

Surveyors of The Past

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CHARLES UNWIN - AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



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1847

I COMMENCED to learn surveying in June, 1847, with the late John Stoughton Dennis, of Weston, but was not under articles until the following November. Mr. Dennis had a good country practice, as well as his city one in Toronto. He was principally instrumental in getting up the Institute of Surveyors, Engineers and Architects, from which has been evolved the Canadian Institute. Of this first-named Institute he was acting as Secretary, and it was when posting a huge pile of circulars for him at the Weston post

office that I first became acquainted with Mr. Thornhill A. Agar, the father of my nephew (the reader of this paper). Mr. Agar was clerk in the store of John Andrew Donaldson, late Immigration Agent, in whose store the post office was kept. We had many rambles in the country round Weston when business was over for the day, and quiet little suppers afterwards. Mr. Agar had but recently arrived from the Emerald Isle, so dear to its children as the "First flower of the earth, first gem of the sea," and he thought it necessary to go armed with a pitchfork when on our evening expeditions, for fear of wild bulls or bears attacking us. There are more "bulls" and "bears" on King and Toronto Streets in

our fair city to-day than were within many lots of Weston then.

The first survey of any consequence which Mr. Dennis undertook after I went to him was one to make a map of the city of Toronto, then extending from the Don to Dufferin Street and from the Bay to Bloor Street. I believe that I personally measured all the houses and most of the sheds within these boundaries, with the exception of the New Garrison. Mr. Sandford Fleming plotted the notes and lithographed the plan, and a more beautiful piece of lithography would be hard to find; but, unfortunately, the plan was on too small a scale to be of much practical use — 12 chains, or nearly 800 feet to the inch, or, including the border which showed the principal buildings, only the size of a pocket handkerchief of moderate dimensions.

I may say that Messrs. Scobie & Balfour, the principal publishers in Toronto at that time, had purchased the notes and undertaken to publish the map, and thinking that a small one would sell best, fell into the error of having it much **too** small, as above noted. I have a mutilated copy of the map and were it not so shabby should have much pleasure in presenting it to the Association, but it is in so bad a condition that it would be no great acquisition.

1848

My first bush survey was assisting in laying out lots on the Indian Reserve on the north shore of Balsam Lake in the Township of Bexley. T. G. Prosser was the surveyor in charge. The survey was made under instructions from the Indian Department to John S. Dennis. I was desired to bring a row boat from Atherley to Point Mara. Now, a Roman Catholic missionary (a fine specimen of a Frenchman, fully six feet high and stout in proportion) also wanted to go to the same place, but there being no room for him in my boat I told him that if he could get another I would let him have a couple of my men to row him down. After a good deal of trouble he succeeded in getting a boat, but it was a very leaky one, and his Reverence had to abandon the book he was reading and bail for all he was worth to keep afloat till he got to the nearest island, where they upset the boat and then pulled back to the mainland as quickly as possible. In spite of this, the missionary, being a capital walker, got to Point Mara shortly after my party. We arrived at Point Mara about sundown and seeing an empty shanty near our landing-place took possession of it for the night, and a very lively night of it we had, as I well remember. Being much fatigued after a hard day's work we turned in shortly after supper and lay down upon some straw lying upon the floor of the shanty,

in our innocence supposing it to be clean. We had not been lying down long before we found we were not the first animals which had made a bed of it. Our first intimation of its having been previously used was the sight of our cook, a young fellow of about fifteen, who had turned in first, sitting up in his sleep and picking over the straw as if looking for something. When I and the rest of the party lay down we could not sleep a wink; we felt something biting us and making us perfectly miserable, but had to grin and bear it until daylight came, when we found our shirts literally covered with fleas—and we had a most difficult task in getting rid of them.

We took our stuff from Point Mara to Balsam Lake with an ox team, a distance of about 14 miles, and had to brush out the road in many places to get the team through. On our arrival at the lake I was invited to take tea at Mr. Stevenson's. Mr. S was father-in-law to Admiral Van Sittart, whose widow, I believe, owned the farm. It was quite a swell place with a squared log fence in front of it. I accepted the invitation, and although I was most cordially welcomed I was soon sorry that I had, for those horrible fleas had not been entirely got rid of, and all teatime I felt perhaps something like Job of old when he took a potsherd to scrape himself withal, for the pesky things were very annoying.

We left the Stevenson's the following morning for the old Indian village, then deserted, and took up our quarters in one of the vacant log houses which the government had built for the Indians.

While on this survey I had my first experience of being lost in the bush. Mr. Prosser had given me a half holiday to go with dog and gun to try my luck at shooting partridges, which were plentiful in the neighborhood. I had not been long out before a covey was put up and I tried to get a shot at them, but they flew away before I had an opportunity. I followed them and tried again, and again they were off, and so on for a good many times until finally they had led me so far into the bush away from our line that I was completely lost, and a more miserable boy (for I was but a boy then) you could not imagine. I climbed a tree to try and find the houses in the village, but could see none—nor even the lake.

I thought my dog could help me out of my difficulty so tore a leaf out of my field book and wrote a note on it to the party intimating that I was lost and begging them to hunt me up, tied the note around the dog's neck and tried to drive him away thinking he would go to the rest of the party, but the little brute stuck

to me closer than a brother. Finally, Mr. Prosser came in search of me and took me to the line the men were opening—but of course they were cutting in the wrong direction! At any rate I thought so.

After the completion of this survey, we made one in the Township of Mara which was then nearly all solid bush. We boarded with a man named Parsons. There was only one room in the house, and what with Parsons, his wife, three children and our surveying party, to say nothing of a woman visiting there, it was pretty full. There were only two beds in the room; one of which, of course, was for Mr. and Mrs. Parsons and as many of the little Parsonses as could be crowded into it. Mr. Prosser and I were given the other. The rest had to sleep upon the floor. Our men, who of course slept in their clothes, were aroused in the morning by the woman visitor pulling the bed-clothes off them. Our board was not the most recherché imaginable. It consisted of hard tack, salted cucumbers and boiled turnips. Whilst on this survey, fortunately for us, a poor old woman died and Mr. Prosser and I were invited to the wake and the funeral. We went to the latter which took place at Beaverton, then a small place but having at least one tavern; it was probably some 13 miles from the funeral's place of starting. The body was put upon a sleigh, although it was summer time, or fall, and no snow upon the ground, but there being no wheel carriages to be had in those days in Mara it was the best that they could do. One would imagine that the poor old lady would have been jolted out of her coffin going over the numerous pieces of corduroy road. We walked behind the sleigh to Beaverton and were frequently refreshed on the way by whiskey dealt out to us by the daughter of the deceased, a woman of about forty, who carried the crathur in a black bottle and gave it to us out of a tin pepper-box.

When the procession arrived at Beaverton Mr. Prosser and I dropped out and had a good square meal at the tavern—a thing we had not enjoyed for about six weeks.

1850-51

In 1850 Mr. Dennis was employed in laying out parts of the Townships of Bentinck and Glenelg. We walked behind an ox-team which carried our possessions and camp equipage from Owen Sound, then a small village, to near where the Saugeen River crosses the Owen Sound road. I well remember remarking to Mr. Dennis as we walked behind some of the provisions that there was a horrible smell and that it was like a sewer. He replied: "You smell the pork you will have to eat the next six months, my boy."

On this survey I was given charge of a party for the first time. Two parties were run part of the time, Mr. Dennis taking one and I the other—one taking the concession roads and the other the side roads—each trying to be first at the intersection. At one time the snow was very deep and I urged my party to hurry up and beat the boss by being at the intersection first. They did their best and got to where the lines should cross late in the afternoon and we were surprised neither to see nor to hear anything of the other party. Having several miles to walk to camp we did not remain long waiting for them, and getting no answer to our repeated shouts started for camp. We had to walk the last mile or two by torch-light. When we arrived in camp we found the other party busy making snow-shoes from pieces of dry cedar. Mr. Dennis' men, most of whom were middleaged, found the snow so deep that they refused to go out, and decided to get some dry cedar and make snow-shoes for both parties. My men tried the home made snow-shoes, but said they would not wear them, preferring to break track in turns, which they did, but found it to be hard work. On our way to camp by torch-light one of my chainmen, an old and a very credulous fellow lately from the Old Country, had a nasty knock across the eyes with a branch, and one of the men told him that he saw fire fly out of his eye and the foolish fellow fully believed it, and frequently told people that it was a fact for so and so saw it.

Mr. C. L. Davies, my chief chainman, and I had a very unpleasant experience one night. A settler wished to show us some hospitality and invited us to sleep in his bed. We accepted the offer, but were horrified to find after we had got very comfortably asleep that he had crept in at the foot of the bed, and that his feet were sharing our pillows.

1851-52

Part of the last year of my apprenticeship and the summer and autumn of the year in which I obtained my diploma I was employed under Mr. Dennis in laying out the Indian Reserves on the north side of Lake Huron. We commenced at Parry Island and ended at the Soo. We had a very nice sail-boat called the "Upper Canada," and had an enjoyable time generally. The scenery amongst the islands resembles in many places that of the islands in the Saint Lawrence.

I remember that we were encamped on an island not far from "Grumbling" Point, which is very difficult to get around with a sail-boat unless the wind is fair. Our guide came to me one morning about four o'clock and told me that we had better make sail as fast as we could for

the wind was fair for us. I called all hands up, and, although prettv tired after a hard day's work, all but one got up and loaded the boat. There was one man however, my first chainman, who had strong objections to getting up before the day was aired, and he refused. I told the men to take down the tent and leave him on the island, when finding I was serious my gentleman aroused himself. Unfortunately for his comfort we had to make a still earlier start next day, for we had not succeeded in getting around Grumbling Point, but on this occasion my friend did not require calling twice.

There were many rattlesnakes upon some of these reserves; we killed eight one Sunday—"better day, better deed." Mr. Dennis had one of his party bitten on the finger. Mr. Dennis promptly took his razor (surveyors shaved in those days, fortunately for the bitten man) and cut the bitten piece out, put some gunpowder on the wound and applied a match. By this treatment without loss of time, he probably saved the poor fellow's life.

The last reserve I laid out was near the Soo. My instructions were to "begin at a pine tree at Maskinonge Bay (this tree had probably been squared and marked); thence north 43° E. (true if possible, if not magnetic and ascertain true) twelve and one-half miles. Then due north 12 miles; when near river (on which look out for Vidal's posts for mineral location) send party back to take batteau around up the river at head of Echo Lake; from here take a supply of provisions at line at end of twelve miles on north and south line. Start due west and run fifteen and three-quarter miles; during this time you may perhaps get supplies up Garden River, to which point batteau had better be sent. At end of east and west lines turn due south and run to crest of mountains north of River St. Mary's; from here run trial line down to boundary which Indians will show you at Partridge Point. Measure offset and calculate direction of true line to close, which run, taking angle between it and the first line where difference begins. When concluded make way to Penetang and so home.

The distances above were taken from Bayfields' chart, and agreed to by the Indians and Mr. Keating, their interpreter, and Mr. Dennis.

When I got to the crest of the mountains I could see St. Mary's River. I thought that if I had a smoke made at the post I could come pretty close to it, and determined to send a couple of men down to it and make a smoke, which when made we saw from the mountain crest. I took the bearing and ran the line some three miles from top of mountain

and came within two feet of the post, which I moved into my blazed line. The season was well advanced and the steamer was soon to make her last trip, so that I was afraid to adhere literally to my instructions, for in those days there was no C.P.R. to take me home.

I had a rather pleasant experience at the end of this survey. I had no money to bring my party to Penetanguishene, and only an order from Mr. Dennis on the Captain or Purser, I forget which, of the regular boat, and as it had met with an accident and been replaced by another I was doubtful as to whether my order would prove to be of any service to me. Meeting one Archie Dunlop, a well-known cattle dealer, trading from Penetang to the Bruce Mines and other places on Lake Huron, I told him my story. He kindly offered to lend me all the money I required to pay the passage of myself and party, and also advised me to take all my party down cabin passage, as the boat was so slow that it would cost more to pay deck fare with meals charged extra, than cabin fare with meals included. I took his advice and took cabin passage for all. I may say here that the order was accepted, and Archie's kindness was not trespassed upon, but I felt the generous offer very much, the more so as I had met him only once before.

1857

On Saturday, the 17th January, 1857, I put in a miserably cold night, whilst surveying the road line from Lake Couchiching to Muskoka River. We had a ridge tent, but no stove, nor any means of having a fire inside and we had not too many blankets. The fire outside roasted one side of us, whilst the other side was freezing; the thermometer registered 38° below zero. On the survey of this road I had with me a gentleman who is one of our city ex-aldermen, and he used to sleep in all the clothes he could pile on—over-coat, boots and mitts.

In making road line surveys I thought it would be well to show some of the features of the country on my map on each side of my line. Having with me an Indian who knew the country well, I got him to sketch the lakes and streams near the line, and showed them on my plan. Of course this made a more symmetrical map and also made more square inches than the bare road line—and we were paid by the square inch!

The late David Gibson was much amused at the remark made by Mr. Cauchon (the then Commissioner of Crown Lands) upon seeing my plan. He said: "Meester Geebson, there ess no getting over you surveyors. Eef you pay them by the day they fool away their

time, and eef you pay them by the eench — Mon Dieu: look at thees plan! !"

1858-59

During parts of the years 1858 and 1859 I was engaged surveying the township of Lutterworth. There are numerous small lakes in this township and one large one—Gull Lake. At the time the survey was made it abounded in beavers. We were fortunate in having an old hunter in our party who killed a good many, and we were glad to have them served up for our suppers. They were in camp thought to be excellent eating, but on sending one home I was informed that it was not relished much, but then you see they had not the hunger-sauce that a bush life gives a man.

In surveying the townships of Esten, Spragge and Salter in 1860-61, I had occasion to cross a lake about 1¼ miles wide. We made a raft and my cousin (F. L. Foster), an axeman and I went across on it all right enough, but when we had completed our work the raft had soaked so much water that it would bring only two back again. There was a small island about a quarter of a mile from the southerly shore, and Foster, who was an excellent swimmer, said that he would swim the mile from the north shore to the island if I would swim the quarter mile. He did his part like a duck, but I lost heart altogether when I attempted my part, and had to lay hold of the raft. So long as I could just touch it I felt safe. However, we all arrived safely in due time.

There were several rather interesting circumstances connected with this survey. One of the men, a Mohawk half-breed, was very fond of whiskey, as was also the cook—a great friend of his. The Mohawk frequently pleaded illness and unfitness for work. I noticed at the same time that my supply of liquor was diminishing very fast, and suspected the cook and Mohawk of helping themselves in some way or other. My first chainman thought he would try an experiment, so put some tartar emetic in a bottle of whiskey one morning when the Mohawk pleaded sickness, and placed it so that there would be little difficulty in these worthies finding it. When we returned at night we found that Mr. Mohawk had been really very sick and was not at all well pleased with the trick that had been played upon him.

Knowing that Indians do not like to work long at one job, I had made those hired by me on this survey sign an agreement that they would remain and work faithfully until the end of the survey or forfeit whatever money was due them. One man, an elderly one, named Esque-meaux, a man I frequently sent to La

Cloche for letters and provisions, did not return when sent on his last trip, and when paying off the party at Little Current I requested the interpreter to give him a good fright and tell him that there was no money coming to him as he had left without leave before the end of the survey. The poor fellow was well frightened and promised never to serve any other surveyor such a shabby trick. He was highly delighted when he got his money. I have heard since that Mr. Niven, one of our ex-Presidents, had Esquemeaux afterwards and found him an excellent man.

During the time of this survey H. R. H. the Prince of Wales visited Canada, and my provisions getting short and money for obtaining more being exhausted, I determined to visit Toronto, raise the wind and get a fresh supply. I killed two birds with one stone, for I saw the Prince and also got my fresh stock of provisions, amongst them being a barrel of home-made mixed pickles, which were much appreciated by the party.

On returning to my survey I met three of my party at La Cloche and with them started off for camp, calling at store camp for supplies. One man reached the camp that night, but I was too much played out and remained out all night a mile or more from camp. It was a beautifully moonlit night, but too decidedly cold to sleep without blankets and we had none with us, so were very glad when it was light enough for us to proceed on our journey.

After finishing the townships of Esten and Spragge we started from Serpent Bay, on the ice, about three p.m., walked about three miles and camped for the night, which was an awfully rough one. On getting up in the morning we found about four inches of snow on our blankets. After breakfast we started and walked to the mouth of Spanish River, a distance of about eighteen miles, with snow and sleet in our faces nearly all the way—and oh! how cold! We had to drag our provisions and camp equipage on roughly made hand-sleighs. Several of us were pretty well played out and were more than pleased when we saw the mast of a schooner that was frozen in at the mouth of the river. It put new life into us.

There was only one man, if I remember rightly, on the schooner when we got there, but he was afterwards joined by two others who were bringing a barrel of whiskey from the Bruce mines to trade with the Indians. I think I may safely say that we all sampled that same barrel. In the morning we started off for La Cloche and made arrangements with the Hudson Bay factor there for such

supplies as we might need for the survey of the Township of Salter. In walking up Spanish River I was bringing up the rear and was carrying my tripod, the men who preceded me all carrying loads. They had all got safely over a bad place in the ice where there was quite a current. When I came along I broke through. One of the men called out, "Save the tripod." Another more considerate one sang out, "Damn the tripod; save the man!" However, both were saved, and the man was not sorry to reach the store shanty he had made on the bank of the river and in which he had something to keep out the cold.

1880-81 MANITOBA

I left Toronto on 29th July, 1880, to re-survey two townships on the Riding Mountains. Taking the steamer "Frances Smith" at Collingwood we had an exceedingly pleasant trip all the way from Toronto to Duluth. Our jolly travelling party consisted chiefly of relatives of one of my surveying party. Mr. Edward Gooderham, who when writing home afterwards said: "I can get through all my work and manage the food, but at washing I am a failure." The steamer called at Owen Sound and took on board a Miss Webb, a school teacher, and a brother—a young boy of about twelve years—who were on their way to Rapid City. Miss Webb informed me that she was going to keep house for her brothers who were out there. "Take my word for it," said I "you will be married before a year is out." "Oh, no," she said, "I am going to keep house for my brothers." Nevertheless she was married inside of six months.

I left Miss Webb and her young brother at Winnipeg to wait for an elder brother who was to take her to Rapid City. They overtook me, however, two days after I left, just as we were having breakfast. I persuaded them to join us in our matutinal meal for they had not had theirs, and I advised Miss Webb to leave her ox-cart and take my buckboard, being more comfortable to ride in. Thus we travelled together for several days to the ever-to-be remembered music of the Red River carts.

The first township, which I re-surveyed was a fearfully rough one, and if the surveyor who took the original contract took it at anything less than a good round figure I don't wonder at his scamping his work. It was while moving camp in this township that I learned of the marriage of my late travelling companion, and strange to say, my informant was her new father-in-law, and he drove the team with my camp equipage.

One of the longest tramps of my life was on the 14th of January, 1881, travel-

ling from my first township to the second. We had a double team and a single horse; the team consisted of a horse and an ox yoked together; the single "horse" was an Indian pony, which gave out before we got half way to our destination. Although the distance was only about 30 miles it took us from 5 a.m. till 10 p.m. to accomplish it. When we started it was beautifully bright and clear, the moon was about at the full, but it was bitterly cold. We had to keep moving for there was no place to stop at until we reached a settler's shanty, our objective point. Certainly we stopped once or twice on the road to boil the kettle and have a meal, but were mightily glad to get to the shanty, have a good supper and go to bed—although the bed was on the floor of the said shanty. A tramp of 17 hours with the thermometer at 20° below zero gave me all I cared about having.

After completing my survey we made for Minnedosa, where I hired a horse and buggy, on May 2nd, and drove to Grand Valley to see a friend who lives opposite where Brandon now stands. After spending the night at my friend's, I returned to Minnedosa in the morning. In August, 1880, when I first saw the site of Brandon there were no houses; only the tents of the C.P.R. were standing there. To-day it is a populous city. It was supposed by many that Grand Valley would be chosen for the town plot. It was then a stirring little place containing 10 tents and 15 wooden buildings. While at Grand Valley I visited the grave of my old friend, Archie McNabb, who had died shortly before whilst on a Government survey in the neighborhood. He lies buried in a school section near the village. We left Grand Valley on the 16th of May by the steamer "City of Winnipeg," at 3 a.m., arriving at Winnipeg at 5 p.m. on the following day, and in Toronto at 6:30 a.m. on the 22nd, in good time for the Queen's Birthday.

Dear Queen!—she who has for nearly 60 years reigned over so vast an empire and in whose crown our own dear country, "Fair Canada, Land of the Maple Leaf," shines so bright a jewel—may she be long spared to occupy in health and strength her glorious throne, and when she is called home by the King of kings may her natal day, known to us all so well as "the 24th," our most charming and best enjoyed outing day, coming, as it does, in a month which in this Dominion is so fresh and fair and sweet, continue to be celebrated as a public holiday in perpetual remembrance of so noble and so good a woman and so greatly beloved a sovereign as is our Supreme Lady Victoria the Good, whom God preserve!