

Kingdom by the Sea

A Short History of the Anticosti Railway

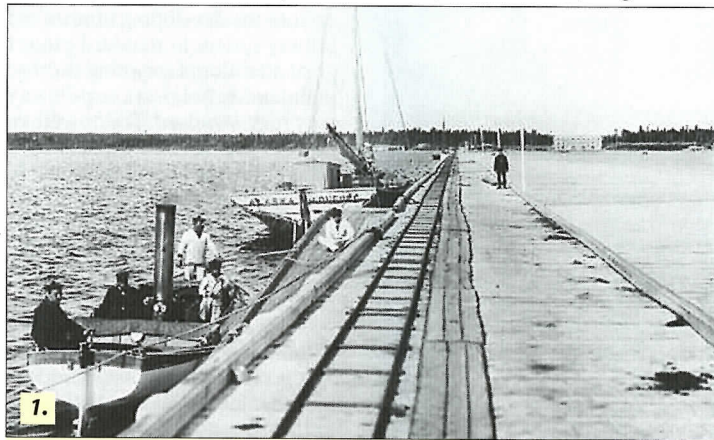
by Shawn MacWha

Anticosti Island is a large, sparsely inhabited landmass at the outlet of the St. Lawrence River. With an area of approximately 8,000 square kilometres, it is almost one and a half times the size of Prince Edward Island yet has a population of only about 250 people. For almost 300 years, between 1680 and 1974, it was one of the largest privately owned islands in the world, changing hands several times through a succession of wealthy landowners and large corporations. One of the more influential of its many owners over the years was Henri Menier, a Parisian millionaire often referred to as “the chocolate king” due to his family’s prosperous confectionary empire in Europe [1]. He purchased the island in December 1895 from the bankrupt Island of Anticosti Company Ltd. of London, England for the modest price of \$160,000 (\$3,700,000 today) and almost immediately set about establishing what amounted to a French colony in Québec [2].

Menier laid down the first railway on Anticosti in the spring of 1896. It was a short, horse-drawn Decauville narrow gauge (23-1/2 inch) track that ran along a newly constructed 300-foot-long pier and into the little commu-

nity of Baie Ste. Claire [3]. With branch lines leading to a farm, the local warehouse and a sawmill, the line stretched for about a mile, although Menier envisioned a day when the railway would span the entire 138-mile (222-kilometre) length of the island [4]. True to his ambition, within

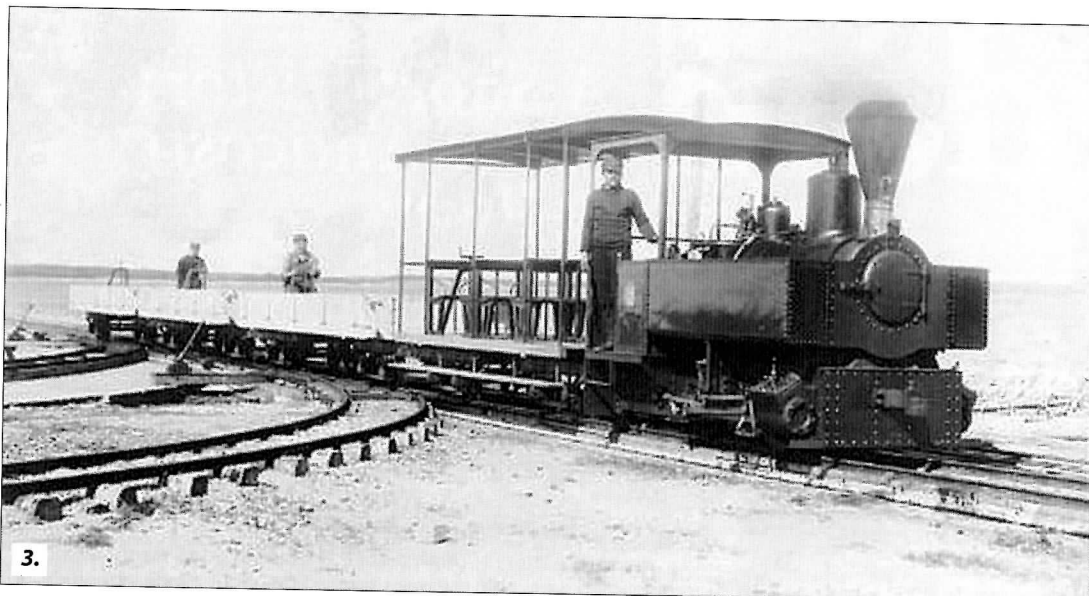
less than a year of its establishment Menier had already begun to extend it to Baie Ellis (later renamed to Baie Gamache), 13 kilometres to the southeast [5]. The Decauville railway was, incidentally, an ingenious portable railway system developed in France at the end of the 19th century [6]. Comprised of sections of light steel rails between four and sixteen feet in length and connected by flat steel sleepers the tracks were assembled somewhat like a model railroad. The system could be configured for temporary or permanent installation, and a variety of pre-made curves, turntables, switches, and crossings were available to suit the needs of customers [7]. First manufactured in 1875 and used extensively in industrial, agricultural, and military applications Decauville railways remained in relatively common use until the 1950s. A few still exist as



1. Decauville tracks on pier at Port Joliet, Baie Ellis, circa 1905, photographer unknown, from p. 20 of a photo album of Henri Menier. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 0005222719.

2. Horse-drawn Decauville carts, Baie Ellis, 1900. Collection Lucien Commetant, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, <https://www.comettant.com/photographies/ile-anticosti-1900-1905/>, photo 71, accessed 2022 03 11. Also available on Wikicommons.





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3. The original 1904 Decauville 0-4-0 locomotive at Baie Ellis, Anticosti. Collection Lucien Commetant, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, <https://www.commetant.com/photographies/ile-anticosti-1900-1905/>, photo 139, accessed 2022 03 11. Also available on Wikicommons.

tourist trains to this day.

Unfortunately, Menier soon realized that Baie Ste. Claire did not offer sufficient anchorage for larger ships and, in 1899, he moved his headquarters to Baie Gamache where he established what would become the village of Port-Menier. Once again, he oversaw the installation of another Decauville railway, also horse drawn, along a 900-foot pier (photos 1 and 2, previous page), ordering at least 272 pieces of track in October of that year [8]. In 1904 the island's first steam locomotive, a French made Decauville tank engine type 0-4-0T, arrived

and was put into service (photo 3). For the next six years, this locomotive pulled freight from the water's edge to the growing townsite (photo 4) and on into the developing lumber camps before Menier converted the entire railway system to standard gauge in 1910-11 [9]. He did this work with great attention, foreseeing the day that his system would connect to the mainland network at Gaspé via a rail ferry, and he built the railroad to a very high standard. Trains were carried on steel rails of between 55 and 70 pounds per yard laid upon "ballast of a quality to make any railroad man happy" that had been excavated from local gravel pits using the railway's own steam shovel [10]. By 1913 there were almost 27 miles (45 kilometres) of track radiating from Port-Menier, with lines extending from the pier all the way to Lac Zédé in the north, and Lake Princeton towards the centre of the island [11]. Photo 5 is an aerial view of Port-Menier showing the rail line coming off the dock, branching into the village and also continuing on further into the island. An interesting feature of this railway, which was primarily dedicated to shipping Anticosti's timber to market, was the fact that it ran the entire length of Port-Menier's 4,000 foot "double-decker" pier that jutted out into Baie Gamache. The train ran on the lower deck of this structure for the first half of its length before climbing a wooden incline to the upper level from whence it transferred outbound pulpwood and other products directly into the hatches of waiting ships [12]. Photo 6 shows a ship being loaded at the dock from the lowered ramps of the upper level.

The new standard gauge railway started operations with a single 2-4-0 type, 44,000-pound, wood-burning locomotive (Engine No. 1) manufactured at the Montreal Locomotive Works (MLW) in 1910 [13] (see photos 7-11). There are also reports that Menier had ordered a four-coupled engine from the American Locomotive Company of Schenectady, New York in the spring of 1910, although for some reason this order was never filled [14]. Regardless, in 1912 the original locomotive was converted to coal and two additional engines (Nos. 2 and 3) were added to the fleet (photos 12-14). Both were manufactured by the Heislner Locomotive Works of Erie, Pennsylvania, the first having a 4-4-0 wheel arrangement and weighing 90,000 pounds while the second one was of the same type but was slightly larger at 100,000 pounds [15]. A March 1928 article in *Popular Science* magazine referred to one of these engines as a "limy" and described it as being "a double jointed, loose hung engine (that) runs on eight drivers, operated by bevel gears and universal joints, driven by cylinders set amidships and slanting downward." The article went on to state "Not speedy, by any means, but the engines are incomparable when working on grades and curves and in carrying tonnage that would make ordinary engines jealous [16]."

In addition to the new locomotives, by the end of 1912 the railway's rolling stock included at least one locally made passenger car and twenty

4. Staffhouse Port-Menier, date unknown, undated postcard. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 0002636013.

5. Aerial photo of part of Port Menier Village, Anticosti Island. Note the tracks at the right coming off the wharf, which is out of the photo in the left foreground. One siding goes into the village and the other continues away from the dock. Postcard, Valentine-Black Co., Toronto, date unknown. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2634083_1.

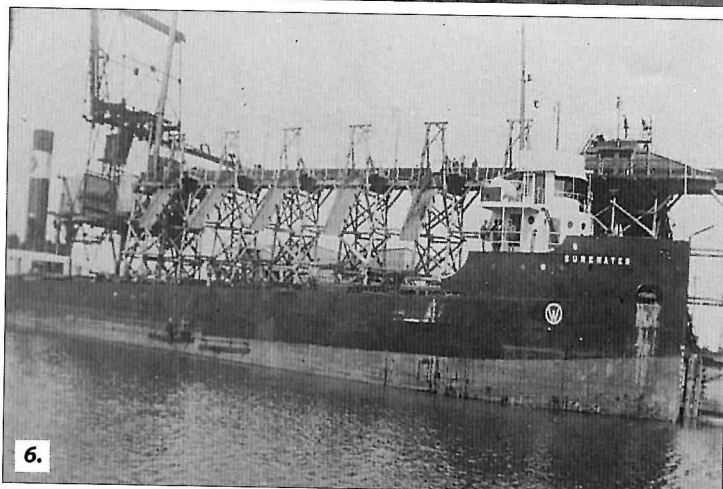
6. Loading wood onto ship, c1928, Port-Menier, Anticosti. Note the ramps from the upper level of the dock are lowered to allow dumping from the railway cars into the ship's hold. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. P19, S1, SS1, P280.



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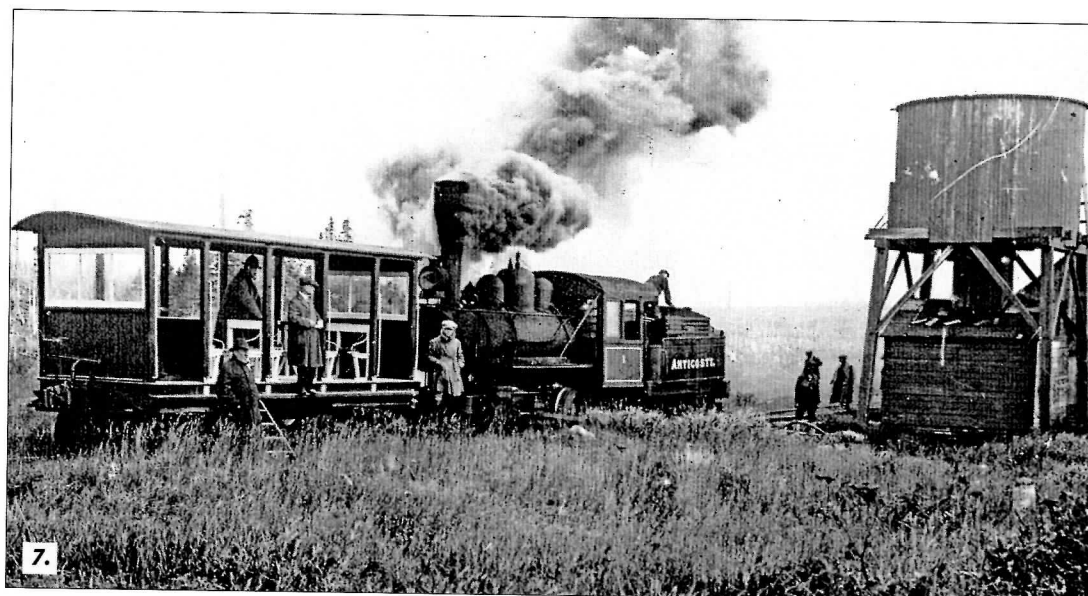


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7. Engine No. 1, the Montreal Locomotive Works 2-4-0, near Lac Anna, 1920. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. P1, D178.9, P60.



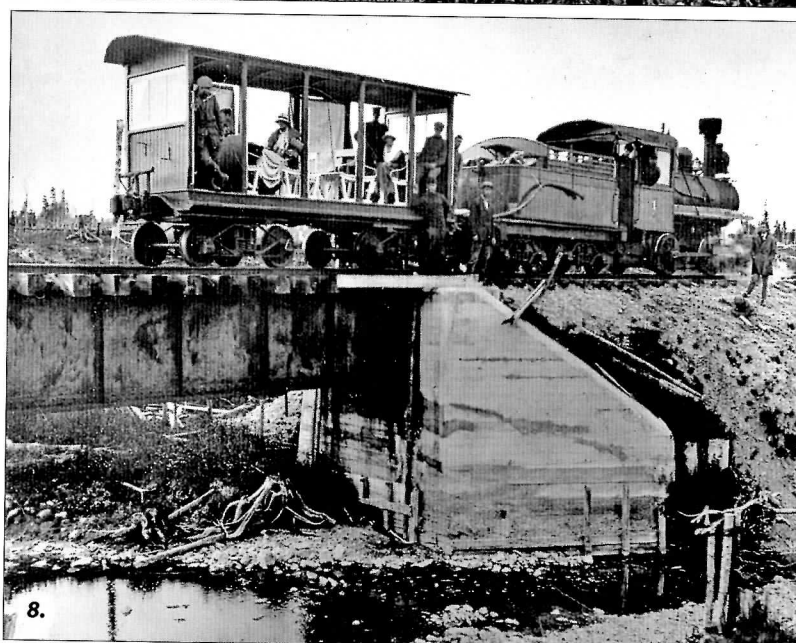
dump cars [17]. Photos 7 and 8, c.1920s, show the passenger car with its sides open and photo 15, c. 1930, shows it with them closed. A year later, in 1913, a fourth engine was added (No. 4), a Baldwin 4-6-0 manufactured in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and weighing 140,000 pounds. A fifth and final steam locomotive (No. 5) was finally added to the fleet in 1917. It was a 150,000-pound 2-6-0 engine of unknown manufacture acquired second hand from the failing Quebec and Lake Saint John Railway [18]. Sometime in 1929 or 1930 the Anticosti Railway also purchased a small gas-powered 120-HP Vulcan switching locomotive from the E.B. Eddy Company in Hull, Québec [19] (photo 15). While the motor on this little engine failed after less than a year of service, mechanics at the Port-Menier machine shop replaced it with a smaller 100-HP motor and as will be seen below, this locomotive outlived all of the others on Anticosti [20].

Despite its impressive start, in many ways the development of the Anticosti Railway reached its zenith in 1913. Photos 16 and 17 show the sawmill c. 1910-11. Photo 16 shows loading of pulp logs onto the side-dump cars for transport to the dock, whereas photo 17 shows the train at the other end of the mill. Only a couple of years after these photos were taken, Menier died, in September of 1913, taking with him much of the passion that had fuelled the development of the island. His brother Gaston assumed control over the enterprise but with much less interest than his predecessor, especially after the start of the First World War caused a significant devaluation of the French franc and the family fortune [21]. While the railway stayed in use during the war, supplying much needed pulp and timber supplies to the allied effort, in 1918 engine No. 5 was pulled off the rails and put into storage. This was followed by engine No. 4 in 1919, engine No. 2 in 1921 and engine No. 3 in 1923 [22]. As early as 1924 Gaston Menier was looking to divest himself of the island and in July 1926, he finally sold it, and all its improvements including the railway and its rolling stock, to The Anticosti Corporation (later named the Consolidated Paper Corporation in 1931 and then Consolidated-Bathurst in 1967) for the sum of \$6,500,000 [23] (\$101,739,000 in 2022).

This change in ownership resulted in a brief resurgence of the railway and by the end of 1926 all six of its locomotives were once again back at work hauling wood from the forests to the seaside. Within only two years the island was supplying North American customers with 150,000 cords of pulpwood a year and the future looked promising [24]. However, with the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression, demand for wood products fell sharply and most of the saws, axes and trains of Anticosti again fell silent. As railway historian Art Clowes observed "With no lumbering, there was no need for a railway and the line, except for about 4,000 feet between the wharf and the warehouse, was basically abandoned around 1930 [25]."

For the second time in a decade most of the railway's rolling stock was put into storage, with engines Nos. 2, 4 and 5 taken out of service in 1930, followed by engine No. 3 in 1934, leaving only the original 1910 MLW 2-4-0 (No. 1) and the gas-powered Vulcan working on the line. Engine No. 1 was finally pulled from service in 1936, effectively marking the end of the railway's industrial use [26]. From that date forwards, only the Vulcan remained in limited use, such as when it carried officers from the Royal Canadian Air Force on a 1938 survey mission to assess the possible installation of fortifications on the island in anticipation of the Second World War [27]. By 1939 all of the steam locomotives, as well as additional rolling stock comprised of 25 wooden flat cars, 20 pulpwood dump cars, 10 steel flat cars and three boarding (or camp) cars had been either sold or scrapped [28].

The end finally came in the fall of 1947 when a well-made gravel road running along the tracks was completed, allowing trucks to carry the wood to the sea. The little Vulcan locomotive along with ten remaining flat cars and the original hand-made passenger car were all



8. Engine No. 1 pulling passengers on an excursion to the Beaver River. Digital copy courtesy of Colin Churcher Collection. Original is from Library and Archives Canada, C071713, 3228672.

9. Engine No. 1 in the village of Port-Menier, 1923. Library and Archives Canada, Fonds de la Famille Henri Menier, C0717124, 3622931.

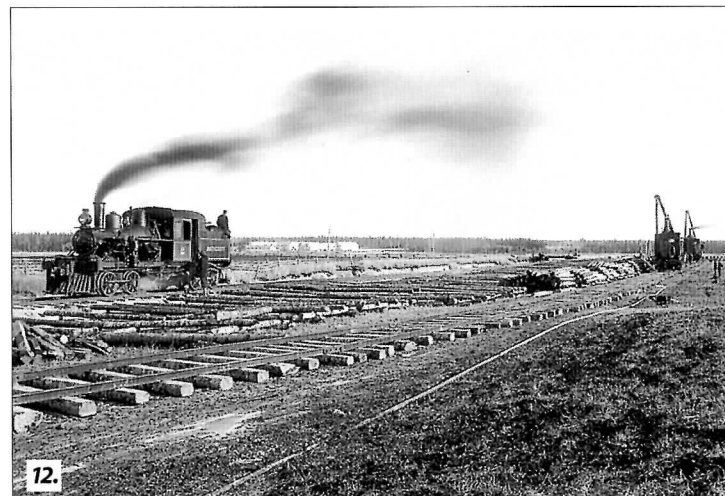




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retired and rail operations ceased completely, never to start again. By 1949 all the rolling stock had been scrapped and the Anticosti Railway was no more [29].

Anticosti Island remained in private hands until 1974 when the Province of Québec purchased it from Consolidated-Bathurst for \$23 million dollars. Today much of the island's economy is based upon tourism although some logging continues, as it has for more than a century. Visitors can now arrive by ferry from Rimouski or via flights from Sept-Îles or Havre-Saint-Pierre and while there is much to see and do on this beautiful island, riding the rails is, sadly, no longer one of the options available.

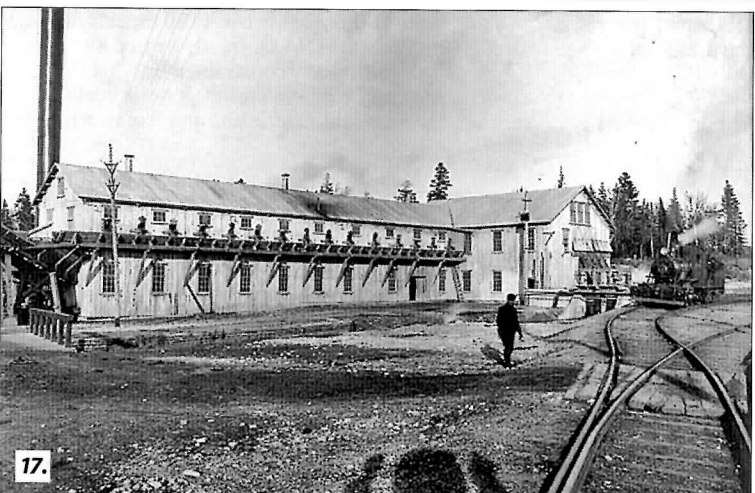
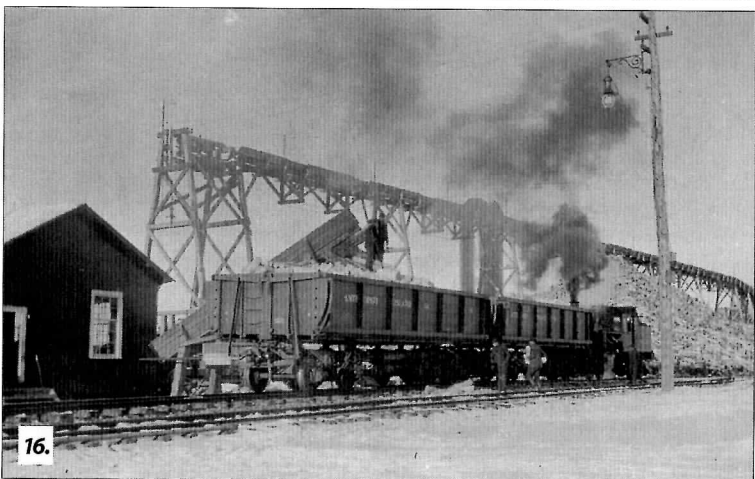
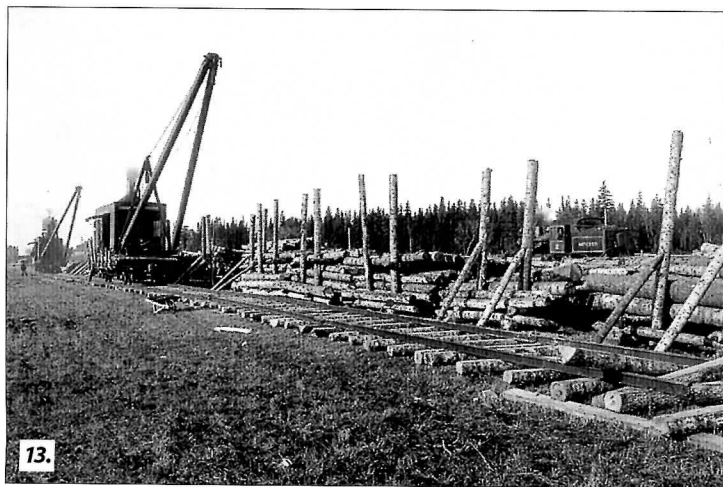
Endnotes:

1. For an excellent account of Menier's early efforts in Québec see "L'Île d'Anticosti" Rapport du Congrès de la Colonisation, (Montréal: Imprimerie de La Patrie, 1900), pp. 372-382.
2. Alfred S. Johnston ed. The Cyclopedic Review of Current History (Vol. 8), (Boston: Current History Company, 1898), pp. 916-917.
3. "Making a Paradise", The Windsor Star, Monday, June 15, 1896, p. 1.
4. "Anticosti", L'Écho des Bois-Francs, Samedi, 24 Octobre 1896, p. 2.
5. « Côte Nord et Anticosti », Journal des campagnes, Samedi, 16 Octobre 1897, p. 11.
6. The Decauville railways were themselves an improvement upon an earlier model of narrow-gauge portable railways manufactured by the Peteler Portable Railway Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota. For a contemporary account of this technology see Horace Greeley et. al., The Great Industries of the United States, (Hartford: J.B. Burr and Hyde, 1873), pp. 533-541.
7. Reports of the United States Commissioner to the Universal Exposition of 1889 at Paris (Vol. 1), (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890), p. 51.
8. « Sur L'Île d'Anticosti », Journal des campagnes, Samedi, 28 Octobre 1899, p. 16.

10. Engine No. 1 and a passenger car in front of Port-Menier store. Digital copy courtesy Colin Churcher Collection. Original is from Library and Archives Canada, Mme. Georges Menier, C087054, 3320542.

11. Engine No. 1 by the pulp mill, c.1910. Collection Lucien Commetant, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, <https://www.commetant.com/photographies/ile-anticosti-1900-1905/>, photo 62, accessed 2022 03 11.

12. Engine No. 2 adding to the railway's trackage. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. P1, S6, SS8, D299 P1-047.



9. Robert Samson, "Anticosti Railway", Canadian Rail, No. 340, May 1980, p. 138-139.

10. "Businessmen's Anticosti Trip", The Quebec Chronical, Tuesday, June 24, 1913, p. 9.

11. C.W. Anderson and R.F. Corley, "Anticosti Railway", Canadian Rail, No. 252, January 1973, p. 17. Samson gives a number of 38 miles, comprised of 27 miles in the forest, eight miles of branch lines and one and a half miles in the village. However, Anderson and Corley's figure is more consistent with contemporary reporting and, in the absence of other information, taken to be correct.

12. "Businessmen's Anticosti Trip", p. 9.

13. Anderson and Corley, p. 19.

14. The Railway and Engineering Review, April 23, 1910, p. 408.

15. There is some confusion here, as Samson stated in May 1980 that this engine arrived in Port-Menier in 1912 or 1913 while Anderson and Corley reported in January 1972 that the engine was manufactured in 1916.

16. "The World's Greatest Timber Crop", Popular Science Monthly, March 1928, p. 42.

17. "Anticosti Island Ry", Canadian Railway and Marine World, October 1912, p. 509.

18. Samson, pp. 139-141.

19. Anderson and Corley, p. 19.

20. Art Clowes, "Railway Archeology", Rail and Transit, May-June 1996, p. 11.

21. Jean-Yves Pinal, L'Île D'Anticosti Étude de Potentiel Archéologique, (Québec City, 2018), p. 66.

22. Samson, pp. 139-141.

23. Pinal, p. 66, and Clowes, p. 11.

24. "The World's Greatest Timber Crop", pp. 42-43.

25. Clowes, p. 11.

26. Samson, pp. 139-141.

27. Thomas Wayling, "Germans Shift Pulpwood Trade from Anticosti", The Winnipeg Tribune, Tuesday, August 9, 1938, p. 2. See also "Government to Fortify Anticosti Island", Paper Trade Journal, Vol CVII, No. 8, Thursday, August 25, 1938, p. 14.

28. Anderson and Corley, p. 17, Samson, p. 143 and Clowes, p. 11. It should be noted that Samson offers a higher count of rolling stock including five locomotives, 60 wooden flat cars, ten dump cars, five steel flat cars and ten gravel dump cars.

29. Samson, "Anticosti Railway", p. 143. ■

13. Railway construction on Anticosti Island. Note Heisler 4-4-0, No. 2, in the background. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. P1, S6, SS8, D299 P1-045.

14. Heisler locomotive, No. 3 pulling empty log cars, Anticosti Is., c. 1900-1905. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, <https://www.comettant.com/photographies/ile-anticosti-1900-1905/>, photo 139, accessed 2022 03 11. Also available on Wikicommons.

15. The gas-powered Vulcan, taken sometime after 1930. This was the last locomotive to run on Anticosti Island, being in service until 1947. Undated post card. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 0005017676. According to the Archives this photo was taken sometime between 1900-1910, but the clothing, and engine, suggest a later date closer to the 1930s.

16. Loading pulp wood into side-dump cars at the Anticosti pulp mill. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. P186, S5, P55. Photo 55 from photo album of visit of Princeton University Engineers to Anticosti, 1910-1911.

17. Anticosti pulp mill and train, c. 1910. Note the locomotive is in the same position as in photo 11. Possibly the photo was taken at the same time. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. P1, S6, SS8, D299 P1-025.