



Death Knell on the Hamilton & North Western Railway

By H. David Vuckson

In the 19th Century, railways were the last word in transportation on land when there was nothing faster to compare them to. The few roads that existed were often impassable during winter and spring because of deep snow or mud and ruts but a railway meant year-round convenience and progress for the communities it passed through and decline or, at the very least, inconvenience for those it bypassed.

The Hamilton & North Western Railway which, at its peak, connected Lake Erie (at Port Dover), Lake Ontario (at Hamilton), Lake Simcoe (at Barrie-on the main line) and Georgian Bay (at Collingwood-on the branch line from Beeton [Allimil] Junction on the main line), was, in the minds of the citizens of Simcoe County, supposed to be a grand alternative to the monopoly held by the Northern Railway of Canada. The Northern which had linked Toronto and Collingwood since 1855 was not universally praised or admired by those it served because it was the only game in town and could charge whatever rates it wanted and offer whatever level of service it cared to give. The concept of another railway linking Toronto's great rival, Hamilton, with Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay in the 1870's persuaded Simcoe County and

the townships the line would pass through to give financial bonuses for the construction of the H&NW in the hope of having another option to the rates and service dictated by the Northern.

As history has recorded, within a few months after the railway from Hamilton arrived in Collingwood in 1879 it merged, mainly for financial reasons, with its rival to whom it was intended to offer stiff competition. Politicians in Collingwood must have been frothing at the mouth over the nearly \$38,000.00 in bonuses the Town had voted to give the H&NW which had promised from the outset that it was to be a “competing” line and would never amalgamate with another railway. The Walnut Street Station, Roundhouse and turntable were dismantled not long after they were built; the proposed wharf out into the harbour with a grain elevator on it was never built and all activity for both railways in town was now centred at the Northern Railway’s St. Paul Street Station and railyard. And so began a direct rail connection between Hamilton and Collingwood which lasted for seventy-six years until 1955.

The amalgamated Northern and North Western Railways, as the two separate lines came to be known in 1879, were taken over in 1888 by the Grand Trunk Railway. In the early 1920’s when the Canadian National Railway network was formed by the Federal government taking over the charters of a number of bankrupt railways, they must have wondered what to do with the line between Collingwood and Beeton and it was remarkable that this branch line survived as a through route for over thirty more years. Traffic on it was light as were the rails themselves (56 lb./yard) and this line ended up, in its later years of through traffic between Beeton and Collingwood being serviced by two types of small steam locomotives: 4-6-0 “Ten

Wheelers”, my favourite type of engine of them all, and, in the last year, a couple of 2-6-0 “Moguls” (#’s 87 and 88) built in Kingston in 1910. There is a legend that during construction of the line, the contractor did things cheaply and had filled the railway embankment with tree trunks and other organic stuff and as this material rotted, the roadbed, with minimal maintenance, became uneven with the result that the mixed passenger/freight train that ran between Beeton and Collingwood was limited to traveling at a speed of “60 miles per hour” divided up this way: 20 mph forward, 20 mph sideways, and 20 mph up and down (see Ian Wilson’s book *Steam At Allandale* pg. 69)—a slow roller coaster of “shake, rattle and roll” before that term was applied to rock music.

The CNR finally received permission to stop the six days-a-week through service between Beeton and Collingwood in 1955, the last run being on October 29, 1955. Creemore’s handsome railway station, built in 1906 in the Grand Trunk era, did not live to see the end of through service because it burned down in April of that year, apparently struck by lightning according to one authority. After this event, the original H&NW station on the opposite side of the tracks that had been demoted to the function of freight shed resumed being a station for another six months until the end of through service and then reverted again to a freight shed until 1960. The tracks between Alliston and Creemore were removed and what remained were freight spurs between a) Beeton and Alliston (until 1990), and b) Collingwood and Creemore (until the spring of 1960). During those last five years there were occasional freight runs via Collingwood down to Glen Huron for Hamilton Bros. or all the way to Creemore with the locomotive carefully tiptoeing its way at 5-10 miles per hour over the now overgrown and

much-deteriorated rusty rails and rotten ties. Travelling from the Allandale roundhouse north to Collingwood and then south again to Glen Huron or Creemore and then retracing their path became a full day's work for the crew from the time they left Allandale until they returned there late in the afternoon. It was a leisurely all-day excursion with a bit of work thrown in as long as there were no issues with the decrepit tracks.

After October 1955, this truncated railway presented a difficulty for steam locomotives. Because the line was now a dead end at Creemore, a steam locomotive had no way to turn around to head back to Collingwood. With a standard steam engine there were only two options, neither of them ideal: they either had to head for Glen Huron engine first and then very carefully back all the way to Collingwood where they could use the turntable before heading back to the roundhouse at Allandale, or they could back all the way to Glen Huron from Collingwood and return locomotive first. Both of these options presented difficulties. Travelling in reverse could be risky because of the above-mentioned condition of the tracks requiring extra "eyes" from the brakemen to avoid a potential derailment.

Charles Cooper, in his magnificent book *Hamilton's Other Railway*, a "must have" for rail enthusiasts in Collingwood, records that, "Between August 1955 and January 1957 the CNR experimented with a Baltic-type (4-6-4T) tank engine (#48) on stub end service on the Collingwood-Creemore spur" (pg. 200). A tank-type steam locomotive had its coal and water supply mounted on the main frame rather than in a separate tender so that it could run easily in either direction without having to turn around. The Grand Trunk built six of these engines in 1914 that were primarily used on commuter trains in the Montreal area. The

website

www.canadianrailwayobservations.com/croarchives/dec2012cn.htm

has a photo of engine #48 about 7/8 of the way down the page.

In my memory I can still hear the sound of this engine's whistle; it was the most mournful sounding whistle I had ever heard. It would come up to Collingwood from Allandale usually on Saturday mornings when required, [although I did see it from a distance when it was coming back into town late on a weekday afternoon as it crossed Sixth St. at Walnut as I was leaving Victoria School] with loads of freight for Hamilton Bros. in Glen Huron and/or H.P. Shepherd & Son in Creemore. Shepherds conducted a business similar to Hamilton Bros. (coal, grain, feed, cement, building supplies and farm machinery, to name a few items). There were several other customers in Creemore as well, but Shepherds had the luxury of a long railway siding with a switch at each end onto the main track passing by their mill.

I could gauge the locomotive's progress from when it first blew its whistle for the Poplar Sideroad crossing coming into town from Stayner and then as it made its way into town, across the waterfront and then as it switched onto what was left of the old H&NW, heading south down Walnut St. through the front yards of those living on the west side of the street, the whistle blowing for every street crossing all the way to Campbell Street. Around mid-afternoon #48's whistle would sound for the Poplar Sideroad as it made its way back into town from the direction of Nottawa. Every time that whistle blew it was sadly announcing the death knell of the Hamilton & North Western line that had arrived in Collingwood in January 1879 with such great hopes. The reality had proved to be very different.

Those who live on Walnut St. today may find it difficult to visualize a street-level railway track on the west side of the road between the edge of the pavement and the grass on their front lawn. There was no fence or any other barrier between the front yards and the tracks (see pg. 236 *Hamilton's Other Railway*). Mothers of small children, especially boys fascinated by moving machinery, must have had heart palpitations worrying about their children being outside when there were two "mixed" trains (freight and passenger) passing through their front yard every day, six days a week until October 1955, one of them during the lunch hour when children were home from school. Parents must have heaved a sigh of relief when the trains stopped running Monday through Saturday and then five years later when the tracks were taken up in September/October 1960, their peace of mind must have increased greatly.

An additional sigh of relief must have come from mothers in 1955 because of how the railway timetable impacted their housekeeping schedule. An issue that existed along this railway track and, indeed, anywhere else in town where people lived near the tracks in an era when most everyone used a solar clothes dryer, better known as a clothesline, was the peril of having the washing hanging out to dry when a steam locomotive went by belching black smoke. At least on the Walnut St. line the ladies could wait to hang out their wash until after the train returned to Beeton around 2 p.m.; there would not be another one passing by until during the noon hour the next day. Train time was predictable on Walnut St., not so on Minnesota St. near the CNR railyard where there were numerous steam locomotives throughout the day on multiple freight and passenger train assignments. Even the direction the wind was blowing the smoke on

any given day could affect the laundry hung out to dry. The increasing popularity and convenience of electric clothes dryers from the late 1950's onward also coincided not only with decreased activity on the main railway into town but also with the end of the steam era.

Unlike today when Walnut St. runs right through to First St., in the railway era Walnut St. ended at Second St. The right-of-way between Second and First Streets was, in 1879, a terminal with a station, roundhouse and turntable—an “unopened street allowance”.

Following the merger with the Northern, those facilities were removed. Here, until removal of the tracks in 1960, was a switch for a siding to service the Collingwood Milling Co. (now Kelsey's Restaurant). Just south of First St. the flour mill siding had a “derail” device commonly used on railway spurs to prevent a runaway rail car from entering the main track. In this grassy area between First and Second Streets the tracks crossed over the western branch of Underwood Creek that wound its way west from the corner of Oak and Second St. over to Hickory St. and then north out into the harbour, now mostly underground. I used to see hundreds of minnows in the water under the railway trestle at this location. Years before I explored this area there had been a second railway siding into the Canadian Oil Company facility on the east side of the tracks.

There is a bizarre “legend” in Collingwood's railway history about a runaway boxcar on the Hamilton and North Western. When Smart Bros. had their large farm spanning the area between Campbell St. and the Poplar Sideroad, they had a railway siding in this area. The siding paralleled the main track running north and south with a switch at each end. The alleged runaway boxcar is said to have started rolling from Smart's farm on a Sunday morning. Somehow it must have single-

handedly managed not only to unlock and move out of its way the derail device intended to keep it from getting onto the main track, but also it is then supposed to have unlocked and turned the switch onto the main track. It then is said to have rolled more than a mile north all the way to First St., crossed a busy Highway 26 and then somehow managed to unlock and turn the switch at Lake Junction allowing it to enter the main track between Collingwood and Meaford. It is doubtful that this boxcar bothered to stop and record its entry in the register booth at the Junction. It allegedly then continued rolling east across town behind Smart's Cannery then past the St. Paul St. CNR station, continuing south before coming to a rest just north of Hume St. This had to be the most miraculous boxcar in Collingwood's history. Just think, it could have been preserved in a rail museum and those trying to achieve perpetual motion would have been captivated by it and would have gone crazy spending many hours trying to figure out its secret!

When I was in high school in the early 1960's, our gym curriculum included cross country running. The route was west up Campbell St. from C.C.I. to where the H&NW tracks used to be, then north along the high railway embankment to a path leading through the fields to the then-western end of Cameron St. and back to the school. At the place where Campbell St. met the railway, the road surface rose up to meet the tracks. Years later, the railway embankment was removed and Campbell St. became a level surface where the Walnut St. trail begins (or ends depending on which direction one is going), the trail itself being many feet lower than the former railway grade. No traces of the Hamilton & North Western now remain in Collingwood although a few portions of the right-of-way south of Campbell St. to Duntroon and beyond (where it has not been turned into farm fields or had houses

built on it) can be picked out in the satellite view on Google Maps by those of us oldtimers who know what to look for.

Diesel freight locomotives had started to operate out of Allandale as early as the spring of 1956. For two more years they shared the rails with the steam locomotives that were nearing the end of their usefulness and gradually being retired to be sent for scrapping, many of them having given upwards of half a century of service. When the steam era at Allandale came to an end in October 1958, the motive power on our branch line now consisted of SW1200RS General Motors diesel locomotives which could easily travel in either direction down the decrepit tracks from Collingwood to Glen Huron/Creemore without having to turn around. My friends on the daily Allandale to Meaford wayfreight crew told me in the summer of 1959 they would take me with them to Glen Huron “if they ever went there again”. I had so hoped to experience travelling on this wonderfully scenic branch line, riding in the locomotive and the caboose along the east flank of the Niagara Escarpment and then down through the valley of the Mad River, but it was not to be for the closing of the line to Creemore came in April 1960 [born too late]. My boyhood summertime adventures with the crew of the daily freight train to Meaford can be read in Chapter 6 of Rick Leswick’s book *Riding the Hog Special*, published in 2014.

One evening in December 2016 I watched a number of YouTube videos of railway activity in Ireland. One of them featured someone walking along an overgrown, abandoned rail line, lamenting its state of decay. Early the next morning, while asleep, my brain played me the most

amazing dream in living colour: first, I was in a café in the Duntroon area talking with the locals about what life must have been like in Duntroon around 1879-1880 when the Hamilton & North Western Railway was their principal point of contact with the outside world. Later, I found myself driving on a rural road somewhere southeast of Creemore when, after exiting the car and while walking around, to my great surprise and delight, I came upon the H&NW tracks, including a switch for a siding. A couple of other people came along and I was so excited to tell them, "Look what I've found! These tracks were supposed to have been removed in 1955 when the line was abandoned between Creemore and Alliston and they're still here!" I thought to myself that I must call Peter Coates and tell him about it. Then I woke up.

Over fifty years ago there was another fantasy concerning the Hamilton & North Western line. Jim Belcher who operated the CN Telecommunications office at the CNR station and who was a great rail enthusiast created his own version of the H&NW and called it the "Noisy River Railroad" named for the fact that the Mad and Noisy Rivers meet near (west of) Creemore. The list of half a dozen or so executives of that fictitious company all had the surname Belcher except for the freight agent who had the tongue twisting name of "H. Klyupoistinsyatshyttis" whose office was in Metz, France. Frank Hamilton of Hamilton Bros. in Glen Huron would have had to learn French to communicate with this guy to order a hopper carload of coal to be delivered by Jim Belcher's railway. Jim created a pamphlet listing these executives and containing a timetable for trains running between Collingwood and Creemore on his imaginary railway much like I created

a price list for my fictitious Collingwood piano factory [see *Collingwood Never Had A Piano Factory*].

The railway that ran from Hamilton all the way to Collingwood via Beeton, Alliston, Creemore, Glen Huron, Duntroon, Nottawa and Walnut St. is just a memory for those of us who remember it. The inactive (since 2011) railway from Allandale (actually just the portion from Utopia to Collingwood)—the town's original reason for existence—is, unfortunately, rapidly achieving that status as well. However, a four mile portion of the original Hamilton & North Western main line survives as a tourist railway in Simcoe County—The South Simcoe Railway operating between Tottenham and Beeton—with two steam locomotives from 1883 and 1910, passenger coaches from the 1920's and other vintage rolling stock, maintaining the flavour and experience of 19th Century railway travel.

In Simcoe County, another short segment of the former H&NW mainline between Allandale and the Highway 400 overpass is still in use for freight service, operated by the Barrie-Collingwood Railway short line which currently operates between the CPR interchange at Utopia and Highway 400 via Allandale.

Seventeen years ago, a summer tourist train operated out of Victoria with vintage equipment for a couple of seasons before giving up. In their gift shop, I bought a bumper sticker which I placed on the front of my tool box. It reads, "**OLD RAIL FANS NEVER DIE.... THEY JUST LOSE TRACK.....**"

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