

# *A Canadian Adieu*



Photo by Angus McIntyre

Excerpted from

*Railroaded: The Life and Near-Death of Canada's Passenger Trains*

By

Greg Gormick

© 2020 by Greg Gormick and On Track Strategies

# A Red Letter Day

For - Canada

## June 28, '86

WHEN THE

## CANADIAN PACIFIC

RAILWAY

## OPENS PACIFIC OCEAN

- TO THE -

TRAIN LEAVES DAILY:

Toronto,	- -	5.00 p.m.
Montreal,	- -	8.00 "
Ottawa,	- -	11.45 "

EXCEPT SUNDAY

EXCEPT SUNDAY

## OUR OWN LINE

FROM THE

## ATLANTIC TO THE PACIFIC

NO CUSTOMS NO DELAYS NO TRANSFERS  
LOW RATES QUICK TIME

For further particulars apply to any Agent of the Company, or to

W. D. HUGHES,

Principal Travel Agent

W. H. CALLAGHY,

Chief Travel Agent

THE KING STREET WEST, TORONTO

W. C. VAN HORN

Chief Travel Agent

550 KING

St. York Street

SCOTTER & SONS

2. MURPHY

Chief Travel Agent

Refugee Ship, Toronto, Ontario

1886

When the CPR dispatched its first passenger train over its newly-opened transcontinental main line on June 28, 1886, the company proclaimed it a Red Letter Day for Canada. That surely made January 14, 1990, a Black Crepe Day for Canada; the day when 52 per cent of VIA would die and *The Canadian* would be the final passenger train sent down the length of that same trail of steel.

Appropriately, the day began slate gray and clammy cold in Toronto. At 1 o'clock, I was leaving for Winnipeg on the last westbound *Canadian* and I was dreading it. How to bid adieu to an icon you've known and loved for 30 years?

On the subway ride to Union Station, I met a VIA engineer about to make his last run to Windsor. We talked about the glory days and he said, "When CN hired me 40 years ago, I didn't expect the trains to retire when I did."

Union Station's cavernous Great Hall was awash in protesters eddying around the information kiosk and ticket windows with banners and placards. Even the staunchest Conservative Party member would have known this wasn't a day to solicit donations.

One demonstrator highlighted the federal government's financing of Amtrak's new Bombardier-built coaches: "Tories give \$200 million to Amtrak. Big fat zero for VIA."

The protesters cheered when Toronto Mayor – and Liberal Party heavyweight – Art Eggleton vowed to fight long after the cuts sent the surplus trains into dead storage. Other Liberals pledged the same. All forgot to mention their government mothballed some of the same trains when it knocked off a fifth of VIA in 1981.

Beneath the platform tracks, word spread of a more subtle protest. *The Canadian* was not in her stall on Track Seven, but tugging at her fetters six miles away on a departure track at VIA's Toronto Maintenance Centre. Soon-to-be-axed workers at the shop inspected her, but they refused to remove the blue flags that protected them during the inspection. The rulebook is clear: those who put the blue flags up have to take them down.

The delay afforded a chance to mingle and mourn.

Beaming like Cheshire cats in the midst of this swirl of humanity were two men whose smiles could warm even the saddest heart: train service manager Gaston Ouellette and his buddy, retired dining car steward Joe Kratochvil. How apt that Joe should be there with Gaston, helping to close out a legend he'd helped build when he was one of the railroaders who had taken her out on her first run.





## None But the Best for Canada

The Canadian Pacific's new transcontinental train, "The Canadian", leaves daily from Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. It is the most modern and beautiful train ever built . . . with dome cars from which to view Canada's magnificent and varied scenery on the longest dome ride in the world.

The car you ride in, dome or otherwise, is constructed of many-times-stronger stainless steel. And it is equipped with

Budd disc brakes that make stops velvet smooth, and barely whisper down long mountain grades.

For years, the Canadian Pacific has made a practice of studying the quality and performance of passenger equipment on all the world's great trains. Out of these searching studies have come the ideas that provide for your travel enjoyment in "The Canadian". And also the decision to have these trains built by Budd.

**Budd**

Philadelphia

Detroit

Gary

With them was one of *The Canadian's* most faithful fans, Dave Brain. For more years than most VIA employees could remember, Dave and his wife, his son and their friend, Terry Fox, had ridden the train several times a year. Before his marriage, Dave frequently took off spontaneously on Friday or Saturday evenings to Sudbury with Terry, just so they could have dinner in the dining car and then while away the hours in style over champagne in the Park car's drawing room.

Dave had taken his last ride on *The Canadian's* CPR route and Terry had done the same a few weeks earlier. Neither of them wanted to participate in the last run, knowing what a circus it was apt to become. But Dave did have a request – and a bouquet of red roses.

In attempting to recreate that elegant era when *The Canadian* was still the pampered pride of the CPR, he'd always brought cut flowers along to help enliven the Park car. Could I continue this tradition for him *in absentia* on this last run?

As we chatted, the ceiling above us rumbled. With the blue flag problem at the coach yard resolved, *The Canadian* had finally been unshackled and sent to Union Station for her last sailing. The passengers boarded, the media was unleashed and Mayor Eggleton had only minutes to dash down the concourse and up the stairs. The conductor's "All aboard!" rang out and our two spotless F40 diesels were unleashed. Every Dutch door was open as the CPR-routed *Canadian* departed Toronto – possibly forever.

Cameras flashed, video recorders whirled and tears flowed from many well-wishers lining the platform. Leaning out of *Brock Manor*, Eggleton was cheered. As we crossed to the north side of the Toronto Terminals Railway and curved on to CN's Bala Subdivision, I strolled back to *Banff Park* on the tail and discovered the vultures were already circling. The media types were stalking the train looking for anyone who could put more than two words together about the cuts. It was a harbinger of a rolling transcontinental media circus.

*The Canadian* meandered. In a heartwarming gesture, CN booted VIA out of the Spadina Coach Yard in 1986, freeing the valuable downtown land for the construction of the SkyDome and high-priced condominiums. This forced VIA to construct the \$100 million Toronto Maintenance Centre on CN land in Mimico. But there wasn't enough room for a loop track or even a wye long enough to turn *The Canadian* intact.

Uncoupling was forbidden because of steam line freeze-ups after re-coupling, so the train had exited Toronto for the past four years over a circular route, snaking her way up the Don Valley and then west on the York Sub that funnels freight traffic into CN's main hump classification yard. There, *The Canadian* would gain the Newmarket Sub that would carry her north to connect with the CPR's transcontinental line near Parry Sound.



**IN KINDER, GENTLER TIMES:** When CP proudly dispatched *The Canadian's* first two cars on a cross-country tour in the summer of 1954, Canadians believed a new era in rail travel was dawning. The new Budd rolling stock was a crowd pleaser at every stop across the CP system, including Toronto's Canadian National Exhibition. Today, many Canadians are hoping for the same rail passenger renewal that CP promoted back in the mid-1950s, although the outcome is far from certain. Greg Gormick Collection.

As *The Canadian* made her back-up move, we passed another dying train: a long cut of covered ore hoppers that fed the steel mills of Hamilton. Closure of the Temagami iron mines meant this train, too, was condemned.

The CN dispatcher realigned the switches, the snowflakes finally drifted down and the steam escaping from *Banff Park* licked around its illuminated drumhead. Two honks of the horn and we were off, the clatter of our wheels over the Snider diamond crossing heralding our departure from Toronto.

*The Canadian* flew through the falling snow. As we approached Newmarket, Gaston told me Joe had a roundtrip ticket to Winnipeg, but he decided at the last minute he couldn't take a four-day funeral for the train on which he had spent 29 of his 39 railway years. He got off at Newmarket with his son, Len, and rode back to town with the mayor.

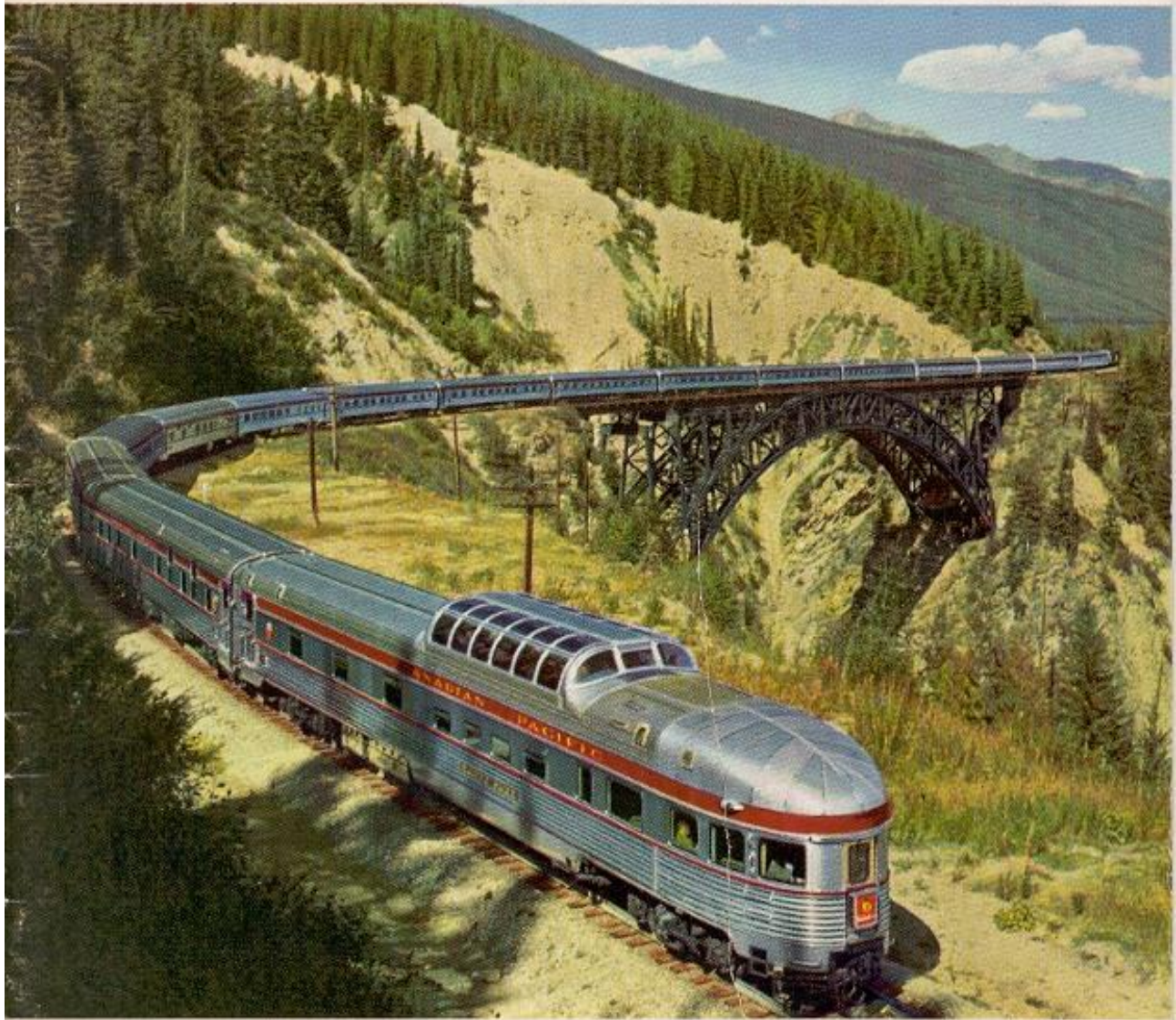
When *The Canadian* began to roll, Joe's eyes welled up. I wondered what melancholy thoughts were going through his head. His first run on the new equipment in 1954, when he took the dining car *Selkirk* out on the *Dominion*? Or perhaps his last trip, when he brought the very same dining car back into Toronto on VIA's *Canadian*? More likely the camaraderie of the men with whom he'd spent four days of every working week on his runs to Winnipeg.



WESTWARD

# ACROSS CANADA

BY *Canadian Pacific*



*"The Canadian"*

*"The Dominion"*

CANADA'S SCENIC DOME ROUTE

With Joe still saluting us as *Banff Park* cleared the end of the platform, we picked up speed and soon the rural stations slipped by: Bradford, Barrie, Orillia and Washago. The first call for dinner brought the reporters and camera crews bounding into our dining car, *Champlain*, like a scene from *The Day of the Locust*.

Gaston descended in high dudgeon. A particularly pushy Global TV reporter went too far and he was on to her instantly. The gist of the message – not delivered with Gaston's typical bonhommie – was that his crew was under enough pressure feeding a sold out train and containing their own emotions. The dining car was now off limits to reporters, thank you very much, madame.

My dining car companion chuckled and offered his thanks to Gaston. It was well handled, he said, and he would know. Like Joe Kratochvil, Fred Graham was a CPR steward in the days when *Champlain* and her 17 sisters were factory fresh and being broken in on the *Dominion*. He, too, was on that first departure of *The Canadian*.

"I worked the dining car as a waiter that day," said Fred. "They wanted us all about the same height in the diner for the publicity photographs and you had to be about six feet or so. Joe is not that tall, so he got the steward's position on the *Skyline*. I wasn't senior enough to work as the steward on the first trip, so they put me on as a waiter."

So far, the trip on the CN line had been foreign territory for Fred. He retired just before VIA took over in 1978 and yanked the train off the CPR main line south of Parry Sound. But when we nosed on to CPR steel at Reynolds, Fred was back on home rails.

We were more than three hours late at the witch-hatted Parry Sound station and the eastbound *Canadian* was also running late when we met her to the north. The signs of imminent death were visible: darkened equipment being deadheaded back from the West. As the two *Canadians* rolled slowly by each other, the crews leaned out the Dutch doors to wish each other the best. For some, such as Joe Kratochvil's long-time dining car waiter, Ken Farrell, there was work on corridor trains. For the rest, unemployment.

At Sudbury, we met N<sup>o</sup> 1, our Montreal section, and passengers from there and Ottawa Valley points made their cross-platform connection to join us. Although the Toronto section went through to Vancouver, and the marshalling of through sleeping cars from Montreal hadn't occurred since the end of April, we were confusingly timetabled as N<sup>o</sup> 9 to Sudbury and N<sup>o</sup> 2 beyond. No matter. All of this number switching became academic at midnight, when new CP and CN operating timetables took force and we were demoted to Passenger Extra 6453 West.





**IT'S A JUNCTION:** The Montreal and Toronto sections of VIA's Canadian are combined at Sudbury, and the headlight of the switcher doing the work is seen in the background. Photo by John P. Carter

The Sudbury stop revealed upsetting news. Near Petawawa, N<sup>o</sup> 1 had slammed into a pickup truck at a grade crossing, killing its two young occupants. The nose of F40 6409, sitting on the Sudbury house track with its steam generator and four ex-CN smooth-sided cars, had no damage save a broken ditch light and a scraped pilot. But its CPR engineer was on his last run with his family aboard, expecting to have a retirement party. The engineer was shaken and in no mood for a celebration.

West of Sudbury, *The Canadian* quieted down and she now felt like the train I'd always known. The sleeping cars were hushed and the heavy curtains on the berths swung out into the aisles ever so gently as we heeled to the curves of the CPR Nemegos Subdivision. Gaston turned *Champlain's* lights low, got a glass of orange juice from the kitchen and wearily slumped onto a banquette at the forward end of the dining room.

"I almost booked off," he sighed. "This is going to be a zoo and it's not the way I want to remember this train. I want to remember the good times and especially the fellows I've worked with, like Joe. Just the same, it will be something to talk about when I'm pushing a cart up and down one of those corridor trains."

It had been a tiring day. We said good night and tottered off to our bedrooms.



Photo from the Greg Gormick Collection

The view out of my sleeping car window the next morning was postcard perfect. The sun was bright, the sky was Technicolor blue and the snow was as high as a polar bear's eye as we clipped along toward Heron Bay and our rendezvous with Lake Superior's North Shore. Retired steward Fred had predictably been up since the crack of dawn; old habits die hard. He kept the crew's spirits up with a friendly banter as they passed with plates of pancakes, thick-sliced ham and eggs, and endless pots of freshly brewed coffee.

As we chatted over breakfast, Fred shook his head in disbelief at the antics of a handful of train buffs. The crew quickly labelled them DRF: demented rail fans. They carried their squawky railway radio scanners everywhere and all were experts on curing VIA's ills. A few picked *The Canadian's* bones during the night. Some of the car name plates were now missing from the doors and Gaston caught one in his bedroom, hoping to pocket his operating instructions as a souvenir.

One passenger who got special DRF attention was Archie Laidlaw. He retired with *The Canadian's* last departure from Sudbury after a 40-year as a CPR and VIA ticket agent. As Archie sipped a beer in the observation lounge of *Banff Park*, he mentioned a long-forgotten folder of internal memos about the 1955 launch of the train. It tumbled out of its hiding place while he was downsizing the office to handle the reduced demands of the tri-weekly *Dayliner* remaining on the Sudbury-White River portion of the route.





**NORTH SHORE LANDMARK:** Nearly 17 years before the federal government deprived travellers of the scenic wonders of the North Shore, the westbound *Canadian* threaded the fabled Mink Tunnel in May 1973. Famed for its rugged beauty, CP builder Sir William Cornelius Van Horne called the route “200 miles of engineering impossibilities.” Photo by D’Arcy Furlonger.

When Archie let that slip, he became a glowing porch light among a swarm of DRF moths. They seemingly couldn’t go on breathing if he didn’t hand over those documents. As they frothed on with their pleas, Archie smiled serenely and ordered up another cold one. None of this could dampen the spirits of those determined to see *The Canadian* off in style. If this be farewell, so be it. We’d give her a wake befitting a grand dame whose company would be sadly missed and long remembered.

Soon, *The Canadian* was coiling and uncoiling herself like an ice-cloaked sidewinder along the undulating shoreline of Lake Superior. She was a fine sight, pretty as the day she rolled out of Budd’s Red Lion plant. The two mechanical department riders on board to make sure the last run didn’t turn into a corporate embarrassment reported they had no trouble through the night. “She’s being a good girl,” said one.

The sadness of the night before lifted and the mood became buoyant. The Dutch doors were opened wide and the crew didn’t chastise those leaning out to get their last shots of what the CPR’s first general manager, Sir William Cornelius Van Horne, called “200 miles of engineering impossibilities.”

At the CPR divisional point of Schreiber, many residents marched along the platform with protest signs as the steam generators were watered and a Petro-Canada tank truck offered up a liquid lunch for *The Canadian*’s two hungry ponies. A massive sign was nailed up on a building on the town’s main street, which – as in any self-respecting CPR town – leads to the station. The message was clear: “Scrap Mulroney. Save VIA Rail.”





**SHOW TIME:** Passengers pose and little boys gawk as the svelte and powerful diesel-electric locomotives hauling *The Canadian* are serviced during the westbound streamliner's station stop in Thunder Bay – then Fort William – on April 19, 1958. Photo from the Roger Boisvert Collection.

Thunder Bay brought another group of protestors. The big turnout had been the night before, when a large group gathered at a nearby arena and staged a candlelight march to the CPR station to meet the eastbound *Canadian*. We expected an even larger outpouring of protest and tears on the way back.

From here to Winnipeg, we were joined by the Singing Baggage man, Bill Hofmeister. He and a buddy had toured the country at the first hint of VIA's shearing, singing railway songs and urging Canadians to fight back. Bill was still ready to sing and fight, but resigned to going back to being a CPR freight conductor ... for now. In his care was the only passenger not pestered by the media and the DRFs: Poxy, a big orange tabby bound for Regina. He was the last cat to ride *The Canadian*.

After a large demonstration in Kenora and some slow running due to a CPR freight derailment, we crossed on to CN rails at Transcona (which is sort of "transcontinental" spelled sideways). Some fast running and the spanning of the Red River brought us into CN's Winnipeg Union Station, that tasteful creation of CPR challengers Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Pacific. Its tracks were lined with stored cars and the last westbound *Super Continental* was steaming away two tracks over.

It was time to say good-bye to the passengers who were heading off to Vancouver – and good riddance to the media’s feeding frenzy. For the crew and me, this was the turnaround point. We’d grab a night of stationary rest and board the last eastbound in the morning.

A couple of hours later – with *The Canadian* running well “off the advertised” – I gazed down on her from my room at the former CN Fort Garry Hotel as she ambled out of town behind a long freight. As her red markers winked out in the distance, I thought about the sad event that awaited her. Somewhere to the west, she’d meet her eastbound sister, evoking memories of Cunard’s original Queens saluting each other in mid-Atlantic for the last time in 1967. Like them, *The Canadians* would be ships of state, passing in the night on a rolling sea of prairie “under stars chilled by the winter,” to borrow a lyric from Cole Porter.

The next morning brought the raucous blare of car horns at the corner of Broadway and Main. The Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Transport and General Workers was sponsoring a protest, picketing the station with signs that said, “Honk if you want to save VIA.” There was lots of honking, but no Tory politicians to hear it.

Inside the Beaux Arts terminal, Gaston was behind the check-in desk. He grinned when he announced, “Now it’s just us family. The vultures went on to Vancouver last night.”

*The Canadian* shook the station as she stomped into the trainshed above us. She was close to her schedule, but the last eastbound *Super Continental* was running more than an hour late. Waiting for her to arrive with connecting passengers, the engineer on *The Canadian* – alias Passenger Extra 6457 East – proudly showed off the cab of his just-scrubbed F40. Behind was a train identical to her westbound sister: two diesels, two steam generators and 12 Budd cars.

The last *Super* arrived and it was time to take our leave of Winnipeg. The announcement came over the station’s p. a. system for porters to “close up your doors for the last time.” As Gaston promised, *The Canadian* now had a family feel with a mixed manifest of Canadians and Americans who had known her well over the years. The atmosphere in the Mural Lounge of *Strathcona Park* was convivial. Up ahead, the dining car crew set up *Alexandra* for lunch. Gaston hustled along the corridors, ensuring everyone was comfortable and there were no stowaways.

At Kenora, there was another crowd and many residents stood on their back porches to cheer us along. “Come back soon,” said a teary woman on the station platform. “We’ll miss you,” said her husband. “Don’t vote Tory,” advised a CPR employee beside them.



**NORTH SHORE TEASER:** At the Thunder Bay National Dream Renewed town hall workshop in November 2012, several participants told me of the yearning they've felt when they've witnessed the sporadic re-routing of VIA's *Canadian* over the CP main line. Thanks to a blockage on its CN route, VIA N° 1 was photographed crossing the Little Pic River at Middleton on August 23, 1995. Greg Gormick Collection.

Our conductor, Joe Mutz, came into the Mural Lounge and unwrapped one of the packages for which he'd become famous: Several pounds of kielbasa, which he'd picked up at his favourite Ukrainian butcher shop back in "the 'Peg." He once brought 22 of the tasty sausages on board "and not one of them made it back to Thunder Bay."

The kielbasa was sliced and served to the passengers. We used it to toast VIA's recently-appointed interim leader, Ron Lawless, who had assured Canadians he'd not let a little thing like his presidency of freight-only CN get in the way of protecting the reduced passenger system. The day before, he told a Montreal business group to get over their romantic attachment to passenger trains and expect more cuts.

As we munched on the kielbasa, Joe mentioned he saw the recent newspaper obituary for retired CPR chairman and president Buck Crump, the man who had placed the order for *The Canadian's* stylish Budd equipment back in 1953. Crump died in Calgary on Boxing Day at the age of 85 from the emphysema he told me was a result of "too many cigarettes, too many cigars and too many bloody nights in smoky roundhouses."





**COMMUNITY BENEFITS:** Re-routing the *Canadian* back to the CPR main line would benefit all the communities between Sudbury and Thunder Bay, and west to Winnipeg. Towns such as Schreiber and Terrace Bay, which were always supportive of the pre-1990 *Canadian*, now have an increased need to focus on tourism opportunities. The train's return would be a logical component of their economic redevelopment plans. Photos by D'Arcy Furlonger



“He was a pretty tough old bird,” said Joe. “But at least he was a real railroader, not like these guys today.”

To his final days, Crump maintained his quixotic, paternal interest in *The Canadian*. He frequently told me that buying the train was one of the worst decisions he ever made because, with hindsight, rail passenger profitability was a thing of the past by the time he placed the order. But he’d also get antsy if you suggested replacing her with more modern and potentially cost-effective equipment. To Crump’s dying day, *The Canadian* was “his train” – or “Buck’s Beauty,” as the CPR employees frequently called her.



**LAUNCHING BUCK’S BEAUTY:** In his typically down-to-earth style, CPR President N.R. “Buck” Crump greets the sleeping car porters prior to *The Canadian*’s first departure from Montreal’s Windsor Station on Sunday, April 24, 1955. Canadian Pacific Railway Photo

With the sun setting behind the Park car’s tail, the last sitting for dinner in the dining car, *Alexandra*, is called. As the passengers are lingering over coffee and dessert, singing baggageman Bill Hofmeister appeared with his guitar to serenade us with his own song, *Hey, Come Ride*. It proved too much for some. A number of passengers cried and a few equally full-eyed crew members sought refuge in the kitchen. To thunderous applause, Bill was led back to the rounded end of *Strathcona Park*, where he repeated his performance just as the grain terminals of Thunder Bay loomed in the distance.





**VANCOUVER, FAREWELL:** Passengers, protestors, VIA employees, the media and heartbroken well-wishers mingle at Pacific Central Station as the last eastbound Canadian prepares to depart on January 14, 1990. Photos by Angus McIntyre





As expected, Thunder Bay had a big crowd with lots of banners, candles and tears. The VIA agent – who would be unemployed after the last truck of ticket stock and office equipment was carted off the next day – announced, “From the people of VIA Thunder Bay, thank you and good luck.” The CPR conductor took his cue and boomed out a long and low “All, a-b-o-a-r-d!” that reverberated off the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool’s towering concrete silos across from the station. The disc brakes sighed their release, the whine of the F40s grew to a howl and we sped out of town paralleling the Trans-Canada Highway, paced by motorcadars. The firefighters of east-end Port Arthur saluted us with flashing lights, sirens and horns as we charged by.

Past Nipigon, *The Canadian’s* headlights played on the craggy rock faces of the North Shore as the CPR Schreiber dispatcher kept us moving briskly. Opposing freights were all tucked in their holes. On each, the headend crews honked madly and the conductors gave us the highball with their lanterns from the rear platforms of their cabooses. In just a few weeks, this would be vanished Canadiana, too, when the CPR went caboose-less.

Gaston darkened the diner after midnight and stretched out, contemplating his re-assignment to the Toronto-Windsor run. He lamented, “I’d like to think this will all come back, but even if it does, it won’t be like it has been. They’ve chased away too many good people. I’m only grateful for the friendships I’ve made with the people I’ve worked with. Take someone like Joe Kratochvil. He taught me a lot, we laughed a lot and he became a very good friend along the way. Will that happen when I’m pushing carts up and down aisles on trips that last three or four hours?”

The hour was growing late and fatigue was overcoming Gaston. He waited to welcome one last passenger out of Red Rock, but she was a no show. “C’est la vie,” he sighed as he trooped down the sleeper’s aisle to bed.

The next morning at Chapleau, the ultimate demonstration was staged. Even Gaston couldn’t keep a check on his emotions this time. Chapleau is a railway, timber and service town, but there’s no mistaking the fact that its roots are in the railway, which founded it as a divisional point on the soon-to-be-completed transcontinental main in 1885. Pug-faced CPR Mikado 5433 stands proudly stuffed and mounted in the park across from the station, reminding citizens that their town was built by the men and women of the age of steam. For good measure, the morning parade of CPR freight trains still awaken them daily as they trumpet their approach.

It seemed as if the entire town was waiting for us in the pre-dawn cold and mist. Some of them carried a jumbo-sized love letter to Prime Minister Mulroney, taller than *The Canadian* herself: “Brian resign. Put VIA back on track.”

CPR men and women who had known this train for 35 years strolled its length, shaking hands, embracing and saying farewell to friends who were working on her that day. Toasts from flasks were shared and Rule G (“The use of intoxicants or narcotics by employees subject to duty, or their possession or use while on duty, is prohibited”) was bent.



**SUPERIOR ROUTE, SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE:** CP's North Shore route is not only better suited for a long-haul train that must attract a large number of tourists, but it also offers a more likely prospect of better on-time performance. The current service and infrastructure problems between Capreol and Winnipeg show little sign of easing, and the *Canadian* is apt to face frequent and lengthy delays so long as it remains on the CN route. Greg Gormick Collection



Time to go. As *The Canadian* began to roll, a pipe band struck up *Auld Lang Syne* and the crowd serenaded us through their tears. They were still singing and waving as *Strathcona Park's* graceful bow slipped around the curve east of the station and eased on down the road for home.

Sudbury brought a smaller crowd, no doubt reduced by the freezing rain. The Montreal section had made its last eastbound trip on Sunday, so Montreal-bound passengers had a choice. They could take *The Canadian* to Toronto, pay for a hotel room and proceed to Montreal by train the next day or they could take a chartered VIA bus. Problem: Ontario Provincial Police had closed the ice-coated highways. The Montreal passengers came with us.

As we took our leave of Sudbury to the strains of *Oh, Canada* from the station's p.a. system, Archie Laidlaw skittered across the icy platform with a sheaf of papers held high. He handed them up as I leaned out of *Bell Manor*. "Here, these are for you. Take good care of them," he said with a sly smile.

"New Streamlined Train" read the yellowed cover. It was the packet of CPR communiqués that had mysteriously tumbled out of a dusty corner of the Sudbury station a few weeks earlier. The top document was pure poetry. It was a letter presented to every member of the CPR passenger team when they reported for duty on *The Canadian's* launch day on April 24, 1955. In it, Thomas P. James, manager of the CPR's Sleeping, Dining and Parlour Car Department, told his colleagues:

*"This is a memorable day for the world's greatest travel system.... The world's finest train, The Canadian, is ready for its inaugural run. It is a thing of beauty and represents today the ultimate in technological advancement, but it still lacks a soul. It is a privilege and an honour that the men of this Department have been chosen to create that soul.... The train is now in our hands; let us make everybody conscious of it."*

They did. And despite constant government interference and hostility, the men and women of VIA who worked on and protected the train after they inherited it from the CPR carried on the tradition.

For the people of the CPR's Eastern Region, that tradition died at Reynolds when our silver lady bid adieu to CPR rails. A few hours later, the westbound *Canadian* did the same at the Sapperton interchange to the CN line, near Vancouver, ending 104 years of transcontinental passenger service over the railway that built a nation.

The executioner grew near. As we ran fast through Muskoka and into the lush Holland Marsh, the last meals came out of *Alexandra's* kitchen. Waiter Dale Antunik set down plates for Fred Graham, our CN conductor and then me. He swung his silver tray up in the air and proclaimed, "That's it! It's done!"





**TORONTO-BOUND:** After passing through Woodbridge, the Sudbury-Toronto section of The Canadian crosses the Humber River and heads south on the MacTier Subdivision in June 1971. Photo by Bill Thomson



**NORTHERN PASSAGE:** The Toronto-Sudbury section of The Canadian makes its way north past the community of Midhurst on a pleasant June day in 1976. Photo by A.W. Mooney



I probably should have been honoured to have the last supper on the last real *Canadian* into Toronto. Twenty-two years before, I enjoyed my first one as we streaked across the Severn and Moon rivers and through Muskoka. Then, as a train crazy kid of 11, I viewed *The Canadian* as one of my country's finest accomplishments; a delicate intertwining of American innovation with understated Canadian flair. She was a shining symbol of the postwar vision and aspirations of Canada. What would my country now be without her?

Back across the CN Snider diamond we clattered, loudly proclaiming our return to Toronto. We'd been on continuous welded rail for most of the journey, but the line here was still 39-foot jointed sections. *The Canadian's* staccato clickety-clack bounced off the factories and nearby homes as we raced downhill to Toronto Union Station. The porters piled the luggage high in the vestibules for our arrival and the bags of linen were stacked up in the dining car.

At the track maze leading into Union, *The Canadian* slowed to pick her way, serpent-like, through the crossovers and double-slip switches. But her engineer opened the throttle as we approached the trainshed, rocking the stainless steel cars back and forth merrily while the engine's horn trumpeted our return. Then, the big finale, as the disc brakes came on to bring us to a fast but smooth stop. The time: 7:20 p.m. EST.



Photo by James A. Brown; CPR Park car drumheads from the Greg Gormick Collection

How do you write an ending for 104 years of history? The first “new” *Canadian* had already left Toronto the night before, so the saga of transcontinental rail passenger service had not ended. But running far north over CN and missing Lake Superior, Regina, Calgary, Banff and “the CPR Rockies,” it wouldn’t be the same. The Long Red Line of Imperial fame had been broken.

Perhaps it’s best to hark back to the days when the country was newly spanned by the CPR’s twin ribbons of steel. When that plain iron spike was hammered home at Craigellachie, deep inside British Columbia’s Eagle Pass, Sir William Cornelius Van Horne heightened the accomplishment by understating the enormity of it all. He merely said:

*“The work has been done well in every way.”*

So it was, too, on *The Canadian*. And – though few of us who were there on that last run suspected it – so it would be again.



© 2020 by Greg Gormick and On Track Strategies

Last Revised: January 16, 2020



