

# War pipeline serves purpose

by Janice Michaud

Much of the organization of the United States' secretive Canol Project (1942-1944) actually took place in Edmonton, one of the project participants said during a recent Boreal Institute lecture at the U. of A.

Few Edmontonians are aware that this World War II project was based here, Richard S. Finnie pointed out.

The author of three books, Finnie said in 1942 the United States, sought an inland source of oil for the Alaska Highway and district airbases that would be relatively safe from enemy attack.

In addition, many people felt that if the Japanese got "a foothold on Alaska" they could enter the United States through Canada, the historian noted.

"We were, all of us, very anxious about this situation," Finnie said.

For some time, Finnie and Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson had recommended and urged the development of Norman Wells in the Mackenzie District, he said.

The recommendation was accepted by the United States Defense Department and the project became known as the Canol Project (short for Canadian Oil).

Finnie, hired as liaison officer and northern specialist for the project, met in Lethbridge and then Edmonton with U.S. Colonel Theodore Wyman who commanded a core of engineers . . . "along with thousands of tons of pipe, all of which would be funnelled through Edmonton".

In six months, some 25,000 tons of freight had to be carried by boat from Waterways, Alberta, down the Slave River to the Mackenzie River to Norman Wells where a camp would be established, Finnie said.

Before leaving for Fort McMurray to await the arrival of his officers, Colonel Wyman commented that the project would never get done but "I have orders to follow," Finnie quoted.

In the meantime, thousands of tons of four-inch pipe were sitting in Edmonton.

"It (the project) was all secret . . . but everybody could see it (the pipe), Finnie said.

The Canol Project planned to ship oil from Norman Wells to Whitehorse, where it would be refined. Ultimately 3,000 barrels a day were processed to supply gasoline, aviation fuel and diesel fuel for the planes, equipment and vehicles required for the Alaska Highway.

Before that was accomplished, though, much preparation was in order.

"My job was to hire competent staff," Finnie explained. He contacted an old land surveyor, Guy Blanchet, who was a very "efficient man and a real explorer".

"I hired him, then got in touch with Grant McConachie, general manager of the newly founded Canadian Pacific Airlines." A flyer who had pioneered the skies between Edmonton, Whitehorse and back, McConachie was informed of the project. He, like the Colonel, had doubts about the project.



Meyers/The Canol Mystery

This is the Canol Project. It covered an undeveloped area one half the size of the United States. 1500 miles of winter roads were laid. 1800 miles of pipeline were laid — Denver to New York. Over 30,000 men worked on the pipeline which took 22 months to build.

"He said, 'The Colonel's never going to do it! I already knew that,'" Finnie added.

Nonetheless, McConachie volunteered to fly a reconnaissance plan. In a later meeting with Colonel Wyman, McConachie said the project could not succeed without the construction of airfields.

McConachie was "a very persuasive fellow", Finnie said. In September, a DC-3 airplane landed at the Norman Wells site.

Finnie's earlier recruit, Guy Blanchet, was responsible for the basic route of the pipeline. Fifty-eight years old when he set out, Blanchet traversed the Great Divide and trekked from Canol Camp 300 miles to Sheldon Lake.

When he reached Sheldon Lake, though, the person he was to meet was not to be found. Blanchet waited, waited and waited.

"We managed to have a pilot go from Carcross to pick him up . . . he arrived in Edmonton and was spitting nails," Finnie reminisced. Despite that obstacle, Blanchet had completed his job. The next season, one year after the project had started, pipelining had begun.

By this time Japan was no longer a threat. The War Department in Washington was on the verge of cancelling the project. But Washington proceeded because it was thought the Alaska Highway could be advantageous.

On February 16, 1944, the Canol Project was in operation. In April, oil began flowing to the Whitehorse refinery.

The refinery operated for nearly a year.

## Canol project valid

Aside from the criticism it attracted following the war, Canol fulfilled its purpose.

Richard S. Finnie, author of *The Canol* said, "The Canol project did what it was supposed to."

Despite charges that the project, in conjunction with the construction of the Alaska Highway, was expensive and unnecessary, Finnie stressed the validity of the endeavor at a recent seminar.

"I always felt Canol was a worthwhile project . . . it helped to open up new country (the Yukon and North West Territories)" that has proved to be rich in resources, he said.

Even though the main pipeline was rendered useless and the Whitehorse refinery dismantled and moved to Leduc, several support pipelines continued to operate, including the lines to Fairbanks and Skagway, Finnie pointed out.

The North was not only opened by land but by air as well. During the project the first airfields to the Mackenzie District were founded.

Initiated by the U.S. government to

secure a base safe from enemy attack during World War II, the project was severely criticized by many.

According to a report written by Lyman L. Woodman in the summer 1977 issue of "The Northern Engineer", Vol. 9 No 2, "The Canol served no great practical purpose as a logistical aid in World War II, and to many it seemed a visionary, unnecessary, and expensive undertaking. But in early 1942, when Alaska was being bombed and invaded and the northwestern states threatened, was no time to ignore the potential for producing critically needed fuel close to the action, however, difficult the means of doing it."

Finnie also said the project was beneficial to Edmontonians.

"The Americans taught Edmonton how to dress," Finnie quipped. In 1942, Edmonton business men and women, even in -60 degree weather, still wore their conventional, fashionable overcoats and fedoras, he said.

"The Americans came along and said, 'It's cold here!' And they began wearing parkas." Finally, Edmontonians began wearing them too. "They're still in vogue," he said.



Photo by Richard Finnie

Workers building the pipeline take a break at the site.

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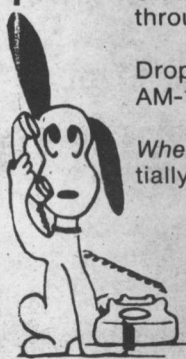
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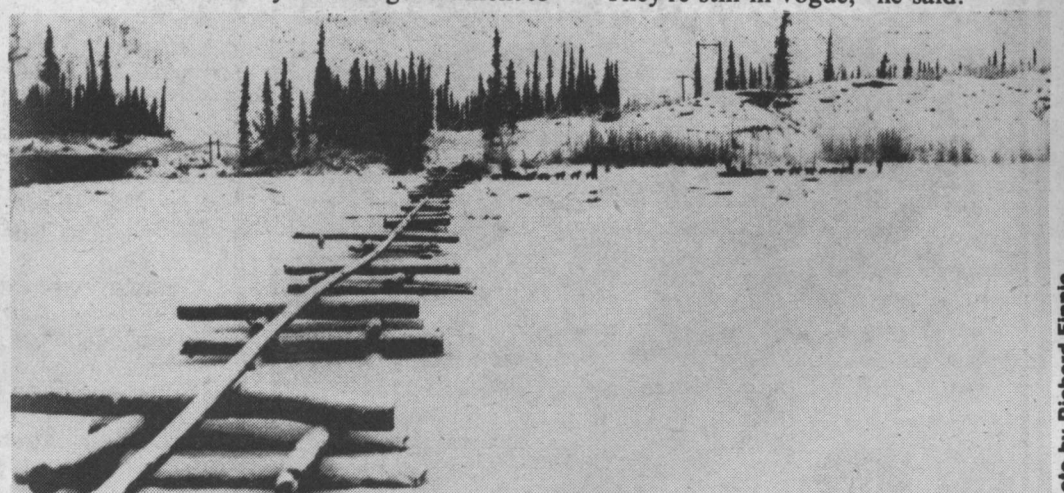
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# Student Help



The temporary pipeline, pictured here, was later built on bridges, such as the one pictured in the distance on the left side.

Photo by Richard Finnie