

Railway to the Western Laurentians: colonization, connecting villages, logging, mining, skiing and cottages

By David Page

In the late 1800s, Quebec was experiencing an outflow of young people seeking and finding paid work in the mills of the American New England states. At the same time much of the land within a 100 mile radius north of Montreal lay undeveloped. A number of "colonization" schemes were put in place by the Provincial government, acting through the agency of the ubiquitous Catholic Church. A key factor in colonization was the availability of reliable transportation, up until then non-existent.

Canadian Pacific was an early player in this region, having built or acquired lines north and south of St. Jerome, and from Ste. Therese to Hull in the 1870s. The hinterland north and west of these corridors was still without rail transportation, despite having been sporadically settled and farmed a good 50 miles up the various feeder valleys. Thus, in 1890, the Provincial government issued a charter to the Montfort Colonization Railway to build a 21-mile line from Shawbridge (now Prevost), westward to Morin Flats (now Morin Heights), and Montfort, terminating at Sixteen Island Lake (now Lac des Seize Iles). Because of its similarity in function to another such line further west to Lake Temiscamingue, the new Montfort line was built to an economical 3 foot gauge. The grades (up to 4%) and sharp curves as-built were part of the line over its entire 67-year lifespan.

The new line opened March 8, 1895. By this time the village of Sixteen Island Lake was already a logging and lumber centre, with a sawmill in the village and boats bringing logs up the 4 mile long lake, and by sleigh on the ice road in winter. Summer cottages followed soon after and are now the mainstay of the village economy along the old right-of-way, now Highway 364.

Two years later the railway management obtained powers to extend the line another 10 miles to Huberdeau. At this time the decision was made to convert to standard gauge, enabling direct interchange with Canadian Pacific at Montfort Jct. This was done by December 1897, ending the short life of narrow gauge in the Laurentians.

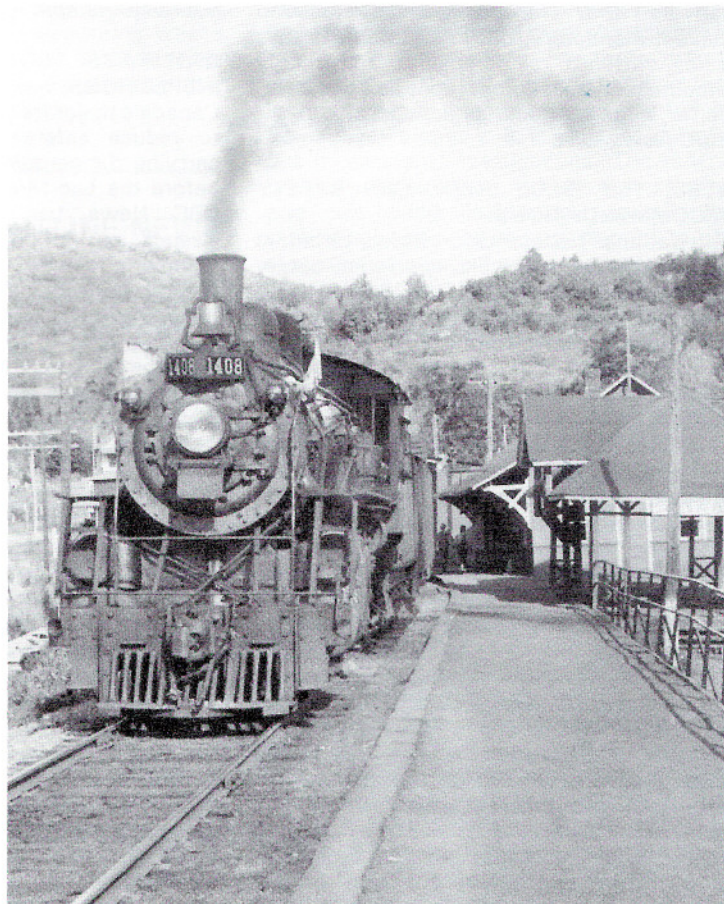
In 1900 the by-then Montfort & Gatineau Colonization Railway was bought by the Great Northern Railway of Canada. This latter railway, in turn, became the Canadian Northern Quebec Railway (CNQ) six years later. It was the CNQ that "filled" in the gap and completed the 13 mile section between St. Jerome and St. Sauveur in 1907. The old interchange with Canadian Pacific north of Shawbridge was closed, and it was now possible to travel all the way from Montreal to Huberdeau on the CNQ/CNoR. In 1918 the whole line became a Canadian National Railway property.

The little line was extended two more times: once, in 1916, 8.5 miles to a china clay deposit at Kasil, and the final time in 1926 another 3 miles to Lac Remi, the terminus of the line for good. It was now 91 miles from Montreal.

While lumber, supplies, farm produce and cottager traffic grew and thrived, a new activity was being born in the Laurentians: skiing, both Alpine(downhill) and cross-country. Ski traffic on the CN and CPR lines filled weekend trains. On the CN line, stations at St. Sauveur, Christieville and Morin Heights were the most popular. Trains carrying hundreds of people called for double-headed motive power to tackle the grades.

This was a good offset to summer recreational demand when cottagers, kids, dogs, boats and beer filled trains that often took four hours from Montreal. In all, this little line fulfilled its original mandate very well.

With the advent of good (although not paved) roads more or less paralleling the CN line, rail traffic dropped off dramatically. The last straw was a road connection to Sixteen Island Lake from St.



Canadian National 4-6-0 1408 and its upbound Extra freight train from Montreal take a breather at Sixteen Island Lake (Quebec) station, after a curvy, hilly slog from St. Sauveur over the past 18 miles, circa 1948. Until a road provided direct access to Montreal in 1960, passenger train service on this line was the main means for cottagers to get "up north" in this part of the Laurentians. The Lake did not have (and still does not have) any road around its shore, meaning that everyone had to switch to their boat to get to the cottage and "open up". For some that was a rowboat on a wet Friday night, while others had their motorboat brought up to the Village in the afternoon. It was a great place even for us post-train cottagers, and still is. In a few minutes this little engine will tackle a short section of 4%+ grade just west of the village, and then descend at 1.5% to Weir and points west. The line and the station were closed in 1962. Photographer unknown.

Sauveur and Morin Heights, circa 1960. With pressure on to close marginal branches and, in this case, to build the Laurentian Autoroute, the CN line "up north" was abandoned. The last train ran on May 27, 1962. I wish I could have heard the engine whistle from our cottage on Sixteen Island Lake, but we were 10 years too late.

What can be seen now?: some bridge remains along the Laurentian Autoroute between St. Jerome and St. Sauveur, the wide curves on Highway 364 through St. Sauveur, on to Morin Heights ... you're on the old R-O-W here ... the station sign in Weir, the station itself in Arundel, nicely restored and being used as the post office, and walking trails either way from Sixteen Island Lake and other places. The sounds and smells have gone.

David Page, former cottager at 16 Island Lake, with quality check by James A. Brown. Sourced from several articles by Omer S.A. Lavallée.



Esso map, 1961.

Read Down — De haut en bas

MONTREAL — HUBERDEAU — LAC REMI

Read Up — De bas en haut

Note
93
Fri.
only
Ven.
seul.

P.M.
5.20
5.29
5.40

Note
91
Mo., Tu.
We., Th.
Fri.
Lu., Ma.
Me., Je.
Ven.

P.M.
2.40
2.48
3.00

95
Sat.
only
Sam.
seul.

P.M.
1.10
1.19
1.35

Note
97
Sat.
only
Sam.
seul.

P.M.
12.10
12.19
12.32

Note
99
Sat. &
Sun.
Sam. &
Dim.

A.M.
8.00
8.09
8.22

Mil.

TABLE 94

Eastern Time
Heure de l'Est

Altitude

Note
90
Mon.
only
Lun.
seul.

A.M.
8.00
8.50
7.38

92
Ex.
Sun. &
Mon.
Dim. &
Lun.
ex.

A.M.
10.05
9.55
9.45

Note
94
Sat. &
Sun.
Sam. &
Dim.

P.M.
7.00
6.50
6.43

Note
98
Sun.
only
Dim.
seul.

P.M.
8.00
7.50
7.43

Note
100
Sun.
only
Dim.
seul.

P.M.
9.20
9.10
9.03

Also runs Wednesday June 30th.

6.08
6.38
6.50
6.57
7.02
7.08
7.18
7.25
7.25
7.37
7.40
7.45
7.52
7.58
7.78
8.00

Will not run on Fridays after September 3rd.

Circulera aussi le mercredi, 30 juin.

No marche pas les vendredis après le 3 septembre.

June 19th to Sept. 4th. incl.

19 July au 4 sept. incl.

also runs July 1st & September 6th.

cc8.42

8.53

9.04

9.28

9.40

9.48

9.52

10.00

10.00

10.08

10.20

10.20

10.31

10.36

10.43

10.46

10.57

10.59

11.11

11.30

11.43

11.48

11.50

12.07

12.13

12.20

12.30

12.40

12.50

13.00

13.10

13.20

13.30

13.40

13.50

14.00

14.10

14.20

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

P.M.

Canadian National Railways public timetable, June 20, 1948. □