An Unsung Canadian: Robert Bell

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The Hudson’s Bay Company cover shown on page 14 (Figure 2) was posted at Mattawa, July 23rd, 1901 to Mr. Robert Bell at the Geological Dept., Ottawa and received July 24th. Who sent it? Did the letter originate at Mattawa? Was there a Hudson’s Bay Post at Mattawa or did the letter come from the post at Fort Temiskamingue by boat to be put on on the train to Ottawa? Who was Bell?

One does not read much Canadian mining exploration literature before one encounters the name of Robert Bell. While unrecognized today, this man left giant footprints in northern Ontario and Québec, Hudson Bay, Ungava and in Rupert’s Land (North West Territory) from the Athabaska River east to Hudson’s Bay, mapping and exploring the geology of these regions in annual summer trips over the period from 1857 until 1911.

Name any mining area in the “north” (and west) – Bruce Mines, Cobalt, Great Slave Lake, Michipicoten, Missanabie, Nipigon, Rat Portage, Red Lake, Sudbury, Wawa, the bitumen sands of the Athabaska country – Robert Bell had been there. The best source of information about Robert Bell is the BNAPS Exhibit #4 prepared by Gray Scrimgeour, which is still in print.

Born June 3rd, 1841, Bell was sent as an assistant on Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) field trips to the Magdalen River (Gaspe Peninsula) in 1857 and to the St. Lawrence River in 1858. In 1859, at the age of 18, he headed his own survey group. He completed a B.Sc. (civil engineering) at McGill University in 1861. From 1863 to 1867, he was on leave from the GSC, being appointed Interim Professor of Chemistry and Natural Science at Queen’s College (Kingston), although still carrying out surveys for the GSC in the summer months. He left his position at Queen’s in 1867 to work full time for the GSC. From 1869-1879, annual summer trips centred in the area between Lake Huron and Lake Superior north to James Bay (Moose Factory) and Hudson’s Bay as far as York Factory and Fort Churchill and west to the Red River Settlement, the Qu’Appelle River and Fort Pelly. Bell was promoted to Assistant Director of the GSC in 1876 and,...
studying in the winter months, received his Doctorate in Medicine and Surgery from McGill University in 1878. Letters were now addressed to Doctor Bell, not Professor Bell.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the interest in the GSC was focused on the Arctic, with voyages from Halifax to the Davis Strait and Ungava as well as extensive trips from Fort Temiskamingue to the Abitibi, the Montreal and upper Ottawa Rivers. He still found time to explore north of Lake Huron and the eastern part of Lake Superior above Sault Ste. Marie. He became Acting Director of the GSC from 1901-1906, was appointed Chief Geologist in 1906 but was never appointed to the position of Director. He continued working in the field, his interests still focused on the mineral-rich geology above the the north shore of Lake Huron. He retired at the end of 1908 but had one more trip ... to the Athabaska River (Fort Chipewyan) in 1911. He died in 1917.

Recently acquired at auction, a typical example of much of his correspondence shows that he was always “on the move”. (Fig. 3). This 1866, prepaid (5 cents), letter was sent from London, CW. (JY 4) to Bell at the GSC office (located in Montreal at that time), was re-directed to Kingston (JY 5), received and forwarded (JY 6) to Bruce Mines, Lake Superior (incorrect since it is east of the Sault on the north channel of Lake Huron behind St. Joseph’s Island). A faint receiving Bruce Mines, broken-circle postmark (JY 12) is shown on the front. As usual, Professor Bell was not there since the letter was consigned to Pay Dwr 3G to await his return. That particular summer, he was surveying Manitoulin Island and other islands in northern Lake Huron.3

Reading between the lines of Scrimgeour’s excellent documentation of Bell’s life,3 one can see that Dr. Bell was happiest in the field, loved the outdoors, the geological exploration and possessed the physical strength for long gruelling
trips by canoe or hiking through some God-awful country. He pioneered the concept of reconnaissance or track surveys across country by compass. He was an independent person, sometimes attending conferences when he was forbidden to do so. He had a close association with many Hudson’s Bay personnel, frequently mail being held at remote posts awaiting his return from the hinterland. He was well known internationally.

Having acquired Rupert’s Land from the Hudson’s Bay Company in the 1870s, the GSC was responsible for exploring this area as well as assessing the potential mineral wealth. In the late 1800s, Dr. Bell explored much of the north and western wilderness of the North West Territory, accurately mapping lakes and rivers where he travelled and preparing report of the significant geological features. It is not surprising that many of these locales became important mining enterprises in later years. ☛

REFERENCES: