

“Big Pants” McLean --- The Baloney Road 1928

In the 1880s, talk had begun of a railway to Hudson Bay through The Pas, which by then had become a commercial centre and steamship port supplying a growing number of settlements along the Saskatchewan River. It was the dream of farmers and businessmen _ a railway from The Pas to Hudson Bay and an ocean port. Construction of the line to The Pas was delayed until 1908, when the growing lumber industry generated enough commerce to warrant construction of a line to The Pas from the Canadian Northern main line. From that point on, The Pas was to become an important transportation link between southern Manitoba and the North. After the boundary division of 1912, the North became a part of Manitoba. There was a renewed interest in the region, not just as a source of furs, but as a source of timber, fish, minerals and precious metals. Gateway The opening of Mandy Mine (circa 1916) near Flin Flon secured The Pas' place as 'Gateway to the North,' and the town became the headquarters of northern mining, transportation and exploration. The discovery of the huge, rich copper/zinc discovery at Flin Flon (circa 1915) galvanized the entire area north of The Pas in a mining claim-staking frenzy. CV (Sonny) Whitney interests were willing to put up the millions required to construct a metallurgical complex at Flin Flon and a hydro generating station at Island Falls _ but a rail line to Flin Flon was essential to supply the undertaking. On December 17, 1927 an agreement was signed between the Province of Manitoba, Manitoba Northern Railway and Canadian National Railway to construct a line to Flin Flon 'for the purpose of developing Manitoba's resources.' The contract was awarded to Dominion Construction with a completion date of September 30, 1929. The contract included a bonus of \$250,000 if 2,000 tons of freight could be delivered to Sonny Whitney's Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Company Ltd. in Flin Flon by December 31, 1928 (one year early). Enter Dominion Construction's fiery president, Harry Falconer McLean. McLean was born in Bismark, Dakota territory, and became a railway construction worker in his mid-teens. A civil engineer, he came to Canada as superintendent for Toronto Construction Company, and worked there from 1905 to 1912. During the First World War, he was sent overseas to direct the construction of railways in France, returning to Canada to undertake the reconstruction of Halifax after the 1917 explosion. In 1927-28, McLean was the driving force behind the railroad construction from The Pas to Flin Flon _ the 84-mile branch line of Canadian National Railway that was to put Flin Flon on the map and open up northern Manitoba. Skeptics believed that the job could not be done due to the rugged terrain of muskeg, lakes and rock _ not to mention harsh weather conditions. Driven The naysayers quickly realized that Harry Falconer McLean was not your average leader, but rather a person so driven that the money was inconsequential compared to the challenges of the job. He worked grueling hours, tiring younger associates with his inexhaustible energy. After receiving the Flin Flon contract, McLean, also known as 'Big Pants,' boasted: 'I'll have the steel in to Flin Flon in one half the contract time.' Winter temperatures found gravel deposits frozen solid, while summer weather presented muskeg and wet ground. In a radical departure from established practice, McLean laid track on the frozen muskeg without a roadbed. In two months he had freight and mail going up and down the line. See 'Cranberry...' on pg. 9 Continued from pg. 5 When spring thaws came, the crews went back and lifted the rails and installed foundation fill and ties. As work progressed, Cranberry Portage and The Pas began enjoying daily passenger service by rail. Cranberry Portage received freight and mail twice a week and the telephone service was later extended to Flin Flon, without a single track

derailment. The greatest obstacles were sinkholes, or bog. On one 34-mile stretch, 11 bottomless pits were encountered. A solid stretch of roadbed suddenly became a heavy quagmire into which a bridge and logging disappeared, leaving the rails suspended in the air. A temporary trestle at Mile 25 was already half built when the bottom dropped out; further along the line a gravel train disappeared into the bog when a 300-foot stretch of roadbed sank out of site. One gap required thousands of feet of timber and 140 trainloads of gravel before it was filled. The 'Grand Daddy' sink hole at mile 60 was fed night and day until 330 loads of gravel had been consumed at an added cost of \$45,000. All told, sink holes cost the contract an additional \$150,000. Obstacle Another huge obstacle to completion were rock slides along lake edges. Whole sections of stable rail bed suddenly skidded from their foundations into adjacent lakes due to shifts in underground and underwater sloping rock formations. On one occasion an engine and caboose met a watery grave _ and the roadbed had to be moved back from the lakeshore, causing more delays. Fires destroyed equipment and records, causing more timeline problems. A single fire ravaged half of Cranberry Portage, and complete destruction of the community was only prevented by the gallant stand of 100 weary men who fought the blaze with only two locomotive pumps. One can only imagine the personal problems endured by McLean's work crews. Cold, frostbite, blizzards, mosquitos, lice, and fever and other forms of sickness _ not to mention the loneliness and isolation. But the loyalty and dedication of the crews, along with the driving force of Harry Falconer McLean paid off _ the 24-month job was completed in nine months. On September 22, 1928, Manitoba Premier John Bracken drove the 'Golden Spike' at Flin Flon 15 months ahead of schedule. Amazingly, Dominion Construction had also earned \$333,000 from freight and passenger service during construction. Harry McLean collected the well deserved \$250,000 'early completion bonus'. Results were quickly felt in the north as mining initiatives such as Mandy, Sherritt Gordon and HBM&S were able to forge ahead. Northern Manitoba had been opened up and the communities Lynn Lake, Thompson, Snow Lake and Leaf Rapids followed later. The railway to Flin Flon was not the only gigantic project that 'Big Pants' Harry McLean conquered. He established a number of companies, notably Dominion Construction Corporation, H.F. McLean Limited, Grenville Crushed Rock Company and Seaboard Construction Limited (US). Between world wars he became internationally famous as a specialist in large and difficult construction projects. Among the most important were, of course, the Flin Flon railway in Manitoba, as well as the Grand Falls Hydroelectric Dam in New Brunswick, Wolfe's Cove Terminal Tunnel in Quebec and the Delaware Aqueduct in New York State, among others. During the Second World War, he undertook a number of defense projects in Quebec and the Maritimes. As was not uncommon for famous people of his era, Harry Falconer McLean was both eccentric and unpredictable. Here are examples of what others had to say about him: 'McLean is one of that fading group of colourful men who look eternally toward the horizon.' 'When I am with him, I always feel a deep concern. One never knows what he might do or say.' 'I just knew he was Harry McLean. That was the way Harry acted. It never dawned on me that he was eccentric. I thought, 'That's just Harry acting naturally.'" 'To my mind, Harry McLean was the best railroader that this country ever had, bar none. He was a genius and had all the courage in the world. Nothing could stop Harry McLean when something had to be done.' 'McLean is the last of the frontier busters, the great pioneers.' 'Many people say they don't give a damn. Many people would not like to give a damn. But Harry McLean doesn't give a damn.' Weighing in at more than 250 pounds and standing six feet four inches tall, McLean was hard to miss. Given his penchant for bursting into song at several decibels above socially acceptable levels, and for

wrestling unsuspecting acquaintances to the ground, he was impossible to ignore. 'Big Pants' He had many nicknames. He acquired 'Big Pants' from northern natives, 'Little Red God' came from a poem favoured by his friend Berton Puddington, and 'HF' and 'The Boss' were terms often used by his employees _ though they always called him Mr. McLean to his face. To some he was a boyish prankster; to others nothing more than a bully. His post-retirement antics were legendary. He gave a hotel keeper \$209 and told her, 'Every time I meet you _ a \$20 is yours.' See 'Two...' on pg. 9 Continued from pg. 9 Two maids who cleaned his room got \$50 a piece. An RAF officer who bumped into McLean had \$45 thrust upon him. A bellhop received \$96 in tips _ total outlay in one day \$281 _ but it was small fry stuff for Harry McLean. On another occasion he gave returning soldiers fistfuls of cash ranging from \$50 to \$200 and ended by tossing a couple of thousand dollars on the floor. In Halifax, a taxi driver got \$2,000 for his son's education, a hotel clerk received \$1,000 for no reason at all, and a telephone operator came out \$500 richer. On a visit to a hospital McLean ran through \$6000 in short order and left, happy as a lark, that he had 13 cents in his jeans. For his philanthropies, he had a standard explanation: 'The basis of a new social order must be happiness.' McLean recognized that the huge projects he undertook required his workers do hard and dangerous work. Inevitably there were injuries and deaths. It was part of the job. When one of his men was injured or killed on the job, McLean would ensure that the man's family was taken care of. There are many stories of McLean paying off a dead worker's mortgage, providing his widow with a pension and financing the education of the children involved. His jobs were models of safety and his workers had the best medical care available. McLean did not want to risk losing his experienced workers, many of whom had been with him from the start. He often downplayed his own efforts, preferring to give the credit to his men. He truly valued his workers and considered them his greatest resource. Erected cairn Fittingly, McLean erected a cairn upon completion of each project to honour his workers. There are eight cairns in all in Canada. The cairns were built specifically in memory of those men who were injured or lost their lives during each construction. Bronze plates were placed on the cairns, in some instances with the names of workers involved, as well as a verse of the Rudyard Kipling poem extolling the virtues of labour, The Sons of Martha. The poem was inspired by the Biblical story of Mary and Martha. It contrasts the lives of thinkers and labourers, and celebrates the careful work done by workers and builders to provide for others' physical needs. It was Kipling's view that without the 'Marthas', or 'doers' of the world, we would not have the quality of life we enjoy today. Rudyard Kipling and Harry McLean met at a gathering where Kipling recited The Sons of Martha, and from this McLean received the inspiration to erect monuments to the workers on his projects. Manitoba project cairns included The Pas, Flin Flon and Churchill. Most notably for our story, Harry McLean had a cairn erected at the Sherritt Junction just north of Cranberry Portage on the completion of the railroad to Flin Flon in 1928. The 10-foot high cairn still stands, although no memorial plaques remain on the decaying cairn itself. The last remaining plaque was removed from the cairn in 2004 by the Flin Flon Archives Group. The plaque had been hanging by two loose bolts and showing the scars of at least one wayward bullet hole. In 2004, according to The Reminder, the Flin Flon Archives Group removed the last remaining plaque to the Flin Flon-Creighton Public Library with an unveiling ceremony held July 2 of that year. The organization stressed that it had been a struggle to decide whether or not to remove this piece of history from its natural habitat. However, their concerns about potential vandalism permeated the realization that the last remaining plaque be brought in from the bush or it would eventually disappear. (Testament is the fact that the location of the other plaques originally on the cairn are unknown at this

time). The concerns and actions of the Archives Group, which may be deemed controversial in some quarters, have preserved a key artifact in this crucial chapter in the shared history of The Pas, Cranberry Portage and Flin Flon. Ownership issues were resolved and the group established a new home for the Sons of Martha plaque at the Flin Flon Station Museum. By doing this they were able to preserve this vital item of memorabilia, capturing an important chapter of northern Manitoba history.