

Extract from AJ's Log

1942 – Winter Installations in Manitoba

by Frank Start - VE3AJ

The last trip I made was to Halifax. This time I am answering the call of “Go west young man, go west,” and I found myself in the wilds of northern Manitoba. In the early forties, Abitibi Power and Paper were using low power AM units in their pulp cutting camps around Lake Nipigon. It was not long before Manitoba Paper Co. heard of this and decided to try out this modern system of communication between their bush camps. Of course, as one might expect, this would have to take place in the winter time. Installation of equipment and aerials would have to take place when the temperatures were below zero. So it was arranged that Abitibi of Port Arthur would loan two complete stations from their Nipigon camps which were closed for the winter.

The first part of my journey was by rail to Winnipeg. After an overnight stop there I continued to Pine Falls the next morning. The next question was how to continue from the Falls to the bush camps. I had visions of putting on my koolitah and mukluks and hitching up a dog team to go mushing through the wilderness. But no, the method of transportation for the next lap was new to me. No less than a three piece tractor train. Nowadays technicians go back and forth in chrome plated, fur lined helicopters, but this was 1942. This time it was a tractor hauling a twin caboose. The rear one carried three double decked bunks and all the radio gear. Both were fitted with small wood stoves.

We got under way the next morning and headed straight north for 40 miles. Temperature was -40 degrees F speed 2.5 mph. Several stops were necessary along the way to clear the trail of windfall trees. After miles and miles and trees and trees we arrived at our first stop, camp 6 or was it 7 (they all look alike). This was a brand new camp but to make it liveable there was work to be done. Night was falling and so was the temperature. The combination bunkhouse and cookery had not been chinked (the space between the logs had not been filled in). I could see that this building was going to be well airconditioned.

I immediately picked up my gear and went to the end caboose and left it on a top bunk (on the theory that heat-if any-goes up). Back at the bunkhouse I found the whole crew were literally wrapping the place in tar paper. Overlapping layers were wrapped around, covering windows and doors. After which it was cut where the doors existed. Inside, a large horizontal wood stove had been set up and was beginning to warm the place. I could see that the stove was going to do a good job. I therefore returned to the caboose and retrieved my gear. This I set up in a likely looking spot not too far from the stove and on a top bunk. Got settled down for the night but was soon up again moving to a cooler spot in a lower bunk.

Ran into problems the next morning sorting out the radio gear. It had been packed in a hurry by some joker who was anxious to get home after a long hot summer in the bush. While a couple of helpers set up the transmitter and receiver on a suitable bench, I put up an aerial between a couple of trees. A single wire type Windom variety would be suitable for the one frequency operation. The receiver was crystal controlled and presented no problems. The gas engine (an Onan) was set up and put into operation. On test this machine ran a little too hot so I suggested

that a little air conditioning was necessary. In short order the carpenter was on the job. He went to work (with an axe) and arranged quickly for the needed fresh air. This was the first installation completed. I gave the operator a few final instructions and arranged for some tests. The next day at camp 7, following another tractor train journey, the equipment was set up in jig time and so that was enough winter installation for one season.

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