

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

10/12/1924 *Montreal Star*

Thurso and Nation Valley

PRIVATE BILLS IN QUE. LEGISLATURE

From Sir Douglas Alexander and others for the passing of an Act creating the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway Company starting northerly and extending to the county of Labelly [sic]

29/01/1925 *Montreal Gazette*

Thurso and Nation Valley

second reading was given to the bill incorporating the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway Company.

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.

14/12/1933 *Montreal Gazette*

Thurso and Nation Valley

An interesting series of motion pictures depicting the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway operated by the Singer Sewing Machine [sic] to transport lumber from the camps to the mills and to the factories where it was used to make cabinets and showing the complete process through which a sewing machine went before it was ready for sale was presented by Robert R Brown recording secretary of the association.

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 railline. 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, Seheult said the prisoners and the guards eat their meals together in the same mess at the camp.

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Sentences Passed On Two Guards Of Nazis At Thurso

Cpl. William Lee of Montreal has been convicted of three charges and Pte. Nelson Skinner of Granby, Que., of five charges heard at district courts-martial arising from irregularity while escorting prisoner of war at Buckingham and Thurso, Que., Defence Headquarters announced Saturday. The court ordered Lee reduced to the ranks and sentenced to nine months' detention while Skinner was sentenced to one year's detention, the announcement said.

Lee had been acquitted of three charges at the courts-martial, held at Buckingham two weeks ago, while Skinner was acquitted on one charge. They faced six charges each.

Both men are members of Company 12 of the Veterans Guard of Canada.

The announcement said Lee was found guilty of drunkenness; disobedience of standing orders by permitting prisoners of war to fraternize with the public; and conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline by permitting prisoners to consume intoxicating liquor in a public place.

Skinner was found guilty of permitting prisoners to fraternize in public with civilians; without reasonable cause, leaving six prisoners in the custody of a civilian; carrying out his duties in an improper manner by permitting prisoners to proceed in a truck unaccompanied by a regular guard; while acting as escort permitting prisoners to fraternize with civilians and permitting prisoners of war to consume intoxicating liquors in a public place.

06/03/1946 *Ottawa Citizen**Thurso and Nation Valley*

R. Stoodley, of the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway Company, want me to ride their railway. That's a date, Mr. Stoodley.

Like Jacob who wrestled with the angels, I am still wrestling with my conscience as to whether I can call this a railway or not. It doesn't count, usually, if it is not listed in the railway guide, and is not a common carrier. I shall reserve judgment, and only stop wrestling, after I have seen the set-up..

25/10/1946 *Ottawa Citizen**Thurso and Nation Valley*

The Thurso and Nation Valley has acquired a new Diesel engine, No. 5 and soon will be operating on the Singer Company private line up into the bush. Even if I do ride this line, it cannot count with me for a "new" railway, since the T & NV is not a common carrier, and is not mentioned in the official book, the Railway Guide. Why the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway has never taken steps to make itself official I do not know since the Guide is full of lines which are operated by private companies. Aluminum companies, lumber companies, copper companies, all have their own railways, and list them in the official book.

Meanwhile, whether the railway is officially a railway or not, I hope to get down there some day soon and try it..

14/11/1947 *Ottawa Citizen**Thurso and Nation Valley*

By Austin Cross

From E. P. Reid of 539 Roosevelt avenue, Ottawa comes a letter about an article I have recently written on forty Canadian railroads. He accuses me of minor technical inexactitude, and begs leave to make some hair-splitting comment.

He wants to know for instance, why the Thurso and Nation Valley is not regarded by me as a railway. I repeat again, that if it is not in the Railway Guide, it is not a railway. I have to draw the line some place. First, it is owned by a private firm, and apparently operating mainly on their own property. Second, it does not seem to be a common carrier. For instance, I am sure that the T.& N.V. would accept freight from say, Carleton Place, to Ripon, P.Q. Ripon is on or near their line. But if the Thurso and Nation Valley will put their railway in the Railway Guide, thereby indicating they accept freight from outside sources, then I claim it as a railway.

As a matter of fact, the reason I have not rushed down to ride it is simply that it would not count as a railway.

I am accused of omitting the Maritime Railway and Coal Company in my article, also the Cumberland Railway. It so happened that I omitted these two railways, through sheer stupidity. How I could overlook the Cumberland, I don't know, since they have a president by the name of A. Cross.

In any event, as long as anybody wants to split hairs with me about railways, he is welcome. I only wish more rail fans would write to and find fault with me..

01/11/1948 *Ottawa Citizen**Thurso and Nation Valley*

Austin Cross

I have received a pass to ride the Thurso and Nation Valley from Thurso to the end of steel, about 60 miles north. I hope to do so as soon as I can.

But why doesn't the T&NV invest in an advertisement in the official Railway Guide, thus making their railway legal?

I am anxious to ride this line, but it won't count as a new railway till Charles Bullwinkel of the Official (Railway) Guide has the cheque in his hand.

L. E. Hird please note.

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 whole 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 Beaver 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.

VIP's Ride Gas-Lighted Coaches On The T&NVR, Published 12 June 1953

This column is by way of explaining why it has taken me so long to ride the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway. It does seem absurd that I have ridden far more remote railways first. Once for instance, I played hookey from the United Nations in San Francisco to travel on the Northwestern Pacific. On another occasion I dropped off in Mobile to "do" the Alabama Tennessee and Northern. Again, there was that rainy day in Roanoke when I got drenched riding the Virginian. Thus I rode this far mileage long before I got round to travelling on the T&NVR, which is practically in Ottawa's backyard.

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How I came to be on the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway is in itself an item. I was driving down to the Seignior Club, all in the line of duty, with Scott Murray. Mr. Murray said he managed a departmental Store but I did not catch the name of it. We had with us a helpless guest - Robert H. Ross, of the Washington Board of Trade. Mr. Ross had forsaken his job of selling insurance with Ross and Groves Agency at 711-14th Street N.W., Washington, long enough to take in the Coronation delights of Ottawa.

I suggested to Scott Murray that we detour into the head office of the railway which also happens to be the head office of the Singer Sewing Machine Co. We were warmly greeted at the door by P. B. Bourget, the manager, and promised a locomotive on our return.

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Just as precisely at 4 p.m. we rolled up to the front door of the Thurso and Nation Valley office, a locomotive rolled up too. from the opposite direction.

Mr. Murray, an old rail fan at heart, with the somewhat confused but apparently pleased Mr. Ross, climbed into the six spot on the T and NVR. Off we were, down the tracks of the railway, up around to the back door of the property, and passed a switch where they had to move a hand car to let us go by. On, on, we sped, with Engineer Joe Lalonde at the wheel, and R. J. Macintosh, mill foreman as our guide.

At our specific invitation he stopped the engine, the 25-ton power "Six Spot" at the mill. These days all mills are the same to me, after seeing those west coast operations under the direction of that old Elgin Street alumnus, Paul Emerson Cooper, who is now president of Pacific Mills, Vancouver. Back on No. 6 I learned that it was one of four engines owned by the company. There are two larger types and one 70-ton operation which is their biggest. They also own a few box cars and a brace of cabooses. When the VIP's arrive, there is available "The Twenty-Seven" a private car which has berths, eating facilities and the luxuries of relaxation all rolled into one private car. Rail antiquarians would relish this for it is gas lighted and its other facilities are of a corresponding era.

The line started off from Thurso, about 1925 and extended a few miles north into the company forest limits. The Singer people ultimately went on through St. Andre Avelin, Ripon, Cheneville and after a pause, finally pushed through to within 16 miles of Nominique. Altogether the railway has the rather substantial total of 70 miles of line.

Scott Murray had his first ride in a diesel, Mr. Ross found a common friend through President Bourget of the Railway, and your old Geography Teacher rode his 155th railway. It was a worthwhile day.

12/06/1953 *Ottawa Citizen**Thurso and Nation Valley*

VIP's Ride Gas-Lighted Coaches On The T&NVR

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Thurso P. & P.

Thurso Pulp & Paper Co., is building a 200-ton kraft pulp mill at Thurso, Que., about 95 miles northwest of Montreal near the Ottawa River. The mill, which is expected to cost in the vicinity of \$17 million, is 70% owned by Singer Manufacturing- Co., a sewing machine manufacturer, and 30% owned by Perkins Goodwin Co., New York, pulp and paper distributors since 1846.

When completed, the project will comprise a power house, bleach plant, pulp dryer, storage room and be equipped with office as well as laboratory facilities. Detailed engineering and construction is being carried out by Foundation Co. of Canada. The plant is scheduled for completion in January of 1958.

Cutting rights on some 490,000 acres of woodland in the Thurso area, controlled by Singer, are considered sufficient to sustain the mill in perpetuity. The mill will also use sawmill waste and salvage from the Singer operation. Some freehold timber may also be purchased. Pulpwood will be transported to the mill by the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway, a wholly owned subsidiary of Singer Manufacturing. About 60% of bleached hardwood and 40% bleached softwood will be used in production. The mill will employ approximately 250 persons. Perkins Goodwin, an international pulp and paper marketing and management organization, will handle both domestic and export sales. President of Thurso Pulp & Paper Co., is P. B. Bourget, manager of the Singer Manufacturing Company (Thurso Works) and president of the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway Co.

All directors are representatives of either Singer or Perkins Goodwin.

Consulting engineer in charge of design and construction of the over-all project is E. A. Chariton, Montreal..

12/11/1957 *Ottawa Citizen*

Thurso and Nation Valley

Thurso

Pulp Mill Addition To Singer

By Fred Inglis Citizen Staff Writer

THURSO A new, \$17 million bleached krait pulp mill is being rushed to completion at this Quebec town, 30 miles east of Ottawa, with production expected to start early In January.

The new mill is designed to produce 200 tons of high-finish pulp daily, using both hardwood and softwood. It is located half a mile west of the Singer Manufacturing Company's sawmill, veneer end woodworking plant, which produces wood components for Singer sewing machines.

The plant is 70 percent owned by the Singer firm and 30 percent by Perkins-Goodwin Company of New York, who are sole distributors for the mill's products.

From Singer Limits

Wood for the plant will come by rail from Singer's half-million acre woodland limits, harvested for many years for saw and veneer logs, and now to yield pulp-wood as well.

Logs will come to the yard on the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway, a Singer subsidiary, and from farms by truck.

An unusual feature of the Thurso mill's construction is that the plant is connected both electrically and with steam lines, to the neighboring Singer plant. The Singer sawmill will supply both chips for pulp making and wood waste to be burned in the boiler and in return, Thurso Pulp and Paper will produce power and steam for both plants.

Employment For 225

The mill will provide work for about 225 people, working three shifts daily except Sunday.

Executive officers of the Thurso Pulp and Paper Company are: Paul B. Bourget, president; Stanford G. Blankinship, vice-president; Lawrence E. Hird, vice-present and treasurer; Hazen Hansard, secretary.

Mill manager and assistant to the president Is Lawrence M. Burns. Members of the supervisory staff are: C. C. Ripper-berger, superintendent; J. L. Aikman, chief engineer; William Mc-Keon. pulpwood supervisor, and R. B. Bourget, personnel manager.

Consulting engineers for the job, started in June, 1956, are E. A. Charlton Associates, Montreal, and the contracting firm is The Foundation Company of Canada.

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 Montpelier, 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 Montpelier, 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.

14/01/1959 *Ottawa Citizen**Thurso and Nation Valley*

I am told that the Thurso and North Nation Valley, which had beaver trouble along its right-of-way last fall, attempted to fool the beavers by siphoning out the water with a long hose. But the beavers were not to be fooled. They plugged up the hose with rocks and sticks, and went on ahead to build up their dam and flood the railway again.

15/02/1961 *Ottawa Citizen**Thurso and Nation Valley**Duhamel*

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.

25/07/1962 *Ottawa Citizen**Thurso and Nation Valley*

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

24/06/1963 *Ottawa Citizen**Thurso and Nation Valley*

Train struck by auto near Thurso

THURSO, Que. (Special)-Armand Serre, 29, of 272 Eigin St., Ottawa, escaped with minor injuries early Saturday when his car crashed into a logging train.

The accident occurred shortly after midnight 11 miles north of Thurso at a crossing of the Thurso-Nation Valley Railway Line. The crash derailed a car loaded with logs and damaged the Serre auto heavily.

Pierre Blais of Thurso, engineer on the train, said he gave the usual whistle warning signal as he approached the crossing. When he saw the approaching car lights, he blew three or four more warnings.

The driver was taken to St. Michael's Hospital in Buckingham, where x-rays showed he had suffered no serious injury in the crash.

Thurso Pulp Is Acquired By MacLaren

Barnet MacLaren, president of The James MacLaren Company Limited, Buckingham; Ralph P. Benn, president of Singer Company of Canada Ltd., and Louis Calder, Jr., president of the Perkins-Goodwin Company have reached agreement in principle on the purchase by MacLaren of Thurso Pulp and Paper Company.

Thurso operates a sulphate pulp mill producing 300 tons a day of bleached hardwood kraft in Thurso, Que. Singer owns 85 per cent of Thurso Pulp and Perkins-Goodwin, the sales agent for the mill's output, owns the remainder.

Included in the purchase are land and buildings in Thurso, the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway, 25 square miles of woodlands, and logging camps and other improvements on 660 square miles of Crown-grant timberlands north of Thurso.

Singer will continue to operate its furniture factory in Thurso. The price was not disclosed.

29/07/1977 *Ottawa Citizen*

Thurso and Nation Valley

Thurso

Thurso and nation Valley Railway equipment (above) at MacLaren mill. Gaetan Lafleur (right) runs railroad.

Thurso timber train longest log line

By Dan Karon Citizen staff writer

Gaetan Lafleur of Thurso, uncle of the famous Montreal Canadien hockey superstar, is more interested in trains than hockey.

And there is a good reason for it. He is in charge of running Canada's longest logging railway system, the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway, owned and operated by the James MacLaren pulp and paper company.

Anyone passing through Thurso, a small pulp and paper town on the north shore of the Ottawa River some 35 miles east of Hull, is unlikely to be aware of the railroad's existence.

A simple machine shop at the side of the company's huge pulp and paper complex serves as the T & NVR terminus.

"We don't need any fancy stations because we are strictly a logging operation," said Lafleur, who heads a 21-man railway staff.

But the modest staff is deceiving. The T & NVR consists of five diesel locomotives ranging from three 70-ton engines to a 25-ton switcher, plus 145 different type of wagons.

The most impressive statistic of the railway system is its length. It stretches 56.2 miles north from Thurso into the heart of the company's timber cutting territory in Labelle County.

During the summer months, at the height of the timber cutting season, Lafleur travels the whole route almost daily.

"It takes about five hours to make the return trip, depending on the length of the train," he said.

Normally, two big engines are used to pull between 35 and 50 wagons. "But when we get a huge load, we use all three big engines and up to 63 wagons," he said.

The power of two engines is necessary for normal runs because the route cuts through some rugged terrain with steep slopes and 255 curves, some of them as tight as 18 degrees.

Although the railway is not equipped to transport passengers, on several occasions rail fans are allowed to come along.

"The most popular time is in the fall when the leaves on the trees change color, making it a breathtaking experience," said a smiling Lafleur. It is his favorite season.

The railway system wasn't built overnight. It was started in 1925 by the Singer Manufacturing Company which built the pulp and paper mill in Thurso.

The initial spur was 23 miles long. After about 10 years of operation, the territory in the vicinity of the railway was denuded of usable timber and the first extension was built.

The last extension was completed in 1941, when the railway was extended about 15 miles north of Duhamel, a village north of Lac Simon.

"Building such a railway system would be impossible financially in this day and age," said Pierre Seguin, a MacLaren spokesman.

This, he said, is why his company is one of the few in Canada that still operates a railway.

"But we are fortunate in having it, because it eliminates having to truck the logs from our timber cutting rights, which is an expensive operation," he said.

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 it's 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 excited 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.