

The Great Inter-Provincial Link

The Telephonage

(With acknowledgements to Kipling)

When the last great switchboard is finished

And the lines are working right,

When the last cut-in's been tested

And the lamps are burning bright,—

The buzzer will sound a warning

And then in a minute or two,—

Chief Operator shall choose the worthy

And set them to work anew.

M. O'R

Prince Edward Island's prolonged opposition to joining Confederation until June 26, 1873, was to some degree influenced by the poor and sometimes impossible means to communicate in person or by mail across the Northumberland Strait during the winter months.

Up until 1827, the only means of communication by mail was a lone courier who carried the mail fortnightly across the ice and water between Wood Islands, P.E.I., and Pictou, N.S., a distance of some 15 miles.

Subsequently, weekly winter communication was established by "ice boats" carrying passengers and mail under the most hazardous and difficult conditions between Cape Traverse, P.E.I., and Cape Tormentine, N.B.

When Prince Edward Island entered Confederation, the first steamship service was established, the first boat being the *Albert*, and in 1877 the *Northern Light*, both of which operated between Georgetown, P.E.I., and Pictou, when ice and weather permitted. These were replaced later by power boats, the *Stanley* and the *Minto* and then by a more powerful steamship, the *Earl Grey*, in 1909. Daily communication was not established until 1917 when the first ice breaking ferry, the *Prince Edward Island*, was placed in service to carry both automobile

and railway cars. This beautiful ship was operated jointly by the federal Department of Transport and the Canadian National Railways.

The first decade of the 20th century were important and challenging years for the Telephone Company of P.E.I. as telephone service had been extended to all towns and villages and to many rural areas throughout the province. However, no means had been found to provide a telephone communication link across the Northumberland Strait to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, a topic of great discussion among 950 telephone subscribers. They wished to have telephone service to the mainland for business and social reasons, a matter which had become a strong political issue since telegraph service had been provided to the mainland by the Newfoundland-Prince Edward Island Electric Telegraph Company, incorporated on April 16, 1853.

Since the formation of the Telephone Company of P.E.I. in 1885, the use of a one-wire distribution system caused many problems. With the introduction of electric power, the company was forced to add an additional wire to provide metallic circuits or a two-wire distribution system. The cost to improve service plus the requirements to purchase telephones, materials and



The Ice Boat Navy, 1907. Even the paying customers had to get into harness to move the bouts across the brutal ice that infested the Northumberland Strait between Carleton Head and Cape Tormentine. (Photo: Public Archives of P.E.I.)



It was heaven, almost, when S.S. Prince Edward Island, the world's largest icebreaking ferry, went into service during World War I. (Photo: CN Marine)

switchboards, as well as additional long distance circuits east and west of Charlottetown, placed the company in a weak financial position.

At a meeting of the directors held in Charlottetown in January, 1907 the idea of providing telephone service to the mainland was discussed. It was recommended if the Island company was to survive, it must make an all-out effort to persuade the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to support their effort to have the Government of Canada provide this service by placing a submarine telephone cable across the Northumberland Strait.

Preparations were immediately made to study the most suitable location to cross the strait relative to distance and costs. The Nova Scotia Telephone Company, exerted a strong influence to have the cable land in Nova Scotian territory.

To secure the support of the Nova Scotia Telephone Company, a delegation of the Telephone Company of Prince Edward Island consisting of President Benjamin Rogers, General Manager W.A. Winfield and Director A.E. Ings, visited Halifax on February 13, 1907. They met with President Pearson, Vice-President Robertson and General Manager J.H. Winfield of the Nova Scotia company.

The Nova Scotians were impressed with the well-worded submission and agreed to provide an annual subsidy of \$6000 if the Island company should undertake to proceed with the project alone. Pearson agreed to seek the support of the provincial and federal governments, also members of the Senate from Nova Scotia.

The Island delegation then proceeded to Montreal for a meeting with President Sise, and Mr. Boyles, chief electrical engineer with the Bell Telephone company. Both of these gentlemen showed interest in the project and assured the Islanders full support of the Bell company.

On February 25, 1907, the delegation arrived in Ottawa to meet with Hon. S.A. Fisher, Minister of Public Works, and other members of his department. The cable project was fully explained and documented. The Island delegation were pleased to have in attendance members of the House of Commons and

the Senate from the province to lend their support. The delegation left Ottawa with the assurance of the federal government that they had great interest in providing this service if money could be found.

Feasibility studies, surveys and great discussion took place from 1907 to 1910 over the location and need of the proposed submarine cable, but the project was still not undertaken. It took a private company to give impetus to the idea. In 1910, F.B. McCurdy and Company, a Halifax-based stock broker, opened a new branch office in Charlottetown. To keep in touch with the stock markets on the mainland, the company laid a single-wire telegraph circuit from Wood Islands to Pictou at its own expense.

McCurdy invited the Telephone Company of P.E.I. and the new Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company to experiment with the line by placing a telephone on each end of the cable. To the amazement and delight of many, the first long distance call was established to the mainland. It extended through Pictou to the Halifax telephone operators who were happy to assist and enable people to talk over so great a distance under water and on land.

The *Guardian* of January 4, 1911 wrote:

An event of much importance in many ways to the people of Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia took place yesterday morning, when the Telephone Company of Prince Edward Island officially opened for use, the first submarine cable for telephone service between Wood Islands, Prince Edward Island, and Caribou, Nova Scotia, on January 3, 1911. Following preparations, for some time after the placing in service earlier in the year of the McCurdy experimental cable, the Telephone Company in order to contest the rights of the Anglo-American Telegraph Company, which had a 50-year monopoly on laying cables to Prince Edward Island, a permanent two-core cable was placed, under the supervision of the Maritime Telegraph & Telephone Company Ltd.

The laying of this cable over a distance of 15 miles was completed on New Year's Day, January 1, 1911 and was said to be the longest telephone cable in North America.

Prince Edward Island was for the first time able to communicate by telephone with the mainland of Nova Scotia.

Present at this official opening were President H.J. Palmer, MLA, R.M. Johnson, a director, Mayor Rogers, and W.S. Grant, the efficient manager of the Telephone Company of Prince Edward Island, all of whom made calls to many areas of Nova Scotia.

With no more delay than making a local call, messages were placed to Pictou, to Mr. Hughes, the local manager of Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Co. Ltd., the Mayor of Pictou, and to Mr. MacDonald, publisher of the Pictou *Advocate*.

Further calls were extended to Maritime Telephone officials in Halifax, including a call from W.S. Grant to W.A. Winfield, district superintendent of the Eastern Telephone Company in Sydney.

The transmission on this call was reasonably good, considering it covered a distance of 257 wire miles of line, including three submarine cables to connect the speakers, Halifax-Dartmouth, Caribou-Wood Islands and Mulgrave-Port Hawkesbury.

Grant said the company intended to give continuous service, but for the present the hours for business would be from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and only for emergency calling in the other hours of the day. The areas of Sydney, Windsor, Halifax and Amherst were designated as calling areas.

The long-awaited service created great interest in the use of long distance services and in the years to follow the new communication link stimulated many new telephone installations in both provinces.

Although the new link was of considerable benefit to the province, many outages occurred during the winter months when drifting ice crushed or pulled the cable apart. These disruptions could last from three to four months or until such time that weather conditions would allow cable repairs to be carried out. This problem of complete isolation during the winter months continued to worsen as the cable deteriorated due to wear and strain caused by severe ice and tide conditions in the strait.

Prior to the laying of the cable, it was recommended that the existing 40 miles of obsolete pole and wire plant be replaced between Wood Islands and Charlottetown to improve transmission and conversational qualities. At the same time, the Telephone Company of Prince Edward Island was continuing its improvement program to meet the demand for many new lines and services.

These many projects placed unbearable financial hardships on the telephone company. As a result, discussions were

underway with the newly formed Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company requesting financial support. After many months of negotiations, the Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company made a proposal to purchase the controlling interest in the Telephone Company of Prince Edward Island. This was agreed upon and finalized on December 31, 1911. Thereafter, the growth of telephone service in Nova Scotia would be closely linked with development of service in Prince Edward Island.