The Story of The Canadian Railways

The Russians had a sure instinct when, on surrounding Lake Baikal in Central Asia, with their Trans-Siberian line, they put on the western end of the Central Tunnel a conspicuous inscription “To the Great Ocean,” and on the eastern end “To the Atlantic Ocean.” No railway can stir the imagination like one that bridges a continent, and links oceans far apart. In no other work of human hands on a gigantic scale, have the spirits of romance and adventure been so closely allied with industry, or, indeed, with any enterprise, except none more fast engaging round the world. The story of the construction of the Canadian Railways, is an epic of a great accomplishment in which the engineer’s overcome difficulties will match unreasonably—difficulties of interposed lakes, rising streams, strong and weak mountains, bottomless chasms, avalanches, swift eddies and snow-covered canyons, with the usual want of labor, and doubt as to adequate capital.

The main length of the Canadian Pacific, joining Montreal with Vancouver, does not seem, at first, the story of the difficulties encountered and overcome.

Looking back into the mists of the past, the greatest world nations have all been transport pioneers. One has only to consider the road and bridge building activities of the Romans to realize this, or the merchant shipping of the Spaniards in our own Elizabethan times. In more recent times, countries that have been slow in the development of Railways, Roads or Waterways, have been lifted high and stay by the flooring title of commerce.

Canada soon began to realize this, and by the development of her railway system she has secured an outstanding position amongst the leading nations of the world.
The first Canadian railway was constructed in 1836 between St. Johns and Sappora, Quebec, with the object of shortening the journey between Montreal and Quebec. In 1850, however, there were only sixty-six miles of railway in all Canada. The railway era in Canada may be said to have begun in 1851, when an act was passed providing for the construction of a main line of railway. The result was the completion of the Grand Trunk Railway in 1856.

In 1869 it was extended westward to Sarnia and continued to Thunder Bay. In 1889 on the completion of the Victoria Bridge across the St. Lawrence at Montreal, the Grand Trunk had a through route, eight hundred miles long, from Portland to Sarnia. In 1888 the Grand Trunk took over the Northern Railway (Toronto, Barrie and Hamilton and North Western Railway) and in 1891 the completion of the St. Clair tunnel gave direct communication with the United States of America.

As early as 1830 it was proposed to build an Intercolonial Railway between the maritime provinces and Quebec. In 1851 the Government were prepared to give money, but the project failed through a difference of opinion as to the selected route. Nova Scotia made a start, but both New Brunswick and New Brunswick were not able to raise sufficient capital, and in 1851 there were only 341 miles of railway in the maritime provinces, and these passed to the Dominion Government, which undertook to complete them. They took over new branches and obtained running rights over the Grand Trunk tracks into Montreal, and the Intercolonial Railway became a competitor for the metropolitan business of Montreal, which was at that period the commercial centre of Canada. Although the building of the Grand Trunk line, and of the Intercolonial, was a fine engineering work, there can be no doubt that the greatest railway enterprise undertaken and accomplished by men, has been the
construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway—the first transcontinental railway linking Montreal with Vancouver. Some seventy years ago, Major Sir Michael Smyth had advocated the construction of a Canadian Pacific Railway nearly along the present route. In 1881, a government commission reported against the proposal. Nevertheless, the problem had to be grappled with at the price of a united Canada. Only on the promise of a transcontinental Canadian railway could British Columbia, whose valleys rich in minerals run northwards into the United States, agree to enter the Canadian Federation. That conditional agreement to join with the Eastern Canadian provinces was made in 1871, and surveying began in that year. But it was not until 1885 that the difficulties of the long journey were surmounted, and the steel track finally linked the Atlantic and the Pacific across British lands.

Building began in 1874, but extraordinary difficulties were encountered.

"After Ottawa was left behind, was a stretch of some nine hundred miles of 'bad lands'—rocky, infertile, waterlogged, abounding with difficulties, barren of resources. When the line emerged from rock and inhospitable forest, and reached the gateway of the great prairie lands, some distance short of Winnipeg, there was another 1,000 miles of easy gradient, rising to the great central prairie plateau of 2,000 feet elevation, but known only to the hunter and trapper, and entirely devoid of every form of supplies, whether of wood, or other material. Across the prairies loomed the most forbidding bastions of the Rocky Mountains, with the Rocky Selkirk range behind that, and the Coast Range beyond, a prospect to daunt all except the most hopeful and fearless."

The enterprise never would have been carried through but for the splendid public spirit of the Canadian Government under Sir John MacDonald. A brief statement of the help given by the government will show how formidably the financial obstacles to this huge scheme the government itself made and gave to the company 100 miles of line through the
almost impassable Rockies lands, separating the fertile east of
this great Dominion from the fertile centre in the West. They
made the company, which eventually completed the line, a
loan of $6,000,000 and gave them a present of 26,000,000
acres of land lying across the railway, through the wide stretch of
thick undulating prairie. The difficulties of the route were increased
from the fact that the line had to skirt the northern shores of the Great
Lakes, and so enable the future corn lands of the West to ship their
grain at the North Western extremity of Lake Superior, and secure a
cheap outlet to the markets of the world. The railway was built by 1885
and like the Grand Trunk, it began to acquire branches linking it to
Quebec, Ottawa, Manitoba, various ports of Ontario, Manitoba, Nova
Scotia, Sydney and St John, Maine, and many other places.

The second great transcontinental Railway is the Grand
Trunk Pacific. The story of the construction of the Grand Trunk is
told very concisely in “The Making of A Great Canadian Railway”
by F. A. Talbot. About the end of the 19th century the Grand
Trunk Pacific Company, which already had a line as far west as
Chicago, submitted to the Canadian Government a proposal by which
it might have a share in the settlement, and (2) development of the
West.

The Government objected to the first scheme, because too
much of the line would lie in the United States. The company
then proposed to construct a line from Winnipeg to North Bay,
but the Government suggested that they themselves should
continue the line east to Montreal, New Brunswick, and Atlantic to
the Grand Trunk Pacific for fifty years.

The western half from Winnipeg to Prince Rupert
was to be built by the Grand Trunk Pacific. The Company
agreed to these proposals, and work on the National-
Transcontinental and Grand Trunk Pacific Railway was begun.
The Government furnishing subsidies to aid the work of construction.
The special feature of the Eastern part of the Grand Trunk
line was the attempt to get clear of the wilderness of rock and water.
that lies to the southwest of the Great Lakes, and which presented such a nearly barrier to the Canadian Pacific. By carrying the line still to the North through New Ontario, it was found possible to avoid much of the heavy work needed to blast a passage through the wilderness of rock, and also to aim at, for cultivation a clay soil belt of great richness. Beyond the prairie, the Grand Trunk crosses the Rocky Mountains by the Yellow Head Pass to Prince Rupert, at a height of only 3772 feet compared with 5329 feet at the Great Divide of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The third of the great transcontinental railways — the Canadian Northern Railway, was begun in 1886 when the 155 mile line of the Lake Manitoba Railway and Canal Company was completed. The Government of Manitoba wished to compete with the Canadian Pacific Railway, and assisted the Canadian Northern Railway to secure the Manitoba lines of the North Pacific, and in 1902 the line from Winnipeg to Port Arthur was completed. During the next ten years the west was filling rapidly, and during the boom of immigration, the railway was able to secure grants from the Government of the Provinces and Dominion to enable it to continue the line east of Montreal and west to Vancouver, and so complete the great scheme.

With two new transcontinental main lines and branches under construction, the mileage between 1900 and 1915 almost exactly doubled. For it increased from 17,687 to 34,832 miles.

The builders of the new lines, the Government, the people, everyone expected that immigration of capital and labour from Europe would rapidly settle the areas served by the new railways; and bring them adequate and profitable traffic, as had been the case with the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The great War, however, intervened. Neither capital nor labour from Europe was available. Immigration decreased enormously, and working costs increased to an abnormal extent, and it became necessary for the Government to assist the Railways. In 1916.
Loans were made to the Grand Trunk Pacific and the Canadian Northern Railway Companies, and a commission of three experts was appointed to investigate the working of these railway systems. The commission issued a report called the Drayton-Arrowth Report which has been the basis of railway management in Canada since then. Their recommendation was that the public should take control of the Canadian Northern, the Grand Trunk Pacific, and the Grand Trunk, and that they should be administered by a board of trustees. In this way the Canadian Northern Railways came into being and several eastern lines were acquired recently. The very latest is the Railway to Churchill (formerly the Hudson Bay Railway). The former name was Nelson but in 1926 it was transferred to Churchill, and which was reached in April of last year, though it is not completely graded or ballasted yet.

The boldness of spirit and faith in enterprise which have planned and financed the vast network of communications which has so swiftly developed every part of the Dominion, would seem to indicate that the Dominion of Canada has before it a great future, through its railways Canada will live and grow.