

Box 441 Athabasca,
Alberta, Canada
November 8, 1979

Dear Mrs. Twitchelle:

Mrs. Donahue has informed me that you wished some information about the way of life at the Calling River Telegraph Station after you last lived there. I hope I can contribute a little that is helpful, even after thirty-three years since living there, and a poor memory.

My husband, George T. Monson, took over the Office in 1924, after a few years in the Station at House River. A man named Rollo Goodwin was operator before that. Before Rollo Goodwin, a man whose name had been changed to Ed Love, after a stint in the Army, and living down East, was in charge. I do not remember his real name, though I must have heard it. We have never heard of the names of the other men who were in charge before that.

After my husband retired in 1945, a man named John Plews took charge. He was our son-in-law. He moved to the House River Station after a few years, and stayed there a few years -- until the line was closed down. (During the War they needed the line to ensure secrecy in weather reports and other information which would not have been the case in using radio transmission)

After John Plews, a Veteran named Joe Gill took over at Calling River for a few years, until the line was closed down. He moved to Fort Assiniboine after close-down.

I do not think conditions changed too much after you were there. They built a lumber Telegraph Station - white siding and a green roof, in front of a tall log house which we used as a storehouse. A few yards north of that, my husband had a log cabin built, to house the girls and the housekeeper. A little later, a lumber bunk house was set up on the South of the Station for the male guests, with bunks in it, and much more comfortable than sleeping on the floor of the dining room of the Station.

I married George T. Monson in 1934, and we had two children in addition to the three girls he had by his first wife. She died when their youngest girl was born. The Athabasca River was breaking up then, and there was no way of getting help. I taught all the five girls while we were there. I also did the office work and learned the Code to become the stand-in operator, and the Dominion Government was delighted to have an assistant operator at no cost. I sent the weather reports and relayed information when my husband was doing line work.

The only means of communication was the telegraph, and a slow monthly mail service (introduced later, ten years before we left) The stations Pelican and Calling River were the Post Offices, the operators being post masters also. The mail carrier used a motor boat when the River was open, and a horse and cutter when it was frozen over. He had to work his way around Pelican Portage the best he could.

Travel was by means of a motor boat, or by foot on the line. Travelling was good on the line when the ground was frozen and some snow on it, when a dog team could travel on it with a toboggan. In the summer, no horse could travel on the Line. We travelled on foot, followed by our pack dogs, as no doubt you remember. There were 26 creeks with muskegs between them, to cross on the way South to Deep Creek, and beyond that, to Richmond Park. These places are heavily-populated farm areas now, but there is no one living more than ten miles north of them. North of Calling River, it was better travelling on the line -- not many creeks and muskegs.

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An American Family named Smith, had a sheep farm a mile north of the Station, and their son had a sheep farm also, across the Athabasca River, about a mile away. A farmer named Bieber, lived not too far away from him.

Across Calling River itself, an old Indian named Min-a-hoo, lived with a daughter and family. Their name was Jacobs. The old man died when he was 106 years old, but they had all moved away by that time. The buildings fell in after a few years. I don't know if you could have heard of Min-a-hoo, as I am not sure he was there in your time. But that was all the population besides our family.

As you probably know, we had to shoot wild meat, and set nets for fish, as there were no refrigerators, except when the cold weather kept everything well in the winter. Of course, everyone grew garden stuff, and picked berries. We kept a cow. Other staples and canned stuff came in by the trader. He pulled a barge with a motor boat, and there was no freighting in the Winter in our time, except what could be moved in a dog toboggan. The first trader we knew, was Edward Gamber, and the next one was Dick Newmann. He died last Year.

There was still much good fellowship amongst the people living in the Area between Athabasca and Fort McMurray. You all went to the boat landing when you heard a motor boat on the River, and they always stopped and came up for a meal at least, if not overnight. When they left, the whole house went down to the River to see them off. If you were dying, you would still be expected to do that. Of course, in the Winter, you would meet any incoming dog team on the top of the Hill in front of the Station. I think you would remember how close the edge of the hill was to the Station; so you wouldn't have far to go then. But you still went out in a body to meet and greet them, and all went out to the edge of the Hill to say "Good-by".

We were accustomed to very much company in the thirteen years I was there. I don't remember any time when we were alone in the thirteen years. Many, many times, there were two or three settings of twelve or thirteen at the table during a meal. And I do not count the housekeeper and the hired boy.

I am sorry I cannot supply more names. There are not any people left in the Country here, who could remember what happened before my husband lived there.

In 1977, a number of our children made a trip to Calling River, overland from Calling Lake. The Forestry Service keeps a road open to Calling Lake. They said the grass had grown tall around the buildings, as well as some shrubs. The buildings were badly deteriorated. No one is living in the Area nor anywhere along the River, but there is a Forestry cabin near the River close to the boat landing. The Area is open to moose and deer hunting. I didn't want to go, as I wished to remember the place as I left it in January 1946. The young people didn't remember anything about the way it looked, but when they saw it, they began to remember a little, the way it was.

Yours very sincerely,

Monson

P. S. It would be wonderful to meet you, but at this time, impossible, so I greet you across the miles and the years.

