

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

MISSION WORK AMONG THE NAVVIES ON THE C.P.R.

By special request, we publish the following condensed report of the address delivered by Mr. J. Nixon, at the meeting of Knox College Missionary Society:

The advisability of sending a missionary to the navvies on the C.P.R. was discussed last spring, and after due consideration the Society felt it their duty to send the Gospel to these men, and accordingly, with great hesitation, I resolved to undertake the work, the experience of which I am now called upon to relate.

I left Hamilton on the 12th of April, 1882, reaching Winnipeg the following Sabbath morning about nine o'clock. Professor Thompson, a graduate of this College, met me at the railway station and kindly assisted me in securing a boarding house, which, at that time, was no easy task. After remaining in Winnipeg a few days, awaiting the arrival of my baggage, and viewing the famous city of the North West, I proceeded to the celebrated town of Brandon. The train, as usual, was late, and the unfortunate passengers were obliged to seek shelter wherever they could find it. Messrs. McKay, Malcolm, Hardie and myself were in a short time prostrated on a shake-down in the upper floor of a boarding-house. It is needless to say that we were rather uncomfortable. One year ago last May there was not a single residence in this now large and flourishing town. A new Presbyterian church has been erected during the past summer. In this place I met Rev. J. Ferries, Presbyterian minister, whose extensive knowledge of the western country greatly encouraged and aided me in discovering my field of labour, and providing the necessary equipments indispensable to the successful prosecution of missionary work among the railway men. On the 14th of April Mr. Hardie, Presbyterian missionary to Oak Lake, and myself, conducted our first meeting in the railway station called Flat Creek. The name has since been changed to Oak Lake. The attendance was very large, and all were apparently delighted to hear the voice of a missionary in this remote corner of Manitoba. From this point my labours began. During the week I went out some fifteen miles west of Flat Creek, then the terminus of the railroad, and made arrangements for continuous services among the labourers. Mr. D. Grant, contractor, received me very kindly, and promised to lend his assistance in carrying on our work, believing it to be very necessary. Owing to spring floods, the material for railway construction was delayed, and consequently labour was postponed. On this account I was advised by Mr. Grant to defer work for a few weeks, until the waters subsided and labour properly commenced. The inclemency of the weather at that time also prevented open-air services. In the meantime I retraced my steps to Brandon, and preached one Sabbath for Mr. Ferries, in a settlement eight miles south of this place, where, during the latter part of the summer, Mr. Gardiner, one of our students, laboured with much acceptance. Having remained in Brandon for several days in expectation of a train to Winnipeg, and being still disappointed, I finally set out on a journey of 140 miles on foot. Fortunately I was overtaken by a train, after having walked sixty miles on the ties.

On Sabbath morning, May 14th, I arose from my bed on the prairie very weary, and somewhat melancholy. After breakfast I put up notices announcing service at eleven o'clock. During the greater part of the forenoon the majority of the men were employed in washing their clothes, hair-dressing, playing cards, hunting game, working on the road, and not a few passing sarcastic remarks concerning the shape, appearance, and other eccentricities of the recently arrived missionary. About a quarter past eleven some fifty men gathered together and lay down on the open prairie. I requested them to lie so that the wind would favour me while speaking. One gentleman, more boisterous than the others, exclaimed, "All right, sir; fire ahead!" With one or two slight interruptions we had a very good service. The labourers received tracts, and expressed their desire to have me come and preach to them again. Towards evening some five or six young men came into my tent and conversed about the service, and religion generally. I felt very grateful to God, and hoped many would be soon asking for eternal life. One

young man was exceedingly anxious to know if all denominations should not be united. I soon discovered him to be a Roman Catholic, and afterwards learned why he came to be in my tent. He and some of his companions resolved to stone my tent, and force me from the road altogether. One was to come in and interest me while the others made the necessary preparations for stoning. However, their plan was rendered null by some others who interposed, and threatened to punish them severely if a single stone was thrown, or myself molested in any way. Ever afterwards I had no trouble in this way; generally there was good order at all my meetings.

EXTENT OF THE WORK.

I first began about fifty miles west of Brandon, and early in September had the pleasure of visiting Regina, the present capital of the North-West Territories. The distance between Oak Lake and Regina is about 250 miles. There were contractors nearly every two miles, for a distance of one hundred miles. Each of these employ from twenty to 250 men. Their work is to grade the road and prepare it for the putting down of ties and rails, which is done by another contractor with great rapidity. When everything is working harmoniously they can complete from three to four miles daily. It is interesting to witness the very systematic order connected with this work, and the celerity with which it is accomplished. Another company always keep pace with the tracklayers in putting up telegraph poles and wires, so that every evening a message could be despatched from the terminus of the track to almost any other part of the world.

Very few of the contractors are permitted to undertake more than one mile of grading at a time. This, of course, necessitates frequent movement, and increases the work of the missionary to such an extent that he often finds it impossible to reach the same camp in less than seven weeks after his first visit. There were between 5,000 and 6,000 men in all employed on this division of the road. One missionary among such a multitude can accomplish very little.

DIFFICULTIES.

Contractors generally take no interest in mission work. Mr. Langdon, head contractor, informed me personally that my services were not required. In reply, I requested permission to procure my meals in the various camps along the road. He positively refused, and walked away. On this account it was sometimes difficult to obtain supplies of food. Very few of the contractors ever attended service. This had a bad effect upon the men in their employ.

The navvies were of various nationalities, and also belonged to different denominations. The majority were Swedes, Norwegians, and western Americans. Only a small number of the Swedes could speak English, hence they were very seldom at service. They are a careless class of people, and much given to Sabbath desecration. Many of those who could understand English spent their Sabbaths in playing base-ball or some other sinful amusement.

I likewise found week-nightly services unsatisfactory. Many of the navvies do station work, and continue until late in the evening. Occasionally quite a number would assemble together, more frequently very few. It is easy to understand that men working hard all day would feel indisposed to listen even fifteen minutes to a discourse. The weeks were always long and wearisome. I had no place where I could read or study, except on the open prairie, and the mosquitoes in the west have a mortgage on nearly every spot of it, so that my reading was very limited.

I often met with serious difficulties, even on the Lord's day, in attempting to preach the Gospel. Sometimes, after walking five or ten miles to a certain camp, the contractor would refuse me permission to preach. Their reasons often amounted to mere excuses. One gentleman thought it unwise, because it would create a controversy among the men, which might result in something serious. This seems very plausible, and an excuse likely to meet the approbation of any person anxious for peace, but, after all, it is simply an excuse unworthy of notice, and yet the missionary must act as though it were all a reality. Again, many work on the Sabbath, and consequently it is impossible, even at the noon hour, to obtain a hearing.

ORDER AND NUMBER OF SERVICES.

I conducted from two to seven services every week. On Sabbath day I generally preached three times,

walking from ten to twenty miles, and always carrying two pair of blankets. On the 21st of May I walked twenty miles, wearing two overcoats, preached three times, and then retired to an old freight car, partially filled with sacks of oats. This was about the coldest day I ever experienced, either in Manitoba or Ontario. During the summer I visited some seventy-five different camps and preached from one to ten times in most of them. Sometimes services were held in dining tents, sometimes in the open air, often in boarding cars and stores, and not unfrequently in hotels. In short, I preached everywhere and anywhere practicable. Three thousand tracts were distributed and 150 hymn books disposed of. It may be interesting to some to be told of the usual places of retirement, and therefore I mention a few. At the terminus of the track the navvies sleep in large cars constructed like a small ware house, long and narrow. In addition to these they have four ordinary freight-cars used for various purposes. In one of these cars are kept for the horses employed in drawing ties. Here I was always obliged to sleep, sometimes on the floor of the car, more frequently on sacks of oats. On one occasion I slept on kegs of shingle-nails, and once on sacks of flour. Occasionally I slept in stores where a number of boxes would be placed together, covered with drygoods. For the most part I rested on the prairie wherever night overtook me. This was neither pleasant, satisfactory, nor desirable. It was also very unsafe because the nights are often extremely cold. Under these circumstances I was sometimes anxious for the return of October. Often I have been completely discouraged, and resolved upon returning to Ontario, but after a moment's consideration would decide to try again. Accordingly I continued the work all summer, with the exception of five weeks devoted to the visitation of new settlements, with a view to ascertaining as accurately as possible the number of Presbyterian families and the prospects for mission work during the coming summer. Ten different settlements were visited and many others heard from. The Presbyterian element predominates in nearly every settlement. The people everywhere received me kindly, and expressed their desire to have missionaries among them during the coming summer. Not long ago I received a letter from one of our people near Qu'Appelle informing me that a subscription towards the erection of a church had been circulated among the settlers with good success.

SABBATH DESECRATION.

MR. EDITOR,—Your article on the above-named subject, in your issue of the 17th inst., is timely, and not one day too soon. The desecration of the Lord's day by the Canada Pacific Railway Company in this part of the country has become so systematic and so boldly defiant of public sentiment that at the last regular meeting of the Presbytery of Lanark and Renfrew, steps were taken to endeavour to secure some united action among all religious bodies, to make at least an attempt at having the evil put a stop to. The danger we are in of having our Sabbath altogether robbed of its sacredness, and made in great part like any other day, will be apparent if we reflect that, what is seen here is probably only a specimen of what is going on wherever the C.P. extends; and if now, in the very infancy of this railway company's existence, it desecrates the Sabbath with such unblushing effrontery, what will it do in the course of years, when it is old and strong? Besides, what one company does, others, in self-defence, as they imagine, will be obliged to do also. And if, as appears likely to be the case, the whole railway system of the country is to be controlled by a very few companies, we shall soon have a general setting aside altogether, so far as the railways are concerned, of the Sabbath rest. That it will stop here, no one who knows the natural tendency of this course to go from bad to worse, or who has observed the history of Sabbath-breaking abroad, until virtually no Sabbath has been left, will for a moment dream. That this evil can be put a stop to at once would be too much to expect, but that its progress may be arrested is not too much to hope for, and in time greatly reduced in its extent, if only prompt, united and energetic action be taken by the Christian people of the country. To restore the Sabbath to its old and sacred place, for that it has lost it now to a good degree is obvious, will be a work of time and sound Christian education. To attain this end it will be necessary to attempt to discover how this evil has