



Rivers of Water and Steamboats North

Meeting Place of Many Waters

Part two in a history of Fort McMurray, 1870-1898

By D.J. Comfort

Excerpts from pages 170-175

Segers was the epitome of a riverboat captain. He had a passionate fondness of adventure and a knack of getting into and, more important, getting out of the most impossible of situations. He had to be one of the more colorful of riverboat captains and tested the waters of more rivers than many would sail in a lifetime. He was American born, July 3, 1832, in the state of Maine and was on the upper Mississippi, the Minnesota, the Red and the Nile, the Athabasca, Slave and Mackenzie and the waters of the Yukon.

John Scribner Segers enjoyed shades of success. He was one of the few captains who invested his savings in his own vessel, named the Quickstep, and certainly had to be the only one whose ship would quickstep to the top of a dockside warehouse in Nome, Alaska, during a tidal wave caused by a subterranean earthquake; a tall tale if there ever was one but these were tall days. The resulting damage, not to mention loss of boat and life savings, involved him in a \$1500 lawsuit for property damage. Yet, Captain Segers was indefatigable; at 71 years of age and travelling in 1905 with two companions in the mountains of Idaho, he became entombed in a spring snowslide; Captain Segers was the lone reported survivor. The Captain died in the spring of 1909 at Rossland, B.C. His wife died and was buried at Fort McMurray in August of 1887.

Born in Bangor, Maine, Captain Segers moved to the Red River in the 1860's, employed on such vessels as the Anson Northrup, the International, the Manitoba and the Minnesota and, in 1883 captaining on the Saskatchewan for the first time, commanded that interesting vessel, the Lily. He did not receive his Masters Certificate until 1901 when in April of that year he wrote the examination at Victoria, B.C., his address at that time, and received his Masters, Passenger Steamers, Minor, Inland Waters, on the 9th of July, 1901.

When Henry Toke Munn met Captain Segers of the S.S. Grahame in the spring of 1894, he said he was "one of the handsomest men I have ever seen. He was, I suppose, in the early sixties. He had been a Mississippi River captain and had a fund of anecdote about the early days on the "Father of Waters." With him was his seventeen-year old daughter, an astoundingly beautiful girl and full of fun - I met her again, a handsome middle-aged woman, in Vancouver, in 1929. . .

The devilishly handsome Segers was a captain distinguished by two singular events; he was one of four riverboat captains to have accepted an offer from the British army to sail riverboats on the Nile river and, secondly, for which he became far more famed than the former, was the fact that Captain Segers was coming to the S.S. Grahame relatively fresh from battle. In the 1885 Battle of Batoche, the sternwheeler Northcote had inspired the imagination of a certain General Middleton. Middleton had 'dreamed himself up a navy.' The Northcote, rather hurriedly converted, was to become the first steamer-gunboat ever to enjoin battle on the prairie. To Segers was given the rather dubious distinction of the navigational command of the vessel, crouched in the

crowning, flimsy and exposed pilot house towards which any rebel of however little military training would logically direct his fire.

To prepare the Northcote's defenses, planking had been taken from Dumont's stable to armorplate the lower deck and exposed engine and boiler; a billiard table served as protection for the matted and bolster-sheltered soldiers on board. Encumbered by two weighty barges, 200 troops on board, about 300 tons of supplies and ammunition, and drawing 34 inches of water on a river that frequently had only 30 inches to spare, Captain Segers, Purser Talbot and Captain Sheets, Segers's superior officer, necessarily took a dim view of the proceedings, but as J.K. Howard put it in his book "Strange Empire", there was no use in protesting, "they were in the Army now". The plan was for the Northcote to coordinate progress with a land attack by the militia. As Howard relates, "This, if the Metis stood still for it, would trap them between two broadsides and the war would be over in short order. It was unlikely, however, that the enemy would cooperate, in view of the fact that its scouts, securely hidden in the bushes, had watched the whole operation of 'armorplating' the boat...and had gleefully reported all details to Gabriel Dumont." With Captain Segers in charge of navigation, Captain Sheets acting as pilot and Purser Talbot manning a rifle, all three were warned to keep a sharp eye for the ferry cables stretched across the river by the rebels. The vessel moved downstream per instructions for the coordinated attack timed for 8 o'clock.

But, as the Edmonton Bulletin put it, "the boat was too previous or the soldiers too slow", the Northcote went it alone. Underway for less than an hour, the steamer approached a long sand bar and was raked by fire. Talbot suffered flesh wounds in shoulder and ankle; Segers, a bullet in his coat sleeve; dozens came through the thin walls and windows of the pilot house and no less than 90 bullets would later be found embedded in a protecting bale of hay. The steamer straggled out, building steam to the limit, swinging into middle river, and ran for her life. Too late, she found herself bearing directly for the ferry cables. The lurching vessel frantically tried to stop but with her momentum carrying her on, Segers signalled for full speed ahead. One of the cables splashed into the river behind her; the other, a few feet ahead, was coming down, too. The Northcote plowed into the cable, ripped down her smokestacks, her two tall spars, her mast and her whistle. The hurricane deck blazed into fire and the vessel, critically wounded, repaired downstream, around a bend and out of range at last. The military men on board, to their consternation, found themselves outside of battle and attempted to induce the civilian captain and crew to re-enter the fray. But Segers and crew were no fools and steadfastly refused to expose the rickety craft again, at least, not until the wheelhouse was rendered sufficiently more bullet-proof. A few days later, and in company with the Marquis whose steering gear eventually gave way and had to be towed, the Northcote returned to Batoche only to find the war ended. She arrived just in time for the victory celebrations.