

# When Worlds Collide

## Railfans and Post Card\* Collectors

by Ralph Beaumont

\* Spelled variously as one or two words, the earliest form of 'Post Card' is used throughout this article.

Railfans seem to have specific aspects of our hobby that most attract their interest. Some concentrate on modelling, while others focus more on the real thing. Some strictly follow diesels and the modern day scene, while others like me have a bent toward steam. With a passion for steam there are always the trips to see preserved steam in action, but also a curiosity for times past when steam was king – making historic photos a prime area of interest.

For someone interested in broader railway history, there is more than just the study of railway locomotives. In fact, I find three-quarter views of engines to be quite sterile. I like the trains in the context of their geography and especially the infrastructure that made the railways run. As a kid in the early 1960s, I mourned the dismantling of roundhouses, engine sheds, turntables and water tanks. This was followed in the early 1970s by the systematic demise of the rural railway station; if not actually torn down, they were often moved off-site to serve a non-railway purpose.

It is in this context that I have always enjoyed the search for historical railway photos. They are a way to literally picture the past. Images can answer many questions for historians, provide a basis for on-the-ground research, and be a boon to the many modellers who strive to create a tribute to the glorious steam era.

When researching old photos, two primary sources previously have been used in railfan-oriented histories. One is museums and archives, for their preservation of local photographic collections, which usually include railway views. The other is the private collections of railfan photographers, especially those in the 1950s who recorded the waning days of steam quite successfully.

Included in this mix is the railway post card, and many historical books and publications include post card views from local museums

and private collections. It wasn't until relatively recently however, with the meeting of two new friends, that the resource of post cards was brought more into focus for me. One friend is a railfan who collects post cards, the other a post card collector with only a passing interest in railways. Aha – the two worlds collide!

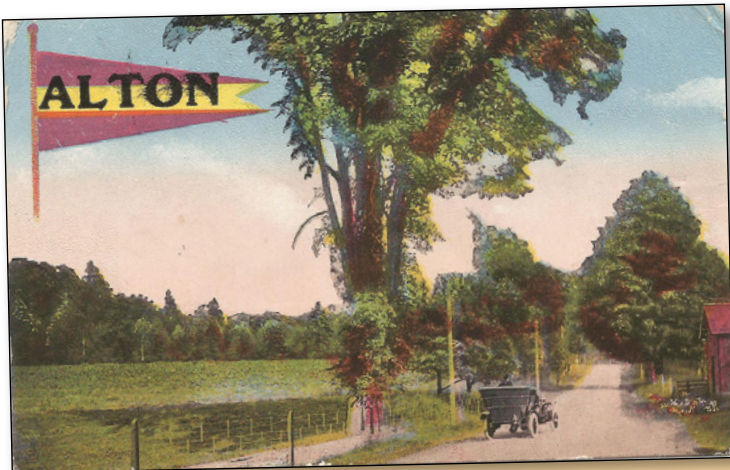
### COMMUNICATION BEFORE POST CARDS

Since I'm writing about post cards as an historical resource, it may be a good idea to provide some background that post card collectors will be familiar with but railway historians only vaguely aware of – and it all has to do with communication.

For verbal communication, other than face-to-face conversation, the telephone has now been a staple of households for several generations. For written communication, fax machines have been around a long time, and we take the even more immediate mediums of texting and email for granted.

Most readers will know that in the 1870s there was only one primary means of long distance communication. This was the postal letter, where a message written on paper was put into an addressed envelope, a stamp applied and then hand delivered by the Post Office to its destination. Telegrams were of course faster, especially over long distances, but they were primarily used for business and only occasionally by the general public, for special occasions or circumstances.

Postal service was vastly superior than today, especially within individual communities, and it became quite proficient in the use of railways to deliver mail over long distances. I won't touch on the Railway Post Office (RPO) service here – the collecting of RPO franks is a hobby in itself. As letters were relatively cumbersome to compose, expensive to mail and did not make optimum use of the postal system, a quicker and less expensive medium was therefore proposed – the post card.



**Generic Post Cards (Above)**

This non-descript scene was apparently used on many Edwardian post cards throughout southern Ontario. It is a stock image with the name of the town simply overprinted to coincide with the seller's community. Unless there is a unique stamp, cancellation or message on the back, the card and its image are of little historical value.

Author's Collection



**Photo Manipulated Post Cards (Above Right)**

Scores of Edwardian scenes and thousands of post cards were printed that depicted Ontario's tiny Huntsville & Lake of Bays Railway. At just over one mile in length, it was undoubtedly the most photographed railway on a 'picture per mile' basis. This view is an example of a highly manipulated image, where a box car and three passenger cars are seen negotiating the curve by Osborne's Lake. But wait – the line only had two operational passenger cars at any one time! The third has been manually added, debunking the saying that a photograph never lies.

The H&LOB was much visited by railfan photographers in the post-World War II years, right up to its abandonment in 1959. The era between the wars is well documented in the albums of local cottagers and full-time residents, and the earlier Edwardian post card views complete the line's historical record. Jeffery Young, the owner of this fairly common card and friend Peter Foley are researching a detailed and updated illustrated history of the H&LOB.



### THREE PHASES OF CANADIAN POST CARD DEVELOPMENT

There were three phases of post card development in Canada, beginning with the first cards issued in June 1871. During the first phase, production of post cards was a monopoly of the Post Office; the card was of standard size bearing a pre-printed stamp and cost all of one cent. Designed for quick correspondence, the front (stamp side) was used exclusively for the address, and the blank reverse side for the message. At one third the cost of a letter and without the cumbersome paper and envelope, it was an instant success. Canada soon developed a reciprocal arrangement with the USA that enabled cards to be mailed across the border with the addition of a second stamp. In 1878, Canada joined the Universal Postal Union, which extended international post card delivery to many other countries.

The second phase of the post card story began on January 1, 1895. Permission was granted for private (non-Post Office) cards to be produced. This was a good move for the Post Office because it no longer had to print the cards – just sell the stamps. Cards were still required to have only the address on a plain front and the message on the back, but scope-creep soon developed as private issuers began stretching the rules and including illustrations.

This led to the third phase – the full blown illustrated card. In the style we are familiar with today, cards with a divided front were officially permitted as of December 18, 1903. The front could now have the address and stamp on the right half and the message on the left, which freed up the entire reverse for a full-size illustration. While railfans may think of the photograph as the most important part of a card and hence its front, the Post Office felt otherwise – the address and stamp were the most important aspect and therefore on the front, the photo being relegated to the back.

With these developments the flood gates opened and the heyday of Edwardian-era post card production began.



#### Mislabelled Post Cards

This card is captioned as Inglewood, Ontario, but even though there was an attempt to obliterate the name board wording, railfans of the area will know it's a shot of the Grand Trunk Railway's Newmarket station. The only plausible reason for the deception is that the photographer received a post card order from an Inglewood retailer. Having no Inglewood station shots on hand, he substituted this one and took great pains to label it accordingly. One wonders what the Inglewood merchant thought when he opened his box of cards, as it was certainly not an image his customers would recognize.

Jeri Danyleyko Collection

### CANADIAN RAILWAYS AND THE EDWARDIAN POST CARD CRAZE

It is amazing how this simple development led to a huge uptick in the use of the mails. If we think of it in modern day terms, it was quite a marketing success and the use of post cards skyrocketed. From only 27,000 cards mailed in 1900, there were 41 million mailed in 1908 and a staggering 60 million in 1913.

This occurred for two reasons. For practical purposes, the post card had become a part of daily life, especially with the Post Office offering twice daily delivery in non-rural areas. In the time before telephones, there were many examples of senders using the 'morning post' to ask a question and expecting a reply that same afternoon. A sample exchange might read "Would you like to come over for supper tonight?" with the sender knowing they'd get a response by return 'afternoon post' confirming or declining the engagement.

The second factor was the rise of formal post card collecting, primarily for the illustrations. Illustrations could be corporate advertising, patriotic messages or seasonally appropriate greetings, with Valentine's Day and Christmas being common themes. Humorous sketch or cartoon cards were produced and, of course, risqué cards – at least by Edwardian standards – were in vogue. By far the most prolific were photo-based post cards, depicting every subject imaginable

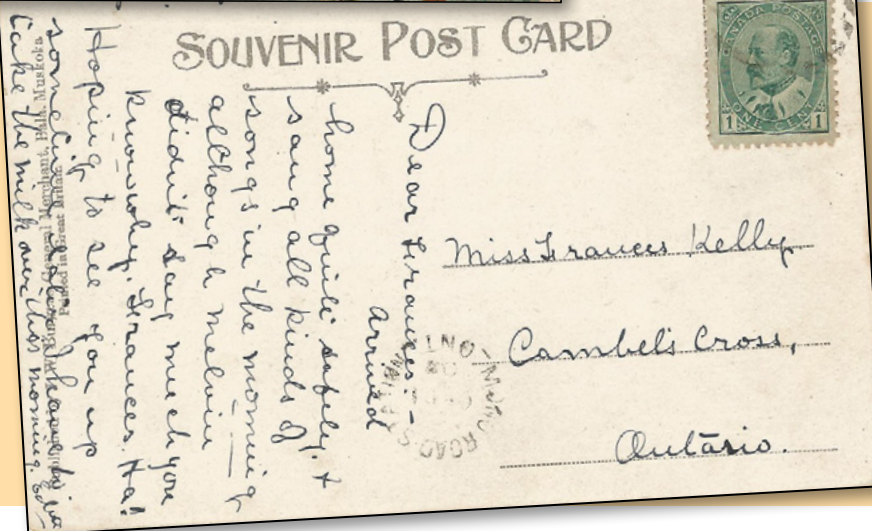
and, as we will see, railways were a prime favourite.



#### Above: Colourised Post Cards

This card began as a 'real photo' scene of Bala, Ontario that was then colourized and printed in quantity for the lucrative Muskoka tourism market. Even with the added colour, it retains enough detail to be worthwhile for historical research. Its subject matter is timely, based on the October, 1908 cancellation date. The new CPR line between Toronto and Sudbury had just been opened from Bolton Junction to Bala the previous year. Bala itself had a 'winter' station right in town as well as this photo's 'summer station' that allowed easy access to the Muskoka Lakes steamship wharf at the lower right.

Author's Collection



#### Left: The Revolutionary Split Front Card

The Canadian Post Office originally decreed that post cards have only the address and stamp on the front with a written message on the reverse. No illustrations were allowed. In a revolutionary change, the split-front card had the address, stamp and message space all on one side of the card. This freed up the entire reverse for illustrative use, enabling picture post cards as we know them today.

This is the front or address and stamp side of the Bala CPR summer station card. Note that it was likely mailed from Muskoka but franked on delivery at Mono Road Station, located on the CPR's old Toronto Grey & Bruce 'Horseshoe Curve' line just north of Toronto. This was presumably the closest post office to the card's end destination, in the nearby hamlet of Campbell's Cross.

Author's Collection



Some of the lithographed photo cards were produced by large companies distributing in Canada, such as Valentines and Sons. Although headquartered in Scotland, it produced 20,000 different Canadian scenes, and most were printed by the thousands. The really unique cards were produced by small concerns, however, where the local photography studio or drug store got in on the post card craze. Featuring town scenes and sold only locally in very small quantities, these are the 'real photo' cards that are particularly rare and most collectable today.

Of course, railways were a big part of almost every Canadian community in the Edwardian era and it is therefore logical that the local railway would be well documented on post cards. Remembering that personal photography was still beyond the means of most people, these scenes present an important time capsule of railroading in this period.

The most prominent railway subjects were undoubtedly stations. Not only were the large ones in urban centres recorded, but it seems that almost every small community station throughout Canada appeared in a post card view. Picturesque scenes along the right-of-way were also featured, and less often railway yards, bridges and facilities. Especially prized are scenes of local railway 'events' such as wrecks, special excursion trains and visiting dignitaries – often produced in very limited quantity compared to the more common station views.

The use of cards as a daily means of communication came to a quick end by World War I. Not only did the war effort result in the reduction of time and ability to send cards, but the telephone was becoming a more common feature of Canadian households, making the use of the mail for immediate communication obsolete. However, post cards are still with us today, having seen a resurgence in the 1950s for tourist use.

## EDWARDIAN POST CARD COLLECTING – YESTERDAY AND TODAY

From the early 1900s, post card collecting became quite the national craze. Amateur collectors of the time created post card exchanges and traded cards with correspondents across the country. Some went to extreme lengths to fuel their hobby, writing into the wee hours of the night to dozens of correspondents in almost chain letter fashion, to increase the size of their collection. Special post card albums were created and proudly displayed in the homes of avid collectors.

All this frenzy also died after World War I, and it was not until the late-1960s that collecting post cards – not the modern colour cards but the old historical ones – once again came into vogue. Up until the mid-1970s, collectors of historical cards could amass sizeable collections at a cost of only pennies per card. The author partnered with post card collector Allan Anderson in 1978 to produce a book entitled *Postcard Memories of Muskoka* illustrated exclusively with post cards. Allan's collection numbered a staggering 35,000 cards, yet that was quite modest compared to some. He purchased many through antique stores and garage sales and many others by acquiring whole collections from the families of original collectors.

Acquiring original Edwardian family collections is becoming increasingly rare, if not downright impossible. As more and more people entered the hobby, the cost of cards began to increase and prices rose as competition for rare cards increased. Suddenly, the large collections of early collectors reached considerable value, and involved major investment to acquire.

As in our railfan world, post card clubs were formed and formal networks developed. Where some railfans concentrate on one railway versus another, post card collectors also began to specialise their collections. Many wanted shots – any shots – of specific towns or regions while others focused exclusively on subjects like churches or schools,



### Above: "Real Photo" Cards

*Real photo post cards are definitely the most valuable for railfans. Their high quality of photographic reproduction without manipulation presents fertile ground for historical research.*

*This shot is thought to be extremely rare, but readers can let us know if they have seen the picture previously. Although tattered, the main image is intact and depicts the Central Ontario Railway's Maynooth station under construction. The COR arrived in the summer of 1907, which accurately dates this scene. Maynooth's station is unique in being the first built entirely of concrete in Ontario, making this shot of construction all the more important. The station survives today in abandoned condition, although it is understood that plans are under way for its preservation.*

*Sean Murphy Collection*

### Below: A "Real Photo" Card to Complement Photo at Top

*Continuing the Maynooth theme, post card collector Sean Murphy has found no less than three cards depicting the early days of Maynooth as a railway centre. This shot is labelled CNR, dating it soon after the Canadian Northern acquired the COR in 1911. The photo turned out a little grainy in its reproduction, but it is still an interesting view taken when the station was a bustling part of the local community.*

*Sean Murphy Collection*



private homes or street scenes, steam ships or canals. As can be imagined, many specifically targeted railway scenes.

Also in common with our hobby, many post card collecting pioneers are advancing in age and fewer young people are taking up the hobby. Unlike the decline of the antique market, the result is not an immediate drop in the post card market, but there has been a general softening. Unfortunately for railway historians, one aspect of the market that has maintained its value is post cards of railway subjects, which are still highly prized and specifically collected.

Some post card collectors remain old-school and prefer to attend swap meets, sales and auctions where cards can be viewed in person. Others buy and sell mostly online, especially through mediums such as eBay, opening up the market literally to a whole world of potential buyers. In late November 2015, more than 33,000 Canadian post



cards, including many of railway interest, were listed for sale on eBay alone. And then there are specialist post card selling sites like playle.com, with 73,000 current listings for Canadian cards, of which 16,400 are pre-1920. Among them are glorious 'real photo' cards of Goderich CPR 'first train' (\$99) and Listowel CPR with a 4-4-0 out front (\$61). The identical Listowel scene is listed twice on eBay, lithographed in colour (\$21) and printed black & white (\$26), but both are inferior in quality to the 'real photo' card which, in turn, may have a bearing on the asking price.

With the rise in individual values, actually owning some cards is not always practical. In a September eBay sale, 13 bidders drove the sale of a card of the Grand Trunk station at Justice, Manitoba to \$348, while at a private sale, another small town Canadian station card went for more than \$1,000. Prices of more than \$100 can be easily reached for other rare cards, although many are in the more modest range of just above or below \$10. Fortunately, in this day of digitalization, some collectors (but obviously not all) are willing to share their images for historical research and publication use. This is great for railfans since the images are usually more prized than the actual cards.

### WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN HISTORICAL POST CARDS

From both talking with collectors and personal observation of Edwardian railway cards, I have concluded that there are essentially three categories of historical photo post cards.

One category, which is of little use for historical research, comes in three general types. The first is the stock scene in which a standard view is simply overprinted with a different town name depending on where it was sold. These are completely untrustworthy as to content. The second is the photo-manipulated card. In an age before Photo-shop, details were crudely altered right on the negative, rendering the card useless for serious research. The third is the mislabelled card, sometimes easily detectable, but often not. These cards may purport to show a specific railway or location, but only a knowledgeable historian will recognize that it's not correct.

A second category is the colourized card. Sometimes hand coloured in small quantities but most often lithographed (machine printed) by the larger manufacturers, these cards usually retain their historical detail. Be careful however – they may also have had their content altered, and the colours are unlikely to be those of the original subject – the red roof of the station or the green coaches of the train may not be true to the prototype.

A third category is the one I consider to be the best – the 'real photo' card, usually sharp, high quality scenes with no manipulation. Unlike a printed page photograph, which uses 'dots' in the printing process, 'real photo' cards are produced as a continuous tone image on photographic card stock. As such, they can be magnified many times to reveal many interesting details for the historical researcher.

### RAILWAY POST CARDS TODAY

Edwardian post cards definitely serve a purpose for today's Canadian railway history researcher. We have all seen publications that include the post card holdings of museums and railfans, and some of these scenes are common and well known. Hopefully, in the future the rarest views of all will come from the post card collecting fraternity, as this non-traditional resource is realized for the potential it presents. We can be of help to post card collectors too. As I type this, the website of the Toronto Postcard Club features a station photo whose location it is trying to identify, something the railfan community could help with in return.

With this article I'm including illustrations to give examples of post card types. Hopefully in future Branchline editions, and through the good graces of post card collector friends, I'll pass along other shots that some of you may have seen before, but maybe not - and hopefully they will be both rare and new to most readers.

I'd like to draw your attention to a great site that exclusively features Canadian railway-oriented post cards, especially stations. It is the



#### Above: Another Rare Find

Many photos were taken of the Toronto & York Radial Railway, but this one shows the station and three-track car barn in Newmarket, a location not commonly photographed. Car 64 sits just outside the barn while another waits its turn on the main line. The T&YRR reached Newmarket in 1899 and was extended toward Lake Simcoe and Sutton by 1907. It was taken over by the Ontario Hydro Electric Commission in 1922 and by the Toronto Transit Commission in 1927, which continued the service until 1930. Juice fans can benefit from old photo cards just as much as steam railfans, especially in urban scenes where street cars are often included.

Sean Murphy Collection

#### Below: Post Cards Can Yield Unusual Surprises

My recent book, Heckman's Canadian Pacific, contains a view of this bridge, made significant as Joseph Heckman's first ever photo as CPR corporate photographer. The bridge spanned the Grand Trunk's former Toronto & Nipissing narrow gauge line to Cobocok, in a location north of Toronto that was still open farm land in the early 1900s. Although noteworthy, the bridge is hardly spectacular and so it is surprising that it rated a commercial post card a decade after Heckman's original view.

Sean Murphy Collection



long-term collection of a combined railfan and post card collector, the true coming together of the two worlds. The website URL is [www.canada-rail.com](http://www.canada-rail.com), and it contains more than 1,500 railway post card images from right across the country as well as brief histories of the railways themselves. I hope you will relish paging through this fascinating collection.

So enjoy the accompanying post card images. Hopefully they'll be of interest, and I'm sure Branchline will welcome the submission of your own unique post card photos for publication. ■

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