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# INDIAN AND NON-NATIVE USE OF THE BABINE RIVER

## AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Brendan O'Donnell

Native Affairs Division Issue 2  
Policy and Program Planning

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## INTRODUCTION

The following is one of a series of reports on the historical uses of waterways in New Brunswick and British Columbia. These reports are narrative outlines of how Indian and non-native populations have used these rivers, with emphasis on navigability, tidal influence, riparian interests, settlement patterns, commercial use and fishing rights.

These historical reports were requested by the Interdepartmental Reserve Boundary Review Committee, a body comprising representatives from Indian Affairs and Northern Development [DIAND], Justice, Energy, Mines and Resources [EMR], and chaired by Fisheries and Oceans. The committee is tasked with establishing a government position on reserve boundaries that can assist in determining the area of application of Indian Band fishing by-laws.

Although each report in this series is as different as the waterway it describes, there is a common structural approach to each paper. Each report describes the establishment of Indian reserves along the river; what Licences of Occupation were issued; what instructions were given to surveyors laying out these reserves; how each surveyor laid out each reserve based on his field notes and survey plan; what, if any, fishing rights were considered for the Indian Bands; and how the Indian and non-native populations have used the waterway over the past centuries for both commercial and recreational use.

Primary sources for this information are found in the National Archives of Canada, the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, the Harriet Irving Library of the University of New Brunswick, the British Columbia Provincial Archives, the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, the Indian Land Registry at DIAND, and in the Legal Surveys Division of EMR. Secondary sources are found in the National Library of Canada, DFO's departmental library, DIAND's departmental library, or are brought in from other libraries throughout Canada on inter-library loan.

Each report in the series is being distributed to the Reserve Boundary Review Committee members. It is hoped each will make this research available to other members of their department by depositing the reports in their departmental library.

## Babine River: Report on its Historical Use

By Brendan O'Donnell

The Babine River, from its headwaters at the northwest end of Nilkitkwa Lake to its junction with the Skeena River, is approximately fifty miles in length. The Babine originates in a wide valley that becomes progressively narrower and the river becomes more rapid as it nears the confluence with the Skeena River.

Most historical documents found to date refer to the river as the Babine. The sole exception are early Hudson's Bay Company reports which refer to it as the McDougall River. The name "Babine" came from a French word meaning drooping lip and was given to the local Indians by French-Canadian and half-breed employees of the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies because of the custom of the native women of adorning themselves with a wooden labret worn in the lower lip.

White fur traders first entered the Babine Lake region in 1812 in search of salmon<sup>1</sup>, but it wasn't until 1822 that Hudson's Bay Company Chief Trader William Brown established Fort Kilmaurs on the Lake. This site was later abandoned (date uncertain) and the post re-established as Fort Babine at the northern end of the west arm near the outlet of the Lake.

One of Chief Trader Brown's duties was to ascertain the topography of the territory within the district of his post. This was done either through personal exploration or by interviewing local Indian bands. In 1823 he submitted his "Report of the Establishment of Fort Kilmaurs, Babine Country,

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<sup>1</sup>. Lewis, Palmer G. "Babine Lake", The Beaver, Oufit 299 (summer 1968): 26-35.

New Caledonia" wherein he reported hearsay evidence on the navigability of the Babine River.<sup>2</sup> (Brown refers to the Babine River as McDougall's River, the Skeena as Simpson's River, and Hazelton as the Forks.)

...Should this be the case, and we find we are not able to make an arrangement to stop the trade of the seacoast, the most effectual way in my opinion to do so, will be to form an establishment at the junction of Simpson's and McDougall's River.

...As I will state in its proper place, the grand obstacle to the forming of an establishment at the Forks is that the greatest part of McDougall River from this Lake [Babine] to its junction with Simpson's River is not navigable. It being impeded with rapids, and the rocks on each side so high and perpendicular as to render it impossible to make portages...This account of McDougall River I had last winter and have had it frequently confirmed this winter by different Indians whom I particularly requested to examine it...

Three years later, in 1826, Brown changed his assessment of the Babine River based on personal examination.<sup>3</sup> However, it is apparent that Brown only travelled to approximately the mid-point of the river.

In going to the country of the Atnahs this spring we followed the [Babine] River all the way from Babine Lake to the Village of Chil Do Call. Which gave me a much better opportunity of seeing it, than last year from the mountains. As I am glad to find, contrary to the opinion I then formed, that it is navigable. As far as we went and by every information I could procure the navigation improved

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2. Brown, William. "Report of the Establishment of Fort Kilmaurs, Babine Country, New Caledonia." Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba. B.11/E/1.
  3. Brown, William. "Report of the Babine Country and Countries to the Westward, April 1826." Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba. B. 33/E/3.

the further you descend. A canoe moderately loaded, when the water is not too high could be from our present establishment to the Upper Atnah Village in three days. From there to the Forks in three more. And from the Forks to the sea in six. Making in all twelve days.

In 1833 Simon McGillivray Jr., another Chief Trader for the Hudson's Bay Company, explored part of the Bulkley Valley for the British-based company. This report, entitled "Voyage to Simpson's River by Land, Summer 1833"<sup>4</sup> explained how he walked overland from Babine Lake to the Bulkley, near the Indian village that would eventually be named Moricetown, then north to the confluence of the Skeena River. McGillivray was aware of Brown's earlier reports, making reference to them in his report. However, McGillivray included a map with his report showing the Babine River from Babine Lake to its confluence with the Skeena River. A notation on the map states: "Babine River Unexplored."<sup>5</sup>

By 1875 white missionaries had descended on the Skeena-Bulkley valleys in search of Indian converts. Among them was the Rev. R. Tomlinson, C.M.S., missionary at Kincolith. In a diary of his trip, entitled "Journal of a Tour of the Naas and Skeena Rivers",<sup>6</sup> written in October 1875, Tomlinson recounted his attempt to reach the Indian village of Kisgegas on the Babine River.

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4. McGillivray Jr., Simon. "Voyage to Simpson's River by Land, Summer 1833." Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba. B. 188/A/18. 1833.
  5. Map on file at Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba. D.4/126 FO 45.
  6. Tomlinson, Rev. R. "Journal of a Tour of the Naas and Skeena Rivers," Church Missionary Intelligencer, Vol XI. (August 1875): 251-256; (September 1875): 281-288.

Rising with the break of day, we started for the Kishgagass, reported to be about thirty-five miles higher up the Skeena [from the village of Kispiok]. The river here is not navigable for canoes, but there are two paths, or trails, as they are called in this country. The one on the same side of the village only reaches about half way; the other reaches the whole distance, but is more winding, so that the first is generally chosen at starting, and the river crossed by means of a canoe or raft kept for the purpose. Accompanied by a Kishpiyoux Indian, who kindly volunteered to show us the way, we left, intending to cross the river, seven miles higher up, on a raft which we learned was moored there. On reaching the spot we were doomed to disappointment, for, though the raft was there, it was so firmly embedded in the ice that it was useless to attempt to cut it out. As the ice was still too thin to warrant our crossing on it, we decided to push on some ten miles farther, in hopes of finding a canoe which was reported to be beached there, or, failing this, to build a raft on which we might cross the river. With this intention in view, we had travelled about three miles, when, finding a sheltered spot, we lit a fire and prepared our dinner. Just as we were about to start again, we were hailed by some persons on the other bank of the river. From these we learned that the canoe was not at the place we had been led to believe we should find it. We also learned that the Kishgagass Indians were just about to start on a visit to the Indians at the Forks, and I was advised to await their arrival there. On hearing this, we decided to turn back.

The existence of trails from the village of Kisgegas down to Kispiok leads one to conclude that the Babine River, at least between these two villages, was not used by the local natives as a means of transportation.

In 1889 the federal government created the Babine Indian Agency, headquartered in Hazelton, that included the Kisgegas Indian village. Richard E. Loring was appointed the first Indian agent.

In the early 1890s the British Columbia government decided to promote the colonization of the northern interior of the province by track surveying the region and sub-dividing the arable land into townships. Two surveyors, A.L. Poudrier and N.B. Gauvreau, were assigned this task. In December 1891 Poudrier described in a report his "Exploration Survey of New Caledonia",<sup>7</sup> which included the Babine River. The Babine was described thus:

The Babine River is the most important of all the feeders of the Skeena, in size and the extent of the area drained. It brings in the water of Babine Lake, the largest sheet of water of New Caledonia. The general course of the river from its source, at the north end of the Babine, is about S. 85° E. The width of the river at the mouth is about 200 feet, and 3 or 4 feet deep at low water. The river is not navigable for canoes, though they may be used on certain parts of the stream. It drains the water from the Babine Mountains, lying south, and the Atna on the north. About 12 miles from the Skeena there is an Indian village of some importance, known as Kish-ki-gas, on the north shore of the Babine. The current is everywhere swift, and the river is closed into canons for a great part of its course. The valley of the lower part is generally timbered with all the coniferous species; and where the first growth has been destroyed by fire, it is replaced by thickets of aspen poplars and small birch. The average width of the valley is over one mile. The upper part of the river was track-surveyed by Mr. Gauvreau. It comes out of Babine Lake and extends in a long, narrow lake after which it runs with a fearful current.

A river of some size falls into it from the north; it drains the flanks of the Fryingpan Range of mountains and the Atna Mountains. Numerous other feeders, mostly mountain torrents, come in from both sides.

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7. Poudrier, A.L. "Report of A.L. Poudrier. Exploration Survey of New Caledonia," in B.C. Sessional Papers 1892 (Crown Land Surveys), p. 354-370.

In 1898 it was decided by the Indian Reserve Commission, A.W. Vowell, to allot a reserve to the Indians of Kisgegas. Vowell, who also held the post of Indian Superintendent for British Columbia, had assumed the position of Commissioner on the retirement of Peter O'Reilly in February 1898. Vowell decided to go to Kisgegas following a letter sent to him on February 14, 1898 by Indian Agent Loring suggesting possible problems in the region due to white encroachment on Kisgegas land. Loring's letter read:<sup>8</sup>

I have the honor to report that in the early part of October/97 I received a note signed J. Dallas Devereux, requesting an interview. Devereux called at my office volunteering the information to have been sent by the Provincial Government to lay out a telegraph line from here to Kuldoe, where he was to meet a Mr. W.T. Jennings, C.E., coming there to meet him (Devereux) on the same errand from Telegraph Creek. Soon after Devereux [sic] departure he went his way towards Kisgegas, and subsequently learned for prospecting purposes.

By the receipt of mail on the 9th and 10th inst I observed in the columns of the Victoria semi-weekly Colonist of the 6th ultimo, a notice a clipping of which is hereto appended. The land therein applied for comprises the old village site of Kisgegas, called Aligo sum dyh. Same is part of the only available land there is to be secured for the Indians of Kisgegas and aside of that the people of the village consider Aligo sum dyh their inalienable right to retain. Their dead were formerly cremated thereon and the bodies of many of their number lie buried there.

Allowing this ground, under consideration, be taken from the Indians of Kisgegas, would, if it be known, result in arousing a feeling of indignation shared by every village on the Skeena and among the Hagwelgets.

I could conceive of no other action taken pertaining thereto too seriously.

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8. Richard Loring to A.W. Vowell, February 14, 1898. Copy of letter on file at National Archives of Canada. RG10, Volume 1279, pp. 320-321; Microfilm #C-13901.

Loring's letter arrived in Victoria on April 28, 1898 and that same day Vowell wrote the Deputy Commissioner of Lands and Works for British Columbia<sup>9</sup> sending a copy of Loring's note "...relative to an application by Mr. J.D. Devreux to purchase 320 acres of land near Kisgegas on the Babine River.

Mr. Loring states that the land in question embraces the site of an old Indian village and burying ground.

I proposed to leave Victoria for Babine some time next week to define reserves in that vicinity, and I beg to request that Mr. Devereux' application not be entertained until my return.

Vowell, accompanied by surveyor Ashdown H. Green, left Victoria on June 30, 1898 and arrived at the mouth of the Skeena River four days later. They waited eight days for the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company sternwheeler "Caledonia" and finally arrived at Hazelton on July 18, 1898. On July 21, 1898 they "laid off" Sik-e-dakh Indian Reserve No. 2 for the Kispiox Band and on July 25, 1898 left Hazelton for Kisgegas, arriving two days later. In his journal, titled "Diary of Indian Reserve Commissioner on duty laying off Reserves, etc. in the Skeena River country from 30th June till 30th of August 1898,"<sup>10</sup> Vowell wrote:

July 28th. Meet Indians in Mission House, quite a number of the representative people were present although many of the band were absent fishing and hunting. They were fairly reasonable in their demands in connection with land which they desired to have reserved for them. After meeting go over

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9. A.W. Vowell to Deputy Commissioner of Lands and Works, April 28, 1898, Ibid., p. 319.

10. A.W. Voewell. "Diary of Indian Reserve Commission on Duty Laying Off Reserves, etc. in the Skeen River country from 30th of June till 30th of August 1898." Copy on file at National Archives of Canada, RG 10, Volume 3938, File 120, 710-2; Microfilm #C-10164.

ground with Mr. Surveyor Green when part of intended reserve is sketched, in accordance with my instruction as to area and location.

Vowell and Green left the next day for Kuldoe and returned to Kisgegas on August 2, 1898. Vowell's journal continues:

Aug. 2. Leave [Kuldoe] camp at 7 A.M. and after a walk of about 7 miles get to Kisgegas, 9:30 A.M. Day very warm; rough walking Indian trail - steep grades, fallen timber and thick brush and undergrowth to be overcome - afternoon visit a small meadow particularly desired by the Indians and include it in Kisgegas reserve.

Aug. 3rd. Have some delay at Kisgegas before seeing Indians, etc. Mr. Green and I, with one of the principal men deputed by band to give expression to their wishes as to land desired, etc. start ahead of packers, on our way back to Hazelton, stay over for a time at old Kisgegas village and finish reserve, camp about 14 miles from Kisgegas, having walked over 20 miles examining and laying out lines for reserve.

Vowell's Minute of Decision for the Kisgegas Reserve, which was written on August 3, 1898, reads as follows:<sup>11</sup>

Kisgegas, a reserve of two thousand four hundred and fifteen (2415) acres, situated on the Babine River about four miles from its confluence with the Skeena River.

Commencing at a spruce tree, marked Indian reserve, and running west twenty (20) chains; thence north forty (40) chains; thence east forty (40) chains; thence north forty (40) chains; thence east one hundred and twenty (120) chains; thence north twenty (20) chains; thence east sixty (60) chains; thence north twenty (20) chains; thence east sixty (60) chains; thence south twenty (20) chains; thence east twenty (20) chains; thence south sixty (60) chains; thence west sixty (60) chains; thence south fifty

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<sup>11</sup>. Minute of Decision, on file at Lands, Revenues and Trusts Operation Branch, DIAND, Ottawa.

(50) chains; thence west eighty (80) chains; thence north ten (10) chains and thence west one hundred and forty (140) chains to the place of commencement.

One and a quarter ( $1\frac{1}{4}$ ) acre, on which the Anglican Mission house stands, is not included in this reservation.

A map of the Kisgegas Reserve was included with the Minute of Decision.

Two weeks later, on August 19, 1898, Surveyor E.M. Skinner arrived at Kisgegas and the next day he "commenced traverse of Babine River."<sup>12</sup> On August 22, 1898 he left for Kuldoe and returned to Kisgegas on August 27, 1898. For the next three weeks he remained at Kisgegas, completing the traverse of the river and surveying the reserve.<sup>13</sup>

Based on the sketch of the reserve in Skinner's survey field book and on the plan of the reserve,<sup>14</sup> as well as the area stated (2415 acres), the beds of the Babine River and She-din Creek are not included in the reserve. However, according to these maps, the boundaries of these reserves are shown crossing the river and the creek.

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12. "E.M. Skinner. Diary for August 1898" and "E.M. Skinner. Diary for September 1898." Both on file at National Archives of Canada, R.G. 10, Volume 3938, File 120, 710-2; Microfilm # C-10164.
  13. Skinner, E.M. "Kisgegas I.R. No. 0" Unpublished Survey Field Book; copy on file at Survey and Mapping Branch, Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, Ottawa. B.C. 327.
  14. "Plan of the Kisgegas Indian Reserve, Cassiar District, British Columbia." Indian Affairs Survey Records, No. B.C. 59 and T.B.C. 59. Copies available at Survey and Mapping Branch, Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, Ottawa.

Also indicated on the maps are the village and the Anglican mission, as well as the trails leading to Hazelton, Kuldoe and Bear Lake. A fishery on both sides of the Babine River, called Ali ge sum dach, is also shown.

On August 10, 1899 the Deputy Commissioner of Lands and Works for British Columbia wrote A.W. Vowell that the Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works has that day approved and endorsed the Minute of Decision for Kisgegas Indian Reserve.<sup>15</sup>

During the summer of 1906, Provincial Mineralogist William Fleet Robertson made an examination of that portion of British Columbia lying east of the Rocky Mountains and to the west of the 120th meridian of West longitude, also known as the Peace River Valley District. To arrive in this locality, Robertson and his party went via the Skeena River and Babine and Stuart Lakes. From Hazelton, Robertson walked the 70 mile trail along the Suskwa River Valley to reach Babine Lake. Arriving at the Hudson's Bay Post on Babine Lake, he made the following observation<sup>16</sup>:

All supplies for the Omineca country pass through Babine, the pack-trail continuing from there easterly to Takla Lake, which is crossed by ferry. All supplies for the Stuart lake, McLeod lake and Fort Grahame Districts arrive at Babine from Hazelton by pack-train, and are there forwarded in sailing scow up Babine lake to the portage at its south eastern end, across which they are taken by horses and wagons to Stuart lake, then by another sailing scow down this lake to Fort St. James at its eastern end, where they are distributed.

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15. Deputy Commissioner of Lands and Works to A.W. Vowell, August 10, 1899. Copy on file at National Archives of Canada, RG 10, Volume 3747, File 29858-1; Microfilm # C-10131.
16. Robertson, Wm. Fleet. "Essington to Edmonton. Via Skeena River, Babine and Stuart Lakes and Peace River." Annual Report of the Minister of Mines for...1906...British Columbia. Pp H101-H131.

Babine river, from the lake to its junction with the Skeena, is some 50 miles long, but in that distance drops some 1,200 feet by a succession of rapids without any distinct falls, and is reported to be in canyon for a considerable portion of its length. That the river is not practicably navigable, even for canoes, is indicated by the fact that it has not been used either by Indians or the Hudson Bay Co. as a route for bringing in supplies from Hazelton, it having been found more economical and safer to transport all freight for the whole of the northern interior by pack-train over the trail already described, a distance of 70 miles, at a cost of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  cents a pound or \$50 a ton - at least, that was the current contract rate charged, even by the regular pack-trains, in 1906.

In 1913 the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia was appointed to resolve the long-standing federal-provincial dispute concerning Indian lands in that Province. The Royal Commission was given the power to investigate Indian land matters, to adjust reserve acreage by reducing the size where the Commissioners deemed that the Indians had more land than needed, to determine the area to be added in cases where bands had insufficient land, and to set aside reserves for bands that had not yet received any. The Commissioners were also authorized by a separate federal order in council of June 1913 to gather information on issues which, although extraneous to the terms of the McKenna-McBride Agreement setting up the Commission, were nevertheless considered to affect the rights and interests of the Indian population. From 1913 to 1916 the Commission travelled the province compiling their evidence.

According to the Commission's Progress Report No. 5, written by N.W. White, chairman of the Commission, the group left Victoria for Babine Agency on April 10, 1915.<sup>17</sup>

On this occasion the Commissioners met the Indians of all the tribes and bands in the Agency, excepting the Babines, Kuldoes and Kisgegas, who were unable to be present at Hazelton as had been previously arranged. This difficulty was, however, overcome by making appointments for meetings with these tribes at Hazelton between the 10th and 20th of July.

The report continues that:

On the 10th of July a telegram was received from Mr. Loring of the Babine Agency, stating that arrangements had been made for further meetings with the Indians of that Agency according to the promise made by the Commission in April, and the Chairman, with Commissioners McKenna and MacDowall left Victoria for Hazelton via Prince Rupert.

At Hazelton, the Indians of the Babine and Kisgegas tribes received the Commission cordially and answered all questions freely and frankly - this meeting was held at the office of the Indian Agent...

The meeting with the Kisgegas and Babine Bands was held on July 13, 1915. However, according to the transcript of evidence, no members of the Kisgegas band testified.<sup>18</sup>

On April 3, 1916 the Royal Commission passed the following Minute of Decision concerning the Kisgegas Band<sup>19</sup>:

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17. N.W. White to W.J. Roche, Progress Report No. 5; copy on file at National Archives of Canada, RG 10, Volume 1044; Microfilm #T-1461.
  18. Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia, Babine Agency 1915. Typed manuscript at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Add. Mss. 1056.
  19. Copy available at the National Archives of Canada, RG10, Volume 1044, Page 251; Microfilm #T-1461.

Ordered: That Kisgegas Indian Reserve of the Kisgegas Tribe, described in the Official Schedule of Indian Reserves, 1913, at Page 54 thereof, BE CONFIRMED as now fixed and determined and shown on the Official Plan of Survey, viz:

"Kisgegas, 2415.00 acres."

Victoria, B.C., April 3rd, 1916.

In order to be implemented, the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia had to be approved by both the federal and provincial governments. Following the passage of enabling legislation in 1919 and 1920, the task of adjusting the Commission's recommendations was delegated to W.E. Ditchburn and J.W. Clark, federal and provincial representatives respectively.

However, many of the Indian bands, especially in northern British Columbia, were disgruntled that the Royal Commission had not addressed the problem of the so-called Indian Land Question. In 1922, following a conference held in Vancouver between the Minister of the Interior, the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs with his advisors, and the members of the Executive Committee of the Allied Indian Tribes of British Columbia, a two-man delegation was sent to Port Essington to interview the Bands of the North coast of British Columbia. A report on these interviews in the form of a letter, addressed to W.E. Ditchburn and dated October 16, 1922, is on file at the National Archives of Canada.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the last page of this letter with the author's signature is missing from the NAC file.

The author states that:

I found that it was impossible to complete the task satisfactorily in six weeks. I did the best I could

20. \_\_\_\_\_ to W.E. Ditchburn, October 16, 1922, copy on file at the National Archives of Canada, RG10, Volume 11028, File SRR-3; microfilm #T-3967.

up to the end of September but I must confess that the following report is not as comprehensive as I had hoped to make it. I believe an additional two months spent in the Babine, Stuart Lake and part of the Belle Coola agencies would make the report complete in scope and purpose.

On August 12th, we held a general meeting at Port Essington, where nearly all the Indian tribes of this section of the province were represented. We stated very explicitly the purpose of our mission until it was thoroughly understood. Following that meeting, we held meeting with the different tribes and bands separately to get their particular and peculiar needs.

The meeting with the Kisgegas Band was not very satisfactory. According to the report:

The claims of the Kisgegas were presented by Abel Oaks. His claim is a high territorial block and absolute ownership of same.

His claims were very vague. It appears he did not know just how to state the needs of his people.

Handwritten beside these two paragraphs is the word: "Impossible."

Meanwhile, in 1919, the Commission of Conservation, a federal body constituted under The Conservation Act, 8-9 Edward VII, Chap. 27, 1909, surveyed the Pacific Coast in search of water-power possibilities. In a report submitted by Arthur V. White, the Commission's consulting engineer, the Babine River was described thus:<sup>21</sup>

Babine River, as yet, has not been examined especially for power sites. Its general

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21. White, Arthur V. Water Powers of British Columbia ...  
Ottawa: (Commission of Conservation Canada), 1919,  
p. 277-278.

characteristics are, however, similar to those of the Skeena between Hazelton and the mouth of the Babine, which stretch of the Skeena is apparently not easily navigable even for canoes. This is indicated by the fact that the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company, in transporting supplies from Hazelton, apparently find it safer and more economical to use a seventy-mile trail across the country. The river rises in Babine Lake at an elevation of about 2,220 feet. Babine Lake, upon examination, might be found to afford storage but its tributary watershed is relatively small.

Babine River from Babine Lake to its junction with the Skeena, is some 50 miles long and descends in that distance about 1,475 feet by a succession of rapids without any distinct falls. The grade is, of course, not uniform, and there are probably many places where it considerably exceeds the average figure of 29 feet per mile. As the river flows in a [canyon] for a long distance, there are no doubt several points where developments might be made by means of dams.

During the latter half of June 1951 a major natural disaster occurred on the Babine River. A rock slide, causing a virtually impassable barrier to the prolific sockeye salmon run that ascends the river to Babine Lake and spawns in its tributaries, occurred in a narrow canyon of the river 20 miles above its confluence with the Skeena River. Because of the remoteness of the region, the slide was not located until August of 1951. The disaster was considered the worst catastrophe to strike the salmon fishing industry in British Columbia since the slides at Hell's Gate Canyon on the Fraser River.<sup>22</sup>

A Department of Fisheries report, written in 1953, describes the slide thus<sup>23</sup>:

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22. Dyson, J.B. "The Babine Rock and Earth Slide," unpublished thesis, presented to the Association of Professional Engineers of British Columbia, June 30, 1955; copy available at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans library, Ottawa.
  23. "The Value of Survey and Research in Resource Development. Overcoming a Natural Calamity and Its Effects on Fish. The Babine River Story." Copy available at National Archives of Canada, RG23, Volume 695, File 715-2-305(7).

It was obvious that a disaster of tremendous proportions had struck the Babine. The slide had occurred in a deep canyon. The right bank was in its natural state, a sheer rock cliff 300 feet in height. The left bank was a tumbled slope of angular rocks extending from the top into the river bed. Some of the boulders were restimated [sic] to weigh as much as 200 tons. The slide had formed a low dam in the river which backed up the water to form a lake over a mile long. The drop in the water surface throughout the length of the slide was about 30 feet. Salmon were congregated in large numbers in each eddy below the slide while many were fighting to ascend the turbulent waters.

Over the winter and spring of 1951-1952, a sixty-five mile road with some forty bridges and numerous culverts was built. On November 14, 1952, the Federal Treasury approved the expenditures of approximately \$500,000 to remove the slide. By April 18, 1953 the river had been cleared of over 140,000 cubic yards of rock and the salmon run of that year up to Babine Lake was back to normal.

The slide occurred some 12 miles above the village at Kisgegas. By this period, 1951, the village had been abandoned by the Band as a permanent-living site. Engineer J.B. Dyson, among the first group of people to find the slide, noted this fact in his analysis of the disaster:<sup>24</sup>

A party consisting of the writer, a biologist, and two inspectors, all of the Department of Fisheries, and a packer set out by horseback from Hazelton on August 23rd [1951]. An old Indian trail was followed up the east bank of the Skeena and south bank of the Babine to the abandoned Indian village of Kisgegas 50 miles from Hazelton. Owing to the rugged nature of the terrain, the remaining distance to the slide, 12 miles, was covered on foot. The location was on the left bank of the river in a narrow rock canyon ...

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24. J.B. Dyson, *ibid*, p. 12.

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THE BABINE ROCK AND EARTH SLIDE. 1951

In 1956 the Geographic Branch of the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, Ottawa, published a booklet titled: Extracts Relating to the Navigability of Canadian Inland Waterways.<sup>25</sup>

This booklet is a compilation of extracts from published works and was designed "to make available in convenient form the wealth of source material revealed in the work of preparing a navigable waterways' map for the Atlas of Canada." Under the chapter titled "Pacific Coast Drainage," is a quotation concerning the Skeena River that makes mention of the Babine River:

"... stern-wheel streamers navigated the Skeena River as far as Hazelton, some 150 miles from its mouth, and one or two succeeded in reaching 12 or 14 miles beyond that town ... Motor boats operate on the 100-mile long Babine Lake from which Babine River issues, but rapid and canyons prevents any descent of that tributary to ... the Skeena." p. 27

Jenness, D. and Leighton J. The Fraser River system. Typed MS. in Geographic Branch Library, Mines and Technical Surveys Department. Ottawa, n.d.

A search of the Geological Survey of Canada Library, the National Library of Canada, the National Archives of Canada, and the National Museum of Man could not locate the above manuscript.

In recent years, the Babine River has seen occasional use by canoeists and kayakers. In an article put out by Tourism British Columbia titled "B.C.'s Recreational River: The Babine and Kispox," the Babine River is described thus:<sup>26</sup>

Babine Lake empties through Nilkitkwa Lake and the Babine River, a 90 km waterway that offers challenging kayaking and canoeing experiences.

Flowing northwest, then south to its confluence with the Skeena, the Babine encompasses a rich wilderness: hard-and-softwood forests and diverse

25. Black, W.A. Extracts Relating to the Navigability of Canadian Inland Waterways. Ottawa: Geographical Branch, Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, (1956).

26. Grover, Brian. "B.C.'s Recreational Rivers: The Babine and Kispox," Information Services Branch, Tourism British Columbia, no date.

wildlife. You'll see bears - grizzly or black - during the late-summer sockeye run. Mink, beaver, coyote, moose and bald eagle are also encountered along the river.

The Babine becomes narrower through its course, making paddling more difficult. The upper section to Le Clair Creek is an easy drift with no major mid-stream obstructions. Then the river becomes faster, narrower. Watch for some rapids and boulders. Enroute to the river's confluence with the Skeena, difficult rapids and steep canyons provide thrills but dangerous paddling.

In a report prepared in 1981 by Jennifer Eastwood, Regional Recreation Coordinator for the B.C. Ministry of Forests and Lands, Smithers, the Babine River is described as follows:<sup>27</sup>

The Babine River Corridor is located northeast of Hazelton in the Skeena Mountains. It lies within two Biogeoclimatic Zones. The upper portion of the river corridor from Nilkitkwa Lake to Le Clair Creek lies within a Sub-boreal Spruce Zone. The lower section of the corridor is encompassed by the Coastal Western Hemlock Zone. Stands of spruce, cedar, balsam, lodgepole pine, cottonwood, birch and aspen are intermixed throughout the river drainage. The headwaters of the Babine River originate at the northwest end of Nilkitkwa Lake. From there the Babine flows northwest for 90 km through a wide valley that becomes progressively narrower towards the confluence of the Babine and Skeena River. Little development has occurred along the corridor, thus a wilderness environment can be enjoyed by recreationists.

Access to the Babine River Corridor is reached by travelling along Babine Lake Road from Talkwa to Nilkitkwa Lake. The egress site for river travel is just west of the town of Kisegegas near the confluence of the Babine and Skeena River.

River travel along the upper section of the river is quite easy and no major midstream obstructions are present. The lower portion of the river becomes narrower and faster. Difficult rapids and steep canyon walls are present towards the confluence with Skeena River.

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27. Eastwood, Jennifer. "Babine River Corridor," unpublished manuscript, Ministry of Forests and Lands, British Columbia.

The Babine river provides double challenge of difficult water and a wilderness environment. It requires that those who attempt it be competent paddlers as well as skilled outdoorsmen.

The report concludes that:

The upper reaches of the river vary from grade I to III in difficulty. There are no major obstacles in this section, some rocks and sweepers require maneuvering. In the lower reaches of the river, canyon areas are present and the velocity of the current increases creating strong hydrolics. The rapids are grade III in difficulty approaching grade IV.

This river is very remote and there are no egress points till the mouth of the river. Only experienced paddlers should attempt this river when the water levels are adequate.

Adequate water levels to navigate the Babine River, according to the report, is low water.

#### CONCLUSION:

Based on historical documents found to date, it would appear that the lower reaches of the Babine River, from Le Clair Creek to the confluence of the Skeena River, was not used as a transportation route by either Indians or white fur traders or miners. However, contemporary evidence shows that experienced recreational canoeists and kayakers can run the entire length of the river.

As was pointed out by Provincial Mineralogist William Fleet Robertson in 1906, evidence that the river was not used historically as a transportation route can be deduced from the fact that supplies sent from Hazelton to Babine Lake were transported over a seventy-mile trail. This cross-country journey by pack-horse was considered more economical than using the river.

In recent years experienced canoeists and kayakers have run the river and the British Columbia Government lists the Babine as one of its "recreational rivers." However, all accounts warn paddlers that the lower reaches of the river are rapid and potentially dangerous.

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