

WILLIAM BRODERICK JR.

A HISTORY OF THE TELEGRAPH CABIN ON BOBTAIL LAKE BY WILLIAM BRODERICK JR.

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In the early days of the Yukon Telegraph, William Broderick and his partner built a little cabin on Bobtail Lake. The little log cabin on the shore of what is now Lake Naltesby in the Cariboo country is obviously old. It was the maintenance cabin and telegraph office of Bobtail Lake.

When the discovery of gold in the Yukon Territories sent thousands of men hurrying north, it caused it to grow in a few months from a wilderness to a scene of intense activity, as the Nechako from the south dug for riches in the rivers and creeks. It was an isolated area, the gold fields of the Yukon, with only dog team communication with the outside. So the miners, and the businessmen who kept them supplied with food and equipment petitioned Ottawa for some means of communication. In those early days it meant sending by dog team to the coast, then by steamer to the "outside". Finally, after much stalling on account of the great cost, the government started work on a telegraph line through wilderness country of the Cariboo, across the Yukon, and up to Dawson on the Yukon River. Thence it continued on to the Alaska boundary. The work commenced from both ends, and once the right-of-way had surveyed, the slashing crews worked mightily cutting the heavy timber through the valleys and across the rugged mountain terrain. When the line was cleared, the wire was packed in, along with the heavy insulators, on mule and pack horse from the rail point of Ashcroft. By the fall of 1900 the line was strung from Ashcroft north to the headwaters of the Nass River, above Hazelton. From the Alaska boundary it ran south to a point just below Telegraph Creek on the Stikine River. Then bad weather forced a halt, leaving a short gap.

As the construction of the line progressed, the job of finding personnel for its maintenance was in progress. It would take linemen to tend breaks in the swaying strand of wire, to hunt down and correct the many spots where it would ground and short circuit. Then too, telegraph operators would be needed; men of a specialized trade who could, by the use of key and sounder, send and receive. In the early years of the present century not many men had that trade, and those who did were in great demand, for there was no other means of long-distance communication.

In May of 1899, my father William Tyndall Broderick was accepted as a railroad telegrapher and started work on the Pacific Division of the CPR. After working in the Roger's Pass area for two years, he started work for the Yukon Telegraph Service on December 1st, 1901. He had been assigned to a cabin 160 miles from Quesnel and made his way there by snowshoes with an Indian guide. From Dec 1901 until spring of 1902, my father worked in a cabin above Burns Lake. That was the first year the complete line was in operation, and the number of cabins manned proved to be inadequate. It was found necessary to shorten the territory of some of the

operator-lineman crews by butting cabins in between. Copies of public work reports show that there was very few cabins the first winter. It shows only one cabin, that of Blackwater, between Quesnel and Fraser Lake. In the report for December 1902 however, it lists Bobtail Lake with W.T. Broderick as operator and A. McDonald as lineman.

According to stories my father told me there was a cabin of sorts at Bobtail Lake, intended only as an overnight stopping place while online patrol. He was sent to Bobtail Lake in the spring of 1902 as operator of the new maintenance cabin.

I remember him using the name Alex when speaking of one of his linemen, so it was probably A. McDonald shown in the report. The miserable hovel at Bobtail was an impossible abode, so the men decided to build a new one. By wire they were supplied with department specifications and plans for its construction.

The actual construction of the cabin was described to me bit by bit, as incidents or remarks would remind him of it in the later years. From somewhere they acquired a whipsaw, and with it they sawed the boards used for the door and window casings. To use the whipsaw they dug a pit, and over it constructed a platform where the man on top of the saw stood. Then, with the long firmly anchored on the ground, one man in the pit, each to an end of the long rip saw, they slowly laboriously sawed down the length of the log to make one board after another. Each board was an achievement and precious in that isolated land. It is unfortunate that the door of the little cabin has disappeared, for the lumber which it was constructed represented long hours of hard work by my father and his partner on the other end of the saw. But the window and door casings are still intact, as is part of the floor they laid.

The floor was made of "puncheons". Straight threes were cut, two sides were smoothed off, and they were laid as tightly together as possible. Then, with an adze, one of the important tools of early homesteaders, the tops were hewed down so as to make a flat surface. That was a great improvement over many cabins which had merely round poles for a floor.

The construction of the roof was described in detail by my father who felt justified pride in the fact it never leaked. They first laid a course of round poles as tight as they would go and covered them with a good layer of heavy clay. Then as shingles provide the final watertight surface in modern construction, they used what my father called "scoops". They cut straight clear poplar trees and sawed them to the required length. Then they split them straight down the middle, which gave them two pieces, each with one flat surface. Those pieces were then hollowed out with axe and adze, to make open-ended troughs. They covered the clay roof with their hollowed out "scoops" laying them edge to edge, with the open ends up. Firmly another layer of scoops was placed with the round bottoms up. The hollowed-out sides covering the juxtaposed edges of the bottom layer. So they made a watertight roof that lasted for many years. Poplar was chosen for the scoops because of its straight grain, making it easy to split straight down the middle, but unfortunately when it is not cured properly it rots quickly. For that reason the scoops on the roof

of the little cabin have gone, but poles and layer of clay remain, reminders of the labor of the two builders long ago.

From this little cabin my father and Alex McDonald patrolled the stretch of wire North and South. The operators were provided with a portable set of key and sounder which they could cut into the line at specified points where a wire lead down to a low pole. That way they could test the line, and report on its condition to the next cabin. The two men had the responsibility of keeping the messages flowing north and south regardless of weather. As they worked, the operator patrolling with his portable sending and receiver set, the lineman splicing and repairing. In the cabin there was a set of bluestone and copper batteries. Sometimes grounding conditions would so weaken the current that the messages could not get by their cabin. Then my father would ground his end of the wire, cutting it off at that point. He would receive them messages as they come to him and copy them. Then, hooking into his batteries, he would transmit to the next cabin, where the operator would do likewise if the current was still too weak. They called that method "repeating".

Until the beginning of 1904 my father lived in that cabin and saved his money. In January 1904 he resigned from Yukon Telegraph service and moved to Enderby, and opened the first drug store there.

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