

SHANLY, FRANCIS (Frank), civil engineer and railway contractor; b. 29 Oct. 1820 at Stradbally (County Laois, Republic of Ireland), the eighth child and seventh son of James Shanly, barrister and estate manager, and his first wife Frances Elizabeth Mulvany, who died bearing Francis; m. 28 Sept. 1853 to Louisa Saunders of Guelph, Canada West, daughter of Thomas Saunders, colonel of the militia and clerk of the peace for Wellington County, and they had ten children; d. 13 Sept. 1882 of a heart attack.

James Shanly, an ma from Trinity College, Dublin, who had been called to the bar in 1809, intended that his sons should become professional men like himself. All six of his surviving sons were privately tutored in classics, algebra, chemistry, French, and drawing by Dublin's best masters. One boy, who showed special promise and was sent off to apprentice under a noted Liverpool civil engineer, died of consumption at the age of 20. This tragedy, combined with other disappointments, prompted James to seek a better future in Canada for his family: four surviving sons from his first marriage, his second wife (his first wife's sister), and the three children of that marriage. In 1836 the Shanly entourage moved through New York City, Toronto, and Hamilton to some improved acreage on the Thames River near London, Upper Canada, which they named Thorndale.

Emigration proved costly and ultimately disillusioning for the family patriarch, as the name chosen for the homestead suggests. James and his boys failed as farmers in plain view of all those around them who were making a go of it but whom they considered their social inferiors. The boys at least regarded "competition with unlettered boors whose labour and sweat were certain of all the reward *they* aimed at – a hundred acres of clearing with the stumps out," as fundamentally "hopeless." Nor could they comprehend how human beings could bear such mind-numbing toil, much less thrive on it. Eventually James gave up farming and opened a distillery, but in time it too failed.

The Shanly boys yearned for a more rewarding, exciting, and intellectually challenging life than the narrow world of Thorndale and one by one in the 1840s they left home to find it. James Jr took up law in nearby London. Then Walter* went away to become an engineer. Through a stroke of good fortune one of the Shanlys' neighbours was an amiable and powerful fellow countryman, Hamilton Hartley Killaly*, who was commissioner of the Board of Works for the province. In 1840 Killaly accepted Walter as one of his engineering protégés in the department. Walter in turn secured a place for his older brother Charles Dawson* as a clerk. But by the time Frank could extricate himself from the slowly dying distillery in 1846, the politicians had stripped Killaly of much of his power and imposed strict economies upon the reorganized Department of Public Works. Throughout 1846 Walter looked in vain for an opening for Frank on the Welland Canal reconstruction, to which he had recently been assigned, and on other government works. Eventually that year Frank found temporary employment himself, surveying the right of way for the Great Western Railway under the supervision of Charles B. Stuart. When the surveys were completed, construction was postponed indefinitely while the promoters tried to raise the necessary capital. Frank rejoined Walter briefly, but there were still no prospects of permanent work in the Niagara peninsula.

Anxious to find a place, preferably building railways, Frank reluctantly turned to the United States where in 1848, through the good offices of Killaly's son Jack, he secured a job as an assistant engineer for the contractor who was building the eastern division of the Ogdensburg and Lake Champlain Railroad. "I was very glad that you have at length succeeded in obtaining something like a footing on any terms," wrote Walter, who was thinking about a change of scene himself. "Stick close to it, be it ever so trifling in emolument." Shortly afterward Walter did give up his appointment with the Department of Public Works to take a more senior post on the western division of the same railway. "The name of the thing would be of great use to me," Walter admitted, "besides letting me into all the mysteries of laying down rails and some other minor details that I am at

present practically ignorant of." During 1849–50 the Shanly brothers gained invaluable experience and mastered the technique of railway construction on the Ogdensburg road. As it neared completion they ached to return to "show the Canada folk how quickly Railroads can be built when they get the *right man* at them." But Canada was not ready for railways just yet. So Walter stayed on with the Ogdensburg and Lake Champlain as resident engineer while Frank followed his employer to his next job, working on the Union Canal in Pennsylvania.

In 1851 Walter returned to Canada as chief engineer of the Bytown and Prescott Railway. With the affairs of that short line well in hand he accepted a second chief engineership with the Toronto and Guelph Railway late the same year. Walter then called his brother back from his canal-building exile in the United States to supervise construction of the Toronto and Guelph. When this railway became the western extension of the Grand Trunk in 1853 the whole character of the work and the importance of the Shanly brothers' positions changed. The road had to be built to higher standards: timber trestles were replaced by iron bridges on massive stone pillars, and the line was extended to Port Sarnia (Sarnia) and beyond. They were fast becoming the most experienced railway engineers in the country and their services were in great demand. When their section of the Grand Trunk neared completion in 1856 Frank scouted for new opportunities in the Maritime colonies and in the northwestern United States before deciding to build the Welland Railway, his first important contracting job. During the 1860s Frank served as a consulting engineer for numerous railways in Ontario and Michigan, rebuilt the Northern Railway to proper standards, and operated a profitable stone quarry and railway tie supply business in Georgetown, Ont.

The Shanly brothers were reunited again in 1868. From 1858 to 1862 Walter had been general manager of the Grand Trunk system, a post he resigned to become involved in the Canada Starch Works [see William Thomas Benson] and Liberal-Conservative politics in Grenville County, Canada West. An invitation to tender on construction of a railway tunnel through the Hoosac Mountains in northwestern Massachusetts enticed him out of semi-retirement. Walter and Frank formed a partnership and won the bidding. For the next two years they commanded a small army of men, animals, and machinery against an obstacle that had already defeated other men, the longest tunnel project attempted in the United States to that time. Unpredictable underground rivers made boring through the five miles of solid rock hazardous in the extreme and progress was slow. Nevertheless, by 1870 they had mastered most of the technical challenges involved. At this point Frank left the partnership to take up a number of promising opportunities in Ontario which had suddenly materialized with the opening of another railway boom.

For the next four years Frank Shanly was at the height of his career. As a railway contractor he had more work than he could handle and he was in constant demand as either a consulting engineer or an arbitrator. During this time he did consulting work or contracted for the Brantford, Norfolk and Port Burwell, the Cobourg and Peterborough, the Credit Valley, the Georgian Bay and Wellington, the Grand Junction, the Grand Trunk, the Great Western, the Kingston and Pembroke, the London, Huron and Bruce, the Midland, the Port Dover and Lake Huron, the Toronto, Grey and Bruce, the Wellington, Grey and Bruce, and the Port Whitby and Port Perry railways among others. In a day when railways were people's politics, it was only natural that railway engineers frequently became politicians. Walter had been a member for Grenville South since 1863 and in 1872 Frank joined him in the political arena, having been persuaded to stand for the Liberal-Conservatives in Toronto Centre in the general election. Although Frank was not a good public speaker and was notably shy in public, the Tory organizers were convinced that his towering reputation and their smooth machine would carry the day. However, both Walter and Frank went down to defeat, to William Henry Brouse and Robert Wilkes*

respectively. To add to the disappointment, Frank was left to take care of most of the \$8,000 in election expenses.

This political misadventure was a portent of even greater disaster ahead. Frank had taken payment for his contracts in railway bonds as was the custom. He either borrowed on these bonds or sold them to raise the necessary cash to pay his men and purchase equipment and materials. When several railways of which he held bonds defaulted and the market for these securities virtually dried up, Frank Shanly was wiped out. Late in 1874 with notes falling due and no solid collateral in hand upon which to renew or pay off these loans, he threw himself upon the mercy of his creditors. Walter rescued him by assuming the bulk of his obligations. In return, Frank took a job as city engineer for Toronto in 1875, assigning his entire salary to his brother. For the next five years, while he worked on the straightening of the Don River and the planning of a municipal sewer system, Frank did his best to keep his creditors at bay and still feed his family.

In the last years of his life Frank Shanly was a driven man, tormented by pride and debts, which were still more than \$90,000 at his death. When the Conservatives returned to power in 1878 he begged Sir John A. Macdonald* to give him a post commensurate with his talent and former status. The party, it seems, seldom neglected its friends. In 1880 Frank became chief engineer of the Intercolonial Railway at an annual salary of \$6,500. This was a handsome sum, but not enough to repay his brother and erase all his outstanding debts. So, while he commuted between Toronto and Ottawa to administer Intercolonial affairs, he kept an eye open for a main chance. He needed another successful contracting coup. In July of 1881, for example, he and George Alexander Keefer* tried to get the contract for the Port Moody, B.C., section of the Canadian Pacific Railway, only to have their financial backer pull out at the last minute. The chance never came.

Nor could he find consolation in a happy family life. By 1880 only six of his ten children were still alive. Then in 1882 his oldest boy contracted tuberculosis and died. This tragedy, Walter Shanly recalled, "seemed entirely to crush him. He never rallied from it. His work was done. His indomitable energy had resulted in disappointment and failure in all his undertakings, which were large outside of the strict professional line, and he died of a broken spirit." In fact, he died of a heart attack on the overnight train to Ottawa, on 13 Sept. 1882.

Frank Shanly was one of Canada's most skilful and experienced railway engineers. He had the misfortune to be drawn into contracting, where the rewards of success were phenomenally greater, but where failure could be sudden, ruthless, and irredeemable. Frank was "a naturally endowed engineer," his brother Walter recorded near the end of his own life, "making it all the more to be deplored that he ever stepped aside, or down, to undertake the part of Contractor for which he was not at all fitted."

[H. V. Nelles](#)

Some of Francis Shanly's letters have been published in *Daylight through the mountain: letters and labours of civil engineers Walter and Francis Shanly*, ed. F. N. Walker (Montreal, 1957).

AO, MU 469-87; MU 2664-776. PAC, MG 26, A. Currie, *Grand Trunk Railway*. Hodgetts, *Pioneer public service*. T. C. Keefer, *Philosophy of railroads and other essays*, ed. H. V. Nelles (Toronto and Buffalo, N.Y., 1972).

