

# Early long-haul truckers trailblazers

## Guest columnist

DANIEL FRANCIS

One hundred years ago, when motor vehicles were in the process of replacing the horse-drawn wagon as the principal means of transporting goods, truckers in British Columbia were challenged by a road network that had not changed much since the days of the gold rush and the mule train.

Reluctant to challenge the mountain ranges and river canyons of the Interior, road builders had not expanded their activities beyond the main population areas in the southwestern corner of the province. When a few local carters got together in Vancouver in 1913 to create the General Cartage and Storage Association, the forerunner of today's BC Trucking Association, it was not even possible for a venturesome trucker – and there were a few in those early days – to drive his Model A Ford one-tonne from the Lower Mainland to the Interior without making a detour through the United States. There were simply no roads connecting the coast to the hinterland.

You could say that long-haul trucking got underway in the province on May 24, 1927. That was the day that the Fraser Canyon Highway officially re-opened, following the route of the old Cariboo Road from Hope to Spences Bridge. The original wagon road had been destroyed by railway builders during the 1880s and it had taken close to a half century to re-establish road contact with the Interior.

Not that the new Canyon Highway was much by today's standards. Even to call it a highway is a bit of a stretch.

It was a narrow ribbon of gravel cut

into the side of the winding gorge with steep, unguarded sides falling away hundreds of metres to the roaring river below. Snow removal being non-existent, it was only open from the beginning of May to the middle of November, and even in the open season it was often blocked by washouts, slides and freak snowstorms. But it was a beginning.

The truck drivers who travelled this daunting stretch of road had nerves of steel. Andy Craig was one of them.

Craig, who later wrote a history of the early industry, explained that most truckers liked to use the road at night to avoid car traffic. He described how he kept a spotlight aimed at the edge of the road "because it had a nasty habit of falling into the Fraser River without warning."

Craig recalled that "we seldom made a trip without finding some unlucky soul who had hit a rock slide, or gone over the bank, or broken through an old bridge."

It took days, not hours, for a truck to reach the Okanagan from Vancouver.

Even when it was paved in the mid-1930s, the road was so narrow that when two vehicles met one had to back up to the nearest pullout to allow the other to pass.

The Canyon Highway was a bottleneck as much as a breakthrough. The Alexandra Bridge north of Yale could only handle rigs that were no longer than 30 feet.

The situation improved at the end of 1949 when the opening of the Hope-Princeton provided an alternative route and larger rigs could begin making their circuitous way to the Interior.

But the big trucks still couldn't handle the Canyon until 1962 when a new Alexandra Bridge went in.

Of course, once past the Okanagan early truckers still faced the barrier of the Selkirk Mountains. For the longest time

there was no road at all across the middle of the province. Then in 1940 the government pushed through the Big Bend Highway joining Revelstoke to Golden via a looping 300-km long gravel road.

For the first time a vehicle could drive from Alberta to the coast without swinging south through the States.

But just because it was possible did not mean it was easy. The Big Bend was a winding, dusty obstacle course, blocked by snow for much of the year. One travel writer called it "the loneliest road in America." Understandably, truckers did not rush to use it.

No, it was not until the Trans-Canada Highway opened across Rogers Pass in 1962, cutting several hours off the trans-provincial route and providing a safe, paved road surface for vehicles of all types, that finally you could say the pioneer period in BC trucking had come to a close.

Today we accept the importance of the trucking industry to the economic well-being of the province. But as we travel in comfort along one of B.C.'s many modern highways, we might take a few moments to consider how much we owe those early truckers who risked their loads, and sometimes their lives, to navigate the primitive goat trails that passed for roads in early British Columbia.

Historian Daniel Francis is at work on an illustrated history of the trucking industry in BC. It will be published by Harbour Publishing in 2013 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the BC Trucking Association (BCTA).

BCTA is the recognized voice of the provincial motor carrier industry, representing over 800 truck and bus fleets and over 250 suppliers to the industry. BCTA members operate over 13,000 vehicles and employ 26,000 people in BC.

## MAILBOX: Your Letters

### A third option necessary

I often wonder what Premier Christy Clark privately thinks of Gordon Campbell's leadership?

In 10 short years, Campbell increased the provincial long term debt \$9 billion, from \$33 billion to \$42 billion. The province is now losing \$1.4 million every 24 hours.

This is an astounding amount of money if you take into account that Campbell sold off billions of dollars of British Columbia's major assets.

When Campbell was first elected in 2002, BC Hydro had a net profit of one billion dollars a year. Today, BC Hydro needs to find \$800 million.

He proposed hundreds of private power river contracts and forced BC Hydro to buy long-term power at exorbitant prices from private producers.

To avoid skyrocketing electricity rates many of these lucrative independent power projects will most likely be can-

celled by Christy Clark.

Worst yet, Campbell created polices to defer many capital projects and now many of BC Hydro's power plants need major costly upgrades.

And, I imagine after the next provincial election, the proposed site C Project on the Peace River will be cancelled once again.

The money is just not there, even though the new Peace Dam was estimated to produce power 40 per cent cheaper than the private sector.

Campbell's complete mismanagement of the HST will cost British Columbia hundreds of millions dollars for many years to come.

And it has been estimated that BC Interior lumber companies will receive a \$500 million penalty by the Free Trade Council because of the many subsidies Campbell gave to BC forest companies.

Given the large mounting provincial

debt, I find it ironic that Mr. Campbell once bragged of his superior business skills to NDP Leader Carole James.

I doubt Christy Clark will change the BC Liberals that much from Mr. Campbell's privatizing and corporate subsidies on one hand and deficit financing in the lower mainland on the other hand.

For example, Premier Christy Clark recently announced an \$800 million hospital for the city of Surrey, and \$40 million to Vancouver's private shipyards.

With the provincial NDP lost somewhere in the cosmos my only hope for a truly new perspective is a new third provincial party.

Perhaps Carole James and Mayor Greg Robinson will create a party that will give a balanced fiscal approach to governing that benefits the entire province.

Mark Clements  
Prince George

## Capitalizing on the Cougars

Dear Mr. Mayor,

I am just wondering if you and your cronies might consider buying your own season tickets to the Cougars. It seems you think we need to support them. You are right but it starts with powers that be.

I have been a season ticket holders since day one for two seats: section R, row 7 seat 1 and 2.

It would be good to see people there for games not just at election time, and not in the box that we pay for as taxpayers.

Don Otto  
Prince George

## Skakun for Mayor

I really think this whole attack on Brian Skakun is getting really out of hand especially when a lot of it is coming from his own colleagues.

Even though I live in a regional district area, whomever becomes mayor does have an effect on my life as I work in town and so on.

I think that Brian Skakun should run for mayor because I like a person who is up front and doesn't hide things from the public and is there for the people.

He sure has taken a lot of crap for doing just that.

Robyn Dyck  
Prince George

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We are looking for energetic, enthusiastic people to fill various positions on our Board of Directors. We are in particular need of persons with skills in media and public relations, contract law, liability and risk management, fundraising and marketing, and persons with a lived experience of mental illness not currently a client of CMHA. Persons of First Nations ancestry, immigrants or visible minority are also encouraged to consider this opportunity to contribute to the Prince George Community.  
If you have 4 to 6 hours a month (the Board of Directors meets in the evening) and want to support Mental Health services in our community and improve the lives of others, send your resume, by September 9th, to:  
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