

Future Today

HOW TIME WAS CREATED

It was snowing and cold at Montreal railway station in December 1875 when Sandford realized in despair that he had missed his train to Halifax. Not again, he thought, but his freezing feet prevented him from thinking rationally. It annoyed him even more that it was his fault because the train he actually wanted to catch didn't run on 'Canadian time', but on 'Halifax time', which was half an hour off from his own time.

Now he and several other disgruntled passengers had no choice but to wait for hours until the next train arrived - an unnecessary loss of time that led him to ask himself: *"Why couldn't the whole world measure their time in the same way?"* In a world that was becoming increasingly interconnected through railways, telegraphs and growing international trade (Future Today **No 10 HOW TEA WAS GIVEN WINGS**), the chaos of different timekeeping was an ever-growing obstacle. Every city, every country had its own time, calculated according to the position of the sun in the sky. And while trains raced along the tracks at breathtaking speed and news travelled across the Atlantic by telegraph in minutes (Future Today **No 4 HOW A CABLE CONNECTED THE WORLD**), there was no standardized system that could efficiently organize this brave new world.

Back in Montreal, he sat down at his desk and began sketching and talking to himself. *"If the earth rotates on its own axis every 24 hours,"* he thought, *"then the world could be divided into 24 zones - each of one hour. These time zones should extend evenly around the globe,*

starting from a single point. But where should this zero point be?"

He knew how crucial this question was but first he needed to convince the world of his time zone proposal and then to find a starting point that was both geographically meaningful and internationally recognized.

It was clear that he needed something more than just an idea - he needed support, international attention and above all the courage to fight against the existing practice to create order. Not an easy thing to do, as he knew that similar proposals had already been met with great disbelief and then rejected as being 'too utopian' by the influential British Association for the Advancement of Sciences.

So, he first turned to the Canadian government, which soon showed an interest in his proposal, as the huge country had a great interest in simplifying its time. Sandford was a calm and persevering man. New challenges kept cropping up - such as the mistrust of other countries and the fear of giving up their own local time. However, he maintained his conviction that only an international agreement could secure "time".

Years passed, then on 18 November 1883, the major railway companies in the United States took up Sandford's time zone proposal and established for the first time in their country four major time zones.

Despite this success, Sandford did not reach his goal, because **the zero-point meridian had to be set** too but it took another year until October 1884 that 25 countries gathered at the International Meridian Conference in Washington, D.C. to decide on this. It was the moment Sandford had been working towards

all these years. However, many countries, had their own ideas about where the prime meridian should lie, for political, scientific and not least prestigious reasons.

Sandford had his own ideas where the prime meridian should be, and so he started his speech before the delegates: *"The prime meridian should be at a point that is recognized by the world as scientifically and historically neutral. We need to orientate ourselves by the stars, and what better place than the British observatory where the history of astronomy and navigation has been researched since 1675? And this place is **Greenwich** near London."*



As understandable as Sandford's proposal was, there was strong political opposition and many of the delegates clung to their own traditions and did not want to accept the "British Empire" solution.

But the fact that about two thirds of global shipping already used Greenwich as a reference, that Britain was still the leading naval power and that the Greenwich Observatory had excellent data and instruments could not be ignored easily and so it was decided by a large majority in favor of Standford's proposal.

The decision of 1884 was a milestone, not only for science, but for the world as a whole. Sir Sandford Fleming's idea - to divide the earth into 24 equal time zones, starting with Greenwich - became the basis for modern timekeeping and enabling the world to work together - on time.

For Sandford Fleming, it was the culmination of years of travelling. Not only had he solved the technical problem of time, but with tenacity and conviction he had also ushered in a new era of international co-operation.

Time zones have helped us find our way locally in a global system. This also applies to all of Carey's legal structures since they adapt to individual life situations but also follow a clear legal and ethical foundation. In the end, time are about being able to count on something that gives us protection and orientation - no matter where and when. The time tells us when - and structures ensures that tomorrow still counts.

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Beat H. Haering

In Memory of Michael Müller

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