

The Town That Overcame Handicaps

Story of a Co-operative Citizenship That Did Not Fail

By D. C. NIXON

ONCE upon a time a town, near the head of the Great Lakes, grown great in its own estimation, began to levy tithes upon the railroad that had created it. Railways hate taxes as the Irish despise the gauger. The town being obdurate, there was nothing left for the company to do but pull up stakes and get out; it would never do to establish a tax-paying precedent. They shifted their works and divisional headquarters up the harbour a piece and laid out a new town-site on conditions to suit themselves, declaring that it would not be long until the verdure would be so dank in the old town that mowing machines would have to precede the trains as they passed through.

It was quite true that some verdure did exhibit itself on the streets, and the outside world awaited the time that they might go in and homestead it. We are too prone to believe that just because a railroad can make a town it can also unmake it. This case is only true when there was no sane reason for its making it first place. But railroads, while they may establish an occasional oasis in the desert, display excellent acumen when they pick out lake or sea ports and stamp them with their approval. In this instance the somewhat deserted town allowed the grass to grow until it recovered confidence in itself by getting out and hustling for other railroads and steamship lines. They found it had been temporarily unprofitable to harass a railway corporation. Their lesson learned, they set about the building of a city, and to-day the town stands at the head of the Canadian upper lake ports, and will soon absorb the rival of its youth, having grown out to it.

HISTORY has the habit of telling the same story twice—or more; and as Port Arthur did not languish and die with the withdrawal of the Canadian Pacific, neither will Owen Sound suffer because the same corporation had reduced it to a mere calling place, with a boat once a week, and created out of nothing a Georgian Bay terminus at Port McNicoll. But why should this greatest of transportation companies make this change? The moving from Owen Sound to Port McNicoll is easily explained, for as a late musical comedy has it, "every little movement has a motive." Owen Sound and Toronto are connected by rail, by a road originally known as the Toronto, Grey and Bruce, that never got into Bruce. It was a narrow-gauge affair and constructed on the air-line principle. It had ant-like proclivities; never going around anything it could go over, climbing a steep grade out of Owen Sound, and negotiating the Caledon Mountain out of Toronto. Climbs like these mean heavy coal bills, and the C. P. R. either had to reconstruct the road to get away from heavy hauls, of necessity diverting the route, or find another port with a short rail connection with their Toronto to Montreal line. While the water route to Port McNicoll is longer than to Owen Sound, the time is made up by the easy grade on the new road. But the C. P. R. has by no means abandoned the town, for while its steamship headquarters are at the new port, a boat makes a weekly call at the old place, and a considerable amount of freight originating in Western Ontario still goes through Owen Sound. Two other steamship lines, the Northern Navigation Company and the Dominion Transportation Company, serve the town, making a total of six boats a week for upper lake ports.

IN actual dollars and cents Owen Sound does not miss much the payroll lost by the removal. In round figures one hundred and sixty thousand dollars was the annual disbursement for wages; and as the greater majority of men were longshoremen having no permanent abode, at least one-half of this amount went out of town. Six dollars per head of population is a loss easily forgotten, and the Owen Sounder resents the commiseration of the outside world, feeling that in no way does it deserve it when, despite the loss of these floaters, it has increased in population. To prove this I made a careful survey of the town and found less than a dozen vacant houses in a town of over 13,000 people.

The great drawback to the town has been lack of proper railway facilities. Its harbour has anchorage for all the tonnage on the Great Lakes, and with the expansion of Canadian shipping the Dominion Government must see that Owen Sound, being the best natural harbour and the nearest one to Western Ontario's manufacturing centres, it will devolve upon it, the Government, to do for lake traffic there what it is doing for ocean traffic at St. John, N.B. Yes! Owen Sound suffers by lack of proper rail service, and the

sins of the father are heaped on the heads of his heritors. Here is another case where history has a repetition. Owen Sound might have been much further advanced had it once in its early youth the foresight which unfortunately comes seldom the right side of middle age. When the old Northern Railway (now part of the Grand Trunk Railway system) began seeking bonuses for its line from Toronto to Georgian Bay the various municipalities along the route came along with the bonuses; all except Owen Sound, which, possessing the only natural harbour, childishly reasoned that the railroad would have to come to Owen Sound, bonus or no bonus.

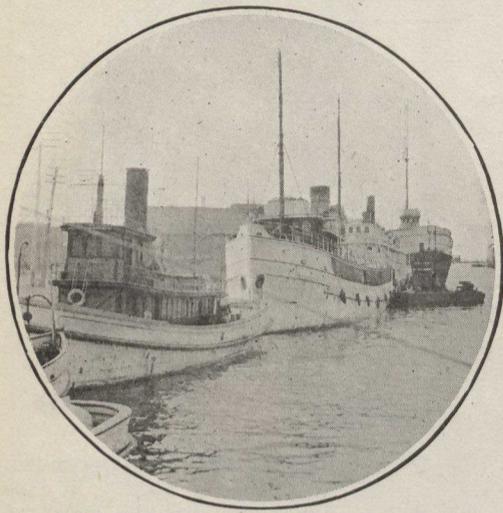
SILLY child! The directors never having heard of Mahomet, built harbours, one at Collingwood and the other at Meaford, leaving the foolish, cock-sure young cock's comb with a perfectly good harbour but no railway. And then just to rub the juice of the lime into the still open wound, the Grand Trunk ran a line into Wiarton to the east. Eventually relenting, not out of good nature, but because business policy demanded it, a branch was run from the latter line, giving the much-suffering town a G. T. R. connection, but by a round about way, with Toronto. Long before this, though, the narrow gauge had been the outlet, and, when taken over by the C. P. R., it was changed to the standard gauge. Had the town listened to reason in the early days and bonused, as all towns did, the old Northern Railway, the line would have followed around the shore from Meaford on a perfectly level roadbed; there would not have been the necessity of building artificial harbours at Collingwood and Meaford, and who knows that there would have been any reason for their existence, though I am sure that I will be accused of high treason by both these towns.

Owen Sound realizes its early mistake, and has realized it for many years. To-day a company, the majority of whose directors are Owen Sound men, has a charter for a railroad from Owen Sound to Orillia, covering the missing link along the Georgian Bay between Owen Sound and Meaford, thence to Collingwood and across country to Orillia. Opportunity has been offered the town of Owen Sound to bonus this road, buy stock or guarantee its bonds, the Dominion Government providing a substantial subsidy. The idea being to construct it and lease it to one of the three great Canadian railroads with a proviso that the road operating it gives the other two running rights. It seems a large order for a municipality to undertake, but the success of the spur that Guelph built and leased to the C. P. R. is emphasized by its promoters. There is no doubt but that such a road would be of great advantage to the town.

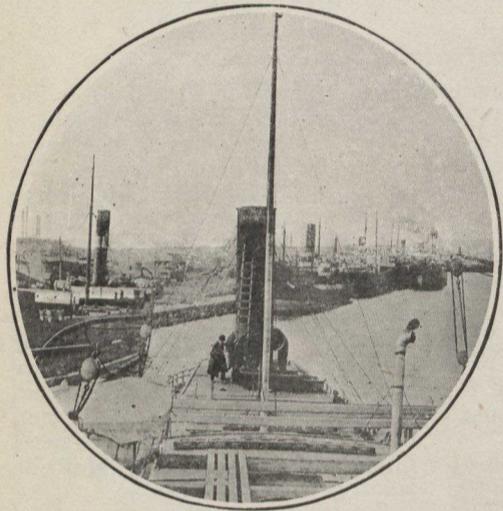
WITH all these handicaps what has Owen Sound been doing industrially? Speaking of handicaps, who or what has ever become of any account without them? Destiny and geography picked out Owen Sound as one of the manufacturing centres of Canada. Lumber was its chief industry, and while much of the glory of saw mill days has departed, it still had some big lumber plants on its outer harbour. But modern saw-milling has followed the modern trend of departmentalism; there was too much waste in the old days; to-day by-products play as much a part if not greater than the main product of yesterday's operations. No longer do our mill-men devastate a forest in order to burn half of it on the slab pile. One Owen Sound mill, besides using every available piece for straight lumber, uses the scraps for pails, tubs, kegs and baskets, and then finds that tooth picks can also be made from the by-products. Another mill doing a big business in lumber has a sash and door mill with a side line of meat skewers for the English trade. The other mills also specialize and in this way manage to give their men continuous employment. A match factory has just been granted a loan and will begin to manufacture next year.

But it is in furniture that Owen Sound excels, and without bias I believe that this town will be the greatest wood-working centre in Canada before many years go by. Fifteen years ago a small factory began operations here. It has developed into a number of companies whose interests are controlled by the same group of local capitalists and whose operations are next biggest in Canada to the trust. They manufacture cheap and high grade chairs, high grade tables, dining-room and bed-room sets. Four immense factories are now in operation, and a fifth is under construction.

Three cement mills (not in the merger) have been in operation. Two of them have amalgamated and will manufacture under a new process, getting their



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