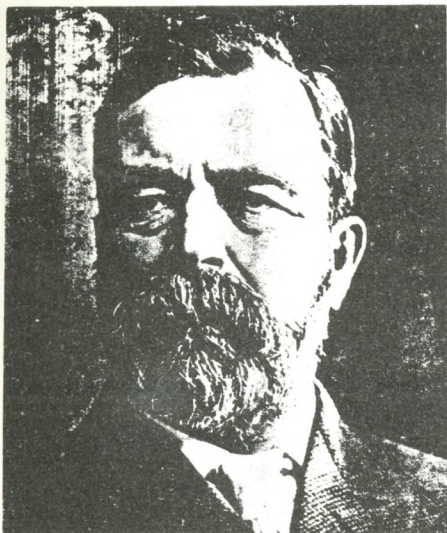


# SURVEYORS OF THE PAST



**WILLIAM OGILVIE, P.L.S.**

*By Charles Fairhall*

*Foreword: I am indebted, for a large part of the following biography to Don W. Thompson, who permitted me liberal quotation from his definitive Canadian survey history "Men and Meridians". I was also fortunate to be able to examine Mr. Ogilvie's field books — an excellent reflection as all surveyors know, of the man.*

William Ogilvie was born at Glen Ogilvie, now known as Cyrville, on the eastern outskirts of Ottawa, in an area established by his grandfather, who emigrated from Scotland. As a young man, he articulated with Robert Sparks, P.L.S., and on July 12, 1869, received his commission as a Provincial Land Surveyor. In the next decade, he operated a survey practice and maintained an office on Rideau Street in Ottawa.

His field notes, neatly written in ink, indicate the scope of his practice and some of the problems encountered and overcome. Like most surveyors operating primarily a rural practice, the bulk of his work consisted of establishing lot lines and aliquot part boundaries for settlers, supplemented by occasional jobs for municipal councils.

In the back of his field books, he kept a methodical record of accounts paid, and it would appear that \$5-\$6 per day was the standard charge. One of his larger jobs in that period was a survey of Ordnance

Lots 34, 35, 36 & 37 in Concession 2, Township of North Gower for the Department of Ordnance & Admiralty Lands. This kept him occupied for several weeks and his account rendered was for \$234.00.

Between the dates of March 4, 1876 and November 27, 1879, his records indicate he performed 165 surveys for a total cost of \$1414.50.

In 1872, Mr. Ogilvie, along with a considerable number of other Provincial Land Surveyors, was commissioned as a Dominion Land Surveyor and in the years between 1875 and 1877, he performed surveys on behalf of the Department of the Interior in the Peace River and Mackenzie River areas, as well as the Railway Belt of British Columbia and in the Northwest Territories. Those were the days preceding the wave of settlers into Western Canada, when vast buffalo herds roamed the prairies, and Ogilvie once claimed to have seen a herd of more than 10,000 bison.

In 1887, Ogilvie commenced work on the Alaska-Yukon Boundary. In the winter of 1887/1888, he was engaged in taking astronomic observations of the lunar transits at a point near Fortymile River, a tributary of the Yukon, some 60 miles northwest of present-day Dawson. The purpose of this was to determine the exact position of the 141st Meridian west of Greenwich. All observations were taken in an unheated cabin through a slot in the roof using a small portable astronomical transit mounted on a large tree stump. Anyone who has ever taken a star shot on a cold winter night can perhaps appreciate somewhat the hardships he endured taking these precise observations while the mercury plummeted at times to 50° below zero.

At the conclusion of these operations, the resulting position of the meridian was marked by a line cut through the bush for a considerable distance on both sides of the river. In the winter of 1895, he returned to Fortymile River to extend the 141st Meridian north of the river. Ultimately this boundary line was established by the joint Canadian-United States Boundary Commission from the Yukon River to Mount St. Elias north of Ice Bay in the North Pacific.

Gold was discovered at Fortymile River in 1886, but it was later overshadowed by the Klondike River District and the Great Gold Rush of 1896.

Early in 1897, Ogilvie arrived at Dawson to lay out the townsite as well as other blocks of land in the vicinity. Indiscriminate staking of discovery claims resulted in almost complete confusion over the position of property lines. Respected by everyone for his integrity and reliability, Ogilvie became the supreme arbiter in property disputes. As a trusted civil servant who jealously guarded his reputation, he refrained from taking advantage of his special knowledge of the situation, although undoubtedly he could have become a wealthy man by staking some of the open fractions that resulted from the confusion.

In 1898, Ogilvie was appointed Commissioner of the Yukon Territory, a post that he retained until 1901. Just shortly after his appointment, Parliament set up a Royal Commission to enquire into allegations of graft by various public officials and Ogilvie presided at sessions of public investigation. Under his commissionship, able men were drafted into the public service, new mining regulations devised, courts and schools established and law and order fully restored. In recognition of his vast contribution to the development of the District, a grateful Parliament awarded him a grant of \$5000. Other honours also befell him. In 1891, he was awarded the Murchison Grant by the Royal Geographical Society. The Ogilvie Range of mountains in the Yukon, Mount Ogilvie on the British Columbia-Alaska boundary, a Yukon valley and a Manitoba hamlet today bear the name of this eminent and distinguished Surveyor.

In 1906, Ogilvie returned to private practice in Ottawa, but returned to the western interior in 1911. It was on this last undertaking that he contracted pneumonia and died in Winnipeg in November, 1912, at the age of 66.

William Ogilvie's success was due not only to his consummate skill as a surveyor, but also to his judicial temperament and tact, his exemplary conduct, his understanding of the prospector's mentality and his constant endeavour to safeguard the interests of the Government of his country.