THE COLLINS' OVERLAND OR RUSSIAN EXTENSION TELEGRAPH PROJECT: A PIONEER ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH TELEGRAPHIC COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE.

by

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ABSTRACT

The primary significance of the Collins' Overland Telegraph or Western Union Russian Extension is as a chapter in the history of communications. A pioneer attempt to establish telegraphic communications between North America and Europe, via Bering Strait, the Collins' Overland Project was ultimately a failure. The successful laying of an Atlantic cable by Cyrus Field in 1866 removed the basic raison d etre of the overland route and led to the halting of construction.

While a failure in the sense that the project did not succeed in establishing an intercontinental communications link, it did bring important secondary benefits to both British Columbia and Alaska. It was, in other words, a relatively successful failure. In British Columbia mining and exploration were stimulated and the internal communications system of the colony vastly improved. In Alaska the telegraph expeditions were responsible for the first systematic examination of the flora, fauna and geology of the area. Members of the telegraph project were thus able to play a minor but significant role in the purchase of Alaska by providing much useful data on the valuable new territory.

The study of the Collins' Overland scheme was made easier by the literacy of the members of the project.

The many unpublished papers and diaries as well as published memoirs which survived the scheme form the basis for the thesis. Especially helpful were the published documents made available by the Western Union Telegraph Company. Three published articles, Charles Vevier's "The Collins' Overland Line and American Continentalism"[1], Corday Mackay's "The Collins' Overland Telegraph"[2], and J.S. Galbraith's "Perry McDonough Collins at the Colonial Office"[3], provided a starting point and in some cases references to documents otherwise unavailable.

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[1] Pacific Historical Review, Vol.65, January, 1960, pp.324-335.

[2] British Columbia Historical Quarterly, Vol.10, July, 1946, pp.187-215.

[3] British Columbia Historical Quarterly, Vol.17, July, 1953, pp.63-74.

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All photographs courtesy of the Archives of British Columbia.

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Particular thanks are due Dr. D.L. Cole and Prof. G.L. Cook for their willingness to supervise the writing of this thesis. Without the assistance of Mrs. L.M. Bitner of the Western Union Library, New York, and the staff of the Provincial Archives of B.C., the research for this thesis would have been difficult, if not impossible. To my wife, who typed and re-typed the text, both thanks and sympathy are due.

CHAPTER I

ORIGINS AND ORGANIZATION OF THE PROJECT

The invention of the electromagnetic telegraph in 1835, by Samuel F.B. Morse, was one of the more important events in the technological revolution which transformed western civilization. Morse's crude instruments were soon recognized as a possible solution to the problem of communications between men, nations and, later, continents. After 1835 no nation could remain isolated from the larger world community. A communications net, already beginning at the local level, was ultimately to girdle the globe. The world was becoming a smaller community in which the rapid transmission of ideas of every sort was an accepted fact of life.

The Collins' Overland Telegraph project, a scheme to link North America and Europe via the Bering Strait, played a minor role in this extension of the global communications network. The Collins' Overland project has received relatively little attention from historians, perhaps because of the ultimate failure of the project to link North America with Europe. The scheme, however, was not a total failure. It did succeed in linking western North America with the telegraph systems of the world and in stimulating

exploration and discovery in previously untravelled regions of British Columbia and Alaska. The Collins' Overland Telegraph project was, in other words, a relatively successful failure.

The originator of this imaginative plan to link the continents was an American, Perry McDonough Collins. Born in Hyde Park, New York, in 1813, Collins had followed the gold rush to California in 1849 after several uneventful years as a law clerk in New York and New Orleans.[1] An aggressive and enterprising young man, Collins found California well suited to his ambitions. Realizing that his talents better fitted him for commerce than to the hardships of digging gold, Collins established himself in San Francisco. The rapidly growing city provided ample opportunity for men of his talents and ambition. Within a year he had established the gold brokerage firm of Collins and Dent and began to enjoy considerable success.[2] Collins succeeded in winning some influential friends in the San

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[1] Biographical material on Collins is not abundant. The best source is Philip E. McDonald, Perry McDonough Collins: A Generous Benefactor of New York University, (in McNicol Collection, Queens University). Another useful source is V. Stefansson, North West to Fortune, New York, 1958. Charles Vevier's reprint of Collins' book, Voyage Down the Amoor, New York, 1860, Siberian Journey Down the Amoor to the Pacific, 1856-57, Madison, Wisconsin, 1962, has a short biographical chapter. Collins' obituary notices can be found in the New York Tribune, January 19, 1900, p.4; Telegraphic Age, February, 1900, p.54, and San Francisco Call, January 19, 1900, p.12.

[2] V. Stefansson, Ibid., p.245.

Francisco business community as his own enterprise prospered. Milton Latham and William Gwin, both later to be Senators from California, were among his new friends. Both men were adopted Californians, vitally interested in the commercial development of the area. It was from William Gwin that Collins first became interested in the profit potential of the North Pacific area. Gwin had formed the Russian America Commercial Company in 1853 in an attempt to develop trade between Russian America and San Francisco. The company held several posts in the Russian territory and had enjoyed considerable success importing ice and timber from the area. By the late eighteen-fifties, Gwin's company had acquired a small fleet of ships and was casting covetous glances at the trade potential of the Pacific coast of Asia.

Collins, like Gwin, soon came to realize the growing potential of the Pacific area for American commerce. Commodore Perry's actions in forcing Japan to open her doors to American traders and merchants in 1854 had helped to focus the attention of Americans, especially Californians, on the area. Collins, as a result of his interest in the Pacific coast of Asia, secured from the Pierce Administration an appointment in 1855 as Commercial Agent of the United States for the Amur River. In the best traditions of mid-nineteenth century American commercial expansionism, Collins set out to explore for himself the Amur valley with

a view to assessing its potential for American commerce.[3] It was during his travels in the Amur area that the idea of a telegraphic link between North America and Europe came to his mind. The first suggestion of such a plan was in a letter to Lewis Cass, the Secretary of State in Buchanan's Administration. Shortly after his arrival in the United States in February, 1858, he wrote,

> This country, the Amur area, provided by nature with a natural road to the ocean, heretofore closed by barbaric powers, it is hoped will ere long awake to the scream of the steam engine and the lightning flashes of the telegraph, and be received as a worthy though heretofore rather a sleeping partner. 4

His initial suggestion that the Amur would soon be reached by telegraph was elaborated upon in a subsequent letter, again to Cass: "In transversing the whole extent of northern Europe and Asia the idea was strongly forced upon my mind that . . . telegraphic communications could

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[3] Collins summarized his findings in his Voyage Down the Amoor, New York, 1860. His particular interest during this trip was to determine whether or not steamships could be successfully used on the river. Finding that it was thought possible he proposed a steamship and railway link between Nikolaevsk and Lake Baikal financed by American interests. There is no evidence that his proposal was ever taken seriously by the Russians. He returned to the United States, however, convinced that the Amur valley was a fertile field for American commercial activity.

[4] Collins to Cass, March 6, 1858, House Executive Document No.98, cited in J.S. Galbraith, "Perry McDonough Collins at the Colonial Office". B.C. Historical Quarterly, Vol.17, July, 1953, p.208.

be constructed . . . uniting Europe with America."[5]

To Collins, a telegraphic link of the continents via the Bering Strait seemed both natural and practical. As an adopted Californian he realized the importance of such a link to western businessmen. As one of the few Americans who were familiar with Asiatic Russia, he realized that an intercontinental link could be constructed to join with the Russian telegraph systems which were being extended eastward down the Amur River. Added to this was his awareness of the repeated failures of attempts to lay an Atlantic cable. The cable project, which was being carefully watched by business and government leaders, had met with failure in both 1857 and 1858.[6] By 1859 the problems involved in laying such a lengthy undersea cable were seen by many as being insurmountable. Prominent leaders of the telegraph industry in the United States, such as Hiram Sibley of Western Union, were becoming increasingly doubtful that Cyrus Field's Atlantic cable would ever be successful. The need for some type of intercontinental telegraph link was, however, obvious to all. Extensive networks

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[5]Collins to Cass, September 20, 1859, U.S. National Archives, Amoor River, February 29, 1856 - December 21, 1860, cited in Charles Vevier, "The Collins' Overland Line and American Continentalism". Pacific Historical Review, Vol.28, August, 1959, p.242.

[6]D. McNicol, "Pioneer Attempt to Establish Telegraphic Communication between America and Europe". Telegraph and Telephone Age, July 1, 1926, p.289.

already bound all the major cities of Europe together. In North America an eastern network, including Toronto and Montreal, was in operation, and now Western Union was planning to extend it across the continent to California. Soon there would be two continental networks, and the task of wiring Europe to North America could then be completed in one final, huge step. The question was which way to turn. To the west lay a relatively few miles of water with a vast expanse of northern wilderness on either side of it; to the east lay a few thousand miles of ocean floor that had resisted all attempts to cable it. Collins was convinced that the link should be forged to the west.

The commercial potential of the project was obvious to such an astute businessman as Collins. In the past it had taken weeks to transmit commercial and diplomatic messages between Europe and North America. In the near future this time would be reduced to minutes. Presumably only one line would carry all the traffic, and whoever controlled it was virtually assured a large profit.

His mind having seized upon the idea, Collins wasted no time in attempting to find backers for his scheme. The route which first suggested itself to him was one from Montreal, through the Hudson's Bay Company territories, Russian America and Bering Strait. This route would avoid the mountainous terrain of British Columbia, making construction much simpler and less expensive. As a first step he travelled to Montreal and secured a charter for the

Transmundane Telegraph Company.[7] His Canadian backers, among them Sir George Simpson, Overseas Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, were favourably impressed with Collins' scheme, but were nevertheless reluctant to begin construction.[8] Such a project required an outlay of capital in excess of that which Simpson could commit, and also needed subsidies which the British and Canadian Governments were unlikely to grant. In addition to this there was considerable talk in the United States of a telegraph line to California. This line would provide a natural starting point for an intercontinental link and would have the added advantage of bringing the western United States and British Columbia into the continental telegraph network. The Transmundane Telegraph Company thus died in its infancy and Collins looked to the United States for support.

Collins' plans had already attracted the attention of Western Union and its energetic president, Hiram Sibley. In 1859, by a process of absorbing its smaller rivals, this immense company was striving for a monopoly over the American telegraphic network and saw Collins' project as a possible means by which to gain a monopoly over intercontinental communications as well. The company was also, during the early months of 1860, lobbying Congress for

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[7] Galbraith, B.C.H.Q., Vol.17, July, 1953, p.208.

[8] Ibid.

federal aid in constructing a transcontinental line to California. When Congress, in June 1860, authorized the construction of the Pacific line, Western Union became even more interested in Collins' idea.

Western Union was ideally suited to execute Collins' scheme. As a large and financially powerful organization, it could easily provide the funds, organization and experience essential to the success of such an ambitious undertaking. Sibley, convinced that an Atlantic cable was many years from completion, became Collins' most ardent supporter. Collins, aware that the route from San Francisco through British Columbia would serve to reinforce that city's commercial dominance over the Pacific Coast and to introduce American commerce to Asiatic Russia, was an enthusiastic recipient of Western Union's support.

Sibley, to aid Collins in the essential negotiations with the Russian, British and American governments, arranged for him to be given $5,000 by Western Union.[9] Sibley's energetic support was expressed in a letter to Collins:

> . . . it is a matter of surprise that any intelligent person at all familiar with the building and working of telegraph lines in the west, should doubt the practicability of the successful working, after built, of a line to Behring's Strait. 10

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[9] G. Oslin, Westward to Europe, Western Union Telegraph Company, Circa, 1930, p.1.

[10] Sibley to Collins, October 16, 1861, Statement of the Origin, Organization and Progress of the Russian-American Telegraph Western Union (continued on p.9)

Samuel F.B. Morse, the inventor of the electromagnetic telegraph, added his somewhat less enthusiastic support when he wrote to Collins that he saw "no insurmountable difficulties in the way of establishing a telegraphic communication with Europe westward from San Francisco."[11]

Collins, after his meetings with Sibley and other Western Union officials, returned to Nikolaevsk at the mouth of the Amur River. While ostensibly in the area in his capacity as United States' Commercial Agent, most of his time was consumed with affairs relating to his telegraph project. He spent the spring and summer of 1860 in the Amur valley, sounding out the Russian officials in the area and making plans for his new enterprise. In the United States, having received federal authorization and subsidies, Sibley prepared to begin construction of the line to California.

In the late fall of 1860 Collins brought his plan to the attention of Congress and petitioned for aid in conducting hydrographic surveys of the Bering Strait region. Information from these surveys would be used in laying the submarine cable. Both the Executive and Congress proved receptive to his ideas and offered all possible assistance

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[10](continued from p.8) Extension, Collins' Overland Line via Behring Strait and Asiatic Russia to Europe, Rochester, New York, 1866, pp.37-38.

[11]Morse to Collins, November 29, 1861, Ibid., p.36.

-- short of financial aid. John Cochrane, a representative from New York and member of the Committee on Commerce, argued strongly in the House for a $50,000 appropriation to finance a survey of the northern waters.[12] Cochrane, whose Committee had recommended the undertaking of the survey, explained to the House that the successful laying of an Atlantic cable was not likely in the near future and added that the Russian Government was already at work extending its telegraph lines to the mouth of the Amur River. The practicability of Collins' scheme, he argued, "had only to be stated to be at once fully appreciated."[13] Cochrane, like Collins, was well aware of the commercial potential of the Overland line. After urging construction by private enterprise he stated that

> There are now in Europe some one hundred and fifty thousand miles of telegraph, and in America some fifty or sixty thousand miles, producing a revenue of probably ten millions of dollars annually. Unite all these lines, and make them a subsidiary to the great world encircling telegraph and it must become one of the most lucrative investments possible. 14

Despite the recommendations of the Committee on Commerce that $50,000 be appropriated and that two ships be provided by the Navy Department, Congress took no action.

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[12] Report of Mr. John Cochrane of the Committee on Commerce to the House of Representatives, February 18, 1861, Ibid., p.17-27.

[13] Ibid., p.24.

[14] Ibid., p.26.

The growing concern over the sectional conflict which was, within months to break into Civil War, accounted in part for this inaction. More important, however, was the feeling that Congress should take no action until Collins had secured more concrete promises of cooperation from both the British and the Russians, through whose territory lines would have to pass.

Although 1861 was a disappointing year for Collins and Sibley in Congress, the success of the Pacific telegraph buoyed their hopes for the eventual construction of the intercontinental line. The wire reached San Francisco in November, 1861, just four months after construction had begun. The relative ease with which the line was built and operated provided added evidence to Sibley and Collins that lengthy landlines were entirely practical. The continued successful operation of the line served to reinforce this evidence. The principal significance of the Pacific line for Collins, however, was that it provided a starting point thousands of miles closer to Bering Strait. As the lines of the California State Telegraph Company, a Western Union subsidiary, moved north to tie the Oregon and Washington Territories into the new system, Collins' plans came closer to realization with every mile of wire strung. As Sibley wrote confidently to Collins, shortly after the completion of the Pacific line,

> The work is not more difficult than that we have already accomplished over the Rocky Mountains and plains to California; and, in my opinion, the whole thing is entirely practicable, and that too, in much less time and expense than is generally supposed by those most hopeful. 15

Collins' request for a survey of the Bering Strait area by the Navy Department was taken up again, this time by the Senate, in February, 1862. Milton Latham, the Senator from California and old friend of Collins', repeated the arguments that Cochrane had used the previous year in the House.[16] Despite the support of Latham and the Committee on Military Affairs, the Senate refused to recommend the appropriation of funds for the survey. Again, both the Congress and Executive voiced encouragement for the project, but voted no funds.

Disappointed at his own government's lack of tangible support, Collins turned to the Russians. He approached William Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State, and Simon Cameron, Minister to Russia, for support in the Russian negotiations. Both promised their full support for Collins' project.[17]

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[15] Sibley to Collins, October 16, 1861, Ibid., p.37.

[16] Report of Mr. Latham of the Committee on Military Affairs . . . ., February 17, 1862, Ibid., p.28-29.

[17] Seward, while favouring the project purely as a means of improving communications between Europe and North America, also expressed the opinion that the new line would further the national interest of the United States. "The country," he wrote, "that has the largest (continued on p.13)

Assured of the valuable support of Seward and the State Department, Collins travelled to St. Petersburg in September to present his proposals to the Russians. Collins and Cameron were well received by the Russian Government. Informed by Collins that the project had the full support of the United States Government, General Melnikoff, the Chief Director of Ways of Communications, assured him that, "our government will be ready to cooperate with you as far as possible in carrying out your enterprise."[18] On May 15, 1863, after numerous discussions with Melnikoff and other Russian officials, Collins was granted a charter giving him exclusive telegraphic privi-

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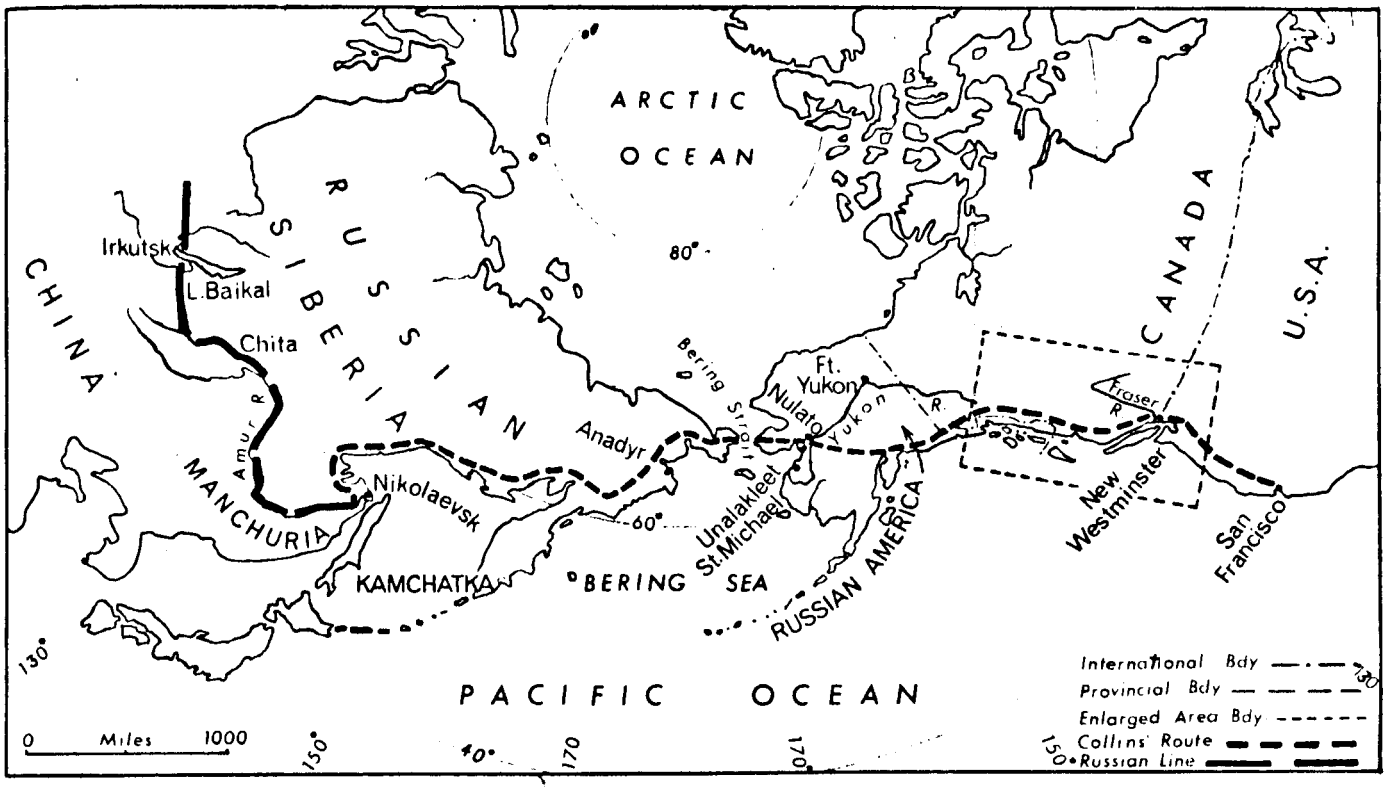
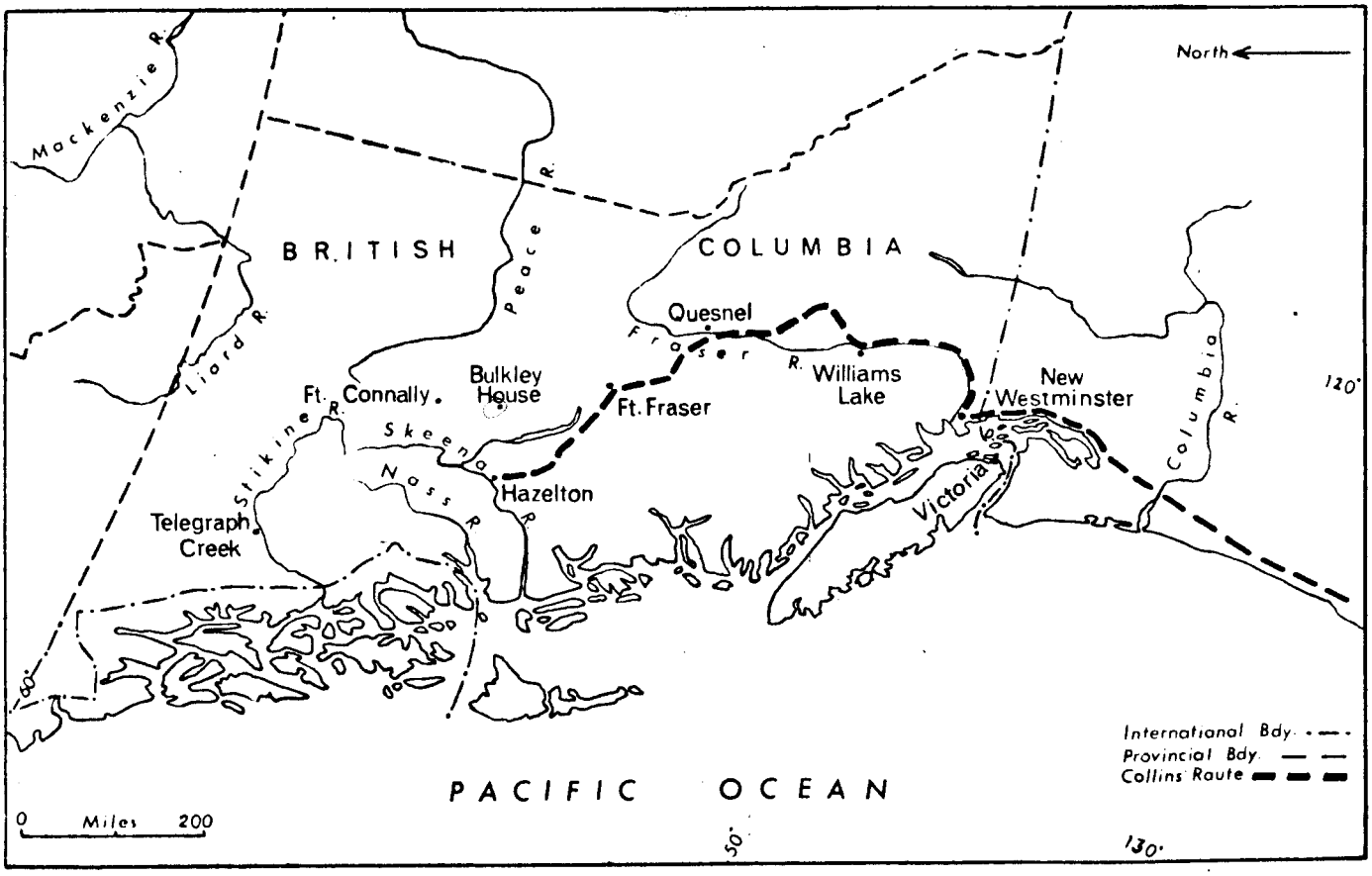
[17](continued from p.12) extension and most thorough radiation of the telegraph wire, enjoys the most active and profitable system of domestic commerce." (Seward to Chandler, May 14, 1864, Ibid., p.64). Another motive for his support is hinted at in the despatches of Simon Cameron and his successor as Minister to Russia, Cassius Clay. Both men spoke of the distortion of American Civil War news by the Reuters News Agency in London and saw the Collins' project as a means of combatting this. ". . . the United States, as well as Russia," wrote Clay, "are interested in not having the telegraphic intelligence of the world confined to the Atlantic line, in the sole possession of the British Nation." (Clay to Gen. Ignatieff, May 1-13, 1863). U.S. Department of State, Papers, Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Washington, 1862-1864, (reprinted, Microcard Editions Inc., Washington, 1966, p.793). There is no evidence that Seward himself held such views but certainly he was aware of the feelings of his officials. The secondary benefits of ending British distortion of Civil War news would not likely have been overlooked by the astute Seward.

[18]Bayard Taylor (U.S. charge d affairs in absence of Cameron) to Seward, December 19, 1862. Papers Relating to the Foreign Affairs of the United States, 1862-1864, p.774.





PROPOSED ROUTE—COLLINS' OVERLAND TELEGRAPH

leges for his line for thirty-three years.[19] The terms of charter, while satisfactory to Collins, were not as generous as he had hoped for. An annual subsidy of one hundred thousand rubles that he had requested was not granted.[20] Instead the Russians agreed to allow a rebate of forty percent of the net profit from messages transmitted to and from the United States along the Russian lines. Collins' proposed company was also granted the right to construct buildings on Russian soil and to employ natives whenever necessary. The workmen hired for the project, it was

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[19] Melnikoff to Collins, May 23, 1863, Statement . . . of Collins' Overland Line, p.54. Several reasons could account for the Russian willingness to support Collins' scheme. First, the Russian telegraph experts, like their American counterparts, saw the completion of an Atlantic cable in the immediate future as an impossibility. Second, Collins' organization were to construct a line on Russian territory from Anadyr to Nikolaevsk at their own expense. The Russians were thus to be given a lengthy addition to their internal telegraph system at no expense to themselves. It is also likely that political considerations influenced their decision. The United States and Russia, out of common opposition to Britain's policies, made rather strange diplomatic bedfellows during the Civil War years. (see A. Woldman, Lincoln and the Russians, Collier Books, New York, 1961). The Russians saw support for Collins' project as being consistent with their overall policy of promoting close relations with the United States. Collins, then, was an incidental beneficiary of this Civil War relationship.

[20] The ruble was equivalent to approximately $.51 (U.S.). Collins' requested subsidy, therefore, was $51,000 annually. The Russian refusal was probably a result of their limited financial resources. The Russians suggested that Collins attempt to get subsidies from the governments of Western Europe with whom the United States had a greater volume of trade. Melnikoff to Collins, May 23, 1863, Ibid., p.55.

stipulated, were all to be Russians who along with their families could assist in the settlement of the newly acquired territory.[21] At the same time, the Russians formally undertook to extend their own telegraph system to the mouth of the Amur River, where it would connect with Collins' lines stretching southward from Anadyr.[22]

His St. Petersburg negotiations successfully concluded, Collins next turned his energies toward Whitehall. The negotiations with the British Government, while more difficult, were not too much for the zealous American entrepreneur. After discussions with Lord Palmerston, the Prime Minister and Lord Newcastle, the Colonial Secretary, as well as other British officials, Collins was able to conclude an agreement.[23] The agreement with the British

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] T.F. Elliot to Collins, February 9, 1864, Ibid., pp.57-60. The negotiations with the British were more difficult for several reasons. The most important complicating factor was that Sir Edward Watkin, the President of the Grand Trunk Railway Co., had during the spring of 1863 been lobbying the British for financial support in a scheme to build a telegraph line between Canada and British Columbia across the Hudson's Bay Co. territories. The British, while recognizing the importance of Watkin's proposals, had been unwilling to commit funds to the project (see E. Watkin, Canada and the States: Recollections, 1851 to 1886, London, 1887, pp.113-14). The British were thus faced with a choice of an all-Canadian transcontinental link or an intercontinental link which would provide communications between Canada and British Columbia over American territory. They chose the latter for several reasons. First, Watkin's proposal would require British subsidies which the Palmerston Government thought it politically unwise to grant. (continued on p.16)

was similar to that concluded with the Russians, except that no rebate was granted and no exclusive privileges accorded.[24] Collins' company, subject to the approval of the British Columbia Legislature, was given the right to import telegraph materials free of customs duties or toll charges.[25] The final condition was that the messages of the British or British Columbian Government should receive equal treatment with those of other governments, namely a reduced tariff and priority over private messages.[26]

While generally satisfied with the agreement offered, Collins also desired to have his company given exclusive control of telegraphy in British Columbia for ten years. The British Columbia Legislature, which had not been consulted by the British, was quite prepared to grant this and incorporated such a monopoly clause in the necessary legislation.[27] When objections were raised by the Imperial

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[23] (continued from p.15) Second, the Watkin plan would not link Britain with North America until such time as an Atlantic cable could be laid. Collins' plan, on the other hand, offered an immediate connection between Britain, British Columbia and Canada at no cost to any of these parties and the important secondary benefit of stimulating development in British Columbia, (lecture of Perry McD. Collins to Travellers' Club, New York, 1865, Statement . . . of Collins' Overland Line, p.164.).

[24] Ibid., pp.57-60.

[25] Ibid., p.58.

[26] Ibid., p.59.

[27] British Columbia, Legislative Council, Ordinance No.9, 1864.

authorities, however, a further ordinance was passed amending the original and repealing the sections giving exclusive privileges.[28]

Having negotiated agreements with the Russians and British that were acceptable if not totally satisfactory, Collins now had only two major obstacles to overcome: one of these was to conclude an agreement with Western Union; the other was to acquire the official sanction of the United States Government.

The agreement with Western Union was obtained with no difficulty. Hiram Sibley, who had arranged for the company to finance Collins' negotiations, presided over a meeting of the Board of Directors in March, 1864, which reached an agreement for the transfer of the rights Collins had obtained to the company.[29] Collins was well rewarded for his efforts. One hundred thousand dollars was paid to him for securing agreements from the Russian and British Governments. Ten percent of the stock of a new company, formed to carry out the enterprise, was also given to him

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[28] British Columbia, Legislative Council, Ordinance No.7, 1865. The British were concerned, with Watkin's scheme fresh in their minds as well as the pending Confederation discussions, that such a clause would prevent the construction of an all-British telegraph link of British North America in the future. The British Columbians, on the other hand, simply wanted a telegraphic connection as soon as possible.

[29] Western Union Telegraph Company, Secretary's Office, March 16, 1864. Statement . . . of Collins' Overland Line, p.5.

and a further ten percent was reserved to him for future purchase.[30] As the new managing director of the Western Union Russian Extension, or Collins' Overland Line, he saw his project beginning to take shape.

A special stock of the Western Union Telegraph Company, the Extension Stock, consisting of one hundred thousand shares of one hundred dollars each, was created to finance the new undertaking. All Western Union shareholders were entitled to purchase this new stock, the potential of which was described as unlimited, up to fifty percent of the value of their holdings of Western Union stock. Until completion of the overland line all affairs of the new company were to remain distinct from those of the parent company. After completion of the line the two companies were to merge.[31]

After reaching an agreement with Western Union, all that remained for Collins was to secure a grant of right-of-way and hopefully financial assistance from the Government of the United States. Hoping to obtain such assistance, Collins, in April 1864, submitted another petition to Congress. This new petition, strongly supported by Secretary of State Seward, asked for aid in a survey of the proposed route, a right-of-way through United States'

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[30] Message to stockholders of Western Union Telegraph Company, March 24, 1864. Ibid., pp.7-8.

[31] Ibid., pp.8-9.

territory, and a subsidy in the form of contracts for the despatch of government messages.[32]

Congress could hardly refuse Collins' requests, especially in light of Seward's active and strong support. The cost to the United States was, as demonstrated by Collins, minute in comparison to the benefits the new intercontinental link would bring. This time Congress did not reject Collins' requests. On July 1, 1864, Abraham Lincoln signed an act designed to fulfill the needs of Collins and his associates.[33] The company was given the right to build a telegraph line and to use such materials from public lands as were required. A permanent right-of-way from San Francisco to the British Columbia border was granted and the Navy Department was instructed to assign a ship to the project for aid in either survey work or the laying of cable.[34]

Western Union and Collins entered their ambitious new project with unbounded optimism. The overland line, the shareholders were told, would "obviate the necessity of any trans-Atlantic cables."[35] Expectations of profit were

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[32] Memorial of Perry McD. Collins. Ibid., p.41.

[33] An Act to encourage and facilitate telegraphic communication between the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, Public Act No.171, 38th Congress, 1st Session, in Ibid., pp.60-61.

[34] Ibid., p.61.

[35] Organization of the Expedition for the construction of the Western Union Extension, Collins' Overland Telegraph, Ibid., p.16.

similarly optimistic. Taking into account construction costs and operating expenses, the company confidently predicted annual profits of from one million to eight million dollars.[36] Collins, in a lecture to the Travellers' Club of New York, described the enterprise which he had begun:

> Like the British Empire upon which the sun never sets, our messages . . . will never cease; and those who can look sharply into figures may be able to estimate the earnings of the Overland Line. 37

Looking beyond the plan to link North America and Europe, the men of Western Union planned lines to tie China, India, Central and South America to their telegraphic empire.[38] The whole world, if one could have believed Collins' speeches of the summer of 1864, was soon to be bound with Western Union telegraph wire. Milton Latham expressed this optimism earlier when in the Senate he said: "We hold the ball of the earth in our hand, and wind upon it a network of living and thinking wire."[39] The investors of the United States were also caught up in this spirit of enthusiasm. The entire stock of the company was quickly

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Lecture delivered by Perry McD. Collins before the Travellers' Club, New York, Dec. 1865, Ibid., pp.155-56.

[38] Organization of the Expedition for the construction of the Western Union Extension, Collins' Overland Telegraph, Ibid., p.15.

[39] Report of M.H. Latham of Committee on Military Affairs, Senate, February 17, 1862, Ibid., p.33.

subscribed and was soon selling at premiums of from thirty to sixty dollars a share.[40]

The man chosen to supervise the construction of the line was Colonel Charles S. Bulkley, a former Superintendent of Military Telegraphs. As he left New York in December, 1864, to begin the organization of the next year's expeditions into the field he read a message from the President of Western Union:

> You are entering upon a work which if successful will give you a name and reputation, not only in the history of this country, but in that of all the civilized nations of the earth, well worth the efforts and sacrifices before you. [41]

Bulkley's answer was brief and in keeping with the optimism of those faced with the construction of the new communications channel between the continents:

> More courage was exhibited in the determination of those who said "this shall be done -- we will do it" than is requisite in your engineer to accomplish the task. You will be successful. [42]

In fact the engineer had already turned his attention to accomplishing the task.

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[40] Western Union Telegraph Co., Secretary's Office, August, 1864, Ibid., p.64.

[41] Palmer to Bulkley, Dec. 16, 1864, Ibid., p.82.

[42] Bulkley to Palmer, May 2, 1865, Ibid., p.83.

CHAPTER II

THE COLLINS' OVERLAND PROJECT: WORK OF 1865

When Colonel Charles S. Bulkley arrived in San Francisco on January 14, 1865, he found the work of organizing the expedition already under way. Edmund Conway, the head of the project's American division, had visited Victoria and New Westminster in November, 1864, and arranged for the purchase of provisions. While in New Westminster he met Governor Seymour and Colonial Administrator Arthur Birch, establishing cordial relationships with the two officials.[1] When Conway arrived back in San Francisco in January to meet Bulkley and the other officers who had sailed with him from New York, the work of organizing the great enterprise began in earnest.

Both Bulkley and Conway were military men, serving with the Military Telegraph Corps in the Civil War. The organization that they set out to create reflected their background. Bulkley described his organization in a report to the Executive Committee of the company:

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[1] British Columbia, Archives, Microfilm 91A, Edmund Conway, Diaries, January, 1864 - December, 1865.

> My organization is military in its character, requiring officers and men both in the land and marine service to wear uniforms, without cost to the Company; and our system of accounts is similar to the Quartermaster's Department of the Army. With the local inhabitants and Indians I find such an organization desirable, and one which can be controlled much more satisfactorily than any other. 2

Bulkley organized his men into "working divisions" and an "Engineer Corps". These working divisions were subdivided into "parties of construction" and these again subdivided into four "working squads".[3] Each unit of the organization had its own foreman and operated under a clearly stated set of rules.

> Camp guard will be kept on duty at night and if necessary during the day, and will be responsible for property stolen from camp. Indians or others not engaged in work will not be permitted to loiter about the camps . . .
> Natives will be treated with the utmost kindness and consideration, and, as far as possible employed in the work. The most scrupulous system and exactness must be observed in paying them . . . .
> . . . all trading with the natives is expressly forbidden. Employees will take especial pains to gain and retain the goodwill of both the Hudson's Bay and Russian American Companies . . . .
> Spiritous and intoxicating liquors will not be allowed in camp, nor under any circumstances, furnished to the natives . . . .
> All work will be suspended upon Sunday.[4]

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[2]Bulkley to Executive Committee, July 25, 1865, Charles S. Bulkley: Papers Comprising Correspondence relative to Collins' Overland Telegraph Scheme, July, 1865, to June, 1867, p.45.

[3]General Rules and Organization . . . ., Statement . . . of Collins' Overland Line, p.77.

[4]Ibid., pp.78-79.

Bulkley had no trouble recruiting men for his telegraph "army". George Kennan, the Quartermaster of the Siberian division, recalled that:

> Adventurous Micawbers, who had long been waiting for something of this kind to turn up; broken-down miners, who hoped to retrieve their fortunes in new gold-fields yet to be discovered in the North; and returned soldiers thirsting for fresh excitement -- all hastened to offer their services as pioneers in the great work. 5

To facilitate the transportation of men and supplies Bulkley found it necessary to assemble a small flotilla of ships. Under the command of Captain Charles Scammon, the Chief of the Marine division, two steamships, the George S. Wright and the Nightingale, as well as a score of barks, schooners and river boats were put into service. The United States Navy put the steamer Saginaw at the disposal of the company while in Asian waters the Russian Government offered the services of the steam corvett Variag.[6]

For convenience the project was divided into three divisions: British Columbia, Russian America and Siberia. Command of the British Columbian division was given to Edmund Conway. Franklin L. Pope, an energetic and able young telegraphic engineer who was to later achieve considerable note as a partner of Thomas A. Edison, was

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[5]George Kennan. Tent Life in Siberia, New York, 1879, p.3.

assigned to work under Conway and to be specifically responsible for exploring the telegraph route through northern British Columbia. J.T. Rothrock, a medical student from Harvard, joined Pope as a naturalist in charge of reporting on the flora and fauna of the area.[7]

Robert Kennicott, a naturalist attached to the Smithsonian Institute, was put in charge of explorations in Russian America. Described by Rothrock as "thoroughly saturated with the spirit of exploration and capable of communicating his enthusiasm to those associated with him," Kennicott had already established a considerable reputation both as an explorer and as a naturalist.[8] He was intimately familiar with the North, as from 1859 to 1862 he had been engaged in exploration of the Mackenzie River basin, having travelled that river to its mouth.[9] Under Kennicott in Russian America were a group of outstanding scientists and explorers some of whom, like W.H. Dall, were to achieve considerable note in later years.

In Siberia exploration and construction was under the

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[7]British Columbia, Archives, J.T. Rothrock to E.O.S. Scholefield, January 11, 1913.

[8]Ibid.

[9]James Alton James. The First Scientific Exploration of Russian America and the Purchase of Alaska, Chicago, 1942, (Northwestern University Studies in the Social Sciences, #4). This useful volume contains the journals of Kennicott from 1859-1862 and the journal of H.M. Bannister, who was also connected with the Collins project, from March 1865 to January 1867.

charge of Serge Abasa, a Russian nobleman who had been living in the United States. Abasa, with his knowledge of the Russian language had connections with Russian officials, was to be one of Bulkley's most valuable officers. J.A. Mahood, Collins Macrae and George Kennan, who was to develop a lifelong interest in Russia, were appointed to work under Abasa.[10] Their primary responsibility was to be the exploration of a route from Nikolaevsk to the Bering Strait.[11]

Despite the tremendous efforts of Bulkley's group in San Francisco, the various expeditions did not arrive in the field as soon as had been hoped. The ships of the Marine division had to be refitted for work on the project and were not ready for service until late in June. It was early July before Abasa and his assistants were able to set out for Kamchatka aboard the brig Olga and Kennicott's group for Russian America aboard the George S. Wright and the Golden Gate. It was only in British Columbia, where Conway had been at work since February, that any appreciable progress had been made.

Serious difficulties had also arisen between the Western Union group and the Russian Government in the spring

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[10] Kennan in 1870 published an account of his travels in Asiatic Russia. In 1885 returned to Siberia to study the Russian system of penal colonies. The result of this study was Siberia and the Exile System, New York, 1891.

[11] Statement . . . of Collins' Overland Line, p.12.

of 1865. The most serious problem concerned the rebate that the Russians had promised to give Western Union on messages transmitted to and from the United States over the American-built sections of the line in eastern Siberia. This forty percent rebate, the company claimed, had "formed the leading inducement in the formation of the company and the subscriptions to and sale of shares."[12] The Russian officials decided, in 1865, that the whole system of Russian telegraphs had to be taken into account and administrative expenses of the government telegraphs paid before the net profits on American despatches could be allowed to the company. Collins and Sibley, objecting to this new method of accounting, submitted vigourous protests against this interpretation of the original charter. "Our ships were upon the sea, our capital invested, the enterprise happily on foot," Sibley wrote, "when we found the undertaking must be abandoned, or submit to the views of the Department of Imperial Telegraphs."[13] The Russians, however, remained firm. J. Tolstoy, the Director-in-Chief of Imperial Telegraphs, informed Sibley and Collins that if they did not agree to the Russian terms their rights under the original grant would be forfeited, their capital lost

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[12] Sibley and Collins to Gorchakov, March 9-21, 1865. Papers, Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Department of State, Washington, 1862-1865. (Reprinted, Microcard Editions Inc., Washington, 1966), p.449.

[13] Ibid.

and the construction of the line given over to another company.[14] In face of this determined Russian stand, taken in an attempt to avoid any additional strain on the depleted Imperial treasury, Collins and Sibley had no choice but to sign the convention offered them. Their acceptance was reluctant at best; they stated that they had acquiesed only "to save the company from great loss and the abandonment of the construction of the telegraph."[15]

An official protest was sent to Prince Gorchakov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, but with no success. The long and difficult negotiations in St. Petersburg, however, took their toll on Hiram Sibley. Shortly after he and Collins had reluctantly signed the Russian convention, he was forced to return to the United States and resign the presidency of Western Union, a victim of ill health. He was succeeded in the presidency by O.H. Palmer, the former secretary of the company. Thus the work of constructing the Collins' Overland Line in Russia began in 1865 with relations between the company and the Russian Government somewhat strained.

In British Columbia relations between the company and the government were more cordial. Governor Seymour, in a speech to the Legislative Council, described the telegraph project as "the only subject I can refer to with unmixed

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., p.376.

satisfaction."[16] He spoke of the great service the telegraph would provide to the colony by opening communications links with the isolated Cariboo and Kootenay regions. The telegraph would "double the effectiveness" of the colonial police force and would prove invaluable both to the merchants of New Westminster and the gold miners of the Interior.

Communications with the Interior was the single most important issue in British Columbia. Any project that offered more efficient and rapid communication with the areas from which the colony's wealth was drawn was assured the support of the colonists. The Collins' Overland scheme had the added attraction of not placing an additional burden on the colony's already strained financial condition. The construction of the telegraph line promised instead to inject much-needed cash into the economy. Provisions and supplies were to be purchased in the colony, wages would be paid to local workmen and the exploration and possible settlement of the relatively unknown northern areas of the colony would be stimulated. To aid the project the Colonial Legislature agreed to admit all telegraph materials free from the usual duties and toll charges. This was a small price to pay for the benefits that were likely to be received. The intense dislike of Victoria by most citizens of New Westminster also was satisfied by the project. New

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[16] British Columbian, January 14, 1865, p.3.

Westminster, it was hoped, would soon surpass Victoria in commercial importance. "New Westminster, traduced and dreaded by a jealous neighbour, will soon be the center of all these great systems . . . .," wrote the editor of the British Columbian.[17]

The work of surveying a route for the telegraph was well under way even before the lines of the California State Telegraph Company reached New Westminster on March 21. Edmund Conway had travelled on foot to Hope laying out a route for the telegraph lines. What he saw of the Fraser Valley did not encourage him. Swamps, heavy timber and nearly impenetrable undergrowth stood in the way.[18] The heavy snow and the ice which clogged the Fraser River made travel by boat nearly impossible and impressed on his mind the need for a road from New Westminster to Yale. The British Columbian, noting the isolation of New Westminster from the Interior with the river impassable, echoed this view.[19] Such a road would complete the wagon route to the Cariboo already extended as far south as Yale. The Colonial Government, also aware of the need for such a road, agreed to start construction as soon as possible. The government agreed to grant the company a right-of-way along

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[17] British Columbian, February 25, 1865, p.3.

[18] Edmund Conway. Diaries, April 6, 1865.

[19] British Columbian, March 11, 1865, p.3.

the route of the proposed New Westminster-Yale road.[20] Conway's problems were eased considerably by this decision. The greatest task -- that of clearing a right-of-way -- became the responsibility of the government. The company had only to erect poles and string wire.

Conway was not successful, however, in gaining another much-desired concession from the colonial authorities. The company, not satisfied that all telegraph materials were admitted free of duty, also sought the free admission of provisions, clothing and other non-telegraphic materials. Conway saw this as a reasonable demand as the colony would benefit greatly from the new roads opened along the telegraph line.[21] His arguments went unheeded, however, and no change was made in the original agreement. Such a concession, thought Seymour, would be a severe detriment to the colonial revenue and would quite possibly be abused.[22] The only materials that could be admitted free of duty were wire, insulators and telegraph equipment.[23] The merchants of New Westminster, who stood to make handsome profits from

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[20]British Columbia, Archives, Western Union Telegraph File, Moberly to Attorney-General, April 26, 1865.

[21]British Columbia, Archives, Edmund Conway. Letters, January 1865 - October 1867, Microfilm 91A.

[22]Conway to Bulkley, February 24, 1865, Conway. Letters . . . .

[23]British Columbia, Archives, Edmund Conway: Correspondence, Papers, etc., March 18, 1865 - April 20, 1866. Seymour to Conway, March 18, 1865.

the sale of provisions to the working parties, applauded Seymour's decision not to depart from the terms of the original agreement.

The task of erecting the new telegraph line began in earnest in late May, 1865. Conway had hoped that the road from New Westminster to Yale would be complete so that the Western Union men could begin work on that section of the line. The government construction party under Walter Moberly did not, however, progress as rapidly as had been anticipated. Construction of the line thus was forced to commence at Yale, working northward.

Pope and his party of thirty men had arrived at New Westminster on May 25 and had several days later set out to commence their explorations of northern B.C. It was hoped that they would be able to locate a suitable route through northern British Columbia and if possible travel as far north as Fort Yukon in Russian America. Pope's party was made up of Hudson's Bay Company employees, Canadian voyageurs and a number of Indian guides and packers. While this group sought a route to Russian America, Conway's men were to erect a line toward Quesnel, following wherever possible the already existing wagon road.

Western Union, whenever possible, tried to hire for its construction parties both Chinese and Indian labourers. This practice, dictated according to Bulkley by the "extravagent ideas of the value of labour" held by many

white colonists, caused considerable resentment.[24] The decline of the Cariboo goldfields had made the colonists aware of the scarcity of employment. Jobs on public works such as roads and telegraphs, it was felt, should be reserved for white colonists. The British Columbian, holding true to its consistent anti-Oriental editorial position, echoed these objections to the hiring of Chinese labourers. The Chinese, whose "only value would appear to consist of their adaptation to work tailings and consume rice," wrote the editor, should not be employed in the place of white colonists.[25] Despite this resentment, Western Union continued employing the native Indians or Chinese whenever possible. At an average wage of fifteen dollars per month the Chinese were attractive to an economy-minded company.

The progress of construction during the summer of 1865 was phenomonal. By the end of July Conway's men had over 400 miles of cut poles on the ground. Mid-August saw the completion of both the road and telegraph line to Hope; mid-September completion to a point about 20 miles beyond Quesnel.[26] The method of construction was described by one observer:

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[24]Bulkley to Executive Committee, July 25, 1865, Bulkley, Papers . . . ., p.45.

[25]British Columbian, May 6, 1865, p.2.

[26]Details of construction from E. Conway, Diaries . . . .

Figure 1. Collins' Overland Telegraph Line beside the Cariboo Road near Chapman Bar Bluff, 1866. (Courtesy Archives of B.C.)

Figure 2. The Telegraph Line at the Great Bluff on the Thompson River, 1866. (Courtesy Archives of B.C.)

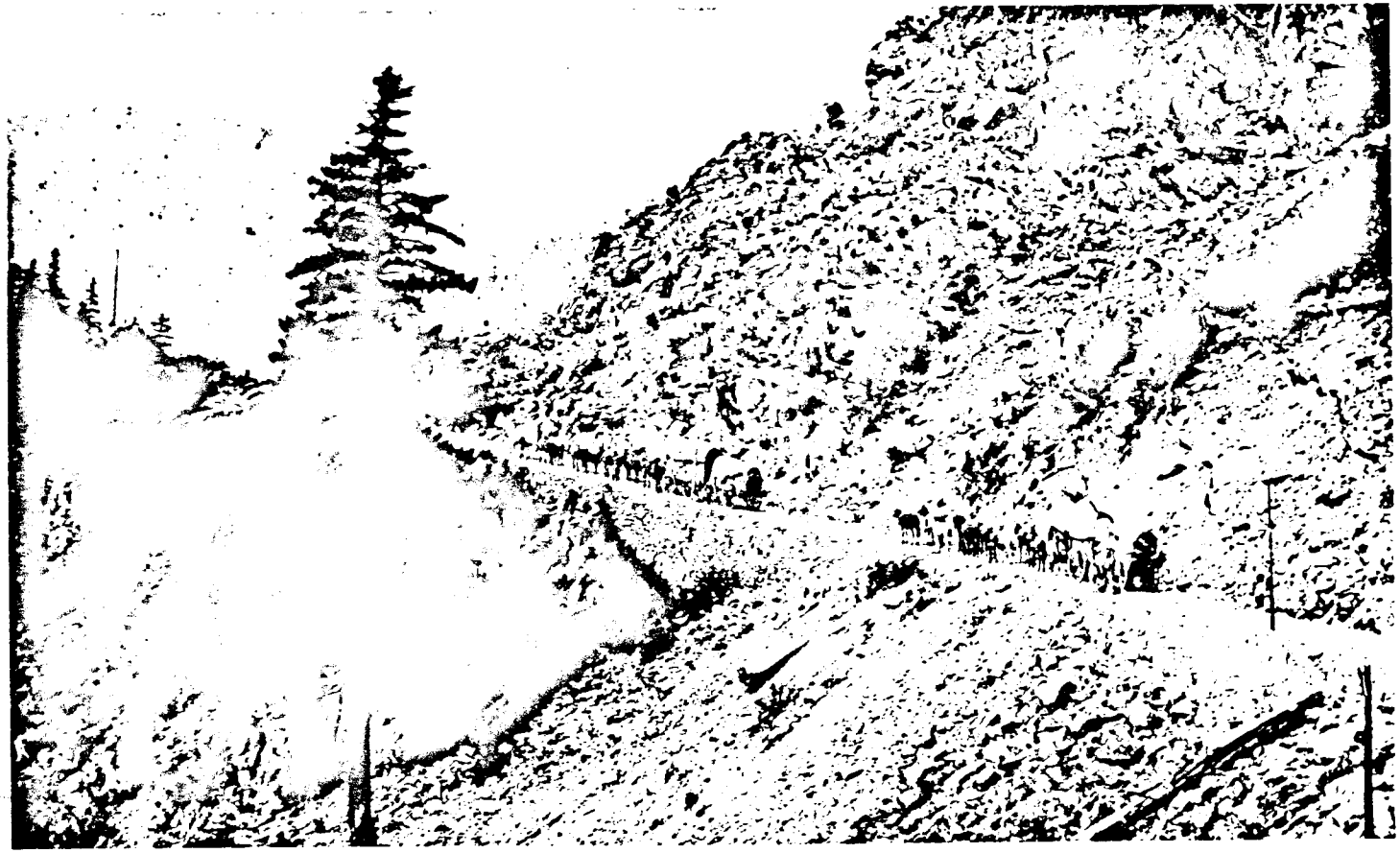

Figure 3. The Cariboo Road and the Collins' Overland Line at 19 mile post, 1866. (Courtesy Archives of B.C.)

> The plan of work was to have a surveyor go ahead with a rough sketch of the country. He had over 200 axemen who blazed the trail. Behind them came the choppers who cut down the trees within a width of 20 to 30 feet. Next came a man who paced the distances of about 70 yards and drove a stake at each one; then a party of Chinamen who dug the post holes; then axemen who cut poles for the wires; they, in turn, were followed by the pole setters, who nailed brackets and placed the insulators on these and set the poles upright in the holes. Lastly came the wiring party to string the wire. Stations were set up at regular intervals 27

The rapid progress of the construction parties in the south was not matched by successful explorations to the north. It had been hoped that Pope would be able to reach Fort Yukon, where he would be met by Kennicott's party working south from St. Michaels. At the same time Conway directed Captain Horace Coffin to explore the Skeena, Nass and Stikine Rivers in the steamboat Union, with a view to establishing supply routes to the Interior on these rivers.[28]

Pope's party moved much more slowly than had been anticipated. Leaving Quesnel on July 4 they travelled north to Fort St. James at the south end of Stuart Lake. A party of twenty-five proved too unwieldy so Pope reduced his group to fifteen at Fort St. James and continued north up Stuart and Takla Lakes, hoping to establish winter quarters at the northern extremity of Takla Lake. Heavy

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[27]Cited in Corday Mackay, "The Overland Telegraph". Canadian Geographical Journal, Vol.32, April 1946, p.176.

[28]Conway to Coffin, Bulkley, Papers . . . . , p.39.

frosts began early at that latitude so the party lost no time in erecting Bulkley House, their winter quarters, at the northern end of Takla Lake. From Bulkley House Pope's men succeeded in reaching a point on the Nass River nearly 150 miles to the north.[29] These explorations, while considerable, fell far short of Conway's expectations. There remained over 1,000 miles of unexplored territory between Fort Yukon and the point to which Pope had explored. Pope was himself dissatisfied with what his party had accomplished. With his bitterness thinly veiled he wrote to Bulkley in November:

> I do not hesitate to say that with five good men I could have accomplished more than with the twenty-five upon my hands the most of the season. 30

Conway, concerned at Pope's lack of progress and anxious to explore the country himself, set out from Quesnel on September 20 with a party of four men. He followed Pope's route to Bulkley House and then on to Fort Connally, where he attempted unsuccessfully to get an Indian guide to take him on to the Stikine River. Forced to halt because of his failure to obtain a guide, he returned by the same route to Quesnel, arriving on November 20. What he saw of Pope's route convinced him of its unsuitability and he was even more fully convinced of the

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[29] Ibid., Pope to Bulkley, November 7, 1865, p.37.

[30] Ibid., Pope to Bulkley, November 7, 1865, p.37.

failure of the summer's explorations.[31] Tired and disillusioned, he wrote to Bulkley on December 10, asking that he be allowed to resign. His inability to pay enough to hire competent men, the inadequacy of his own salary as well as the failure of Pope's explorations he indicated as the sources of his dissatisfaction. His own salary, he wrote, had proven inadequate because he had "spent a large part of it getting those Legislative grants through." One man, he continued, could not "explore, construct, organize and manage" a telegraph line.[32] A raise in salary offered by Bulkley, however, persuaded Conway to withdraw his resignation.[33] Although agreeing not to resign, Conway's view of British Columbia and its inhabitants remained dismal.

> . . . one encounters nothing but heavy timber, rum mills, broken miners, plug operators, English aristocrats, loafers and swindlers, all of which tends to drive a man crazy. Banishment in Siberia is a paradise in comparison to this place. 34

The explorations of the northern rivers by Captain Horace Coffin proved only partially successful. In September he had travelled 90 miles up the Skeena River in the steamship Union. From that point his party had journeyed

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[31] Ibid., Conway to Bulkley, December 30, 1865, p.24.

[32] Conway to Bulkley, December 10, 1865, Conway. Letters . . . .

[33] Ibid., Conway to Bulkley, May 1, 1866.

[34] Ibid., a "plug operator" is an amateur telegrapher.

another 125 miles up river to a point near the present town of Hazelton. There they had left supplies and provisions for the construction parties of the following year. After returning down river they next entered the Nass River, hoping to establish a similar supply cache. Coffin was able to navigate the Nass for only 40 miles in the Union before he was forced to use canoes to move another 40 miles up the river. At this point, far short of the point they had expected to reach, telegraphic stores and provisions were cached for use during the following summer.

The Stikine, the river that Coffin had most hoped to explore, was by November beginning to be gripped by winter and he was forced to return to New Westminster, his explorations only partially completed.[35] In proving the partial navigability of the Nass and Skeena Rivers he had, however, made a significant contribution to the knowledge of the area and provided some solution to the enormous problems of supply faced by the construction parties in northern British Columbia.

The progress of work in British Columbia, however disappointing to Conway, was far better than had been achieved in either Russian America or Siberia. Kennicott's men had arrived at St. Michaels, Russian America in September and were able to do little more than establish

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[35]Conway to Bulkley, December 30, 1865. Bulkley. Papers . . . . , pp.25-26.

their winter quarters before the season ended. Finding it impossible to work during the long northern winter, the men in Russian America had to content themselves with making plans for the next summer's operations.

Abasa's Siberian party had also arrived late in the season, but, not content to sit out the winter, they had begun to explore the territory from Bering Strait to Nikolaevsk. The success of their preliminary reconnaissance was phenomonal. During the winter of 1865-1866 they explored the entire Asiatic route, travelling on foot or occasionally mounted on reindeer. They floated in native skin canoes down all of the major rivers, befriending the natives and enlisting their support for the telegraph project. When spring came the Siberian division was ready to begin construction.[36]

Perhaps the most encouraging news that Western Union received during the summer of 1865 was that of the failure of the latest attempts to lay an Atlantic cable. The Overland project, however slowly progressing, still appeared to be the only feasible way to link the continents. The first year of construction ended, as it began, with a mood of optimism and confidence.

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[36]Kennan, Tent Life in Siberia, p.422.

CHAPTER III

THE COLLINS' OVERLAND PROJECT, 1866

The spring of 1866 found Edmund Conway in New Westminster preparing for the coming season's work. His problems were formidable. The organization and supply of such a vast project was a problem in logistics to challenge even experienced military men such as Conway and Bulkley. Conway's major problem in 1866 was the supplying of construction materials and provisions to the far-flung working parties in northern British Columbia. The hauling of materials up the Cariboo Road was both too time-consuming and expensive to be practical. He hoped to overcome this difficulty by using the Nass and Skeena Rivers, explored by Captain Coffin the previous summer, as supply routes to the Interior. The Stikine River, which Coffin had not been able to explore, was also seen as a possible supply route.

Conway's worries were compounded by the fact that no satisfactory route had yet been found north of Quesnel. The failure of Pope's explorations and his own inability to reach the Stikine River during the autumn of 1865 led him to accept personally direction of the northern explor-

ations during 1866. If he could successfully extend his surveys northward to link with the southward explorations of the Russian American parties, the entire route of the Overland line would be determined.

In San Francisco Bulkley busied himself with a thorough reorganization of the Marine division of the project. The supply problems of 1865 and the even greater problems faced in 1866 demanded this. Work had been delayed in Russian America and Siberia as well as in British Columbia by the late arrival of telegraphic materials and other needed supplies. The flotilla that Bulkley had organized in 1865 had proven inadequate for the supply of such a mammoth and far-flung project. To remedy this inadequacy the clipper-ship Nightingale was added to the company fleet, as were the barques H.L. Rutger and Onward. In addition to these a number of small sternwheel steamships were built, on Peget Sound, to order for the company.

The Nightingale was made the flagship of the company's fleet and the two barques were assigned the task of supplying the distant posts in Russian America and Siberia. The sternwheelers, Bulkley hoped, would prove suitable for use in the northern rivers supplying the Interior working parties.[1]

Conway's exploration parties in northern British

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[1]Bulkley to Executive Committee, March 1, 1867, Bulkley, Papers . . . ., pp.184-187.

Columbia, headed by Pope and Rothrock, had not enjoyed the relative comfort of New Westminster during the winter of 1865-1866. They had wintered at Bulkley House on Takla Lake, hoping to begin their explorations to the north even before winter loosened its grip on the country. Conway was determined to have his men find a route from the Skeena to the Stikine and beyond, through country that was still virtually unknown.

Rothrock began in January, 1866, by travelling westward from Bulkley House to the Skeena and descending the frozen river as far as Kitsalas. Pope, together with former Hudson's Bay Company employee, George Blenkinsop, and several natives, set out in late February with the aim of reaching the Stikine River. They succeeded in reaching and descending the river after a tortuous journey of over 500 miles. This seventy day journey, on which they were faced in turn with freezing, starvation and exhaustion, was one of the most memorable feats of the Western Union men. Returning to Bulkley House in late February from his explorations of the Skeena, Rothrock wasted no time in setting out on an extended exploration trip northward. His route is not altogether certain. As he was travelling through unexplored country and had only the crudest of surveying instruments, he could only guess where he had been. In a letter to the Provincial Archivist, over forty years later, he was of the opinion that he had reached a point on the headwaters of the Stikine about 70 miles south-

east of Dease Lake.[2]

Pope and his assistant, Rothrock, while not finding a definite route for the line through the difficult northern country, had added immeasurably to the knowledge of the area. Their work of the winter and spring made the work of subsequent exploration parties considerably lighter.

The season's work began in earnest when Conway left New Westminster in late April for Quesnel, where he met a small party of men who had been left at Quesnel during the winter building bateaux for the transportation of materials north from Quesnel. Anticipating the difficulty of hiring men at Quesnel, he took with him a party of coastal Indians to be employed as boatmen and packers. This move proved fortunate as the Big Bend gold excitement made it nearly impossible to hire men in the Interior. When he commenced work on May 14, about 18 miles north of Quesnel, he had a group of twenty-five white men whom he had lured with a bonus of ten day's pay.[3] This party was later augmented with twenty-five Chinese labourers. By June 1 Conway was able to report that he had one hundred and fifty men; eighty-six in construction camp, twenty-six packers with one hundred and sixty animals; thirty-eight white men and

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[2]British Columbia, Archives. J.T. Rothrock to E.O. S. Scholefield, January 11, 1913.

[3]Conway to Bulkley, February 19, 1867, Bulkley. Papers . . . ., p.159.

Indians transporting supplies in bateaux between Quesnel and Fort Fraser.[4]

Conway, still unhappy with the route surveyed by Pope the previous summer, set as his first task the finding of a better route to the Skeena from Fort Fraser. In May and June he had his men survey a more easterly route from Fort Fraser to a point on the Skeena near Hagwilget, a small Indian village. This new route proved satisfactory in every detail and the route selected by Pope via Bulkley House was abandoned.[5]

A satisfactory route chosen, construction of the line proceeded rapidly. By October 2, when construction was halted because of the approaching winter, the line was complete to a point on the Kispiox River about 25 miles north of its junction with the Skeena. Conway's report to Bulkley summarized the summer's work:

> We constructed the Telegraph Road, and line to latitude 55.42 N. and longitude 128.15 W. The distance from Quesnel, by the road, is computed at 440 miles, and by the wire 378 miles. There are fifteen stations built, a log house, with chimney, doors and windows, 25 miles apart. We built bridges over all small streams, that were not fordable, corduroyed swamps. All hillsides too steep for animals to travel over, were graded, from 3 to 5 feet wide. The average width of clearing the wood for the wire, is, in standing timber, 20 feet, and in fallen timber 12 feet.

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[4] Ibid.

[5] British Columbia, Archives. T. Elwyn, Letters, T. Elwyn to Acting Colonial Secretary, July 5, 1866.

> All underbrush and small timber is cleared to the ground, thus leaving the road fit for horses, travelling at the rate of, from 30 to 50 miles per day. Double wires are stretched across all large rivers. Number of poles put up 9,246. Boats are built for crossing the Bulkley and Westroad Rivers.[6]

The steamer Mumford, under Captain J.L. Butler, had succeeded in landing considerable quantities of telegraphic materials and provisions at both Fort Stager, where the construction was halted, and at Shakesville on the Stikine.[7] Enough materials were landed to allow the construction of a further 350 miles of telegraph line during the next working season.

Conway's reports showed considerable satisfaction with the work accomplished during 1866 and optimism for the future. He had repeated a suggestion first made in 1865 for securing the company's position in northern British Columbia. Western Union, he suggested, would be wise to begin trading with the Indians along the telegraph route. The Western Union men, he wrote "now know the country better than the Hudson's Bay Company, having seen all that they have seen and a great portion that they know nothing about."[8] By trading with the Indians, Conway reasoned, the company would both secure their cooperation

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[6]Conway to Bulkley, Bulkley, Papers . . . ., p.159.

[7]Ibid., Shakesville was located near the present community of Telegraph Creek.

[8]Ibid., Conway to Bulkley, December 30, 1865, p.34.

and add to the company's profit. This would meet with little opposition from the Colonial Government, he noted, as the Hudson't Bay Company was in official disfavour. Colonial Administrator Arthur Birch, concerned with Indian relations, added his support to Conway's argument, accusing the Hudson's Bay Company of refusing to support legislation for the humane protection of the Indians and failing to act to stop the sale of liquor.[9]

The success of construction on the British Columbian division of the Collins' Overland project was matched by similar, if less rapid, progress in both the Russian American and Siberian divisions. In Russian America, little progress was made during the summer and winter of 1865. The late arrival of the construction parties, the shortage of supplies and the difficult climate all contributed to this lack of progress. The explorations of the Yukon River and the territory between St. Michaels, where the telegraph party wintered, and Bering Strait were not accomplished by the spring of 1866. William Ennis, second-in-command to Robert Kennicott, wrote of the leader's difficulties during that first winter:

> From personal knowledge I state that everything that it was in the power of man to do, he did, to try and

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[9] British Columbia, Governor, Despatches from Governor Seymour and Administrator Birch to the Colonial Office, January 8, 1866 to December 31, 1867. P.A.C., G. Series, No.356, pt.2. Birch to Carnarvon, October 8, 1866.

> overcome the numerous obstacles that impeded his road. The trip to Fort Yukon, by the means of dogs and sleds was a long and arduous one. This, however, was a matter of little moment with him; it was the lack of Indians on the road to supply him with either provisions or dog feed, the bad roads, soft snow, poor dogs, and in fact everything that could be conjured up, conspired to blast his every plan. 10

Kennicott did not live to carry out his plans for 1866. He died, apparently of a heart attack, on May 13 at Nulato on the Yukon River, while working on a map. The death of Kennicott further delayed the explorations of the Western Union party. William Ennis, who assumed command after Kennicott's unexpected death, was convinced that the failure of the winter's explorations contributed to Kennicott's death. "The failure to proceed to Fort Yukon in winter," he wrote, "prayed so much upon the mind of the late Commander, that I am certain it in some measure hastened his untimely death."[11]

Kennicott's ability as a leader was praised by Henry Bannister, another of Kennicott's lieutenants.

> Kennicott was, I think, the only man who could have led this party through the country without more difficulty with the natives . . . success is owing mainly to his policy followed out by his successor. There was no other man in the whole country who had anything of his influence amongst the Indians and Eskimo. 12

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[10] Ibid., Ennis to Bulkley, June 30, 1866, p.55.

[11] Ibid., p.55.

[12] Journal of H.M. Bannister, March 1865 to January 1867, p.270, Bannister's journal (continued on p.67)

Figure 4. Stringing wire between Quesnel and Fort Stager, 1866. From an original water colour by J.C. White, an artist attached to the construction party in British Columbia. (Courtesy, Archives of B.C.)

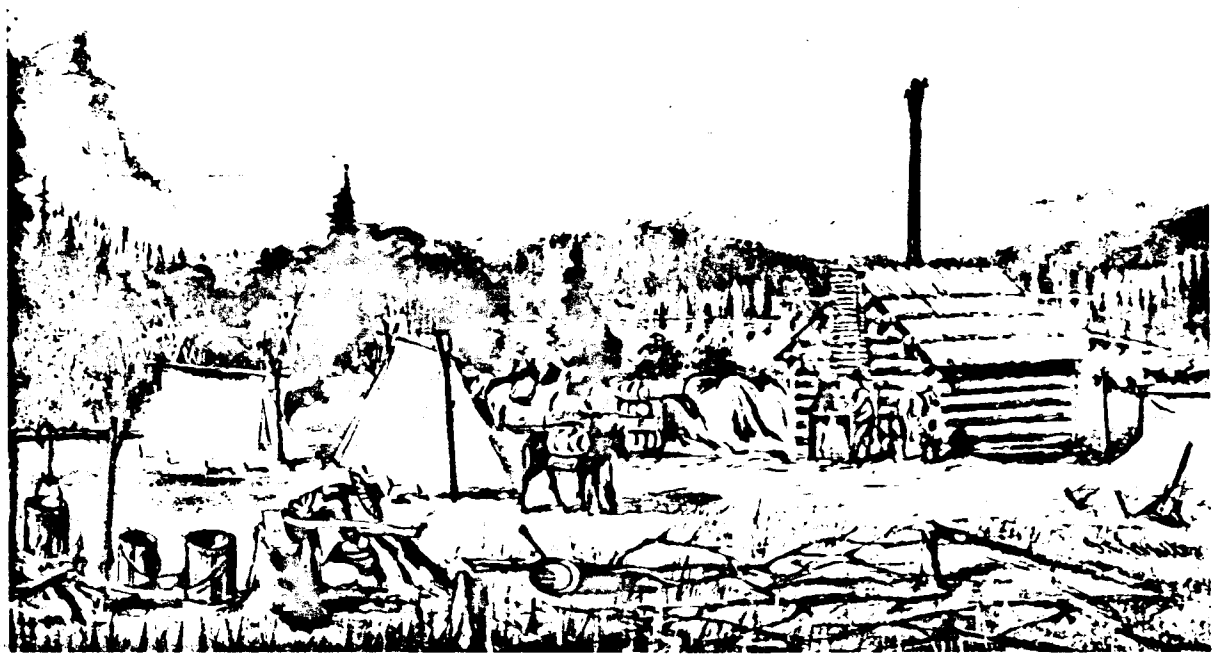

Figure 5. A station house in the Bulkley Valley, 1866. From a J.C. White water colour. (Courtesy, Archives of B.C.)

Figure 6. A pack train on the Telegraph Trail south of Fort Fraser, 1366. From a J.C. White water colour. (Courtesy, Archives of B.C.)

Kennicott, while respected for his ability to deal with the Indians and as an explorer, was not well liked by his men. P.M. Smith made this assessment of his Commander shortly before Kennicott's death:

> I don't know what to make of this man. I begin to think he is crazy. He has succeeded in making himself generally disagreeable and has disgusted us all to such an extent that hardly one will remain in the country another year, at least to be in any way connected with him. 13

George R. Adams, another member of Kennicott's exploration party, gave a more sympathetic assessment. He noted that Kennicott appeared dejected because of the failure of the winter's explorations and that this depression had seemed to prevent him from taking decisive action to get the work of 1866 under way.[14]

The death of Kennicott was not the only frustrating difficulty faced by the Russian American party. Inadequate provisions and materials, poor weather and the failure of the steamship that they hoped to use on the Yukon River all contributed to their frustration. The

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[12](continued from p.63) printed in James, Alton James, The First Scientific Exploration of Russian America and the Purchase of Alaska, Northwestern University, 1942.

[13]British Columbia, Archives, Diaries of Western Union Telegraph Company's Alaska Survey, (Typescript copy prepared by Charles Hubell in 1940), Diary of P.M. Smith, August 26, 1865 to March 22, 1867.

[14]British Columbia, Archives, Diaries of Western Union Telegraph Company's Alaska Survey, Diary of George R. Adams, April 28, 1866 - June 11, 1866.

loss of the steamship Lizzie Horner was an especially disappointing setback. They had hoped that the steamer would enable them to transport materials up the Yukon River at least as far as Fort Yukon. The vessel was plagued with trouble from the beginning. She had been brought around Cape Horn from New York on the deck of another Western Union vessel. Attempts to start her engines at St. Michaels, on Norton Sound, met with repeated failures because of the incompetance of the engineer assigned to her. The final blow came when she broke loose from her moorings and ran upon the rocks. Attempts to use the Lizzie Horner on the Yukon River were thus given up and she spent the remainder of 1866 on the beach at St. Michaels.[15]

Despite the setbacks suffered by the Russian American division during 1866, by the autumn of that year the entire route was surveyed and found suitable. Rather than suspend work for the winter season, as had been done the previous winter, it was decided to begin construction and to continue work through the difficult Arctic winter.

The Western Union men, most of them unaccustomed to the severe northern winters, found working in these conditions a unique experience. Post holes, which normally

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[15]Ennis to Bulkley, June 30, 1866, Bulkley, Papers . . . ., p.55 and Diary of P.M. Smith, August 26, 1865 to March 22, 1867, June 19, 1866.

could have been dug in a few minutes, took hours to complete. The construction parties were forced to light fires to thaw out the ground before they could begin to dig in the frozen earth. P.M. Smith commented on the difficult conditions in his Diary: "It was fifty-eight below zero . . . This was the fifth time my nose has been frozen today. I also froze my finger, cheek and toes. I begin to think it is getting cold."[16]

Winter in Russian America brought with it formidable difficulties in transporting provisions and building materials. The construction parties, isolated, uncomfortable and in some cases hungry, grumbled continuously about the poor conditions. George Adams voiced this dissatisfaction in his personal Diary:

> No body of men could have more reason to upbraid a company than we have. Left in a country like this where a person requires twice as much food as in any other, with hardly half Army rations is very rough to say the least. 17

Adams went on to blame the "brass-mounted officers" of the expedition for these shortages. He accused them of "lining their pockets" with commissions from dealers and of having little concern for the welfare of the men

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[16] Diary of P.M. Smith, August 26, 1865 to March 22, 1867, January 27, 1867.

[17] Diary of George R. Adams, October 1, 1866 to October 8, 1867, January 12, 1867.

in the field."[18] Adams was attempting to blame Bulkley's officers, when in fact he should have blamed geography and the hostile climate for his discomfort. The working conditions during the winter of 1866-1867 were perhaps best summarized by Adams' comment that, "Building a telegraph line with only dogs and sleds for transportation in the frigid zone is not as much fun as it is cracked up to be."[19]

By the spring of 1867 the work in Russian America was showing results. Over 45 miles of line were completed, stations were built and thousands of poles were cut and distributed along the route. William Ennis, the Division Commander, was confident that the line could be completed within a year and the cable across Bering Strait laid during the summer of 1867.[20] Bulkley, in his report to the directors of Western Union, was able to state that: "the greatest obstacles have been already surmounted and with the experience and knowledge gained the result must be satisfactory."[21]

In the Siberian division the task of exploring the route was accomplished during the winter of 1865-1866.

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., February 4, 1867.

[20] Ennis to Bulkley, August 15, 1867, Bulkley, Papers . . . ., p.206.

[21] Bulkley to Executive Committee, March 1, 1867, Bulkley, Papers . . . ., p.195.

After the spring of 1866, the problems faced were those of supply and organization rather than of great individual effort.[22] As in British Columbia, the major problem was to efficiently distribute men and materials over an immense and isolated route. Despite the reorganization of the Marine Service carried out by Bulkley, Serge Abasa, in command of the Siberian division, found his major problem to be the late arrival of building materials. Abasa assigned his lieutenants to specific sections of the line. Mahood was given responsibility for the Nikolaevsk to Okhotsk area; Kennan for the Okhotsk to Gizhiga section; and Bush and Macrae for the Okhotsk to Anadyr line. In each of these three sections the spring and early summer was spent in hiring native workmen, cutting poles, clearing trails and erecting stations.

When the first supply ship, the Russian corvette Variag, arrived at Gizhiga in early August Abasa was able to begin the work of distributing telegraphic materials along the far-flung route. Construction continued through the summer, autumn and winter of 1866, with results comparable only to the rapid progress made in British Columbia. By the spring of 1866 over eight hundred natives and seventy-five Americans were at work. The entire route was surveyed and most of it cleared;

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[22]Vilhjamlmur Stefansson, Northwest to Fortune, New York, 1958, p.265.

between forty and fifty station houses were built along the route. George Kennan was confident that by autumn over one thousand men would be at work and that the entire line would be completed during 1868 at a cost not exceeding two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.[23]

The parties working in Russian America, Siberia and British Columbia made good progress during 1866. They were, however, working in ignorance of the momentous events and decisions being made in Rochester, New York during the summer of that year.

The first event that was to have a profound influence on the fate of the Collins' Overland project was the absorption of the American Telegraph Company by Western Union, in June, 1866. Early in 1866 the President of Western Union is reported to have said to Cyrus Field, the President of the Atlantic cable project: "I would give $50,000 to know if you are ever going to succeed. I hope you will; but I would like to know for certain before we spend any more in Russia."[24] By absorbing the American Telegraph System, Western Union reduced the risk of loss should the Atlantic cable ever be successfully

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[23]George Kennan. Tent Life in Siberia, New York and London, 1879, p.422.

[24]Quoted in, Jane M. Parker, "The Russian or Collins' Telegraph: A defeated Success", Overland Monthly, Vol.XII, (July, 1886), p.17.

laid. The American Telegraph System included all of the lines to which an Atlantic cable would have to be connected, and thus provided for Western Union a means of securing additional revenue should the cable ever prove a success and the Collins' Overland have to be abandoned. While this move was indicative of the sound business accumen of the Western Union directors, it would not have inspired confidence in the minds of those engaged in building the Collins' Overland line.

The greatest blow to Western Union's hopes for the Collins' Overland line came on July 27, 1866 when the steamship Great Eastern carried Cyrus Field's Atlantic cable into the harbour of Heart's Content, Newfoundland. On the following day Field sent the first trans-Atlantic message to England, demonstrating the success of the new cable. Several weeks later the cable which had been lost the previous year was located and recovered, providing a second trans-Atlantic cable.[25] When, in mid-August the cable went into commercial operation, a deepening gloom descended on the headquarters of Western Union in Rochester, New York. The immediate profit shown by the Atlantic cable was matched, to the relief of Western Union, by a similar increase in revenues from the former American Telegraph System.

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[25]James D. Reid, The Telegraph in America and Morse Memorial, New York, 1886, p.403.

Work continued, however, on the construction of the Collins' Overland line. In British Columbia, where the construction parties were informed of the success of the cable, work continued until the end of the season. Exploration parties continued working throughout the winter and plans for the start of work in 1867 were made.[26] In Russian America and Siberia, where the working parties were not aware of the success of the cable, construction continued throughout the winter of 1866-1867.

The directors of Western Union, while impressed with the laying of the Atlantic cable, were unconvinced that the cable would succeed. Scientific and technical opinion had long been that such a cable would prove inoperable and the Western Union men, relying on such advice, decided to wait and see. It was also possible, some thought, that the great volume of messages from Europe to North America would be sufficient to support two intercontinental telegraph links.

Some actions of the Western Union directors did, however, hint at the possible abandonment of the Collins' Overland project. In September a resolution of the board of directors, stating that Extension stock could be

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[26]Some sources, eg. R.L. Thompson, Wiring a Continent: A History of the Telegraph Industry in the U.S. (Princeton 1947), assume that work was suspended upon receipt of the news that the Atlantic cable had been laid. Conway to Bulkley, February 19, 1867, Bulkley, Papers . . . . ., p.161, would appear to clearly refute this assertion.

exchanged for Western Union bonds at any time up to February 1, 1867, was revealed to the stockholders.[27] This proposition was accepted by almost all holders of shares in the Extension Company and by February 1 bonds to the value of $3,170,292 had been issued.[28] Throughout the winter of 1866-1867 the public were assured, despite Western Union's actions, that the Collins' Overland had not been abandoned and that its success was assured.[29] The directors of Western Union, who were the principal holders of the Extension stock, thus avoided the possibility of a personal loss and required the shareholders of Western Union to absorb any loss from an abandonment of the Collins' Overland project.[30] When on March 9, 1867 the decision to abandon the project was made public, the questionable conduct of the Western Union directors was noted by several newspapers. The editor of the Telegrapher, a New York journal, wrote:

> We would like to enquire if there was any warrant for the issuance of these bonds, whereby the stockholders of the Western Union are compelled against their will to accept the gigantic expense of the

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[27] Thompson. Wiring a Continent, p.435.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Morse to E.S. Sanford, January 4, 1867, in E.L. Morse (ed.), S.F.B. Morse: His Letters and Journals, Vol.II, Boston, 1914, p.445.

> huge failure? Mr. Collins made money, and the directors of the enterprise have saved themselves a great loss, but what do the stockholders of the Western Union have to gain? 31

The Boston Traveller made similar comments:

> The impression is very general that the affairs of the company are managed soley with a view to the interests of a few large stockholders who are represented in the Direction, and that although the net earnings, as shown by the balance sheet are large, the smaller stockholders are not likely to realize much from them. 32

The conduct of the board of directors marred an otherwise sound decision to abandon the Collins' Overland project. The reasons for the company's decision were best outlined in a letter to Secretary of State Seward, an enthusiastic supporter of the scheme. The company's expectations, Seward was told, had "in every single instance proved illusory."[33] It was obvious to the company that the volume of telegraphic communications would not be sufficient to support both the Atlantic cable and the Overland Telegraph. The Atlantic cable was able to transmit in four to six hours each day all the business that the public offered. The cable, beyond all doubt,

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[31]Cited in Thompson, Wiring a Continent, p.436.

[32]Cited in Thompson, Ibid., p.436.

[33]Western Union Telegraph Company to Seward, March 25, 1867, Papers, Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Vol.VII, Department of State, Washington, 1868, p.387.

was capable of operating efficiently. The old arguments that the cable would soon fall mute were no longer valid. Telegraphic concessions that the company had expected to receive in eastern China, Seward was told, had been withdrawn. This dashed hopes of stimulating Sino-American trade and of creating a vast Asian telegraphic network controlled by Western Union. The expectation of profit had been removed and Western Union saw the stopping of the whole project "as a stern, peremptory necessity."[34]

Seward, who had been a keenly interested observer of the project, recognized the necessity of this decision to abandon work. He had, in 1864, thought that both the Collins' line and the Atlantic cable could operate simultaneously. This, it was demonstrated to him, was not in fact feasible. His primary interest was in the creation of an effective intercontinental communications link. The Atlantic cable provided this link. Seward, despite his support for the enterprise of Collins and Western Union, was forced to recognize economic reality.[35]

The only alternative that the company could suggest was that the Russian Government undertake to extend their lines to Russian America. If the Russians would do this, Western Union would complete its lines to Russian America from British Columbia. The Russians, by this time

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

anxious to end their presence in Russian America, showed little or no enthusiasm for this proposition. The magnificent dream of Perry McDonough Collins had come to nothing.

The men at work in Siberia and Russian America were totally unaware of the decision to cease work. In British Columbia, where communications were considerably better, work was never resumed in 1867. The telegraph line ended in the wilderness at Fort Stager, near Kispiox.

The order to cease work was not received by the Siberian party until July 15, when the company ship Onward arrived with the news. The diary of Richard Rush revealed the feelings of the men in that division upon receipt of the news:

> The announcements, instead of causing that joy one would expect from a band of men who had been exiled from the world and civilization for one and two years, and who had been undergoing privations and sufferings in a cause which affected them so indirectly, was received without a word of approbation . . . To construct a telegraph for upward of 7,000 miles through a wild and hitherto unexplored territory, among savage tribes . . . was an enterprise at which we all felt a pride in being engaged. 36

Serge Abasa and his men displayed their American entrepreneurial skill in disposing of the telegraphic materials left with them. Glass insulators were sold to the natives as colourful American teacups; tools were

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[36]Cited in Stefansson, Northwest to Fortune, p.281.

auctioned off to the unwitting natives, who were assured that they would be useful for burying the dead. In a superb marketing campaign they sold items "that were of no more use to the poor natives than ice-boats and mouse-traps would be to the Quaregs of the Saharan Dessert."[37] Eventually the market for insulators, wire and tools was saturated and the Siberian parties left for home, leaving behind thousands of natives awkwardly drinking their tea from green glass insulators.

In Russian America the news that work had been abandoned was received in late July. Frederick Whymper, who was engaged as an artist with the Russian American division, recalled that the men's reaction was to "hang black cloth on the telegraph poles, and put them into mourning."[38] The Collins' Overland Telegraph project was dead.

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[37] Kennan, Tent Life in Siberia, p.429.

[38] Frederick Whymper, Travel and Adventure in Alaska, New York, 1868, p.241.

CHAPTER IV

A SUCCESSFUL FAILURE

The success of Cyrus Field's Atlantic cable, a project as imaginative and ambitious as that of Perry McD. Collins, dictated the ultimate failure of the Overland Telegraph. Field's cable rendered Collins' Bering Strait route obsolete even before the Overland line went into operation. The Collins' Overland line, however, even in failure provided important secondary benefits to both British Columbia and Alaska. These benefits remained apparent long after the cease-work orders of 1867.

British Columbia, left with a depressed economy after the decline of the gold rush excitement, benefited materially from the Collins' Overland project. The British Columbian, somewhat over-optimistically, had predicted that the new communications link with San Francisco would make New Westminster "the capital of an important colony, and the great center of commerce on the British Pacific".[1] At the same time the newspaper, caught up in the metropolitan rivalry existing between

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[1] British Columbian, New Westminster, February 25, 1865, p.3.

New Westminster and Victoria, noted with considerable satisfaction that "it is not in contemplation to establish a branch line to Victoria".[2] The editor of the British Columbian proved a poor prophet. New Westminster, despite the new link with San Francisco, did not develop into "the great center of commerce on the British Pacific". To the delight of Victorians and the chagrin of New Westminster, Western Union also "wired the tail of the British Lion to the left wing of the American Eagle" by completing a line to Victoria in April, 1866.[3]

British Columbia, despite the unfulfilled hopes of the British Columbian, owed the Collins' Overland project a great deal. During 1865 and 1866 the construction of the line proved a stimulant to the depressed economy of the impoverished colony.[4] The influx of men, the employment offered to colonists and the three million dollars spent by Western Union provided welcome, if temporary, relief.[5] Communications between New Westminster and Victoria and the Interior of the colony, which prior to the construction of the Collins' line had

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Victoria Daily Chronicle, April 25, 1866.

[4] British Columbia Mines Department, Annual Report of the Minister for the Year ending December 31, 1905. Notes of R.B. McMecking, Western Union Agent at Quesnel, p.91.

[5] Ibid.

been difficult and slow, were vastly improved. Governor Seymour's address to the Legislative Council in January, 1865, in which he referred to the telegraph project as the only subject he could refer to "with unmixed satisfaction", pointed out the importance of these new communications links.[6] The line to the Interior, Seymour claimed, would double the effectiveness of the colonial police force as well as provide valuable benefits for both the goldminers of the Interior and the merchants of New Westminster.[7] An editorial of the British Columbian supported the Governor's view of the new line. Communications with the Interior were seen by the newspaper as being as important to the colony as the link with the "outside" world.[8] The contribution of the Collins' line to the internal communications of British Columbia was vital. The line facilitated the rapid and inexpensive transmission of both governmental and commercial messages, enabling administration, law enforcement and commerce to function more effectively.

The work of the Western Union exploration parties in northern British Columbia was also of material benefit to the colony. Thomas Elwyn, a former colonial magistrate assigned to Edmund Conway's exploration

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[6] British Columbian, January 14, 1865.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., February 25, 1865.

parties to deal with Indian relations, noted in his reports to Arthur Birch the potentially valuable mineral resources of the Hazelton area.[9] Elwyn was confident that "a half dozen of the old Cariboo pioneers would, after a few weeks prospecting, give to the colony a new mining district."[10] He was not the only person to note the mining potential of the area. Some of the men working with the Western Union construction party, notably a French-Canadian named Vital LaForce, heard of the encouraging reports and started prospecting when the telegraph parties disbanded in the autumn of 1866. LaForce, an experienced prospector, soon succeeded in finding gold on the creek which now bears his name and a minor gold rush ensued.[11] In 1867 still more placer gold was discovered around Dease Lake in the northern Cassiar district, again as a result of the surveys carried out by the Western Union exploration parties.[12]

As well as providing a stimulant for mining

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[9] British Columbia, Governor, Despatches from Governor Seymour and Administrator Birch to the Colonial Office, January 8, 1866 to December 31, 1867, P.A.C., G Series, No.356, pt.2, Birch to Carnarvon, Oct. 26, 1866.

[10] British Columbia, Archives, Thomas Elwyn Correspondence, 1863-1866, File No.526. Elwyn to Acting Colonial Secretary, July 5, 1866.

[11] Rev. A.G. Morice, History of the Northern Interior of British Columbia, Toronto, 1904, p.314.

[12] B.C., Mines Department, Annual Report . . . . 1905, p.92.

development in northern British Columbia, the Western Union parties were responsible for the introduction of steam vessels to the Nass, Skeena and Stikine rivers. Prior to the exploration of these rivers by Captain Horace Coffin of the Marine division, they were largely unknown and not considered to be navigable by steam vessels. With the discovery that all three were navigable for a considerable distance inland, these new routes began to end the isolation of the northern Interior of the colony. During the Omineca gold rush of 1870-71 steam vessels were able to carry gold-seekers up the Skeena to Hazelton, near the site of the diggings.

The Collins' Overland line, as well as stimulating mining and facilitating internat communications, wrought some important changes in the colony's principal media for public information, the newspapers. The British Columbian described this change as the beginning of "an important epoch in the history of the colony," which the newspaper noted was brought by a telegraph line "which cost us nothing."[13] The colony's two principal newspapers, the Victoria Daily Chronicle and the British Columbian, began after the completion of the line to print "by telegraph" news columns in each issue. British Columbian readers no longer had to rely upon the vagaries of the steamship lines and mails to bring

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[13] British Columbian, April 22, 1865.

them the news of the "outside" world. American news agencies, which found the problems of Reconstruction in the United States more important than the discussions leading to Confederation in Canada, distributed news to British Columbians. What effect this exposure to, and thus involvement in, the world outside British Columbia had upon the colonists is largely a matter for conjecture. After the completion of the Atlantic cable, however, British Columbia was irrevocably "enfolded within the magnetic embrace"[14] of the telegraph networks of three continents.

The Collins' Overland project made a lesser, but still significant, contribution to the development of Alaska. This contribution took two principal forms: the first in the great addition to Americans' knowledge of the new territory; the second in helping to facilitate the purchase by the United States.

Two men, Robert Kennicott and William Healy Dall, were largely responsible for the successes of Western Union's scientific explorations in Alaska. Kennicott, before his premature death in 1866, prepared the ground for his successor, Dall. From 1866 to 1868 Dall and his assistants remained in Alaska, surveying every aspect of the area's natural history.

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[14] British Columbian, January 25, 1865.

Much of the territory covered by the Western Union parties had already been travelled by Russian or British traders.[15] The telegraph parties, however, were the first to map many areas and to examine scientifically the flora and fauna of the territory. The Yukon River, for example, was mapped and found navigable by the Western Union parties.[16] Another major contribution made by the telegraph parties was the first mapping and exploration of the Rocky Mountains in Alaska.

In the fields of Zoology and Botany the contributions of Dall were impressive. Hundreds of species of birds, mammals and plants were identified, collected and described in his book, Alaska and Its Resources.[17] This body of knowledge provided the first scientific examination of the flora and fauna of the territory. In geology, Dall's achievements were equally impressive. He made the first geological maps of the Yukon Valley, noting particularly the absence of glaciation in much of Alaska and the gradual decline of volcanic activity.[18] Dall's work in geology provided the first knowledge of

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[15] M.B. Sherwood. The Exploration of Alaska, 1865-1900, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1965, p.33.

[16] Bulkley, C.S. Papers: Comprising Correspondence relative to Collins' Overland Scheme, July 1865 - June 1867, J.T. Dyer to F. Ketchum, July 7, 1867, p.228.

[17] Boston, 1870.

[18] Sherwood, Exploration . . . ., p.34.

the mineral resources of the area as well. He examined coal deposits along the Yukon River and reported finding traces of gold in the same area. While these minerals had been noticed by both Russian and English parties prior to this, Dall carried out the first scientific survey of their extent.

The work of the Collins' Overland parties in Alaska provided a mass of information of all varieties on Alaska. It was this body of acquired knowledge which enabled the Collins' Overland project to make its indirect contribution to the purchase of Alaska.[19]

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[19]The role of the Collins' project in the purchase of Alaska has been the subject of some controversy. Several authors have concluded that the work of Western Union was largely responsible for the purchase. W.H. Depperman's "Two Cents an Acre", North American Review, Vol.245, July 1938, pp.126-133; George P. Oslin's Westward to Europe, Western Union Co. (circa. 1930); Jane Marsh Parker's, Russian or Collins' Telegraph: A Defeated Success, Overland Monthly Magazine, Vol.12, July 1886, pp.14-21; and J.A. James' (ed.), The First Scientific Exploration of Russian America and the Purchase of Alaska, Northwestern University, 1942, all echoed this view. Other writers, notably F.A. Golder in his "The Purchase of Alaska", American Historical Review, Vol.XXV, 1920, pp.411-425, ignored the work of the Collins' project. More recent research has tended to downplay the role of the Collins' project, while at the same time recognizing its significance. The best examples are S.R. Tompkins', Alaska: Promyshlennik and Sourdough, Norman, Oklahoma, 1952, and Morgan B. Sherwood's, "George Davidson and the Purchase of Alaska", Pacific Historical Review, Vol.28, 1959, pp.141-154, and The Exploration of Alaska, 1865-1900, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1965. The controversy is probably not ended as George P. Oslin, in a forthcoming book, intends to re-emphasize the contribution of the Collins' project to the Purchase. (G.P. Oslin to S.A. Robb, September 23, 1967.)

The principal contribution of the Collins' Overland project to the Purchase was in the information it made available to William Seward and Charles Sumner. The latter, as Chairman of the powerful Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, was instrumental in obtaining Senate ratification for the Purchase Treaty. It was his magnificent three hour speech in the Senate, based on information obtained from the Western Union parties, which proved the turning point in the ratification debate.[20] Information provided by Collins to Secretary of State Seward also was of considerable use at this time. Collins wrote to Seward shortly after the announcement of the Treaty,

> The fisheries along the coast and islands will build up a population and commerce there which at no distant day, will rival Newfoundland and the coast of the Atlantic east of Cape Cod . . . . The fisheries alone are worth more than the whole cost of the country. 21

Collins also praised the timber resources of coastal Alaska and mentioned that traces of gold had been found on the Yukon River. Seward, eager to point out the value of the new territory, arranged for the publication

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[20]Charles Sumner, The Works of Charles Sumner, Volume IX, Boston, 1875-1883, p.186.

[21]Perry McD. Collins, Purchase of the Russian Possessions in North America by the United States. Papers relating to the value and resources of the country, Washington, 1867.

of a series of documents supplied by Collins and based largely on the experience of the Western Union telegraph parties.

Henry Bannister, one of Dall's lieutenants in Alaska, was in Washington at the time of the Senate debate. He testified before the Foreign Relations Committee, pointing out the value of the newly acquired territory. Convinced that his testimony was vital, he later wrote,

> The annexation was ridiculed at that time but we could testify that the country was worth the price asked. Time has sufficiently proved that we were right and I can safely say that we did not overstate anything. The project of the Western Union Telegraph Company of an overland telegraph across Behring Straits to Europe was a failure, but its greatest result was the annexation of Alaska. 22

Bannister considerably overstated the role of the Western Union project. The information provided by the company's men did help to facilitate the passage of the treaty through the Senate, but could in no way be seen as responsible for the purchase. To understand the motives of the Russian and American governments, a problem beyond the scope of this study, the growing Russian desire to rid herself of the area, Russo-American relations during the Civil War, and the intense concept of manifest destiny held by Secretary of State Seward would

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[22]Journal of Henry Bannister, in James, First Scientific Explorations . . . ., p.45.

have to be examined in considerable depth. To explain the passage of the appropriation bill in the House one could more profitably examine the role of the Davidson Expedition to Alaska and the purported bribery employed to gain the support of several powerful Congressmen.[23] It is only with reference to the Senate ratification debates that the Collins' project can be seen to have an influence, albeit indirect, on the purchase of Alaska.

The Collins' Overland Telegraph project, originally conceived as a means of linking North America and Europe with telegraphic communications, thus provided incidental but significant benefits to both British Columbia and Alaska. The original purpose of the scheme proved a failure but the incidental benefits wrought by the scheme added a measure of success to this failure.

The work of the Collins' project continued to bring benefits to British Columbia for more than a decade after the abandonment of the scheme to link the continents. The line, which continued to operate as far as Quesnel after the cease-work orders of 1867, was in 1869 extended to Barkerville.[24] When in 1871 British Columbia was

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[23]These two subjects have been well researched by M.B. Sherwood in his "George Davidson and the Acquisition of Alaska", Pacific Historical Review, Volume 28, 1959, pp.141-154 and W.A. Dunning's "Paying for Alaska: Some Unfamiliar Incidents in the Process", Political Science Quarterly, Volume 28, 1912, pp.385-398.

[24]British Columbia, Archives, Western Union Telegraph File, To Buie to Colonial Secretary, April 16, 1869.

preparing to enter Confederation, the government of the colony secured a lease on all the Western Union lines within the colony. This lease was transferred to the Dominion Government when British Columbia became a province later in 1871. The Collins' lines continued to form the basis of the colony's telegraphic network, as over the next ten years lines were extended to reach nearly every significant center of population in the province. Western Union's presence in British Columbia lasted until February, 1880, when the Dominion Government acquired all of the company's rights for a low purchase price of twenty-four thousand dollars. The purchase price proved a considerable bargain as the revenues from the telegraph network consistently exceeded thirty thousand dollars per year.[25] The first telegraphic communications between British Columbia and the eastern provinces via Canadian territory was constructed in 1885 with the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway to British Columbia. The twenty year old reliance of British Columbia on the United States' telegraphic system was thus ended.

The Collins' lines continued to serve British Columbia until 1936. In that year the Yukon Telegraph, which had been built from the original Collins' line, was abandoned. The age of wireless telegraphy meant the

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[25] Canada, Sessional Papers, 1881, No.6, p.98.

end of land-line telegraphs. The Collins' Overland line was thus left to the wilderness. A few rusty wires and broken insulators, scattered through British Columbia, Alaska and Siberia are all that remain of Collins' great scheme.

Collins himself continued his interest in transportation and communications after the abandonment of the Overland telegraph scheme. His interest, however, never again reached the heights of the early eighteen-sixties. Investing heavily in railways and telegraphs and left with a small fortune from his promotion of the Overland telegraph, he lived a comfortable and uneventful life in New York. His death in 1900, at eighty-seven, rated only passing attention.[26] As telegraph lines continued to be extended to the most remote areas on earth bringing with them a new era in the history of communications, few people recalled the contribution that the Collins' Overland Telegraph project had made to that era.

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[26] New York Times, January 20, 1900; San Francisco Call, January 10, 1900.

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