A MAGNIFICENT FIASCO

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The Jesse Hamilton Robinson referred to in this article, my father, was born in 1844 and spent his early years in Pittsburgh or old Allegheny. His father, William V. Robinson, was one of the city’s early councilmen and had a dry goods store at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Market Street. His mother, Mary Robinson, was the daughter of Jesse Hamilton, who was in the saddlery business on Wood Street as early as 1816.

My father’s early association with the telegraph service began about 1863 as a member of the Signal Corps of the United States Army, and led to an association with Andrew Carnegie, now commemorated, with others, in a large bronze plaque placed by Carnegie in the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall in Pittsburgh’s Civic Center. The tablet bears the inscription: “To Commemorate the United States Military Telegraph Corps”; the names of the members of the corps; and bas-relief portraits of a majority of the members, including my father. It was unveiled on the fiftieth anniversary of the telegram sent from Washington on April 22, 1861, to D. McCargo, Pittsburgh, by Andrew Carnegie in his capacity as Assistant General Manager, Military Railroads and Telegraphs. The telegram reads as follows: “Send four of your best operators to Washington at once prepared to enter government service for war.” Just below appears a quotation from Grant’s Memoirs: “No Orders Ever Had to be Given to Establish the Telegraph.”

The material in this article was derived from an old diary of my father, found after his death in 1911, and from an article by W. H. Deppermann, published in full in the North American Review, Spring, 1938, under the title, “Two Cents an Acre,” and in condensed form, under the title used here, in the Reader’s Digest for March, 1938. The article has to do with a now almost forgotten incident that occurred immediately after the Civil War. As the war drew to a close men’s interests and
imagination turned in other directions, just as they are doing today. Cyrus W. Field had made five unsuccessful attempts, beginning in 1857, to lay an Atlantic Cable and had spent over ten million dollars. The importance of trying to reach Europe by telegraphic communication was the talk of the day and men’s minds were trying to find a solution, just as today they are trying to find solutions to problems relating to air transportation, atomic energy, and other war-created possibilities.

The Western Union Telegraph Company had been organized in 1856 and had just completed a transcontinental line of over three thousand miles, which turned out to be a great success. The idea took root in the brain of Peter MacDonough Collins that since it was only thirty-nine miles across Bering Strait a telegraph line could be built from New York to Paris which would consist of sixteen thousand miles of pole-strung wire and thirty-nine miles of underwater cable. If a line three thousand miles long could be laid successfully, why not sixteen thousand miles? It was only a matter of multiplication. The line would extend up through British Columbia, then some nine hundred miles across unknown Russian America (now Alaska), thence across the thirty-nine miles of water of Bering Strait to Siberia. From this point it would pierce the bleakest part of Siberia for sixteen hundred miles to the mouth of the Amur River. The Russian government had promised assistance and would lay a line seven thousand miles long from St. Petersburg to the Amur River. The enterprise was known as the Collins Overland Telegraph.

I shall deal with the story in two parts, much after the fashion of Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities*.

There is the story of the whole enterprise itself, its failure and its unexpected success, and the story of a small segment of the operation in one of the most desolate parts of eastern Siberia near the Arctic Circle, which was under the direction of my father, at what was known as Bush Station. The finding of my father’s diary, an official record, after his death by my sister has induced me to look into this whole matter and to develop this article. It seems a particularly appropriate time following the Second World War when so many new enterprises are afoot and men’s imag-
lations are again at work saving minutes and seconds where some eighty years ago men were interested in trying to save days and hours.

On July 8, 1865, with the camp fires of the Civil War barely extinguished, a curious flotilla of twenty-four vessels sailed out of the Golden Gate headed for British Columbia and Russian America. On these twenty-four vessels were five hundred young men seeking adventure and willing to take the risks and the hardships of the unknown in Russian America and later in Siberia, for a salary of one hundred dollars a month. They were surveyors, explorers, engineers, and telegraph operators, a carefully selected group launched on a great enterprise which was to be rushed at all speed. Evidently there had been little time to anticipate the perils and difficulties ahead and to provide all the requisite materials and supplies, both to accomplish the job and to live in these remote parts while the work was being carried on. The vessels carried several tons of large green glass insulators and some one thousand two hundred miles of iron telegraph wire. Mr. Collins was a promoter, a visionary if there ever was one. He had joined the California gold rush in 1849 but had soon learned that the road to wealth did not lie in the hardships of discovery but rather in handling business for the successful discoverers of gold. He found this a lucrative field and more in line with his talents, so he formed an association with the father-in-law of General U. S. Grant and operated the firm of Collins and Dent, bankers and dealers in gold dust in San Francisco. Through this association he established important political contacts and in 1856 was able to persuade President Pierce to give him an appointment as commercial agent to Siberia. It was while he was making the necessary journeys and carrying on this mission that he discovered that there were only thirty-nine miles of open water across Bering Strait, and this, with the failure of the Atlantic Cable, developed in his mind the possibilities of an overland telegraph to reach Asia and Europe. He was able to enlist the support of Czar Alexander II of Russia and also of Queen Victoria, and by the time the Civil War was over his plans had ripened and he was ready to move. He had even developed estimates in great detail of the prospective earnings of the operation. His 16,000-mile line with the two wires would handle 1,000 messages a day at $25
a message, and this would produce an annual gross income of $9,000,-
000. He gave little thought or consideration to costs of operation and
maintenance, but gave great emphasis to the prospects of the total income.
Notwithstanding all these great expectations and magnificent prospects
he had great difficulty in getting financial assistance and it was not until
he established contacts with Hiram Sibley, the first president of Western
Union, that he made any headway whatever in financing the enterprise.
Hiram Sibley had just thrown the first transcontinental telegraph line
across the United States and it had turned out to be a great success.
Since the Atlantic Cable seemed doomed to failure, why not back this
idea, and so the Collins Overland Telegraph Company took form and
the enterprise was launched. Later President Lincoln signed a draft on
the United States Government for fifty thousand dollars as a voluntary
contribution toward this undertaking, and Collins became the most talked
of character of his day. Collins, with his fertile imagination, had hardly
waved goodbye to the twenty-four vessels as they sailed out of the Golden
Gate into the unknowns of Russian America and Siberia before he envis-
ioned the telegraph lines extending into China, into South and Central
America, and all over Europe, and began to lay his plans accordingly.
Such were the telegraph titans—and so the race was on.

Now having started the enterprise, let us turn our attention for a mo-
moment to a small segment of territory in eastern Siberia just south of the
Arctic Circle at latitude 64.55° North, longitude 177.48° East. It is
New Year's Day, Tuesday, January 1, 1867, at 6:00 A. M., and in
total darkness. In fact, at this season of the year there are only a few
hours of faint sunshine out of the twenty-four hours at this location in
Siberia and it is minus 50° below zero. It is one of the sections of the
Collins Overland Telegraph known as Bush Station, and twenty-four
young men are huddled in a frame dwelling some twenty-five feet
square, heated only by a small coal stove. There is no fire wood in this
part of the world. All the coal must be shipped in and there are only a
few months in the year when shipping can reach this section or deliver
its cargo. The camp is located at the mouth of the Anadyr River in east-
ern Siberia to the west of Bering Strait and directly north of the long
Kamchatka Peninsula, which extends southward toward the Japanese
Islands. At this season of the year the men can carry on no work because the ground is frozen to a great depth and any one who ventured out into the night for a distance of more than one hundred yards from the station took his life in his hands, as many discovered. Many rescue parties had to be organized to try to save those who ventured out and who became lost, and other rescue groups attempted to get food to some of the stations. On one occasion a party of five at another station ran out of provisions. The local Indians carried the message to the quartermaster general, a Mr. George Keenan, who organized a rescue crew consisting of two Americans, one Cossack, and eleven natives, who set out with eleven dog sleds. They journeyed for eleven days for a distance of 250 miles before they located the five wanderers who had set out to find food. Had it not been for the friendly help of the natives, not only the five wanderers but the men at that station would probably have died for lack of food. George Keenan in his book, Tent Life in Siberia, which he wrote on returning to America, describes one night while on this journey during the month of January, 1867:

Many times before in Siberia I had seen nature in her sterner moods and winter garb but never before had the elements of cold, barrenness and desolation seemed to combine into a picture so dreary as the one which was presented to us that night near Bering Straits. As far as the eye could pierce the gathering gloom, in every direction lay the barren steppes like a boundless ocean of snow blown into wave like ridges by previous storms. There was not a tree, not a bush, not any signs of animal or vegetable life to show that we were not traveling on a frozen ocean. All was silence and desolation. We seemed to have entered upon some frozen abandoned world where all the ordinary laws and phenomena of nature were suspended, and where animal and vegetable life were extinct, and from which even the favor of the Creator had been withdrawn.

Vivid as this description is, it can only suggest the hardships of travel and existence in this frozen waste, particularly to those who were thrown pell-mell and without adequate foresight and preparation into this remote and desolate country. Let us turn for further information to the entries in my father's diary. On January 9, 1867, we find the following entry:

Purchased 51 deer from the Tchucktchi (the name of the Indian tribe that inhabited this area). Price paid 30 pounds of navy tobacco, one kettle, a hatchet, some beads and a pair of scissors, altogether amounting to $15. They
seemed very much pleased at their bargain and so did we. They kill the deer by sticking a knife in behind the foreshoulder and any deviation from this mode, such as cutting a deer's throat, would displease them. After their saying "Magenka" several times (which means good) they took their departure.

It was most fortunate that the deal was made on January 9 for the next day the diary records:

Strong gale blowing all day with drifting snow making the day one of the most disagreeable of the winter. Cold indoors and stove drawing so hard that all the heat goes up the chimney. All day yesterday the frost which gathered on the inside of the roof melted and wet the blankets in our beds, which made them very uncomfortable to sleep in.

At night we rigged rubber blankets to the ceiling so that the water drained off on the floor. One day suffer from the cold, the next from being drowned out of our beds. Such is life in Siberia.

On January 14 is the following record:

Our handsome and kind dog "Nick" was killed by the wolves last night. Everybody is pervaded with feelings of sadness at his unexpected demise. The wolves came close up to the house and killed him within a hundred yards of the house. They did not eat his corpse, but merely sucked his blood.

On the following day my father and another took quite a tramp in pursuit of the wolves but did not see them. He reports:

However, we were well paid for our trouble by the beautiful and varied scene which the snow clad mountains and valleys presented. The laurels were covered with a delicate frost which at a distance gave them the appearance of white rose bushes, which brought back to memory the scenes of warm climates.

And so they wear out the long winter and the sun rises on the horizon so that it is no longer daylight for only two hours and fifty-two minutes but, on the contrary, the days are getting longer than the nights. But spring has its dangers, too, as the following from the diary of March 31 discloses:

Temperature 6:00 A. M. 50° below zero. Two of the men in the morning daylight have gone out on the ice and one of them, Kelly, has become so numbed that he could not walk. At 8:00 A. M. a rescue party brings him back to the camp so frozen stiff that life is almost extinct. His senses and speech were gone.

The entry of April 17 records that:
On this day two of Kelly's fingers, which had frozen, were amputated. They had become so mortified that there was no alternative except to take them off. The tools used in performing the operation were a carpenter's saw, pen knife and a pair of tweezers. The operation was successfully performed with these crude implements in two hours. The patient being under the influence of chloroform experienced no pain from the operation.

Such were the allurements of spring and the inexperience of the organization.

There was also found with my father's diary an original letter by George Keenan dated November 28, 1866, delivered by dog express to Lt. J. H. Robinson, Camp Bush, Anadyr Bay, North Eastern, Siberia, which describes another rescue party. It reads:

Your letter bearing date of "Camp Bush Anadyr Bay Nov. 1st" reached me five days ago about fifty versts south of Anadyrsk while attempting to cross a range of mountains in a storm at night . . . I read it by the light of the camp fire among the mountains while the wind whirled smoke and ashes in my eyes and the snow drifted in dense clouds over my head. It seemed queer enough under such circumstances to have recalled to my mind the old "No. 3 days" with the "ciphers," "specials" and piles of business over which you and I in our "owlish" capacity used to get sleepy and cross in the nights long ago. My surroundings and circumstances, ends and aims have changed so entirely since then that I look back upon those days very much as a disciple of the Pythagorean philosophy might look back upon a previous state of existence when his spirit occupied another body in another sphere. This country of barren steppes and bleak mountains with its wild tribes of wandering natives, with its isolation from even any suggestion of civilization, seem hardly like a part of the busy active world which we have left. Were it not for an occasional letter a man might about as well be an inhabitant of the planet Jupiter.

Let us turn now from Bush Station to other points along the 16,000-mile route and see what has transpired there since July 8, 1865, of nearly all of which developments the small group at Bush Station was in total ignorance. By New Year's Day of 1866, or a year earlier than the period just referred to, the North American expedition had pushed through British Columbia into Russian America, had reached the shores of the mighty Yukon, and there set up the last spruce pole amid the thunder of a thirty-two gun salute and the explosion of an old Russian blunderbuss. The Russian Government had made the best progress of all, nearly completing three-fourths of their 7,000-mile line from St. Petersburg to the Amur River. They later completed the line and Great Britain extended
it into India. But Cyrus W. Field had not given up either his hopes or his endeavors, and on July 27, 1866, after five failures, the Steamship Great Eastern, at the cost of his last dollar, entered Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, and the Atlantic Cable was finally successfully laid. A 2,000-mile trail of gutta-percha covered wire not much thicker than a man’s thumb had connected Ireland with Newfoundland. It was the end of the titanic job to which Cyrus W. Field had devoted more than a dozen patient, painstaking years, and it was the death knell of the Collins Overland Telegraph, of which the small group at Bush Station was long in total ignorance.

On the North American part of the route the telegraph pioneers had already returned to America leaving behind them the material which they had brought into the wilderness and a fifty-foot right of way hacked through an almost solid wall of virgin spruce, which is still the main highway through central British Columbia, and to this day is known as the Telegraph Trail. For decades afterwards the Alaskan Eskimos were drinking reindeer milk from huge green glass insulators. They also found that telegraph wire came in handy for fishing nets and weirs. In British Columbia the Siwash and Chinook Indians used the abandoned wire to construct primitive suspension bridges, some of which were hanging until recent times. The twenty thousand telegraph poles which had been so neatly piled in Siberia provided ample fire wood for many years for the wandering Koraks, to whom this strange telegraphic pageant was beyond all understanding. They saw the white man rush into their land, hew down tall trees, painstakingly strip them of their branches and then pile them in huge mounds, and suddenly disappear. Inscrutable indeed are the ways of the white man.

But the actual building of the telegraph line was an epic of hardihood. Bitter cold, sometimes fifty-five degrees below zero, numbed the workers hip-deep in snow. With the ground frozen like rock to a depth of five feet, the men laboriously gouged out post-holes for the telegraph poles brought with heroic drudgery behind straining dog teams. Whymper, the artist of the expedition and one of the group at Bush Station, reports that “six holes were a good day’s work.”
It is difficult to say which of the two enterprises involved in reaching Europe by wire displayed the most dogged determination and perseverance, but the uppermost idea was that, since messages could pass over wires, Europe must in some way be linked with America. Who would develop the first successful connection? Cyrus W. Field made five unsuccessful attempts before his sixth one succeeded and spent what in those days amounted to many fortunes. The Collins Overland Telegraph spent $3,000,000 and never paused in its efforts until Field had succeeded, and until it was demonstrated that the Atlantic Cable was a permanent success and could carry its messages at prices against which the Overland Telegraph line could not compete. Today we accept communication both by telegraph and telephone around the world as a matter of course. We do not stop to think of the years of experimentation, of hardship and endurance which lie behind these accomplishments, nor what we owe to our ancestors.

Let us return again to see what is going on at Bush Station. The entry in the diary on February 21, 1867, records:

Wind blew so hard that no one could see ten feet from them. M. J. Kelly in attempting to go to the outhouse and back was lost and bewildered so that he could not find his way back. Several of the party started in pursuit of him but failed to find him; guns were fired to attract his attention, but the wind being so strong their reports could not be heard ten yards from the house. He by accident found the way back almost frozen to death after being out about half an hour. The out-house is only one hundred yards from the main building.

The entry of March 20, 1867, records:

Visible eclipse of moon 6:30 P. M., entered Penumbra; 7:30 P. M., shadow half over; 8:00 P. M., shadow commenced declining. The Tchucktchi were very much frightened at the eclipse. They chanted, prayed and feasted and would not come out of their houses while the eclipse was on. They account for it by saying that an evil spirit or Carmack is trying to eat a piece of the moon.

It is now some nine months since the successful laying of the Atlantic Cable, of which not a word has reached Bush Station, nor are they aware of the fact that the enterprise in which they are still actively en-
gaged is, in fact, over. They are still planning and laying out their work as spring comes on. The diary of May 14, 1867, records the temperature at 11° above zero and notes:

Took a walk today and saw many pleasant sights (for the eye of one who has been penned up by a 7 months’ winter), such as grass, green moss and a walk on bare ground. Saw the first wild goose of the season. The poor fellow seemed at a loss to know what to do with himself, as there is no open water yet. Measured the ice on the lake and found it 6 feet 9 inches thick.

On May 24th the diary notes:

Took a long walk last evening returning at one this A. M. Daylight does not leave the sky now.

George Keenan has described the vegetation in Siberia and the coming of spring in a couple of paragraphs which I now quote:

The months of April and May, owing to the great length of the days and the comparative mildness of the weather, are the most favorable months in Northeastern Siberia for out-door work and travel.

The snow was rapidly disappearing under the influence of the warm long continued sunshine, the ice in the river showed unmistakable signs of breaking up, patches of bare ground appeared here and there. The sunny hill sides and everything foretold the speedy approach of the short but hot Arctic summer.

Hardly is the snow off the ground before the delicate wax like petals of the blueberry and star flowers and the great snowy clusters of Labrador Tea begin to whiten the mossy plains. In three weeks after the disappearance of the last snow all nature has put on the garments of midsummer and rejoices in almost perpetual sunshine. There is no long wet lingering spring, no gradual unfolding of buds and leaves one by one as with us. The vegetation, which has been held in icy fetters for eight months, bursts suddenly its bonds, and with one irresistible sweep takes the world by storm. There is no longer any night; one day blends almost unperceptibly into another, with only a short interval of twilight, which has all coolness and repose of night without darkness.

By June 28 the temperature had risen to as high as 70° above zero; ships were beginning to come in with provisions, and the work was moving along as scheduled. It was not, however, until July 16, 1867, or almost a year after the successful laying of the Atlantic Cable, that word reached Bush Station that the enterprise had been discontinued and all work was to stop. Such was the isolation in eastern Siberia that it took just about a year for the sound of “taps” to reach the workers in this lo-
cality, so far were they from civilization and from any means of prompt communication. The diary on July 16, 1867, records:

Sighted the Barque Clara Bell this A. M. off Cape Alexander. Major Wright was the only passenger on board. He brings the bad news of the suspension of operations by the Company and orders for us all to return to San Francisco as soon as possible. The suspension is owing to the working of the Atlantic Cable. The members of the party here all feel disappointed. Many of them would like to remain another season and some few until the work could be completed.

It was not until July 29 that Bush Station was evacuated and all boarded the "Clara Bell" heading back from the mouth of the Anadyr River to travel across the Pacific to the Golden Gate, which many of them had left some two years before in such high spirits and expectations. The steamers which plied along the Siberian coast to furnish supplies had a speed of only two and one-half miles an hour and those that traveled the Pacific were not much faster. Notwithstanding all the rigors and hardships of the seven months of winter, many of the men would like to have remained another season and some few until the work could be completed. Such is the spirit of youth and the spirit of man. No difficulty daunts him but only invites him to find the solution even if he must spend his life in the quest. The journey to San Francisco was completed on the clipper ship "Nightingale," with a stop at the Sandwich Islands, now the Hawaiian Islands. The "Nightingale" arrived at San Francisco on October 8, 1867, one day behind the "Clara Bell," and the adventures of Bush Station were only a memory. Fifteen months had passed since my father, about twenty-two years of age, had left San Francisco, with every reason to believe that he would be part of a great enterprise which would link the Americas with Asia and Europe with two small wires some 16,000 miles long. So far as he was concerned, it was a momentous and thrilling experience, and while he had suffered great hardships there was no permanent impairment of health. As he left the steamer at San Francisco his thoughts must have centered on the question—what next?

But let us take another look at the enterprise itself. Of Peter McDonough Collins there is little more to relate. The Overland Telegraph was his one stake in history. When it failed Collins turned eastward and
hibernated for twenty-five years in an obscure hotel in New York City where he died in 1900 at the age of eighty-seven. His work, his dreams, his enterprise had been forgotten and his passing stirred no more than a paragraph of comment in the New York newspapers.

The story would end here but for one other incident. In the group that had laid out the line in Russian America was one Major Robert Kennicott. Kennicott was a scientist and explorer. Some years before he had been engaged by the Smithsonian Institution to explore Russian America. He had furnished the Smithsonian with many reports covering not only the geography but the rich resources of timber, fish, fur, and precious metals to be found in this country. Now he had joined in pushing the Collins Overland Telegraph only to die heroically in the Alaskan wilderness while trying to save a companion who had fallen into the icy waters of the Yukon, but his reports still lived in the files of the Smithsonian Institution. It was this information coupled with the knowledge gained from the expedition that set in motion a sequence of events which magnificently justified all the hardships and heartaches of the ill-starred telegraph expedition. The difficulties and squabbles of the American fishermen in Russian waters had to be settled. All these things inspired Secretary of State Seward to conclude negotiations with the Czar's government for the purchase of Russian America, 586,000 square miles, for $7,200,000. It became the property of the United States and we called it Alaska. For two cents an acre we had purchased an inexhaustible territory from which we have already taken a billion dollars in minerals alone, not to mention fishing and seal skins.

Perhaps also the Overland Telegraph had redoubled the efforts of Cyrus W. Field and had spurred him on to final success.

Such were the fruits of the failure of the Collins Overland Telegraph.

Today, a mountain, a city, a lake, and a glacier bear Kennicott's name, but his most enduring monument is Alaska, the frost-bound theater of the Collins Overland fiasco.