the brink of their adventure. After pictures, and a few words of inspiration, they were off.

The trail was rough – but they knew it would be. Dense with foliage, brimming with biting insects, and peppered with windfalls to bush-whack, it was not easy going. By seven o'clock, they called it a day and fell into sleep by the small campfire almost immediately.

Next morning, they found they were not alone. One of the Venturers left his tent to come face to face with a black bear not five feet away. He yelled at the intruder, who turned and ran...probably disappointed at not being asked to stay for breakfast.



### **Monkman Lake**

The sun beat down at 28 degrees Celsius on a marshy but hilly trail. Trees were sparse, and the trail snaked to a high ridge where they could see far beyond Monkman Lake clear to the glacier.

Spectacular scenery provided postcard-perfect views as the 22<sup>nd</sup> Nechakos headed around the lake. It was tough going, and they began to get frustrated at their lack of speed and progress. Ominous clouds didn't make them feel any better – nor did the sudden blast of rain that quickly turned to thunder and lightning. They would have no choice but to bed down for the night. Using their tarp as a funnel, they filled their canteens with rainwater; collecting enough for drinking and cooking. They were lulled to sleep by the driving rain – but awakened quickly to a small explosion of fire, as their dormant campfire had sparked a small branch that caught and ignited like a firecracker. Throwing sand and dirt on the flames, the fire was out, and they made certain by digging a large hole

and checking to see that all roots and branches were clear.

Determination was palpable in the air the next day. No matter what, they were going to hike through the divide to the other side. The walk down the mountain side was steep, but they handled it like experienced hikers.

Going up the other side was another story. The trail got tougher, the bugs got meaner, the sun got hotter, and they could feel their resolve weakening. The merciless hill took so much out of them, several wanted to quit on the spot. After a long break to recoup and discuss the problem, on they went. It was at this point that disaster struck.

One of the Venturers developed a toothache that worsened very quickly. The team decided that the best thing to do was to abandon the rest of the hike and call for help on the satellite phone. Their advisor radioed back immediately, with instructions to wait for an emergency helicopter pickup. While the Venturers were disappointed at not fully completing the hike, that helicopter looked pretty good to them. They were picked up only six kilometres shy of achieving their goal.

By then they were exhausted. Returning to the camp cookhouse, they tucked into a large meal, and gulped down all the fresh cookies and juice they could hold. They were back home by five p.m. that day, showered, and into their own beds.

In the days after the trip, they all felt the sting of pride. It had been a great adventure, but still they couldn't help but feel a nagging disappointment at not being able to finish. Even so, their comments were laced with adjectives like, "exhilarating," "wonderful," and "challenging".

Perhaps one Venturer put it best when he said, "This trip was the greatest achievement of my life. I never have done anything within a shadow of what we did on this trip. It changed my way of thinking and it changed my heart and soul. Never would I give up the opportunity to do this trip again."

For this eight-day adventure, that said it all. ^

– *Participants: 22<sup>nd</sup> Nechako Venturer Company: Mark Asquith, Dirk Graham, Ian Sinclair, Brian Medley*  
– *Advisors: Gord Simmons, Wendy Dale*