

Here comes the Lamb Express

Year round, Tom Lamb and his flying sons run one of the busiest little air lines in Canada

By Bill MacPherson

Jean and Tom Lamb looked out on their snow-bordered walk at The Pas, in northern Manitoba, and smiled with satisfaction. An oversized turkey and two plump geese were done to a turn, the enormous table with its triple extension was set, and now, with most of the family streaming up the walk, it looked as though, for once, the six boys would make it for Christmas dinner.

They carried and herded in their budding families—Greg, 28, with his three; Don, 26, with two; Dennie, Don's twin, with one; Jack, 25, with two; and Doug, 23, with one. Conrad, still a bachelor at 21, lives at home.

There was also Phyllis with her five youngsters. Only Carol, 50 miles away at Moose Lake, and Sheila, at her home in Washington state, were missing.

But just as everyone was settling down at the table, the telephone rang. It was for Greg.

"Lake Winnipegosis," he explained a moment later, on his way out to his car. "A man just died at a fish camp and I've got to fly the body out." From the lakeside base of Lamb Airways, he took off for a 120-mile flight.

This was Christmas 1958. It was typical for the Lambs. Over the past 27 years, Tom himself has spent many Christmas days on airborne missions. Now that the boys have taken over (all of them fly except Conrad) they've also inherited the "Christmas-in-the-air" tradition. In 1957, Greg missed dinner to fly a Mountie into Moose Lake to deal with a two-man Christmas party that had degenerated into an axe-swinging duel. The year before, Doug flew a man with a stomach ailment from a remote settlement to hospital at The Pas.

This Christmas the Lambs will once again try for a family reunion. No one voluntarily will miss the fun and food that Mrs. Lamb meticulously prepares.





The air line will fly almost anything into the north—anything that a northerner can use



Tom took over the Moose Lake store from his father

But if flight duties intervene they will have the consolation of knowing that they are bringing a much-needed service to thousands in the Canadian north.

The 10-aircraft fleet of Lamb Airways is never busier than during the two weeks prior to Christmas. The Beaver, Norsemen and Cessna 180s carry Christmas gifts, turkeys and fresh vegetables into places like Brochet (310 miles north), Split Lake (225 miles north-east), Oxford House (270 miles east) and Eskimo Point (645 miles up into the N.W.T. on Hudson Bay).

It's a Santa Claus express in reverse—carrying Christmas into the north rather than out of it.

The planes rarely return to The Pas empty, because almost every settlement has miners, fishermen, teachers or clergymen eagerly waiting to fly out to the crossroads town on Christmas leave. The Pas' normal population of 4,500 swells to 5,700 in the week before Christmas. About half of the newcomers continue southward; the rest celebrate Christmas on the spot.

Once the Santa Claus express ran head-on into the stork. During the busy season Jack was called to Grand Rapids, 100 miles southeast. He headed back with an expectant Indian mother but, 15 minutes from home, suddenly discovered he had two passengers instead of one. He radioed ahead for an ambulance and doctor to meet them and landed without further incident.

A full schedule of mail, passengers and emergencies has been standard Christmas fare for the Lambs since Tom, now 61, learned to fly in 1931. Since that time he has logged about 16,000 hours.

This in turn is only part of a remarkable career which has earned him such sobriquets as "The Bushland Tycoon," "Entrepreneur of the Northland," and "Muskrat King." Long before he thought of flying, Tom had established himself as a hard-headed lumberman, fisherman, trapper and trader. Years later he moved successfully into tractor-train freighting, northern road-building and—surprisingly—cattle ranching.

A mild heart attack slowed his pace slightly in 1957, but he's still remarkably energetic. A stocky five-foot-nine, he walks lithely—usually on Indian-moccasined feet. His brown eyes still sparkle with amusement or snap with authority as he issues orders to employees—in English or fluently-guttural Cree.

The Cree tongue is a legacy from his childhood when he absorbed the skills and the lore of the Indians. It was a childhood confined to his father's Moose Lake trading post in northern Manitoba. The father was a tough Yorkshire school teacher named T. H. P. Lamb—better known as Ten Horsepower Lamb.

Tom received his formal education from his father and an informal but highly practical one from the Indians.

At 15 Lamb was earning a living bush-cutting, fishing, trapping, and trad-

ing the horses used for fish hauling.

The turning-points in Tom's life came in 1925: he married Jean Armstrong of Winnipeg and his father retired from the Moose Lake trading post. He offered the post to Tom and, because "Ten Horsepower" did not believe in silver-platter business deals, set the price at \$5,000—at six percent interest.

Still maintaining his fishing and trapping business, Tom plunged into the job of running the post. He had inherited his father's tough mind for business and spiced it with his enterprise and spirit. In two years he paid off his father with interest.

The trading post continued to flourish, but in the 1930s the muskrat—mainstay of northern trapping—began to wane.

For the first but not the last time Tom Lamb embarked upon the impossible. He presented a muskrat conservation plan so radical that for two years the provincial government refused to consider it. At last, Premier John Bracken gave Tom this cheerful approval: "Go ahead, you darn fool, and try."

The government leased him a swampy 54,000-acre tract near Moose Lake. To restore the dried-out marshes, he built irrigation ditches from the surrounding Head and Summerberry Rivers. He installed pumps to maintain the flow in low-water season and planted wild rice and cattail to provide food for the muskrat.

And the muskrat thrived. Where once



there were 40 muskrat houses on the tract, 10 years later Tom counted 5,000. During one depression year only 75,000 muskrat pelts came out of the entire area around The Pas—where earlier there would have been millions—but Tom Lamb harvested 25,000 of those.

Convinced, the provincial government used Lamb and his methods to start its own big muskrat conservation project. Word of the Lamb project reached Argentina and prompted the government to call on him for assistance in transplanting Manitoba beaver to Patagonia, at the southern tip of South America. When Tom last heard, the beaver (which he flew there) were thriving.

In the meantime, Tom didn't neglect his other enterprises. About 1930 he had transferred his fish-haul from horse-drawn sleighs to aircraft—but the uncertain bush-flying schedules caused the ruin of much fresh fish before it reached refrigerated cars at the railhead. So Tom bought a Stinson, took flying lessons and began ferrying his own fish out of the north and almost immediately flying became an important part of his career. He incorporated Lamb Airways in 1935, and no other northern air service has remained intact so long. In 24 years of bush flying, the Lambs have never asked for help to find one of their planes.

After World War II, as northern exploration and development gathered momentum, he was the first to realize the potential of caterpillar tractors for bush

and muskeg transport. He quickly moved into tractor-train hauling to mining ventures in the north—supplemented, of course, by his growing fleet of aircraft.

In the 1940s Lamb aircraft were flying men and equipment into the Moak Lake area for the first surveys which led to the \$175 million International Nickel development at Thompson. Flights increased with diamond drilling, the sinking of an exploration shaft and construction of a mine, mill and townsite.

Today, the busy town of Thompson is a brand-new “market” for Lamb Airways. One plane is stationed there permanently to handle the frequent charter flights for Inco officials or employees.

By the late Forties, Tom's sons were growing up, each attending Ravenscourt School in Winnipeg and each (except Conrad) learning to fly in his early teens.

In the winter of 1950-51, Greg, then 20, took over a huge tractor-train haul of diamond-drilling equipment from Churchill to Tavani, on the shore of Hudson Bay.

“That was quite a project—moving 159 tons of stuff 350 miles,” Tom recalls. “Every day I'd fly out from Churchill to the cat-train on the bay often landing on treacherous floe ice to bring coal for the caboose stove and mail for the boys. The worst part was that I underestimated the job and didn't make any money out of the haul.”

During those years Tom Lamb was nursing yet another wild dream. He had often looked longingly at the rich grass in natural northland meadows, particularly a tract on the east side of Moose Creek, two miles from Moose Lake settlement. In 1953, with a 10-year lease on 2,000 acres from the provincial government, he moved in with a brushcutter. He cleared the bush, broke the land and bought tractors, plows, hay-balers, hay-loaders, drills and broadcast-seeders. He moved in 30 Hereford cows and three prize bulls and built open sheds, a machine shop, a dock on Moose Creek, a cookhouse and a comfortable bungalow. He christened the whole operation the 7 Bar L Ranch—for the seven male Lambs in the family.

His meadows this fall yielded some 118 haystacks, oats at 90 bushels to the acre, barley at 45 bushels, wheat at 35 bushels. This fall the herd had grown to more than 400 and he had already shipped about 120 head to market in Winnipeg—by barge to The Pas and from there by truck. In addition, Tom supplied beef for the six Lamb households in The Pas and a host of Lamb

transport camps around the north.

Today Tom Lamb can tote up an investment of \$1.5 million made in the north over the years.

“Sometimes,” he grins, “I own it, and sometimes the bank does. We take turn about.”

More important, he's enjoyed every minute of those years.

“If anything happened to me right now I'd feel I've had more than my share of fun with my family,” he says. “I've hunted with them, fished with them, trapped with them and once or twice starved with them.”

“I think if people would go hunting and fishing *with* their families more often during the week they wouldn't have to hunt and fish *for* them Saturday night...”

The family shares his feeling. Last fall, for example, Doug flew into the 7 Bar L one evening to announce that Dennie, then flying full-time in the sub-arctic barrens, would contact the family by radio from Eskimo Point that night. Delighted, Tom headed for the two-way radio set in his living room to spread the word.

First he called Greg, at that moment flying into The Pas from Thompson. Greg relayed the word to Jack at Thompson. Next Conrad joined the Lamb network, radioing from a boat towing a barge-load of cattle into The Pas. Finally Tom contacted Carol and Sheila, two miles away at the Moose Lake store. Don was already at the ranch. Satisfied now that the entire family would tune in on Dennie's broadcast, Tom signed off.

As usual, the flying Lambs were at home—in spirit. Perhaps this Christmas, for once, they'll get time off from the Santa Claus express to be home in person. But they know it's not very likely ☉

Tom keeps track of all his enterprises by radio

