The Ferrophiliac Column *March 1991*

Conducted by Just A. Ferronut

Since the ides of March is fast approaching, I had better convert some of your mail into our column for the month. I must apologize for being slow in handling some mail this year but hopefully, I will soon get caught up.

There has been mention about the Atherley Narrows area just east of Orillia in several of the recent Newsletters. Well Norbert Krommer of Lindsay writes that he and Ross Gray took advantage of winter and the barren trees to get a better look at the abandoned rights-of-way in the area. Norbert also mentioned the advantage of light snow in helping to highlight the abandoned rail lines. To add to that, drifted snow along old road beds, etc. make them very visible from the air in the springtime. One thing I did miss on our December 1990 map is the alignment of the old TS&MJ (Northern) bridge across the narrows. It was located between the two railway lines shown on the map and swung northward on the east side of the narrows. Our friends from Lindsay write that the centre pier of the old TS&MJ swing span is still plainly there. Also the stumps of the piling for the east approach trestle are still visible. Not bad since it has been 102 years since the superstructure of this bridge was demolished. Norbert closed with a couple of comments and questions relating to the Orillia station area, but I since I want to cover that subject separately, I am leaving it for now.

Denis Taylor of Cobourg, writes on another subject that has drawn considerable response, telegraphy. He has sent along an article he has prepared from sources on the subject and which he titles Some Telegraph History. "In the last few issues there have been discussions on station locations and some of the odd office signals that were assigned.

No railway station is really complete without its telegraph bay and the shelf of ticking relays. The telegraph equipment began to disappear some time before the stations vanished, but in earlier days it was the link to the outside world for most towns.

In the early 1800s, when scientists were doing research into the properties of electricity and magnetism another group of experiments were being carried out in both Europe and the USA to apply these discoveries to a method of long distance communication.

Cooke and Wheatstone in England and Morse in the US approached this problem from different directions.

By 1837, Samuel Morse had reached a point where a crude device of coded type set in a rule which, when drawn along a sender, would send signals along a wire. At the other end a register made a record of the received signals. At this point Morse med Alfred Vail whose father owned the Speedwell Iron Works. Vail improved the apparatus for Morse and a patent was obtained on October 6, 1837.

Within a few weeks Vail had suggested changing the type rule to a key and had improved the recording register. In March 1838, Morse and Vail formed a partnership by which Vail would supply money and service for a share in the profits from the invention. With the advent of the key, Vail devised a telegraph code and a new patent was granted in June 1840.

The first successful public demonstration of telegraphic communication was made in 1844 between Baltimore and Washington, DC Telegraph lines soon became common and operators found that they could read the messages by listening to the click of either the relay or register. Recording registers became superfluous and were abandoned, to be replaced by another Vail innovation, the sounder. The telegraph system was now complete with battery, line, key, relay and sounder.

This system found favour in Europe, but because of the accented letters, the code was changed in 1851 to the Continental Code and removed the spaced letters C,O,R,Y,Z, and added the additional letters they required.

Meanwhile, in Canada, the first telegraph line was opened between Toronto and Hamilton on December 19, 1846, and between Toronto and Montreal in August 1847. Early telegraph lines usually followed country roads, but in 1852, the GTR saw the value of the telegraph to the railway and agreed to lines along their rights-of-way.

Early telegraph keys came in all shapes and sizes and many operators made their own and carried them from job to job, just as they did with their Autoplex and Vibroplex bugs many years later.

As the wires spread across the country the volume of traffic increased, especially on press and commercial circuits. The strain on the circuits was relieved somewhat by the introduction of automatic, duplex and quadruplex telegraphy, but operators on busy routes worked harder than ever.

An operator, transmitting 15,000 words in eight hours, is depressing the key about 180,000 times and releasing the key at the same rate, with the result that operators became victims of "glass arm", a telegrapher's paralysis.

To relieve this problem, Horace G. Martin, in 1903, received a patent for a semi-automatic key, followed in 1904 by a patent for the original Vibroplex. The sixth Vibroplex key, offered by the H. G. Martin Company in 1923, had a choice of black or nickel plated base and was named the Lightning Bug, probably the best known of all "bugs".

For an operator to "copy" code means to transcribe it or write it down. An operator with good penmanship might reach 25 to 30 words per minute, but above that it requires proficiency in touch typing on a "mill" or upper case typewriter. T.R. McElroy set the record, in 1939, at 75.2 words per minute.

To-day the clicking of the sounder has faded away and the instruments of telegraphy can be found only in museums or hands of ardent collectors.

Now to change to a totally different subject, Sean Robitaille forwarded a letter about a trip he had made last August to Simcoe, Ontario. Amongst Sean comments, he writes of the amount of rail this small town has, although most is unused. Well what would Sean have to say if he had made his trip 50 or so years ago. Simcoe's first railway was the Canada Air Line Railway built as a subsidiary of Great Western Railway. This line was an attempt to compete with the Canada Southern and opened from Fort Erie to Glencoe on December 15, 1873. The second line into Simcoe came two years later on October 7, 1875 when the Port Dover and Lake Huron Railway opened its line from Port Dover to Woodstock. The third railway arrived in Simcoe on June 30, 1889 with the opening of the South Norfolk Railway line from Port Rowan. These three railways all became part of the Grand Trunk Railway and later the CNR.

The fourth railway to arrive did not come until June 2, 1916, when the CPR controlled Lake Erie & Northern reached Simcoe. This electric line had planned on considerable freight traffic to and from the lake freighters but with the Grand Trunk owning most of the lake front at Port Dover they had to settle on catering to the beach goers.

Sean tells us of the small prefabricated metal building located on the south side of the CN Cayuga Subdivision a few hundred feet west of Highway # 24 used by CN presently as a base for the M.O.W. employees. This site, CN Mile 73.23 Cayuga Subdivision is the location of the original Canada Air Line Simcoe station and is one of at least four station sites in Simcoe.

The first Air Line station was officially opened with great fanfare by the Earl of Dufferin on August 28, 1875. This two storey, multi-gabled frame structure lasted until October 27, 1904 when it burned. A new structure was started at once, but it had a close call when a fire started by a spark from a passing locomotive set the roof on fire in late August 1905. This depot lasted until July 1930, when again a passing locomotive deposited a spark that his time totally gutted the building.

Going west 1.1 miles on the Air Line (CN Cayuga Subdivision), one comes to Simcoe Junction. The GTR 1907 B&B Inventory shows a single storey 14' x 18' frame telegraph office at this location.

The second station on the GTR/CNR side was the Simcoe station located just south of Union Street, east of Queen Street. This site is near the current end of steel of the Simcoe Spur, details of the present trackage in the area is shown on the Simcoe map. This station site is 1.75 miles south of Simcoe Junction. The first station at this location was a 21' x 63' single storey frame one built in 1876. Since this depot was a Union station, is this where the name Union Street comes from? A second question is did this station last to the end or was there a second generation station at this location? The GTR 1907 B&B Inventory show 53 foot turntable that was built in 1888 near Victoria Street and the junction with the Port Rowan line. This GTR record also shows a station platform located on the Port Dover line at the Exhibition (Fair) Grounds. This platform was constructed in 1896 and was maintained by the Town.

My information on the LE&N stations is not as good as for the GTR system. But this late comer to Simcoe had two stations in Simcoe. One called Simcoe North was north of the LE&N underpass of the Air Line. The second LE&N depot was .7 miles to the south on the west side of the track near Wilson Avenue and was a single storey structure combined with an electric sub-station.

Simcoe in the early part of the century saw trains in all directions. There would be the local switching and through freights (don't forget the Wabash). You could expect an average of two GTR passenger trains a day on each of the branches to the south. The Airline in 1908 saw three GTR passengers and four Wabash Express trains each way every day. The 1921 LE&N Timetable in John Mills book Traction on the Grand lists ten trains each way through Simcoe. No wonder the north south lines had grade separations with the Airline.

Well as will be seen from Sean's report things were a little quieter in 1990. Sean started in the north east part of town at CN mile 73 Cayuga Subdivision at the recently removed junction with the LE&N. This LE&N junction was 43.1 miles from Galt on their Simcoe Subdivision. The last main use of the LE&N line into Simcoe was to make connection with CN's Cayuga Subdivision to give the TH&B (CP Rail) access to the steel traffic from Nanticoke. The arrangement started in the early 1970's when Stelco was constructing their new plant at Nanticoke was for CN to move the traffic for 60% of the time and CP for 40%. While it may have been fair, it didn't make much money for either. The Brantford mud slide solved that problem but spelt the death knell for the LE&N. The removal has left a roadbed of limestone ballast and various railway signs that were of no value to the contractor. The switch at the connection with CN, while spiked is still in place and equipped with a CP switchstand. Sean then started walking westward over the dilapidated half-deck plate girder bridge where the LE&N used to pass under the Airline. Sitting on a back track near the CN station (M.O.W. building) was CN brush cutter 689-14. The rusty condition of all the tracks except the main line indicated the low level of rail traffic these days. The main user presently is the Norfolk Southern and their two trains.

Sean continues, "I hiked on west along the 115 pound mainline to Simcoe Junction. The vines growing amongst the limestone ballast and split ties in this area seems to be attempting to reclaim this rail line for mother nature. At Simcoe Junction, mile 74.3, the Simcoe spur swings off southward and I followed along it. The Simcoe Spur is a little used remnant of the Port Dover & Lake Huron Railway. At the connection between the Cayuga connecting track & the PD&LH a surprise awaited me. When the PD&LH was abandoned north of the connecting track, they left the track intact! It is in very poor shape; 80 pound rail on very rotten ties. Actually, the Simcoe spur isn't in much better shape by the time you pass the Highway # 3 crossing. In the stretch between Highway # 3 and Queen Street, there was signs of a passing siding along the north side, now ripped out. Halfway between the crossings is a small wood pile trestle, still in quite good shape over a creek."

"The spur ends in a maze of trackage between the Ball Packaged Product plant and the Nabisco foods plant. (This is the site of the former PD&LH SIMCOE station) – JAF). At the time of my visit, it looked as if the siding hadn't been used in years (a bit of an overstatement – back in 1987, these sidings used to be filled with cars). The spur ends just short of Kars Street. Prior to 1987, the spur continued south towards Port Dover, see map. That's what is left in Simcoe today."

Mike Lindsay and Rick Mannen have both sent along an item from the Hamilton Spectator about a building in Hamilton. The question around Hamilton is whether part of the Shakespeare Steak House at the corner of Ferguson Avenue and Main Street is in fact the Hamilton & Lake Erie Railway station. Apparently many old patrons in the days when this restaurant opened spoke of this as the old H&LE station. All agree it is about the right location. This rail line extended from Hamilton up the escarpment and southward to Jarvis and Port Dover. I have had a quick look at this building and based on the GTR 1907 B&B Inventory, my vote would be no. The GTR refers to the location of this station as at Hamilton, King Street, the next block north, but that is not my reason, my reason is size. The old part of this restaurant is a single storey about 25 feet x 50 feet. The GTR go on to list three buildings in this general location, all single storey. The station, waiting room is listed as being a brick building on a stone foundation 13' x 68'-6". There was a flagman's and store room, again a brick building 18' x 27'. However, the third building listed was the baggage room & closet. This building was built 18 years after the other two. This building was a 24' x 48' brick building on a stone foundation with a slate roof. This is very close to what I paced out, so without more knowledge would get my vote. As they say 'stay tuned.'

One closing item that was brought to my attention. Don't forget this is 1991 and when ordering books be sure to add both an amount for taxes as well as mailing and handling. This is for times I mention a publication but forget all the add ons. See you next month.