

# A philatelic and postal history of NEWFOUNDLAND

a continuing series by Brien C. Damien; part five

## Beginnings: the Portugal Cove Road and Private Packet Posts

During the first years of postal service, Newfoundland's two principal towns were St. John's and Harbour Grace. Communication between them was costly, irregular, and at best unreliable, despite arrangements made in 1809 for postmaster Solomon to forward letters to Harbour Grace. The best route utilized an overland path from St. John's to Portugal Cove. This often impassable muddy path — probably more commonly referred to as this *bloody* path — had been hacked out of the hills by British soldiers expelling a French invasion, and by 1826 had become unfit as a thoroughfare.

Subscriptions had been taken in 1811 to build the road, and an 1812 lottery attempt failed as well. In 1826 Governor Sir Thomas Cochrane set out to build the road — and he meant a *good* road. It was constructed in the summer of 1826. Although we find no direct reference stating that reasons for constructing the road included improvement of letter communication, we do find mention of "easy communication." It is likely that improved postal communication was among the causes, for private packet boats on Conception Bay relied upon the St. John's-Portugal Cove route overland.

As we know by the need for the Portugal Cove Road and the arrangements made for

the chief Conception Bay centers made in 1809, there was a great amount of private postal business in that densely-populated bay. As early as 1807, Michael Dooley of Portugal Cove advertised a new six-oar skiff to carry mail and passengers to any outpost. James Neary of Portugal Cove informed the public in 1822 that his packet *Lively* would run bi-weekly from the Cove to Harbour Grace. Rates were 5s for ladies and gentlemen, 4s for tradesmen and labourers, and 9d for letters. There was the cutter boat *Express*, the foremost of the Conception Bay packets. She was lost in a storm in 1842, but was replaced by the *Express II*.

James Doyle of Carbonear was the owner of three packets — the *Dart* (1826), *Nora Creina*, and *Native Lass* (1838). His second packet, the *Nora Creina*, was outstanding from a philatelic point of view because she was the only packet with its own postal marking device. Many of the packets had manuscript markings used to indicate the rate (which was generally 6d single and 1s double) and prepayment ("Paid") or payment by the addressee ("To Pay"). The *Nora Creina* had a device consisting of a seal which made the imprint "N.C."

The experience of two travellers in the early days of the packets sheds light on conditions:

*"... when we arrived at the Cove, the wind was so inviting that, promising as it*

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did a passage of only two or three hours, we preferred to start immediately and stepped on board, having just barely broken our fast. This may give you some idea of the uncertainty of communication in the country. There was not on board the packet either meat or drink for what need of either where could see the landing place before you, but having been becalmed and headed by the wind afterwards, we were tossed about the bay that entire day, the entire of the night following, and arrived at our destination not until 11 a.m. next day, when we landed in a complete state of exhaustion from want of food."

"These packet boats were very small, averaging about 23 tons, sailing craft, very uncomfortable and not fitted to accommodate fastidious passengers, who wanted privacy and ordinary comfort. You can picture to yourself a small cabin, berths each side, a couple of locker seats, a small table, a few trunks on the floor of the cabin, in cold weather a stove emitting sulphur and smoke, the smell of bilge-water permeating everything, the only berths occupied by sick female passengers and no

place to lie or sit down, the deck the only accommodations to be found."

But not all packets were like those above:

"The subscriber begs to inform the public and his friends that having now completed a new packet *Native Lass* in a style hitherto unknown in this country, being fitted up with a comfortable cabin, sleeping berths, etc., he has commenced running between *Portugal Cove* and *Carbonear*. The *Nora Creina* will also continue to run heretofore and he will therefore arrange so that one of the above packets will leave *Carbonear* and *Portugal Cove* every morning while navigation remains open. The *Native Lass* is built in a superior manner, copper-fastened and coffered sails, remarkably fast, and is decidedly superior to any craft of that description. The *Nora Creina* is sufficiently known to render it unnecessary that any exposition as to her qualities should be gone into. Fares Cabin passengers 7/6 Steerage 5/ Letters single 6d, double 1/- and parcels in proportion to their weight and bulk. The subscriber will be responsible for any parcel, etc. that will be given in charge to him.



## British Columbia Notes

by John Henry

On merely a cursory examination of the Wells, Fargo & Co. operations on Vancouver Island, the printed franks appear to be rather uninteresting and essentially all alike. Further investigation, however, will show a wealth of subtle variations in these franks. Apparently no definitive account has ever been prepared which documents the various types used and their periods of use.

This is understandable, since the most complete survey of Wells, Fargo franks and handstamps, prepared by Dr. Berthold<sup>1</sup> in 1926, is little known and not readily available. Articles by Wellburn<sup>2</sup> and Paige<sup>3</sup> treat the franks briefly but contribute significantly to the total information available. Other writers have shown Wells, Fargo franks on covers used to illustrate some facet of the postal history of the region, but to this writer's knowledge little emphasis has been placed on a systematic study of the franks to identify them all and to

establish a chronological record of their use.

The results of such a study could be of great use in establishing the year of posting of undated covers. Wellburn's study of the Colonial Post Office franks<sup>4</sup> provides a useful tool for determining dates of use of pre-Confederation covers, but from 1871 on dates of use are not readily resolved since only one of the Wells, Fargo handstamps used in Victoria included the year-date. This particular handstamp was used in 1880; and possibly a few years before and after.

This problem of providing a tabulation of the franks and their periods of use might be resolved through a cooperative effort from BNAPSers collecting colonial British Columbia and Vancouver Island and post-confederation postal history items. The author proposes to initiate such a project and offers the attached matrix as an aid in collating the known facts about the franks.