

Local Railway Items from Area Papers - Thurso and Nation Valley Railway

06/01/1926 Ottawa Journal Thurso and Nation Valley Thurso

Work was commenced last year at Thurso, and the first contract was the construction of a lumber railway into the Heart of the Singer limits to bring out the timber. At present there are 35 miles of railway ready to operate, all privately owned lines, handling nothing but wood for Singer company needs. During 1925 a modern saw mill was erected at Thurso, and it is now practically ready for operation. Plans have been approved, and work will be started at once on the main plant, The woodworking mill at Thurso.

The factory will be completed this year, and when it commences operation it will give steady employment to 800 skilled workman.

The Singer company has another important plant in Canada, located at St. Johns, Que., and with the new Thurso plant in operation, its operations in the Dominion will reach important dimensions.

14/07/1926 Ottawa Journal Thurso and Nation Valley Thurso

Mill at Thurso is opened today by Sir Douglas

The new lumber mills, railway and timber limits of the Singer Manufacturing Company at Thurso, Que., are being inspected today by Sir Douglas Alexander, president of the Singer Manufacturing Company. Sir Douglas formally opened the new mill, which constitutes the first stage in what is expected to be a huge development at Thurso.

Sir Douglas spent the day inspecting the works and will leave Thurso this evening.

Although head of one of the largest corporations having headquarters in the United States, Sir Douglas is a Canadian, having spent the early part of his life in Hamilton. He is a graduate of Osgoode Hall and was knighted in recognition of the services of his company, and his own personal services, during the Great War.

05/06/1936 Ottawa Citizen Thurso and Nation Valley

Governor General visits Manufacturing Plant

His Excellency Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor-General, accompanied by Colonel Willis O'Connor and a party from Government House, visited the Singer Manufacturing Company plant at Thurso yesterday and was taken through the works by the manager P.B. Bourget.

The party arrived at Thurso about 10 a.m. and after visiting the sawmills was taken on a company's private railway to Iroquois Lake and shown the plants there. After lunch at the camp at Iroquois lake the party returned to Thurso then to the Capital.

28/03/1944 Ottawa Citizen Thurso and Nation Valley Thurso

Court Martial is told of Drinking, dancing party with Germans

Eight German prisoners of war, two members of the Veterans Guard of Canada whose duty it was to guard them, and four Buckingham girls had a gay time drinking beer and dancing at a Thurso hotel on the night of March 15, according to evidence given at today's session of the court martial where the two guards are on trial for alleged dereliction of duty.

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Singer works project some 45 miles north of Thurso.

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Duhamel, a station on the privately-owned railway line of the Singer company running from Thurso to the camp and some 37 miles north of Thurso, and gave movement orders to bring the eight prisoners to Buckingham for dental treatment.

he was expecting a detachment of 14 war prisoners from Maniwai that morning, and thus there would be a movement of prisoners both ways on the rail line. The prisoners under Corporal Lee, Private Skinner and another private and a civilian guard travelled to Thurso on the Kalamazoo, a motor truck with flanged wheels which rides on the rails.

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Witness stated that one of the prisoners told him that three of them had had major extractions at the dentist and could not go back to work, especially in the open Kalamazoo, and suggested that they be left at the hotel overnight.

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Under cross-examination of Capt. Brown, Scheult said the prisoners and the guards eat their meals together in the same mess at the camp.

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<http://news.google.ca/newspapers?id=pPouAAAIBAJ&sjid=ENwFAAAAIBAJ&pg=6317,4561554&dq=railway+singer-company&hl=en>

10/04/1944 Ottawa Citizen Thurso and Nation Valley Thurso

Sentence passed on two guards of nazis at Thurso.

<http://news.google.ca/newspapers?id=LPYuAAAIBAJ&sjid=9NsFAAAAIBAJ&pg=4246,1511376&dq=thurso&hl=en>

Singer-owned Railway Runs 50 Miles in Bush

This is the home of the famous Singer sewing machine, one of two big Singer plants in Canada. The other is at St. Johns, Que. Woodwork for the machines is made here from logs cut in the bush north of here and shipped to St. Johns where the machines are assembled and sent to distributing centers across Canada. Although Thurso is one of the best agricultural centers of the region, with about 200 prosperous farms on good clay land lumbering has been the town's mainstay for many years. First it was W.E. Edwards who had mills in Rockland, across the Ottawa river, then the Gatineau Company, a subsidiary of Riordan who took over the Edwards timber limit.

Sawmill Closed

By 1923, most of the large white pine had been removed and with nothing left but hardwood, the mills closed shortly after.

At one time Canadian hardwoods were not regarded very highly by the building and furniture trades until after the First World War. Singer imported walnut from the United States for cabinet work on its machines.

After many trials and much research, birch was accepted as a suitable substitute; uses for maple, beech and basswood were found and the Canadian hardwoods became firmly established.

It was in 1923 that the Singer firm purchased the former Edwards timber limits north of here and after timber cruises, railway location surveys and consideration of possible plant sites Thurso was chosen for its initial unit, consisting of a saw-mill, power house, dry kilns and other equipment. At that time Thurso's population was around 600; today it is more than treble that number.

50-mile railway

So Singer came to Thurso in 1924, a standard gauge railway was built over 50 miles into the bush, the plant was erected in 1925 and the first log was sawn on July 2, 1926.

Today the company operates lumber camps in an area of 647 square miles, north of Thurso, along the watersheds of the nation, Blanche and Lievre rivers.

Numerous lakes in the forest make this a veritable paradise of natural beauty. By a system of careful cutting and reforestation the firm plans to have a perpetual source of raw material.

In the fall and winter 300 men and 60 teams of horses are engaged in logging operations. The company-owned railroad, the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway, with three heavy diesel-electric locomotives and a lighter engine for yard switching, brings logs to the plant and supplies the various camps.

During the firm's first 20 years here lumber and logs were shipped to St. Johns for further processing. In 1946 additional machinery was installed here and now the logs are turned into plywood, dyed, glued, cut and shaped ready for shipment to the St. Johns assembly plant.

Aircraft Propellers

During the last war the plant produced veneers needed to make aircraft propellers for Canada and her allies. Genuine walnut and even mahogany are still used in making more expensive model machines.

The Singer Company carried out a rigid reforestation and fire protection program, with the fire protection towers, telephone lines and radio units to protect the woods from fire. The rangers also report insect infestations and the company co-operates with the federal and provincial entomological services for control purposes.

The Singer firm does everything possible to keep its employees healthy and happy. It operated the Singer Dairy which supplies the whole town and sells milk at reduced rates to Singer employees. About 80 purebred Ayrshire cows are kept on a large farm that included one of the more modern barns in the area.

Health Insurance

Employees and their families are covered by a sound group health insurance plan. Wages and working conditions are negotiated through a union. A registered nurse is in charge of the plant first aid and medical treatment room.

About 22 miles northwest of Thurso is the Beave Lake Fish and Game Club, a modern clubhouse and a group of five or six lakes stocked with a tasty trout for the exclusive use of Singer employees. There is excellent deer hunting in this area too.

Recreation for Singer employees and their kin is provided in the company-owned arena which was built in 1947. Artificial ice was installed about three years ago and Thurso has had a team in the Eastern Canada Hockey League for the last two years.

In the east end of Thurso is a new section of high quality houses recently built with company assistance for Singer employees. Nearby is the Catholic Brothers' school and the large new protestant school.

A subsidiary of the Singer firm is the Thurso Lumber and Planing Mills Company Ltd., which includes the mill formerly owned by Fabien Frappier and a hardware store in a former garage previously owned by Thomson's store.

Top men at the Singer plant in Thurso are Paul S. Bourget, general manager and his assistant Lawrence E. Hird.

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Caption to picture

For your sewing machine - in this corner of the big Singer Manufacturing Company plant at Thurso, QUE., men and women process plywood veneer made from hardwood logs taken from the firm's own timber limits north of Thurso. Here machines dye and glue plywood veneers that are shipped to their assembling plant at St. Johns, Que. The plant employs 300 people; more in woods operations.

Lumbermen survive train derailment.

THURSO (Staff) At least 25 lumbermen were injured - one seriously - when a company train struck a washout just north of Duhamel Monday morning. Duhamel is about 30 miles north of here.

Injured and admitted to St. Michael's Hospital in Buckingham were seven men. They are:

Pierre Blais, 65, of Montpellier, with a fractured skull, fractured left arm and glass cuts to the body. His condition is critical and he is in a semi-conscious condition.

Aldee Riopelle, 39, of Montpellier, with a dislocated left shoulder.

Andre Louzon, 27, of Duhamel, with a fractured right leg.

Robert Belisle, 32, of Cheneville, with a fractured left arm and lacerations to the face and body.

Simeon Pilon, 57, of Cheneville, with several fractured rib; and lacerations to the face and body.

Jean Louis Faubert, 39 of Duhamel, with a broken right arm, assistant train engineer, he was trapped in the cab for three hours.

Theophile Fournier, 38, of Cheneville, with a broken left leg and a possible fractured right leg, and facial lacerations.

It is understood that possibly 20 other men were treated at the hospital but not admitted.

Beaver Dam Breaks

A broken beaver dam was blamed for the accident by spokesmen for the Singer Manufacturing Company in Thurso.

About 75 men were aboard the one - coach train when it struck the washout at eight o'clock. The Singer Company -woods division - operated the train. It was heading from Duhamel to the Singer lumber camp about 20 miles north of there when the mishap occurred.

Ambulances were rushed to the scene from St. Andre Avelin and Montebello. Automobiles and trucks were used to take the injured to hospital at Buckingham, 40 miles west of there.

The ambulances and doctors were in operation from eight hours before the injured men and others were all admitted or completely X - rayed at St. Michael's.

Aerial photos of the wreck scene showed the engine plunged into the water but the single coach behind it remained up-right on the rails with the front half of it projecting over the embankment leading to the water.

This was denied by several company spokesmen.

They said the mishap happened about 17 miles north of Duhamel - a spot only accessible by small track cars and trains, Nobody was allowed on company property except officials.

Several small track cars were used in transporting the injured men to Duhamel for transfer to the waiting ambulances.

Ice - Coated Rails

The train engineer, Albert Degagne, 54 of Cheneville apparently knew of the washout in time. The tracks were frozen, however, and the train skidded for some distance when the brakes were applied to the small diesel locomotives.

The men inside were shaken up and glass windows were broken when the train came to a sudden stop. The broken glass accounted for the many cuts sustained by the men.

One report said the washed-out section of the embankment was about 50 feet long. It was one of the largest beaver dams constructed in streams and creeks along the private line.

It apparently burst under the heavy rains during the holiday weekend. This was the third time in recent years that broken beaver dams were responsible for washouts on this line.

A company crew was out at the scene all day repairing the damage.

At St. Michael's Hospital a team of three doctors took care of the patients brought in. They were: Dr. P. E. Belisle, Dr. Gerard Rochon and Dr. Jacques Joubert. Company officials were in Duhamel most of the day.

Duhamel - Fernand Beauvais, 22, of Cheneville, Que., was killed instantly when the truck in which he was a passenger was struck by a train in this community 75 miles northeast of Hull.

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Beauvais was riding in a truck driven by Denis Pilon, 26, also of Cheneville, when it skidded at a private rail crossing, operated by the Singer Machine Manufacturing Company of Duhamel.

The impact caused the truck door to open and Beauvais was thrown out into the path of the train.

One man is dead and a young girl is in critical condition at Sacred heart Hospital in Hull following a car-train collision at Montpellier, Que., last night.

Montpelier is about 35 miles northeast of Ottawa.

Two other persons are in St. Michael's Hospital, Buckingham..

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Quebec Provincial Police from Montebello investigating the accident said the accident happened about 8 p.m. on a level crossing at Montpellier when Meilleur, driver of the car, apparently failed to see an approaching diesel. The train is owned and operated by the Singer Manufacturing Company to transport men and equipment from the Thurso area into the bush-land.

Another piece of history bites the dust.

The Thurso and Nation Valley Railway barreled along its track for the last time June 21, 1986, leaving behind a trail of sad and resigned people. The logging railway was originally built in 1926 by the Singer Manufacturing Company to, among other reasons, haul wood from the forests for its sewing machine cabinets. In 1964 The James Maclaren Co. bought the ailing Thurso Pulp and Paper Company and continued to use the track for its own logging purposes. It was the only logging railroad left in eastern Canada and one of the few left in North America. The train crew held out for just as long as they could, says railway superintendent, Gaetan Lafleur, but they were finally forced to surrender to progress. It is now cheaper to haul the logs by truck.

"We did everything we could to keep the cost low and the directors know it. We had very good workers and it was a special situation. It was like a family, a family affair," he says.

Since 1964 Lafleur has been superintendent of the railway, as was his father before him.

Perhaps the hardest hit by the closure, Lafleur seems on the outside to have taken it in his stride saying, "Well, you know, I take things as they come, there was no other choice."

But its not hard to see that deep feelings of regret lay underneath this well weathered man's composure.

"Last year I had an idea that the closure was coming but I wasn't sure. And then I thought we could keep it up. There was a 1974-75 study that showed it was still cheaper to haul logs by train. And they (management) had changed their minds before about closing it down. I thought they could change their minds again". But this time, management didn't change their minds.

In fact, says Bruce Hunt, manager of logging operations, the writing had been on the wall for the past few years.

Hunt explains that the concentration of cuttable wood got further and further away from the train tracks and that the train simply became an economically impracticable method to haul the logs. Right now plans are in the offing to construct a logging road which will open up a virgin-stand of wood in Papineau-Labelle Park.

But Hunt is quick to give credit where credit is due, saying the logging train "was definitely a good operation and it had very devoted employees."

So far, Hunt says, all 12 full-time train staff have found other jobs, some placed within the Maclaren's operation and others with Valleyfield Metals, the company who got the tender to remove the train track and ties.

Five men are without permanent jobs and now Lafleur has become superintendent of the wood yard, a job with which he says he is happy.

He says he feels sadder for those who have lost their jobs than the actual loss of the train, echoing more the sentiments, one would think, of a patron than a boss. But the Maclaren's people are not the only ones sad to see the end of an era.

Colin Churcher, director general of railway safety for Transport Canada and train buff from many years back, has been riding the train route along with Gaetan and his men for a number of years.

Along with five diesel locomotives and numerous tree-length flat cars used to haul logs, Maclaren's inherited an old Canadian Pacific Railway official car that had been built at Farnham, Quebec in 1907 and purchased by the Thurso and nation Valley Railway in 1929.

In 1979 Maclaren's later donated the official car to the Bytown Railway Society which promptly set about to renovate it right there on the premises. The Society also stores an old caboose on the grounds. And the logging train would often pull the two extra cars on a weekend run, into the bush.

Churcher talks of happy times spent on those excursions, good meals cooked on the business car's wood stove, stops along quiet streams and shared precious moments.

He laments that the end of the train is the end of an era and feels most sorry for the men who gave the railway all they had.

"They worked together, played together---really it's the end of a way of life for them.

"Their attitude and cooperation were admirable. They did everything from fixing engines, to welding and the ingenuity and energy that were exercised to keep the train running without too much expense was amazing."

Churcher emphasized that the train didn't just die out or be put out to pasture because it was old and derelict and he took pains to point out that it had performed an unflinching duty.

"That last train had a big log load and it delivered the logs as it had everyday. It fulfilled its purpose right to the end".

Two locomotives saved.

Churcher is in the process of writing the history of the line and explains, "we can't save the train but we can record its history for posterity before it gets forgotten."

At the end, the Thurso train consisted of five locomotives, 85 flat cars to haul the tree lengths and 15 cars which carried saw mill logs and was only used for slashed wood.

Some 27 miles of track was opened in 1926 running from Thurso to Singer, Quebec and by 1948 it consisted of a 56 mile main track reaching spots just north of Lac Ernest. During its lifetime the train used to haul between 26 and 32 loaded flatbeds of wood once a day which would equal about 34 to 40 truck loads.

A two-phase plan was implemented by Maclaren's to slowly ease the train out of operation.

In January of 1984 they moved their slashing equipment from the woods to the yard and they started their trucking operation less than two weeks ago.

Now the company will keep two of its locomotives and some of its cars to move wood from the slashing point to the saw mill on the six and a half mile track that will remain on the grounds.

As for the rest of the track, the first of the approximately 258,000 ties has already been torn from the ground.

Randy Douglas, Valleyfield Metals' director of merchandising, estimates that about 80 percent of the ties are good and has already sold the lot to one person. He believes there to be about 8,800 tons of good quality steel which he will sell to foundries and perhaps overseas where a lighter rail, such as this one, can still be used. North American trains, explains Douglas, need heavier rail on which to travel.

Douglas doesn't mind that a piece of history is being torn from the ground, saying it's better to pull it out than to let it rot, as he says it is in the process of doing.

"And of course, because it is cheaper to haul wood by truck, no one is going to spend money on a dinosaur," Douglas says.

No indeed.

And so the "dinosaur" will be removed. It will be taken from the ground with perhaps not the same grace and necessity with which it was placed.

Certainly the labor will be much easier and quicker than it must have been to lay the track down. After all, we have modernization to help us now. Quick and easy. The less sweat the better. Time is money.

The Thurso and Nation Valley Railway served its purpose well and one cannot feel remorse at the ending of an era, at a door of history being tightly shut and locked forever.

It seems rather appropriate that the last load of wood was taken from mile 26, the same place from which the first load had been taken almost 60 years ago to the day. The circle has been completed

Erin Scullion.