

WORKING THE NORTH'S River Highways



Active on the Mackenzie and Liard rivers for 60 years, Cooper Barging Services provides a vital freight supply service for small NWT communities and work camps.

The last time we visited Cooper Barging Services, the hydraulic excavator was a machine of the future, the D9G reigned as the biggest dozer in the world, and a very young Mike Cooper was learning the ropes at the family-owned Fort Nelson firm he would one day head.

That was back in the spring of 1968, the occasion being the re-powering of the company's 40 foot river tug, the Barbara J II, with twin Cat D333TA diesels (400 hp), state-of-the art marine power for the day. An article profiling the company's freight operations on the Mackenzie and Liard rivers in the Northwest Territories appeared in *Tracks & Treads* later that year.



Mike Cooper Jr. in engine room of the Sheila J III; the 50-foot, Cat-powered tug on the Liard River this spring.

As Mike observes, much has changed since, and much hasn't. The company is still a family-owned firm, still in the freight barging business on the two rivers, but has long since diversified into trucking and road construc-

tion. Mike's father Ed, who started on the rivers in 1942, died in 1984.

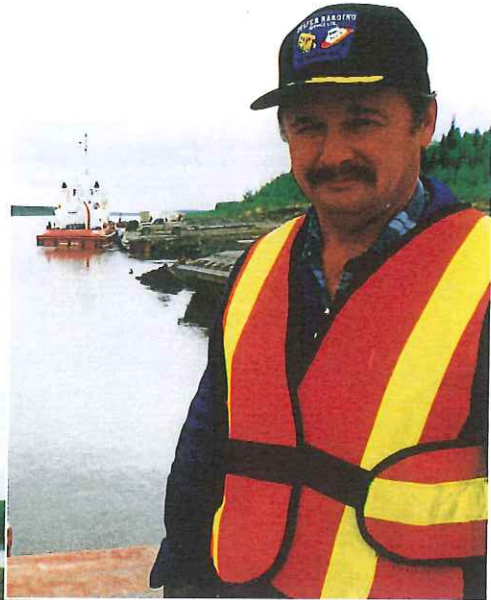
"In the late '60s, the road construction side of the business was really just a fledgling operation and we hadn't yet gone into trucking," says Mike. "The

biggest part of our business was on the rivers, barging freight out of Fort Nelson, mainly to Fort Simpson (on the Mackenzie River) and Fort Liard (on the Liard River)."

Operations on the rivers expanded considerably during the height of the oil boom in the 1970s, with some six barging companies competing for business, he recalls. "Things were really humming almost throughout the

weekends, helping out and learning the business.

The construction arm, headed by Ed Junior, is steadily busy as well, mainly with road construction and maintenance, and oil/gas lease development. The division runs 20 pieces of equipment, mainly Cat dozers, graders, wheel loaders and excavators. Ed's son, Darcy, is a crew foreman and



Company president Mike Cooper; the 70-foot, Cat powered Miller Delta works the Mackenzie River out of Fort Simpson.

'70s, but by the early '80s the oil industry had hit very hard times. Like everybody else, it seemed as if we had no sooner finished expanding than we were looking at cutting back."

Only two of the six companies survived through the '80s, Cooper Barging and another veteran firm, also started in the 1940s, based in Hay River.

Cooper's barging business took another hit in 1984 with completion of a road between Fort Nelson and Fort Liard; the route has since been extended through to Fort Simpson. "That didn't help our marine operations much at the time, but it did help our trucking business, so it wasn't entirely bad news," says Mike.

The trucking division, headed by Mike's brother, Milton, now runs 12 highway tractors and oil patch rigs, most powered with Cat 3406 diesels, and 18 trailers including lowbeds for hauling equipment. Like Mike and Milton before him, Milton's son Braden (grade 8) can usually be found around the shop or yard during

equipment operator and his son, Brent, works for the company part-time as a mechanic.

Meanwhile, after a few lean years things have picked up again on the rivers, mainly due to strong activity in the oil/gas sector, says Mike, who heads up the barging side in addition to his duties as company president.

"Things have been looking fairly good the last couple of years and it seems like that might continue for a while yet. That's good news because there were some years there when there was so little business it was hardly worth putting the boats in the river."

The company now owns two Cat-powered tugs — the 70-foot Miller Delta based in Fort Simpson, NWT, and the 50-foot Sheila J III, based in Fort Liard. The company also contracts the services of the 60-foot Malta II, powered by twin Cat D343s, that is owned and operated by a fourth brother, Cameron. Seven barges currently in the fleet range in size from 90 feet (27 foot beam) to 128 feet (35 foot

beam), with carrying capacities up to 275 short tons. Four are stationed in Fort Simpson and three at Fort Liard.

"Typically we haul oil field supplies and mixed freight for work camps or the communities, including groceries, building supplies, or what have you. Most of it comes in first by road, from Fort Nelson (to Fort Liard) or via Hay River (to Fort Simpson). We also transport reefer trucks with fresh or frozen food."

The company was busy this spring, Mike reports, with eight trips already scheduled to Norman Wells (just south of the Arctic circle). "We schedule the longer trips in order to leave ample time for additional runs if required before the end of the season. I could actually use more barges, but there aren't any more readily available to lease or rent. Our haul season is only five months long, which means our tugs and barges are idle more than half of the year. You want to be sure the

Langley Firm Builds New Railcar Movers



Industrial Railcar Movers has entered the market with a new line of machines. The first, designed and built by the Langley-based company, was delivered to an Alberta grain terminal early this year. Powered by a Cat 3176 diesel, the machine utilizes both rubber tires and steel wheels; it can move 19 fully-loaded railcars. Other Cat components utilized include the transmission, electronic controls, and cooling system. IRM president Brent Dorion (left) says the company has four different model-sizes in the works. The firm also remanufactures existing units and runs a busy field-service side with customers throughout North America. We'll run a full field report on the machines in an upcoming issue. ■

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business is there long-term before you build new ones."

New barges are either built locally or shipped up from Vancouver, the latter requiring a long, potentially perilous trip around Alaska and across the Beaufort Sea before heading down the Mackenzie.

Pushing at least three barges, and often four abreast, the Miller Delta makes the 355-mile trip from Fort Simpson to Norman Wells (down-river) in about 35 hours. The return trip upriver takes considerably longer. With the barges lashed together to form a single line, reducing friction from the river's flow, it takes anywhere from 80 to 100 hours. "It really depends on the river and the time of year. The flow varies from about 3.5 knots when the river is low in the fall to about nine knots when it is high in the spring."

The Miller Delta is running twin Cat 348 diesels, each rated at 750 hp,

driving stainless steel, four-bladed, 49.5 x 49 Western props, guarded against floating debris. The props turn in nozzles that provide about 25 per cent more thrust than equivalent open blades, says Mike, a necessity when heading upriver during the spring especially. Power is transmitted through Cat 7241 gears with 3:1 reduction. Both engines have accumulated about 5,000 hours since a major overhaul by the previous owners in 1995/96.

With her engines running at 1750 rpm, the Miller Delta averages about five mph while traveling upstream. Heading downstream, she averages 10 to 12 mph at just 1400 rpm. Her draught is about 4'-3" light and about 5'-0" with a full load of fuel.

Working out of Fort Liard, the Sheila J III and Malta II both have three-foot draughts for the generally shallower (although faster flowing) Liard River. The Sheila J III was built to Cooper's specs in 1970 and re-powered with twin, 443 hp Cat 3408Bs in 1989. Both

now have over 11,000 hours on them. Because of the draught, the Sheila J III has Twin Disc 518 reduction gears turning at 2:1 and driving twin, 30-inch, four-blade Osborne propellers with a 30 x 28 pitch. For shallow water, they are protected in a tunnel recessed into the bottom of the boat. The small propellers are necessary, notes Mike, although at a cost of reduced efficiency.

When we visited, the Sheila J III was hauling supplies across the Liard for a 200-person camp run by Chevron for its K-29 well — one of Canada's five top-producing gas wells. Mike's son, Mike Junior, is a crew member and another son, Kelly (grade 6) signs on between school terms.

All told, the three Cooper divisions employ 40-50 people during the peak season; Mike guesses that about a dozen Cooper family members are involved in one way or another. "Visit us again in 30 years and we'll do another count," he smiles. "The rivers will still be here — and we'll still be working on them." ■