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THE FADING GLORY

AFTER the merger of the Hudson's Bay and the North West Companies, York Factory became the Queen of Hudson Bay, a monarch whose realm extended throughout the Northern Department of Rupert's Land. As the central depot for the department, York gathered the fur returns of its subject districts and forwarded into the interior the trading outfits brought to its vast warehouses by sea from London. It gave to countless new servants a first impression of life in Rupert's Land—and a final memory to those who retired and went back to the British Isles. Whenever the Council of the Northern Department assembled on the Bay, York became the administrative headquarters; and it remained the fiscal centre, preparing indents for all outfits and compiling the annual financial statement for the whole department.

The Northern Department's transportation system, to which York Factory was the key, was an awesome triumph of man over nature. Each summer, at least one ship sailed into Hudson Bay with trading goods for York. Navigation was a difficult task requiring skilled masters. A ship's turn-about at York had to be swiftly, expertly managed lest the summer season, so inhospitably brief, suddenly shut down and imprison the vessel in the Bay. Moreover, unloading was additionally complicated by the fact that the Hayes River was too shallow to accommodate larger ships. All goods had to be lightered ashore before they

could be warehoused and stored for later distribution according to districts.

York's method of distribution was complex. Transportation in the interior depended upon an involved network of rivers and lakes. From York, the trunk line ran southwest to Norway House, an entrepot at the north end of Lake Winnipeg, and then south to Fort Garry at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. From Lake Winnipeg, a gigantic spur "line" twisted westward along the Saskatchewan River till it reached Edmonton one thousand miles away. Linked to this line by portages were the rivers serving the great northern districts. Within this pattern, brigades of York boats carried furs, provisions, and trading goods from district to district; and beyond it, the Company used carts, horses, and canoes. But despite the obstacles of space and time, it was a marvellous system that functioned well enough for nearly half a century.

The supremacy of York Factory began to fade when an American road arose to challenge its position as the best route to the outside world. In the 1830s, the far-ranging, buffalo-hunting half breeds of the Red River Settlement touched and traded with American posts on the upper Red River and then were drawn into a progressively broader traffic with settlements farther to the south. By the end of the decade, these same men were making "annual excursions to St. Paul and Mendota" to exchange products of



York boat crew struggling to get their heavy wooden craft over a shallow spot on the route between York Factory and Norway House. C. H. M. Gordon

the chase for merchandise suited to their wants. Their vehicle was the Red River cart; their highway, the Red River Valley; and the round-trip, for all its distance, was more convenient and pleasant than the back-breaking passage to York Factory.

In 1843, Norman W. Kittson of the American Fur Company quickened the development of the new route when he established a trading post at Pembina, and thereby translated the American market to within a day's ride of the Red River Settlement. Free trade and smuggling abounded and despite the Company's efforts to crush the illicit traders, they soon won the power, if not the right, to trade within Rupert's Land. All that remained for the Company was to undersell its competitors; and this it did quite successfully for a number of years, although price-cutting drew furs from all the southern districts and demanded larger indents for the Red River District every year.

Kittson's position steadily improved until he could not only undersell the Company but also provide his customers with a greater variety and volume of goods. The explanation for his success was twofold. While the traffic system serving his needs had been ameliorated by a "transporta-

tion revolution," the Company's own system had deteriorated until it could no longer meet the demands of its southern districts. In the 'fifties, several American railroads reached the Mississippi and joined hands with western steamboat lines. Therefore Kittson could direct his shipments from the East to the river town of his choice and bring them upstream to St. Paul with regularity and dispatch. And beyond, the gap was readily filled by the Red River cart.

By contrast the York system was slow, laborious, and uncertain. Kittson ordered his goods in the winter and got them in the summer. The Company's outfits were ordered two or three years in advance of delivery; and to guard against the system's occasional breakdowns, reserves had always to be kept on hand. Shipment by steamer and railroad from Liverpool or London to St. Paul took from twenty-six to thirty-two days. With good luck, a ship to York could make the passage in thirty days. But this was rare. Many vessels, after a fast crossing, found Hudson Strait so choked with ice that the last leg of their voyage required a month or more. For a price, Kittson could always find men willing to cart from St. Paul to Pembina

or Red River; but good, reliable men were hard to find at any price to work the York boats. The work involved was so distasteful that few of the Company's servants would perform it. After 1836, much of the freighting was done by private contractors; but they, too, had difficulty getting enough recruits. The settlers were loath to leave other more rewarding jobs for the peril and labour of the heavy wooden craft. Brigades were often composed of "poor sapless fellows" or, like the Portage la Loche boys, "of rough & terrible fellows caring little for the contents of the packages."

A cost-comparison of both routes reflected the time difference between them. By the 'fifties, freightage from London to St. Paul was decidedly less than from London to York. But the case for St. Paul did not rest upon freightage alone. There was also the matter of interest—of the invisible charges that worked day and night against the Company. Kittson needed little or no inventory; the Company had to have enough for two or three years. And Kittson's merchandise varied according to taste and fashion; while the Company's offerings were always two years out of style.

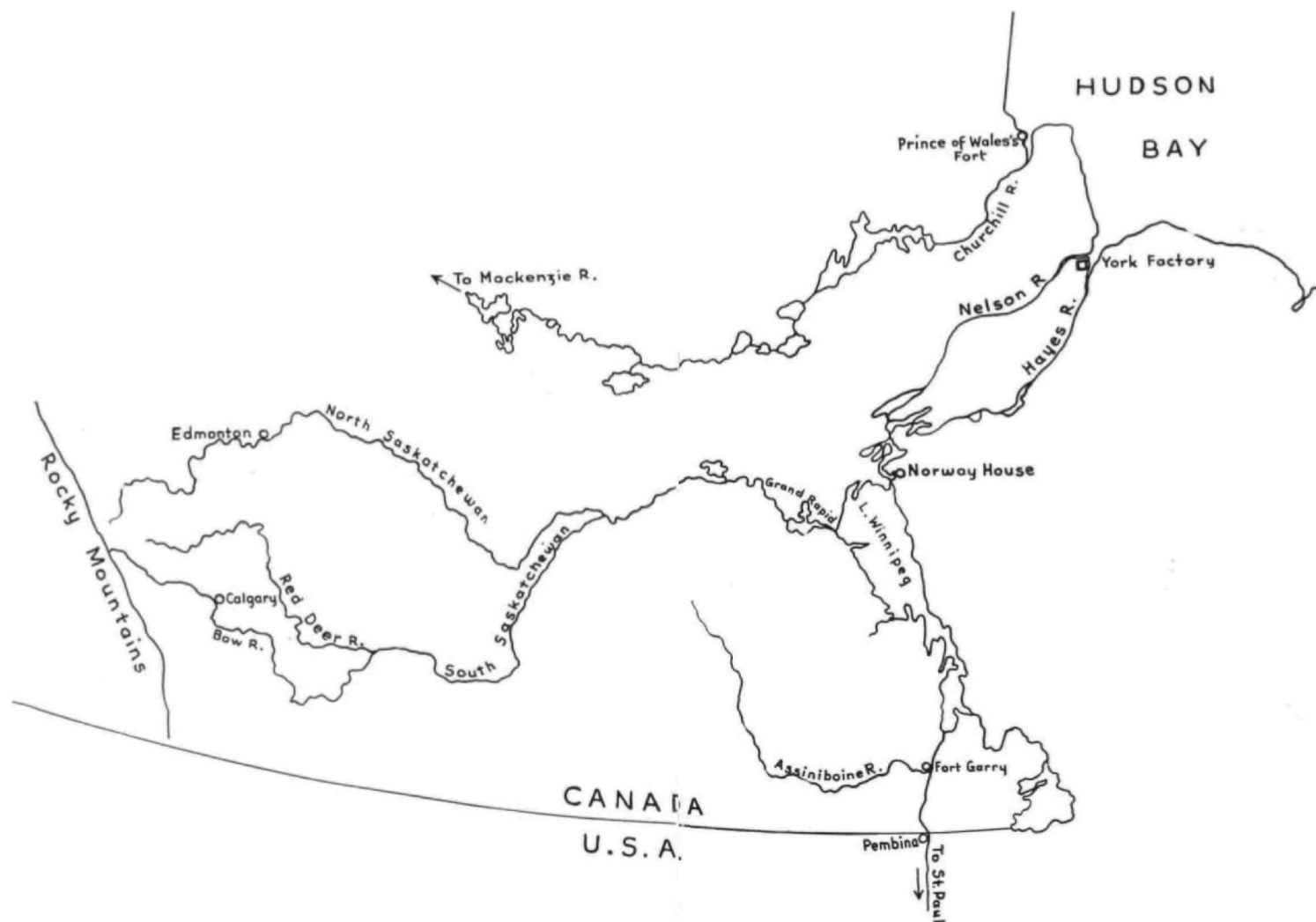
Perhaps the most telling argument against the York route was its inflexibility. It could not be readily expanded to meet growing demands. This was a defect of which Sir George Simpson had been made aware while endeavouring to create an export trade for the Red River Settlement. He realized that if such a trade ever matured, the Company's trunk line to York Factory could never bear the additional load. He therefore promoted the building of an auxiliary line, the Winter Road, intended to run from Norway House to York Factory. Begun in 1825, the road's history lingered for a decade or so, a grisly, gloomy tale told in terms of frozen oxen and ruined outfits. Fortunately for the Company, Red River did not develop a staple for export and the road was never needed. But by the 'fifties, the situation had changed. Ever increasing outfits for the Red River District and its own mounting returns were straining the trunk line. In 1855, the shelves of the Company's Red River sale shops were often bare. Two years later, when the Royal Canadian Rifles came down to Fort Garry, the system broke down completely. Needed supplies had to be left behind at York Factory. In the following year, the Hudson's Bay Company turned to the Minnesota route for relief.

Opened in 1858, on a trial basis, to bring in part of the Red River outfit, the Minnesota route proved an immediate success. The Company swiftly expanded the route, efficiently fusing together American and/or Canadian railways, steamers on the Mississippi, carts and/or wagons on the prairies, and, for the last leg, a steamer on the Red



Above: Red River cart brigades like this one linked railway and steamboat between St. Paul and Fort Garry. Leonard Reid

Below: Transportation routes referred to in this article are shown on this map. Another route (not shown) linked the Saskatchewan with the Churchill.



River. Each year, a larger portion of the Red River indent was sent via St. Paul. Then the Saskatchewan District indent was added and, by 1861, Swan River as well. In the opinion of the Governor and Committee, the Minnesota route was "completely established." Now instead of one depot for the Northern Department, there were two. Unable to match her rival in supplying the southern districts, the Queen of the Bay had been forced to divide her realm.

The promise of the Minnesota route was not entirely fulfilled in the 1860s. It was as if an evil spell had been cast over the system. The Sioux Wars of Minnesota broke out in the fall of 1862 and instantly severed all communication lines between St. Paul and Fort Garry. With peaceful assurances from the Sioux, the Company managed to re-open the route in the following summer, intending to cart goods with its own men from St. Paul to the Red River. But the river was less responsive than the Indians. Its waters fell to an unnavigable depth and remained there for several years. A new steamboat, just christened the year before, was unable to ply the Red with regularity until 1869; and the Company had to extend its carting operations over the entire distance. There seemed no limit to the problems of the Minnesota route. The American Civil War, with its manpower shortage and its curtailed transportation, held up shipments. Customs officials at Port Huron on the St. Clair River and at Milwaukee were annoyingly uncooperative, impounding returns and detaining outfits. And amidst these crises, the Company's American partners and agents helped not at all. Some of them worked hard for the Company's competitors and all of them were notoriously inefficient. It was a bad era for the Minnesota route—but for the York route, it was even worse.

During this decade, it became apparent to the Company that York's ills were terminal. An abiding fault in the system lay in its use of brigades. In 1863, a Red River brigade bound for York broke down at Norway House, a victim both of epidemic and mismanagement. In 1865, all the Mackenzie River brigades failed. Of the four involved, one got lost en route to Norway House. The others arrived at Norway House but then mutinied and refused to proceed to York with their furs. Confronted with a like situation in 1853, the Company's officer at Norway House had seized the ringleaders and remanded them to Red River—and "some weeks" in prison. But 1853 was not 1865, when "none but the scum of the population" would work the York boats and there was not enough of that to go around. Because of the brigades, York Factory declined; and with each downward step, Fort Garry rose higher. In 1867, it added Athabasca's outfit to its shipments; and in the next



S.S. "Colville" wooding up at Warren's Landing on the way from Lower Fort Garry to Norway House in 1881. From the photo by F. Jay Haynes of Fargo, Dakota Territory.

Loudon Wilson

year, assumed the burden of exporting the returns of the Athabasca and Mackenzie River districts.

The Governor and Committee determined "to take measures which will make the services of the tripmen less necessary and enable the Company to be independent of them." The solution seemed to be steam power; but in this matter as in most, the policy was to make haste slowly. In 1869, London sent out a small steamer to work the rivers above York. Like the Winter Road, it also failed. Man cannot easily fashion highways or waterways from the rocks, rivers, and marshes of the Canadian Shield. Greater attention was given to navigation on Lake Winnipeg and the Saskatchewan River, larger and more promising waters than the Hayes and its tributaries. Moreover, they could be easily entwined with railroads south of the 49th parallel.

In the post-Civil War era, Minnesota's railways had grown at a fantastic rate. St. Paul was tied to Chicago shortly after the end of the Civil War. In 1866, the St.

Paul and Pacific pushed its branch line to St. Cloud; while its main line raced westward with the Northern Pacific. It was a dead heat; both lines hit the Red River in 1871. And plans were already under way for the St. Paul's branch line to extend to the Red and then work northward to St. Vincent on the international border.

In addressing the Company's shareholders in June, 1871, Governor Sir Stafford H. Northcote projected a new policy for the Northern Department. Instead of sending goods by sea to York he contemplated using North America's "nearly completed railway system" which would give the Company a "very much shorter route." To replace the brigades, he considered employing steamers, far faster and more certain vehicles than the clumsy York boats. The key to a successful change-over, as Northcote well knew, was the steamboat, for the railroads had already proved themselves. In November, he announced to the stockholders that steamers had been ordered for use on Lake Winnipeg and the Saskatchewan.

The Company launched the first steamer, the *Chief Commissioner*, in the summer of 1872 and the second, an unnamed vessel, in the year following. But the latter met with disaster. In endeavoring to get her around the Saskatchewan's rapids and up river where she was to ply, the crew stranded and wrecked her. Fortunately, all was not lost. The engine and machinery were saved and incorporated into the hull of a second boat, the *Northcote*. The *Northcote's* maiden voyage was a success. She steamed five hundred miles upstream to Carlton House in the summer of 1874 and doubled the distance to Edmonton in the next year. The Company had cut a new pattern of transportation: by rail to Red River; by steam (in two stages) from Fort Garry to Norway House to Grand Rapid; and, finally, by steam again to Edmonton. Steam navigation had not provided the Company with a foolproof system of transportation. Fitting a river or lake with an appropriate vessel often demanded further modifications in draught, power, and materials; but experimentation or not, steam was there to stay. The Northern Department had been relieved of the greater part of its troublesome brigades—and York Factory of her crown.

Even as the experiment in steam was underway, the Company was making preparations to reduce York Factory. Within a period of three years, it had been stripped of most of its remaining functions. In 1872, the year in which the dismantling began, the Company put a new man, Chief Trader Fortescue, in charge of the factory. He found it in a dilapidated state—every dwelling in need of floors and foundations—and the ovens in ruins—but

there was little he could do about it at the time. The Company was more interested in cutting maintenance costs than in paying for repairs. When he assumed the post, York made up the accounts of the Northern Department; but in the same year, they were shifted to Fort Garry. The Company ignored Fortescue's personnel problems. The number of men given him each year was always small and frequently undetermined till late in the season. When he asked for more men from London, the Chief Commissioner refused, citing the need to reduce York's complement to the "lowest possible standard" and remarking that in the future, recruits would come via Fort Garry, not Hudson Bay.

The last season of any importance for York Factory was the summer of 1873. In that year, it received most of the outfits for the districts north of Oxford House and remitted to London a very considerable portion of the department's returns. York was living on borrowed time. Had the steamers proved themselves, this final flurry would never have occurred. In 1874 with both vessels in operation, York's activities were greatly reduced; and thereafter it handled only the outfits and returns for itself and the coastal posts. That summer, Fortescue virtually completed the reduction of York. He sent his overstock of trading goods to Norway House and ultimate transfer to Fort Garry's account. The York brigades had made their final trip to Norway House. In 1875, Fort Garry received all the outfits for the interior districts and managed all their returns. To York, was left itself—and a rather uncertain suzerainty over the coastal posts. ♦

S.S. "Northcote," first successful steamer on the Saskatchewan, beached at Cumberland House. Photo by J. B. Tyrrell, 1894.

