

THE HUDSON BAY RAILWAY

- BY -

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Section One

The Development of the Idea to 1820.

The question whether the Hudson Bay Railway should or should not be completed is one which has now officially passed from active argument into history. For weal or for woe the Canadian government is committed to its completion and most of the actual construction has been done. The question of ^{the} wisdom of such a course as yet lies on the knees of the gods, and a few years must elapse before judgment can be passed in regard to the value or futility of the scheme.

The history of the development of the idea of the route is almost as old as the history of Western Canada and is inextricably bound up with the growing consciousness to the Canadian people of the value of western lands.

The Hudson's Bay Company from the first recognized the importance of the route in reaching their fur preserves, and by practical experience seem to have found it an economical one. Its value during this phase of its history however is somewhat complicated by their need of a route free from Montreal and the influence of the Nor'Westers, and this need of a certainty of making port without engaging in hostilities gave an enhanced value to the route. The same complication of course holds good as to why the Nor'Westers preferred the route now nearly traversed by the Trans-Continental railways. Their traders and trappers could not with safety have gone the other way if they had wished. Whether they wished to do so or not is one of the questions upon which history is more or less silent.

1 Joseph Robson - Account of Six Years Residence in Hudson's Bay. 1732-1736 and 1741-1747. London, 1733. Page 58.
 2 Report from the Select Committee of the British House of Commons on the Hudson Bay Company, 1857.
 3 A.H. de Tremblay, The Hudson Bay Road, J. M. Dent, 1915. Page 195

1
 Sir George Simpson while occupying the position of governor of the Bay, inasmuch as the season is exceedingly short; the Bay is never free from ice About how long? Two months.
 "I do not think that any part of the Hudson's Bay Company's territory is well adapted for settlement; the crops are very uncertain". In referring especially to the straits he remarks. "No great extent of traffic can be carried on through Hudson's Bay, inasmuch as the season is exceedingly short; the Bay is never free from ice About how long? Two months.
 Sir George's testimony is greatly at variance with his book written some eighteen years before, but this he explained by stating that much of the book referred to the vicinity of the Red River; an explanation however that leaves the reader impressed rather with the idea that there may have been ulterior motives for his testimony.

2
 1857 Report Sir George Simpson is quoted as follows:
 That Robson was not incorrect in his surmising is shown by the world.

Not is he any the less firmly impressed with the fact that the company is not desirous that the knowledge of the route and the possibilities of the country served by the route be made known to the world.
 "The company's ships generally enter the straits in the beginning of July as the straits are never frozen over, nor always navigable, even when there is much ice in the Bay; I imagine that a safe passage may be often found in the beginning of June".

the Hudson's Bay watershed. He said:
 Before 1752, Joseph Robson, a former employee of the Hudson's Bay Company seemed to have had a vision of the possibilities of the route as a practical means of ingress and egress to the country of the Hudson's Bay watershed. He said:

Hudson's Bay Company was strongly reprimanded for having written a report favorable to the settlement of the country, in which he made mention of the untold wealth along the agricultural, timber, mineral and other lines of natural resources. He was ordered either to retract the statements he had so made, or to resign. Hence the type of testimony he gave before the House of Commons 1857."

Not only since 1670 had the Hudson's Bay Company found the Hudson Straits a feasible entrance to their fur preserves but the Selkirk settlers made it their means of ingress, and therefore established the route as one practical for immigration, unfraught with serious danger. From 1811 to 1815, four parties came by this route to the Fort Douglas settlement and neither loss of life nor undue hardship seems to have been incurred from either the Straits or the Bay.

Section Two.

Transportation, 1820-1870.

Up to 1820 there were the two recognized routes to the settlement, this one by way of the Hudson Bay, Hayes river and Lake Winnipeg and secondly, the Kaministiquia route by way of the Ottawa and French rivers, Georgian Bay to Fort William and thence, if it was a fur brigade, to Fort Alexander. During these years neither of these routes were entirely satisfactory to the settlers of the Red River valley. The route to Eastern Canada was of course in direct defiance of all geographical features and had been made possible only by the energy of the Nor'Westers. Only high priced articles such as furs could be carried profitably this way. The Hudson Bay route was also far from satisfactory. In the first place there was a tedious and often difficult river journey from Lake Winnipeg to York Factory and secondly only articles which might not be used in any way that would

conflict with their monopoly, would be carried by the company's boats. We thus have the Company refusing to bring out some British manufactures to James Sinclair for this reason. Still more drastic use was made of this power when in 1844, they refused to carry a consignment of tallow to England for the same person because he was suspected of trafficking in furs. However in spite of these drawbacks from 1821, and the union of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, the overland route to Montreal was more or less discarded, partly because it failed in competition with the Hudson Bay route, partly tradition on the part of the Hudson's Bay Company and largely because the northern route kept the trade away from the eyes of eastern merchants and entangling competition.⁴ It is interesting to note that after all a route to Liverpool by way of Port Nelson is but a reversal to type. This route is but following the lines of least resistance which the transcontinental routes went in sheer defiance of.

From about 1845, there began to be a fair volume of trade carried on over a new route. This was south to St. Paul and American routes. By 1856 five hundred wagons carrying tallow and other articles of commerce left Fort Garry for St. Paul. So important did this third route become that by 1859 we have the Hudson's Bay Company contracting to carry their supplies to the Red River posts through the United States.⁵ In 1859 we find the first steamer on the Red River, the "Anson Northup" and in the same year a regular stage route was established to the south.

⁴Report of the Select Committee - 1857 - Page 387.

⁵L. Shere - Transportation in Western Canada - 1785 - 1885. Page 10.

Section Three.

The First Phase of "On-to-the-Bay" by Rail - the 70's and 80's.

Reaching England by the Hudson Bay route on a commercially profitable basis awaited the advent of the development of the railway, the practical means of rapid, bulk transportation overland.

The first railway in Canada - the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railway - did not begin to operate with steam locomotives until 1837, although horse drawn cars were in use the year before. Although railway expansion was fairly rapid - by 1867 there were 2,529 miles of railway in Canada - it was not until the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885 that real railway expansion began in the Dominion. The first railway service for Manitoba, was secured in 1877, when a line from St. Boniface joined the St. Paul and Pacific at Emerson.

Interest however was keen for an alternative route to that one via St. Paul and the possibilities of one by way of the Hudson Bay began to stir the imaginations of the Manitobans. In 1878, the Free Press⁷ quotes a long letter written by the Newfoundland correspondent of the Toronto Globe. The whole tone of the letter is favorable to the possibilities of navigation in the Hudson Straits, while the advantages of the new route - nearness to England and a road for immigration, rather than by New York are strongly stressed. Again in 1879,⁸ interest is revived by the return of Dr. Robert Bell of the Geological Department, Ottawa, from a prolonged stay in the region of the Nelson and Churchill rivers.

⁶ Id. Page 13.

⁷ Manitoba Free Press, June 8, 1878.

⁸ Id. January 14, 1879.

Besides the fascination of an all western route for the transportation of western goods to the sea, and the reason of getting away from the American route and all the dangers of an exit through a foreign country there was another motive for the Hudson Bay road. It would have been thought that the steady pushing on of the C.P.R. would have satisfied fully the people of the west. The greatest motive of all however for the northern route came from this very source. As an inducement to the C.P.R. there had been inserted in their charter the famous 'monopoly clause'. This stated that for a period of twenty years from the date of the enactment of the charter there should be no charter issued to any railway running north-east or south-west within fifteen miles of the boundary line. The purpose of course was to prevent American lines from tapping the resources of the west and thereby impairing the earning capacity of the Canadian Pacific. The people of Manitoba, however, saw in this two dangers - first - the invasion of what they considered their legislative rights in not being able to grant railway charters as the necessity arose, and secondly, the fastening of a commercial disadvantage upon them in the form of excessive rates. The following passage will suffice to indicate the attitude of the western people. Commenting upon the C.P.R. purchase of the Duluth, South Shore and Atlantic Railway, the Free Press Stated:⁹

"But while the Dominion continued to lavish millions wrung from an overtaxed people upon this pampered corporation, they will have no difficulty in buying up whatever roads they require to tighten the chains of monopoly upon Manitoba. This is the same road that refuses to build a few miles of branch lines to relieve the people who were induced to settle in the Souris district by the lying representations made them by C.P.R. managers. It is impossible to understand the fatuity which inspires Canadians to continue in power a government whose sole aim appears to be

⁹ Id. July 26, 1868.

the enriching of this foreign corporation".

Two means of combating the alleged monopoly were attempted by the Manitoba government. One was the issuing of railway charters to railways running south and the boundary line despite the disallowance of Dominion legislation and the second means was the Hudson Bay Railway.

That the building of the C.P.R. was the most potent of the contributing motives for a northern route is evidenced by the fact, that when the Dominion government abrogated the monopoly clause in 1888, interest in the Hudson Bay Railway began to wane, both on the part of the people in Manitoba and also their representatives, the Greenway government.

Section Four.

Legislation in Regard to the Railway - 70's and 80's.

Of the many charters issued by both the Dominion and Provincial governments for companies wishing to reach the Hudson Bay, the two first, in time and in importance, were given in 1880.

On May 7, 1880, a charter was given by the Dominion government¹⁰ to a company, the Nelson Valley Railway and Transportation Company, to construct a road between a point on the north shore of Lake Winnipeg and the mouth of the Churchill river. They were given power also to construct and use steamships.

On the same date a second bill was assented to,¹¹ to construct a line from the city of Winnipeg to Port Nelson, either in a straight line or to use the navigable waters leading to the Port. This company

¹⁰ 43 Victoria - C.57.

¹¹ 43 Victoria - C.59.