

Driving the Mail.

THE TALE OF THE EARLY POSTAL SERVICE IN THE GASPE PENINSULA.

By Margaret Grant McWhirter.

The tale of the early days along the Northern coast of Bay Chaleur cannot be disassociated from the mail service.

Bonaventure and Carleton, in the County of Bonaventure, were old French settlements, while Gaspé was a fishing station from the time when Cartier visited the place.

The conquest of the country by the British brought a new race of settlers, till gradually the whole coast along the noble Restigouche and historic Bay Chaleur was colonized. Disbanded officers and soldiers took land in Gaspé at the close of the War of Conquest, while United Empire Loyalists settled New Carlisle, the county seat of Bonaventure after the War of Independence.

By degrees, reports of the wonderful land reached the inhabitants of the mother countries. Pioneers sent back word of its resources and advantages, and soon immigrants began to arrive. New Richmond, Port Daniel and Pointe à la Garde were settled by industrious British families, who, taking up their abode, prepared to make homes among the French remaining in the country.

There were no roads: only a trail led through the forest and along the seashore; so journeys from place to place were toilsome and slow.

The mail service was of necessity very inadequate. I wonder if the most optimistic of the early pioneers ever dreamed that the Postal Service in this out-of-the-way corner of Lower Canada would be frequent and regular.

The first post office of which there is any record in Gaspé Peninsula was at Carleton in 1796, and bore the somewhat extensive name of Bay of Chaleur. The mail was brought once a year by a courier from Fredericton, N. B. His route lay up the Nashwaak, down the Miramichi River to its mouth, along the Gulf shore to Dalhousie, and across to Bay of Chaleur, whose postmaster in 1805 was J. B. Mann. Next came Gaspé, with a post office in 1803 in charge of Henry Johnson; in 1819 the name of the office became Douglastown.

Matters were progressing when, in 1829, the welcome news became known that "mails for Bay of Chaleur and Gaspé would be sent two or three times during the winter by 'special expresses'." Hitherto, letters had been sent by schooners or other vessels going from Quebec to the Peninsula.

This special service ceasing to be satisfactory, in 1835 John LeBoutillier applied for a regular postal service between Bay of Chaleur (Carleton) and Gaspé Basin.

In 1831 a weekly mail had been started between Dalhousie and Paspebiac. To an Indian named "Noel the Post" belongs the honor of conveying the first mail from the St. Lawrence, by way of Matapédia, in 1833. He carried it through the woods on his back, and across the Big Lake of Matapédia in a canoe, thence along the shore, as there was no road to Migouasha, where he delivered it to Mr. Kerr, who took it on to Dalhousie.

On July 14th, 1838 a new route was opened by way of Metis and the Forks

of the Matapédia. Brochu was the first contractor, promising a weekly service. Later, a road was made around the lake. The courier travelled on foot, making the journey in two days each way; the only track was a path through the woods, the monotony of which was relieved by the homes of two settlers. In winter the courier donned snowshoes. When Mr. George Dickson took the contract, dogs were put on the route; he carried the mail for about twenty-two years by way of the Kempt Road.

A man at the Matapédia Lake made a business of culling rabbits to feed the mail dogs. So successful were his trapping operations that one spring (so the tale goes) he had three hundred in his barn after the dogs were fed.

The long and lonely trail was often the scene of tragedies. Once, when crossing the Matapédia Lake, a squall struck the canoe. One man was drowned; the other succeeded in holding to the canoe, which floated ashore—saving the mail. At another time the courier saw a snowshoe protruding from a bank of drifted snow. Investigation revealed the body of an unknown woman frozen to death. Again, a crippled man was found dead on the road. As indicated by the boughs which he had heaped upon himself, he had struggled heroically for life, but in vain. When found, he lay dead on his bed of boughs beside the trail. Fashioning a casket of birch-bark, the couriers buried him, with his crutch to mark the lonely grave in the heart of the forest.

Among the early couriers was a one-armed Scotchman, named John Howie, who carried the mail in his waistcoat pocket. He lived at Caplin with his brother, who is still remembered for the multitude of pigs he kept, and which were allowed to

the Gaspé Peninsula, conveying the mail with the aid of his sons from Dalhousie to Port Daniel, a distance to-day of nearly one hundred miles, and which in those days must have been much greater, on account of the detours the traveller had to make.

For many years "Archie" Kerr was a well-known figure in the Bay Chaleur country, as, with the mail on his back, in his knee-breeches, he hurried on his way. The mail bag itself was unique. Made of extra-heavy white canvass, bound around with red leather, and heavily fitted with staples and padlock, with strong arm-straps by which it was slung upon the courier's back, it was both imposing and capacious, for it held about a bushel.

One of his sons, William, when only fourteen years old, carried the mail from Black Cape to Port Daniel (51 miles). There were no roads nor bridges, and only one house between Black Cape and Bonaventure—fully sixteen miles of dense forest. In order to cross the Bonaventure River, it was necessary to ascend the stream for a considerable distance, and by means of two spruce trees a crossing was effected. The poor lad suffered both cold and hunger. In winter the courier travelled with snowshoes, and later dogs were used on the route. In those days the storms were very severe; it was no uncommon occurrence for all travelling to be stopped for three days in succession. On one occasion so severe was the storm that the courier was obliged to seek shelter; all that offered was a dwelling-house. This the hospitable French owner opened to admit not only the mail-driver, but also his horse.

The usual journey by foot of David Kerr was from Black Cape to Port Daniel. Once, on a trial trip, he re-

as eighty years ago, following the shore. Once he made a record trip of fifty-four miles from Magdalen River to Griffin Cove. He was accompanied by an Indian, who boasted that he would sleep at home that night, but, reaching Fox River, six miles from the journey's end, he collapsed, and the white man struggled on alone.

The couriers sought shelter in camps and rude shacks along the route, their wages being paid by the merchants. From Gaspé to Port Daniel, Nicholas Mullen was amongst the first mail-carriers, taking a month to make the trip in winter. The couriers from east and west met at Mr. Lauder's, in Port Daniel, and the first to arrive awaited the coming of the other. In later days, when horses were on the route, Mullen was due to leave Port Daniel on his return home at twelve o'clock at night, and made a practice to take his breakfast before going to bed.

On October 6th, 1839, Benjamin Patterson contracted to carry the mails between Gaspé Basin and Port Daniel, making the journey in four days each way. For the greater part of the way, the only path was along the sea-beach; when the trail led through the woods, it was no more than three feet wide, and all the rivers were unbridged.

There were no stamps or envelopes in those days. The price was stamped on the letter, which was folded and sealed. Prices varied from fifteen pence to three shillings for Old Country letters.

In 1851 the mail service was pretty well established. The contractors were: Between Metis and Campbellton, George Dickson; between Cross Point and Perce, Archibald Kerr; between Perce and Gaspé Basin, Abraham Patterson. These three services continued for many years. The first mentioned was changed to Ste. Flavie and Campbellton in 1867, and was discontinued on the opening of the Intercolonial Railway, July 3rd, 1867. George Dickson was succeeded from 1867 to 1872 by the Messrs. Fraser on the opening of the Matapédia Road.

The second division was changed from Campbellton to Perce in 1860, and again to Paspebiac in 1873. David Kerr (son of the original contractor) controlled the service from Campbellton to Paspebiac till July 1st, 1879, when F. C. Cyr took control.

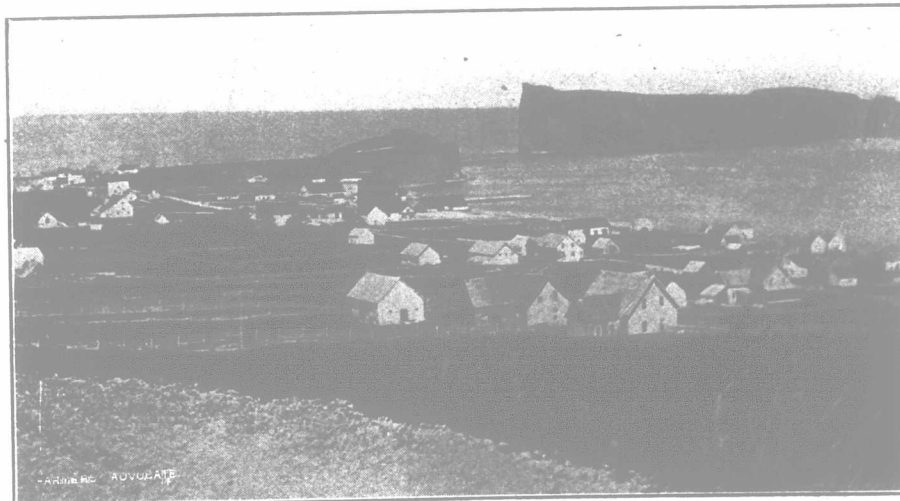
The third division was performed by Abraham Patterson from 1851 to 1872, when he was succeeded by Messrs. Tapp and Leggo.

Death removed contractor Cyr from the second division, but through the instrumentality of friends along the coast, and in authority, his widow, Mrs. Annie Cyr, was allowed to perform the service, which she did, with satisfaction, till May 31st, 1895, when the mail was taken over by the A. & L. S. Ry.

The third division has had many changes, but finally the sub-division between Paspebiac and Perce was also taken over by the railway on Feb. 7th, 1911.

The Gaspé and Perce service is still performed by contractors other than the railway. The present one is M. J. Furlong.

The present postmaster of Gaspé Basin, Mr. John Annett, who has been in charge since 1877, remarked that when he first took charge the



Perce Village, Gaspé, Que.

run wild. When one was required, the old man would go to the door and cry: "A-hoo! A-hoo!" and pigs of all sizes speedily answered his call, the older ones being savage as bears. Once a neighbor, David Kerr, went to help him butcher. The pig was wild and wicked, and the man appeared to old Howie overcautious. Looking scornfully at him, he observed: "You're a big man, but I think you're a bit cowardish."

Mr. McCracken, doing business at Bonaventure with store and mill, interested himself in the Postal Service, and, through his efforts, Archibald Kerr, of Ayr, Scotland, and his family, settled in Bonaventure. Mr. Kerr was the first mail contractor in

turned the same day to Hopetown, in all, to-day, a distance of sixty-six miles; in those days, as I have already remarked, a very much longer distance. He made a record, but his physical condition the following day did not tempt him to a repetition.

At Port Daniel, the courier from Gaspé met the one from the west. Like all others, he too made the journey in winter on snowshoes. The usual trip per day was from Port Daniel to Perce, a distance of fifty miles. From Gaspé to Quebec the mail was carried via the St. Lawrence on snowshoes. One of the earliest couriers on this part of the route was Edward Synnott. He made one trip during the winter, as much