

16 The Hamilton & North Western Railway (H&NW)

When the Hamilton & North Western obtained its charter in 1872, the transcontinental railway was well under debate, and Hamilton's ambitions had broadened their horizon far beyond the Hamilton & Port Dover Railway and traffic from Hamilton's "hinterland". The Hamilton & Port Dover had been a painful lesson in procrastination, and the Great Western, while it had a profound influence on Hamilton's development, was not a railway that was Hamilton's own – any influence that Hamilton had wielded in the affairs of the GWR had waned after the death of its home-grown railway baron, Sir Allan "railways are my politics" MacNab, in 1862. Moreover, the civic rivalry between Hamilton and Toronto was an all-encompassing passionate driving force in the mid-19th century. Toronto's railway, the Northern Railway of Canada, was gradually working its way north, and there were other symptoms of Toronto's ambitions, such as the Toronto & Nipissing Railway. Anything that Toronto did, Hamilton was determined to do better.

Even before the push to the north could get under way, in 1875 the H&NW absorbed the ailing Hamilton & Lake Erie Railway and undertook to build the last leg of that line to Port Dover that should have been completed two decades earlier.

Hamilton's ambition of a connection to the forthcoming transcontinental railway was going to be realized chiefly at the expense of the citizens of Simcoe County who were desperate for an alternative to the Northern Railway of Canada whom they perceived to be a gouging monopoly and disdainful of serving the western portion of the county. The Northern, seeing its interests threatened, put up a game fight with the promise of a line diverging from King City through Beeton, Angus and on to Penetanguishene, but Simcoe collectively put up municipal aid totalling \$300,000. With other civic bonuses totalling half as much again, a sizeable Province of Ontario grant, and with stock and bond issues, serious construction finally got under way in 1877. Simcoe's aid included a condition for a branchline from Beeton to Collingwood that the promoters of the road were not that keen to construct, as it was a diversion of their master plan's ultimate destination. Careful reading of the H&NW prospectus did not conceal the master plan, but Simcoe was blindly desperate to get some competition into the county. The road reached Barrie in late 1877 and Collingwood in mid-1879 (officially December 1878), and for a very brief time God was in His Heaven and Simcoe had its other railway.

However, railway politics, big city civic ambitions and economic reality were bound to intervene. The Northern Railway of Canada was also endeavouring to reach the proposed transcontinental line, and the construction-hostile Canadian Shield across the Muskokas was a formidable barrier to be conquered. Both railways were seriously financially impacted from the difficult economic times of the 1870s, and the Northern was facing the additional burden of conversion to the Standard Gauge. There were other reasons too, including the stark fact that indispensable government aid for one railway through that barrier, let alone for two, would be a very tough sell, if not downright unlikely.

So it was that in 1879, the Northern and the H&NW came to a joint management agreement as the Northern & North Western Railway (N&NW), and in effect became one railway. In Simcoe there was once again, horror of horrors, a dread monopoly. The realization now dawned that Simcoe County was a way-station and not a terminus. Barrie (which stood to benefit economically in any event from the significant railway infrastructure at Allandale), accepted the new reality more or less philosophically, but Collingwood was beside itself with fury at this perceived betrayal.

The joint working of the two railways proved to be a stormy marriage from the outset, the major reasons being the self-interests of the two sponsoring cities, the institutionalized Northern chairmanship of the N&NW joint executive committee, the split loyalties of the H&NW board in its preference for the GTR and the CPR, and the overriding "bone of contention" of the Northern's control of the Northern & Pacific Junction Railway, the tool of extension of the transcontinental connection project north of Gravenhurst.

The near-monolithically powerful Grand Trunk Railway saw a house divided against itself and had bided its time. On January 24, 1888, the GTR took over the 494 miles of track of the Northern & North Western and its leased lines. With its passage into the GTR, the N&NW was at first described as the N&NW Division, but by the beginning of the 20th century it had been fully integrated into the GTR system of operating districts. Almost surprisingly, in 1923, the Canadian National Railways inherited the original N&NW network pretty much the same way as it had gone into the GTR 35 years earlier.

For more information about the H&NW, please consult:

Cooper, Charles: *Hamilton's Other Railway*, Bytown Railway Society, Ottawa, Ont. 2001.

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