

MOVING THE MAIL

Railway Construction in Southern British Columbia, 1898–1900

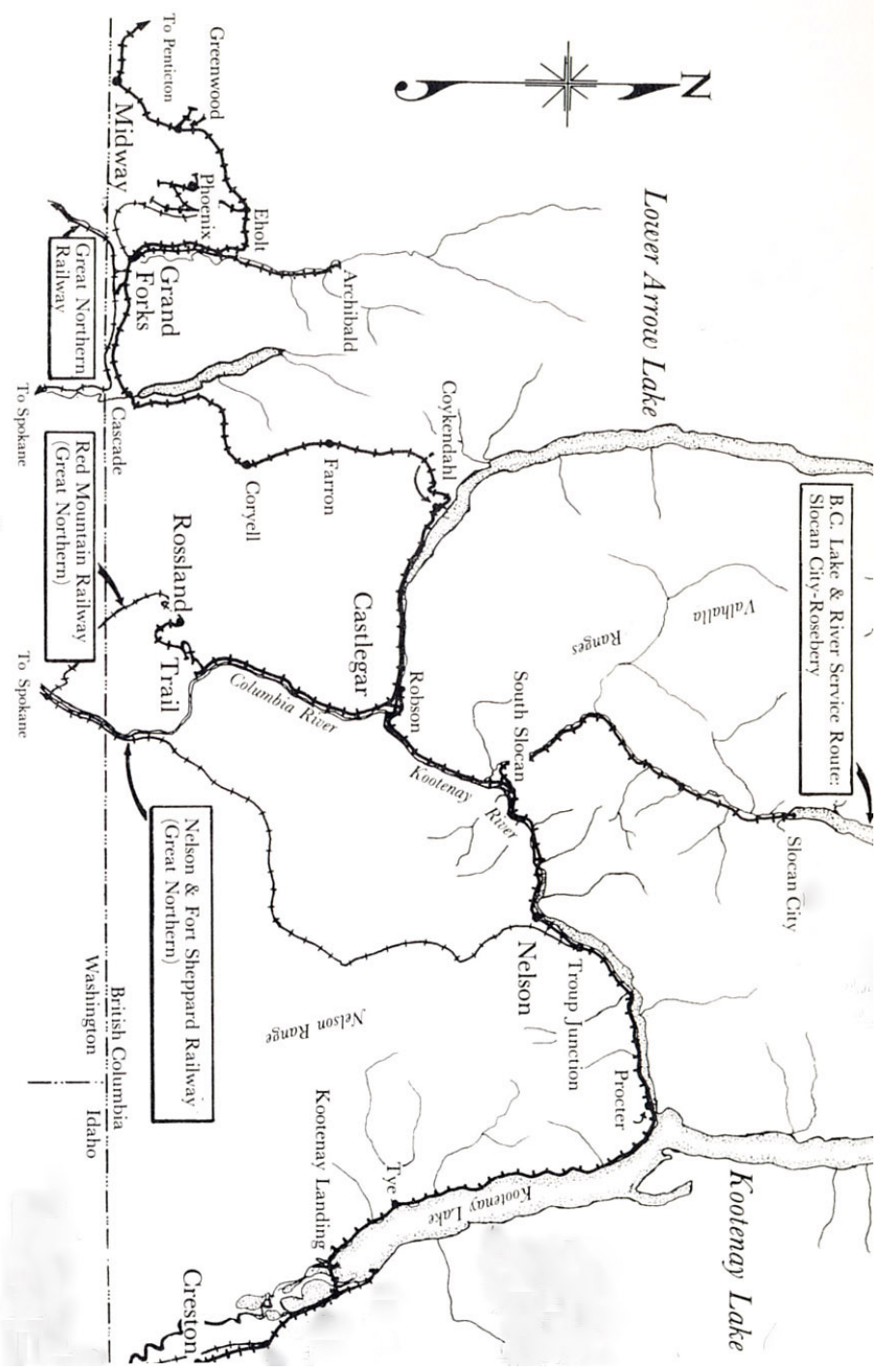
Gray Scrimgeour

Over three decades ago, at the St. Lawrence Hall bourse, I bought two British Columbia covers from the late Michael Head. Both covers are addressed to George G. Hare, Civil Engineer. I knew that they were related to the construction of the Columbia & Western Railway (C&W), but I could not fully explain them until I found a detailed history of the C&W in *Steam Along the Boundary*¹—the recently-published history of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the Great Northern Railway (GN) in the Boundary District of B.C. About a year ago, Tom Watkins sold me a third cover addressed to Hare. This article describes these three covers and their possible significance.

Fig. 1 is a map showing the portion of the CPR's southern B.C. route, between Midway and Creston. In the 1890s, several transportation systems reached the Kootenay region: railways from the United States and steamer routes on the lakes (which run north-south between the mountain ranges). Although there was forestry and some farming, the main products from the Kootenays were minerals. For example, the mines at Rossland were connected by rail to Spokane, Washington, which was the business centre for Kootenay mining. The CPR and the GN competed for access to the Kootenay mines. By 1898, the GN had acquired lines to both Nelson and Rossland.



Fig. 1. Map showing CPR lines in the Boundary and Kootenay Districts of BC.



The CPR countered by expanding westward from the prairies through the Crowsnest Pass, reaching Kootenay Landing and its steamer docks in late 1898.

F. A. Heinze of Butte, Montana came to Trail in 1895. He obtained a contract to process ore from the rich LeRoi Mine in Rossland. He was granted a B.C.-government charter to build a narrow-gauge railway between a smelter at Trail and the mine at Rossland. The charter also permitted Heinze to build a standard-gauge line from Trail to Penticton. His Rossland-Trail C&W opened in June 1896. The C&W Railway from Trail toward Penticton extended only to near Robson, the western terminus of a CPR line to Nelson. In financial trouble, Heinze sold the C&W and the Trail smelter to the CPR in early 1898. Acquisition of the C&W gave CPR authority to extend west to the mines of the Boundary District of B.C. It also provided the CPR with a provincial land grant and a federal cash subsidy. The CPR quickly started to build west from the Columbia River at Robson to Midway via the mining towns of Grand

Forks and Greenwood. William Francis Tye (1861–1932), the CPR's chief engineer, was put in charge of the construction of the C&W between Robson and Midway¹.

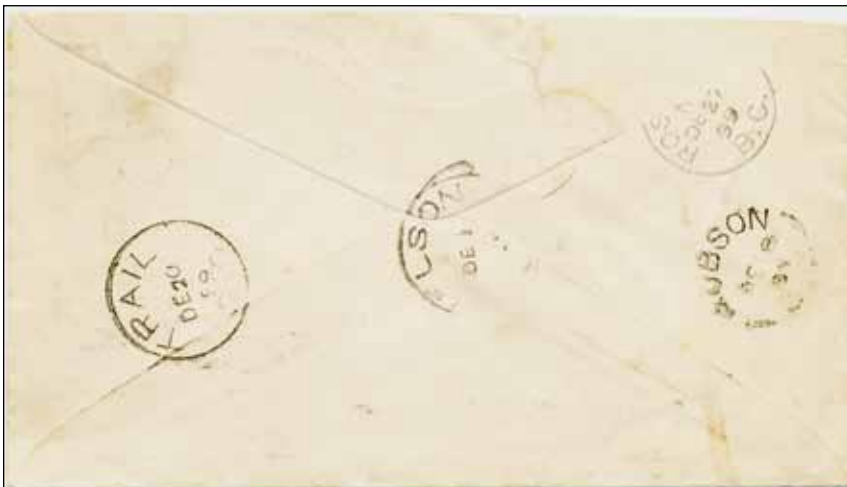
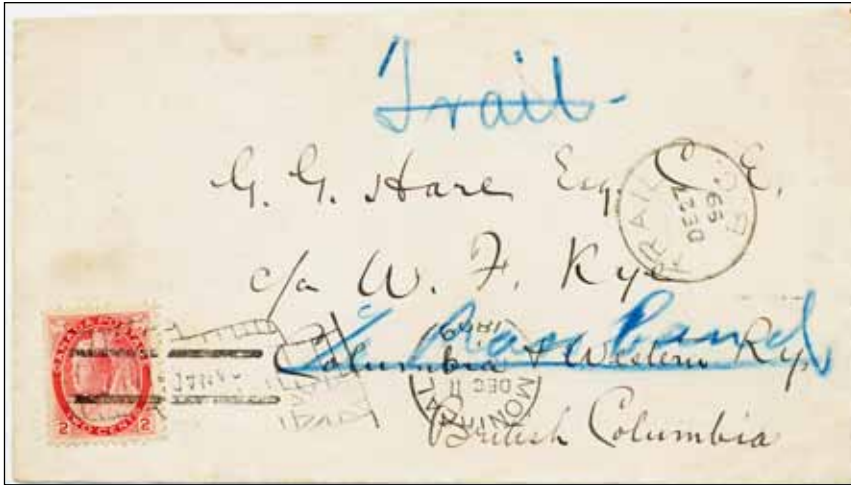
My earliest cover (Fig. 2) was mailed in Saint John, N.B. on November 15, 1898, addressed to "George G. Hare, Esq., c/o W.F. Tye, Trail, B.C. At F. M. Young's Camp." The only visible backstamp was applied at Trail on November 22. Tye and his assistant John Sullivan divided the 100-mile-long project into four 25-mile sections. F. M. Young was the engineer placed in charge of the first 25-mile section west of Robson. This section entailed a steep grade rising over 2,500 feet to the summit at McRae Pass. To be included was the 3,000-foot Bulldog Tunnel. Grading started in June 1898, and track-laying started in November 1898. When the cover was sent, Young's camp could have been any of several places along the line—perhaps at the community of Brooklyn on Arrow Lake, or carried to Tye via a wagon road that had been built from Arrow Lake to the grade and extended west to Cascade at the foot of Christina Lake.



Fig. 2. Cover from St. John, N.B. (November 15, 1898) to George Hare at F. M. Young's Camp.

The second cover (Fig. 3) was mailed at Montreal addressed simply to "G. G. Hare Esq. C.E., c/o W. F. Kye, Columbia & Western Ry, British Columbia." It was readdressed to Trail and then to Rossland. The readable postmarks on the cover are: Montreal, December 11; Robson, December 18; Nelson, December 18 or 19; Trail, December 20 and 27;

and Rossland, December 27. By this time, the C&W had reached Greenwood (passenger service reached Greenwood on November 20, 1899). Passenger service between Robson and Grand Forks had started on September 18, 1899 over temporary switchbacks around Bulldog Tunnel. The first train passed through Bulldog Tunnel on February 12, 1900.



Figs. 3 and 3A. Cover from Montreal (December 11, 1899) addressed to George Hare, c/o W. F. Kye [Tye], Columbia & Western Ry., British Columbia.

Tye and Hare must have been well known, because the cover addressed care of "W. F. Tye, C&W Railway, British Columbia" did reach Hare in Rossland. Perhaps Hare was working on one or more of the C&W's maintenance and development projects on either the Robson–Midway line or the rebuilt Trail–Rossland line. Or perhaps he was just visiting a friend there.

The final cover (Fig. 4) was mailed by F. M. Young at Fairview, B.C. (near Oliver) on July 11, 1900 to Hare in Winnipeg, c/o "W. F. Tye, Eng. Constr., C.P. Ry." Perhaps Young was in the Okanagan District surveying or helping plan the railway anticipated to be constructed west from Midway.

While the C&W had reached Midway on January 20, 1900, a CPR connection between Midway and Hope by the Kettle Valley Railway (KVR) waited more than a decade. The Midway–Penticton section was ready in October 1914. A route through Princeton, Merritt, and Spences Bridge was completed

by 1915. The KVR's Coquihalla route to Hope through the Cascade Mountains was not completed until July 1916.

The three covers I have described are all that I have seen related to the construction of the C&W Railway. Much has been written about the postal history of the construction of the CPR's main line, but almost nothing about the other CPR lines in B.C. Alex Price² lists 1898–1902 as the construction period for the C&W. All three of my covers fall in that period. I particularly like the cover shown in Fig. 2, an end-of-track type of letter. I would like to know more about the activities of Hare, Tye, and Young in southern B.C. between 1898 and 1900, and I would appreciate hearing of any other related covers.

References

1. Turner, R. D. and Wilkie, J. S. D. *Steam Along the Boundary*, Winlaw, B.C.: Sono Nis Press, 2007, pages 36–37.
2. Price, H. A. "The Canadian Pacific Railway and the Postal Historian." *PHSC Journal*, Issue 50, June 1987, pp. 77–85. ✉



Fig. 4. Cover from F. M. Young to George Hare in Winnipeg, mailed at Fairview, B.C. on June 11, 1900.