

Local Railway Items from Ottawa Papers - 1997

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New York Central

Cornwall

A New York Central "Monster" In Cornwall

New York Central's No. 1988 was photographed just north of the Cornwall Station on

Second Street West on March 27th, 1947. The large locomotive was known as a 2-8-2, which corresponds to its wheel configuration: 2 small front wheels, 8 large drive wheels, and 2 small rear wheels. This type of engine was bigger and more powerful than the 10-wheelers which were regularly used on the Ottawa-Cornwall-Helena, N. Y. run. On very rare occasions, one would arrive from Ottawa with a longer than usual freight, but the monster locomotive would not have been allowed to continue on to Helena, N. Y. as its tremendous weight exceeded the old Roosevelt Bridge's load limit.

The railway which once linked Cornwall and Ottawa had its roots to Moira, N.Y., where

construction of the Northern Adirondack Railroad began in 1883. At first, track was laid in a southerly direction, away from Cornwall and by 1889 it had reached Tupper Lake. In 1897, the company changed its name to the Ottawa & New York Railway and the line was extended northward from Moira to Helena, N.Y., then across the Racquette and St. Lawrence Rivers to Cornwall and on to Ottawa by way of Black River, Northfield, Newington, Finch, Chrysler, Berwick, St-Albert, Embrun and Russell. Trains between Cornwall and Ottawa started running in 1898, but cross-border service was delayed until 1900, due to the collapse of 2 of the 3 south channel trusses during construction on September 6th, 1898. The accident resulted in the deaths of 14 workers and remains the worst tragedy in Cornwall's history. The rebuilding of the wrecked spans nearly

bankrupted the company and to continue service, it was forced to hand over operations to the mighty New York Central Railroad. In June, 1908, a washout on the south bank of the Cornwall Canal caused the collapse of the swingspan, disrupting canal traffic for several weeks. The south portion of the line between Helena and Tupper Lake, N. Y., was abandoned in 1937. As for the northern half between Helena, N.Y. and Ottawa, passenger service continued until 1954. On February 15th, 1957, a southbound freight left the NYC Cornwall station and crossed the great bridges for the last time, putting an end to Cornwall's 60-year involvement with an American railroad. The south channel spans were dismantled in 1958, while the north channel cantilever and Cornwall Canal swingspan were removed in 1965. New York Central's little Racquette River Bridge (look to your right from Hwy 37 as you enter the HS. portion of Akwesasne) still carries a Conrail spur and is the last major reminder of the line which Cornwall residents once used to get to Tupper Lake, and from there to Utica, Buffalo and New York City.

By: Gary Villeneuve (submitted)

A little bit of Ottawa's history will be uprooted spike by spike within the next three years, but few tears are being shed.

Thirty-two kilometres of track between Kemptville and Ottawa, part of the first rail line into Bytown, built in 1854, are due to close by 2000, Michel Spénard, a spokesman for the St. Lawrence and Hudson Railway, the eastern division of CP Rail, said this week.

The link, which remains in operation today, is a throwback to another era, when Bytown was a boisterous lumber town.

The line was known as the Bytown and Prescott Railway at first, but changed to the Ottawa and Prescott Railway in 1855 when what would become the capital of Canada changed its name to Ottawa.

In 1867 its name changed to the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Railway and in 1882 it became a Canadian Pacific Railway branch line.

"I hate to see the lines being torn up, but the traffic will still be there, which is a good thing; it's just going to go a different route," said Earl Roberts, editor of Branchlines, the newsletter of the Bytown Railway Society. He thought the freight carried on the line, much of it newsprint, would get to its American markets by way of re-opened lines on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River.

Dave Knowles, the railway society's librarian, said, "You're sorry to see that heritage go, but let's face it, an hour in a car gets you to Prescott today. The railways have become long-distance carriers and that's what they do best."

Mr. Knowles said the railway's main purpose at the start was to move Ottawa Valley lumber to the U.S.

For a long time it was also the route for federal politicians coming to the capital from across the country and at its start it was the only rail route linking Ottawa to Montreal.

"If you wanted to go to Montreal from Ottawa by train, you took the Bytown and Prescott, went south to Prescott, took the ferry across to Ogdensburg, New York, took the Northern Railway of Vermont cross to Rouses Point, New York, and then grabbed the railway to Montreal.

"It's a shame that a line that existed for more than 140 years is being closed, but in the old days Ottawa and Prescott were more closely linked. The railways were the first reliable, all-weather transportation in this country," Mr. Knowles said.

The first train from Prescott arrived in Ottawa in December 1854, some three years after a group of Prescott merchants conceived of the idea of the railway. Eventually the company was financed mostly by Prescott and Ottawa merchants, including Thomas McKay, the lumber magnate whose home later became Rideau Hall, now the official residence of the Governor General.

Mr. McKay wanted, and got, the first railway terminal located near his lumber mills at Rideau Falls, a location now in the area of the Japanese Embassy on Sussex Drive.

Its owners frequently faced financial difficulties in the company's early days and at one point a near-riot occurred when a power struggle among shareholders led to doors being broken down and the police called in. Ottawa police chief Thomas Langrell ended up sitting on the company safe to stop it from being opened by unhappy shareholders.

"Mayor Henry I. Friel was also on the scene and, after the event, swore in special constables and called out the local militia volunteers for a week to keep the peace," railway historian Robert Elliot wrote in his manuscript for a coming book.

Snowstorms were also a frequent problem and in one instance in February 1869, the train that had left

Prescott at 8 a.m. on its regular three hour run to Ottawa became snowbound on the outskirts of the capital at 9 p.m. — 13 hours after it left Prescott — with 45 passengers onboard.

Still stuck at 3 a.m., according to Mr. Elliot, "a passenger from Toronto, named Bain walked the four or five miles into the Russell House hotel to tell of the train's troubles." He arrived at the hotel at 8 a.m. and by 9 a.m. teams of sleighs headed for the train with food and wine.

This century, according to Duncan du Fresne, a locomotive fireman on the line until 1957 and currently president of the Bytown Railway Society, one of the railway's problems was hitting cows that wandered onto the tracks.

"Any time we hit one, it was a prizewinning cow," he recalled wryly. "It was always a prize-winning cow. It was going to, or just had, won something at the Royal Winter Fair or whatever. Our claims agent used to say 'I wish you fellows would run over an ordinary one sometimes because every time you hit one the farmer claims it's a prize-winner and it's worth about 10 times what an ordinary one's worth.' We just never hit ordinary cows."

Today, the line passes through Osgoode and continues past Manotick Station, east of Macdonald-Cartier International Airport, across the Rideau Canal at Carleton University, through the tunnel under Dow's Lake and across Lemieux Island and the Prince of Wales Bridge to Hull.

Mr. Spénard said the proposed closing of the line is part of the railway's recently announced three-year plan to close or transfer a number of lines across the province. The company has until 2000 to make a final decision about each link. Osgoode Township Mayor Lloyd Cranston isn't waiting for the final decision. He wrote to Canadian Pacific Railway headquarters this week saying the Kemptville-Ottawa link "established a vital transportation/economic link between Ottawa/ Highway 416 and Prescott/ Highway 401." Mr. Cranston said that if the link is removed, rail traffic from Ottawa to the U.S. will have to be rerouted a much longer distance through Quebec. He said transportation costs would rise and this area's rail connections to the U.S. would be in jeopardy if Quebec separates. He was also afraid that if the line was closed, the land would be sold off and the region would lose an avenue to expand the Transitway or introduce commuter rail to Osgoode and other communities south of Ottawa.

On the other hand, Osgoode residents who blasted the railway last year because of the noise from its train whistles are less likely to feel any regret about the line's closing.