



Young filmmaker documents Gaspé railway

GILLES GAGNÉ

NEW RICHMOND – Over the years, the Gaspé Peninsula railroad has fascinated railfans from various parts of the world. Some of them have written articles for specialized magazines, sometimes for publications of general interest. Some have advocated for the salvage of the Matapedia-Gaspé line in the 1990s, like John Henry, a freelance journalist based in New York.

No matter the season, people can see them along specific spots along the line, spots that are mentioned on railfans' websites or social media pages, shared by previous visitors. There was a peak railfanning period in December 2016 and over the first months of 2017, when the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG) started hauling windmill blades between New Richmond and Matapedia, where Canadian National (CN) would take them and transport them to Texas or neighbouring states.

Dozens of Americans converged to the railway stretch between New Richmond and Matapedia during that period. The expression "over the years" to categorize the interest of railfans for the Matapedia-Gaspé line is not exaggerated. In the 1940s, Julian Bernard, a well-known photographer from Ontario who died only a few years ago, came to Gaspé and took some photos that can still be found on certain websites. The line likely attracted railfans well before the 1940s.

Then there is Harrison Smith, 20, who has been producing train videos for a few



Photo: Gilles Gagné

Harrison Smith, right, spent two days between Matapedia and Port Daniel chasing freight train 565 along the coast. He was assisted by a Montreal-based friend and railfan, Victor Planché, who also collects railway photos.

years already. He was in the Baie-des-Chaleurs area on March 17, 18 and 19 with a railfan friend, Victor Planché, of Montreal. They finished their journey at CN's Campbellton facility, where most of the SCFG rolling material is maintained.

The SPEC interviewed Harrison Smith just before he left for Campbellton, on his way back home to the northern part of New York State.

When asked what brought him to the Gaspé Peninsula, Harrison Smith said his goal is to tell the stories of unique railways that have received little attention outside the regions they serve.

"That's a great question! Pretty much everyone has asked me: You are from where, from New York? So, I run a YouTube channel called North Country Trains. I write for a couple different railway magazines, and I like to find railway companies that have some character. You know, some short lines, some scenic operations, and most impor-

tantly, railways that haven't been really covered in film, or in print, and bring their story to the world, to the United States to even just, like, Anglophone in Canada, that doesn't necessarily know what goes on here. So, I did a project with the Sartigan Railway, last year, in Chaudière-Appalaches, and this (the Gaspé railway) was one I have had on my list for a while now. And they have Alcos (locomotives), built in Montreal, and it is very scenic. They are a small company, so I made a national target for my next project," he says.

Mr. Smith noted that this was his second visit to the region.

"I visited in 2024. I chased the train but I didn't meet with any people. I just chased the train and like, there is a story here. So, I set time aside to come back, talk to some people, get the full story and make a project," he explains.

The SPEC pointed out

that while the Gaspé railway is not widely known, it has long attracted dedicated railfans, particularly during the wind turbine blade trains that operated several years ago. Mr. Smith said his approach differs from simply photographing the trains.

"I know it has been covered but I haven't seen anybody actually come here and talk to the management. We are on our way to Campbellton next to talk to the mechanical team, because the shots are beautiful and god knows there are better photographers than I am. I would say I am an average photographer. But I want to tell the story and I want to show the people who run the railway, and I like getting the full picture," he says.

Asked how he first became interested in the railway despite being only 20 years old, Mr. Smith said his fascination with eastern railways began as a child.

"I am trying to remember how I... like the Eastern lines, like New Brunswick, the Maritimes, Maine, and Eastern Quebec, have always been like (interesting)... When I was a kid, I was just looking at maps. That's what I did. Over our dining room table, we had a big map of North America and I would just stare at it. The West has been done. People have documented all the stuff out there," he recalls.

He added that photographs he found online and recommendations from fellow railfans convinced him to make the trip.

"It always just called me and I did see photos online, on Flickr, on railpictures.net. And I am like: wow, it is re-

ally cool, and a friend of mine, Lucas Legion from Maine, he started coming up here before I did and he said: 'you have got to check this out,' and I did. But I like to go and get the deeper story, with people," Mr. Smith says.

As for when viewers can expect to see the finished documentary, he hopes it won't be too long.

"I don't want to say soon, because something will happen then but, as soon as I can. Hopefully...hopefully by spring," he says.

The SPEC also asked why he seems particularly drawn to northern railways. Smith said both his upbringing and personality naturally pull him toward rural regions.

"Where I live in the New York State is called the North Country. My channel is called North Country Trains because that's the place I come from. It's fine that you mention that because I mostly go north. And, I have grown up in a pretty rural place and I work in the Adirondacks and so, I don't want to go to cities, and go to... I mean, there is pretty cool stuff in urban areas and industrial areas but, I'd rather live up here, where it is like, slower. There is less going on. The scenery," he says.

When asked if he simply enjoys driving through the North.

"Ya. It is just, I guess, part of who I am, like the way I am wired and I want to go north, I just don't want to go south! I don't know. It is just how I am, I guess."

(Anthony Bernard Prince informed The Gaspé Spec of Harrison Smith's visit to the Gaspé Peninsula.)