

53rd ANNIVERSARY OF A GIGANTIC ENTERPRISE

LAYING THE ATLANTIC CABLE--PUCK'S GIRDLE PLACED AROUND THE EARTH.

A HISTORY OF THE MOMENTOUS EVENT.

(By H. F. SHORTIS.)

It is a pleasure to me to write about telegraphy, as for many years I was a telegraph operator connected with the Anglo-American Telegraph Company in Newfoundland. My early associations were all connected with the operators of that company at St. John's, Harbor Grace, Heart's Content and its numerous branches throughout the island.

The object of this article is not to give my personal recollections of the many great men connected with the enterprise, but to give your readers some accurate information regarding the promoters and to show the many difficulties they had to overcome. Any person reading the records of Newfoundland History cannot but be struck with the very close connection that Newfoundland and its principal merchants had with this vast undertaking. This is only natural, for the geographical position of Newfoundland, coming in midway between Europe and the United States, made our island the pivot upon which the whole enterprise rested.

BISHOP MULLOCK.

There have been many discussions as to who was the "father of the mighty thought" to connect the Old World with the New



T. D. SCANLAN.
One of the Pioneers.

with the electric cable. Frederick N. Gisborne, a telegraph operator and a man of great genius, rapidity and originality of thought and mind, as well as full of enterprise, was the chief official of the Nova Scotia Telegraph Company, and had no doubt many ideas as to what might or could be done, and became eventually one of the prime movers in starting the work. He came to Newfoundland in 1851, and laid a project before the Legislature, which was the prospectus for an overland line from St. John's to Cape Ray, nearly four hundred miles in length, and then to communicate between Cape Ray and Cape Breton by steamer and carrier pigeons, with the hope of eventually laying a submarine cable across the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The Legislature gave every encouragement to the project and granted £500 (two thousand dollars) to Mr. Gisborne to explore and survey the proposed line to Cape Ray. They also passed an Act authorizing its construction, with certain privileges and the appointment of Commissioners to carry it out.

Mr. Gisborne was strongly backed up by the whole community, more especially by the illustrious prelate, Rt. Rev. Dr. Mullock, Roman Catholic Bishop of St. John's, to whom the honor and credit of being the prime mover is always given by the highest authorities, and it was on the initiative of a letter written by his lordship to the Courier newspaper of this city, November 8th, 1850, suggesting this work, that really brought Mr. Gisborne to Newfoundland. Bishop Mullock, when visiting the Western Coast, lay becalmed one day in the yacht in sight of Cape North, the extreme point of Cape Breton Island, and saw how Nature had provided an easy and suitable approach to the mainland on the West, and upon arriving back to St. John's he wrote this memorable letter to our local newspapers contradicting the previous statements that had appeared in the press, stating that Halifax was the nearest point from America to Ireland, and proved conclusively that St. John's was really hundreds of miles shorter, and decreased the distance by two days by steamer. It must be remembered that at this time there was no submarine cable in existence, not even between Dover and Calais in the English Channel, which was afterwards the first cable to be successfully operated.

INITIATING THE LAND LINE.

Bishop Mullock suggested that fast steamers ply between Ireland and St. John's, and establish a land line from St. John's to Cape Ray—thence a submarine cable to St. Paul's Island, which is about 40 miles distant, thence to Cape North in

Cape Breton, which is only about 12 miles—thus two days could be saved in connecting America with Europe for quick despatch of news. He ended up his memorable letter as follows:—"I hope the day is not far distant when St. John's will be the first link in the electric chain which will unite the Old World with the New."

So enthusiastic was Mr. Gisborne that he resigned his lucrative position with the Nova Scotia Telegraph Company and organized a local company in Newfoundland for the purpose of constructing the first telegraph line in our Island between St. John's and Carbonear, and during September of the same year he set out upon the arduous expedition of surveying the line to Cape Ray. This occupied him and his party of six men, upwards of three months, in which they suffered extreme privations and narrowly escaped starvation. On his return to St. John's he reported very favorably on the project to the Legislature, and furnished estimates of the probable cost. Mr. Gisborne then proceeded to New York and formed the Electric Telegraph Company with Mr. Tibbits and Mr. Holbrook, of that city, as his chief supporters. He then left for England to purchase a suitable submarine cable to connect Newfoundland with the mainland—his project being from Cape Ray to Prince Edward Island and thence across Northumberland Straits to New Brunswick. He returned by a small steamer, and in the month of November, 1852 he laid the first submarine cable of any length in America, across the Northumberland Straits, but unfortunately this cable was shortly afterwards broken.

FAVORED AN UNDERGROUND SYSTEM.

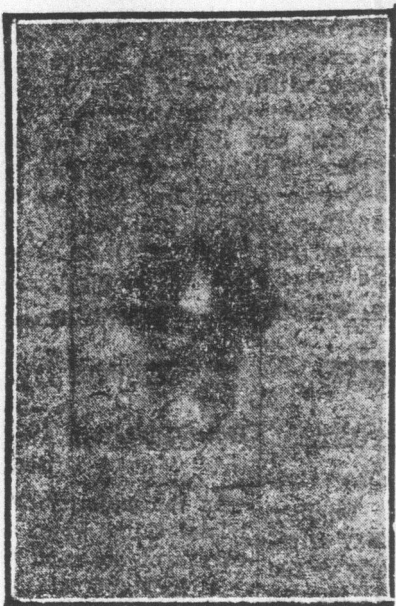
In the Spring of 1853, Mr. Gisborne went to work vigorously to complete his favorite undertaking of laying a telegraph line, chiefly underground, between St. John's and Cape Ray. He had constructed some thirty or forty miles of every prospect of success, when most unexpectedly his financial supporters in New York refused to furnish the required funds, and brought operations to a sudden termination. Mr. Gisborne being the only recognized party, was stripped of his entire property and was arrested to answer the claims of his creditors. He cheerfully and honorably surrendered everything he possessed, and did his utmost to relieve the extreme distress in which the laborers on the line were involved. Mr. Gisborne went to New York in January, 1854 to see his friends again, but they could give him no support. While staying at the Astor House he met an engineer, Matthew Field, and through him he obtained an introduction to Cyrus W. Field, brother of Matthew, who was a merchant of New York, and although a comparatively young man, had retired from business with a substantial fortune.

ENTER CYRUS W. FIELD.

Mr. Gisborne spent an evening at the residence of Cyrus W. Field, describing the route of his proposed telegraph enterprise and the points it would connect. Mr. Gisborne admits that he never proposed a trans-Atlantic cable, as the project was too quixotic, and his ambitions were on a very much smaller scale. Cyrus Field admits that the idea of a trans-Atlantic cable had long been a matter of speculation with scientific men, though their theories had never attracted his attention until Mr. Gisborne brought his project up, and when he grasped the idea, it took a strong hold on his imagination and led him to entertain the Newfoundland scheme as a preliminary to the other. He cared little for shortening the communication with Europe by a day or two, but the hope of greater results inspired and gave him courage to enter upon a work which no man could foresee the end. Cyrus Field then made his own enquiries as to the possibility of laying this trans-Atlantic cable, and being satisfied he then formed up a new company with Peter Cooper, Moses Taylor, Marshall Roberts and Chandler White as the first directors.

FIRST ORGANIZATION MEETING.

They met on Saturday evening, and as they were all very busy men, they had not much time to spare, so they agreed to meet on Monday morning and organize the New York, Newfoundland and London Telegraph Co., with a capital of one and a half million dollars, and I may here state that it was under this company that my friends and fellow-operators Edwin P. Howell, of New York, J. T. O'Mara, A. P. Thompson, the late James G. Scanlan, the late J. J. Thomey and Philip Ryan (both drowned by the capsizing of their boats some few years ago), S. S. Stentafor, E. B. Thompson, P. H. Glendinning, Mike Kavanagh, myself and many others, that we commenced telegraphy and learned our business in the year 1870. It afterwards merged into the Anglo-American Telegraph Co., as it exists to-day with its staff of expert operators and five cables of its own across the Atlantic, besides being connect-



CYRUS W. FIELD.
To whose indomitable pluck and energy the whole success of the enterprise belongs.

THE FUTURE HIDDEN.

The sum of one and a half million dollars was quickly subscribed before breakfast at that memorable meeting, and the company took over Mr. Gisborne's enterprise in Newfoundland, paid all his debts, and well it was for them that the future was hidden to them, with its heavy burden of many wearisome years, or in all probability it would have chilled the most sanguine amongst them. There is nothing easier than to build a railroad or telegraph line on paper. You have only to run a line across the map and one thousand leagues vanish in a stroke. Look at the enterprise and determination of the Reid Nfd. Co., who by their pluck and perseverance overcame all obstacles, and finished their contracts without a compromise, or the original contractors being financially hampered, which is an unusual occurrence in such great enterprises, as witnesses those in the United States, Canada or elsewhere. The original contractors seldom carry out their part to a finish, but the Reid Nfd. Co. have done so, and that with very few accidents, during the past quarter of a century, and certainly with every fair play towards their employees, because I know scores of men who entered the service when Reid took over the contract, and they are in the employ to-day, which speaks for itself.

THE FIRST CABLE.

Gisborne had made a beginning at the easiest end, but now the hard work began. Able and practical men like the late Hon. A. M. Mackay (who rose to the position of Superintendent and held it for thirty years or more), T. D. Scanlan and a few others were young operators, and the difficulties began to disappear, but it would take me too long to narrate one-tenth of their adventures and hardships. For two years they underwent incredible privation and labor of every kind, and then came the laying of the cable across the Gulf to connect with another telegraph line of one hundred and forty miles in length on the Island of Cape Breton. The first attempt to lay a cable across the Gulf in 1855 was a failure; but they were successful in the following year on their second attempt. The company had now telegraph connections from New York to St. John's, a distance, approximately, one thousand miles, and they stood on the heights of historic Signal Hill looking across the broad Atlantic—ready to, metaphorically speaking, clasp hands with their fellow-men in Old Ireland, and flash the news to and from in the twinkling of an eye, should their vast enterprise succeed. And the people of the entire world wondered at the vastness of the scheme, by which a few enterprising men hoped that they would overcome the great storms and waves of the broad Atlantic, and enable the peoples of the two hemispheres to speak to each other with almost the rapidity of thought. The con-

summation of this wonderful undertaking, probably the greatest in the history of the world, first brought our beloved country into prominence, and compelled even the British Government to turn their attention to us, as occupying the most important geographical position among all the colonies. We became the connecting link between the Old World and the New. The hope of the great prelate, Bishop Mullock, was about to be realized. The land of his birth and the land of his adoption were about to be united by the Atlantic cable from shore to shore. It was no longer to be a hazy experiment, but an established fact.

FIELD'S GREAT OBJECT.

This brings us to the beginning of the great object of Cyrus Field to span the Atlantic. It was true that the ocean had been sounded and an excellent plateau had been found between Newfoundland and Ireland that was ideal for laying of this cable, but the very idea of laying a cable across the bed to the ocean, two thousand miles in length, was looked upon as preposterous. How could it be strong enough to stand the weight and strain to which it would be subjected, and then how could the copper wire be in perfect insulation for such a long distance? The idea was looked upon as chimerical by the pessimists, in fact, by the world at large. The very idea of communication between Newfoundland and Ireland in this manner was just as unlikely to prove a success as if we tried to open up communication with the inhabitants of Mars or Venus to-day.

MORSE ON THE "NIAGARA."

The announcement was now made that the s.s. "Niagara" had sailed from New York to assist in this work of uniting two worlds by an electric cable along which the thoughts of men would fly with the speed of lightning itself. The United States Government had acted generously in selecting the "Niagara"—their largest and best equipped ship for the great undertaking, and the British Government on its part displayed an equal liberality. Professor Morse was one of the few passengers on board the "Niagara." He was the inventor of the electro-magnetic telegraph, and was known throughout the civilized world. It would take me too long to give the details of his many endeavors to perfect this wonderful agency of communication. For over forty years he had been prominent before the British and American Governments on this important work, and he was now the chief electrician. Cyrus Field was in England where he was organizing the Atlantic Telegraph Company. This was part of the great project to enlarge the company by increasing its capital with British shareholders. Old John Bull was slow to believe, and asked for more evidence. The undertaking was too vast to be taken hold of rashly, and as yet there had been little or no precedent to go on, as the longest line that had been laid was only three hundred miles. Mr. Field had already made one failure in trying to cross the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and his experience therefore was not very encouraging.

BRUNEL'S PROPHECY.

Mr. Field took council with Robert Stephenson, who manifested a deep interest in the enterprise, and he was joined by younger men, such as Samuel Canning, who were to prove of great strength to aid him in the arduous work. No less cordial and enthusiastic was Mr. Brunel, a man known in both hemispheres, who was then building the "Great Eastern," and one day he took Mr. Field down to Blackwell to see the leviathan hull then rising on the banks of the Thames—"There," said he, "is the ship to lay the Atlantic cable," but little did Mr. Brunel think that ten years later that very ship would be employed in the service, and in the final victory over the sea, and redeem all the misfortunes of her earlier career.

POLITICAL DIFFICULTIES SMOOTHED.

The s.s. "Niagara" arrived in England on the 14th May, and was joined by the British man-o-war "Agamemnon." The "Niagara" was to take half the cable from the manu-

factory at Greenwich, near London, and the "Agamemnon" the other half at Birkenhead, near Liverpool. Mr. Field had been successful in forming a company, raising £350,000 to lay the cable. Mr. Field took one-fourth of this amount himself, and British subscribers three-fourths. T. H. Brooking, well known in Newfoundland, was one of the prominent men, and was elected Chairman of the Executive Committee. Professor William Thomson, LL.D., of Glasgow, was also connected with it. He was afterwards to be so well known as Sir William Thomson, and later as Lord Kelvin, one of the most eminent men in this department of science in Europe.

Mr. Field now returned to New York, and thence he was hurriedly called to Newfoundland to assist in getting an "Act" passed by the Legislature. He then had to rush off to Washington to meet politicians there that were causing trouble, arguing that both ends of this cable were in British possessions, but an agreement was reached, giving the Government of the United States priority of transmission of their messages over all others, and the "Act" was passed. It was the work of a



HON. A. M. MACKAY,
General Superintendent

diplomat to smoothen over national jealousies and opposition, but Field was equal to the occasion and showed the Washington Senators that England was not in reality "crawling under the sea" to get some advantage over the United States.

THE CABLE FLEET.

Now let us return to the s.s. "Niagara." She was three weeks getting the cable coiled on board, and arrived at Queenstown about August 1st to meet the rest of the fleet. Here are the squadron engaged in this work at that time, and will give some idea of its great importance:

The U. S. steam frigate "Niagara," with half the cable.
The U. S. steam frigate "Susquehanna," as tender.

The British warship, "Agamemnon," to take one half the cable, and start laying down from the American side.
H.M.S. "Leopard" as tender to "Agamemnon."

The steamers "Advice" and "Willing Mind" to assist in landing the cable at Valentia, Ireland. The U. S. steamer "Arctic" and Telegraph Co.'s steamer "Victoria" were to be in Trinity Bay, Nfld., and await the arrival of the fleet, and assist in landing the cable there.

INVOKING THE DIVINE BLESSING.

Monday, August 1st, Valentia Bay was studied with innumerable craft bedecked in bunting—their crews and sight-seers cheering enthusiastically, as the work proceeded. The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland stood in the beach for several hours surrounded by his staff and the directors of the Telegraph Company, waiting the landing of the cable, and when the American sailors jumped into the water with the hawser to which it was attached, His Excellency was amongst the first to lay hold

of it and pull it to the shore. The wire having been secured to a house on the beach, the Rev. Mr. Day, of Kenmore, advanced and offered prayer, asking for encouragement to direct and prosper the work. The Lord-Lieutenant, Mr. Brooking and Mr. Field were then called on for speeches.

THE FIRST FAILURE.

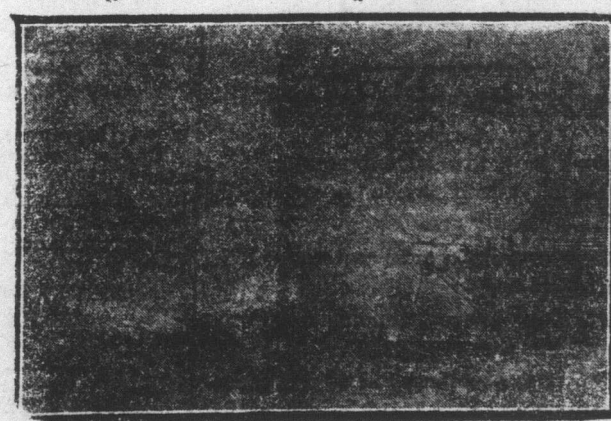
August 5th, the "Niagara" started on her trip to cross the Atlantic. All went well and the ships were moving out into the broad Atlantic. There was a strange unnatural silence in the ship. The cable seemed to them as a human creature upon whose fate they hung, as if it were to decide their own destiny. The engineers are all there, including Professor Morse—the paying-out machinery does its work, and the rumbling is music to their ears. On Monday, one week after they started to land the cable, and they are now two hundred miles to sea—they have got beyond the shallow water of the coast and were now approaching where the cable sank to the depth of two thousand fathoms. The cable was each hour burying itself in the Atlantic Ocean, and every instant the flash of electric light in the darkened telegraph room told of the passage of the electric current. At nine o'clock that night a mysterious interruption occurred which staggered all on board. Suddenly the electrical continuity was lost. The cable was not broken, but it ceased to work. De Saunty tried it and Professor Morse tried it, but neither could make it work. The electricians gave it up, and the engineers were preparing to cut the cable, when suddenly the electric current came back again. It had been interrupted for two and a half hours. The return of the current was like life from the dead, and it was the greatest relief to all on board. The sailors talked of the cable as if it were a pet child, but although their hopes revived, they were crushed again before morning. The cable was now running out freely at the rate of six miles an hour, while the ship was advancing about four miles. To check this the engineers applied the brakes firmly which at once stopped the engine. The effect was to bring a heavy strain on the cable that was in the water, and as the stem of the ship arose from the trough of the sea, the pressure was too great, and the cable parted. The unbidden tear started to many a manly eye, and as Captain Hudson stated, "it made all hands of us feel that we had lost our dearest friend." There was nothing left to be done but return to England and report failure of the enterprise, after laying 350 miles of cable.

FIELD UNDAUNTED.

A private letter from Cyrus Field, dated August 13th, 1857, shows the grit of that gentleman in his deepest troubles. Here is an extract from his letter:—"The successful laying down of the Atlantic Telegraph Cable is put off for a short time, but its final triumph has been fully proved from the experience that we had since we left Valentia. My confidence was never so strong as at the present time, and I feel sure with God's blessing that we shall connect Europe and America with the Atlantic cord."

Mr. Field was now made General Manager of the Company, and preparations were made for a second attempt. The first expedition opened the eyes of all to the vastness of the undertaking, and led many to doubt who did not doubt before. The directors gave orders to manufacture seven hundred miles of new cable, and the British Government promised its powerful aid. The American Government granted Mr. Field his requests for further assistance. On June 10th, the second expedition departed with smooth water, fair sky and bright prospects. They were almost sure of fine weather during June, and therefore a speedy success before them. For three days all went well, but, alas, the barometer started to fall, and signs indicated to the seamen rough weather. From that day it was a succession of gales for a week—it blew fiercer and fiercer. The heavy weight of 1,300 miles of cable aboard the "Agamemnon" caused that steamer to roll and strain heavily with every sign of foundering. In her tremendous rolls the cable broke loose, but at the most fearful moments the gallant captain never lost his presence of mind. The vessel suffered considerably, and the main coil of cable had shifted and became so twisted and tangled that one hundred miles of cable had to be got out and coiled in another part of the ship. Things were now getting into shape again, but not three miles of cable had been paid out before the cable broke, being caught in the machinery aboard the "Niagara." Both ships at once turned about and spliced the cable. Now all went well. About forty miles of cable were paid out when suddenly the current ceased. Professor Morse went on deck and reported a total break of continuity. This

(Continued on 8th Page.)



S. S. NIAGARA
Paying out the cable during the trial trip.



VALENTIA BAY, IRELAND.
The first start of the cable. The eastern terminus in Europe.