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**JOSEPH HOBSON**, Another Name to Add to our List of Engineering Greats.

By Robert F. Legget

The names of some early Canadian engineers are well recognized as those of the real builders of Canada. The Keefer Brothers, the Shanly Brothers, Sir Casimir Gzowski and, perhaps above all, Sir Sandford Fleming are names honoured indeed in engineering circles of today and they are known, at least to some degree, far beyond professional circles. There is one more name well worthy of being included in any such role of this country's pioneer engineers but it is a name virtually unknown today, even by engineers, that of Joseph Hobson.

Readers of these historical notes may recall his name in connection with the building of the St. Clair underwater tunnel at Sarnia, for the Grand Trunk Railway (Canadian Consulting Engineer, September 1979, Page 65).

This superb achievement, still so little appreciated, awakened the interest of the writer. With the kind assistance of W. A. Morris, archivist of the Institution of Civil Engineers (London, England), Miss Lorraine Settringham of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors, and of Miss Katherine Greenfield, of the Hamilton Public Library, it has proved possible to piece together an outline of Hobson's life. It is an interesting record, illustrative of the very practical training through which one entered the profession of engineering in those pre<sup>a</sup>university days.

Hobson was born near Guelph on March 4, 1834 and went to school in that city. Before he was 18, he was apprenticed to John Tully, a civil engineer and land surveyor of Toronto, serving with him until 1855. He then spent much of that year with another provincial land surveyor, C. Schofield, and, passing the necessary examinations (held even in those years), he became a land surveyor himself on October 3, 1855. So closely were civil engineering and land surveying then associated that he practised both fields until March 1858, while serving also as engineer for Waterloo County, (Counties did have officially designated engineers even before Confederation.)

Colonel Gzowski then engaged Hobson as assistant engineer on the construction of the Grand Trunk Railway from St. Mary's to Sarnia until the work was finished in 1860. for the next nine years he resumed his position as engineer for Waterloo County but practised privately also, in Upper Canada, Ohio, Michigan and Nova Scotia. He was engaged in a number of railway surveys and some railway building so it is not too surprising to find that in June 1869 he became the assistant engineer to G. Lowe Reid, chief engineer of the Great Western Railway (GWR), then expanding in southwestern Ontario. He was engaged on the building of the Wellington, Gray and Bruce Railway, for the GWR, and this proved to be the start of his life's work as a railway engineer. He was then 35 years old.

#### RAILWAY ENGINEER

In April 1870 he was appointed as Gzowski's resident engineer on the construction of the International Bridge across the Niagara River at Buffalo, seeing this great job through to

completion. He then became chief assistant engineer of the Great Western Railway, advancing to the position of chief engineer (in succession to Sir John Kennedy, incidentally) in October 1875.

Upon the amalgamation of the Great Western Railway with the Grand Trunk in 1882, Hobson became the chief engineer of the Western division of the combined line. On February 1, 1896 he became chief engineer of the entire system, holding this position until his retirement in 1907, after which he was appointed consulting engineer to the Grand Trunk and so remained until his death in Hamilton on December 19, 1917. He died in his 84<sup>th</sup> year, a greatly respected and venerable figure in that busy city.

Not only did Hobson supervise the construction of the Sarnia Tunnel but he had charge of other notable works for the Grand Trunk. One of these was the replacement of the original (railway) suspension bridge at Niagara Falls with a fine steel arch bridge. Even more important, and truly outstanding achievement, was the replacement of the old wrought iron tubular superstructure of the Victoria Bridge, Montreal, with the present steel through truss spans, without interfering with rail traffic. The truss spans were erected around the original tubes which were then dismantled in succession.

#### HONOURED IN HIS DAY

Such records as now exist all give the impression that Hobson was a shy and retiring man. This must explain why nothing written by him has yet been found in the records of early Canadian engineering and this suggests why his name has been almost forgotten. Although his pioneer work in building the St. Clair Tunnel is little known today, it is clear that this great achievement was well recognized at the time of its completion. It is recorded, for example, that he was the honoured guest at a banquet of the Boot and Shoe Club of Boston, held in that city at the end of January 1892. In his reply to the great welcome he received, Mr. Hobson said that he was not (then) the chief engineer of the Grand Trunk Railway but only its Western division. Speaking of the tunnel he said, "I was simply the chief engineer and builder of the work, and did my best to carry out the idea which Sir Henry Tyler had conceived ...." That word "simply" speaks volumes.

On his death, he was eulogized in a long tribute in the Hamilton Times and by the leading editorial of the Hamilton Spectator (both for Wednesday, December 19, 1917). Due notice was taken of his engineering work but his sterling character was likewise reflected upon "a splendid personality, a man of broad vision and clear mind .... and withal a gentle, courteous, jovable (sic), approachable gentlemen." One of his sons became president of the Steel Company of Canada.

Hobson was a member of the Canadian Society of Civil Engineers, the American Society of Civil Engineers and also of the Institution of Civil Engineers (of Great Britain). His application for membership in the institution was signed by (among others ) Casimir S. Gzowski, Thomas C. Clark, Samuel Keefer and Sandford Fleming. When one finds that he was also a member of the Caledon Mountain Trout Club, one wants to know so much more about this fine man.

Maybe, one day someone will be moved to write a full biography which would be a valued addition to the slim corpus of Canadian civil engineering biographies.  
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One other point, while we are on the topic of Hobson. While I don't think it ever made it to employee's time tables, but during the construction on the new St. Clair Tunnel, the new alignment, for it was named the Hobson Subdivision for the purposes of obtaining regulatory approval for the project. This was done since the new tunnel was built as new construction, not as a relocation of the old track and tunnel.