



Confederation Trail *The Prince Edward Island Railway*

It is difficult to imagine the energy surrounding the building and operation of a railroad across all of Prince Edward Island, first the steam trains and then the diesels. Few children today have seen a train up close and a very few have ever traveled on one. Our parents certainly remember them but trains were much more important to our grandparents, who depended upon them.

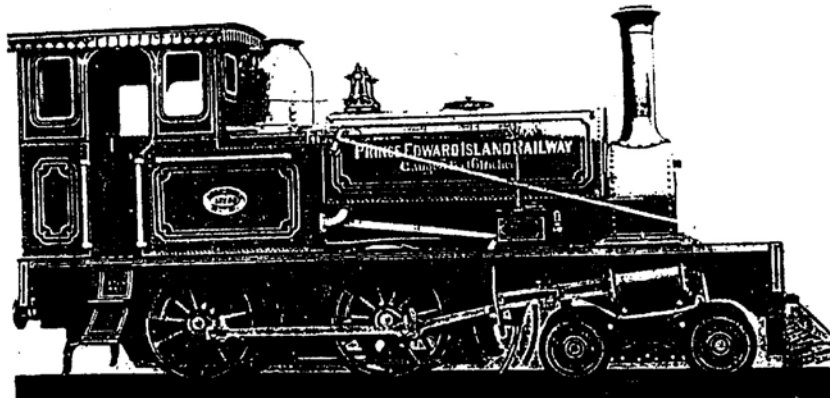
So why were trains important to PEI? What did they do for the province? Why didn't we just use the roads? What happened to them?

About 125 years ago when the first railway was being built, there were very few roads and certainly no good roads. They did not have the bulldozers or graders or trucks used to build them, and pavement had not been invented. Everyone traveled by boat, or in dry seasons, by horse and wagon along narrow winding paths through the woods. So trains were a very exciting invention. They traveled very fast compared to a horse and wagon. In those days they went perhaps 30 kilometres per hour. They made it possible to take farm products to the big market building in Charlottetown and to shop in the stores in all the communities and return home the same day. That was a huge change in the way people lived. Before that the farms were isolated. They saw a few people at church every week and three or four times per year they might make a trip to the city or to a larger community to get things they could not make for themselves.

In 1875 the new and noisy steam engines were very welcome to settlers all over the Island. The railway was developed from Tignish in the west end to Souris in the east end with branches into Georgetown and Charlottetown. It was a very friendly railway, with stops every few kilometres for every rural community it passed near. There were two kinds of stations on the line, regular scheduled stops where the train stopped every day, and "flag" stops where it only stopped if the station master put a signal flag out by the track to indicate that there was someone or something to pick up. The engineers became well-known and everyone waved as the train went by at all of the road crossings.

Train schedules changed the entire schedule of rural life. Everyone waited for the trains to arrive to pick up or deliver passengers, to get their mail and to send farm products or animals to market. If you were on a busy line in the centre of the province, there could be eight different trains per day. Some would be passenger trains with perhaps a mail car while others would be freight trains. The first steam engines were very small and the steam must have terrified the horses that everyone used for local transportation. Within 5 years they were replaced by heavier engines which could handle our snow.

*One of the first engines on the
Prince Edward Island Railway*



By early in the 20th century, steam engines were larger still and the railway had been extended to Elmira in the eastern end of the Island, to Montague, to Murray Harbour, and to Cape Traverse on the south shore. We had what was called a “narrow-gauge” railway. That meant that the space between the two rails was smaller than the wider standard gauge being built in the rest of Canada. No-one had ever thought that trains would cross the Northumberland Strait, but in 1917, the first ice-breaking ferry came to Borden, and it could carry railway cars. So first they moved the end of that branch from Cape Traverse to Borden and then they added a third rail so that wider railcars could be used here. There were some very funny-looking trains for a few years with narrow and wide cars being pulled by the same engine. The engines did not usually cross on the ferry, they just backed the cars aboard and another engine in Tormentine pulled them off. By 1930, all of the changes were complete and all of the railcars, including the engines, were standard gauge, and the third rail was gone. Because they widened the railbed at that time, many of the old concrete culverts still seen today along the trail have dates from the 1920s. Every one they replaced had a date impressed into both ends to show which year it was built. Some of the other structures still seen along the trail are interesting also. There are about 25 bridges still in use. The one across the Brudenell River is the highest and the one over the Morell is the longest. Morell was also what was called a “swing” bridge. One section could be turned on large gears to allow boats to go up the river. It was last used in the 1950s but if you look over the side, you can still see the gears on the round pier near the west end of the bridge. One of these existed in Charlottetown too but it was removed also in the 1950s. In Montague, there is the remains of an old turntable which was used to turn the engines around. An engine would pull railcars into Montague and be turned around on the turntable to pull them out again. The foundation for that turntable is now being used as a trail-side daytime theatre. At other “ends” of the line like Tignish, Murray Harbour and Elmira, the engine was turned on a “Y”, a short piece of track perpendicular to the main line. The “Y” is still in place at Elmira.

In 1948, Prince Edward Island became the first province in Canada to change completely to diesel engines. All of the old steam engines were sold. This was also a time when highway improvements were beginning and it was modern roads that spelled the end of the railroad. Passenger services were dropped by the 1970s. Mail was no longer carried by train by that time either. Finally in late 1989 all trains were removed from the Island. It is much more convenient to hop in your own car when you need to go somewhere than to wait for the next train, but that is what our grandfathers had to do.

In 1994, after some study, the province purchased the entire rail corridor from Canadian National Railways and a new idea began to take shape. Walking and cycling have become very popular activities and we know that exercise is good for our health. So it seems very natural that the railway corridor which connected communities across the province for 114 years be converted to walking and cycling trails. Tourists come here for the scenery and the fresh air and they like active vacations where they can see the province and meet Islanders. Perhaps the trail idea is not completely new because it still connects our rural communities and, like the trains, provides a place where people can meet. The trail was connected across the Island in July 2000 and many people are attempting to walk or cycle from tip-to-tip, between Tignish to Elmira.

Islanders and visitors can enjoy some remnants of the railway days. The Elmira Railway Museum operates in the restored station building, offering an interesting collection of pictures and items from the railway. Rails, switches and a railway mail car are located on the site. The Kensington Station has been restored as a National Historic Site and is one of two stone stations (the other one is in Alberton) that can be visited. The last diesel engine on PEI is also on display in Kensington. Other old stations have been restored for various uses and can be seen in Charlottetown, Montague, Summerside and O’Leary. A caboose was traditionally the last car on the train where the train staff ate or slept or did their paperwork and one can be seen in Wellington, PEI. Also, two small tank cars are located beside the trail in the Sherwood Industrial Park in Charlottetown.