

"Spud Island"

(Special to the Journal of Commerce.)

Charlottetown, P.E.I.

Prince Edward Island is well maintaining her title "Spud Island" this season. The total potato crop was estimated at 6,700,000 bushels, with a surplus of 3,000,000 bushels for export.

Up to date we have succeeded in getting away 1,500,000 bushels, leaving an equal quantity to be moved.

Shipping by rail and water was carried on briskly, it might be said feverishly, in October after the crop was dug. Never has the Prince Edward Island Railway been called upon to move such a quantity as was sent by the car ferry operating between Port Borden and Cape Tormentine. The shortage of schooner tonnage and the withdrawal of other steamers placed the greater part of the burden of transport upon the car ferry which had frequently to make several round trips daily to handle the tubers. Finally the railway had to cry, "Hold, enough!" An embargo was placed, owing to car shortage on November 1st, and the outward flow of potatoes to the mainland was checked for a time.

Then came the order that all potatoes for points beyond the Maritime Provinces had to be sent in refrigerators or lined cars, and there were few, if any, of these in the province.

The shippers began to agitate, and the Board of Trade to "resolute." A volley of messages directed at the Food Controller, the Minister of Railways, the Minister of Agriculture, the Railway Commission, hurtled over the wires.

Food Control officers came to the Island, talked over the situation, and it was finally arranged that the Prince Edward Island Railway should provide fifty lined cars for the handling of Island potatoes, said cars to be equipped and heated.

The cars were supplied and Mr. C. W. Baxter, of Ottawa, was sent here to direct the work. He is still here.

Up to date 35,000 bushels of potatoes have left the Island in heated cars. They are taken as far as Port Borden, transferred from the narrow gauge car to the standard gauge mainland heated car and sent through to Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto and Hamilton.

Messengers provided free of cost by the Department of Agriculture and the Food Controller take charge of the car once it begins to move from the railway station, keep the fires going and the potatoes from freezing, in fact sleep with the potatoes until they reach the destination.

The farmer or shipper must deliver his potatoes free from frost into the lined cars, the railway keeps the fires burning until the messengers take charge.

The railway charge for this frost proof service in addition to the regular freight is \$3.50 for an Island car and \$8.00 per mainland car, making a total of \$15.00 from shipping point to destination.

This is the first time in the history of the Island since the movement of potatoes to any extent, has been carried on under such conditions in winter.

Heretofore the great bulk of the crop has been moved in the Fall and the Spring but the inauguration of the car ferry service has made winter shipments possible.

Mr. Baxter maintains that from his experience in shipping potatoes during the recent cold weather, he is confident that they can be delivered to any of the above mentioned markets without damage provided they are free from frost when loaded. He has sent out to farmers' organizations detailed instructions how sleighs should be loaded and heated to handle potatoes in transit from cellar or warehouse to the railway's heated cars.

An effort is now being made to supplement these lined cars which are heated by stoves, with a number of the Eastman heaters, used exclusively for shipment in the States. These are supplied with oil heaters and an automatic thermographic "fool proof" attachment which keeps the temperature uniform all the time.

The main object of Mr. Baxter's coming down here is to secure a continuance of movement of potatoes from Prince Edward Island so as to avoid a glut in the Spring with consequent low prices. Unless there is a regular movement now it will be impossible to handle them in the spring when the farmer will be busy putting in the crop. It is disappointing that only about 35,000 bushels have been exported in heated cars.

Mr. Baxter hoped that at least 15 Prince Edward Island Railway cars, holding 330 bushels each (or 4,950 bushels) could have been moved per day, but snowstorms and other causes, including at first the tendency of the farmer to hold for higher prices in the spring, interfered with the movement.

The greatest difficulty to contend with is the lack of power on the P. E. I. railway. Having in view the changing of narrow gauge to standard the Department refrained from buying any new locomotives, with the result that the majority of those now in use are utterly inadequate for the service. Some are so patched and re-patched that it is impossible to get up steam in very cold weather and it does not take much of a storm to put them out of commission.

With favorable weather and improved ice conditions the car ferry (which handles 12 P. E. I. cars) could make several return trips daily across the nine mile gap which separates the island from the mainland and given the necessary power on the P. E. I. Railway the transportation problem would be readily solved.

With 1,500,000 bushels yet to be moved, the prospects for getting the quantity away before spring and the slump comes is at present not very encouraging.

Mr. Baxter is strongly urging the farmers to make the best of even the present transportation conditions, and ship away all the potatoes they can.

He is positive in his belief that there will be a drop in price in the spring, for the following reasons:

There is a surplus in British Columbia and in Alberta, a million and a half of surplus in New Brunswick, and the same on the Island. Saskatchewan has none to spare, Manitoba will have a few to spare, Ontario will have enough for her needs, but there will be a shortage in Quebec.

At present, owing to the severe weather there is little movement of potatoes from Western Canada, and these will all be poured into the eastern markets in the spring.

At the time of writing, the Island farmers are about convinced that the time to ship is now, but they recognize the transportation handicap.

Some arrangements must be made whereby a portion of the power now being used for passenger trains will be given over to the movement of such food products as potatoes. Whether the travelling public will approve of the further curtailment of the passenger serves, has yet to be determined.

TRAFFIC CONDITIONS CHAOTIC IN RUSSIA.

Economic conditions in Russia as outlined in Russian newspapers are discussed in an article in the Manchester "Guardian," which says:

"An instructive outline of the situation was given by M. Prokopovitch, the Minister of Food Supply in M. Kerensky's last Administration, before the ill-fated Council of the Republic (or Provisional Parliament) at one of its last sittings. He pointed out that though the orders for the supply of the army with foodstuffs were being carried out much more adequately than at the same time last year, their conveyance over the railways was much behind the figures of twelve months ago.

"Thus during the first eleven days of October the orders for flour were carried out to the extent of but slightly over 48, those for groats 67 and those for meat 40 per cent, while the amounts actually conveyed over the railways were still lower. The efficiency of the railways had, indeed, sunk very low owing to the dilapidation of the rolling stock and engines, low productivity of labor, etc. By October 11 no fewer than 3,023 wagons, of which 735 were laden with foodstuffs, had accumulated at Petrograd and were unable to proceed farther; at Moscow the congestion amounted to about 4,000 wagons, and the situation at many other junction stations was similar.

FOOD SHORTAGE HITS ARMY.

"The result, so far as the army was concerned, was as follows:

"On September 28 the northern front had flour for twenty-seven days, but at present (end of October) the stock has fallen to fifteen days. The stock of grain forage does not exceed the needs of one and three-quarter days. At the western front

the amount of flour available would suffice for eleven days only, while that of forage does not exceed three and a half days. The southwestern front has flour for six, the grain forage for three-quarter days. The Rumanian front has flour for seven and grain forage for three days. In these circumstances the horses often perish from starvation.

"Here, for instance, is what Talonnikoff, of the Commissariat Department on the northern front, telegraphs: 'The most terrible of all autocrat Czars, famine, has already directly touched by his breath the army. Some of the bakeries have already stopped, and in two or three days' time all the bakeries at the front will close down for lack of flour. Not a moment must be lost. Ordinary supply trains will not improve the situation. It is necessary to reduce immediately the number of passenger trains at least by one-half, and to load them with flour and send them here with all speed.'

"And here is what General Tcheremisoff writes: 'The food situation at the front is disastrous. Horses are perishing for lack of fodder. Only biscuits remain, after which wholesale famine will begin with all its consequences. Every hour's delay in the removal of the crisis threatens the army with destruction.'

DECREASE IN CROPS.

"It is still a debatable point whether Russia suffers from an absolute deficiency of foodstuffs or only from a relative one due to the dilapidation and the disorganization of the means of transport. What seems to be a fact is that so far as European Russia is concerned the deficiency is absolute. The 'Novaya Zhizn' quotes official figures showing that, whereas the average crops during the five years preceding the war amounted in European Russia, excluding the now occupied territories and the Northern Caucasus, to 3,830,000,000 poods, in 1916 it only amounted to 3,242,000,000 and in 1917 to 2,964,000,000 which makes a decrease of 23 per cent. The main factor responsible for this decrease is, of course, the depletion of the country population of its able-bodied males by the war, which, as is credibly estimated, has involved, from start to finish, the mobilization of nineteen million men.

"The 'Retch' of October 27 quotes the following eloquent passages from the reports reaching the Ministry of Railways:—

"On the Moscow-Kieff-Voronezh Railway only seventy-five wagons of freight are accepted daily, instead of the normal 450, in consequence of the frequent failure of the engine personnel to turn up owing to lack of boots, the necessity of obtaining bread, etc. . . . On the southern railways the lack of conductors is causing an enormous congestion of wagons with freight, while on others the lack of fuel and engines, as well as the failure of the engine personnel to turn out for the performance of duties owing to sickness, are creating very serious difficulties.

CONGESTION OF FREIGHT.

"The same reports describe the congestion of freights on the railways as 'almost catastrophic.' The Moscow-Kursh Railway, the main artery of the capitals with the grain bearing south, has 26 per cent of its engines on the sick list, and the efficiency of the remainder has been reduced 50 per cent as compared with previous war times. Instead of the normal run of twenty trains per day each way, only twelve trains are running daily, and twenty-five trains are blocking up the sidings, unable to move owing to lack of engines. On the Nizhni-Novgorod section the freight remaining behind is twice as large as that forwarded, while on the Moscow-Kazan line the aggregate number of wagons of freight at a standstill reaches 6,000.

"It is only natural that the scarcity brought about by these conditions should find expression in a gigantic rise of prices. To take Moscow (which is much better situated than Petrograd), the rise of prices between August, 1914, and August, 1917, has, according to official data collected by the Municipal Council and quoted by 'Novaya Zhizn,' been as follows (per cent): Rye bread 330, white bread 300, beef 400, veal 727, pork 770, herrings 767, cheese 754, butter 557, eggs 443, milk 471, calico 1,173, cotton 1,233, cloth (woolen) 1,900, boots 1,025, sole leather 1,900, men's suits 900, soap 789, kerosene 597, candles 1,076, metal articles 1,900. On the whole, it may be said that foodstuffs have increased in price on an average 556 per cent, and manufactured articles 1,100 per cent. Such facts as these may help to offer some explanation of the longing of the Russian masses for peace and the success of the Bolsheviks."