

THURSO AND NATION VALLEY

Laurentide Visits Canada's Longest Logging Road

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(Editor's note: The following is a description of the Laurentide Chapter's first fan trip. Although other similar trips have run in various places, we thought the Thurso and Nation Valley of sufficient interest (indeed, the editor had never heard of it until he saw the chapter's trip announcement) to warrant more space.

In this regard, we might mention that the Canadian Pacific has been reported as contemplating the abandonment of part of its present main Montreal-Ottawa line on the south side of the Ottawa River and routing all trains over the line described, via Thurso and Montebello. There is far more industry on the north side of the river. This would mean that CPR transcontinental trains would have to back into Ottawa Union Station, but Canadian National's transcontinentals do this now).

To the stranger, Canada is, at times, rather paradoxical. It is the largest country in the western hemisphere, and the least populated. It has the largest land mass in North America, and the smallest population to fit that land mass.

Not the least of these paradoxes is the location of Canada's longest logging railway within less than fifty miles of Ottawa, its capital city. This is as much as to say that the Louisiana Long Leaf Lumber Company's railway ought to be located around Baltimore, Maryland.

And as though that weren't enough, nobody, not even a railroad enthusiast, should pay any particular attention to it.

In August of 1963, at least one aspect of the paradox was changed. The Laurentide Chapter of N.R.H.S. in Montreal decided to arrange an excursion over this unique line, the Thurso & Nation Valley Railway. There were several considerations which made this project a little doubtful. First of all, the T. & N. V. had never carried a passenger, in the real sense, that is. Of course, the railway transported lumbermen and company officials up the line to the lumber limits (and back), but as this was all on "company business", no formal tariffs had been established. In addition, the railway just didn't have any passenger cars, so that a group of people travelling up the line would have to ride in some other vehicle.

An exchange of correspondence with Mr. Fernand Lafleur, Personnel Manager of the Singer Manufacturing Company of Thurso, P. Q., resulted in agreement, and a day was fixed for the trip. The party was to contact Mr. Gaetan Lafleur, Superintendent of the T. & N. V., on arrival at Thurso. Mr. Fernand Lafleur reminded Laurentide Chapter that the railway possessed no passenger equipment, so it was agreed that the party would be hauled in one or more gondola cars, which happened to be in the railway yard at the time.



Paul McGee

Laurentide Chapter's special on the Thurso and Nation Valley Railway before departure from Thurso for Camp 27, 56 miles to the north. Former Canadian Pacific business car 27 brings up the rear.

Accordingly, circulars were sent out announcing the trip, and emphasizing that "rain or shine" the party would travel in the gon all the way up—and all the way back, too.

It is quite a long way from Montreal to Thurso. This stage of the trip presented no problem, once Walter Doran of Laurentide Chapter had contacted Mr. Jack Beatty of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Almost before you could say "flying switch", Mr. Beatty had arranged for a CPR RDC-2 Dayliner to be available as a "Special" on the day of the trip. All this at a very reasonable price, with a very attractive schedule thrown in. This vehicle solved the problem of transportation to and from Thurso.

In view of the passenger accommodation on the T. & N. V., it was decided to limit the trip to 40 persons, and it wasn't very long before all the tickets were sold. And so, on the Saturday morning in August, the "faithful" foregathered at Windsor Station, Montreal, at gate number 9.

While the day left something to be desired weatherwise, the condition of CPR RDC-2 9114 did not. The Passenger Department of the CPR had thoughtfully supplied two large red and white signs, identifying the trip as being run by the Laurentide Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society, from Montreal to Thurso (and back). The Chapter members were pretty proud. Their first excursion since the formation of the Chapter, and a sell-out!

The outward trip from Montreal was brisk, through splashes of sunshine and showers of rain. With a party ticket, no "punching" was necessary. The conductor, none other than our fellow-member Walter Doran, accepted the party ticket. Stops at Westmount, Montreal West, and Park Avenue, collected the rest of the participants. A brisk run to Ste. Therese followed, where we stopped briefly to register. From there on, it was non-stop along the beautiful north shore of the Ottawa River, in the

direction of Ottawa, Canada's capital city.

Special arrangements had been made with the CPR to have the engineman on the RDC-2 pull up through the station at Thurso, to the road crossing leading to the mills of the Singer Manufacturing Company. This would allow debarkation and loading on the Thurso & Nation Valley train on firm ground, which was very necessary in view of the previous two-day rain. Everyone was looking anxiously to see what sort of equipment would be on the T. & N. V. Most of us were just plain curious, but no one was too enthusiastic about riding the hundred and twenty odd miles in the gon in the rain.

The train on the T. & N. V. was headed east in their yard, so the first thing identified was a regular 70 ton diesel-electric locomotive, number 7. This was followed by two CPR gondola cars. So far, everything was according to plan. What wasn't according to plan, and could not have been imagined even in our wildest dreams, was the last vehicle of the train. This was T. & N. V. business car number 27, and it was a little gem! Built in 1909 by the CPR at Farnham, Quebec, it seemed to have stepped right out of the past and into the present. The tiny business car was sold to the Thurso & Nation Valley in 1929 by the CPR, and as far as is known, is the only 35-foot CPR business car in existence. With a fresh coat of paint of a red, somewhere between box-car and Pennsy, it was the very thing to bring up the rear of the "Special".

The day had assumed the character of a wet autumn morning in Scotland and consequently, most of the passengers made for number 27. The interior of the car was spotless, and, to make things much more cheerful, there was a fire in the coal stove. Without any further delay, most of the passengers staked out accommodation in the business car. A few of the "die-hards" climbed into the first gondola. After greetings from Mr. Gaetan Lafleur, the Superintendent, and his father Mr. Diamond Lafleur, and with two tremendous "blats" from the

diesel, the special moved slowly out of the yard, headed east.

From the beginning, it was obvious that the day was just not going to be one for riding gondola cars. As soon as Mr. Gaetan Lafleur saw that, arrangements were made very rapidly to leave one gondola behind. Some extra manoeuvring behind the mill soon dispensed with one gon'—and attached nine empty pulp-racks to the rear of number 27. Then briskly out of the yard, across the level crossing and so clankety-clank up the side-hill, heading east from the town.

Thurso town is built on the mile-wide river plain of the Ottawa River. Travel to the north of the town involves an immediate climb up the escarpment — about 100 feet rise in elevation. Thus, after proceeding along the hill for about a mile, we turned sharply northward and through a cut in the hill, under a wooden overbridge. In the grey of the wet day, our train presented a somewhat unorthodox, and very interesting appearance. On the draw-bar of diesel number 7 was the aforementioned gondola car and the diminutive business car number 27. Following these two cars were nine spindly log-racks, each composed of two four-wheel trucks surmounted by a flat platform. A retaining rail ran down each side of the flat platform to prevent the loaded logs from rolling, during their trip to the mill. After the first climb, we were soon rattling along at a brisk 30 miles per hour, with the exhaust of the diesel sweeping back into the single gondola car. Some of the "die-hards" were enjoying themselves.

The train clattered through the Laurentian foothills, in a cool drizzle of rain, at a remarkably constant speed. We went around hills, through cuts, across high fills, past farmyards, and through the countryside. Fresh ballast was evident for two or three miles. On the left, a village, St. Sixte. No station. Another village, Valency. No station. No signals either. No train order board. Ripon village, at Mile 15, boasted a shelter for track motor cars. It had (until recently) the line's only train order board, and it was probably more



Paul McGee

Above, Thurso and Nation Valley No. 7, a 70-ton GE product, switches gravel cars at Singer, on the return trip. No. 7 is restricted to operations south of Singer. GE 44-tonner No. 9, below, with the Laurentide Special at Camp 27, the end of the line. The detrucked box car at left forms part of the station and freight shed.



ornamental than useful. Reason? Paradox. The line's trains are dispatched by radio and all locomotives are radio-equipped!

After much clattering and bumping—the roadbed is very good but the gondola's springs were terrible—we arrived at the geographic location called Singer. There weren't enough buildings to call it a hamlet, a village or a town. Whistling for the “yard” (one passing siding and one spur line off into the woods), there seemed to be quite a number of “objects” on the line ahead. We ground to a halt and several things happened all at once. Mr. Gaetan Lafleur climbed down from No. 7's cab, followed by his father. The nine skinny, empty pulp-racks came off the rear end, number 7 came off the front end and onto the siding. Number 9, a 44-tonner, coupled up to our remaining gon and number 27, the 35-foot business car, and we were “out of town” with about 2 and $\frac{3}{4}$ blats on the diesel horn.

Number 7, the 70-tonner, doesn't work north of Singer, but is reserved for the heavy traffic up the hill. By the time number 9 had us out of sight, number 7 had disappeared south with a train of single and double-truck side-dump gravel cars. Visitors didn't make the slightest bit of difference—it was “business as usual”, even on this wet Saturday morning.

When the excitement abated, we found out that Singer used to be the important point on the T. & N. V. It was from this place that the original line ran up the Savanne Valley, following the Riviere Laroche and Riviere Savanne, to the townships of Hartwell, Lathbury and Papineau. All this in 1926. After the Savanne Valley was logged out, the thirteen-mile line was relocated.

The line north from Singer was constructed after the abandonment of the Savanne branch. The new line grew from a five-mile spur in the mid-thirties to a thirty-mile long present-day line, leaving the fields and farms, we climbed steadily into the more heavily wooded country, following the course of Green Creek. As the valley narrowed, the creek and the railroad shared the rocky

canyon. For the first time, evidences of beaver dams could be seen, and all at once, we passed the first of a series of curious warning markers. This sign consisted of a diamond-shaped metal board, surmounted by a small rectangular metal sign. At this particular point, the top legend read “Danger” and the diamond board read “Beaver Dams”. The danger in these beaver dams, we were told, is not solely in the fact that they back up the water and undermine the roadbed. Frequently, these dams suddenly give way due to the weight of accumulated water and cause minor cloud-burst conditions down the line. More than once, this has resulted in sections of the track disappearing completely in less than half an hour, and without warning.

The stream petered out, and the railroad was in sole possession of the narrow defile. We squeezed through a very deep cut and reached the summit of the line, slightly more than 900 feet above sea level, or 700 feet above our starting point at Thurso. This was at mile 30.6, which meant that the remaining 26 miles would be up and down, but mostly down. Clattering out of the rocky pass, the railroad was joined almost immediately by a frothy little river, Iroquois Creek, flowing North. In a welter of spray, the river ducked under the railroad and immediately fell some forty to fifty feet, while the track rolled off down the side of the valley on a 3% grade. Our train dropped 100 feet in about two miles to the second crossing of Iroquois Creek. We passed two “Danger—Beaver Dam” signs on the way. Just the other side of the creek, we came into an opening in the woods, and there, on a wye track, sat two former CPR wooden passenger cars and a derelict caboose, also ex-CPR. Then, clickety-clack into the “station” (there wasn't any) at Duhamel some 37 miles from and 550 feet above Thurso.

Duhamel boasted a two-track engine house. It was empty. We didn't stop, but kept up the “thirty-per” pace up the line. If we had had any serious doubts about covering 112.4 miles up and back between 10:30 a.m., and 4:30 p.m., they had long since disappeared. Number 9

really ate up the miles. Near the shore of Lake Gagnon, we passed long, high piles of logs, waiting shipment to the mill at Thurso. Not the kind of logs for making plywood or furniture, that was obvious. But the pulp mill of the Thurso Pulp & Paper Company just gobbles them up, and that's what keeps the T. & N. V. working so hard all during the snow-free season. Oh yes, they keep the railroad open in the winter — why not? It is difficult, sometimes impossible, but they still do it. The men in the woods, busily cutting the trees for next year's pulp wood, have to be supplied, and there just aren't any roads leading south to Thurso.

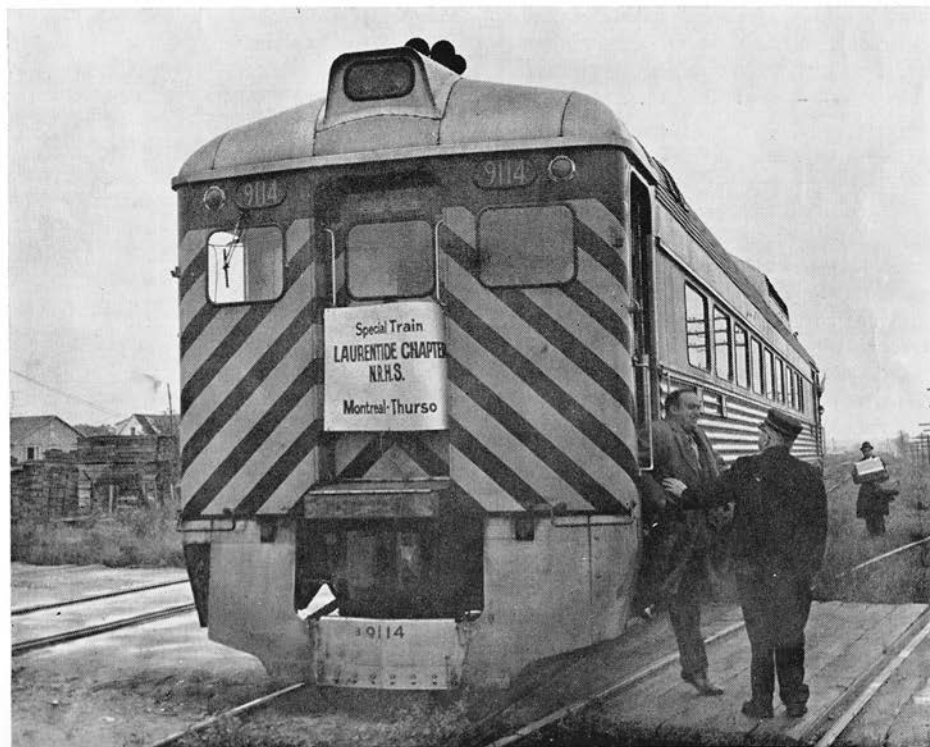
Just when everyone had resigned themselves to riding through the drizzle for another 30 or so miles, there was another echoing blat from the diesel, and

we arrived at mileage 56.2, otherwise known as Camp 27, the end of the line. It was one of the most uninspiring arrivals that you ever saw. Everything just stopped. All the crew left the engine—(there were only two of them to leave). One of them was the Superintendent. Mr. Jobin of the T. & N. V. had been riding on the front platform of No. 27 explaining to some of the hardier passengers the points of interest along the line. When the train stopped, he jumped off.

The drizzle slackened momentarily, and the passengers, having nothing better to do, followed the crew. In addition to the assorted fuel pumps, work sheds and unloading ramps along the railroad, there were about ten very neat bunk houses, at right-angles to and about fifty feet from the railway. No

The RDC at Thurso. Canadian Railroad Historical Association vice-president Omer Lavallee leaves the train as Conductor Walter Doran, Laurentide Chapter member, stands by.

Paul McGee



one seemed to be at home. Mr. Gaetan tried one or two doors, and then delivered a spurt of instructions to one of the other fellows. After three or four minutes, the door to this particular bunk-house was opened, and wonder of wonders, it turned out to be the camp dining room, where cups of steaming coffee accompanied by big, thick sugar cookies awaited all comers. What a lovely feast in the warm dining hall, complete with sugar cookies!

And all this at the end of 56.2 miles of well-maintained 56 to 80 pound rail, which we had negotiated in the remarkable time of just under three hours with one stop and two "hesitations" included!

Five sugar cookies and two "mugs" of coffee later, number 9 had twiddled up the line a bit to a wye and wye'd the engine and gon, run back down the passing track, and hooked number 27 onto the rear of the assembly. Several ringing (wet) blats on the horn, and Extra 9 South was ready to depart. Most of the passengers were reluctant to leave. Another logging spur meandered off northward in a most interesting manner, for two or three miles, we were told. "Just a spur line, that's all", they said, but there wasn't a person who wouldn't have jumped at the chance to ride those three extra, unknown miles.

This unique railroad had been full of surprises all day. Besides beaver in the ponds along the right-of-way, heron and crane and wild ducks flew up from the lake edges. A doe and two fawns scrambled up a ridge as the train surprised them, feeding in a secluded meadow. And business car number 27, teetering and perambulating along on the rear, gently swaying from side to side with a row of faces at every window. Inside, the large lounge had evolved from the small salon and bedroom. A stove for heating and cooking, a table for eating, a pantry for storage, and cupboards everywhere. Not the least important, a real operating flush toilet. Soon the fire in the stove got too hot, so front and back doors of 27 were opened, and the breeze blew through with a vengeance!

Mr. Lafleur was quite agreeable to stopping at the wye where we had seen the derelict caboose and CPR passenger cars. Stopping at the south switch, we backed our train into the wye and then everyone got off and went exploring. In a few minutes, a toot or two on the diesel horn loaded everyone on board again. Several dozen curves and multitude of clickety-clacks later, we arrived at another mysterious spur at mile 33, where an ex-CPR caboose, now T. & N. V., sat in the woods, with a comfortable wisp of wood smoke floating from its chimney. Didn't seem to be anyone at home! We coupled up to it, and our now remarkable three-car train trundled off down through the woods. In the fading daylight, we climbed up Iroquois Creek valley to the rocky canyon at Summit, and then coasted down the other side, at the mile-eating "30 per". Round the curves, along Green Creek, past the beaver dams, and in another minute, we blasted for Duhamel, and the siding to the gravel pit.

When the train stopped, the loudest sound, other than the grumble of the diesel, was the dripping of the rain from the trees. Nearly everybody got off, but nobody knew what was supposed to happen next. Number 9 uncoupled, and went away south out of sight down the track. After a long, long time, spent mostly in trying to see as much of the neighbouring countryside as possible, while keeping the engineless train within running distance, we heard a faint squawk of a diesel horn. This was the signal for the timid ones to run back and get on the train, for who knows, on such a mysterious railroad, maybe trains run without engines and the forest is haunted by sounding diesel horns.

But we were not to be enchanted, for soon the stolid number 7 appeared on the scene, pushing a now-empty string of side-dump gravel cars. Having deposited the gravel cars on the siding to the pit, amid much clanking and banging, 7 grumbled back onto our train, and following a short staccato conversation on the engine radio, we pulled down the main line. Everybody waved and shouted at the engineer of number

9, which was discovered in the siding with a string of pulp-racks.

Rumbling down the main line, it seemed as though the whole railroad had a fixation on the "30 per". Maybe that is the first rule in the book — "no train shall proceed at a speed greater than thirty miles per hour" — signed by the PRESIDENT or maybe the SUPERINTENDENT, or some powerful and respected authority. Nevertheless, we jangled past many loaded pulp-racks, traversed the part of the line where number 7 had earlier dumped ballast (gravel) from the gravel cars, blew our horn at every one of the several dozen level crossings on the line, scared two pastures full of young cattle, nearly ran over three sheep who didn't believe in trains, and finally, with bell ringing and horn blatting, we returned to the town of Thurso.

But did we go back to the yard of the T. & N. V. near the station? No. As if to add the last "fillip" to the day's outing, we ran engine-first into the yard behind the furniture mill, where all the logging racks, work equipment, snow plows and the engine house were located. We very nearly lost every passenger. We did lose the Superintendent for good. He stayed at the engine-house. The rest of us stayed on the train, which then reversed around the wye and backed into the yard adjacent to the CPR RDC-2. Conductor Doran welcomed us aboard. He had had to stay with the RDC-2 while we went up the line. We all felt sorry that he couldn't have come with us.

Actually, we got back to Thurso a little late, so our goodbyes to the T. & N. V. were very brief. We were all very grateful to the T. & N. V. people for giving us such a good time. Even though the weather was wretched and picture-taking was almost a waste of time, everyone agreed that they had had a wonderful day. We all remembered the coffee at Camp 27!

Conductor Doran hustled us all aboard for the trip back to Montreal. More than 70 miles to go, and a little less than 2 hours to do it in, and much of the running through suburban

traffic. No one was ambitious enough to time the run back, but we made an excellent trip. Stop for a meet and registering at Ste. Therese, and then, like an arrow, back to Montreal. Stops at Park Avenue, Montreal West, Westmount and then Windsor Station, promptly at 6:30 p.m. And the day was over, when most of us were feeling it had just started.

And now that it was all over, what had we seen? The longest logging railroad east of the Rockies — probably in the whole of Canada. Chartered in 1925, built and partially opened in 1926. Once the owner of three steam engines, two geared and one 2-6-2 with a tender behind. (McMillan & Bloedel at Nanaimo Lakes on Vancouver Island has the twin!) 30 miles long, this railway was, in 1939. 56.2 miles long in 1941, to Camp 27. And there are a whole series of spurs, branches, disused sidings and gravel pits. And a park, too, beside a nameless lake, where the members of the Singer Long-Service Club go once a year for a picnic! And hundreds and hundreds of lakes and rivers, and fish who love to be caught and lakes that long for swimmers and rivers that are lonely for canoes.

T. & N. V. number 1 was probably a Climax, scrapped in the late 1920's. Number 2 a 2-6-2 (with that tender) sold to the Montreal Coke & Manufacturing Company and number 3 was a Shay, scrapped at Thurso. The rest are diesel-electrics of various makes. One was lost in a washout near Duhamel, caused by those confounded beavers, and one was sold to the Canada & Gulf Terminal Railway at Mont Joli, Quebec. The rest are still running.

Time may be running out for the railway, although annual operating figures say otherwise. The country traversed by the line is largely provincial government forest. The Singer Manufacturing Company leases the lumber rights. Already there are several fish and game clubs in this vast area, which control many hundreds of lakes. Representations are being made to open up these government lands to allow the

(Continued on Page 25)

THURSO (Continued)

building of summer cottages on the lakes. Indeed, in some sections, this had already begun. Roads will be required for access to the cottages.

It may be that some day the logs for the pulp will come out of the woods on trucks, but that day isn't tomorrow. Or the day after. And in the meantime, Mr. Gaetan Lafleur and the Thurso & Nation Valley Railway are doing a very workmanlike job of doing what they're supposed to do — supplying pulp to the pulp mill. Long may they continue — at a steady "30 per".
