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Huron Historical Notes

The London Huron & Bruce Railway Company

The following article is from a book titled "Stories and Memories of the London-Huron and Bruce Railway 1870-1990" by Calvin M. Patrick who kindly gave us permission to use information from his book for our Historical Notes. The book was published in 1990 in Penticton, B.C. where Mr. Patrick now lives. He was born and raised in Ilderton.

"The London Huron & Bruce Railway Company" was incorporated in 1871 to construct a railway from London to Goderich or Kincardine, etc. A line was constructed from Hyde Park Junction to Wingham (68.91 miles) and opened for traffic on January 4, 1876.

The London Huron & Bruce Railway Company formed part of The Great Western Railway Company when the latter company was amalgamated with The Grand Trunk Railway Company of Canada on August 12, 1882. Effective April 1, 1893, under Agreement dated October 1, 1882, ratified and confirmed by Dominion Act 56 V.I.C. CAP. 47, April 1, 1893, the London Huron & Bruce Railway Company and fourteen other companies, were amalgamated into one company under the name "The Grand Trunk Railway Company of Canada."

THE BEGINNING

The hometown station at Ilderton, Ontario was fairly similar in size and shape to the dozens of other wooden box structures erected in small towns and villages by the various Railway Companies.

The memories I have of this station and the related railroading activities have kept my interest in a little known rail line from waning. Located 11.25 track miles from London, Ontario and built by the Great Western Railway in 1875, the station was on the London-Huron & Bruce (L-H&B) subsidiary. This line ran 74 miles north out of London, through Western Ontario, to Wingham.

The chief promoter for the Railway was Patrick Kelly, a local Reeve and owner of a sawmill and sash and door factory at Blyth, 60 miles from London. Kelly, an entrepreneur, had developed a sizeable export trade to the United Kingdom, but his closest rail shipping point was 11.5 miles away at Clinton, so Kelly was forced to transport his products by wagon teams to this town. The extra expense forced him out of the export market, but he was a determined Irishman and began searching for a solution to allow him to continue to export. His thoughts turned to establishing a railway which would run south to London. There, rail connections could be made with the Great Western Railway. This company had laid tracks from Niagara Falls, through Hamilton, Paris and London, arriving in Windsor January 17, 1854 with their first train.

The other railway in London was the Grand Trunk, which also ran in an east-west direction from Toronto (Western Ontario section). The Grand Trunk route was through Guelph, Kitchener (Berlin), Stratford, London (1858) to Sarnia (1859). It was reasoned that if a railway could be built to London, the area north of the city would be open to the world!

Kelly had some influential backers for his idea, with such people as John and Issac Carling, C.P. Smith, Wm. Glass, Alex Johnston and G. Birell, all prominent area businessmen. On February 15, 1871 "The London-Huron & Bruce Railway Company" was incorporated to construct a railway from London to Goderich or Kincardine, etc.

However, incorporating the Railway was the easiest part, but to promote it with a view to receiving financial aid was more difficult. The directors knew they could not even begin construction without greater financial backing and technological expertise than they possessed. The Grand Trunk was approached, but as they were dong nicely at that time, (or so they thought), they were not very receptive to the proposal and offered little encouragement. The group then travelled to the head office of the Great Western at Hamilton, Ontario. The proposal was laid before these officials, whose tracks were already running from Toronto through London to Windsor and Sarnia (1856).

The promoters emphasized the potential passenger and freight business along the proposed route, which would include forestry products, livestock and farm produce. Unlike the Grand Trunk, the Great Western seemed favourably impressed, as they visualized a new distribution route for farm implements, manufactured goods and supplies to flow northwards. They informed the petitioners to return to their municipalities and secure subsidy guarantees from them, plus the goodwill of the local citizens.

Part of their interest may have been due to the fact that one of the L-H&B directors, John Carling, was also a Great Western director. Great Western was somewhat concerned though about building the railway to Wingham and wanted the line to end at Blyth. They feared that the L-H&B would adversely affect the trade of the Wellington, Grey & Bruce (WG&B) line, which had been built through Wingham to Kincardine and was Great Western (GW) operated.

In time, the amount of subsidy or bonuses that each municipality would be responsible for, was established on a loose formula of area to be served by the new railway and expected benefits to that community. After finally agreeing to build to Wingham, GW was to "receive the Municipal bonuses and the Government subsidy granted in aid of its construction."

The amount of subsidies paid towards the construction were:-

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	Province of Ontario	178,630
	City of London	100,000
	Village of Exeter	10,000
	Village of Clinton	20,000
	Villages of Kincardine and Wingham	9,000
	Township of London	15,000
	Township of Stephen	17,500
	Township of Hay	15,000
	Township of Usborne	25,000
	Township of Stanley	10,000
	Township of Tuckersmith	10,000
	Township of Goderich	15,000
	Township of Hullett	25,000
	Township of East Wawanosh	25,000
	Township of Morris	10,000
	Township of Turnberry	5,000
	Total amount of subsidies	\$490,130

Excluding the grants from the Province, London and London Township, the subsidies paid by ten townships and three villages of Huron County, plus Kincardine in Bruce County, totalled \$196,500 or 40% of the amount granted.

This was an indication that these people not only wanted the railway, but believed it would be a successful financial venture. Although the new line never reached Kincardine, this town co-operated with Wingham in pledging \$9,000. Being on the WG&B since December 1874, Kincardine realized the junction at Wingham, with a direct route to London, was to their advantage.

The adherents of the new railway had conducted dozens of meetings in small rural communities and the amount of subsidies voted, had paid off for their enthusiastic endeavors. There were not many objections. Farmers, manufacturers and businessmen desired a swift and convenient route to London. Quickly voting the subsidies, municipal officials realized the benefits a railway would bring to their communities and also realized they could lose office, if they went against the people's wishes. A total of fifteen rural municipalities, plus the City of London, granted subsidies towards the L-H&B construction costs. Considering such a short line, the Ontario Government's grant was generous and more than originally expected.

THE BLUFF

However, there were two holdouts! Biddulph Township (assessed \$8,000) and the town of Lucan (assessed \$7,000), both wanted the Railway, but voted against paying any grants. Lucan, already on an east-west Grand Trunk line (1860) felt they would be on the direct route of the proposed north-south railway, so were hesitant in guaranteeing any bonuses. Biddulph Township, in which Lucan was located, also procrastinated about the subsidy until prompted by Great Western officials. They warned the two municipalities that if payment was not forthcoming by a certain date, there was a strong possibility a new route would be chosen.

In December 1872, Biddulph Township ratepayers went to the polls and voted against payment; 180 against with 97 votes for payment, so the vote was not unanimous and caused hard feelings within families and amongst friends. Those who voted against, reasoned that as other municipalities up and down the line had voted for bonuses, that was enough of a guarantee the Railway would pass through their township, at no cost to the taxpayers.

Lucan followed the Township's negative thinking, but they still relished that Railway! After a time, a special meeting was called and the Town Council voted unanimously to pay the \$7,000 grant. However, the Railway would have to pass through Biddulph Township before it reached Lucan, and as Biddulph Township had voted down any grant, Lucan, although repentant at the very last minute, was out of luck.

Due to the delay and the uncertainty of ever receiving any bonuses at all, GW became impatient and had their surveyors move the stakes 2 miles to the west. By this manoeuvre, GW completely bypassed both township and town, much to their everlasting annoyance.

Losing the convenience of a north-south railway was a blow Lucan long remembered. To add insult to injury, where the L-H&B tracks crossed the Grand Trunk tracks, the stop was known as "Lucan Crossing", although it was over two miles from town! Even 10 years later, Lucan and the Township offered \$18,000 to any company that would build a spur to the L-H&B, but had no success.

The City of London contributed \$100,000 towards the cost, due in part by the urging of Sir John Carling who

foresaw the monetary benefits to Western Ontario, should a railway be built. Carling, keenly interested in agricultural affairs, was Ontario's first Commissioner of Agriculture in 1867 and Canada's Minister of Agriculture from 1885 to 1892. He added his influential voice to the proponents of the railway on general, economic principles. However, he no doubt felt the Carling Brewing Co. in London would benefit through grain shipments and wood products from rural areas north of London, and these areas in turn would benefit from beer shipments. John Carling, a director of the L-H&B had some railroading experience as he was also a director of London and Port Stanley Railway, built in 1856, and a director of the Great Western from 1868 to 1874.

For service to his country, he was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1893; and for his contribution to the agricultural industry, Sir John Carling was inducted into the Ontario Agricultural Hall of Fame in June 1984. The Hall of Fame was established at Milton in 1980 on the grounds of the Ontario Agricultural Museum.

SOME PROBLEMS

After preliminary arrangements for securing grants were completed, the L-H&B was taken over as a leased subsidiary of the Great Western. However, railroading history has proven that the mechanics of establishing, purchasing or amalgamating railways is not a legal process completed quickly and simply. Shareholders, railway officials, bankers, governments and lawyers seldom agree in the initial stages.

Suffice to say the internal problems of the G. W. and L-H & B. were overcome and actual construction began in the spring of 1875, some five years after Patrick Kelly began his quest for a new railway. The last spike was driven at the northern end on December 11, 1875. A few weeks of additional ballast and the line was ready for freight service December 31, 1875. The celerity of construction was due to the fact that work commenced just west of London, at Hyde Park, which was on the Great Western main Toronto-London-Sarnia line. Construction trains and crews branched off this line northwards for track-laying and while the L-H&B totalled 74 miles from London center, the actual trackage north of the main line was 69.75 miles from Hyde Park to Wingham. Along the construction route, there was also a readily available labour force of farmers and work horses to assist in the speedy construction. Daily wages for labourers were \$1.25, while teamsters received \$3.25 per day.

L-H&B RAILWAY OPENING

Referring to the opening of this line, the Stratford Beacon says:

"The last rail of the London, Huron & Bruce Railway was laid last Saturday (Dec. 11, 1875) and London has now a direct line to the rich and populous country north, which will soon bring in a vast volume of business. The line has been constructed with marvelous celerity and economy in the face of numerous obstacles and great engineering difficulties. A few weeks work still remain to render it ready for traffic, but it is expected that before the end of January it will be inspected by the Government Inspectors and open for active business. The success of the L-H&B is worth studying by many other companies in the Province. While they have been bickering among themselves about questions of minor importance, the London people have pitched in with a will and secured for themselves an

important feeder to their commerce in an exceedingly short space of time and at a very low cost."

THE PARTY

On Tuesday, January 11, 1876 the Ceremonial Train left London in the early afternoon for Wingham, where it turned for the journey back to London. At each station down the line bankers, mayors, reeves, magistrates, newsmen and anyone else who could wrangle an invitation crowded onto the coaches. They were all dressed in their finery as the coming festivities would be the most important celebrations that would occur for the majority of the rural people involved in the L-H&B. This diarist had relatives board at the Ilderton Station for the 11 mile ride to London, where the "Grand Opening Banquet" was to be held. Also on board were representatives from Kincardine, who had boarded the "Special" at Wingham.

After disembarking, the jovial group had only a short distance to walk until they entered the foyer of "The Tecumseh House", London's finest, largest (four stories) and most elegant hotel west of Toronto. The travellers enjoyed a pre-banquet "happy hour", with most checking in for an overnight stay. Built in 1855-56, the hotel was located on the south-west corner of Richmond and York, opposite the rail station.

The London Advertiser of January 12, 1876 used several columns in giving a full and glowing account of the previous evening's festivities. The article reported: "Some 800 sat down to a dinner at City Hall and after eatables, supplied in profusion by Messrs. Conklin and Moore, the citizens had been fully interviewed."

London's Mayor, Benjamin Croyn acted as Chairman and George Ross, a local M.P.P. (later Sir George Ross, Premier of Ontario), was the evening's Chief Orator.

The Advertiser continues to report that: "Mr. John Carling, as 1st Vice President, then gave the toast to the Municipalities which contributed bonuses towards building the L-H&B Railway, returned thanks to all who had contributed to the result and expressed his belief that the road would pay if any in the country did. He gave every praise to the Municipalities and also the Legislature of Ontario for the grant of \$2,000 per mile. The toast was enthusiastically drank – three cheers and a tiger being given!

"Mr. Patrick Kelly, Reeve of Morris Township being called on for a response, spoke of this being the happiest day of his life. He hoped to live to see the day when the bonuses granted would return a dividend, and was loudly cheered and applauded.

"Mr. J. Callandar, Mayor of Clinton was proud to say Clinton had given \$20,000 and looked for great things from the opening of the Railroad."

During the evening, toasts were proposed to the Queen, the Governor-General, the Prince and the Princess of Wales, the Lt. Governor of Ontario, the Province of Ontario, the L-H&B Railway Company, the Great West Railway, the Guests, the City of London, to each and every town the Railway passed through, the town of Kincardine, the Counties of Huron, Bruce and Middlesex, the Federal Members of Parliament present, the Ladies, the builders of the Railway, the Press, etc. The drinks flowed freely, as over thirty toasts were proposed and responded to. One report stated "The hall was getting so noisy by this time, that no one was really listening to the toasts, but still more

were proposed." Those who were able, recall that the Railway was well christened during the evening of January 11, 1876!

The London Advertiser concludes its lengthy account with a note: "The train departed at two o'clock today carrying homewards (north bound) the visitors who had come to the Railway celebration. The band played 'For They are Jolly Good Fellows', while the departing ones heartily cheered.

"On Monday next (January 17, 1876) the road will be

regularly opened for passenger traffic."

It certainly appears everyone had a great time and the hangovers would soon be forgotten. I doubt if many other railway openings in Ontario could match the enthusiasm given the L-H&B at the London party. But it was indicative of the determination and dedication of the rural people of that area in procuring the Railway. Sons and daughters of English, Scottish, Irish and German settlers, had prospered through hard work and had demanded a railway for passenger travel, and as a means of transporting their manufactured goods and farm produce to new markets. By 1875 their demands had been met.

NOW IN BUSINESS

As wood and wood products were a poor payload, canny Patrick Kelly, having hundreds of acres of timber which the new Railway must pass through, arranged to have a reasonable freight rate in place for firewood, logs and tan bark before the final papers were signed. The forests of maple, beech, oak and elm produced thousands of cords of fuel wood, lumber, logs for export and tan bark for the tanneries in he area. The Railway also provided an additional outlet for pine from the southern slopes of Georgian Bay and Manitoulin Island. Wood products were a bulk commodity to ship, requiring much manual labour, hence Kelly's desire for a preferential rate.

The first steam engines on the line were cord wood fired 4-4-0's and puffed up and down the tracks at 15 m.p.h. (using some of Kelly's ample fuel supply). However, it was not long before the locomotives were coal fired. A picture published in the November/December 1988 issue of 'Canadian Rail' shows such an engine at the Ilderton Station in 1900. Kelly was right about the rail line being a paying proposition. Belden's 1879 Huron County Atlas stated: "The London-Huron&Bruce, in proportion to its length (74 miles) is the best paying road in the Dominion of Canada."

When Grand Trunk took over the troubled Great Western in August 1882, the L-H&B timetable listed 17 stations where passengers could board, up two stations from the Great Western timetable of 1876. The L-H&B was known as the 'Butter and Egg Special', due to the numerous farm passengers who embarked all down the line with crates of eggs, crocks of butter and bushels of garden produce for their regular customers at London's Covent Farmers' Market. Irate passengers who sat on hard seats over a rough railbed, had their own name for the L-H&B; "Let 'er Hit and Bounce."

The line was part of the Grand Trunk network for some forty years, being integrated into the C.N.R. system in 1923. In 1876 four trains a day ran the London-Wingham route. As freight and passenger business increased, 6 trains per day were running: four passenger, mail and express and two freight consists. The stations with railway stockyards

loaded out hundreds of head each week for Ontario's packing plants. The yards also shipped out breeding stock to the farms and ranches of the United States and Western Canada, once transcontinental lines were established.

The (now) Ilderton Farmers Co-op gave the Railway an enormous amount of business, bringing in farm equipment, lumber, coal, feed and farm supplies and loading out locally produced grain, grain products and livestock. Other flourishing agricultural centers such as Centralia, Exeter, Hensall, Clinton, Blyth and Wingham dispatched and received similar shipments. It was rural towns such as these that contributed to the L-H&B's early success as a profitable rail line. At a later date when sugar beets, corn and beans became prevalent crops, carloads of these commodities left the area on a regular basis.

Some early recorded shipments of the Ilderton Station: During the winter of 1900/1901 a complete trainload of 600 Lincoln sheep were exported for breeding purposes to Idaho, U.S.A. ('Canadian Rail' November-December 1988 issue); during 1912/1913 logs from a nearby 100 acre virgin forest were loaded and shipped for export; in 1920 a shipment of long-wooled sheep and Holstein cattle left for export to Korea and Japan; in 1923 W. T. Colwill loaded out 17 cars of 3 year old steers for live shipment to Great Britain; in 1944, 10 carloads of bagged commercial fertilizer arrived at the Farmers Co-op in one shipment; in 1944, out of a total of 345 carloads of Western Feed grain the Co-op received, 14 carloads arrived the same morning!

During the war years, 1939 to 1945, the L-H&B moved thousands of service personnel to and from Air Force Bases at Centralia and Clinton, as well as moving military

equipment and supplies.

It is written in the 'Ilderton Centennial Book 1876-1976' that during one fall (probably late 1950's), 500 carloads of sugar beets were loaded out for the Canada & Dominion sugar refineries at Chatham and Wallaceburg, Ontario. The same year the Co-op on and off loaded some 600 cars, and coupled with 100 carloads of livestock, a grand manifest of 1,200 cars were handled by the agent, Clayton Groh. Groh also handled freight billings from nearby Denfield (Brecon). Surely 1,200 cars must have been some sort of record for a village of 250. I doubt if anyone outside the village knew or even cared, but Mr. Groh was proud of the achievement and I'm sure CN was satisfied with the business generated.

THE END FOR SOME

In December 1940 Municipalities at L-H&B's northern end were informed by CN that the 24 mile section between Clinton and Wingham was to be abandoned. The citizens of Wingham, Belgrave, Blyth and Londesborough (known locally as Londesboro), all viable rural towns, had little time to put forth what they considered valid reasons against the decision. However, losses on this particular section justified abandonment, and with World War II on, rolling stock could not afford to be on non-viable or convenience runs. With CN Locomotive #1318 heading Train #603, the last passenger train from Clinton up to Wingham made the memorable run on Saturday, April 26, 1941.

Area passengers boarded at Clinton, Londesboro, Blyth and Belgrave for the short, nostalgic journey to Wingham. It is reported that the sun was shining warm and bright, as cattle pastured in green meadows and farmers worked their fields. Passengers gazed on rural scenes, never again to be

viewed from the tracks.

At Wingham, the train (now #604) turned for the last journey to Clinton. Those who boarded on the up run disembarked at their respective stations on the down run, with only four passengers continuing on to London. Train crew on that April day were: Conductor, L.C. Steele; Engineer, Wm. Rowell; Trainman, A. Sherlock; Expressman, Roy Steinberg; and Mail Clerks, N.S. Fletcher and W.H. Amos: 6 personnel. Agent at the Wingham, station, W.F. Burgman, bid the southbound farewell at 1:50 p.m. and after sixty-six years the tracks would become silent.

The London Free press published several candid pictures and a short story concerning the last run in the April 28, 1941 issue. Pictures included the Londesborough Station, Agent Burgman, Conductor Steele, Agent Lyons of Blyth and some passenger photos. However, passenger service from Clinton to London was available for several years to come.

During the last years of mail and passenger service, a diesel electric powered combination express, mail and passenger unit was the type of locomotive that plied the trails twice daily. In Railway terminology this type of unit is known as a Diesel Rail Car (D.R.C.) or dayliner. This unit ceased operating in April 1956. With coach service gone and trucks delivering mail and express, the passenger stations became redundant.

The Londesborough, Blyth and Belgrave depots closed in 1941.

In December 1987 CN was granted permission to abandon a section of the line. In August 1988 CN advertised for tenders to lift the tracks from Ilderton, 14.13 miles northwards to Centralia.

Lifting of the tracks began at Centralia with the crews working southwards to Ilderton. Using modern track lifting equipment, it was over within a few weeks. By June 1, 1989, the eight-five pound rails (85 pounds to the yard), splice bars, tie plates, etc. were gone, having been shipped to a steel mill in Pennsylvania. No doubt to be transformed into products with a greater demand than railway rails.

The material was loaded on to flatbed rail cars for the trip to the U.S., so at least they finished their life's journey by rail and not by a Mack truck. For the most part the wooden ties were sold in Ontario. Now only a gravelly roadbed remains, crossing the countryside like a giant gray scar, creating a ribbon of wasted land.

The southern section is still operational, with freights on the CN main east-west line, leaving their main drag at Hyde Park siding. When business warrants, headers limited to 30 m.p.h. run north to a siding at Highway 22 where there are lumber and building supply yards. If business warrants, they continue six miles to Ilderton for pickups and deliveries. The line south from Clinton now ends just past the Centralia station at the Mount Carmel road. Originating in Stratford, the local way freight leaves the Goderich manifest at Clinton and rolls south with whatever cars there are for Hensall, Exeter and Centralia. Returning to Clinton, the Goderich cars are moved 13 miles west to that town and the local returns to Stratford for overnight a typical way freight run, quiet and uncomplicated. Mileage from Stratford-Centralia-Goderich and return is approximately 140 miles. (CNR situation in 1988).

END OF THE LINE

With the lifting of the tracks between Ilderton and Centralia, the once proud and profitable L-H&B line gets chipped away, as have the dozens of other railroads that once brought convenience and prosperity to Ontario's small towns and villages. From a short but mighty seventy-four mile railway, the line is now reduced to a way freight thirty-one mile track, with a long gap in the middle of those thirty-one miles.

No one thought on the evening of January 11, 1876, that grand night of congratulatory speeches and numerous toasts, there would come a time when the Railway would be cut apart and perhaps eventually even cease operating. But that joyous night was a sign of the times and the technology of that era, was deemed to last forever.

The celebrants have long gone, but the old London-Huron & Bruce (albeit CNR) still exists - a bit battered and worn, but nevertheless still partially there, and now one of the oldest name railways in Canada at 114years. From Great Western to Grand Trunk to Canadian National, the branch was known and still is known affectionately, as the L-H&B and will continue so, until the last tie is lifted.

The steamers, railwaymen, station agents, livestock pens, passengers and trackwatchers that I remember, will not be forgotten and unfortunately will never be known by the village youths of today.

On the whole trainsmen considered the run from London to Wingham to be a leisurely trip. No hot shots flew down the rails at 75 m.p.h. and the only extras were fair special service personnel runs and sugar beet consists which were in days long past.

Being on a direct route from the 'northern end' many of the same passengers travelled on the coaches frequently and it became known as a 'homey train'. It provided a setting away from the labours of the field and housework, where politics, crop conditions, livestock markets, and neighbourhood gossip could be discussed freely as they jolted along on their interpretation of the L-H&B – 'Let 'Er Hit and Bounce.' Had the Railway been built twenty years previously it would have been of the wide 5'6" gauge and forced to change to the narrower 4'8.5" distance between rails, when that gauge become mandatory. The wide gauge would not have eased the passenger's comfort thought, as it is the roadbed and tracks plus the condition of the cars under carriage that combine for a smooth or rough ride.

Now only memories remain for a few of the senior citizens, of those Saturday journeys to London, as the last call for 'All-I-I Aboard' was in 1956.

In 1989 the NTA approved a total of 2092 kilometres (1297 miles) of track abandonment by CN and CP. In 1990 the two rail companies have applied for abandonment of an additional 1690 kilometres (1048 miles) of track, and it is expected in succeeding years further applications for removal of branch or marginal lines will be made. Railway companies do not have goods or manufactured products to sell – what they do sell is a transportation service and if commodities are not there to be moved, they are justified to either seek abandonment or attempt to sell to a short-haul regional carrier.

The Canadian National Railway sold two secondary freight lines in 1991 to the Rail Tex Inc. of San Antonio, Texas, who continue to provide freight service over the 70 miles of track from Stratford to Goderich and Clinton to Centralia as the Goderich-Exeter Railway Company Limited. – Article submitted by R. Latham.

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10.55	6.40	9.50		Clinton Junction			8.08	4.18	1.06	
10.30	6.25	9.36	431	Brucefield	301		8.22	4.32	1.25	
10.12	6.13	9.29	391	Kippen	341	D	8.31	4.40	1.40	
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