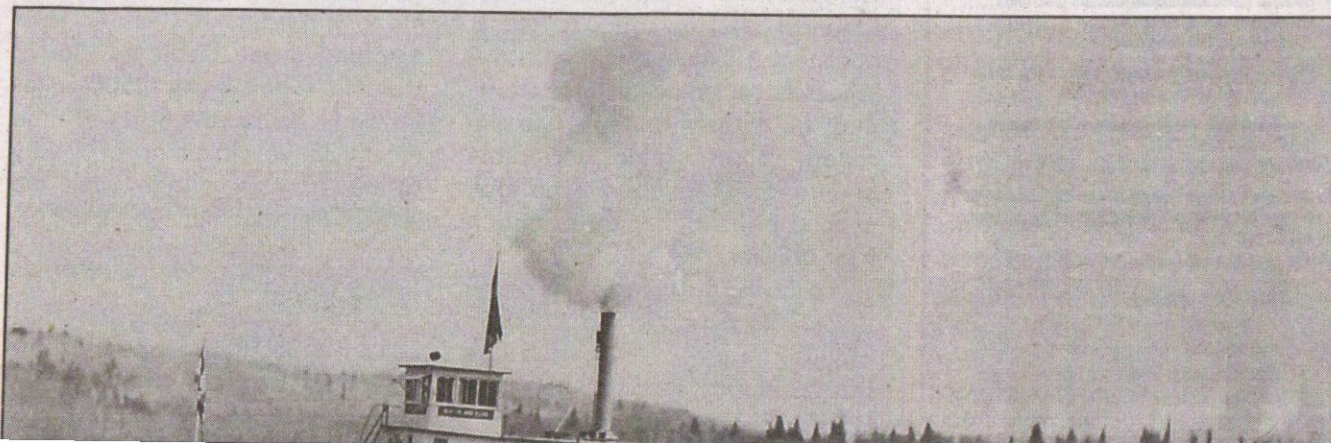


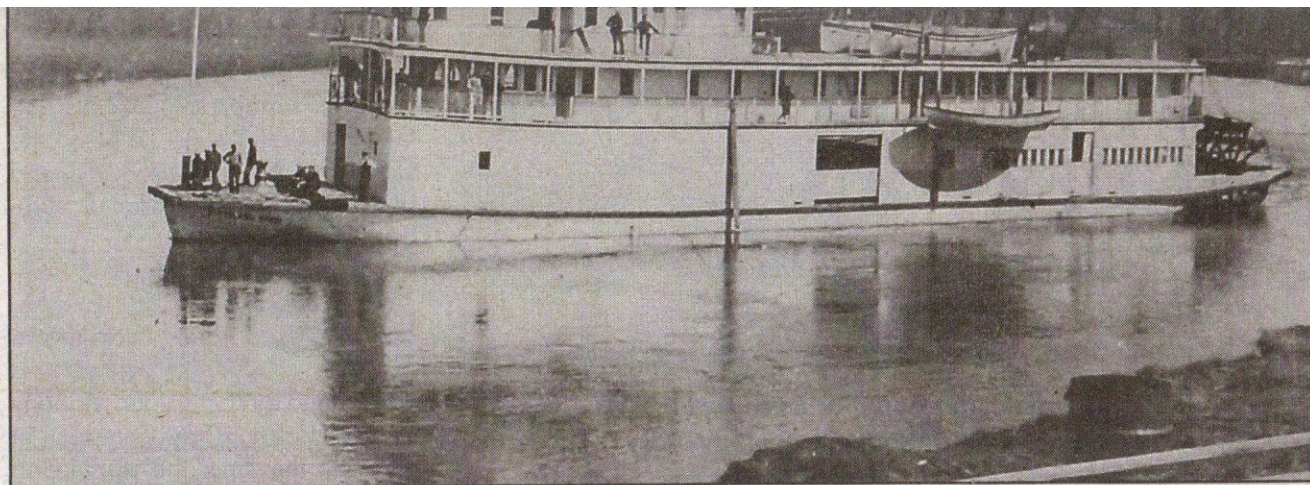
Fire Canoes: Hudson Bay Company's Boats, Barges and Booze

by Scot H. Dahms

In the early 1960s, Frank R. Conibear, inventor of the Conibear bodygrip trap, and Sydney Clarke Ells exchanged a series of letters discussing the early steamboats ("steamers") in the Athabasca River Transport of Canada. Conibear was a wealth of knowledge as he had grown up there and his father



had worked on several of the vessels. Ells had done a substantial amount of topic research, and Conibear helped fill in where there were documentation voids. Ells had become familiar with rivers across northwest Canada, including the Stikine, Dease, Lower Liard, Mackenzie, and Athabasca, so he appreciated the evolution of transportation in the northern streams. In his work, he focused on the development of transportation between Fort Pitt, Athabasca Landing, Fort McMurray, and Fitzgerald. The following article summarizes their exchange with the foundation, from a document produced by Ells in 1959, called "Athabasca River Transport."



In the late 19th century, stern-wheel steamers, originally referred to as "Fire Canoes" by Native Americans, were used to supply trappers and transport furs in the north.

"During the second half of the 19th Century, stern-wheel steamers—originally referred to as 'Fire Canoes' by Native Americans—replaced York boats and freighting canoes on many rivers of Northern Canada. In the name of progress, unrivalled rivermen—rugged individualists all, who took a deep pride in their skill

and prowess—were exchanged for a few tons of engines. The hoarse and toneless voice of the steam whistle drowned forever the haunting melodies and soul-stirring chansons (songs) of hardy voyageurs." (Sydney Clarke Ells, 1964.)

The Hudson's Bay Company, starting in 1670, and the North West Company, starting in 1775,

carried out invaluable initial exploration in northern and northwestern Canada. Following developments of the LaLoche portage subsequent to 1778, the Hudson's Bay Company led the way into the Athabasca-Mackenzie Basin.

In 1778, Peter Pond became the first white man to follow a trail across the Arctic Divide, which was

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to become known as the Methye or LaLoche portage. Over this trail for more than a century was to flow trade goods and the fabulous wealth of the fur empire of northern Canada. The portage opened a way to the development of almost countless other trails by water and land throughout territories tributary to the Athabasca-Mackenzie river system. Thereafter on an uncharted wilderness, Hudson's Bay Trading Company and North West Trading Company were to strive with almost fanatical zeal to conquer half a continent. Ultimately, however, the successful outcome of their efforts must be largely attributed to the superb skill and almost incredible endurance of voyagers, who took a deep pride in themselves and in their abilities.

Following the union of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, Hudson's Bay Company dominated the fur

trade and also water transportation on the Athabasca and Mackenzie rivers and tributary waters. On the waters south of Fitzgerald, the Hudson's Bay Company had several steamers including the S.S. Grahame (No. 1) (renamed the Fitzgerald), S.S. Grahame (No. 2), S.S. Fort McMurray, S.S. Athabasca River (No. 1), S.S. Athabasca River (No. 2), S.S. Slave River, S.S. Peace River, and S.S. Northland Echo (No. 3).

Machinery and boilers for the S.S. Grahame (No. 1) were freighted from Dubuque, Iowa, via Fort Garry some 1,500 miles beyond Railhead. Part of the machinery was taken north by way of the LaLoche portage, while the remainder, together with the boilers, were scowed down the Athabasca River.

North of Fitzgerald, the Hudson's Bay Company operated the following steamers: S.S. Wrigley (No. 1), S.S. Wrigley (No. 2), S.S.

nearby, Fort McMurray was an outpost of Fort McKay.

Transportation of north-bound freight by way of the Athabasca River was initiated in 1845. Freight for the Roman Catholic Mission on Athabasca Lake was transported by the Hudson's Bay Company by way of Ile a La Crosse and the LaLoche Portage. Owing, however, to increasing shipments of the Company's own freight, the final 21-year agreement with respect to Mission freight was terminated in 1868. In anticipation of such termination, Archbishop Tache, subsequent to 1856, had perfected plans (including the opening of a cart road northwesterly from Fort Pitt) to ensure continued transportation of freight by way of Lac La Biche.

Thereafter, for a period of 20 years subsequent to 1869, shipments of such freight were transferred by carts from Fort Pitt to Lac La Biche and thence down La Biche and Athabasca rivers by canoes,

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Mackenzie River, and the Distributor III. The Distributor was dismantled and put back together two times to support building of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, the Canadian Northern Railway, and at Fort Smith for Lamson & Hubbard in 1920.

As a result of increasing shipments of supplies from Lac La Bishe, and increased trading activities, a post known as Fort McMurray was established by Factor John Moberly for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870. At the time, the population comprised four white people and varying numbers of visiting Native Americans. Apparently about 1780, the North West Trading Company established, near the mouth of Athabasca River, their first post north of LaLoche Portage known as the "Old Establishment." Moberly claimed that shortly afterwards, a post known as the "Fort of the Forks" was established on the site where Fort McMurray now stands, but owing to a smallpox epidemic, it was abandoned in 1784. For a short time, owing to scarcity of furs

4-ton scows, and possibly by a modified type of York boat. Finally, in 1889, shipments by the above route ceased, and the transient glory of Lac La Biche—cradle of the Athabasca Route—departed. Meanwhile, until 1885, the Hudson's Bay Company continued to use the LaLoche route.

Between 1885 and 1914, water transportation to Fort McMurray, a distance of 245 miles, was by scows and canoes supplemented subsequent to 1900 by stern wheelers to a point a short distance above Grand Rapids. Average time downstream for steamers was 20-30 hours, and since "Lining" upstream was frequently necessary at Pelican Rapids, time for the return trip varied from two to three days. Scows varied in length from 20-50 feet, corresponding cargo capacity was four to ten tons, and crews for the larger craft consisted of from six to eight men. As far as Grand Rapids, navigation presented no hazards. However, the main falls at the rapids is 55 feet within less than one-half mile, but an island divided

the river into east and west channels. On this island the Hudson's Bay Company laid wooden rails prior to 1892, and before the "line" was dismantled in 1915, the use of a small push cart was available to the public at a nominal charge. As a result, scow cargoes could be readily portaged past the most difficult section of heavy water. The empty scows were customarily run down the east channel. Thirteen other rapids between Grand Rapids and McMurray (with an aggregate fall of 330 feet) presented no serious difficulties for experienced crews.

In normal years, approximately 100 scows were run down to Fort McMurray, where they were then sold for about \$10 and the lumber salvaged. During the Klondike Rush in 1898 to 1899, upwards of 200 scows transported gold seekers downstream. Many of these scows were operated by skilled crews under the supervision of J.K. Cornwall. Hundreds of passengers were led by him, with not one lost

successful organizations included Revillion Freres Trading Company, Bradin & Roberts, Hislop & Nagles, Northern Transportation Company, Northern Traders Ltd., Athabasca Shipping Company, Peace River Transportation Company, and the Alberta and Arctic Transportation Company. Companies which met with little success included Lamson & Hubbard and A & W Nesbitt.

Prior to 1823, the Revillion Family had become one of the world's largest dealers in furs. Eventually, following various setbacks, the new organization established some 14 posts and outposts in Ungava, along Hudson Strait, and in James Bay. Posts in Ungava and along the Strait were serviced by the S.S. Adventure until 1915, when that vessel was taken over by the British Government and became a war casualty. In 1916, shipping facilities were established at Pagwa on the Canadian National Railway, and transportation provided to and from Albany by a fleet of 15-ton

of trading posts on Lesser Slave Lake and along Peace River. In 1905 Roberts retired from the organization, and shortly afterward control was purchased by Revillion Freres Trading Company.

In, and subsequent to, 1894, Traders of the North, owned by Hislop & Nagle, had operated a chain of eight trading posts on Lower Slave and Mackenzie rivers. In 1910, Northern Traders Company was organized by Cornwall, Campbell Young, and George Slater, acquired the assets of Hislop & Nagle, and increased the number of trading posts to 15. In 1900, Traders of the North purchased a steamer from the Roman Catholic Mission; Northland Traders renamed it S.S. Northland Trader. In 1915 Campbell Young retired, and his interests were acquired by A.L. Sawle, who thereafter acted as secretary in various Cornwall oper-

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Charge per ton of freight downstream by scow was usually \$100. Owing, however, to damage by water to perishable goods such as tea, sugar, and salt, prices of these were such that Fort McMurray was known as a "three for a dollar" settlement. Passengers accommodated themselves as best they could among bales and boxes, while the fare charged was usually a matter for negotiation.

The last important brigade of scows from Athabasca—some 50 in all—descended the river in 1914. Among the pilots were such great names as Jow Bird, Jim Cardinal, and Big Stone, Chief of the Wabasca Crees. In 1915, pending completion of the railway to Cache 23, some Hudson's Bay Company's northern freight was shipped by rail to Peace River and thence downstream.

The latter years of the 1800s and the early 1900s were marked by increasing competition as new fur trading and transportation companies entered the field. The

barges. Other posts were established in the Northwest Territories and were serviced from Edmonton and Prince Albert. As a result, in 1923, the Company had a total of 43 trading posts and outposts in various parts of Canada. In 1926, the Hudson's Bay Company secured 51% of Revillon stock and complete ownership in 1936.

Among other fur trading and transportation organizations which entered the northern field subsequent to 1896, were those dominated by an outstanding pioneer, James K Cornwall, widely known as Peace River Jim. Prior to 1900, as a trapper and free trader, Cornwall had gained invaluable experience, had acquired a knowledge of Indian dialects, and had established an enviable reputation among northern whites and Native Americans. He was associated with many trading and transportation organizations.

For a number of years prior to 1905, Cornwall was associated with Bredin & Roberts in operations

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ations. The name was changed to Northern Traders Ltd. in 1925. About 1938, stock in trade, but not properties, of Northern Traders Ltd. was acquired by the Hudson's Bay Company.

The Northern Transportation Company was organized by C.D.A. Barber and Cornwall in 1900, and was out of business by 1915. It did have several steamers that were owned and operated, including the S.S. Northland Echo (No. 1), S.S. Northland Echo (No. 2), S.S. Northland Echo (No. 3), S.S. Northland Call, S.S. Northland Sun, S.S. Northland Light, and S.S. Northland Star. S.S. Northland Echo (No. 1) was originally going to be named S.S. Midnight Sun and S.S. Echo before being registered as its final name. S.S. Northland Echo (No. 2) was equipped with machinery from No. 1. It was the second steamer to run the Grand and other rapids. The S.S. Northland Echo (No. 3) was No. 2 rebuilt in 1916 and eventually

subsequently disposed of \$1.5 million worth of preferred stock and 50,000 shares of common stock. Owing, however, to various handicaps, which included a complete ignorance of the intricacies of the fur trade, temporary difficulty in securing delivery of staple supplies and of trade goods, and to sensational fluctuations in prices of furs, the company went into bankruptcy in 1923.

Over a considerable number of years prior to 1920, the British Columbia Express Company, which had been organized by Charles Miller of Toronto, had been engaged in successful transportation activities by land and water in areas tributary to the upper Fraser River. Following the construction of the Grand Trunk Pacific and Pacific Great Eastern Railways, operations by the Company were gradually curtailed.

Early in 1921, the highly experienced and efficient officials of the British Columbia Express Company

also operated the M.B. Canadusa, M.B. Lady Mackworth, and the M.B. Jackfish. In March 1924, the Hudson's Bay Company acquired all outstanding capital stock of the Alberta & Arctic Transportation Company, and beginning with the 1924 season, all other steamboats of the Hudson's Bay Company fleet were transferred to that company. In 1927, the operation of water transportation was placed under the control of a department of the Hudson's Bay Company known as the Alberta & Arctic Transportation Department. In 1929, the name of the service was changed to Mackenzie & Athabasca Transport Department. Meanwhile, from March 1924 until December 1, 1938, the Hudson's Bay Company kept the charter of the original Alberta & Arctic Transportation Company alive. It was finally struck off the Alberta registry in 1941.

Movement of freight and passengers northbound from Fort McMurray depended almost

of a liquor being shipped to North America being a French brandy in 1692. There are also records of a Scotch whisky being shipped in 1701 and a rum in 1775. By the mid-1890s, Hudson's Bay Company had established wholesale businesses in Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Victoria. They sold liquor, tea, coffee, cigarettes, and tobacco in Hudson's Bay stores and fur trading posts. Liquor operations were controlled by the Winnipeg wholesale branch from 1915 to 1935, when the Wine and Spirit Division was formed. Hudson's Bay Company Inc. was a U.S. wholesale subsidiary that sold liquor and other products to the American market from 1925 until 1976. Hudson's Bay Company also bottled and sold liquor under its own label, and at one time had a full line of spirits including scotch, rye, brandy, rum, and gin. In 1987, Hudson's Bay Company Distillers was sold to Seagram's.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Hudson's Bay Company

sold to the Hudson's Bay Company in 1929.

In areas tributary to Chipewyan prior to 1918, J. H. Byrne had become an aggressive trapper-trader, and ultimately interested Boston and New York Promoters in the possibilities of the northern fur trade. As a result, Lamson & Hubbard Canadian Company was financed largely in Boston, secured a charter from the Dominion Government on November 18, 1918, and

and the relatively inexperienced officials of Lamson & Hubbard, organized the Alberta and Arctic Transportation Company, and on January 27, 1921, secured a Dominion Charter. In December 1922, the Company conducted operations from a railway base on Peace River.

As of March 1924, their river steamers included the S.S. Distributor, S.S. Slave River, and the S.S. D.A. Thomas. In addition to the above steamers, the Company

entirely on wooden steamers and barges operated by the Hudson's Bay Company as a common carrier. Eventually, however, development of a petroleum field, and of important deposits of other minerals, demanded increased cargo capacity, and as a result the Northern Transportation Company was organized by Gilbert Labine in 1930. In 1944, this organization was superseded by a Crown Company of the same name, which in 1947 operated a fleet which comprised 21 steel tugs, 10 wooden tugs, two wooden barges, and 100 steel barges. Freight transported in 1958 amounted to 192,000 tons.

In 1958, the Hudson's Bay Company sold its Mackenzie River Fleet to the Northern Transportation Company and ceased to operate as a common carrier. However, it still handled its own freight beyond the interchange point at Tukoyaktuc.

The Hudson's Bay Company was involved in the trade of liquor for centuries, with the first record

1700s, Hudson's Bay Company sold a blended Scotch whiskey. The brand name was "1670" after the year in which the trading company was granted a Royal Charter by King Charles II. At one point, Hudson's Bay Company owned 25% of the Glenlivet Distillery in Scotland, and wooden boxes of the whisky were marked "Product of Scotland."

The Hudson's Bay Company's place in history for exploring and traveling in northern Canada cannot be understated. Their "Fire Canoes" were the only way to transport furs south and supplies north to the trappers in large amounts. Once roads and railways were introduced, their workload was lightened, but their importance in history can never be diminished.

Scot Dahms is a trapping historian from Wilmington, Ohio.

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