

A NEWSMAN'S WATCH ON THE
LOWER ST. LAWRENCE.AN INTERESTING CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF
THE TELEGRAPH.

Some books are lees free end to end,
And some great lees were never penned:
Ev'n ministers, they hae been kened,
In holy rapture,
A rousing whid at times to ven i.
And naill't wi' scripture.

But this that I am gann to tell,
Which once upon a time befell
Is just as true's the Dell's in hell,
Or Dublin city;
That e'er he nearer comes coorsel
'S a muckle pity.

People now-a-days, who are accustomed to read the latest English and foreign news, say from London, Berlin, St. Petersburg, Paris, or Rome, or even Melbourne, Australia, or Calcutta, British India, in the local morning papers, printed side by side with news of the same date from points a few miles distant, say Hamilton, Port Hope, or Rochester, can scarcely realize the anxiety with which "Old Country" news was looked for in Canada and the United States prior to the completion of the Atlantic cable. Up to the time of the cable becoming a workable success in 1866, the latest intelligence from Europe was, of course, brought across the Atlantic by steamer, and the arrival of a mail steamer—they were not called "Greyhounds of the Sea," then, although, all things considered, they made very good time—on this side of the Atlantic was always a momentous event, and eagerly looked for, more particularly at a time when stirring events were transpiring abroad. The New York Associated Press, which in its day has given indisputable evidence of great enterprise in gathering news, and in catering to its patrons, put into practice in times antecedent to the laying of the cable, every conceivable scheme, having speed to recommend it, that would cause the latest important news brought out by steamer, to be hurried forward to New York the moment the vessel came in sight off Sandy Hook.

Mr. James McParlan, Chief of the Marine Service, in connection with the Western Union Telegraph Co., New York, describes the methods in this respect in vogue between 1850 and the successful working of the cable in 1866. He says: "In 1850 telegraphic communication was established between Sandy Hook and New York city, and on the approach of a European steamship to Sandy Hook, a boatman would put off and row or sail out to the Bar, three miles distant, where the purser of the incoming vessel would throw overboard a tin can, having a small red flag attached; when this was secured, he would open it to find three manifold copies of the most important European events, such as the death of a king, a pope, some disaster, war, etc., but most important of all were the very latest quotations of American cotton, corn, pork and United States consols. When putting off, the boatman took in a basket a couple of his best-trained carrier pigeons. To Dick's leg, with a rubber band, he would neatly fasten one copy and let him go; afraid that he would not attend to business properly by flying directly to the loft over the telegraph station, a second copy was made fast to the other bird, which was immediately liberated. A third copy the boatman took ashore himself with all dispatch. The object now was to beat the steamship, which had some twenty-five miles to run, or about three hours in those days. If the line worked 'O. K.' they could head off the steamship by two hours; this was of immense value to the

members on Change who subscribed for this particular news through D. H. Craig and George Stoker, the agents; it gave them a long start in their operations ahead of those waiting private advices which were still aboard the vessel coming to the harbor."

In 1859 the Allan Steamship Company established a regular weekly line of steamships between Liverpool and Quebec, and Mr. O. S. Wood, the able, progressive and popular general superintendent of the Montreal Telegraph Co., with wise foresight discerned in the new weekly steamship service a means of increasing the revenue of the Montreal Telegraph Co., and at the same time conferring a benefit upon the community at large. As soon, therefore, as the Messrs. Allan had decided upon their new enterprise Mr. Wood took prompt measures to extend the lines of his company to some suitable point on the Lower St. Lawrence River, where the ocean steamers could be intercepted, and the latest Old Country news obtained and forwarded by telegraph in advance of the arrival of the steamer at Quebec. Mr. Wood's plan proved to be eminently successful, and Canada presently furnished a much more important point as an oceanic repeating station for Old Country news than Sandy Hook.

After much correspondence and investigation Father Point, some 200 miles below Quebec, was selected as the place at which the incoming steamers were to call, and from whence the news they brought, as per arrangement between Mr. Wood and the Press Association, was to be telegraphed to D. H. Craig, New York, acting for the New York Associated Press. A telegraph line along the sparsely settled shores of the Lower St. Lawrence must have been, at that time, a failure financially had it depended upon local business, but the Associated Press agreed to pay a large sum for the transmission of the weekly despatch, and it was soon clearly demonstrated that Mr. Wood was amply justified in incurring the expense of building the line. On the inception of the project it was proposed to establish the terminal office at Bic, or, rather, at Cape Original, which is at Bic, and the people of Bic, which was farther west, made a strong bid for the honor of having the terminus of the line at that place. Old pilots and sea captains and those familiar with the navigation of the river, however, decided that Father Point was the proper place.

Had Bic been chosen it was intended that the steamers should pass up between Bic Island and the main shore, but on the captains of the steamers declining to take the responsibility of bringing their vessels safely through this somewhat contracted channel in rough weather, those who favored Father Point—and each place had its active and influential advocates—carried the day. The original and only Jim Poustie, who superintended the construction of most of the Montreal Telegraph Company's wires, and his hardy gang of French Canadian line builders set out from Riviere du Loup en Bas early in April, 1859, to build the telegraph line to Father Point. The writer of this sketch, through the kind intervention of Mr. H. P. Dwight, then western superintendent of the Montreal Telegraph Company, was appointed to take charge of Father Point station. The time of which I write preceded the building of the Intercolonial railway by about sixteen years. I reached Riviere du Loup about the first of May, and at once started out for a long drive along the picturesque banks of the river St. Lawrence, reaching Trois Pistoles in due time, where, as the new line was finished

to this point, I found that I was expected to teach the school marm of the place—a French Canadian lady in the sere and yellow leaf as to age, and also in the sere and yellow as to color, to telegraph, and thus fit her to take charge of the office. Fancy my consternation, on meeting her, to find that she could not speak a word of English, and as I was unable to speak her language, the result was a dead lock. It did not take long to find out that we had "no use for each other," that there was, as it were, no "affinity" between us. Trois Pistoles had a population of perhaps 200 or 300 people, but there was not one person in the place sufficiently well versed in English to come under my manipulations, and on reporting the same to headquarters I received instructions to move on. It was a great relief to me to get away from this bailiwick. At the *Maison Pension*, at which I was housed, the food was not of that character which is described as being "fit for the gods." I have by no means the same poor opinion of the hog that the Jews are said to have, but when you get that animal served up to you three times a day in hunks—flabby, rancid and rank, and with the bristles still on, you are apt to lose all respect for him.

On my way down, after leaving Trois Pistoles, I overtook Poustie and his gang of line-builders, and remained with them until we reached Bic. Before arriving at the latter place, and while I was still with the line-builders, Poustie had occasion frequently to consult by wire with Mr. Wood, at Montreal, as to various matters in connection with the extension of the line and the fixing of its terminal; this was easily accomplished by grounding the line on the highway and inserting a relay into the circuit. The rivalry, as I have already intimated, between Bic and Father Point was very keen. Poustie, who was full of business, and had charge of all the arrangements, was one day explaining to Mr. Wood the advantages and disadvantages of Cape Original at Bic as a stopping point for the ocean steamers. The names of these places and their pronunciation being unfamiliar to me, I said:—

"Jim, how do you spell Cape Original?"

"Well," said Jim, "I don't know exactly, but o-a-p, Cap; o-r-n, Orn; y-a-l, yal; Cap Orn-yal, ought to be about right," and over the line in this fashion it was flashed to Mr. Wood.

I can imagine the genial smile that flitted over Mr. Wood's benevolent countenance as he listened to this phonetic, though eccentric and irregular, style of spelling; but if he laughed quietly to himself he laughed right out loud over the line, and back came the words to me: "Ha! ha!—that's good. You, of course, mean Cape Original. Ha! ha!" I explained that I had spelled the name of the place according to Jim's teaching, but Mr. Wood indulged in another "Ha, Ha," and seemed greatly amused. Possibly he was thinking of the gay and festive Jim's wayward idiosyncrasies in the matter of spelling; for, although Jim was a man of great natural ability and force of character, and had a complete mastery in all its details of his own particular branch of the telegraph business, he had, like many men of note and marked individuality, an absolute and undisguised contempt for all established rules in orthography. I had, I confess, a sort of vague and depressing notion that the laugh was on me equally with Jim, and it may be readily taken for granted that I exercised considerable caution ever afterwards when transmitting Jim's French to Mr. Wood.

I remained at Bic two weeks, and there taught a clever young Frenchman, M. Mercier, to telegraph. By this time Jim and his