

THE PICTOU BRANCH

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"PICTOU BRANCH"

Mr. R. C. Tibbetts

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HE THIRTY SIXTH ANNUAL BANQUET OF the Association was held on March 15th., 1968. The Guest Speaker was Mr. R. C. Tibbetts, Manager, Tibbetts Paints, Ltd. and Association member from Trenton, Nova Scotia. Mr. Tibbetts gave a very interesting paper on the construction of the Pictou Branch of the Nova Scotia Railway in 1866-67, which we are privileged to reproduce herewith.

PREAMBLE.

RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION IN NOVA SCOTIA was not very rapid in the pre - Confederation days in the Maritimes, nor was it without incident. As early as 1836, there were stirrings and mutterings, and these rumblings continued for fifteen years, to the time when in 1851, Francis Hincks eschewed government ownership of main-line railways. This decision did little to improve Mr. Joseph Howe's temper! Lately an enthusiastic proponent of responsible government, his 1851 enthusiasm was for railways, - be they public (government) or private. This enthusiasm was engendered as early as 1848, when Premier Howe and his solicitor-general fathered a resolution in the House of Assembly, to construct a railway from Halifax, the Provincial capital, to Windsor, and the Government was in the railroad business. The spring of 1850 resounded to the enthusiasm of the legislators as they pledged the government to underwrite half the cost of the line. Next was a new project, which was no less enthusiastically promoted. This was to run sixty one miles from Halifax north westward to Truro, and the first sod was turned at Richmond, near Halifax, on June 13, 1854. This line was destined to form the first portion of the Incomparable Intercolonial, - 560 miles of marvellous railway, joining Halifax, in the Province of Nova Scotia with Riviere du Loup, on the eastern extremity of "Upper Canada".

THE HALIFAX-TRURO LINE WAS COMPLETED on December 15, 1858. Although Truro was at the head of Cobequid Bay, which was part of the Bay of Fundy (and thereby of the Atlantic Ocean), it became apparent that an outlet to Northumberland Strait and the St. Lawrence River was very desirable. Hence, there must be a line from the "main line" to some point to the east. The estuary of the West River provided admirable harbour facilities, and there were evidences of coal measures along the proposed route. Thereupon, it was decided to construct this line, and it is from this point of decision that Mr. Tibbett's article takes its start.

THE BUILDING OF THE EARLY RAILWAYS of Nova Scotia, as was the case with any other public service that was there built, began a political battle that lasted for years and years! In fact, the two proposals which caused the greatest political controversy that

continued to lead to battles in the House of Assembly were first, the Eastern Extension - that 80 miles of single track railway running between New Glasgow in Pictou County and Mulgrave, on the Straight of Canso (which fight lasted for 33 years before it was settled) and second, Confederation itself, which dispute started long before 1867, and has not been settled yet!

FROM THE TIME THAT THE NOVA SCOTIA Railway reached Windsor in one direction and Truro in the other, every session of the House of Assembly at Halifax echoed to firey verbal battles over why the road was not extended to Victoria Beach, to give a water connection with New Brunswick and the United States, and to Pictou, to establish steamship connections with Montreal and central Canada. By 1864, Sir Charles Tupper's ministry was convinced that the only practical solution was to extend the Truro line to Pictou as a government project, while aiding a commercial company to build down the valley from Windsor to Annapolis. This decision once taken, Sir Charles Tupper moved fast. On March 14, 1864, House of Assembly resolutions authorized the " Pictou Branch ".

WITHIN THE MONTH, THE RISING YOUNG SCOT, Sandford Fleming, fresh from successes in railroad building in "Upper Canada", had been appointed chief engineer of the Nova Scotia Railroad and instructed to make the necessary surveys for its construction. He recommended the Riverdale, West River, Landsburgh, Summit, Glengarry, Lorne - Stellarton route, from Truro to Walmsley or Fisher's Grant (now called Pictou Landing) on the west side of the West River estuary, and estimated the cost at \$2,314,500. Excited beyond reason by lurid tales of huge construction profits reaped by contractors on United States and Upper Canadian railway construction, every local contractor who could scrape up the amount of the deposit, put in a bid. It is reported that every third man in the County of Pictou aspired to the dignity of being a railway contractor and was ambitious to build five or six miles of railroad for the Province, although in many instances, he knew about as much about the best way of doing the work as we know about travel through time!

THERE WERE FARMERS WHO HAD SOME MEANS, but very little practical knowledge; there were adventurers who had neither means or knowledge; and there were merchants and shopkeepers who had money and no experience and a few who had experience and no money! There were also a number who knew something of their business and who had some capital and character which they were anxious to lay out to good account. The scramble was thus a somewhat desperate and confused one, and as those who really knew something of a contractor's work were in mortal fear, lest the adventurers should underbid them. They, in most cases, put in bids ridiculously low, trusting to contingencies, extras and good luck. One month after the tenders were filed, Section I was awarded to the lowest of twenty - one bidders, - a James A. Fraser of New Glasgow, and the other sections followed immediately. Work began on November 30th., 1864, with the breaking of ground at Fisher's Grant.

THREE LOCOMOTIVES WERE ASSIGNED by the Nova Scotia Railroad to the job and the Richmond Shops of Nova Scotia Railroad began building \$98,000 worth of rolling stock, turning out 12 flat cars for immediate construction purposes. The Richmond Shops built switches and frogs, also two second - class cars (forty - one feet long, of sixty passenger capacity), six box cars and a total of for-

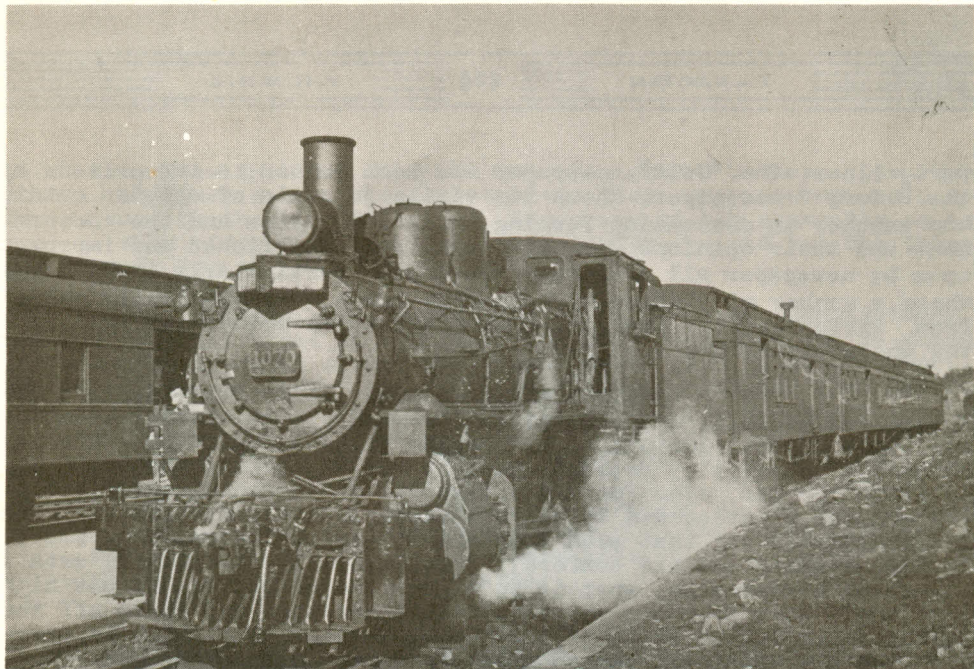


PHOTO ABOVE: C.N.R. 1070 standing in the ferry terminal at Point Tupper, N.S., with the Iverness train, in July, 1938.

Photo courtesy Al Paterson.

ty - one flats. They also had to construct two first class cars, six box cars, six cattle cars and four horse cars, which were to be ready for the official opening in 1867.

MOST OF THE CONTRACTORS WERE VERY poorly financed and most had no engineering experience, so that they quickly fell behind schedule. On October 25, 1865, Mr. Fleming notified the Government that work was so far behind that unless something were done quickly, it would be at least 1868 before the railroad could be finished. Tupper immediately called conferences and meetings in private, and it was decided to have Fleming take over the contracts himself and build the road. Mr. Fleming resigned from the Nova Scotia Railroad and his deputy, Alex McNab was appointed Chief Engineer. Fleming then tendered for the whole road at \$2,116,500 and on January 10th, Fleming and the Province of Nova Scotia signed the contract. All this had taken place with complete secrecy and it was not until three weeks later when Fleming cancelled all contracts and paid off the contractors that it was discovered in Pictou and simultaneously announced in Halifax.

THERE WAS ALREADY A GOOD DEAL of newspaper criticism of the Pictou road; and to the keen partisan mind, honed to razor edge suspicion the unnatural official speed with which this contract had gone through had all the earmarks of a put - up job. But when it was noted that the amount named by Fleming was \$198,000 less than his own former estimate as Chief Engineer, the partisan press went berserk and raged and ranted with unrestrained fury. The "Lamentations of Jeremiah" were nothing compared to the shrieks and wails that rose from Pictou County, where the opposition press took the local contractors to its bosom and trained its heaviest castigating artillery upon Fleming and the Provincial Government.

SO INTENSE WAS THE FEELING among all classes in the County, that it cut straight across the usual rock - ribbed Pictou

party lines. The "Grit" newspaper was soon joined in its crusade by the "Tory" newspaper. These two virile journals of opinion outdid one another in denouncing Fleming, his associates and the Government and their opinions were picked up and embellished and improved upon by newspaper all over the Province, particularly in Halifax, where a number of influential newspaper men who originally hailed from Pictou County, imagined that they had an unusual insight into the whole situation.

EACH SUCCEEDING BLAST MORE VEMENENTLY accused the Government of being underhanded and treacherous and called upon local MP's to vote against it or resign their seats. The "Eastern Chronicle" eventually realized that it was stretching the libel law a little too far even for those days of free-wheeling editorial comment, for it proceeded to hedge slightly, in this fashion: "We do not positively say that such a catastrophe will happen, but really, if Mr. Fleming and his confere, Mr. McNab, choose to give such a startling performance, what is to hinder them? Oh! Is it not high time that Nova Scotians should arouse themselves and shake off the deadly thing in the shape of the present government which is preying upon the vitals of our country?"

MR. FLEMING WHO PAID LITTLE ATTENTION to this general newspaper barrage, divided the 50 miles between Truro and Fisher's Grant into 10 sections and placed a civil engineer and two assistants in charge of each. He hired three large locomotives and two small ones from the Nova Scotia Railroad and quietly imported what proved to be his secret weapon in this political guerilla warfare. His critics were taken entirely by surprise when he announced the first complete section of railroad; New Glasgow to Fisher's Grant, to be opened by running a train on September 29, 1866. This threw the newspaper into a fresh tizzy; but it was E. M. McDonald, who produced the most devastating comment: "We can assure all concerned that there is an independent authority watching the whole process of railway botheration very closely, and the result of its supervision will be made known at the polls at the general election, now perhaps not far distant." It might have been only wishful partisan thinking or a lucky shot in the dark, but Mr. McDonald hit the bullseye, dead center.

IT IS STILL A MYSTERY HOW THE locomotive that was to haul the first Pictou Branch train between New Glasgow and Fisher's Grant reached this isolated section of the road, - forty-four miles from the end of the main steel at Truro. Presumably, it was brought around by way of the sea and put ashore at New Glasgow, but nobody knows for sure. At any rate, its presence inspired the local journals to near libel, and Simon Holmes in the Colonial Standard poured scorn on the proceedings in a report entitled "A Ride On A Rail".

I WILL NOW QUOTE FROM THIS ARTICLE, the description of this first trip: "The ridiculous farce (for the thing is clearly undeserving of any other title) of opening the railroad from New Glasgow to Fisher's Grant's was pretended to be enacted on the line last Saturday. It had been whispered about for the past few days that notwithstanding all that was said to the contrary, Mr. Fleming would have the line ready according to contract. Those who knew the real state of the work were aware of the utter folly of attempting such a thing. Sensible and reflecting men refused to believe that so preposterous a piece of folly could be entertained, much less enacted.

ted. They knew that the road was not even graded between these two points, and they could scarcely believe that any persons could so far presume on the simplicity and innocence of the community as to make a show of opening the line on Saturday, -- and yet the thing was done."

THERE WAS MR. LONGLEY, THE RAILWAY Commissioner, mounted in full blast on the laboring and straining engine which attempted to scramble along the rugged paths leading to the Grant, and there was Mr. McNab the Railway engineer, and the real Chief, Fleming, and a host of other wondering spectators who assembled to witness the great triumph of opening a little railroad of 8 miles. The affair was so ridiculous that a number of ladies and gentlemen from Pictou crossed in the sailing ferryboats to meet the engine at 4 o'clock p. m., the time announced. On arriving at the ground they observed men and horses galloping up and down the line with trollies, for sleepers and rails and others engaged in throwing them on the road bed and spiking them together.

IT APPEARS THAT AN ATTEMPT was made at the time named to run an engine with some flat cars to the Grant, but a gap was encountered about a mile and a half from the goal, and the engine with the distinguished party aboard returned to New Glasgow. At a later hour the attempt was repeated, and the engine came down as far as the Grant, with Mr. Longley, McNab, Fleming, and a few others brave enough to risk their lives, continuing on board the trollies, and this the farce was over.

AS A MATTER OF FACT, AFTER this first run was demonstrated no attempt was made to operate the New Glasgow-Pictou Landing section.

MEANWHILE, MR. FLEMING PROCEEDED with his main program. He settled with all the old contractors, built comfortable shanties and boarding houses for construction workers, opened new quarries and hired sufficient teams to get out stone, erected a telegraph line to maintain touch between his headquarters and construction crews along the line. He hired every available mason in the territory, and roofed over the principal structures so that they could work all winter, instead of seasonally. He adopted a system, then new in this country, of carrying on tracklaying and ballasting simultaneously with other work, substituted tunnels for bridges and culverts wherever possible, and built temporary wooden trestles to carry trains until the stone work could be completed.

HE IMPORTED FROM THE STATES two "Great American Steam Excavators", as the pioneer steam shovels were grandly called, and ran them day and night except Sundays. They made short work of the Big Fill between Glengarry and Lorne, which otherwise would have required an expensive iron bridge. The most difficult bridge of all was over the East River between Stellarton and New Glasgow which called for four 70-foot spans. Even today, although this bridge has now been replaced with steel girders, it is still called the "Iron Bridge". Foundation work was a problem with this bridge and it required five steam pumps going day and night to keep the coffer dams dry enough for the masons to work.

TRACKLAYING CREWS WERE PUSHING steadily north from Truro, and on the last day of the year, December 31, 1866, the road

formally opened between Truro, and West River -- 20.5 miles. This section had been in operation less than a month when it was abruptly closed down by a heavy snow blockade that lasted several days and required all the snow fighting resources of the Nova Scotia Railroad to get it going again. The unusually severe winter was interfering seriously with all forms of construction work; and with a bare five months to go, Fleming, fighting to complete the Pictou Railroad, settled down to a grim battle.

YET STILL THE TRACK GANGS crept slowly northeast:

Mile 0. Truro (head of Cobequid Bay - arm of
Bay of Fundy)

8.5 Union
12.5 Riversdale
20.5 West River
28.25 Glengary
34.75 Hopewell
40.25 Stellarton
42.75 New Glasgow
50.25 Fisher Grant
51.25 Pictou Landing

THE SMALL LOCOMOTIVES OF 1867 had limited tender capacity and required frequent refuelling and watering, especially in winter, so that between Truro and Pictou Landing there were four stations that had wood yards and water tanks. Pictou came within an "ace" of having the first railroad car - ferry in Canada to avoid breaking bulk freight at Pictou Landing. The idea was given long consideration but finally abandoned because of winter ice conditions. All stations on the Pictou Branch had a 30" x 60" wooden passenger and freight depots with stone foundations, except New Glasgow, which had a larger all-stone construction. Pictou Landing had a six - locomotive cruciform stone engine house, so arranged that it

could be enlarged to accomodate 12 engines, if required. Because of the exposed location, the turntable was placed inside the shed for protection from the weather. Each station on the line had a 800-foot passing track except New Glasgow which had 1,000 feet and Pictou Landing which had two sidings of a thousand feet each.

SANDFORD FLEMING LOVED civil engineering work and he made a thorough job of it. To show just what could be done under difficult circumstances with limited funds, he spent \$40,000 on the stations and another \$30,000 on the "Mayflower" which he had built in England, to be used as a ferry for freight at Pictou Landing. He used his pioneer steam shovel to put 4,000 instead of the stipulated 3,000 cubic yards of gravel on every mile of track. He kept within his contract price and still built one mile and 1,200 feet more main line than the specifications called for. He was the only contractor ever known to have given more than he was supposed to have given.

THERE WERE TWO GREAT INNOVATIONS on the Pictou Branch. One was the adoption of the then revolutionary sheath rail joint in which abutting flat ends of rails were connected by a close form - fitting steel sheath, into which they were driven and the whole joint then spiked solidly to the sleepers thus doing away with the clumsy old cast iron chairs and their wooden wedges which had proved so costly and unsatisfactory on the NSR main line since 1855. The rails were also of steel and the Nova Scotia Railroad tried 300 tons of these rails and never went back to iron. The other new feature was provision of the first eight-wheel, double-truck, coal cars, to handle the expected heavy trade from Stellarton.

AFTER THE EMBANKMENTS HAD TIME to settle, the cuts had been cleaned and the ballast trimmed, passenger trains were run over it in tests at fifty miles an hour more smoothly than had ever been possible on the main line. However, the ordinary operating speed was about 25 miles an hour.

THE LONG DRAG ON THE PICTOU BRANCH with its political bushwhacking and newspaper guerrilla fighting was over at last and right on the dot of May 31, 1867, as Sandford Fleming had predicted and promised, the road was officially opened through from Truro to Pictou Landing. At twenty minutes to 8 a.m., a company of 400 - 500 gentlemen invited by Sandford Fleming, among whom was His Excellency, the Lieutenant-Governor, and the Archbishop of Halifax, left Halifax (Richmond) station in a train numbering eight cars. At Truro they were met by a large number of people, and to honor the occasion, the "Rothsay Blues" were paraded. At about 11 o'clock the train started for Fisher's Grant, and at the Big Culvert at Lairg, it was met by a locomotive and car from the other end of the line with a few gentlemen from Pictou and New Glasgow. At this place a luncheon was prepared; and to protect the guests from the "Scotch Mist" which fell all day, the feast was spread inside the culvert, - the bottom of which was bridged over with a floor of timber and planks for the occasion. It is hard to understand how so many people could get under one culvert, so it is obvious that most of them were as wet outside as they were no doubt inside.

AFTER ABOUT HALF AN HOUR DELAY, the united trains proceeded eastward, stopped a few minutes at Stellarton where a salute was fired, and a few minutes at New Glasgow where nothing hap-

pened and arrived at Fisher's Grant terminus about 4 o'clock p. m. A banquet was served in the station building on the estuary wharf and after many toasts and speeches the train started back at 6 p.m. and stopped only at New Glasgow and Riversdale for refreshments and again at Truro to leave the guests for that placed and arrived at Richmond Station at 1:30 in the morning.

AVARD LONGLEY, CHIEF COMMISSIONER of Railways, never lost faith in the branch and publicly lamented that he had not doubled - tracked it to handle the expected heavy Pictou coal traffic. He declared that on the whole it was equal to any line on the continent of America, and that Mr. Fleming is entitled to highest praise for the vigor, ability and integrity displayed. Leading British and U. S. engineers who came to have a look at it, said much the same thing.

THE ROAD BEING FINISHED, it would have been thought that it would be the end of controversy, but this was not to be. It is to be emphasized that the attacks on Fleming did not stem to any extent from personal hostility to himself or to railways as such. There were, of course, a few old hardshells who really believed that the coming of steam heralded the breakdown of civilization, but most criticism was based strictly on politics and partisan sentiments.

THE CHIEF PREOCCUPATION OF MOST parties and politicians at that time was Confederation. It is almost impossible for a modern Canadian, unless steeped in the literature and lore of Nova Scotia in the 1867 period, to have any idea of the intensity of the animosities that were created when the Legislature voted the Province into union, against the wishes of a majority of the people. Many, who at the start had not been particularly adverse to union as such, were turned into raging partisans by the methods which brought it about. The Pictou Branch was a pet project of Tupper's Confederates, -- hence to be criticized, fought and libelled by every loyal "Anti" in the land. Political friends and allies of a lifetime parted company on the Confederation issue. Homes and families were broken up. Brother turned against brother. It was almost as bitter as actual civil war, -- an alternative that was in fact advocated by more than one popular agitator of the day.

MANY OF THE PARTICIPANTS NEVER forgot or forgave. Forty-six years later, two venerable Nova Scotian senators, who had been leaders in 1867, meeting by chance on the steps of the parliament buildings at Ottawa, had to be forcibly restrained, while one denounced the other as a "toothless old viper" and other endearing terms. "(Let not friend, Donald MacInnis, one of our present sitting Cape Breton members, imagine that he is the first belligerent Cape Bretoner to challenge the opposition to put up its dukes -- not by a long shot!!)"

THE FEELING WAS SO EVIDENT in Pictou County, that after the grand opening of the Branch Railroad, the utter dearth of anything resembling enthusiasm among the population of Pictou County could not fail to be noticed by every person on the train. Not a cheer greeted the arrival at New Glasgow. Even at Fisher's Grant, only 6 or 7 gentlemen of any position of influence were present, -- most of them only out of courtesy to Mr. Fleming. This feeling carried over to the succeeding election; and when the votes were counted, Pictou County had contributed to the expulsion of the Tupper Government from Nova Scotia.



CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS station at Truro, N.S., - a most monumental pile, as it looked in May, 1949. CRHA EA Toohey Collection.

BECAUSE OF THE CRITICAL EXCITEMENT attending it, the building of the Pictou Branch came in Nova Scotia railroad folk lore second only to the building of the Intercolonial, for which, in fact, it served as an engineering curtain-raiser. Sandford Fleming experimented on the branch with various new equipment and the techniques he had devised soon proved of greatest importance in the arduous task of joining Nova Scotia and Upper Canada. Preliminary work on the 500-mile line from Truro to Riviere du Loup, began almost before the last spike had been driven on the Pictou railroad, although active construction did not get under way until 1869.

SOME OF THE OUTSTANDING ENGINEERING features that were used on the Pictou Branch set the pattern for many of the later Canadian railroads. The most outstanding of all was the use of steel rails, being the first such use in Canada. This of course will be disputed by our Upper Canadian friends. The second feature was the first iron bridge, since all bridges up to that time had been built of wood. With the dropping of hot ashes from the engines, the life of these wooden structures was not too long. The third item was the sheath or scabbard rail fastening which was developed and used here for the first time in Canada. The fourth item was the first steam shovels to be used in the construction of railroad in Canada. These had only been used up till that time during the building of the Welland Canal. The fifth item was the permanent drainage system provided for the road bed by cutting tunnels through solid rock and by building the road bed on higher ground. And the sixth item deserves significant mention. Sandford Fleming was the only contractor who gave more than the contract called for, such as the extra mile of track and the 4,000 instead of the 3,000 cubic yards of gravel ballast per mile. Moreover, the total cost was \$2,321,577 against an tender of \$2,116,500, -- 9.6 % more!

IT STARTED AN ENGINEERING TREND that was carried through to the ICR construction. For many decades, to say in a prospectus that any intended construction (including the CPR) was to be built to ICR standards, was the highest praise or promise that could be given. Incidentally, it is not generally known that the mighty CPR itself, - for the first few years of its existence, was built and operated with second hand motive power and rolling stock from the ICR. These are the reason that the Pictou Branch initially set the

standards of railroad construction for the rest of Canada.

IT IS THEREFORE TRUE THAT although the Pictonians were very much against the methods of construction when the railroad was built, they had a great deal of which to be proud - and for which to be thankful.

