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## The (almost) Russian-American Telegraph

By PHILLIP H. AULT

As Lincoln lay dying from an assassin's bullet across the street from Ford's Theatre through the grim night of April 14, 1865, frequent bulletins on his sinking condition clicked between the major American cities along the country's spreading web of Morse telegraph wires. News of his death in the morning spread from city to city within minutes. Yet eleven days passed before the tragic tidings reached Great Britain and Europe when the steamship *Nova Scotian* from New York docked in England on April 26.

Successful construction of the American transcontinental telegraph across the Great Plains and the western mountains in 1861 had put New York within a few minutes' message time of San Francisco, three thousand miles away, though transmission was less than perfect. Raiding Indians cut the line, herds of buffalo trying to scratch their itchy backs knocked down the poles, heavy storms disrupted the tenuous flow of electricity. Despite these annoying interruptions, at the end of the Civil War most of the United States was tied together with almost instantaneous dot-and-dash communication. Americans could exchange news with the rest of the world, however, only as rapidly as a ship could sail.

This unsatisfactory situation challenged the expansionist-minded, profit-eager northern financial community. After the burden of war was lifted, the victorious North was in a mood for fresh peacetime ventures. And with the techniques of the Morse telegraph well tested by nearly two decades of domestic development, the desire for fast electrical communication to the capitals of Europe was compelling.

Out of this drive for international communications, and a belief in the telegraph as a magic producer of fast messages and fat profits, came a bizarre adventure, a scheme to build a telegraph line linking the United States to Russia and the rest of Europe. Its sponsors conceived of it as a romantic story of scientific ingenuity and human daring. What resulted was a frustrating two-year mission into the far reaches of the Arctic in temperatures that sometimes fell to 60° below zero, with nearly a thousand men scattered in the wilds of Siberia, Alaska, and British Columbia trying to build the telegraph while a fleet of sailing vessels and steamships plied the far North Pacific in support.

The most obvious way to connect the United States and Europe by wire was to lay a cable under the Atlantic Ocean. Cyrus W. Field had failed for the fourth time to complete this feat in the summer of 1865, and his persistent dream was widely discounted as impractical. Laying a cable under two thousand miles of restless ocean, then maintaining an adequate flow of electricity through it for the transmission of telegraphic messages, plus the problems of raising it to the surface for repairs, seemed beyond the capability of Field and his associates.

But the world is round. Instead of an Atlantic cable, could a surface telegraph line be

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built from the United States across the Bering Strait to Russia and there connect with circuits around Europe? A persuasive promoter, Perry McDonough Collins, was convinced it could be done. Collins had been United States consular agent at Nikolaevsk, Siberia, at the mouth of the Amur River on the Sea of Okhotsk. After a trip through northern Asia in 1857 and conversations at the Russian court in St. Petersburg, he returned to the United States full of enthusiasm for the concept. Once the transcontinental telegraph line was completed to San Francisco, he stepped up his efforts to win support. With the confidence of an armchair general who casually brushes aside problems of logistics and geography, Collins painted an intriguing picture as he peddled his scheme to Congress and to New York financiers. He pointed out that only a thirty-nine-mile water barrier, the Bering Strait, interrupted the backdoor route from New York to Paris. The rest was open land. Hadn't American telegraph builders already shown they could overcome obstacles of plains, mountains, and desert in building the line to San Francisco?

Collins proposed that the intercontinental telegraph line be connected to the American line at San Francisco. It would be built up the Pacific coast to British Columbia and from there northward across Russian America (now Alaska) to the Bering Strait. An underwater cable would be laid to the Asian shore of the strait. The line then would run through northeastern Siberia to the mouth of the Amur River. At this point it would join the seven-thousand-mile line the czarist government was building from St. Petersburg. Automatic "repeating instruments"—that is, relay stations—would be established every three to five hundred miles so messages could be sent across the huge unpopulated areas on both continents without need of human touch.

At first the idea sounded grandiose beyond reason. Collins' attempt to win support in Congress early in 1861 failed; with the outbreak of the Civil War that body had far more urgent things on its mind. But Collins was nothing if not persistent, and he turned to the most obvious private source for support, the Western Union Telegraph Company.

By then Western Union was reaping abundant rewards from construction and operation of its transcontinental line, which had been built in less time and at less cost than anticipated, assisted by a federal subsidy. Visions of even greater profits dangled before the eyes of Hiram Sibley, the Western Union president, and his associates. Collins asserted that with a side extension of the line from Siberia to China half of the world's population would be tributary to the Russian-American line. The company saw the possibility of controlling the worldwide flow of telegraph messages, a prospect hard to ignore.

Western Union endorsed the idea, the normal caution of its board of directors overwhelmed by Sibley's enthusiasm. At one point he wrote Collins: "The work is no more difficult than we have already accomplished over the Rocky Mountains and plains to California; and, in my opinion, the whole thing is entirely practicable, and that, too, in much less time and with much less expense than is generally supposed by those most hopeful. No work costing so little money was ever accomplished by man that will be so important in its results."

The scope of the project that Sibley, Collins, and their associates approached with such nonchalance would have given pause to men less wrapped up in their own visions. The obvious possibility that the need for the line's existence would be destroyed if Field completed his Atlantic cable did not deter them. A path must be opened for the telegraph line through forests, over mountains, across many stretches of Siberian steppes where no trees grew to provide poles, through thousands of miles of almost unexplored and unpopulated wilderness. All supplies except poles must be hauled from the United States, many of them by ship from the East Coast. Poles must be cut, hauled from afar and erected, wire strung, relay stations constructed. In fact, the promoters knew almost nothing about the terrain to which they were committing millions of dollars.

The line would run some thousand miles up the Pacific coast from San Francisco across the border to New Westminster, British Columbia; from there twelve hundred miles up the Fraser River Valley and Caribou Trail to Russian America; nine hundred miles across unknown territory to the Bering Strait; under the strait by cable; and then eighteen hundred miles across the Siberian steppes to the mouth of the Amur—in all approximately five thousand miles of construction, much of it under ferocious conditions of weather and terrain.

During the years of promotional work for the scheme by Collins the project was known as the Collins Overland Telegraph Company. That changed when Western Union took over the project in March, 1864. For his ideas, promotional work, and contacts with all the governments involved in providing the necessary official approvals, Western Union agreed to give Collins one tenth of the stock in the project, free from assessment or call; the right to subscribe one tenth more on an open basis; and a hundred thousand dollars in cash to pay for his services and expenses during the years he had been beating the drums.

Russia promised to complete her trans-Siberian telegraph to the mouth of the Amur in

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order to hook up with the American project, gave the American company the right to construct its line through Siberia and through Russian America, and promised the company a 40 per cent rebate on tolls from international messages passing over the government wire. In June, 1864, Congress passed an act granting Collins and his associates the right to construct a line from any point on the Pacific telegraph north to the British Columbia border over unappropriated public lands, to take timber and stone for construction, to build stations, and to receive forty public acres for each fifteen miles of telegraph line constructed. United States troops were to secure the line "from injury by savages or other evil-disposed persons." However, an effort by Collins' friends in Congress to guarantee the telegraph company fifty thousand dollars a year for ten years after completion of the line was defeated. From the Legislative Council of British Columbia Collins obtained permission to build the line through the territory without restrictions or subsidies.

The Western Union directors decided to finance the venture separately from the parent company. They created the Western Union Extension Company with Sibley as president and authorized sale of a hundred thousand shares at a hundred dollars par value, a total of ten million dollars. Stockholders and the directors themselves took a majority of the stock, and Collins received his stipulated share. A 5 per cent assessment, or five dollars, was declared against each share for operating purposes, with the idea that a total of not more than 20 per cent in assessments would be charged to complete the line. As a reflection of confidence in the wisdom and financial wizardry of Western Union, the entire ten-million-dollar stock issue was quickly sold.

Few people outside the Western Union management, and not many within it, questioned the assumption upon which the Russian-American telegraph scheme was based: that the Atlantic cable could not succeed.

Surveying and constructing the Russian-American line required a hard-nosed boss, an organizer who knew the telegraph business and could ramrod operations that would be scattered over thousands of miles. In August, 1864, the company selected for the assignment as chief engineer Colonel Charles S. Bulkley, former superintendent of military telegraphs in the Department of the Gulf.

As a northern officer, with the Civil War still in progress, Bulkley naturally tended to visualize his telegraph force in military terms and organized it along those lines. All leaders of the expedition were given military titles, and as one of the men wrote in a letter to his home:

We all wear a uniform of dark blue, according to army regulations, with appropriate buttons and shoulder-straps of our own. The Director-in-Chief's strap is a silver globe in the centre, on a dark blue velvet ground, with silver flashes of lightning darting toward either end. ... The Colonel thinks best that the party be handsomely uniformed to sustain among the Russians the dignity of the United States and of the Collins Overland Telegraph.

Bulkley sailed from New York to San Francisco in December, 1864, to organize his force and fit it for operations in the field. His goal was to get exploration of the route started in the spring of 1865. Time was important because the agreement with the Russians called for having the line working within five years, in 1868. Bulkley was accompanied by George Kennan, who though only nineteen years old was an experienced telegrapher in Cincinnati. Kennan—who was later to become an expert on Russia and the uncle of George F. Kennan, ambassador to Russia in the mid-twentieth century—had convinced the company that his knowledge of Morse dot-and-dash transmission, and of the mysterious rites of keeping power flowing from the batteries into the telegraph lines, qualified him for the expedition.

Once established in headquarters in the Customs House, Bulkley circulated word around San Francisco that he was recruiting men. Response was great. Soldiers discharged from the northern army, men from the goldfields looking for fresh adventure, and hangers-on around the port clamored for the jobs. Few of them were the skilled engineers Bulkley needed, but from the motley assemblage he chose a crew.

He planned operations in two phases. First, breaking the route into segments, he would send an exploring party into each with instructions to travel the land and locate a path for the line. In the second phase construction parties and materials would be carried by ship to the bases established by the exploring parties. Actual building of the line in British Columbia was to be well started by the end of 1865. To move the parties around the foggy reaches of the North Pacific Ocean he assembled a fleet of seven company ships, assisted by a United States Navy vessel promised to him by Congress in its 1864 telegraph act. Indeed, the project did resemble a combined land-sea military operation.

As a preliminary to the work on foreign soil the California State Telegraph Company, controlled by Western Union, undertook completion of a telegraph line from San Francisco up the Pacific coast and across the Canadian border into British Columbia, at New Westminster. It had already completed its line to Portland and was pushing it

toward Seattle when Western Union bought the company in 1864.

The work was a sample of what lay ahead: roads had to be cleared through forests and across mountains, poles cut and placed, and supplies hauled by horse and mule from the nearest settlements, of which northern California, Oregon, and Washington had few. A major delay occurred when the cable that was to carry a branch from the mainland line under water to Vancouver Island was lost at sea while being brought around Cape Horn. Another cable had to be shipped from the East.

The line across the border was completed in 1865, shortly before the departure of Bulkley's exploring party for the northern wilderness. The first message to click over it into the Canadian terminus at New Westminster announced the death of Lincoln.

Bulkley's expeditions started from San Francisco during late spring and summer. One, a party of four led by Serge Abaza, a Russian who was known as the Major, sailed aboard the creaky Russian trading vessel *Olga* on July 1 for Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula. Accompanying Abaza were Kennan, James A. Mahood, a California civil engineer, and R. J. Bush, just returned from three years' military service in the Carolinas. Their mission was to explore the proposed route from the mouth of the Amur River in Siberia northeast toward the Bering Strait. Eventually they were to link up with a far-northern Siberian party to be put ashore at the mouth of the Anadyr River, southwest of Bering Strait. This party's mission was to strike inland and to the southwest across the steppes until it made contact with Abaza's group. Between them they would explore the entire projected eighteen-hundred-mile route from the Bering Strait to the junction with the Russian line from St. Petersburg at the Amur.

Across on the North American side of the Pacific Ocean, Bulkley's plan was to base a party in northern Russian America at Fort St. Michaels. Its assignments were to explore up the coast of Norton Sound to the Bering Strait and to ascend the Kvichpak River aboard the thirty-five-foot steamboat *Lizzie Horner* as far into the interior as possible, then to go by reindeer or dog sledge through the mountains and make contact with the party striking north through British Columbia. Only after the expedition was well under way did the Americans discover to their surprise that the Kvichpak was the same stream as the Yukon River, an indication of how little the telegraph builders knew about the country into which they were plunging so hopefully. This party, under Robert Kennicott, was deposited on the shores of Norton Sound in September, with little time to explore before the winter freeze.

A fourth party, assigned to land near the mouth of the Fraser River in southern British Columbia and build the line north to a junction with the Russian America party, had potentially the easiest mission of all and, as events developed, proved the most productive. Its members sailed from San Francisco on May 17, 1865, under Major H. L. Pope, and upon arrival at New Westminster they set vigorously to work. Although British Columbia was virtually unexplored beyond a few border settlements, gold miners had pushed up the Fraser Valley and cut a trail along which the telegraph crew could start. Cutting and setting poles at the rate of six miles a day, the crews of Americans, Chinese, and Indians—in all about 250 men—laid the line up the east bank of the Fraser River through rocky gorges. At places the poles had to be set in holes blasted in the rock.

Late in 1865 the line reached Quesnel, 450 miles up the Fraser. There the builders struck to the northwest. The main crew wintered at Bulkley House, named for Colonel Bulkley, at the northern end of Tacla Lake while exploring parties pushed ahead on sledges. Early the next spring construction was resumed, headed toward Yukon Territory. Tons of material and wires were hauled up the line on the backs of 150 pack animals. Crews slashed a swath from forty to sixty feet wide through the forests, hoping to prevent falling trees from snapping the wire.

Far as they were into the northern forests, the British Columbia party had a link to civilization. Commercial telegraph service had been started from Quesnel south. Messages were telegraphed to the construction camp as it moved north week by week. By the end of July, 1866, the line was strung to the Naas River, about four hundred miles northwest of Quesnel, in territory known previously only to fur-hunting parties. Nearly four hundred more miles lay ahead before the party would, in theory, join the segment being built across Russian America.

Seven weeks out of San Francisco, after fumbling through the North Pacific fog, the brig *Olga* arrived at Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula on August 19, with the fourman party, led by Abaza, that was to undertake the Siberian explorations. Abaza and Kennan debarked at Petropavlovsk to make their way northward through Kamchatka while Mahood and Bush continued across the Sea of Okhotsk aboard the *Olga* to Nikolaevsk at the mouth of the Amur. Before parting Kennan accompanied Mahood and Bush for a short while as the *Olga* stood out to sea. Recalling that moment but a few years later in his book *Tent Life in Siberia*, Kennan wrote:

As we began to feel the fresh morning land-breeze, and to draw out slowly from under the cliffs of the west coast, I drank a farewell glass of wine to the success of the "Amoor River Exploring Party," shook hands with the Captain ... and bade good-bye to

the mates and men. As I went over the side, the second mate seemed overcome with emotion at the thought of the perils which I was about to encounter in that heathen country, and cried out in funny, broken English, "Oh, Mr. Kinney! (he couldn't say Kennan) who's a g'un to cook for ye, and ye can't get no potatusses?" as if the absence of a cook and the lack of potatoes were the summing up of all earthly privations. I assured him cheerfully that we could cook for ourselves and eat roots: but he shook his head mournfully, as if he saw in prophetic vision the state of misery to which Siberian roots and our own cooking must inevitably reduce us. Bush told me afterward that on the voyage to the Amoor he frequently observed the second mate in deep and melancholy revery, and upon approaching him and asking him what he was thinking about, he answered, with a mournful shake of the head and an indescribable emphasis: "Poor Mr. Kinney! *Poor* Mr. Kinney!" ...

Travelling in pairs, and at times singly, Abaza and Kennan set out with native drivers to explore the proposed route from the junction with the Russian line northward along the eastern shore of the Sea of Okhotsk and onto the Siberian steppes. Somewhere up there, according to the plan, they were to make contact with the party to be landed at the mouth of the Anadyr River, a short distance southwest of the Bering Strait.

The two men started up the Kamchatka Peninsula on September 4 by horse, native boat, and, as the fine fall weather turned into Siberian winter, by dog sledge. Abaza had added James Dodd, an American fur trader living in Petropavlovsk, to the party because of his ability to speak Russian. Their destination was Gizhiga, at the head of the Sea of Okhotsk. Situated near the midpoint of the planned Siberian telegraph route, Gizhiga was chosen as operational headquarters. Despite promises from St. Petersburg and Washington nobody in this remote corner of the czarist empire had received word about the telegraph project. This was not surprising, since the local Russian governor at Gizhiga hadn't had mail from St. Petersburg in eleven months. Few foreigners, or even Russians, had visited this wilderness, except in whaling ships and trading vessels that called occasionally in summer around the Sea of Okhotsk. Inland the natives existed by fishing and tending reindeer herds. The concept of a telegraph was far beyond their comprehension.

Arriving in the Kamchatkan settlement of Milkova, Kennan and his companions were amazed to find themselves treated by the natives with so much deference as to be embarrassing. The halter of Kennan's horse was seized by an "excited native" while three others "with reverently bared heads fell in on each side, and I was led away in triumph to some unknown destination!" His companions were greeted similarly, and as Kennan wrote, "The inexpressible absurdity of our appearance ... reminded me faintly of a Roman triumph. ..." He continued:

The excitement increased rather than diminished as we entered the village. Our motley escort gesticulated, ran to and fro, and shouted unintelligible orders in the most frantic manner; heads appeared and disappeared with startling kaleidoscopic abruptness at the windows of the houses, and three hundred dogs contributed to the general confusion by breaking out into an infernal canine peace jubilee which fairly made the air quiver with sound. ...

Kennan and his party were ushered into a large one-story log house to meet the *starosta*, or chief of the village, who appeared "bowing with the impressive persistency of a Chinese mandarin."

It appears that the courier who had been sent from Petropavlovski to apprise the natives throughout the peninsula of our coming, had carried a letter from the Russian Governor giving the names and occupations of the members of our party, and that mine had been put down as "Yagor Kennan, Telegraphist and *Operator*." It so happened that the *Starosta* of Milkova possessed the rare accomplishment of knowing how to read Russian writing, and the letter had been handed over to him to be communicated to the inhabitants of the village. He had puzzled over the unknown word "telegraphist" until his mind was in a hopeless state of bewilderment, but had not been able to give even the wildest conjecture as to its probable meaning. "*Operator*," however, had a more familiar sound; it was not spelled exactly in the way to which he had been accustomed, but it was evidently intended for "Imperator," the Emperor!— and with his heart throbbing with the excitement of this startling discovery and his hair standing on end from the arduous nature of his exegetical labors, he rushed furiously out to spread the news that the Czar of all the Russias was on a visit to Kamtchatka and would pass through Milkova in the course of three days! The excitement which this alarming announcement created can better be imagined than described. The all-absorbing topic of conversation was, how could Milkova best show its loyalty and admiration for the Head of the Imperial Family, the Right Arm of the Holy Greek Church, and the Mighty Monarch of seventy millions of devoted souls? ...

The Major [Abaza] explained to the *Starosta* our real rank and occupation, but it did not seem to make any difference whatever in the cordial hospitality of our reception. We were treated to the very best which the village afforded, and stared at with a curiosity which showed that travellers through Milkova had hitherto been few and far between. ...



Dark, brooding, bone-chilling Siberian winter had set in fully when the Abaza party first saw the red steeple of the Russian church at Gizhiga, after three months on the trail from Petropavlovsk. No word had been received from the American party that was to have been landed at the Anadyr River mouth. Abaza decided to send Kennan and Dodd by dog sledge to Anadyrsk, a native village situated 250 miles up the Anadyr from the ocean. Downstream from Anadyrsk no permanent habitation existed in the windswept, treeless steppes at the edge of the Arctic Circle. Wandering Chukchis with their herds of reindeer were the only human life in the huge desolate area.

Leaving Gizhiga, the two men plunged northward into the deep snows of the steppes. Tremendous clouds of snow a hundred feet high swirled across the open spaces, and the temperature dropped to 60° below zero. Despite these extreme conditions the winter months were the only time when travel was possible on the steppes. In the summer, when the snow disappeared, a deep, spongy matting of moss covered the ground so heavily that the legs of animals and men sank far into it. Swarms of mosquitoes rose in clouds from the damp vegetation. Walking was virtually impossible beyond a few steps. Travel stopped, to be resumed when the early snows of October made a path for the dog sleds again.

At night on the steppes the travellers survived by following the techniques employed by their native drivers. Three dog sledges were drawn up like three sides of a square about ten feet across. The dogs curled in balls in the snow, breathing small clouds of steam. The drivers shovelled snow out of the square and scattered twigs on the frozen ground. On these they spread shaggy bearskins, on which the men placed their fur sleeping bags. Pulling masses of a tundra vine from the snow, they piled the material high at the open end of the square and set it afire. The travellers were wrapped in layers of fur, including masks. Warmed by the tea they brewed, the party settled into their bivouac for a few hours of sleep while the drifting snow piled up around their barricade and ice coated their beards and almost froze their eyes shut. Awakened one night because his feet were cold, Kennan was struck by the winter night's "strange, wild appearance":

High over head, in a sky which was almost black, sparkled the bright constellations of Orion and the Pleiades—the celestial clocks which marked the long, weary hours between sunrise and sunset. The blue mysterious streamers of the Aurora trembled in the north, now shooting up in clear bright lines to the zenith, then waving back and forth in great majestic curves over the silent camp. ... The silence was profound, oppressive. Nothing but the pulsating of the blood in my ears, and the heavy breathing of the sleeping men at my feet, broke the universal lull. Suddenly there rose upon the still night air a long, faint, wailing cry like that of a human being in the last extremity of suffering. Gradually it swelled and deepened until it seemed to fill the whole atmosphere with its volume of mournful sound, dying away at last into a low, despairing moan. It was the signal-howl of a Siberian dog; but so wild and unearthly did it seem in the stillness of the arctic midnight, that it sent the startled blood bounding through my veins to my very finger-ends. In a moment the mournful cry was taken up by another dog, upon a higher key—two or three more joined in, then ten, twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, until the whole pack of a hundred dogs howled one infernal chorus together, making the air fairly tremble with sound, as if from the heavy bass of a great organ. For fully a minute heaven and earth seemed to be filled with yelling, shrieking fiends. ... Suddenly the Aurora shone out with increased brilliancy, and its waving swords swept back and forth in great semicircles across the dark starry sky, and lighted up the snowy steppe with transitory flashes of colored radiance, as if the gates of heaven were opening and closing upon the dazzling brightness of the celestial city. ...

A party of natives from the north, whom Kennan and Dodd met on the trail, told of reports from bands of Chukchis that Americans had appeared earlier in the winter at the mouth of the Anadyr. The news had been passed from mouth to mouth. Little was known about the party except that it apparently had dug in for the winter. At this point in their exploration five hundred desolate miles separated Kennan and Dodd from the Anadyr party, whose condition struck them as potentially dangerous.

From the start it was recognized that landing an exploring party at the Anadyr as winter approached constituted a risky undertaking, the most dangerous aspect of the entire project. The Russian consul in San Francisco had written Colonel Bulkley urging him not to do it. Bulkley pressed ahead nevertheless, and the schooner *Milton Badger* had put ashore a party led by C. L. Macrae at the river's mouth in early fall, weeks later than planned.

Bulkley, on an inspection tour in the steamer *George S. Wright*, visited Macrae shortly after he landed. Bulkley made a trip thirty miles upriver in a whaleboat just before the winter freeze. Ice was closing in as he sailed back blithely confident that all would be well. In fact, however, the situation with the Macrae party was perilous. It had only casual contacts with wandering natives, no transportation of its own in winter, only the food supplies it brought from the ship, no housing, and only the slightest knowledge of the terrain it faced. It was, indeed, stranded in one of the most remote, forbidding corners of the world.

The five men in the party gathered driftwood from the shores of the Anadyr, combined this with planks brought ashore from the *Milton Badger*, and hacked out an underground retreat in the partially frozen tundra. All they could do was hole up for the winter. Snow soon buried their rough building until only the top of the stovepipe was visible from outside.

Back in San Francisco, Bulkley wrote a report to the Western Union management, later published in newspapers, giving quite a different picture. To read his optimistic account, everything was in splendid condition. He said the Macrae party was probably already exploring the Anadyr River area and pushing up to Anadyrsk with sledges drawn by reindeer. Where these sledges were to come from he didn't specify; presumably from the natives.

"The most northern regions through which our lines will pass present no serious obstacles, neither in the construction nor successful operation of telegraphs ..." he confidently wrote. "It has been argued by some that the terrific gales of high latitude opposed insuperable difficulty in keeping up lines; they are not fabulous, yet no more violent than the gales of your temperate zone."

The truth, however, was something else. Kennan and Dodd found Anadyrsk to be a cluster of cabins along the wooded bank of the upper Anadyr, the last inhabited outpost in northeast Siberia. Downstream toward the Pacific the trees dwindled to shrubs, then all vegetation disappeared and only hundreds of square miles of barren snow were visible, through which the mile-wide river meandered, covered with ice. After a brief rest they determined to go in search of the marooned Macrae party.

The two Americans organized a party of eleven dog sledges loaded with a thirty-day supply of food for dogs and men. Their tiny target was a stovepipe sticking up through the snow somewhere near the river mouth. The natives were vague as to how great the distance was. For ten days and nights the sledges moved down the riverbank. The searchers' hope grew on the tenth day, when tea brewed with ice taken from the river tasted salty. They knew they had reached tidewater. Presumably the buried hut, and their long-sought compatriots, must be fairly close.

On the eleventh day, nearing the area where the Macrae party was supposedly encamped, they searched for signs of life. The temperature dropped to 50° below zero that night, and no shelter was available; they kept pushing ahead. Kennan and Dodd had been travelling nearly twenty-four hours without pause when a native found an overturned whaleboat on the riverbank. About a hundred yards away the rescuers discovered the stovepipe. Exhausted but jubilant, Kennan fell through the snow-covered roof of the dugout entrance and almost into the arms of old friends he had last seen when the *Olga* sailed from San Francisco.

Only three men were living in the hut, where they had been holed up for five months. In desperation Macrae and another man had gone away with a Chukchi band three weeks earlier, hoping through them to reach a settlement. After three days of rest, refitting, and packing up, the three stranded men and their remaining supplies were loaded on the sledges and hauled to Anadyrsk. Not until six weeks later, in mid-March, did Macrae and his companion reach that settlement with their native companions.

Despite their hardships the Americans continued their explorations during the rest of the winter. By spring, when the thaw set in and travel on the steppes ceased, they had traversed the entire proposed Siberian route. At places they had located wooded areas and hired natives to cut trees for telegraph poles. Abaza had gone by dog sledge four hundred miles inland to Yakutsk and had arranged to hire a thousand natives to help construct the line.

Making the Siberians understand what was to be built proved almost impossible. At one point Kennan hired natives to prepare poles, giving them instructions to cut each pole twenty-one feet long and five inches in diameter at the top. Three months later he returned to find five hundred poles cut, each so huge that a dozen men could not raise it. He asked why the men had not followed his orders. They said they believed he planned to build an elevated road on the tops of the poles and realized that poles so small on top never would be strong enough to support it.

In his grand plan Bulkley anticipated that the summer of 1866 would see major strides in construction of the line on both sides of the Pacific. Ships carrying men to reinforce the exploring parties and hundreds of tons of supplies were scheduled to leave San Francisco in early spring. Poles were to be placed in the ground of Alaska and Siberia, crossbars erected, miles of galvanized iron wire strung. But almost from the start of 1866 things went wrong. The company's ships to the Sea of Okhotsk were scheduled to arrive in June. The *Clara Bell* didn't show up until mid-August and the *Palmetto* a month later. The latter was barely unloaded before the winter ice closed in. Thus the entire summer was lost for southern Siberian construction.

Even worse befell the ill-starred Anadyr River base. This had been re-established under Bush, with the thought of building the line along the river edge during the summer. A supply ship was due in June. It did not arrive. Food supplies were

dwindling, and the party was falling into a dangerous plight. Bush's men survived on a few fish pulled from the river. Surrounded by an impassable moss swamp, they could not leave the river fringe. Finally, in October, the *Golden Gate* arrived, but before she could be fully unloaded, she was trapped in the new winter ice and sank. The construction workers and crew members aboard were saved, but little food was. That left a party of forty-seven men stranded on shore facing the long winter. A shortage of fish created famine at Anadyrsk, so no relief supplies could be sent from there. One American died during the winter; the others survived on reindeer meat sold to them by the wandering Chukchis and sledgeloads of food from Gizhiga. The only work on telegraph construction this force could accomplish under such difficult circumstances was cutting a few poles upstream near Anadyrsk, accomplished by a party on snowshoes.

Tragedy and delay struck the Alaskan force, too. Its leader, Kennicott, had been in failing health during the winter of 1865–66 and on May 13 was found dead. The little steamer *Lizzie Horner*, brought to the Yukon on the deck of a supply ship, proved to be a failure and never left Norton Sound. Shoddy construction work with inadequate poles marked the miles of line that were strung along Norton Sound southeast of Bering Strait during the summer.

Then came the blow that destroyed the entire multi-million-dollar dream.

The *Great Eastern*, laying Field's cable westward from England across the Atlantic, arrived at Heart's Content, Newfoundland, on July 27, 1866. The cable was brought ashore successfully and connected to the land telegraph lines. This time it worked. The cable that had been so casually brushed aside by Western Union when it put its dollars into the Russian-American telegraph gamble suddenly was a sensational success. A broken cable of the previous year was located in mid-Atlantic, raised to the surface, spliced, and continued to the American shore. Now there were two working lines.

With messages flashing beneath the ocean from the United States to Europe in minutes, no reason existed any longer for the Russian-American telegraph. Western Union knew it was beaten and set out to close down its project and cut its losses.

Word of the cable's success reached the construction crew in northern British Columbia quickly, flashing up the wire they had strung. Without official orders to do so they waited two or three days, then abandoned the project and headed south to civilization. Their tools, supplies, and wire remained on the ground for the Indians or trappers to use as they wished. The four hundred miles of line constructed and operating north of Quesnel was left to rot. Nobody cared. All they wanted was to go home. (Years later, visitors to the area found that the Indians had used the wire for nails, fish spears, traps, and even in the construction of a crude suspension bridge.)

The line from Quesnel south continued in commercial operation by Western Union until the British Columbia government purchased it in 1870. Decades later, when the gold rush developed in the Yukon, the Dominion government built a telegraph line to that area along the path that had been cut and abandoned by the Russian-American crew. Failure though it was everywhere else, the Russian-American project contributed substantially to the opening of the interior of British Columbia.

News that the project had been cancelled did not reach the Alaskan party until July of 1867, nearly a year after the success of the Atlantic cable. When it did, men at Unalakleet on Norton Sound hung black cloth on the telegraph poles in mourning. Altogether the crews had built seventy-five miles of line and explored a long distance up the Yukon, locating what they considered a practical route through to British Columbia. Some of the 135 men brought home by the *Clara Bell* and *Nightingale* that summer had been gone from civilization for more than two years.

Far away in Siberia the Americans and their native helpers had no idea that their project had collapsed. Sending a ship to them so late in the summer was impossible; the winter ice in the Sea of Okhotsk would prevent her from arriving. So they went briskly ahead, building a line that would never be used. They were more optimistic about their success than ever before, in fact. Arrival of their building supplies at the end of the summer of 1866 had permitted them at last to start construction. Nearly twenty-thousand poles had been cut, and Siberian ponies were distributing them for erection. As they cut poles the men sang:

*In eighteen hundred and sixty-eight  
Hurrah! Hurrah!  
In eighteen hundred and sixty-eight  
Hurrah! Hurrah!  
In eighteen hundred and sixty-eight  
The cable will be in a miserable state  
And we'll all feel gay  
When they use it to fish for whales.*

The first American ship to anchor in the upper reaches of the Sea of Okhotsk in the



spring of 1867 was *Sea Breeze*, a whaler from New Bedford, Massachusetts. Her captain was amazed to find a group of Americans in native dress coming aboard (those fine blue and gold uniforms were long forgotten).

"How about the Atlantic cable?" Kennan inquired.

Captain Hamilton replied cheerfully, "Oh, yes, the cable is laid all right."

With sinking heart Kennan asked, "Does it work?"

"Works like a snatch-tackle. The 'Frisco papers are publishing every morning the London news of the day before."

Realizing belatedly that his tidings were grim news to his guests, the captain gave them newspapers he had aboard and sent them ashore loaded with bananas, oranges, and potatoes from Hawaii, food the like of which they hadn't seen in nearly two years.

Kennan and his men rowed ashore, built a fire to roast the potatoes, and searched through the newspapers. In the San Francisco *Bulletin* they found what they had dreaded. A New York dispatch dated October 15, 1866, stated: "In consequence of the success of the Atlantic cable, all work on the Russian-American telegraph line has been stopped and the enterprise has been abandoned." For seven months of numbing Siberian winter they had worked pointlessly.

Six more weeks passed before a Western Union ship arrived from the States with official orders for the men to sell what they could and come home. To the very end the Western Union leaders lacked comprehension of what their Siberian party had faced. The natives had little money and even less need for American products.

"We sold glass insulators by the hundred as patent American teacups, and brackets by the thousand as prepared American kindling-wood," Kennan recalled. "We offered soap and candles as premiums to anybody who would buy our salt pork and dried apples, and taught the natives how to make cooling drinks and hot biscuits, in order to create a demand for our redundant lime-juice and baking-powder." Natives who bought pickaxes and shovels were given frozen cucumber pickles as a bonus. The thousands of poles and hundreds of miles of wire were abandoned for whatever use the small native population could make of them.

Around on the other side of the world in New York, Western Union's board of directors had some mopping up to do, too. They were more concerned about rescuing themselves from the financial loss than about the fate of their Siberian crew. In September, 1866, two months after the success of the cable became apparent, they adopted a resolution authorizing holders of Extension stock to exchange it for Western Union bonds before February 1, 1867, at a favorable rate. Meanwhile they talked optimistically in public about prospects for resuming construction of the overland line, despite the Atlantic cable.

Much of the Extension stock, it will be recalled, was held by company directors or by Collins. Naturally nearly all of it was turned in for good solid Western Union bonds—\$3,170,292 worth—by the deadline. Thus the directors shifted the burden of the losses from their Russian adventure off themselves and other participants onto the mass of ordinary Western Union stockholders.

On top of that Western Union vice president William Orton wrote to Secretary of State William H. Seward on March 25, 1867, suggesting another scheme. He asked that the United States formally urge Russia to complete the telegraph line across Siberia and the Bering Strait to some point in Russian America, about two thousand miles or more. If Russia would do that, he said, Western Union would resume work in British Columbia to link up with the Russian line. Russia would benefit by having telegraphic communication with her distant North American colony. And Western Union, of course, would have the benefit of the tolls generated.

Seward replied almost effusively three days later, apparently reacting favorably to Western Union's proposal and indicating that he would take the matter up with the Russian ambassador. What he didn't say was more important. At that moment he was near the climax of secret negotiations with the Russian ambassador for the United States to purchase Russian America, thus wiping out any interest by Russia in Western Union's proposal. Two days later, at 4 A.M. on March 30, 1867, Seward signed the treaty purchasing Russian America for \$7.2 million. Unquestionably news about construction of the telegraph line, failure though it was, contributed to American awareness of that remote territory and helped win Senate ratification of the treaty a bare ten days later.

*Phillip H. Ault is associate editor of the South Bend (Indiana) Tribune and the author of, among other works, a book on the opening of communications to the West entitled Wires West (Dodd, Mead, 1974).*

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