

# Return of passenger train service to the Gaspé Peninsula gains new support

GILLES GAGNÉ

**MATAPEDIA** – The efforts of the Coalition of Gaspesians for the return of passenger train service received a significant boost on July 26, thanks to the American Alan Freed and his 1957 Pontiac, equipped to run on rails, passing through the region.

Hundreds of people watched the journey, at the stations located between Matapedia and Port-Daniel, at numerous level crossings along the route, and often from roads and streets running parallel to the railway. At times, spectators gathered in the fields.

The Coalition's coordinator, Micheline Saint-Onge, had made sure that Mr. Freed's visit received media coverage. In addition, regular video updates and broadcasts in real time on the internet also at-



Photo: Gilles Gagné

*Nina and Alan Freed, Micheline Saint-Onge, Cleo Paskal, a friend from Montreal, and Grant Newsham, an American friend of the Freed's, during a quick stop between Carleton and Saint-Omer.*

tracted a large audience. The gleaming yellow Pontiac rolling along the tracks did the rest of the spontaneous publicity.

“Micheline’s work is amazing. I wanted to support her concretely,” explains Alan Freed. Before her arrival in the Gaspé Peninsula, they had

only met virtually.

The VIA Rail passenger train has been suspended between Matapedia and New Carlisle for 13 years, specifi-

cally since September 2013, and between New Carlisle and Gaspé since December 2011, due to the poor condition of the railway, mainly the bridges. The Coalition of Gaspesians for the Return of the Passenger Train has been working for over a dozen years to ensure its return. Micheline Saint-Onge, a retired nurse, has been volunteering full-time for the past three years.

## A Gaspé Peninsula lover

Alan Freed was on his fourth visit to the Gaspé Peninsula with his 1957 Pontiac. He had first come in June 1998 as part of a group of rail-car enthusiasts (small, boxy vehicles once used for railway maintenance and inspection).

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## TRAIN:

### Cont'd from Cover

He returned in August 2016 with a friend, and again three months later, this time with his wife, Nina. In fact, the couple, who live in Virginia, near Washington, D.C., were in the Gaspé Peninsula on American election night in November 2016.

"I bought the car in 1988. A man from Atlanta had saved it from a scrapyard. The car had previously been used on a railway division in Wyoming, near Yellowstone National Park. It was still serviceable in Atlanta. I don't know how it ended up there. The guy drove it on the road before putting it up for sale," says Alan Freed.

"I learned about this car for sale by chance, looking at a classified ad. I called the owner. It was fall, and I didn't have much time to arrange transport. I offered to transfer the money to the guy and asked if he could keep it until the following spring. He told me I didn't need to transfer any money and that he would keep it," he adds.

Alan Freed then found a shop in Massachusetts where the 1957 Pontiac could undergo the extensive overhaul needed to keep it running smoothly over the long term, an operation that practically consumed the remainder of 1989.

"Don't ask me how much I invested in the car. I can say the guys at the shop in Massachusetts did a remarkable job. They can do everything. It would have cost a lot more elsewhere," Alan Freed assures.

Originally, the 1957 Pontiac, equipped for rail travel and often referred to as a "Hi-rail," was commissioned by the Northern Pacific Railway to serve as a railroad inspection vehicle.

"Sometimes, railway division managers used these vehicles for events. I don't know how many cars of this model were built and modified that way," says Mr. Freed.

### Rail in his blood

Alan Freed comes from a long line of railway workers. After completing his university studies, he worked as a locomotive engineer for five years before developing a specialty in a completely different field: preparing seminars on strategic issues in the United States.

He has remained connected to the railway industry in his free time. Even though Washington, D.C., is a city where the weather ranges from mild to very hot, he and his wife, Nina, love coming to Eastern Canada in the winter.

"I love taking the train from Halifax during the holidays. In January 1990, during the major downsizing at VIA Rail, we came to catch the last train from Yarmouth, Nova Scotia," recalls Mr. Freed.

When he bought the Pontiac, he thought he would limit his outings mainly to abandoned railway lines. The existence of the North American Rail Cars Operators Association (NARCOA), a group of railcar owners, and the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie's (SCFG) openness to excursions like those of 2016 and July 26 have greatly expanded the opportunities to operate the vehicle.

"I have to say I hadn't used the railcar since my trip to the Gaspé Peninsula in November 2016. That's 10 years," Alan Freed points out.

Minor technical problems caused slight delays during the July 26 excursion. The horn jammed in Listuguj, about 30 minutes after leaving Matapédia, requiring a stop in Pointe-à-la-Croix. Shortly after, in Pointe-à-la-Garde, the rubber and metal belt on one of the Pontiac's steel wheels began to fray, causing another stop.

A quick phone call to the technician in Massachusetts reassured Mr. Freed and Luc Major, the driver of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie's van, who was clearing the way on the tracks along the entire route. This escort was mandatory.

Despite the blazing sun, the public invited to the gatherings at the train stations in Matapédia, Carleton, New Richmond, Bonaventure, New Carlisle, and Port-Daniel patiently awaited the arrival of the 1957 Pontiac, despite a delay of approximately an hour, attributable to technical difficulties.

Besides Alan Freed's wife and two friends who joined the journey, a few guests were invited onboard for a ride, including Clément Coulombe, a long-time CN and SCFG worker, a Télé-Gaspé cameraman and the Gaspé SPEC. In August 2016, Mr. Coulombe was driving the pickup truck accompanying Alan Freed's Pontiac along the way. The retired railroad employee received a warm welcome from Mr. Freed.

Excluding people along the railroad, nearly 400 people attended the station gatherings, including those who attended the barbecue at the Green in New Carlisle later that afternoon.

### Next steps

Micheline Saint-Onge left



Photos: Gilles Gagné

*At every stop, like the one in Carleton, people rushed towards the vehicle to sit inside and take photos or videos.*



*A few minor technical glitches spiced up the journey, as seen here in Pointe-à-la-Croix when the horn got stuck in the active position. Grant Newsham, an American friend of Alan Freed, and Alan himself are trying to silence the noise.*

the July 26 event extremely satisfied.

"The mobilization continues. We will keep the public informed about the progress of the train's return. We met with VIA Rail again on August 4 to review the work plan that management committed in May to submitting by midsummer. It's a good sign that VIA is asking for our input, instead of announcing it outright," she says.

The Coalition for the Return of Passenger Rail to the Gaspé Peninsula has gathered 19,700 signatures over the past three years. A petition recently launched in the Lower St. Lawrence region demanding better services from VIA Rail has collected 3,500 additional signatures.

In May, during his visit to the Gaspé Peninsula, Mathieu Paquette, interim president of VIA Rail, the federal public carrier, indicated that his management was considering a daytime train service between Quebec City and the Gaspé Peninsula as a possible scenario for the return of passenger rail service.

Éric Dubé, president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, attended the stop of the 1957 Pontiac in New Richmond, where he is mayor.

"This gathering just confirms the public's interest in the return of passenger rail service," he says.

Alan Freed, for his part, plans to return to the Gaspé rail line this fall. He stored the Pontiac in the Baie-des-Chaleurs region and returned to the Washington area by train from Matapédia and by plane from Montreal.

Significant work remains to be done to complete the railway rehabilitation between Port-Daniel and Gaspé. Freight transport by the Société du

chemin de fer de la Gaspésie is essential to the Matapédia-Port Daniel corridor. The SCFG is a municipally controlled entity.

The Matapédia-Gaspé rail network belongs to the Quebec Ministry of Transport. The refurbishment was originally scheduled for completion in 2025, according to a commitment made in August 2019 by former premier François Legault.

In the Gaspé Peninsula, this issue will be central to the Quebec election campaign leading up to the October 5 election.