The Great Slave railway

They couldn't have given it a better name

By Trevor Jones

There were many stories written about the building of the Great Slave Lake Railway in the early sixties, about the drive to reach this "last frontier" in the Canadian Northland. Typical of the romantic indulgence required of journalists on such occasions was this story which appeared in 1964 in The Ottawa Citizen:

"The country along the south shore of the Great Slave Lake is as still as death, as it has been for centuries past. It is as if the thick snow in the spruce trees has muffled all the sound.

"Suddenly the stillness is shattered by a sharp, piercing blast from a diesel locomotive.

"Then it really hits home — the realization that steel has penetrated the last frontier; that they've built a railway from southern Canada to within 400 miles of the Arctic Circle."

But nowhere in the moody epics in any newspaper file in Canada will anyone find the story of R.F. Welch, one of Canadian National Railways favourite construction contractors. And nowhere is there the story of the hundreds of immigrants who built the Great Slave line and the conditions they laboured under. Nor did anyone question how they got there.

The Great Slave Lake Railway, extending 378 miles through muskeg, bush and farm land from northern Alberta to the edge of the Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories, was built at the cost of $86 million in federal funds between 1961 and 1967.

Ever since the days of the CPR's Kicking Horse Pass line, in the 1880's hewn out of the Rocky Mountains by a mass labour force of Chinese and Irish immigrants, the Canadian railway industry has learned the value of immigrant labour. Ignorant of the language, of their rights, strangers to labour union traditions, immigrants make the most docile manual labour force available.

The Great Slave Lake Railway is a good example for several reasons.

For one, it is one of the most recent railways built in Canada. For another, it brings us in touch with Ralph F. Welch, a friend of the railway industry and of Ottawa for many years. And it brings us to the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, as it was then known, and their splended co-operation with men like Welch, and with the railway industry as a whole.

Finally, the story of the Great Slave line is pertinent because it has not ended.

The history of the Great Slave Lake Railway is one of the most blatant examples of Ottawa's accommodation of the interests of private profit that one can find.

The GSLR had been promised to the Peace River settlers by the Liberals for almost thirty years, to transport their products to the markets in the south. But when it was finally built, the settlers' interests were quite secondary.

The impending construction of the GSLR was announced by the Liberal Government, in the person of Northern Affairs Minister Jean Lesage, in 1954, and its construction was carried out under the conservative government — much hailed as testimony to John Diefenbaker's "vision of the north".

Diefenbaker's "vision of the north" coincided remarkably with the "vision" of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The GSLR was built, in Diefenbaker's own words, "primarily to bring out the rich lead-zinc deposits in the Pine Point area" on the Great Slave Lake — one of the richest deposits in the world.

Some 90 per cent of the lead-zinc deposits in the Pine Point region belong to the Pine Point Mines company, which is owned 78.2 per cent by Consolidated Mining and Smelting (COMINCO), in turn owned by Canadian Pacific Investments — the holding company of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

A few Liberals, in opposition, asked loudly in the House why the Conservative government was "selling out to CPR", by using CNR to build a railway for the private company's convenience and profit. But perhaps they, who conceived the project in 1954, knew the answer to that best.

In 1955, the Toronto Star reported: ". . .a federal proposal for a three-way sharing of costs between CPR, Smelters, and the federal government had been turned down by the CPR and the big mining company which has a 99-year lease on the area."

The president of Pine Point, W.G. Jewett, had the unmitigated cheek in 1960 to complain that the government's delay in implementing its policy to build the railroad was causing Pine Point "great concern", and that if government didn't hustle, "alternate forms of transport" would have to be developed.

Though CPR had to repay the Federal Government some of the money over a 10-year period through freight costs on the millions of tons of ore it carried out to its smelters in Trail, B.C., it still received a convenient loan of $86 million, which it was not about to shell out of its own pocket.

Co-operation

It was, in the words of a Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development report, "a splendid example of co-operation between government and private enterprise."

This spirit of co-operation was carried through into the construction phase of the railroad.

In those years, the CNR was virtually the private domain of its president, Donald Gordon, a man greatly respected by the government for getting things done. Donald Gordon had that simple formula for building railroads that kept everything neatly within the budget — kill the unions, and make sure you have the cheapest supply of labour possible.

This is why in the case of the GSLR, as in the case of dozens of other railway contracts in the previous thirty years, the CNR turned to the R.F. Welch (B.C.) Company, with its headquarters in Vancouver.

Ralph Welch has enjoyed virtual obscurity and lucrative CNR contracts for over 30 years. As a "manpower and construction contractor", Welch's specialty has been "extra gangs", the large construction and maintenance crews that build and repair this country's thousands of miles of track. Welch provided Gordon with what he wanted: a cheap, fast job, done without publicity and without combersome frills like unions.

Mr. Welch didn't have no worry about unions raising his costs because Donald Gordon was personally fending them off. Gordon engaged for years in a bitter fight with the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way to prevent its bid to unionize extra gangs. But when, in 1956, Gordon had to give in and extra gang labour was finally given certification under the Brotherhood, the CNR insisted on retaining Welch as a manpower agent on main lines, and also as a construction agent on pioneer lines like the GSLR.

In 1965, the Federal Government brought in the Federal Labour Standards Code (regulating federal employees) establishing a 40-hour work week. Railways were allowed to apply for deferments from the standard for their operating employees and extra gangs. But the only private railway construction contractor given the deferment under the umbrella of railway operations was R.F. Welch.

Immigrant labour

This left Welch free to provide the cheap labour the railway wanted. But Welch didn't restrict himself to dipping into any cheap labour pool he could cull in Canada (Canadians tended to walk off his jobs when they realized what they had to do).

Through arrangements with the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, and the Department of Labour, Welch agents used a travel to Portugal and Italy to recruit manual labour from the unemployment rolls of Lisbon and Rome, and from the surrounding rural areas. Through these arrangements with the Ottawa authorities, he brought them over by the hundreds to work on his extra gangs.

When it came to the construction of the GSLR, however, Welch no longer sent agents to Western Europe to recruit labour. His particular "arrangement" (his word) ended in 1957, apparently because the Immigration authorities took it upon themselves to keep up the supply of immigrants, and he no longer had to do active recruiting. He now only needed to phone up any government manpower office, say how many men he needed, and soon a trainload of Portugese and Italians and other immigrants was on its way to his construction sites.

Technically the Great Slave construction phase should have ended in July of 1967, when the Board of Transport Commissioners authorized commercial traffic on the line. But Ottawa extended the "construction phase" from December 1967 to March 1970. What is now being done on the railway is heavy maintenance, not construction, but the convenient extension means that the line is not regarded as an operational railway, and unions like the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way cannot move in since they are restricted to the operational lines.

The GSLR gangs today do exactly the same work as the unionized men on the operational lines — they lay new steel build up the track bed with ballast and raise the rails where they sag. But they work for Mr. Welch.

Not much has changed on the Great Slave Lake Railway since the early construction days. The immigrant farm labourers and unemployed whom Welch formerly recruited abroad now are obtained in Montreal, Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver. Welch gangs still work on the tracks from 90 to 120 hours a week. They even manage to clear $600 a month — if they work 500 hours.

On Thursday morning June 12, 1969 I joined Gang No. 5, a 30-man Portugese "extra gang", which was then at Roma, the southern junction of the GSLR and the Northern Alberta Railway of the continental system. Our work went on for 16 hours a day, seven days a week.

The new, unsettled track-bed of the GSLR heaves and shifts in the winter frosts, particularly in muskeg and swamp country. Gang No. 5 was a "lifting gang" which repaired these hazardous dips and tiltings of the rails.

At frequent intervals the entire track was raised two to six inches by a power jack, under the direction of a "sight man", who determined the proper track elevation. He was crouched to the ground, his eyes fastened on the sighting boards ahead. Four men with tamping shovels packed fresh gravel under the raised ties. After only two or three hours of steady pounding, their leg and back muscles were numb and the sucsuccessive physical jolts stiffened spine and shoulders.

Two get ill

Behind the power-jack, a three-man crew checked the accuracy of the elevation. A second sight man, also crouched on his knees, bent his head to the ground and peered upside down along the rail. Two men fell ill, doing this sight work, and the fellow who finally managed to cope with it suffered from bruised, swollen knees, constant migraine headaches, and severely strained eyesight.

His two partners followed with a hand jack. With a steel lever bar they raised rails missed by the power jack, and rammed in gravel. I saw only two men during the summer able to work the manual lift for any long period of time.

The shovel crew worked in front of a diesel tamping machine. In previous years this crew had 14 to 16 men. This summer, however, it numbered only five to seven, but it had to cover just as many miles per day.

To ensure a "highball" operation, the head foreman walked the gauntlet of shovellers hurling invective and pebbles at those who fell behind. He insisted — even in 90 degree weather — that the tamping machines bear down on the shovel crew. Many of the shovellers were constantly unnerved by the furious, splitting roar of these great yellow machines.

A ballast gang was sent ahead of Gang 5 in order to survey the line and deposit new gravel alongside the rack for us to use. Often they had not completed certain areas before our arrival and there were frequent miscalculations. Consequently we had to shovel large uncrushed rocks and packed mud from the very base of the track to get gravel. The ground was hard and rocky, and this task served to push many to the limit of their endurance.

No scheduled rest or supper breaks were provided during the nine hour afternoon and it was necessary for the men to smoke cigarettes or eat what food they could carry while they worked. On one occasion three men managed to get far ahead of the shovel crew. When a foreman went back to check their work they sat down to await his return. Because of this rest break they were ordered to their bunks, and their wages were docked for the remainder of the day. The isolated nature of the camps and the desire of the men to keep their jobs helped reinforce the arbitrary power and significance of the gang foreman.

One of the few Canadians who worked on the gang, Pat Cummings, a 36-year-old down-and-outer from Saskatchewan, was overcome by the unrelenting pace of the shovelling and the strain of working near the tampers. Like many of his colleagues, he had not been warned in Edmonton about the work nor of the weather conditions in the north and he had neither rain gear nor parka.

After 11 days he stopped working, and refused to speak with anyone in the bunk car. At night we would find him sitting on his bed with glazed eyes, every so often giving out a strange giggle. After three days, a speeder en route to Roma collected him.

Others too broke down, physically and mentally. In the course of the summer, five of the shovel crew who could no longer muster the strength to work also stopped eating and then finally had to leave. They just drifted off up the track, or through the muskeg to the nearest town.

Fortunately, the tamping machine broke down once or twice a week. When it did we would stand about folding exquisite red lips in the Lucky Strike bull's-eye or playing with pebbles on the ties.

Even if a man if fired on a Welch gang, he must provide his own exit. This means walking 10 to 15 miles up the track to the nearest road or up through long bush cuts to the Mackenzie Highway. In past years, when dismissed men did not leave the gang within two hours, or insisted that they be deposited at the nearest town, the gang foreman radioed for the RCMP, which came in on a speeder to arrest the man for trespassing on CN property.

The living conditions did little to improve either the health or the humour of the men. The cramped boarding cars, popularly referred to as "ovens", housed 17 to 22 in double bunks. The whole car was given two buckets of cold water for personal hygiene and enough closet space for half the men's belongings. There was no ventilation for men on the upper bunks, and many of the lower windows could not be used.

Slept in clothes

The workday began shortly after 5 am, and if the men dispensed with letters, showers and laundry, they could be asleep by 11 pm. We often slept in our clothes, and the smell of unwashed bodies and stale air was intensified by the daytime heat retained within the tin shell of the coach. Few men ever managed a full six hours of sleep.

Each man received his sleeping quarters free of charge, but Welch subtracted $2.85 per day from each man's wages for food. As supplied by Mr. Welch, those meals consisted mainly of macaroni, boiled potatoes, spaghetti, wieners and beef sausages. We never received milk, fresh vegetables or fresh fruit and for much of the time second servings were rare.

On Gang No. 5 over a three-week period in July and August we were fed 23 times with wieners and beef sausages. The beef sausages were often green in the centre and most of the men suffered from regular and violent attacks of diarrhea.

The chicken or ham hocks were usually too tough to be eaten. In Roma, a Welch agent came by the food car during lunch one day, asking if any of the men had any complaints about the food. Finally, one of the Portugese asked for "some meat we can chew on".

Jackson, the agent, told the cook to bring the man more meat, and personally placed it in front of him. "Take your time," said the agent. "Eat slowly. And be out of this camp within two hours."

Six weeks later, when three men refused to work one afternoon because of the food they had been offered at lunch, they were fired.

(Jackson lived in Peace River, in a large mobile home, in which, he would brag, he had invested over $15,000 for wall-to-wall carpeting, panelling, bar facilities, stereo, and colour TV. He had absolute control over every man's job on the track. They feared Jackson and his little rolling palace even more than they hated the foremen.)

It was much easier to replace men than it was to replace cooks on the gangs. We survived six cooks within 80 days and two of them left when their order forms to the Welch food commissar at Roma Junction were only half completed. These same cooks stated that much of the meat would be considered unsalable in Edmonton and that meat originally of good quality had been spoiled by careless freezing and thawing procedures.

At one point, the cook from gang 8, a maintenance crew stationed near Hotchkiss, ran on to the tracks in front of a CNR inspection car to protest the fact that he had not been sent sufficient food supplies for his men. He was fired the next day by Welch's commissar.

Accordingly, experienced Welch cooks took ludicrous steps to minimize costs. They would serve water rather than kool-aid (to save on sugar), skip fringe-incidentals such as pastry, gravy or pancakes, and refuse the men napkins or wax-paper with which to wrap up their supper sandwiches (which, please remember, one ate as one shovelled).

"You're paying $2.85 a day for your food," a cook who had worked for the Canadian army and in bush camps once explained to us. "The food I get costs Welch a buck. What do you expect?"

There was no medical officer for the gangs. When a labourer fell sick, he found it difficult to leave the isolated camps in order to see soctors in Peace River or Manning. The Portugese, to make matters worse, were wary of the local doctors, because they could not communicate with them. Welch provided no interpreter. A worker with a serious back disorder and another with violent intestinal pain were both counselled by the local medical profession to take aspirin.

The one gang member who came from the Peace River area was a simple-minded, 44-year-old Ukrainian. He severely injured his shoulder and legs on the shovel crew, and could not shovel properly. The foreman refused to believe there was anything wrong with him, and did not allow him leave for medical attention. He finally limped off — without permission — and we heard that when he got to a town he was hospitalized for ten days. The doctors warned him never to return to the rails, but it was the only employment he could find, and two weeks later we saw him back on the shovel crew, stiffly going through the motions.

He had long since applied for compensation, but when I left in August he had not received any reply from Roma Junction.

Portugese

The man, like most of the Peace River settlers and the Roma Junction administrators, was contemptuous of the Portugese. They were, to everyone around, "DP's", Dumb Portugese (in officialese, "Displaced Persons"). Behind their backs, the Canadians would taunt them with mock accent: "Maka de money, maka de money, eh DP's?"

In the middle of August a friend of mine, who had transferred to the ballast gang, was crushed between two box cars. Medical assistance came eight hours later. "The engineer was bloody lucky it was only a Portugese," the timekeeper, a Canadian remarked when news of his death reached our gang.

Some of the Portugese working on the lines were brought over by Welch during the earlier construction phase. Others were recent immigrants.

Welch men found that the Portugese were hard-working and, above all, docile. They never questioned authority of foremen, 16 hour work days with no breaks, they ate the food. They would let themselves be herded down the track by a speeder when foremen wanted the job accelerated. The foremen called them "good boy" — the closest human thing to cattle, and like the Chinese, Irish and Ukrainians of earlier decades of the Kicking Horse Pass line they are the muscle for CNR steel.

After the Portugese, the Welch manpower office in Edmonton favours "haywire tramps" who ride the western freights, and Metis from the Edmonton area.

The DP's were family men, who had relatively large families to support in the cities or abroad. Because they spoke no English or French, they had little chance of finding jobs elsewhere in Canada. Those that entered Canada with technical skills could not meet Canadian standards, or were exploited in non-unionized construction work in Winnipeg or Edmonton.

Worker recruited

Antonio Martinez, 50, father of three, his family in Toronto, entered Canada in 1968 to work as a TV repairman or electrician. When he was interviewed by immigration officials in Lisbon, they told him if he took a basic language programme he would find work easily in Toronto.

"Before I left the immigration office," he explained in broken English mixed with French, "the immigration official in Lisbon asked me if I could do heavy labour. He also asked me to show him the palms of my hands. I should have suspected then that they didn't really expect me to get an electrical job."

Most of the recent immigrants told similar stories, about how they were led to believe by immigration officials that they could get technical jobs in Canada. They felt now that they had, in fact, been imported as cheap construction labour.

The only other Canadian in the gang when I first arrived was the head foreman, a 75 year-old railway man from Ukrainian stock who had been unable to accept retirement from the CN line after 44 years of service. As Welch's head foreman of Gang No. 5, John Chypyha was responsible for herding the men down the track. He often boasted that he hadn't given a smoke break in 44 years, and he terrified the men. Bald, bullet-headed, short and tough, he would drive the men with barrages of obscenities and reward them with nickel candy bars.

One day he astonished the shovel crew by giving them a half-hour break, and he sat down to rap about a long-ago trip to Disneyland. He died that night in the foreman's bunk — wearing his railway pants and railway shirt.

He had overworked the men that July, the hottest month in several summers, and had driven many to the point of physical breakdown and furious temper explosions. Now he was dead, and his workers joked and laughed for several hours. Four men wrapped his body in yellow plastic before carrying it through the 5 am drizzle to the RCMP car on the highway.

One Newfoundlander who had lasted almost 40 days on the job had been planning to get himself fired (by complaining about the food) when Chypyha died. He now turned to the gang and smirked: "Here it is we were going to get fired, and we end up having to carry the bastard out. It was just about the other way around. By tomorrow I'd have been a sack over his back."

I quit Mr. Welch's employ at Mile 164 of the GSLR, near the town of High Level, on Saturday August 30. As the 80-day veteran of the shovel crew I had watched some 45 men come and go.

From Last Post

CNR's Toronto yards.