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THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION IN THE LOWER ST. LAWRENCE VALLEY

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The individuality of people depends in no small degree upon the ease with which they can pass to and from their province to the world at large. Also, upon the ease or difficulty of communication between different portions of a single province, depends, to a great extent, the development of local characteristics, the preservation of ancestral traits, and the degree of economic independence. Modern transportation is responsible for much of the loss of character of the Lower St. Lawrence communities, as it is in all other parts of the world. In the 18th century Dr. Johnson was deploring the fact that "commerce has left the people no singularities." It was not until the last decade in the 19th century that commerce so perfected transportation that the communities of the North Shore were opened to cultural contacts and, indeed, many of the settlements are scarcely touched yet. To us, in the modern world of commerce, individuality results from a personal choice of environment. Life is no longer local or accidental, but a matter of choice. With the French Canadian the environment settled down upon his life much as the snow enshrouds the countryside. This was in a large measure a matter of the difficulty of communication. Without going into a retrospect of history, we may venture to comment upon the obstacles to an interchange of commerce and ideas which exist at the present time.

THE WATER COMMUNICATION

The water communication of the Lower St. Lawrence is essentially that of an inland sea. The two shores know less of each other than they do of Quebec. There are some portions of Quebec Labrador that are exceptions to this. They are so far from Quebec as to have considerable communication with the South Shore, whence they derive their products of civilization. During the summer months periodically, large freight and trading steamers make the longer journey to and from Quebec. Strangely enough, altho the Lower St. Lawrence is

FIGURE I. Map of the Lower St. Lawrence Valley. Reproduced by permission from the *Geog. Rev.*, Feb., 1920.

one of the world's great commercial highways, the region has poor or imperfect coast-wise communication. The principal factor in this is the climate. Quebec is a closed port for almost five months of the year, and a dangerous one for one month more. Altho at Father Point the river never freezes over, there is a great deal of ice-float except when the ice bridge forms at Quebec.¹

Of the ocean steamers bound for Quebec, "the first vessel usually arrives at Father Point from the sea in the last fortnight in April, and the last one leaves the last few days in November."² The small craft do not attempt to break anything but the lightest ice, and even then are always running a risk. The modern ice breakers, perfected since the commencement of the war, will probably have little effect upon the smaller ports that lie far out of the steamer channel.

Thirty miles below Quebec the water is too salty to freeze over solidly, and the winds have sufficient play to hinder freezing. But floating ice is in great amount. There is always a channel along one shore or the other, for even a slight breeze is sufficient to blow the ice from the land. But navigation is not a simple matter. Coupled with this is the severity of the weather, which makes the traveling anything but pleasant. In out of the way parts of the world where travel is most difficult, if but one thing is to get thru the weather barrage it is the mail. And yet I saw in Les Escoumains a notice that there would be but six mails that winter for parts of Quebec Labrador, and that those would be of uncertain date. The matter speaks for itself.

But none of this has to do with the delightful summer months. One sees from the little town along the low hills of the South Shore, or from the piedmont hamlet on the north a continual procession of ocean liners, far out in the channel, passing back and forth between Quebec and the world. Occasionally a huge sailing vessel slowly passes, reflecting the sunlight from her sails. Small barges and freighters steam busily out to the Labradorian Coast, or turn south to the Maritime Provinces and the States. One of the larger freighters may betray its destination by turning aside from the procession to head in toward the smoke of a mill waste-pile. A few fine passenger steamers

¹ The following clipping from *Le Progrès du Saguenay*¹ is taken as typical. Chicoutimi, April 24, 1919—

La Navigation

Le fleuve Saint-Laurent est maintenant ouvert entre Quebec et Montréal. A Quebec, on a placé les pontons et les caboteurs ont repris leur service.

Le Saguenay est maintenant navigable partout à la chaloupe et nous espérons que les gros navires y apparaîtront bientôt.

² This and other details of the harbors on both shores, tho they may have been observed personally, are in a great part on the authority of "The St. Lawrence Pilot."²

bring in a load of tourists to the larger towns on the North Shore, stopping however, at the humble places as well, to take away their cheese. In Quebec Labrador the event of the month is when a trading vessel puts in. Along the South Shore there are a few passengers who would prefer the boat to the railway, but the lumbering towns have, nevertheless, from time to time ships anchored off their coasts.

From his cottage the habitant sees thousands of ships pass and yet may know as little about shipping as a Nebraskan. This, of course, excepts those fishing ports of the northeastern coast. Betsiamis breeds

FIGURE 2

Shipping Scene along the quay of the Lower Town, City of Quebec. Photo by Prof. S. F. Clark, Williams College.

as bold and skillful a sailor as does its ancestral Finisterre. This land-lubberly situation of the region as a whole arises from the remarkable paucity of harbors. Certain of the harbors that are good are lacking in a hinterland of importance. The difficulty lies not so much in the contour of the shore, as in the shelving approach due to the latest stages of marine erosion combined with the large tides resulting from the funnel-shaped estuary. At Quebec the neap tide is thirteen feet, and the spring tide eighteen. At Rivière de Loup, where there is an excellently contoured coast for a harbor, the tides are ten-and-a-half feet and sixteen feet respectively. Bic harbor would be an ideal haven were it not for the fact that tides of eight and ten feet leave the cove a dismal mud flat on the ebb. Even at Cape Chat the tide in the spring may run up to thirteen feet. The North Shore is not better off,

and along the islands of the St. Lawrence, where water communication is so important, the tides are the greatest of any place in the estuary. In the Beaujean Channel opposite Gross Ile, the spring tide difference is nineteen feet. The great amount of water that must pass in and out with every tide through the narrow reef-sprinkled delta means that tidal currents and runs are caused, which make navigating in the estuary a dangerous matter. The tide runs seven-and-a-half knots an hour past Baie St. Paul and sets up rips large enough to make navigation in small boats difficult. It is quite common for the river to race past the pier heads of the North Shore towns at the rate of three knots an hour.

However, these tides altho great, might still permit of good harbors if it were not for the shelving marine terrace and the off-lying muds. Let us take a few examples. Baie St. Paul is the first approximation to a harbor on the north Shore. Shielded from the winds and waves of the estuary, by its bulky capes and by Ile aux Coudres, it is afforded sufficient protection. However, the wave-cut terrace that extends a mile beyond the shore, to which is added a half-mile more of delta muds from the valley's two rivers, forms a formidable separation of land and sea. Small barges run up to the mill and beach, but boats of any draft and regularity of schedule must land their cargoes at a pier jutting out from Cap Corbeau in the face of strong tidal currents. The distance from the pier to the village is two miles.

The story of the harbor of La Malbaie is the same. Figure 3 shows a boat stranded three miles from the boat in the first figure. The modern settlement of the town is along the two roads that lead from the head of the bay to the cape on each side. At Pointe à Pic there is a wharf stretching from the headland to deep water. It was necessary for the local pulp company to build a railroad out to the pier where the pulp could be loaded into the larger steam barges. But even at high tide the bay is not easy to navigate because of the strength of the tidal streams. "*La Malle Baie*," Cartier called it when in 1608 he noted that, "the tide runs here marvelously." The harbors of the farther coast have exactly the same difficulty, to which in some cases is added the misfortunes of drifting sands. Tadousac is the one exception. But as the Saguenay passes ships far into the hinterland, this port has no purpose other than satisfying its own modest needs.

Between Malbaie and the Saguenay there is not one harbor or even anchorage. Beyond the Saguenay the coast is well contoured for harbors, but each cove or bay between Tadousac and Portneuf is dried at low tide. At Portneuf there is a river channel that is navigable for a

mile-and-a-half. Beyond the Betsiamis, Outarde, and Manacouagan Rivers all offer harbors of some sort. Godbout has a good harbor. It is fortunate that this farther territory is blessed with a certain amount of harbor facilities, for land communication over such lengths of rough country would have been fatal to development.

The South Shore is less fortunate. There is no harbor from Cap Chat to Rimouski. Matane is the only place here that attempts to keep up water communication, and here the vessels lie off shore, where, in case of a storm, they must hoist sail and clear for the open

FIGURE 3

The outer "harbor," Malbaie, at low tide. Photo by Prof. S. F. Clark, Williams College.

sea. Near Rimouski is the village of Rimouski Wharf. Here a pier 2100 feet long is necessary for vessels with a draft of 11 feet. Continuous dredging is carried on to maintain a 14 foot depth, but to little avail. Rimouski would at first glance appear to have an excellent harbor, but this is not the case. The shallowness of the bay, and the great tide differences causes it to be dry at low tide. The cove at Bic is guarded with islands. There could be no better harbor were there water enough. There is, in the lee of Ile de Bic, an anchorage which gives a "comfortable berth."²

The one other point of the South Shore where a harbor might be possible is at Rivière de Loup where, again, the bay is of little worth and a long pier reaches to deep water. (Figure 4.) There are, as at Trois Pistoles, Rivière de Loup, and Rivière Ouelle, points where small boats

and ferries can, and do, land regularly. For the most part behind artificial protection. But it speaks for the poor water communication that almost no produce other than lumber, bricks, grain, and hay is carried by boats. During the summer months there were at one time steamers to carry tourists to such points as Kamouraska, Cacouna, and Little Metis. Perhaps water communication would have had a greater

FIGURE 4

Coast contours at Rivière du Loup, South Shore, which tho favorable for a harbor at high tide necessitate the construction of a pier and a branch railway to reach deep water at the ebb. Adapted from Canadian Coast Chart No. 201.

modern development were it not for the easy land communication along the level terraces.

THE LAND COMMUNICATION

The South Shore is fortunate in its land communication and has a railway, the Intercolonial, which runs from Quebec as far as Little Metis, where it turns south and breaks thru the mountains along the Rivière Matapédia to Halifax and the Maritime Provinces. Its original function was politico-geographical and had as its aim the con-

solidation of the British Possessions in North America. There is a short line built to accomodate the lumber industry which runs from Mont Joli, just back of Little Metis, to Matane. The only difficulty of construction that either of these roads met with is the frequent stream valley which comes down out of the mountains, notching deeply the terrace on which the road is built. Most of the valleys are spanned by the long wooden trestles that are so characterisitic of American railways.

The highways have the same advantage. There is a road following the river for the entire 240 miles. A large part of the distance the road

FIGURE 5

The harbor at Malbaie (Murray Bay). At low tide the reëntrant is a desolate mud flat.

is on the lowest and most recent terrace, following along at the base of what was the wave cliff. In such sections as the Trois Pistoles-Rimouski stretch, the road takes the first longitudinal valley back from the river. These longitudinal valleys are utilized by the roads of the rear concessions, tho often, as from the water off Trois Pistoles and Matane, two and three lines of houses may be seen on tiers above each other, with no intervening ridges. Of course the highland presents difficulties. The face is unbroken except in two places, the depressions of Temiscouata and Matapedia. Where there are farms on the upland,

roads climb the crest without great difficulty and disappear into the wooded interior. But most of these are short. Between Quebec and Matapedia there are cross roads which run back to the Chemin Taché. Those are government-built and are designed to aid settlement. This artificial stimulus has done little, however, and I am afraid will do little, to promote this. There are also two roads, wilderness roads, which run within the highlands some ten to twenty miles back from the river. The more persistent of these is the Chemin Taché. Its economy is a matter which is not yet determined. Following a circuitous route some twenty miles back from the river, there has

FIGURE 6

Looking across the harbor of Bic at low tide. Photo by the author.

been built within the last few years the Transcontinental Railway (formerly the Grand Trunk Railway). This passes thru a region which is more difficult to traverse than the clear path of the Intercolonial. But difficult communication is not the only drawback to that portion of the country. Between Montmagny and Edmunston, I have it on official word, there is little agricultural possibility.

But whereas the côtes of the South Shore have free passage back and forth along latitudinal lines, it is not so on the North Shore. There is not even a roadway going the entire length. True, on leaving Quebec, the prospect appears encouraging. The Côte de Beaupré has

the same level conditions of the South Shore. But out of St. Joachim one meets the great thousand-foot cliff of the Laurentides and it must be climbed to gain the towns beyond. Once up on the plateau,

FIGURE 7

Communication on the lower St. Lawrence. Photo by Prof. S. F. Clark, Williams College.

every stream that drops into the river has cut a gorge for itself, and this youthful character of the valleys makes difficult grades. Then, on approaching Baie St. Paul, one comes to a magnificent view of the valley of the Gouffre, but the roads that lead to it must needs be more

inspiring to the casual traveler, than to those who must travel it in the pursuit of duty. This stretch tells the story of the road from St. Joachim to the Saguenay, except that from St. Fidèle on there is wilderness, nothing else, and its sixty miles are not lightly undertaken. From Tadousac to Portneuf a road runs that is in places stony on the uplands, but sandy on the lowlands. The road ends with Portneuf. Beyond there is no land communication, unless the lonely journeying of the patrolmen who keep the telegraph line in order may come under that head. The problem of communication and transportation over the land takes on a different character in the winter, whether it be in the lonely trails of the linesman of Quebec Labrador, or the well-traveled road between Bic and Rimouski. On land a severe winter means lots of snow, and once a trail is beaten down there is comparatively swift and pleasant going for the hardy little Canadian horses. Again, the snow aids greatly in transportation in the region's most important industry, the logging. The logs are "snaked" out of the woods to the nearest stream to lie on the ice and there to await the thaw and spring flood. Logs are taken down steep hillsides, sometimes up the slopes, and dragged across frozen swamps, and skidded easily over "soft" ground. The snow covering is responsible for the torrents that make even the little streams capable of shooting the logs to the main stream and thence to the mills. More to the north where the snows are deep, the picturesque dog and sledges are used, and the wilderness is traveled at a speed wholly different from the rate at which a canoe may be poled up against a rapids in summer, or at which a man, loaded with a pack, may fight his way through the brush.

Two elements of the life there are, over which the snow and cold have no control. They are the piety of the habitant and his social instinct. In regions where, I was told, the snow piled up to the windows of the cabins, the league, two leagues, even the three leagues to the church, were covered devoutly by the entire family every Sunday. We say that the church has entered intimately into the lives of the people. Could there be any greater proof of this than the regularity with which the habitant drives over the long stretches of snow to his mass?

A remarkable engineering feat has been accomplished, and much of this during times of war, which materially changes the situation on the North Shore. The Quebec and Saguenay Railway has been completed as far as Malbaie and is now in its second winter of operation. This is an extension of the line that runs from Quebec to St. Joachim, which was built originally to carry the religious pilgrims to St. Anne

de Beaupré. Beyond St. Joachim the road-bed has been carved from the foot of the great rock cliffs. The railway has been constructed at great cost and is the property of the Canadian Government. One might think that in view of the fact that the original section of the Railway, running the length of the Côte de Beaupré was operated by electricity, the entire road might take advantage of this power. It is operated by coal, however, and it is not intended to use electrical power in the immediate future. In response to certain questions, the superintendent of the railway has replied that it will not affect the agricultural economy greatly except in the production of butter in the place of cheese. Certainly there will be large shipments of pulpwood from Baie St. Paul, wood pulp from Malbaie, and iron ore from St. Urbain. Altho thru the winter there are but two trains a week, nevertheless this means an all-year-round communication and a new commercial régime.³

In considering the effect of the lack of communication upon the habitant, the problem must be reviewed from an historical point of view. It was not until the middle of the 19th century that roads were built the length of the South Shore, and until comparatively recent times the North Shore, except for the more western portion, depended entirely upon water communication. An excellent example of the problem in transportation that presented itself early in the 19th century was concerned with Ile d'Orléans. In the early days, when the river was full of flow-ice but was not frozen solidly, Quebec suffered a scarcity of certain commodities usually supplied by the South Shore, as there were then no bridges. Prices rose in consequence. But when the channel froze over, milk and vegetables were brought in a frozen state from great distances, and such bulky commodities as hay and firewood were brought in with ease. Prices in consequence dropped. Below Quebec the South channel, along the side of the Ile d'Orléans, never froze. The North channel froze regularly. Thus the rich farming region of the island was made directly tributary to the city. The vegetables which the islanders had held since summer, awaiting cheap transportation, were now brought into the city and there was again a consequent drop in prices.⁴

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