

[Page 17 - Building the Grand Narrows Bridge](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 23](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1979/8/1

full of dolomite. She wasn't a big ship, especially by present-day standards. But it was too big to move • and they wanted the passage clear • so they put divers down and blew the top away. The rest of it is still there, I suppose. Anyway, they finally got these piers built up with masonry. The next thing was the bridge itself, to put it in position. Now, the first time he did this, he was a young? er man, and nobody paid too much attention to him. But what he did actually was to build these girders with the ends resting on big scows, which he also built. Built the girder, and as soon as it got some sort of shape to it where he could move the scows out onto the water, he built it afloat. They had hydraulic jacks. And it was quite a complicated business to move each one of those girders, which I suppose would weigh in excess of 1000 tons, into position • with the tide and weather • work it over on top of the piers. And when it was exactly right, to flood the scows and let them lower the girder down right in position on the piers. However, he did this. Everything went off all right. The bridge was completed after awhile. And he got paid and he went home and that was the end of that. For nearly 20 years. At the end of 20 years it was badly de? cayed from rust. And the rolling stock • the train equipment • had been getting big? ger and bigger as the years went on. So the government during the First World War said, "We've got to put a bigger bridge in there. Everything else is all right. All we need is a new bridge." So they again advertised for somebody to come and put in a new bridge to replace the old one. But due to the importance of the railroad, they eased a clause into it that the bridge mustn't be held up at any time for more than 8 hours • the traffic mustn't be held up. So any changing of arches had to be done in these short periods. Again, Reid was the only one who took the chance on it. He arrived back at the place. He got his men to work and they built new scows and devised a way to have these spans made and completed on the scows and maneuvered into place alongside. Then, at a given time, he had two other scows put into position under the existing, working span. And with the aid of pumping out the scows and hydraulic jacks, he would lift the old girder out of position and slide the new one in and down and back again. And he was doing this very quickly and very successfully • and apparently very easily. And the word spread around. Some of the senior engineers of the railroad wanted to see how he was doing it. They got a private car hooked onto the regular passenger train and they arrived at Grand Narrows, apparently in the late morning. Reid was all ready to put in a new girder. Word got passed down the line to Reid that the big people were in and would like to see him change the span. But he had al? ready had some kind of a row. He was, it's said, a very rough man • especially where his work was concerned. Reid's the man who built the railway in Newfoundland, which had some very tricky things to do from an engineering point of view. And he hadn't had much trouble with it. He did other structural jobs. Specified the boats (for the ferry between Newfoundland and Cape Breton) • and operated the whole thing very successfully. He became a very wealthy man • but very unpopular with a lot of peo? ple, because he was successful • and he was successful because he was a real



boss. Anyhow, when these engineers came to see how he did his work, he just disappeared from the scene. Told the men to knock off, and he went fishing. And there was abso? lutely nothing doing around the site • un? til the railroad engineers got fed up, hooked up their car and went away. Here is a rough though rare view of Barra Strait in the Bras d'Or lakes showing the Grand Narrows Bridge under construction. The railway is there, and to the left the station is under construction • and in the water you can just make out the tops of the stone piers sticking up. The bridge itself has not yet been built on the piers. The photo comes ?? from Cape Breton Illustrated, an 1891 pamphlet. Thanks to the staff at the MacConnell library for this and locating a photo of Mr. Reid. Reid would never forget his work on the Grand Narrows Bridge. Harry Bruce, in his book LIFE? LINE, v/rites: Once, while overseeing a critical piece of work, he stood for hours in the ice cold water. Sometimes it was up to his neck. The rheumatism he caught that day eventually crippled him." Reid build the Grand Narrows Bridge for the Intercolonial Railway for \$530,000.