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Building the Matapedia-Gaspé railway

GILLES **GAGNÉ**

Photo: Julian Bernard

On July 31, 1949, train number 71 passes in Douglastown, on route to Gaspé. At the time, the Gaspé Peninsula was served by two daily passenger trains. The picture was taken by Julian Bernard, a well-known Ontarian railfan who liked regional railways and who came to the region many times. He died a few years ago, well into his nineties.

MATAPEDIA – When the Government of the Dominion of Canada decided on July 8, 1867, that the Intercolonial Railway would pass through the Northern New Brunswick and Matapedia Valley route, the news was received with excitement by the leaders of several regions, those of the Gaspé Peninsula and Lower Saint Lawrence first and foremost.

At the time, there were only two ways to accelerate development, securing sound maritime and railroad transportation, to have access to other markets as well as being able to efficiently get products fabricated elsewhere. That is not counting allowing people to travel for different purposes.

A company, the Baie des Chaleurs Railway Company, was formed in 1871 by then Member of Parliament and Member of the Legislative Assembly for Bonaventure, Théodore Robitaille, who was the riding's dual representative, which was permitted at the time. Robitaille regrouped a certain number of regional shareholders.

However, six years later, construction had still not begun, despite his efforts to suggest otherwise, and the provincial subsidy was withdrawn.

A second attempt was launched in 1882 by a group that again included Robitaille and several original shareholders. The federal government agrees to pay for the first 20 miles of the Matapedia-Gaspé line as a branch line of the Intercolonial Railway. Construction finally began in 1888, as its finances seemed settled to build until reaching the Cascapedia river, 60 miles from Matapedia. Work came to a halt in 1889 at Maria when employees went unpaid.

Additional government subsidies temporarily resolved the financial problems, but in 1890 the Baie des Chaleurs Railway declared bankruptcy despite having received grants totalling $1.25 million over the previous 15 years, a considerable sum at the time.

The company was quickly reorganized with Montreal shareholders, and construction resumed in 1891 under the name Atlantic and Lake Superior Railway, which was also active elsewhere in Canada.

Train service between Matapedia and Caplan began in 1894. New Carlisle was reached in 1898, although a locomotive had already been sent there in 1895 to satisfy the conditions of a government grant by demonstrating that rail service had reached the community.

That grant did not prevent the company from declaring bankruptcy for a second time in November 1895.

In January 1897, the Intercolonial Railway assumed operation of the Matapedia-Caplan line while the Atlantic and Lake Superior Railway attempted to survive through court proceedings.

In July 1900, ownership of the Atlantic and Lake Superior Railway was transferred to receivers in England, bringing new investment to the project.

The line reached Paspebiac in 1902. At the time, only one passenger train operated each week in each direction.

However, the new management still lacked the financial resources to complete the railway to Gaspé. Another intervention by the federal government was required to finance the Paspebiac-Gaspé section, primarily to construct the 26 steel bridges needed to complete the route.

Two companies are now involved in the Gaspé Peninsula between Matapedia and Gaspé, the Quebec and Oriental Railway between Matapedia and Paspebiac, and the Quebec, Atlantic and Occidental, charged to build the line between Paspebiac and Gaspé.

The railway reached Port Daniel in 1907 and Gaspé in 1911. The construction of the Port Daniel tunnel required some time and for a couple of years, the village was the railway terminal.

Even after the line reached Gaspé, residents of the southern Gaspé Peninsula continued to receive only one passenger train each week in each direction. That level of service remained unchanged for several more years.

The Matapedia-Gaspé line was acquired by then public transporter Canadian National Railways in 1929, after years of advocacy by the population and the Gaspé diocese bishop François-Xavier Ross.

Photo: Archives of the Musée de la Gaspésie

The schedule of 1926 suggests that the passenger train was running three times weekly in both directions.