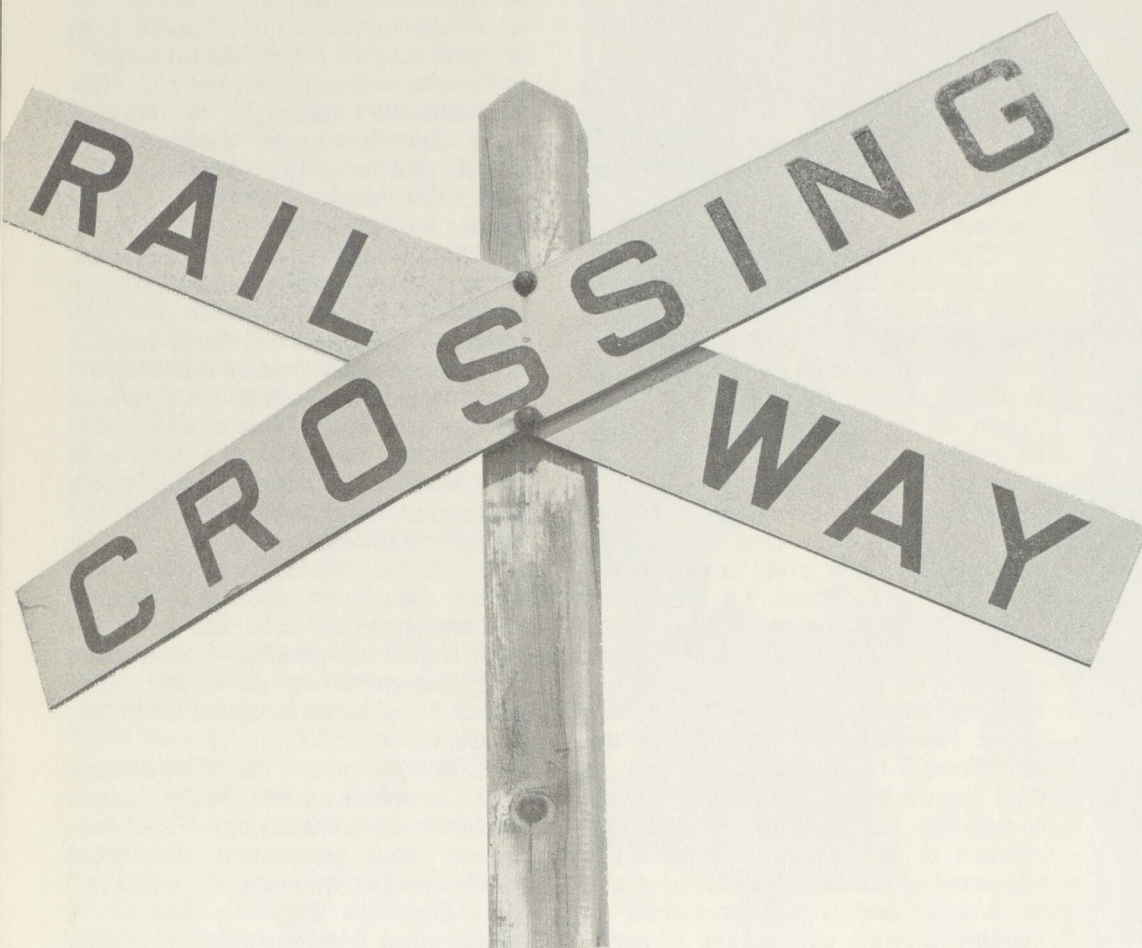


NRC railway beacon New light on old problem



Because they had neither the wheel nor the horse, Canadian Indians had no need of roads. Thus the building of the first roads in Canada was done by French settlers pushing inland along the St. Lawrence River Valley in the latter half of the seventeenth century.

The first operating railroad in Canada was the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railway Company. In 1835, wooden rails, faced with iron strips, were laid to form a portage link around the Richelieu Rapids in the water route between Montreal and New York. A Dorchester, five-ton steam engine imported from England, made the first trip over these primitive rails the following year.

Since the dawn of the railway era in Canada, 134 years ago, both modes of land transportation have grown immensely until today there are in excess of 517,305 miles of roadways and more than 43,613 route miles of rail trackage. This growth — initially spur-

red by a need to first link and then bind Canada together as a nation by permitting trade and commerce to flow along an east-west axis — has not been an unmixed blessing.

Wherever road meets rail there occurs either an elevated or a level crossing. Today there exists 33,963 level crossings and with 8,255,000 automobile vehicles on the nation's highways, the chances of a car-train collision at level crossings are more than remote.

In 1969, the last year for which complete figures are available, there were 343 instances of such collisions. Additionally, 15 persons were struck at highway crossings and 115 pedestrians struck at points other than crossings. There were 45 car-train collisions at points other than crossings.

The death toll for that year was 103 vehicle occupants killed and 358 occupants injured. Eight pedestrians died while eight were injured. The number

of railroad passengers and employees injured stood at 18.

The death and injury totals for other years were generally higher since 1969 was considered to be an abnormally low accident year. In 1949, when the number of motor vehicles was considerably less, 400 level crossing accidents took place and 129 persons lost their lives. The totals for 1959, the year the diesel engine replaced the steam engine, also rated higher. There were 424 crossing smashups and 163 motor vehicle occupants killed.

If one remembers that accidents were commonplace even in the horse-and-buggy days, it would be no exaggeration to say that thousands of lives have been lost and millions of dollars in property damage caused as a result of the intersecting of these two modes of transportation.

Working on the theory that accidents might be reduced if motorists had a better chance of noticing oncoming