

# Future Today

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## *HOW CRUCIAL TIME CAN BE*

It was 1861 and an impressive party was underway to celebrate the completion of one of the most remarkable technological achievements of the age; the first transcontinental telegraph wire. It spanned 2000 miles across the United States of America, through the wilderness of the west, the cliffy Rocky Mountains and the territories of the native population. Peter Bergman, one of the engineers, was with the celebrating crowd. He was proud of the achievement of his team and had no idea of the adventures that lay ahead.

Three years previously Cyrus W. Field had failed in setting up a telegraph connection from Europe through the Atlantic Ocean to America (see Future Today Letter No 4). After initial success the wire had failed after a few weeks. But Fields had not given up and was still working on this dream...

Also, around this time the American Entrepreneur Perry Collins had travelled through Siberia and northern China to evaluate new business opportunities. While travelling and networking he discovered that the Russians were extending their telegraph system from Moscow eastwards and a new idea sparked in his mind:

### ***“Why not connect America and Europe overland via Russia and Siberia?”***

The distance from the Russian Province “Russian-America” (which the United States only bought in 1867 and called in Alaska) to Siberia through the Bering Strait was only 82 kilometres and the water only 30 – 50 meters deep. Sea-cables on shorter distances had already been laid and were working. From this point the telegraph line would need to be built overland until it could be connected to the existing Russian

cable network and the transcontinental wire through to the United States.

Collins spent the next years finding political support for his idea, getting all the necessary permissions and finding a partner to finance his venture. In March 1864 the Russian-American Telegraph Company was founded with one of the largest telegraph operating companies at the time as a major shareholder and operator. Perry Collins got 10% of the shares, an option of another 10% and a cash compensation of 100,000 USD for his rendered services. On July 1, 1864 Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States of America gave the Russian-American Telegraph Company the right of way on American soil.

In August 1864 Peter Bergman was called in the office of his superior, Mr. Stern. “You have done a great job during the construction of the transcontinental telegraph wire” his boss said. Bergman knit his brows, not sure where this praise was leading. Then Mr. Stern came straight to the point: “As of today we will assign you to our new subsidiary the Russian-American Telegraph Company. You will be commanding one of the teams building the telegraph line through Russian-America.

But, **Time is crucial.** Cyrus W. Field is still working on his plan to lay a deep-sea cable through the Atlantic Ocean and we have to finish our job before Fields. Therefore, the construction will be carried out by several teams. You will be heading one of them. All construction groups will be equipped with the necessary material and will stay on location until their section is finished. Your group will set up its camp here.” He had walked to a large map hanging on the wall and pointed to a spot



in the vast Russian-American wilderness. Bergman was shocked. He had to work literally in the middle of nowhere.

After a few months of preparation Bergman's construction squad was ready. Upon reaching the terminal station of the existing railway line, they worked their way through mainly unchartered territory. No streets, sometimes a dirt road, usually unforgiving terrain, whilst always carrying everything necessary to build a telegraph line with them. They had to construct their own bridges over creeks and rivers but at last they reached their starting point. After setting up the camp Bergman immediately went to work. Myriads of flies in the summer, bitter cold days and nights in the winter. Whenever possible they worked on extending the telegraph line further and further across the rough country.

On July 28, 1866, Cyrus Field successfully completed a stable and working deep sea telegraph cable through the Atlantic Ocean and the world celebrated. But not Peter nor Perry Collins. Peter and his colleague's teams were still struggling to build the telegraph line through the Russian-American wilderness not yet aware that the race was lost and the economic rationale behind the venture had

disappeared almost overnight. But Bergman continued to do what he has been told. In all kinds of weather, he and his group strived hard to advance the telegraph line. Mr. Stern did all he could to inform Bergman and his group to stop the construction work but the dispatch rider could not reach the group operating in the middle of nowhere until the following summer of 1867.

What lesson can we learn from this true story?

**Time is crucial in setting up the right structures.**

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**Beat H. Haering**  
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