The Coronado Subdivision: A Typical Branch Line of the Canadian Northern Railway

The Coronado Subdivision, originally built as part of the Canadian Northern Railway, was a typical rural branch line. Its construction made life significantly easier for the settlers in the region through which it passed. The line fulfilled its purpose: the colonization and development of the prime mixed farming region in north-central Alberta. No longer would cattle raised around St. Paul have to be driven overland to the railhead at Vermilion.1 Nor would mundane tasks such as shopping, or marketing small quantities of grain, consume three to four days of arduous trekking over rough trails.2

Prior to the advent of railways in the area, the Victoria Trail for packhorses and wagons provided a tenuous link to Edmonton for early homesteaders north of the North Saskatchewan river. Construction of the Canadian Northern Railway's main line south of the river (1905), in conjunction with the Pakan (1892) and Shandro (1909) ferries, shortened the journey, with stations such as Vegreville, Mundare, Lamont and Bruderheim assuming importance as distribution centres.

Oliver Northeasterly Branch

In 1911, the CNoR promised to construct the so-called Oliver Northeasterly Branch for settlers north of the North Saskatchewan River, many of whom had homesteaded in the area around the turn of the century.3 The Alberta portion of the line—constructed under the charter of the Canadian Northern Western Railway, a subsidiary of the Canadian Northern Railway—was financed by provincial bond guarantees: originally $13,000 per mile, increased by $5,000 in 1915.4 The Company surveyed a through line from just east of Edmonton to North

Battleford, Saskatchewan, via the settlement of St. Paul de Meacutetis.5 A 38-mile stretch on the Saskatchewan end, from North Battleford to Edam, was opened in July 1911.

Grading on the west end was started in 1912 at St. Paul Jct., where the line diverged from the Canadian Northern main line, reaching mile 14 (just south of Gibbons) before the end of the construction season.6 Work was to resume in spring, but little progress was made in 1913.7 Nearly 100 miles of grading was completed on the west end,8 and tracklaying on the east end had advanced from Edam to Turtleford (17 miles), when construction was halted in August 1914.

World War I

With the onset of World War I, immigration ceased and the CNoR faced financial stringencies that made it necessary to curtail its ambitious branchline program and concentrate on more important commitments such as the completion of the transcontinental main line. The branch through St. Paul was but one casualty of this policy.

Tracklaying began from St. Paul Jct. in late spring 1917, progressing at an average rate of a mile and a half per day.9 When tracklaying was suspended in the latter part of June —blamed on a shortage of rails10— the end of steel was a mile beyond Radway Centre.11

In September 1917, the CNoR was forced into bankruptcy and taken over by the Federal Government. It was one of the major constituents of the Canadian Government Railways, which became the Canadian National Railways in 1919. The branch line became the Coronado Subdivision.

Completion of the Branch Line

Following the 1918 Armistice, considerable political pressure was brought to bear on the fledgling Canadian National by the settlers and communities that had established themselves along the route of the incomplete railway line. Despite financial problems, labour strife and continuing shortages of resources, completion of the branch became a company priority. Second-hand rails,12 secured from an upgrading program on the old CNoR main line near North Battleford, were shipped west to complete the St. Paul line13 to Spedden by December 1919, and finally to St. Paul de Meacutetis late the following year. The line from the junction to St. Paul de Meacutetis was formally opened for traffic in February 1921. The Saskatchewan end of the line was extended from Turtleford to St. Walburg (13 miles) in November 1921.

The return of prosperity in the mid 1920s revived railway fever in the West. It was a period of intense rivalry between the CNR and the Canadian Pacific Railway that focused on prairie branchline construction. The CPR's Willingdon Subdivision, stretching between Lloydminster and South Edmonton, and located between the former CNoR main line and the Coronado Subdivision, threatened to siphon traffic off both CNR lines. CNR legal action to preempt what it saw as a clear invasion of its territory proved fruitless, however, and the CPR line was opened for traffic in 1928.

Extensions to the Subdivision were made to Elk Point (19.55 miles) and Heinsburg (19.5 miles) in 1926 and 1928, respectively. A tributary branch was built east progressively from Abilene to Bonnyville (1928), Beaver River (1930) and Grand Centre (1951). Although graded between Beaver River and St. Walburg, Saskatchewan (1930–33), the 40-mile gap east of Grand Centre was never laid with steel.14 This route had gained favour over the earlier proposal to connect Heinsburg with Frenchman Butte, Saskatchewan.

Coronado Subdivision Route

The Coronado Subdivision roughly runs alongside the North Saskatchewan River east of Edmonton to the Alberta-Saskatchewan border.15 The railway crosses several tributaries, necessitating a number of bridges, and encounters moderate to heavy grades that tested the steam locomotives used on the line.

From its divergence from the CNoR main line at St. Paul Jct., the Coronado Subdivision heads 13 miles north to the rim of the broad Sturgeon River valley, the most significant geographic barrier on the line. A series of tight reverse curves carries the alignment down (0.70%) to the valley floor, through Gibbons station (mile 15.6), and over a mammoth pile-and-frame timber trestle 2,300 feet long and 60 feet high. Gibbons was the site of the first water tank on the line. After cresting the 0.70% grade up the north side of the Sturgeon River valley, the line descends into the Vermilion (Redwater) River valley, and over the river on a low timber trestle (mile 31.9). The line traverses a series of momentum grades, then crosses Pine (Waskatenau) Creek (mile 50.5) on a high timber bridge just east of Waskatenau station, the site of a water tank.

Near Smoky Lake (mile 64.6) the alignment takes an abrupt turn east, and trains encounter a series of relatively heavy grades (1.0% against eastbound and 1.3% against westbound) into and out of the valleys of White Earth (mile 69.2) and Edwand Creeks (mile 71.6), which required considerable cut-and-fill work. The third water station on the line was situated just east of Edwand.

The line climbs to mile 83.7, the summit of the Subdivision, then down (0.80%) into Vilna. From this station east the land is undulating. At Ashmont (mile 107.0), the site of a water tank, the tracks swing south to St. Paul. East of the town the line drops 420 feet in 40 miles to the eastern terminus at Heinsburg on the north bank of the North Saskatchewan River. Water tanks were situated at Armistice and Heinsburg.

The Order-Timetable System

Until the late 1970s, when the manual block system was inaugurated, the Subdivision was operated under the train order-timetable system. Telegraph operators were stationed along the line to advise the dispatcher of passing trains. They also acted as intermediaries, delivering messages between the dispatcher and the engine and train crews. These “orders” dealt primarily with changes in train schedules or arranged meeting or passing points with trains other than those noted in the timetable. The dispatcher for the Subdivision was located in Edmonton.

Stations

Resident agents were appointed only where warranted by local traffic, and, commensurately, larger combination passenger and freight stations were erected only in places that generated sufficient business.

In 1919 CNR standard third-class stations were erected at Radway and Smoky Lake. The station at St. Paul de Metis was of a similar pattern but larger, denoting its divisional point status on the future through line.16 The balance of the station buildings on the line consisted of small freight-and-passenger shelters, which were significantly cheaper to construct and maintain. As traffic warranted, many of these were replaced with more elaborate station buildings.

Passenger Service

The CNR’s construction department offered basic passenger services prior to handing the line over to the operating department in mid 1920. Starting December 17, 1919, a coach was coupled to the rear of the tri-weekly freight to the end of steel at Spedden; up one day and back to Edmonton the next (12 hours one way).17 Once ballasting was completed between Edmonton and Spedden in June 1920, a tri-weekly passenger service was inaugurated. Trains ran out and back the same day (about nine hours round trip). Separate freight services were also run as required.18 Passenger services were extended to St. Paul de Meacutetis in December.19 Official passenger runs began in February 1921, on a nine-hour-and-40-minute schedule.20

In June 1923, a mixed train provided passenger service twice a week in each direction.21 Within three years a passenger train—running to St. Paul Tuesdays and Fridays and returning to Edmonton the same day—was added.22 Both trains were dropped in September 1927, replaced by a tri-weekly passenger train between Edmonton and St. Paul that continued east on the new Elk Point extension as a mixed train.23

Effective January 1929, Coronado Subdivision trains connected with the new Bonnyville mixed trains, which ran tri-weekly.24 Passenger train service was extended to the new eastern terminus at Heinsburg in September 1939.25

Mail Services

The Subdivision had no formal railway mail services, that is, there was no provision for a mail car with sorting by on-board clerks. Mail was carried in sealed bags on the mail-express car or in the baggage compartment of local passenger trains. A courier, contracted by the post office in every town, transported the mail between trackside and the post office. This rudimentary mail service on the line began September 1, 1921.26 Within the decade, the inherent delays of processing mail in Edmonton rather than on board CNR trains made it expedient for the public to travel by car to stations along the CPR's Willingdon Subdivision to pick up and send personal mail.27

Freight Services

The Coronado Subdivision's backhaul to Edmonton became a serious handicap with completion of the CPR's Willingdon line. Farmers paid a two-cent-per-bushel premium to ship via the CNR branch over that of the CPR line, with its direct haul to Fort William. Finally, effective January 1930, after over a year of intense lobbying by the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce, the stations on the Coronado Subdivision became subject to a Vancouver tariff, saving four cents per bushel over the previous rate.28 Short of completing the through line, however, there was little the CNR could do to compete with the direct mail, express and less-than-car-load (l.c.l.) freight services that the CPR line could offer.

The Lifeline for Lineside Communities

Significantly, although the Depression forced the CNR to make extensive cuts to its passenger train services throughout the West, the Subdivision was spared.

Until the late 1940s, outbound rail traffic consisted principally of grain and livestock. Coal for domestic heating, and manufactured goods and express freight were brought in by rail. Fall was a particularly busy time on the line, with the grain rush, heavy stock shipments, delivery of heating coal for the upcoming winter and Christmas. A typical eastbound train would spot empty boxcars at the respective elevators. Coal, also in boxcars, was dropped off at the adjacent dealers' sheds for unloading. On certain specified stock days empty cars were spotted by the chute of local stockyards. The train would pick up the cars on its return trip to Edmonton. Spring was also busy, with tank cars for the bulk-oil station, carloads of farm implements or automobiles for local dealers, or lumber for lineyards. Other day-to-day items, from fence posts to literally the kitchen sink, were delivered in less-than-carload shipments through the station agent. Cream and milk were picked up by passenger trains for delivery to the creameries along the line, and these same trains delivered express parcels, butter, bread and fruit. The Subdivision was the lifeline for lineside communities and the adjoining hinterland.

In the spring of 1946, passenger service between Edmonton and Heinsburg was upgraded to daily except Saturday, returning the next day. The Bonnyville Subdivision passenger train was geared to service businesses in St. Paul. Patrons left Bonnyville at 08.00, arrived at St. Paul at 10:40, could conduct their business, then return home on the 16:20 train.29

Changing Traffic

This traffic mix changed significantly starting in the late 1940s. In 1947, bulk salt from the Canadian Salt Plant at Lindbergh was hauled to the capital by rail. Beginning in Edmonton 1949, large quantities of oil were being shipped in railway tank cars from the new Redwater oilfields to Edmonton refineries.30 The line also gained strategic importance with the development of the airbase at Cold Lake (1951–54) and the Primrose Air Weapons Testing Range in northeast Alberta, as aviation fuel was moved by rail from Edmonton.31

In the summer of 1951, the CNR began to operate freight trains out of St. Paul to service the Bonnyville Subdivision.32 The crews for these outpost trains resided in a Company bunkhouse built across the tracks from the station. Operating patterns changed once the Cold Lake airbase complex was in full swing. In the spring of 1955, passenger trains ran to Grand Centre with a side trip to St. Paul (daily except Saturday). Service east to Heinsburg was downgraded to mixed.33

By the late 1950s, diesel-electric locomotives had taken over from steam power on the Subdivision freight runs. In an effort to provide a faster and more convenient passenger and express service to the communities between Edmonton and Grand Centre, the CNR instituted a Railiner (a single, self-propelled diesel car) on a six-days-per-week schedule.34 Running times were cut significantly. At the same time, the CNR inaugurated a highway truck service to handle less-than-carload freight along the line.35 On April 26, 1959, Railiner frequency was increased to daily.36 Mixed service from St. Paul to Heinsburg (daily-except-Sunday) lasted until early 1964.37

Since 1960 significant changes have occurred. Passenger and express services have been eliminated due to the establishment of rival automobile, bus and truck services. The character and volume of traffic has also changed, with grain becoming the predominant item. Some sections of the line have been abandoned: from Lindbergh to Heinsburg (1981), and Elk Point to Lindbergh (1989).38 The 1977 Hall Commission recommended that the Coronado Subdivision between St. Paul Jct. and Abilene Jct. be placed in the basic network, guaranteeing its survival until the year 2000.39

Notes

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3. P.D. Bodnar, Bellis History, p. 5.
4. Alberta, Department of Railways and Telephones, Annual Report, 1915.
5. St. Paul Journal , 29 August 1929, p. 1. Effective 1 September 1929, the “de Metis”; was dropped from St. Paul’s name.
6. Edmonton Daily Bulletin, 3 December 1912, p. 2.
7. Ibid., 12 March 1913, p. 9.
8. Annual Report, 1915.
9. Edmonton Daily Bulletin, 11 June, 1917, p. 7.
10. Edmonton Journal, 31 May 1917, p. 1.
11. Edmonton Daily Bulletin, 28 June 1917, p. 8.
12. Ibid., 18 December 1919, p. 1.
13. Ibid., May 1918, p. 3.
14. St. Paul Journal, 27 February 1930, p. 1; 23 April 1930, p. 1; Public Archives of Canada, RG 30, Volume 7475, File 534–11, Part 23; Provincial Archives of Alberta, 76.422, File 23.
15. CNR condensed profiles, various Geological Surevy Maps, and the author’s field trips.
16. St. Paul Journal, 9 September 1926, p. 1; 28 May 1930, p. 1.
17. Edmonton Daily Bulletin, 18 December 1919, p. 1.
18. CNR Employee Time Table, Alberta District, No. 4, 27 June 1920.
19. St. Paul Star, 23 December 1920, p. 1.
20. Time Table, AD. No. 1, 27 February 1921.

21. Ibid., No. 6, 24 June 1923.
22. Ibid., No. 12, 2 May 1926.
23. Ibid., No. 16, 25 September 1927; St. Paul Journal, 7 April 1927, p. 1.
24. Time Table, Alberta District, No. 19, 6 January 1929.
25. Ibid., No. 4, 28 September 1930.
26. St. Paul Star, 1 September 1921, p. 1.
27. St. Paul Journal, 16 December 1931, p. 1.
28. Ibid., 9 January 1930, p. 1.
29. Time Table, Alberta District, No. 35, 28 April 1946.
30. Wascatenan and District Historical Society, By River and Trail: A History of Waskatenau and Districts. Vol. 1 (Waskatenan: 1986), p. 148.
31. Cherry Grove History Committee, Memories Past to Present: A History of Beaver Crossing and Surrounding District (Cherry Grove: 1981), pp. 49–50.
32. Time Table, Aberta District, No. 46, 26 August 1951.
33. Ibid., No. 54, 24 April 1955.
34. CNR application for permission to discontinue operation of trains 634–636, 635–637, between Edmonton and Grand Centre, July 1965.
35. CNR application.
36. Ibid.
37. Time Table, Mountain Region, Edmonton Area, No. 7, 26 April 1964.
38. National Transportation Agency, Status of Prairie Railway Lines, December 1992.
39. Grain Handling and Transportation Commission (Hall Commission Report), Grain and Rail in Western Canada, Volume I, Ottawa, Minister of Supplies and Services Canada, 1977, p. 494.