

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

"WORKIN' ON THE RAILROAD"

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Edmund Henry Brietzche, a British Civil Engineer, recalls in a 1941 issue of the CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY MAGAZINE his experiences while building the railway from Paspebiac to Gaspé in 1904-1907.

KEN ANNETT

# I've Been Workin' On the Railroad

By EDMUND HENRY BRIETZCKE

At present, the media would have us believe that "the sword of Damocles" hangs over the future of the passenger railway service from Matapedia to Gaspé. It seems timely to recall again the experiences of those who were involved in building that line at the turn of this 20th century.

Previous articles of this series (THE BAY CHALEUR RAILWAY - PART I and PART II, published by SPEC in 1981) recalled the efforts to begin work on the line and the slow progress that carried it first to Caplan, then to Paspebiac and finally to Gaspé Basin over the years 1894 - 1912.

Among those who worked on the extension of the line to Gaspé was a young Civil Engineer, Edmund Henry Brietzche. He was in Gaspesia from 1904 to 1907 and in 1941 recalled his experiences in a vivid article on the Canadian National Railway Magazine. We are indebted to him for this window into our past.

Those who surveyed and built the Gaspé line would be incredulous and amazed that consideration was being given these ninety years later to ending passenger service on the line they created with toil and sweat.

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# I've Been Workin' On the Railroad

By EDMUND HENRY BRIETZCKE

**H**OW very few people realize, when sitting in a parlor car, the labor and hardship which have been undergone by the surveyors and builders of the railway over which they are travelling so comfortably, safely and speedily! It is only one who has experienced the discomforts attendant upon both survey and construction who really appreciates the finished article in the shape of a modern high-speed railway train, with all its luxurious appointments.

In the present article I am attempting to describe the various happenings to my fellow surveyors and myself, when engaged upon the extension of the Gaspé Railway, in 1904 and 1905.

The Gaspé Peninsula is situated just south of the entrance to the St. Lawrence River, and the railway, in those days, terminated at New Carlisle, on the Baie des Chaleurs, connecting with the Grand Trunk at Matapedia.

In the days to which I refer, the Peninsula was unexplored forest land and must have been teeming with wild life; and it is much the same today, in spite of the one road which penetrates it for some miles.

There have been many changes on the Gaspé coast, from New Carlisle to Gaspé Basin, since I first became acquainted with this charming country, thirty-six years ago, though I am glad to say that I find those who live there just as they used to be — hospitable, kindly, simple, and contented with their

lot. I was one of the civil engineers engaged by the New Canadian Company for the surveys and construction of the railway, though I had no direct participation in the latter work.

I landed at Halifax from my native England on Christmas Day, 1904, and as the *Coriscan* was hauled alongside the wharf, I thought to myself "This must indeed be a Holy City, judging by the church bells," for it was a week-day. I later discovered that these musical sounds were produced by locomotive bells—of course quite a surprise for me, for in England such were unknown.

There were some charming Canadian girls on board the ship, and I got quite friendly with them. They came from Winnipeg, and I caused much astonishment to them and their father when I said "Winnipeg! But is it civilized?" having in mind, I suppose, some of the thrillers I had read as a boy, such as *The Young Fur Traders*.

It being Christmas time, the G.T.R. provided a lovely Christmas dinner on the train from Halifax to Matapedia—including wine—and this impressed me very much; so did the beautiful inlaid woodwork in the railway carriages (as we call them in England). I was sitting in the car, after a sumptuous dinner, feeling, perhaps, a little homesick, this being the first Christmas I had spent away from home, when a large man,

somewhat resembling a bear, for he was wearing a fur coat such as I had never seen before, came and sat down beside me, and said, "I thought you looked kind of lonesome, so I've come to have a chat." This kind action on the part of a complete stranger warmed my heart and I said to myself, "This augurs well for me, if all Canadians are as nice and friendly as this one," for I remembered the rather frigid and reserved way in which railway travellers in England regard each other; in fact with a slight tinge of—I was going to say suspicion, but perhaps that is rather a hard term to describe my own countrymen; shall I say reserve, instead?

My first Canadian home was a boarding house at Paspébiac, where the accommodation was most comfortable and the food of ample quantity and good quality, but I found the house terribly hot, I being dressed in extra heavy Old Country clothing, designed for the rigors of an English winter. I used to open the front door, and stand there taking deep breaths until the good lady of the house would appear, ask me what I was doing and tell me that I should freeze the house if I didn't shut the door. It took me a long time to get used to the heating.

My first job was reconnaissance surveys for the new railway which was to connect with the existing railway at New Carlisle and run through to Gaspé Basin. The chief was a Scotch engineer, who had had vast experience in this type of work. I was put in charge of the prismatic compass, and we ran various survey lines over possible routes.

Our party consisted of the chief, the compass man, leveller and his rodman, topographer and his rodman, two chainmen, three axemen, and last but by no means least, the cook and cookee. The Gaspé axemen were wonderful and two of these hefty young fellows could tackle a twelve-inch tree and have it down in two minutes. Thousands of trees were felled during the surveys, and there was only one minor accident, the cutting of a man's moccasin and a slight wound on his foot, which was promptly attended to at our camp, where bandages, etc. were kept.

I had been warned about the danger of frozen feet, so I was very careful until I gained the necessary experience. I used to take off one moccasin and three pairs of socks and examine my foot frequently, for I had been told that one of our fellows had been in hospital for three months and had nearly lost both feet through freezing.

After the reconnaissance survey had been completed, several possible routes for the railway were schemed out, from the information gained thereby. The next step was to make trial location surveys—more accurate work, using the transit instead of the prismatic compass. After this was completed, and the actual route of the railway decided upon, we made the final location, marking out with wooden pegs the centre line of the railway—both straights and curves. We also took more accurate levels along the whole route. As far as I remember, when our original reconnaissance elevation of a certain peg, or "bench mark" as it is called, at Gaspé Basin came to be checked up, it was found to be about 15 inches in error; very good work, considering we had passed over eighty miles, mostly in dense bush and over many deep valleys.

The flies in the summer were awful — mosquitoes, midges and moose flies, the latter enormous insects. Most of us rubbed our faces and hands with mosquito oil, but the axemen said it gave them headaches. The axemen, being constantly on the move, were not plagued as much as those who had to stand still at the instruments. Cheese-cloth fly-veils were tried by some of us, but these proved hot and uncomfortable, and caused considerable merriment, so we gave up using them.

We had four tents, about twelve feet square, one occupied by the chief, the transit man, the level man

and the draughtsman; another two tents were provided for the rodmen and axemen, and one was used for a dining room, in a corner of which the cook and cookee slept. The former was supplied with a wood-burning stove and our dining table, which was about eight feet long, was hinged down the middle to make it easily portable. Our chairs at table consisted of birch logs resting upon birch forks, and sometimes the improvised seats broke suddenly under the weight of six hefty men, and all of them would suddenly crash to the ground; one or two of the men being in the act of drinking hot tea, the results may be imagined. In winter we set our tents on the top of the snow, which was usually about nine feet deep in the bush. Balsam branches, or fronds, I should say, were then spread over the floor, and where we slept heavy macintosh sheets were laid. Our blankets were placed on these sheets and our pillows consisted of our dunnage bags, the softest things being packed in the centre of the bag, as a pair of spare hobnailed boots do not make a very comfortable head rest.

We wore ordinary pyjamas, and I found that, even in sub-zero weather, six thicknesses of Hudson Bay blankets over me and the same number underneath me, gave me all the necessary warmth.

The stoves in each tent, which usually went out at about 3 a.m., were made of sheet steel, and were bell-shaped, just like a bottle-filling funnel. Green logs were cut about a foot longer than the diameter of the stove, and a platform of these was laid. On this the stove was placed and these logs, being cut from living hardwood trees, lasted quite a while, though we burned wood for the stove right on top of them. On two occasions, though, when we had stayed longer than usual in one place, the green logs burned through, and down went the stove, sinking quite a depth into the snow. This unexpected collapse tore all the pipes apart, and we and everything in the tent were covered with soot.

In open bush we could run our transit and level line about two miles a day, but in alder swamps this amounted to only about half a mile.

**B**EFORE I was put in charge of the party, on one occasion, in the summer, our chief started off early in the morning to explore, and we continued to chop our way through the bush in the general direction which he had instructed us to take. When we got back to camp at night, he had not returned; however, knowing his ability to find his way about in the bush, his absence caused us no anxiety. After a hearty supper, we were lying around quite tired after our day's "bushwhacking", when we heard what we thought was the chief calling, a weird kind of cry. We thought that perhaps he had met with an accident, so several of us started off in the direction of the cry. Finally tracing the sound to its source, we discovered a venerable-looking old owl sitting in a tree, who eyed us with suspicion but made no attempt to move. Whereupon, we retraced our steps and found that the chief had returned safely in our absence, partaken of a hearty and well-deserved supper, and was worrying as to whether we had got lost.

My worst experience on survey was the following—not counting the time when in crossing a broad stream on a log, I slipped and fell in; of course I was soaked to the skin, but, though the weather was chilly—it was the fall of the year—I had a fire lighted and toasted myself at it for a while, and then continued to work for the rest of the day, and never caught cold. You can do things like this when you are twenty-five years of age and living a healthy open-air life.

But I started to tell of my worst experience. It was in November, and we were camped at Corner of the Beach, and headquarters had instructed me to join my survey with that of another party coming from the opposite direction, in the neighborhood of Cape Cove. Accordingly, I took with me one of our best bushmen, used all his life to the woods, and each of us had a packet of lunch. We left camp at about 7 a.m. and tramped through the thick bush until noon.

My companion said, "You're not going to eat all your lunch, are you?" I said, "Well, I'm hungry." "If you knew as much as I do about the bush, you would only eat half of it," he told me.

This remark set me thinking, so I decided to follow his advice and, in spite of the pangs of hunger, I ate only half of what I had brought, and he, of course, did the same. I am thankful I did, otherwise I might not be recording this adventure.

After our half-lunch, we resumed our tramp through the bush. The ground was bare; though it was early November, there was no snow.

At about 3 p.m. the worst blizzard I have ever been in, started — howling wind and driving and swirling snow. We found the chainage stakes of the other

party but as they had cut many trial lines, we did not know which one to follow in order to reach their camp. All the matches in my blizzard coat pocket had become wet and my pockets were full of snow. Our intention was to bivouac for the night and resume our search in the morning, and of course we wanted to make a fire. Luckily, I found one match with its head buried in that mysterious fluff found in nearly every pocket, be one ever so respectable. What a find! But what a responsibility to light it in such a blizzard. We tore off a huge sheet of birch bark to act as a shield against the wind, and then a handful of thin strips of birch bark to act as tinder, and then cut some pieces of dry and rotten wood to start our fire.

When all was ready the great moment to strike that only match arrived—but where to strike it was the question. Fortunately I had a small nail file in my pocket, and this I used to scratch the match, it being protected against the icy blast and snow by the birch bark shield. I never before or since put such value on a single match. However, it came up to scratch, in every sense of the word, and we lit our fire.

With the small axe my companion carried he cut some branches and made a lean-to over a fallen log in front of our fire, and we both sat down to review the situation. The time, I suppose, was about 6 p.m. and hunger was assailing us both. I said, "How about the other half of our lunch, Charlie?" He said, "Not on your life—that's for tomorrow's breakfast!"

We dozed all night, our dozing being frequently interrupted by drops of cold water down the backs of our necks, caused by the heat of the fire melting the snow which fell on the top of our lean-to. What a night that was! However, it eventually wore away—the blizzard was over and a glorious sunny morning met our thankful eyes. We consumed the rest of our lunch with relish and then started again to traverse the bush in search of the other survey camp.

To our horror, the snow was knee-deep and of course we had no snowshoes. Charlie said, "You wait here and I'll go back for help and food." "No," said I, "let's stick it out together and see what happens."

We wandered around for about two hours and at last came on what had been the camp—but all the tents were gone—just the remains of camp and the unmistakable burnt-out fires and a stack of empty tins. This certainly was a bit of a blow to us, for we had looked forward to food and a rest. Mastering our disappointment as well as we could, we held a council of war and decided to

see if we could get onto one of the range lines, a strip entirely clear of those annoying trees and windfalls which impeded our progress so much. After wandering about in the snow for about an hour, at last we struck one of these range lines. Charlie said. "I think we are on the fifth range," and that meant five miles to the coast! My heart sank. Starving with hunger, knee-deep in snow, no snow-shoes—and five miles of it! Well, there was nothing to do but do it.

So off we set. We were so weak we could only plug through that awful soft snow for a distance of about fifty feet and then keel over and rest on our sides for a few minutes and then—on again.

Well, we eventually reached Cape Cove at about 5.30 p.m. and made for the telegraph office. The first thing I did was to wire to Corner of the Beach, to our party, that we were safe. This wire had to be carried by hand from the telegraph office to our camp in the woods, distant about two miles, and my assistant received it just as he and the men were starting out with a search party.

My next move was to order for each of us a strong Scotch and a very light dinner, for we knew the danger attending a hearty meal after what we had been through—and then to bed at about 7.30 and a sleep with no dreams till nearly noon next day.

When in camp we could have our provisions brought to us by logging roads, and I found it strange that even in summer sleighs were used for this purpose—I should rather call them toboggans. The reason for this was that the ordinary wheeled cart was too wide to pass through the narrow and rough ways and trails in the bush which were only used in the winter for bringing out lumber on these toboggans.

In the spring when the snow was melting, the small rivulets were swollen to a considerable size and the logs which had been cut during the winter were rolled into these streams and caught lower down; but, of course, there were places where logs had been cut, far away from any such streams, and hence the narrow pathways cut through the bush which were used for the passage of the toboggans.

There was one deep valley we were passing through with our survey-line. It must have been about a hundred feet deep, and piled up on the bank of this valley, ready to be floated down in the spring, were hundreds of enormous logs, ranging in size from about a foot to nearly two feet in diameter. This pile of logs extended from the bottom of the valley where we were working, right up to the top of the gully, about one hundred feet above us. The whole party had just passed the base of this enormous collection of logs, when we heard a roar like thunder, and, looking

back along the route we had just traversed we saw the whole layer of logs come tumbling down like a wooden waterfall—roly-poly, right down to the level of ground we were on, in the valley.

I suppose our talking had caused a vibration in the air, and this was enough to start the whole thing on the move. Had this happened when we were directly beneath this pile of heavy timber, a minute or two before, not a man Jack of us would have lived to tell the tale—we should have been rolled out as flat as pancakes, under a pile of logs fifteen feet high. What an escape for us all, one of the six narrow shaves I have had during my life, so far.

There was one place behind the Percé Mountains which was inaccessible in the manner I have described, so we had to get dog teams and small sleighs, for the transport of our camping outfit. These dogs were very keen on their work, "raring to go," in fact, and when their harness was unhitched from the branch upon which it had been hung, they would rush forward and thrust their heads through the collars, going being good, as there was nothing to obstruct their passage. The diet of on the frozen rivers and streams, the these dogs was meatless, as, had it been otherwise, they would have fought to the death. I was surprised to learn how little food these large dogs actually got, and I thought of the pampered and spoiled pet spaniels to which some people devote as much care as they would to a child.

These dogs slept outside the tents, a hole about a foot deep was dug in the snow, and into this was thrown a few balsam fronds. This seemed rather drastic treatment to my mind; however, Nature had supplied them with fur coats, to suit such occasions.

There is one tunnel on the railway, at Port Daniel, through "Cap a l'Enfer," and the name just suits this jutting out piece of rock, for it was an awful job to measure and take elevations over this prominence, in winter, whilst wearing snowshoes. I had to carry a transit instrument weighing about forty pounds, and last summer (1940) I tried to scale it once more, with no load or snowshoes to hamper my efforts, but I had to give up the attempt. The passing of thirty-six years can certainly produce changes in one's physical abilities, and I take off my hat to those brave Alpine climbers who take such frightful risks at dizzy heights, when one false step may hurl a climber to instant death, thousands of feet below.

During the spring, on one occasion, we came to a fast-rushing torrent, swollen from a most innocent rivulet in summer to a really respectable fast water course. It was impossible to continue our survey. Even an attempt at swimming would have been dangerous. Moreover, how could we get our costly instruments across to the other side? There was a venerable cedar standing just at the edge of this stream, the largest cedar I think I have ever seen. It must have seen nearly three hundred summers and winters, judging by its enormous size. We decided to fell this forest giant, and make a bridge of him on which to cross the water. Four axemen spread all around the tree tackled the job, and skilful as they were they worked a quarter of an hour before the tree came crashing down and lay prone from bank to bank. One man then carefully climbed out on it, and cut off the branches which obstructed our passage,

and we all crossed over this improvised bridge.

As regards our clothing, during our stay in tents, its upkeep was much neglected. I wore Strathcona boots and cord riding breeches, the knees of which became cut into strips, due to the continual friction of the undergrowth through which we had to push our way. I solved the problem, as far as I was concerned, by sewing six-inch square leather patches over each knee. Clothes washing was difficult, and I fear was rather neglected. I did not attempt to darn socks but just tied the hole off with a piece of string, and as the socks I wore were amply large, this method of repair saved a lot of trouble, though some members of the party were not as lazy as I was. Most of the party shaved, but my chief and I decided that this was unnecessary, so we grew beards.

One winter day I determined to take a bath, so I got a bucket of hot water from the cook, placed old newspapers outside the tent, on the snow, and laid soap, sponge and towel ready to hand. I then stripped in the tent, and dashed out into the open, and had a complete stand-up bath, on the newspapers—the quickest I have ever taken, as it was zero weather. It was well worth it, as I felt considerably improved mentally, as well as physically, after it.

In the wilder parts of the country we found bear, moose, and deer tracks, but usually we made such a noise that these animals were frightened away. The partridges were unsuspecting, and we used to cut a stick about six feet long, and attach a slip-knot in a piece of string at the end, follow our victim, slip the noose over his head, and then one sharp jerk and the poor bird had said farewell to its innocent existence—a most unsporting method of hunting, I fear.

On one occasion I was standing at the transit and forward of me were three axemen chopping down any trees which happened to be on the survey line. Suddenly these men stopped chopping and I saw them take off their hats, shield their faces with them and jump about all over the place. At first I thought they had struck a hornets' nest. I left the instrument and went forward and found the cause of the disturbance. They had started to chop a tree at the base of which was a partridge's nest with several eggs in it. The mother bird, plucky little creature, determined to defend her young, was circling round and round on the ground, with outstretched wings and was making a curious crying noise, and every once in a while she flew up and made a swift dart forward at the men's faces. Such pluck deserved respect, so I told the men to leave the tree, which they had started to cut down, and I would swing my line so as to avoid it entirely, which I did, to my own satisfaction, and I suppose, also to the partridge's.

We were very much afraid of setting the forests on fire, and all of us were extremely careful in the dry summer days, to be certain that our lunch fire was properly put out, before we resumed work. We usually ate near a stream, and thus were able to get water for our tea, but in winter, when this was not available, we melted snow, though this is not advisable, as such sometimes produces a bad attack of colic. The cook used to blow a horn inside the flaps of the tents, in the morning, to wake us up, and we dressed and breakfasted by lamp-light, and left camp just as soon as it was light enough for us to see our way in the bush. In

summer, lamplight breakfasts were not necessary.

The instrument which I had to carry on my shoulder, when I was transitman, and before I became chief of party, weighed about forty pounds, and is what is known as a transit or theodolite, and is used for taking angles, both horizontal and vertical, and is fitted with glass tubes almost full of alcohol, these tubes being for the purpose of setting the instrument perfectly level, before taking observations. The whole instrument is set up on a tripod. In carrying this apparatus one day, through an alder swamp, I slipped and fell flat upon my back, and the transit, being on my shoulder, crashed down with me. I got quite a shock, and though not really hurt, I lay there for a while. A most delicious smell crept into my nostrils—so familiar, yet I had not experienced it for many months. Where could I be, and how came this aroma in such a wild place as this? Picking myself up, and examining the fallen instrument, I found that one of these alcohol-filled bubbles had been broken.

On another occasion, the whole party's survey work depended upon a spider, and it happened in this way. We always left the instruments out in the bush at the end of the day's work, often two miles from camp, as the danger of carrying them back and forth each day was greater than the possible blowing down of a tree when we left them in the woods. We covered them with canvas bags, in case of rain. The transit and the level are both fitted with cross hairs, both horizontal and vertical, set on a ring just behind the eye-piece of the telescope. These hairs are composed of spider's web. Platinum wires, drawn to minute dimensions have been tried, to replace spider web, also fine lines have been engraved on a glass diaphragm, but it is found that the humble spider's work is very superior to that of man, being unaffected by temperature, which is not the case with platinum wire, which sags and bends under varying weather conditions. Upon resuming my work at the transit one summer morning, I looked through the telescope and focussed it, preparatory to giving the axemen a line of poles to regulate their chopping down of trees and lopping off of branches which were in the way of my line of sight. To my surprise the usual cross hairs did not appear. I took the eye-piece out of the telescope tube and examined the ring on which the spider's web should be, but there was no sign of the hairs. I suppose some curious person had stayed be-

hind and explored to find out what the hairs were made of, and perhaps had poked an inquisitive finger into the ring which held them—anyway, they were gone and the instrument was useless without them. I think this must be the true explanation of the disappearance of the hairs, as I have known them to last for over thirty years without showing any signs of failure. To send the instrument up to Montreal for repair would have meant over a week's delay, at least, in those days, and we unfortunately did not have a spare part in camp, as some very methodical surveyors do. I reported to my chief and he said "We cannot possibly stop the whole job for this; you will have to find an obliging spider and get it to spin a web for you, so go ahead, and we will continue to cut our line and when you have repaired the instrument, you will have to work extra hard, reading the angles which we turn, and catch up with us."

As a rule you find spiders when and where you don't want them, but this time the quest was a hard one for me. I tramped miles, examining trees and bushes for a spider, and at last found one after some hours' hunt, and very carefully put him into a match box, and rushed back to camp. The only people in camp were the cook and his mate, so I had no one to help me who understood the very delicate operation I had to perform. I took the ring on which the web was to be fixed and put a minute spot of glue in four places equidistant from each other, this ring being about the diameter of a fifty cent piece outside and about the size of a quarter inside. My difficulty was to prevent the spider from escaping, and to persuade it to spin a web. I think everyone knows that a spider never falls off anything; it spins a supporting thread. My entomological knowledge gave me the proper procedure, so I went ahead with the ticklish operation. I opened the match box which contained my spider, on the top of the large drawing board in our tent, and released him, and found him very lively, in fact, I had a job heading him off, for he seemed bent on escaping and his speed was quite "Malcolm Campbellish." Heading him off with my right hand, I grasped the brass ring with the four glue spots on it, with my left hand, and pushed the spider with a book, to the edge of the drawing board and off it, and as he went overboard he acted true to form and started to spin his web. When he was well over the edge of the board, I brought the ring sideways to the thread he had spun and tilted it up against it, and, of course, the

web then spanned the centre of the ring, being held in place by the two glue spots. I then turned the ring and got the second thread fixed to the other two glue spots, at right angles to the first thread. The job was done, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I then put the hanging spider into the match-box again, after cutting him free of my ring, and took him outside the tent and selecting the finest tree which I could find. I thanked him profusely, wished him luck and let him go. By this time it was afternoon, so I had a hurried lunch in camp, and then rushed back with the repaired instrument to where the others were working in the woods. I found they had gone about a mile since I left them in the morning; however, I caught up with them towards the close of the day. I had to start at the last angle which I had read and at each place where they had changed their route, set up the instrument, and read and book

the angle they had turned, and read the magnetic compass bearing, also, a compass being part of the transit's equipment.

I left the Gaspé coast in 1907, and did not visit it again until the summers of 1938 and 1940. I found some of the men who had worked with us on our surveys and it was a rare treat to foregather and talk of old times, when we were all young and lived in tents. I told these men that they were well off, and their own masters. They own their land and houses, have cows, horses and poultry, grow all the corn and vegetables they need, and can make from two to ten dollars a day by fishing. I think they all appreciate their independence and though their work is hard, it is a healthy open-air existence for them, and in many ways they are to be envied.