

Canadian Pacific Railway: vital link in opening up the West

Just 93 years ago, on November 7, 1885, the last spike was driven home in the construction of the Canadian railway that spanned a continent, joining East and West before the introduction of air transportation.

The following article, based on some material in Canadian Scene and information and photos courtesy of Canadian Pacific Rail, describes the formidable task.

At the time of Confederation, in 1867, the now highly developed and prosperous Canadian West was no more than a vast area of prairies and mountains. There were a few pallisaded forts, the trading outposts of the Hudson's Bay Company, but only three major centres: the Red River colony at the site of today's Winnipeg; the gold fields on the Fraser River and in the Cariboo district of British Columbia; and the settlements on Vancouver Island. Their combined population did not exceed 25,000. A 1,200-km belt of forest, rock and lakes divided the Red River colony from the inhabited parts of the new Dominion of Canada. Another 1,920 km of wilderness lay between the settlements on the Red River and those in British Columbia.

Railway promise brings in B.C.

The settlers of British Columbia, which joined Confederation in 1871, becoming the sixth province of Canada, were of two minds about the advisability of joining a

country from which they were divided by geographic obstacles. What persuaded them was the Federal Government's promise to build a transcontinental railway within ten years — a permanent and secure link with the rest of Canada.

After years of dreams and political problems, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company was officially incorporated on February 16, 1881. The men involved in those early days were George Stephen, president of the Bank of Montreal and first Canadian Pacific president; R.B. Angus, manager of the same bank; D.J.

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The driving of the last spike at Craigellachie, in Eagle Pass, on November 7, 1885. Donald Smith, one of the financiers of the railway, drives the spike.

McIntyre, manager of the Canada Central Railway; and James J. Hill, known as the "Empire Builder" and eventually president of the Great Northern Railway. Later, Donald Smith (who became Lord Strathcona) and Sir William Van Horne were drawn into the huge enterprise.

Preposterous proposition

It was a formidable undertaking. The fledgling nation had committed itself to building a railway longer than the one just completed by its American neighbour, blessed with a population ten times larger and a federal government nearly 100 years older.

The contract signed with the Government provided, among other stipulations, for grants of \$25 million and 25 million acres to the company, with the lines already built by the Government or being built included.

The construction of the giant transcontinental railway was to be divided into three sections. The first extended from Callender on Lake Nipissing to Fort William on Lake Superior. The second was the prairie section from Winnipeg to the Rocky Mountains and finally, the third section which was the west end of 450 miles of heavy mountain construction.

The construction route across the top of Lake Superior had to be carved through solid rock that was well over 1.5 billion years old, or built through muskeg areas that seemed to have no bottom. Often, tons of rock would be dumped into an area and it would seem that the track was on solid footing. By the next day, however, the track itself would have

