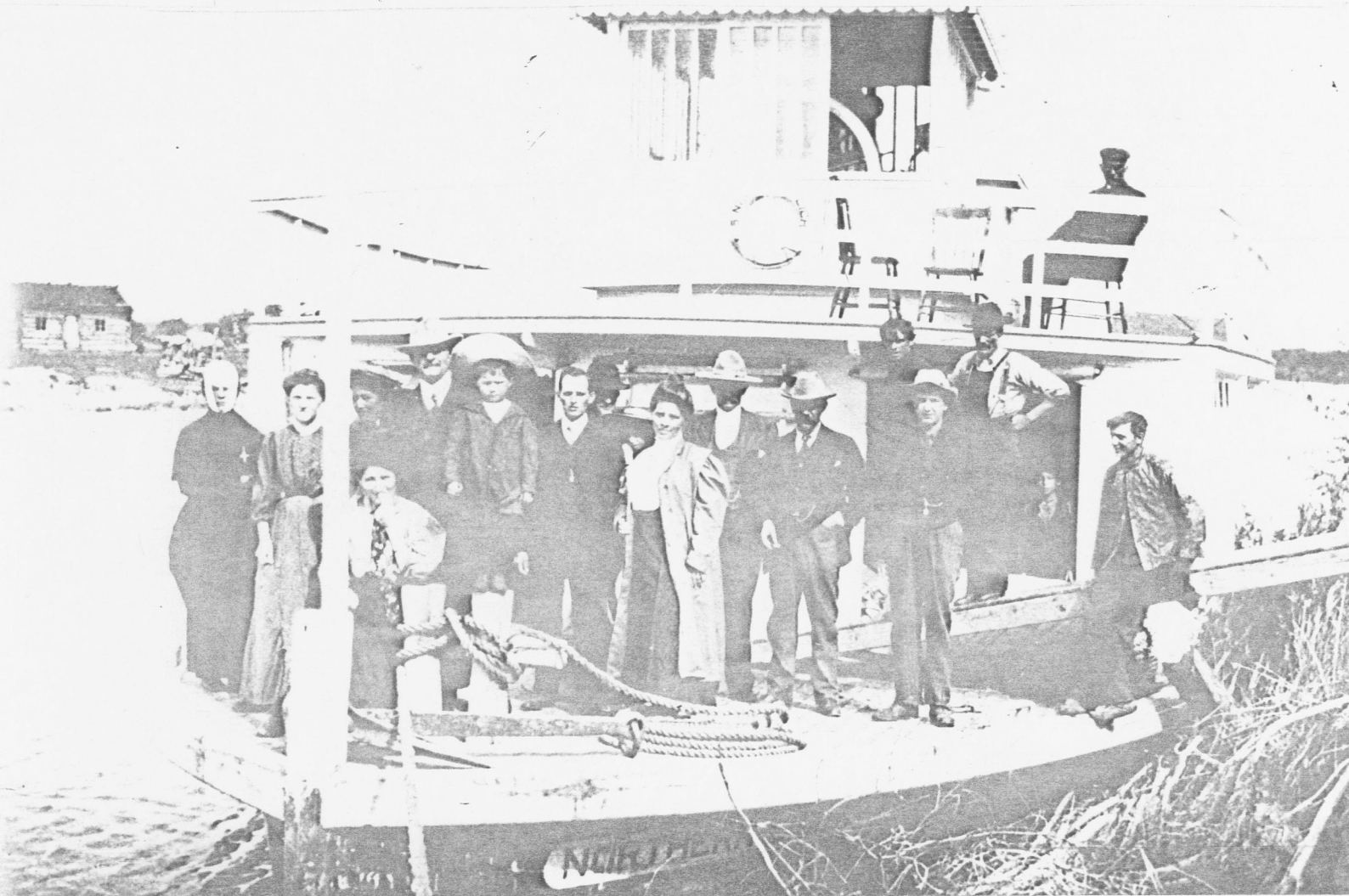


"The Athabasca River Story"



*Spring Boat from Athabasca
Leaving to Lesser Slave Lake*

- R.C.M.P. Archives

Prepared By:

THE ATHABASCA HISTORICAL SOCIETY - July 11th, 1984

THE ATHABASCA RIVER—TRANSPORTATION

The Athabasca River flows in a north-easterly direction from its source in the Columbia Icefields deep in the Rocky Mountains, then takes a dip south and suddenly turns north again.

It is the most southernly of the three great tributaries of the mighty Mackenzie and flows almost eight hundred miles into Lake Athabasca. The river served as the great highway to the north country for traders, missionaries, police and explorers. In earlier years, the explorers came in via the Clearwater River to the Athabasca River, and down to Fort Chipewyan, on to the Mackenzie River area.

In 1883 the C.P.R. reached Calgary which made it possible for the Hudson Bay Co. to find a shorter and easier way to Fort Chipewyan and the riches of the north. A trading post was established at the bend of the river, and was called Athabasca Landing. The Landing became the trans-shipping point for northern posts and Peace River. A warehouse was built where supplies could be stored, ready for shipment when the ice went out in the spring.

In 1882, John Walters of Edmonton was given the contract to build scows for the Hudson Bay Co. The building went on at the Landing all year round. Up to one hundred scows were built annually to transport thousands of tons of freight destined for settlements in the north. The scows held about 8 tons of freight each with a crew of about 6 men. Most of the scows were broken up at their destination and the lumber used for building, but a few returned with loads of furs.

To man these scows, a group assembled which came to be known as the "Athabasca Brigade". They were mainly Cree and half breed, many of whom came from the Lac La Biche area, some from Lesser Slave Lake and Lac Ste. Anne. They were independent,

carefree, strong and loyal to the few who could command their loyalty.

The river flows quickly for 165 miles downstream from Athabasca, during which time the crew and passengers made themselves as comfortable as possible among the packing boxes. Then the river becomes swifter and shallower, and breaks into a series of rapids. Further down at the Grand Rapids, the river drops thirty feet in a half of a mile. Here an island breaks the river into 2 streams. One is unnavigable, but the other could be conquered by a light scow, if handled skillfully by sweep and poles. Cargoes were unloaded at the head of the island and taken across by push carts and wooden rails to be re-loaded into the scows at the other end. Beyond this was a series of rapids, some of which demanded all the strength and skill of the brigade. Some scows were lost in this part of the river and more than one man drowned. Only the most experienced river men could guide the scows through conditions which changed a great deal from low to high water. These guides had the complete loyalty of their men, who responded instantly to their signals.

The few scows that returned up river with loads of furs, had to be pulled by the brigades, a crew of eight to ten men walking along shore with long ropes attached to the scows. This "tracking" was a dangerous and back breaking job. The bank was often slippery, and sometimes the men had to wade in water to cross to the other bank. Mosquitoes and horse flies were a constant menace. The trip took 15 to 23 days. After partaking of the rest and recreation offered at the Landing, the brigade would return to Fort McMurray for another trip up river.

In 1887 the sternwheeler "Athabasca" was built to navigate the waters between Mirror Landing, sixty miles upriver, down to the Grand Rapids. This boat was powered by wood. Great quantities were required, which created another industry in the area. At

Grand Rapids, her cargo had to be transferred to scows for the rest of the trip to Fort McMurray.

In 1882 the first of the sternwheelers the "Graham" was built at Fort Chipewyan and served Lake Athabasca. It was built by Captain John H. Smith and was 130 feet long with a 24 foot beam, to carry two tons of freight.

J.K. (Peace River Jim) Cornwall built many sternwheelers beginning in 1904. They carried freight, missionaries, police, explorers, prospectors, private traders and tourists on the waterways of the north. They served Lesser Slave Lake, the Athabasca River from Mirror Landing to the Grand Rapids and from Fort McMurray to Lake Athabasca, the Slave River to Great Slave Lake and the Mackenzie.

The Landing was a beehive of activity in those years. Then, in the summer of 1898 some 780 Klondikers from all over the world came to take the water route to the Mackenzie. This augmented the activity at the Landing where the river swarmed with boats of every conceivable kind. Young Jim Wallwork, from a ranch at Lethbridge purchased a little sternwheeler, the "Daisy Bell" in Edmonton, and had it hauled to the Landing. It made the trip down the Mackenzie, across the mountains and into the Yukon River, the only sternwheeler to accomplish this feat. Some of these Klondikers, on their return, stayed in Athabasca.

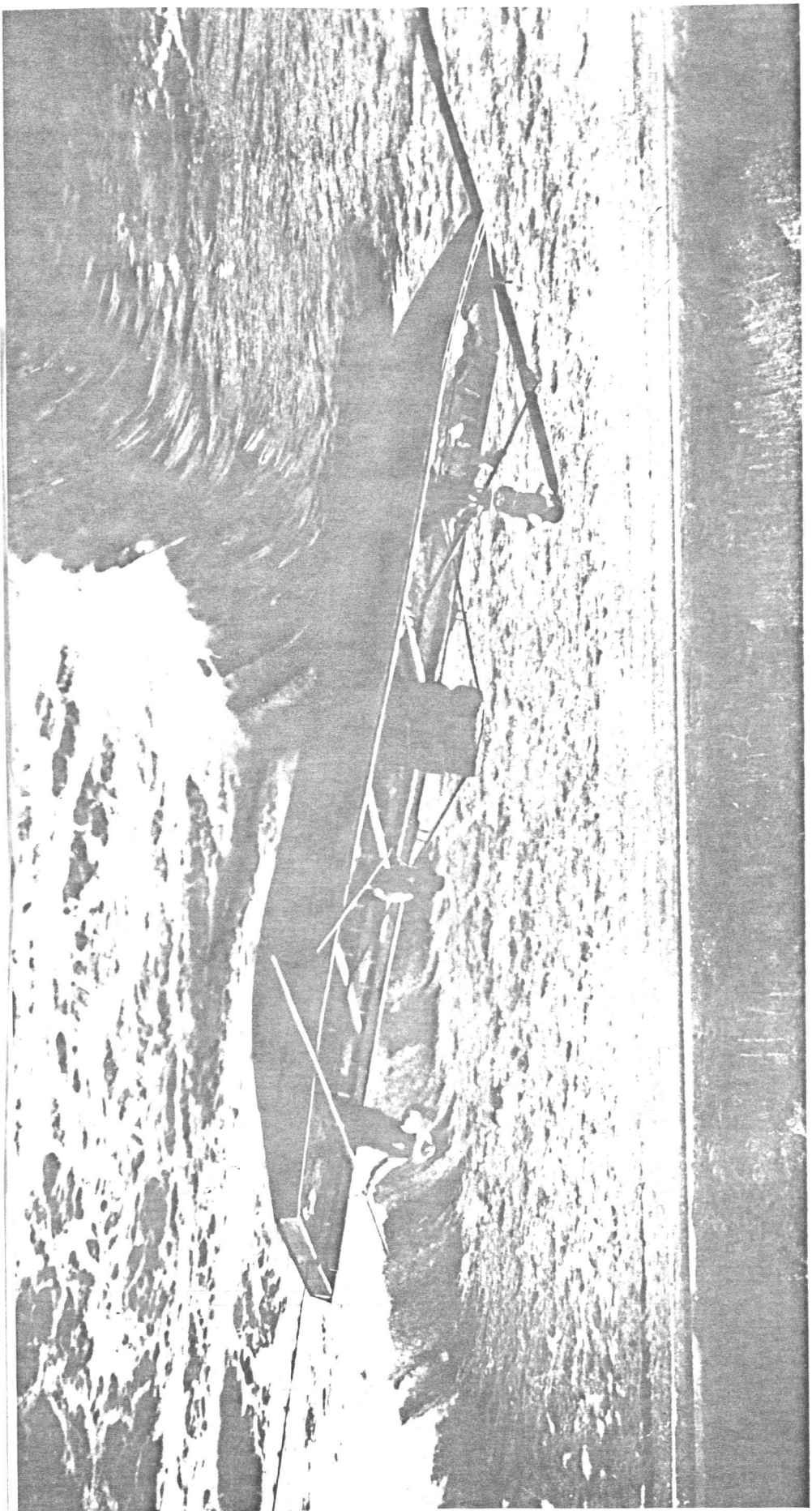
By 1914 new railroads were pushing their way north and boom days of the sternwheeler and of Athabasca Landing came to an end.

By 1906, there were a number of settlers on the north side of the river. To serve these people, a ferry service was started. The ferryman in 1909 was paid \$25 per month and was given a shack to live in. This functioned when the river was free of ice, but there were varying lengths of time in the spring and fall when the river could not be crossed.

To overcome this deficiency, in 1934 a cable cage system was put into operation. The December 14, 1934 "Echo" reports that in six weeks 2000 passengers and four tons of freight were transported by the cage. According to those who still remember, a trip across could be a frightening experience, especially to children. However, it served its purpose until the new bridge was opened in 1952. This brought an end to the use of the river for commercial transportation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

- ATHABASCA ARCHIVES
- ATHABASCA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
- PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES
 - Ernest Brown Collection*
- PUBLIC ARCHIVES CANADA
- R.C.M.P. ARCHIVES, OTTAWA



Scow going over the Big Cascade
Rapids, Athabasca River
-Public Archives



RIGHT.
CARNEST BROWN.

BOAT BUILDING
ATHABASCA LANDING
FOR H.B.C. 1900.

Boat Building, Athabasca Landing
for H.B.C., 1900 -Prov. Archives



Klondikers Preparing to leave for
the Goldfields in the Yukon, 1898
-Prov. Archives

Tim Wallwork's paddlewheeler the Daisy Bell, which he took to Dawson
J. MacGregor: Klondike Rush through Edmonton.