

Building the Bobcaygeon Road

by Michael Shirley

In the autumn of 1856, a group of men from the Bobcaygeon area took axes, picks and shovels to begin the job of clearing a trail through the forest along the boundary between Victoria and Peterborough counties.

They had been hired to construct an access road ten and a half miles long into Somerville Township, but they were in fact beginning work on a project which would open the Haliburton Highlands, facilitate the creation of a number of settlements, provide a corridor to the interior for hundreds of land hungry immigrants and eventually, it was hoped, link Bobcaygeon with Lake Nipissing, 110 miles to the north.

While the construction of what became known as the Bobcaygeon Road began in 1856, the ambitious undertaking was simply another step in land development programs initiated by the government of Upper Canada during the previous four decades.

Sixty years earlier, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, settlement in Upper Canada was confined to a narrow ribbon of land known as "The Front", along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River and Lakes Ontario and Erie. There was some penetration in the south-west toward Georgian Bay and up the Ottawa Valley, but most of what is now central Ontario was untouched by civilization and thought of as "The Wilds" or simply dismissed as wasteland. The ease of transporting goods and people by water meant that early settlers chose locations on "The Front" rather than the rugged interior of the province.

Here, travel was primitive at best. In the winter, when the ground was frozen, the roads were adequate, but during the summer travel was a gruelling ordeal and in the spring the roads were nearly impassable. But with an increase in immigration, chiefly from the British Isles, and a growing native population, the need for cheap accessible land and an extended road system north of the Great Lakes became obvious.

Treaty signed

Access to some of that land became available in 1818 when, on November 5, chiefs representing six tribes of the Chippewa Nation, surrendered nearly two million acres (about 4000 sq. miles) of land between Rice Lake and the 45th parallel. This tract of land encompassed what later became Peterborough and Victoria Counties and a number of other townships including a substantial part of present day Haliburton County. (The 45th parallel crosses Highway 35 at the north end of Mountain Lake).

The provisional agreement, drawn up by the government, promised to pay, "Yearly and for every

year forever, the sum of seven hundred and forty pounds currency in goods at Montreal price." (\$2960).

After the document was signed, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, suggesting the terms of payment were not "sufficiently explicit and defined", clarified the agreement, promising ten dollars in goods at Montreal prices, only to Indians born before the treaty was signed. So much for, "Yearly and every year forever."

That same year, 25 hardy souls, immigrants from England, travelled north on the Otonabee River and settled at a place that became known as Scott's Plains. The village that sprang up on the shores of the river was later named Peterborough, in honour of Peter Robinson, who brought hundreds of families from Ireland to the region under emmigration programs sponsored by the British government.

*Pioneers of the
Kawarthas had no
easy life, but
they were of hardy
stock, and managed
to persevere*

These pioneers of the Kawarthas had to battle typhoid fever, influenza and a hostile climate in order to escape the potato famine and political oppression at home, but they persevered and succeeded in establishing a new life in their adopted country.

As more settlers moved in, some immigrants, others from various parts of Canada or the northern United States, towns and villages were established in the townships around Peterborough. Mills and factories were built, canals were dug, a railroad built, and roads constructed through the forest to link the thriving communities.

During the two decades leading up to confederation, the government foresaw the need for further expansion. There was increasing concern about the rise in emmigration to the United States due in part to a lack of winter employment here, but also because land south of the border was more available and less expensive.

A decision was made to open up the back country between Ottawa and Georgian Bay by constructing a network of colonization roads; seven running north-south and six running east-west.

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Land sold for 50¢ an acre

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The government hoped to establish agriculture, mining and lumbering in this previously unsettled region and although there was strong opposition from lumber barons, who argued the land was not suitable for farming, the government persisted.

50¢ an acre

In 1853, "An Act to Amend the Law for the Sale and Settlement of Public Lands" was announced, offering land for sale at 50 cents an acre "en bloc" and "Free Grants to actual settlers in the vicinity of a public road in any new settlement."

Those purchasing land would be required to build a habitable dwelling measuring 16 by 18 feet and clear and cultivate a specified amount of acreage on their one hundred acre lots each year.

Homesteaders receiving free grants were under the same requirements but were also responsible for the maintenance of the road adjacent to their property, an agreement which would prove to be of major significance for the future durability of the roads.

The following year the Bureau of Agriculture,

the agency which became responsible for the colonization roads, appropriated 60,000 pounds to open up "The Waste Lands of the Province" by constructing a number of roads including "A road from Bobcaygeon in the Township of Verulam, northward as far as the 6th concession of Somerville" a distance of about ten miles.

It wasn't long however before the bureau decided the road should extend as far north as Lake Nipissing. To prepare for the project the land first had to be surveyed.

While surveyors with the Royal Engineers had explored the region in the early part of the century, they were mainly concerned with inland waterways and possible mineral deposits.

Robert Bell was the first land surveyor to make his mark on the Highlands. Bell's Line, which he began in 1847, extended from the Madawaska River to the Bracebridge area along the northern boundary of many future townships including Guilford, Stanhope and Hindon. In his log, Bell described the land he crossed as being, "uneven and hilly throughout, but in my opinion the chief

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Harsh conditions and limited access to amenities tested the mettle of settlers who were enticed to homestead along the newly opened Bobcaygeon Road. (Ontario Archives photo).

'Great abundance of rocks'

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part of it is quite fit for settlement."

Foreseeing a problem that would test the patience of many future homesteaders, he commented, "The greatest objection that exists in respect to the whole territory is the great abundance of rocks." In his report he also emphasised that any roads that were to be built could not follow a straight line as was the practice in the flat lands to the south.

In 1854, deviating only slightly from a line laid out from Bobcaygeon, Michael Deane ran a guide line from the north east corner of Somerville Township where Kinmount now stands to Bell's Line, exploring the country for three to five miles on each side of the line and recommended it as a practical route for a road.

He also cut a line to Gull Lake but rejected the route as impractical "Owing to its roughness as well as Gull Lake presenting a permanent obstacle." He described the land around Gull Lake as being, "Very unproductive and holds out but few inducements to the settler while to the hunter or sportsman its resources are inexhaustable."

Construction begins

On October 16, 1856, the actual construction of the Bobcaygeon Road began. The Sheriff of

Peterborough County, William Conger, who had been lobbying for years to have the project carried out, decreed that the road should be known as the Bobcaygeon Road.

While our research has not uncovered any reports of the methods of construction, wages or working conditions, contemporary accounts of other colonization roads indicate men were paid one dollar a day, while three dollars per week were deducted for food and lodgings. The workers, who were seldom allowed to live at home, probably considered their room and board overpriced since the food was of poor quality and living conditions were primitive. It was also reported that any worker who dared talk of a strike would be threatened with instant dismissal.

Work was carried out either by private contractors under tender, or by the government under the supervision of the Crown land agent.

Certainly the work must have been arduous. The labourers used hand tools to cut trees, slash brush and level the grade, while horses or oxen were used to haul boulders, stumps and logs that were laid along the marshes to create a corduroy road. Logs were also used to construct bridges over the rivers and creekbeds.

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Surveyor maps eight townships

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By the end of 1856 five miles of road had been completed.

Construction continued past the original destination and continued north approaching the Burnt River by the end of 1857. Meanwhile, surveyor James Fitzgerald had gone ahead to establish the boundaries of eight townships in the west half of the Haliburton Highlands.

Travelling up the Gull River, he met squatters on the shores of Moore Lake, Gull Lake and for five miles along the river north of Gull Lake. Obviously in spite of observations made earlier by Michael Deane, people were willing to settle there, despite the lack of a road.

Continuing north, Fitzgerald carried out his survey and, in his report to the commissioner, he described 40% of the townships he explored as being suitable for immediate cultivation with the best prospects being in Minden Township where 60% of the land was well suited for farming.

He also wrote of possible mineral deposits, bountiful game and stands of timber, "That would satisfy all the needs of the inhabitants."

By the time Fitzgerald had completed his report, in late 1858, the Bobcaygeon Road was open for wheeled traffic to one mile north of the Burnt River.

Bleak prospects

In the spring of 1859, Richard Hughes, the road superintendant and Crown land agent, submitted the first of his reports to the commissioner P.M. Vankoughnet. It painted a bleak picture. He wrote in part "I find that a great majority of the settlers are very poor, in fact, if the work does not go on during the summer on the road I think some will have to leave."

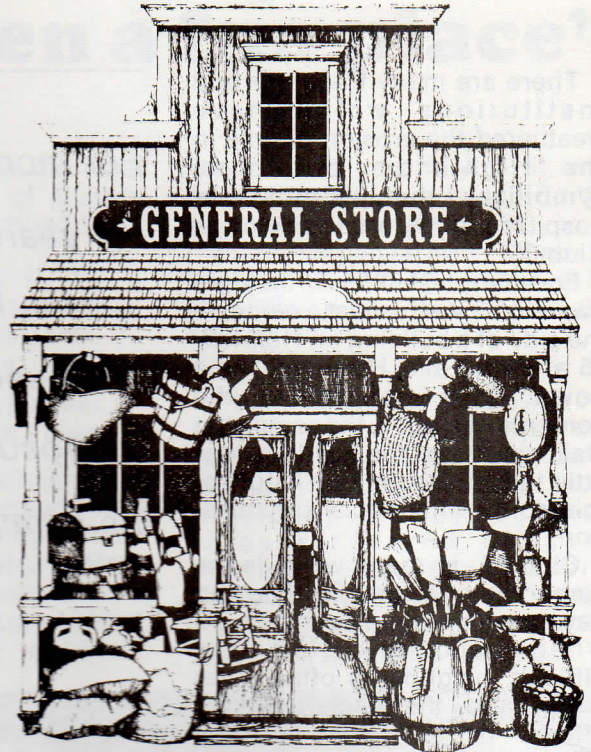
But the despair the homesteaders may have felt eventually gave way to celebration. The road continued northward and, when it reached the Gull River, the settlers and road workers threw a party that lasted four days and five nights!

In his year-end report on the free grant settlers, (he did not assess the homesteaders who purchased land), Hughes wrote of an abundant crop on the nearly 400 acres of land farmed along the road, a yield, "Which will not be exceeded by any other I have seen in the Province."

Thirty-six miles of road had been completed, 697 people had settled along the road, (the majority of them from the British Isles), 32 barns and 126 houses had been built. The first homes in the region were scarcely more than shanties consisting of log walls, a dirt floor and a roof covered with bark,

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Hughes had predicted Minden would soon progress once land was opened

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scooped-out cedar poles or cedar shakes. From the time land had been first offered for sale in Minden township on August 24 until the end of the year, Hughes sold 4200 acres.

He had sold 14,000 acres that year in the three townships, and predicted sales would double the following year when lands in Snowdon, Lutterworth and Stanhope Townships were placed on the market, noting one hundred people had already offered payment, with most of those people "in actual possession and working on the lands." Included in these were 25 families who had settled on the boundary between Stanhope and Minden Townships in advance of the road.

A village site

He recommended the land at the junction of the Gull River and the Bobcaygeon Road (lot 3) be surveyed and reserved as a village flat. With one store in place, Hughes wrote, "I have every reason to believe that a town would spring up rapidly if it was opened up for sale."

His advice was taken. Fitzgerald carried out the survey and the village was given official status with the establishment of the post office in 1860. Although the river crossing had become known locally as "Gull River", the post office inspector announced the village would be named Minden.

The Highland's first village was described in 1860 by one observer as a busy spot and the centre of a fine district. It boasted a general store, a mill on Beaver Creek, a tavern, post office, a school and regular church services were being presided over by itinerant preachers.

With the village expanding rapidly, work continued on the road. By March 30, 1860, the survey to Lake Nipissing had been completed, but not without a price being paid. Two men died and others in the survey party suffered from scurvy.

In the summer of 1861 work crews crossed the Peterson Road which had been chosen as an alternate route to Bell's Line.

Continuing north on the boundary between Stanhope and Hindon Township past Pine Springs, the road wound its way between lakes, around Trading Bay then across the Ox Tongue River. By the end of 1862 seventy miles of roadwork had been completed.

That year, 64 families settled on what was considered to be excellent farmland around Trading Bay. This was the beginning of the village of Cedar

Narrows which was later named Dorset.

Writing to the commissioner in January 1863, Hughes reported a population of 780 on free grant lands and the construction of 150 houses, 69 barns, two school houses and several missionary stations. In addition to a number of mills that had been built in the southern townships, three saw mills were being erected in the townships of Stanhope and Minden, and a saw and grist mill had just been completed on the Gull River north of Minden and two other sawmills were operating successfully in Snowdon Township and in Kinmount. For the benefit of the weary and thirsty travellers there were ten houses of entertainment along the road.

Since the agency had been created in January 1859, Hughes had sold 1000 lots containing over 90,000 acres. "When final payments have been made," he wrote, "the cost of survey and construction of the Bobcaygeon Road will have been paid and a new county opened up which has

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Farmers quickly discovered the reality of the land bordering the Bobcaygeon Road. (Ontario Archives photo).

Road saw extensive use

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hitherto been altogether misunderstood."

Road deteriorates

But, while progress was being made in the region, there were problems. Frosts in the late spring and early fall coupled with a drought during the summer of 1862 had seriously affected crop yields. As well, the road was badly in need of repair.

"Extensive lumbering in the region and the great traffic over the road has had the effect of cutting it up in some places so as to make it difficult for heavily loaded teams to travel a reasonable distance each day," Hughes wrote.

A year later he reported only a small increase in settlers but evidence of greater prosperity due to the improved harvest.

But again he noted, there were serious deficiencies in the road which had impeded the sale of land. "From Bobcaygeon to Burnt River the road is just passable. From Burnt River the road for six miles is almost in an impassable state, and in the spring and fall of the year is really dangerous for teams, accidents frequently occurring on it."

The reason the road had deteriorated to the point of being hazardous is that it was not being maintained. There were no municipal or county workers to keep the road up to standards. The free grant settlers were solely responsible for road repairs, but when the roadbed was most in need of work in the spring and fall, the homesteaders were busy planting or harvesting their all important crops. In the summer, much of their time was spent

clearing land as required under their contracts with the government. As well, there were long sections of road which were devoid of settlers. Add to that, a resentment against the loggers for the damage they were causing, and it is no wonder the road was falling apart.

Unable to depend on statute labour, the Crown Land Agency, which had taken over the responsibility for the colonization roads, decided to spend an additional \$16,000 on repairs. This was about half the original construction costs.

A number of deviations from the roadbed were made as well, the most important being an alternate route around Scott's Hill two miles south of Minden. But there would be no more new construction on the Bobcaygeon Road. It had reached the end of the line.

Perhaps Vankoughnet and his colleagues in the agency were beginning to realize their grand scheme to create a mining and farming district in the Ottawa Huron tract was bound to fail. There were few mineral deposits worth exploiting and the soil which had once seemed so promising in some regions, was too thin and was quickly depleted.

The lumbermen who had warned the government of the folly of the roads program did benefit, and lumbering remained the region's most important industry for more than 70 years.

Settlers leave

During the 1860's and 70's there was an exodus of settlers to northern Ontario and the prairies.

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Road never reached L. Nipissing

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leaving behind abandoned sections of road, farms and villages. As for the Bobcaygeon Road, it never did reach Lake Nipissing, but it cannot be considered a complete failure. The section between Brady's Lake and Dorset was in service until the 1930's when it was made obsolete after Highway 35 underwent major improvements.

The gravel road between Minden and Highway 118 (The Vankoughnet Road), relatively unchanged since it was first constructed, still remains in use although on a limited basis.

This is the only stretch, along the main street in Minden, that retains the name Bobcaygeon Road. The route between Minden and Bobcaygeon has been continually upgraded and still provides an important corridor to the Kawarthas along highways 121 and 649.

In the end, it is ironic that the character of the land that surveyors Bill and Deane saw as impediments to development, the uneven and hilly terrain, the lakes which were barriers to the roadbuilders and the abundance of rock, have now become assets. It is this raw, natural beauty that continues to attract summer residents and visitors to the Highlands ensuring the economic well being

of the area. Compared to "The Front" with its urban sprawl and everything it has become today, the Highlands remains the back country, the wilds of the near north.

The following publications were consulted in the preparation of this article:

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Quotations:

- Comments by Belle & Deane from MUSKOKA & HALIBURTON 1615 - 1875, edited by Florence B. Murry, published by University of Toronto Press.
- REPORTS TO CROWN LAND COMMISSIONER, from Richard Hughes, original reports stored at Archives of Ontario.

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