

Crossing the Red River — Tait had a new steam ferry

by **Bruce Cherney (part 3 of 3)**

J.W. McLane may have been soliciting public support for his bid to continue operating the Winnipeg-St. Boniface Ferry, but on March 15, 1878, Robert Tait was awarded the ferry licence and franchise for a period of 10 years. Under his agreement with the provincial government, Tait was given exclusive rights to operate a ferry from the Winnipeg to St. Boniface crossing to points two miles (3.2 kilometres) upstream and two miles downstream. Within this four-mile (6.4-kilometre) zone, provincial regulations prohibited any other person from operating another ferry in competition with Tait.

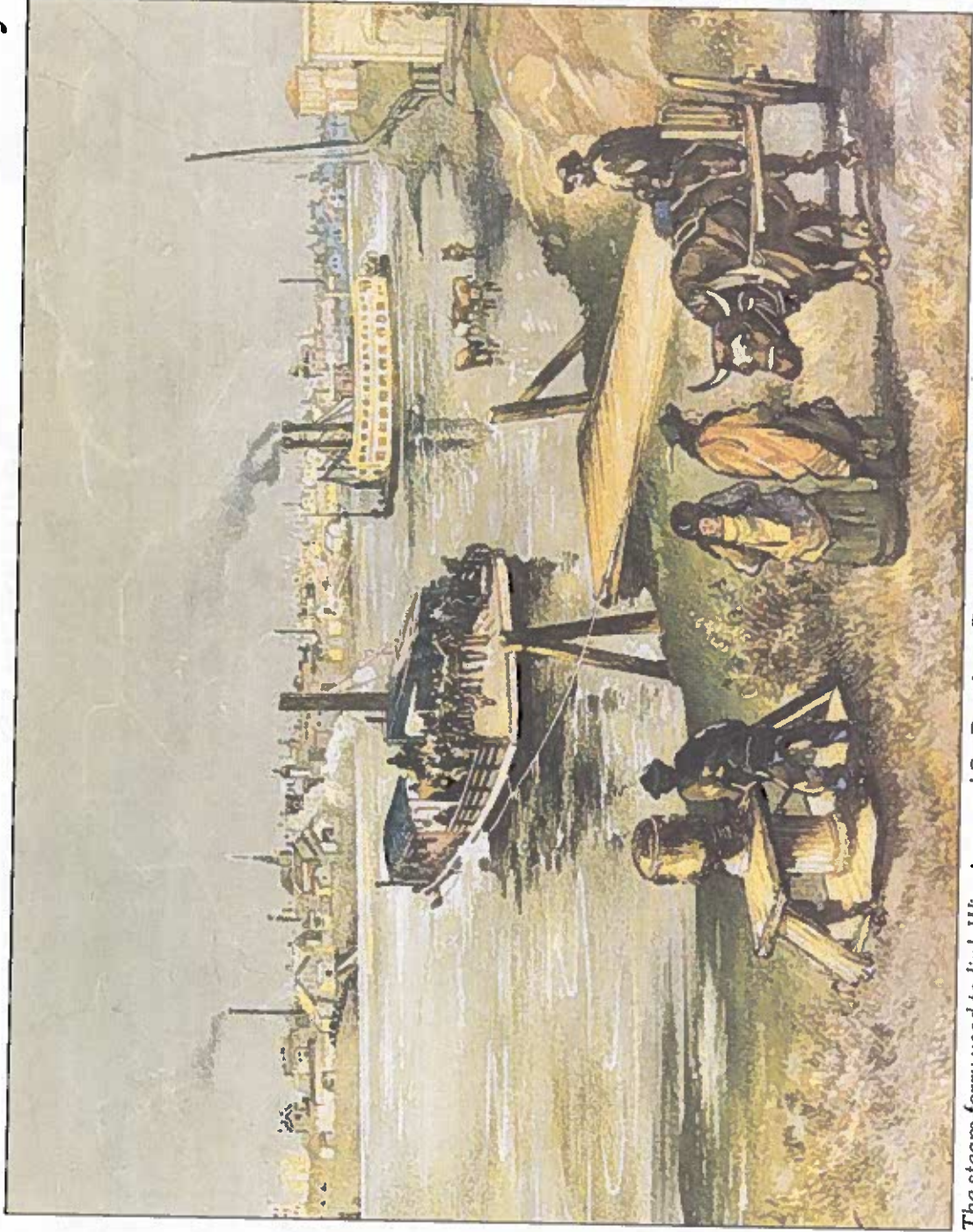
Tait, who was born in the Red River Settlement, had been an HBC employee. He moved to St. James, today's suburb of Winnipeg, and lived in a brick house fronting on Portage Avenue in Deer Lodge. Tait opened a fur trading store and ran a large farm in the area. He also had a grist mill that was in use until 1875, the year it burned down. His next major business enterprise was the Winnipeg-St. Boniface Ferry.

To fulfill his commitment, Tait promptly commissioned the construction of a new steam ferry at Grand Forks, North Dakota. The *Adelaide*, named after Tait's daughter, arrived in Winnipeg under its own steam from Grand Forks on June 9, 1878. Newspapers called the 90-foot-by-30-foot vessel the finest steam ferry in the North-West (i.e., Western Canada).

The capacity of the new \$6,000 ferry was a dozen working animal teams plus a number of foot passengers, according to the June 10, 1878, *Manitoba Free Press*.

"She is a side-wheel double-ender, and the engine being placed on one side of the boat and the boiler the other, the passage from one end to the other is broad and clear of obstructions. On each side is a covered room with a seating capacity for almost twenty-five passengers, which can be utilized in wet weather, and seats are also to be provided outside for the use of travellers."

This was a substantial improvement



The steam ferry used to link Winnipeg and St. Boniface. From an original engraving entitled, Editor's First View of Winnipeg 1879, which appeared in Western World in July 1892 (Archives of Manitoba).

in comfort from the days of Duncan Macdougall's ferry of the 1860s, when passengers had to kneel, one behind the other, on perpetually wet straw strewn about the bottom of a "dilapidated" scow that was in dire need of repair.

The 25-hp steam engine for Tait's ferry was purchased from the North Star Works in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and for its era was considered to be state-of-the-art machinery.

"A whistle is attached by which the times of arrival and departure on each side of the river will be shrieked forth."

To avoid a repeat of the Eli Benoit drowning in 1877, high guard rails were erected on each side of the boat,

and the ends for on-loading and off-loading were also protected, "so that any danger of being drowned off this craft is reduced to a minimum."

The new ferry also used a cable system in the manner of the previous ferry, but a new cable had been purchased by Tait. The newspaper commented that without using the cable, the regular schedule of the ferry would not be seriously disrupted as the vessel also possessed its own steering system.

Tait took over the ferry at a time when the Pembina Branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), the first railroad line linking Winnipeg to

the rest of the world, was completed.

To Tait's advantage, freight and passengers bound for Winnipeg were unloaded at a station established in St. Boniface and then had to be loaded on his ferry for passage across the Red River. While flatboats and steamers arriving from the south were used to transport goods directly to Winnipeg, Tait had a monopoly on end-of-track commerce between the two communities, which resulted in a highly-profitable ferry business.

The small vessel also offered moonlight excursion trips, which became a popular form of entertainment and a sideline for many steamboats in later

built to link Winnipeg and St. Boniface



years (*Steamboats on the Red*, by Edward M. Ledohowski, Prairie Public Television).

This particular sideline was mentioned in the *Free Press* June 10 article, which commented that moonlight excursions were possible because the *Adelaide* could run up and down as well as across the Red, and plenty of space was available onboard "to trip the light fantastic."

The success of Tait's ferry business attracted critics with a self-interest, such as Hamilton Grant McMicken, a railway agent, who in 1880 accused Tait of having a secret partnership with Robert Davis, a former premier of Manitoba from 1874 to 1878, and Joseph Royal, a former MLA and minister of public works. McMicken alleged that the two politicians were instrumental in having McLane's ferry licence cancelled and awarding the franchise to Tait.

Tait pointed out in a letter to the *Free Press* dated July 8, 1880, that Royal was not the minister of public works in 1878, as the post was then held by John Norquay (he became Manitoba premier in the same year). Royal was forced out of the government by Norquay in 1879.

Tait denied that the men had any association with his ferry business.

"In respect to the statement that the Government has paid me \$1,500 to keep up the ferry approaches, I have to say it is altogether incorrect," Tait wrote in his letter to the editor. "It is true that the Government gave me some assistance in fixing the approach, when they forced me to move from Broadway to the present location at the foot of Notre Dame street, but this they were bound to do by their contract."

The latter statement by Tait about being forced to move from Broadway to Notre Dame is somewhat confusing, as the ferry landing had been at the foot of Notre Dame East (today's Pioneer Avenue) since at least 1873 (*Free Press, Manitoba*). A March 16, 1874, city council meeting even reported the construction of a plank sidewalk on the south side of Notre Dame to the ferry landing.



Bird's-eye view of St. Boniface in 1880. Note that Provencher Boulevard is in centre of view and runs to the ferry landing at the foot of the Red River (Archives of Manitoba).

But a *Free Press* city council meeting report on May 19, 1877, does mention that discussions were held to approach the provincial government to move the ferry landing to Post Office Street (today's Lombard Avenue) from its location at Broadway Street, which then ran to the bank of the Red River. It seems that sometime between 1876 and 1877, the ferry landing had been relocated to the foot of Broadway, which then ran to the bank of the Red River, from Notre Dame East.

When Pembina Branch of the CPR superintendent Thomas Lynskey established a competing ferry just north and parallel to the existing ferry for the benefit of the railway's freight and passenger traffic, Tait petitioned the Court of Queen's Bench to uphold his government franchise and licence, which prohibited the establishment of another ferry within two miles (3.2 kilometres) in either direction of his ferry line on the Red River (*Free Press*, August 14, 1880).

Lynskey's only authority to oper-

ate a ferry came by way of a telegram from Sir Charles Tupper, the federal minister of railways and canals. He argued in court that the ferry was federal property and was only used to transport CPR goods and passengers. In 1880, Ottawa owned the CPR. Under the terms of the government contract, the private sector builders were obliged to finish the line, including all sidings, station houses, water towers and all that was needed for the proper running of a railroad, and then turn over the railway to the government in November 1879, but the actual hand-over didn't occur until February 10, 1880. The federal government in 1881 passed legislation that handed over complete control of the CPR to a private-sector syndicate led by Montreal businessman George Stephen.

In 1878, the last spike of the Pembina Branch was driven home and the first trains began operating on December 5 of that year, which allowed the builders to reap the profits of an operating rail line during the time lead-

ing up to the hand-over to the government. The branch line was linked to the U.S.-based St. Paul and Pacific Railroad at Emerson, Manitoba.

Chief Justice Edmund Burke Wood ruled that Tait possessed a grant of a ferry monopoly from the Crown (provincial government) for 10 years, and this grant took precedence over Lynskey's competing ferry.

"No Act has been cited conferring any authority on Lynskey, as an employee of the government (which owned the railway), to establish a ferry at this point in defiance of the Legislative and executive authority of this Province; and the action of the defendant (Lynskey) is directly in defiance of Provincial authority," ruled the chief justice.

"A telegram from the minister of railways may, in the mind of many, possess great weight; but in a matter of this kind it has no more potency than... coming from 'the person who sweeps out his office floor.'"

(See **CONSTRUCTION**, page 6)