

THE Central Railway OF Canada

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The railways of Eastern Ontario were becoming well developed in the early decades of the turn of the 20th century. The Canada Atlantic Railway commenced services between Ottawa and Montreal on 1 November 1882 using the Grand Trunk Railway entry to Montreal through Coteau. The Canadian Pacific Railway M&O (Montreal and Ottawa) line was opened on 5 September 1898. Running via Rigaud, this direct line quickly began to compete with the Canada Atlantic for the through traffic between Montreal and Ottawa. A third railway came on the scene on 5 December 1909 when the Canadian Northern Ontario Railway opened from Montreal to Ottawa through Hawkesbury.

Thus by the end of the first decade of the 20th century there were three competing routes between Ottawa and Montreal, two using the Canadian Pacific and Grand Trunk main lines to cross on to Montreal Island and a third crossing the Ottawa River at Hawkesbury and entering Montreal from the north¹. The local villages and small towns were also well served by this extensive railway network.

Railways in Eastern Ontario were restricted by geography. The St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers came together and the lines were forced to "thread the needle" to obtain access to Montreal. It might have been thought that the railway system was, by then, fully developed and there was no need from the traffic perspective, or indeed, no room from the geographic perspective for another railway line between Ottawa and Montreal. Not only was entry into Montreal difficult but the city of Ottawa was very concerned about the number of railway lines built, or proposed to be built, to gain access to Central Depot which later became Union Station. The Canadian Northern Ontario was initially forced to build a station in the Hurdman area and the Ottawa and New York had a number of road blocks placed in its way in building its line from Cornwall.

Although Eastern Ontario was well served, over served even, by railways, a new company came on the scene in 1906²:

"The Central Railway is the title of a company originally projected as the Ottawa River Ry. with power to construct a line from Montreal to Ottawa. It was proposed to operate the line, for which surveys were made, by electricity. Charters were subsequently

obtained from the Dominion Parliament as well as the Quebec and Ontario legislatures, covering the line from Montreal to Ottawa on the north side of the Ottawa River; a crossing of the river at Hawkesbury, and a line thence to Midland and St. Thomas. Senator Domville of Rothesay, NB is president of the company, and it is stated that United States capital is behind the project. The company has deposited \$25,000 with the Receiver-General in accordance with the provisions of the Dominion charter, 1903. This deposit will be repaid to the company as progress is made on the line between Montreal and Grenville but is liable to be forfeited if construction is not proceeded with. J.M. Shanley is Chief Engineer and it is stated that construction will be commenced early next year."

In April 1906³:

"Senator Domville has returned from Great Britain where he has been for some time seeking to finance the construction of this projected electric railway from Montreal to Ottawa thence to Georgian Bay and on to St. Thomas. At St. John NB he stated in an interview that he had interested a syndicate in London in the proposal. Representatives of the men belonging to it are in Canada looking at the plans and going over the projected route."

Some survey work was done in 1906 but later that year seven members of the survey party brought an action against the company for \$1,102 for salaries while out on survey work in Prescott and Russell counties⁴. This was to be a recurring theme in the life of the Central Railway of Canada – smoke and mirrors while the proprietors played a shell game using wild promises and other people's money.

The Company obtained powers not only to construct a railway but also to acquire the charters of many railway companies in Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec and it was from these by which the company derived its, so called, powers. The 1905 legislation granted power to consolidate the following railway charters⁵:

- ◆ Ottawa River Railway
- ◆ Central Counties Railway
- ◆ Great Eastern Railway
- ◆ Carillon and Grenville Railway
- ◆ Ottawa Navigation Company

The Central Counties Railway, originally incorporated as the Prescott County Railway, had already built the line between Hawkesbury and Glen Robertson on the Canada Atlantic main line. This line opened on 4 January 1892 and was leased to the Canada Atlantic. On 9 December 1895 the Central Counties opened an additional line between South Indian (now Limoges) and Rockland. This line, too, was leased to and operated by the Canada Atlantic. Acquiring the rights to a railway which was already in operation might not seem of much value to a new company but it should be remembered that the capital was being raised mainly in the United Kingdom and France and it would be a useful selling point that the railway could claim it already had something in operation.

With rights to the Carillon and Grenville, the Central Railway could claim that it already had 13 miles constructed and in operation. The Carillon and Grenville was a portage railway which was incorporated as far back as 1840-41. The railway itself had been sold to the Canadian Northern Ontario Railway which narrowed the gauge from 5 foot 6 inches to standard and incorporated it into its line between Montreal, Hawkesbury and Ottawa, opened in 1909. The Central claimed that the Carillon and Grenville had no right to sell itself to the Canadian Northern and that the Canadian Northern had no right to buy the Carillon and Grenville.

But the Carillon and Grenville was useful in another way so far as the promotion of the Central Railway was concerned. The Central prospectus claimed that the Carillon and Grenville had rights to a land grant of 1,300,000 acres. If this could have been proven the revenue potential would have been enormous. The land grants were made pre-confederation and provincial governments maintained that they were now null and void. The federal government moved away from land grants when it started the policy of voting cash subsidies in aid of building railways in 1882.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Central Railway was trying to raise money across the Atlantic under somewhat dubious circumstances.

In 1907⁶ a contract was entered into with Dominion Engineering and Construction of Toronto for construction. This was held in abeyance in the absence of funding and little seems to have been done.

On 11 March 1908 the Minister of Railways and Canals responded to written questions. The Central Railway Company had made a deposit of \$25,000 to the government which was aware that many persons engaged on the surveys had not been paid for services rendered. The Minister pointed out that there was no way by which this money could be retained or dealt with by the government to pay claims against the company. The money in question was "a guarantee for the construction of the line," It was to be "repaid as the work progresses." Presumably the sum was forfeited given the Company's eventual failure as an operating railway.

In 1911⁷ there was another attempt to raise money, the bonds being secured by a first mortgage on 164 miles of line (110 miles from Montreal to Ottawa and 54 miles of branches) which were partly built (!) and a land grant of 1,300,000 acres in the Ottawa Valley. The main line included the 13 mile Carillon and Grenville which was now part of the Canadian Northern line. The British firm of C.J. Wills (or Willis) & Son, now had the construction contract, the first part of which, from Montreal to Ottawa, had to be completed by 1 November 1912. The contract provided for a high standard of construction, with low gradients, light curvature,

¹ There were, in fact, four routes between Ottawa and Montreal. The Canadian Pacific line along the north shore of the Ottawa River via Lachute was entirely within Quebec and is outside the scope of this article.

² Railway and Shipping World, February 1906, page 63.

³ Railway and Shipping World, April 1906, page 215.

⁴ Railway and Shipping World, November 1906, page 675.

⁵ Robert Dorman/D.E. Stoltz, Statutory History of railways in Canada 1987 page 96.

⁶ Railway and Shipping World, August 1908, page 573.

⁷ Railway and Shipping World, September 1911, page 849

bridges and culverts of stone, concrete and steel and 80 lb. per yard rails. This was to be a double track electric railway and an examination of the short section that was graded indicates that the right of way was wide enough for double track and posts for the overhead wires. However, the go ahead was held in abeyance, again waiting for funding.

In March 1912 it was reported⁸:
"Complete surveys and profile and final location have been made from Montreal to South Indian via St. Eustache, St. Placide, Oka, St. Andrews, Hawkesbury, McAlpine and Lemieux. A large amount of the right of way has been purchased, including that for a terminal in Montreal. Rails and ties have been ordered for 50 miles. The bridges over Riviere des Prairies, near Montreal, Riviere des Milles Iles at St. Eustache, and over the Ottawa River at St. Andrews have been commenced. Other construction will be pushed directly weather permits. C.N. Armstrong, Montreal, is Managing Director; F. Stewart Williamson, Montreal, Chief Engineer, and C.J. Wills & Sons, London, England, and Montreal are the contractors."

On 20 May 1912 the Board of Railway Commissioners¹⁰ approved the route from near McAlpine station, on the Canadian Pacific M&O line to South Indian (Limoges) on the Grand Trunk Railway (the GTR had taken over the Canada Atlantic in October 1905.) In July and August 1912¹¹ the BRC authorized crossings over local roads and on July 31 Canadian Pacific Railway was authorized to construct a spur¹² at m. 36.23 at McAlpine station for the Central Railway, to be completed within 3 months.

1912 seems to have been the only year in which actual physical work was carried out on the ground¹³.

"We are officially advised that the company has ordered in the US 1,500 tons of 80 lb. steel rails for prompt delivery. This is in addition to an order previously given the Algoma Steel Co. Track laying will be started as soon as grading is completed from McAlpine to the Norton River. Ties have been delivered for the first 30 miles. All bridges and culverts are under construction and a contract has been given the Canadian Bridge Co., Walkerville, for the steel viaduct over the Scotch River. The station yard at McAlpine has been laid out and a station to be used jointly with the CPR is about to be built. Construction will be pushed ahead west of South Inghorn (sic. should be Indian?) as rapidly as possible. Construction is also under way east of McAlpine, through Hawkesbury, St. Andrews and St. Eustache, thence on to the Back River and into Montreal. F. Stuart Williamson is the Chief Engineer."

The local press was optimistic. It reported on a meeting in Midland in which it was claimed that "steel is laid for a considerable distance"¹⁴. This appears to have been patently untrue, the only location where rails appear to have been laid is in the yard at McAlpine.

In December a further 1,000,000 ties were ordered for delivery as directed to Ste. Agathe, Lachute, Montreal, Grenville, Hawkesbury, McAlpine, Ottawa, South Indian, Carleton Place, Bannockburn, Fenelon Falls, Orillia and Midland¹⁵.

Disaster struck in 1913. The contractors, C.J. Wills, brought a suit against the Central of Canada asking that the company be required to deposit with the court \$750,000 to guarantee the cost of construction between Montreal and Midland. Wills claimed they had already expended \$230,000 on the first 20 miles and on other work. The Company filed a counter claim for \$100,000 alleging the

contractors failed to carry out their work with due diligence¹⁶.

All construction had stopped and the Company tried to engage another contractor¹⁷. Wills obtained an injunction which prevented the Company from going on with construction either on its own or with another contractor. This wound its way through the courts and it was found that the Company had the right to terminate the contract upon paying damages¹⁸. Nothing further was done on the ground and the Central of Canada Railway was wound up in 1922.

However, there was an additional twist to this story relating to the materials purchased and stored on the ground at McAlpine¹⁹. Taking into account demands from the war effort and the need for steel for railway construction in Canada, the rails, ties, etc stored at McAlpine were of some value to the government. The full amount is best described by the Order in Council PC1917-1447 of 25 May 1917 which:

"Authorizes the Department of Railways and Canals to purchase from the Central Railway of Canada, 1,578 gross tons of 80 lb. steel rails, which the Company have, piled up alongside of a siding at McAlpine Junction, near Vankleek Hill on the CPR at a price of \$50 per gross ton, as piled. This quantity includes about 125 tons of rails in the said siding, the cost of taking up will be borne by the Central Railway. The Company have, also piled up at this place, 50,000 hemlock ties, for which Mr. Armstrong, Vice President of the Company, has quoted a price of 40 cents each. He further offers the track fastenings in the siding at the following prices:

- ◆ Plates - \$2.50 per 100 lbs.
- ◆ Bolts - \$3.00 per 100 lbs.
- ◆ Spikes - \$2.25 per 100 lbs.

These rails, ties and fastenings are required for the Canadian Government Railways.

The Department is authorized to purchase such quantities of ties and track fastenings, at the prices stated, as are considered by the Departmental Engineer in charge as suitable for the use intended to be made of the same."

O'Brien and Doheny were engaged as contractors to load the rails and other material on to rail cars for shipment from McAlpine. The cars were destined for the construction of the Quebec and Saguenay Railway. However, like everything else connected to the Central Railway of Canada, things did not go smoothly. Mr. Armstrong did not mention the second quality of some rails or shorts and there were only 41,000 ties on hand at McAlpine and not 50,000 as stated. To make matters worse the

trustees of the Company, which was now in bankruptcy proceedings, claimed that Mr. Armstrong had no authority to sell the rails and materials. On 19th June 1917 the CPR agent at McAlpine was instructed by the Company not to ship any more material. Seventeen cars were loaded and ready to lift. Two days later the contractors were instructed to unload these cars.

The rails were urgently needed for railway construction and the Department of Railways and Canals drafted an order under the War Measures Act. However, cooler heads prevailed and an arrangement was agreed under which the government would pay the amounts owed into an account with a Trust Company in Montreal under an agreement to pay the rightful owner when this had been settled. Loading resumed on Monday 25 June. In all, 54 carloads were shipped from McAlpine. The total payment to the Royal Trust Company for 1695 tons purchased was \$92,194.07. This included an adjustment of \$12,137.50 to cover time lost, picking up the siding, #2 quality rail and shorts.

The line, as originally projected, would have run between Montreal and Ottawa. It would have crossed the Ottawa River at Hawkesbury under running rights over the Canadian Northern bridge. On the Ottawa side the rights would continue as far as the connection with the Canada Atlantic Railway in Hawkesbury. Although shown on the Central's plans, it is not known whether running rights were negotiated or whether this was merely wishful thinking. When the project was extended from Ottawa to Midland the line would have run south of Ottawa which would have been served by a branch line. No detailed locations were approved west of South Indian.

Little remains on the ground at McAlpine today. The rails of CP's M&O sub were lifted in 1986, the bed now a rail trail, and the station has been gone even longer. The geography of the area hides the remains of the line on the south side of the CPR in a small creek valley. A grade wide enough for about three tracks passes a few hundred feet into the bush, where it narrows to a single track bed at the first road crossing.

The CPR runs through a shallow cut on both sides of the creek valley, and by process of eliminating the physical impossibilities of the topography, the only place a connecting track could have existed is in the southeast quadrant.

North of the CPR no grading is visible, but for several miles to the south the railbed is faintly visible through farmers' fields as it runs along the ancient bed of the Ottawa River.

Thus we lost the opportunity to have a double track, electric railway between Ottawa and Montreal. Under other circumstances this might have been the foundation for a railway whisking passengers between the two cities in less than an hour in TGV-type trains. ■

¹⁶ Railway and Shipping World, May 1913, page 219.

¹⁷ Railway and Shipping World, August 1913, page 376.

¹⁸ Railway and Shipping World, January 1914, page 4.

¹⁹ Information for this section has been taken from RG 43 vol 190 file 18859, "Canadian Government Railway purchase of rails, ties and fastenings from the Central of Canada Railway."



⁸ Railway and Shipping World, March 1912, page 120

⁹ In the record both McAlpine and McAlpine have been used. Unless used in a direct quote we have used McAlpine here.

¹⁰ Board of Railway Commissioners order 16551 of 20 May 1912.

¹¹ Board of Railway Commissioners orders 17102(23 July 1912) and 17254 (22 August 1912)

¹² Board of Railway Commissioners order 17151 of 31 July 1912.

¹³ Railway and Shipping World, October 1912, page 501.

¹⁴ Ottawa Journal, 11 October 1912.

¹⁵ Railway and Shipping World, January 1913, page 20.