STIRRINGS IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS – by Carl Riff

The first means of transportation in Canada was by water, so it is not surprising that the first railways built in British North America usually performed a portage function by providing a link between navigable waterways. The first public railway in Canada, the Champlain & St. Lawrence Railroad, was opened in July 1836, and is a classic example of a portage railway. It connected Laprairie (opposite Montreal) on the St. Lawrence with St. John's on the Richelieu River. From there, steamers transported freight and passengers up the Richelieu, through Lake Champlain, into the Hudson River to New York. The only other railroads built in the next decade or so were another short portage line between Montreal and Lachine, Que, eight miles long, to avoid the Lachine Rapids of the St. Lawrence (in 1847); and another that connected Joliette, Que. to the St. Lawrence (in 1849).

At the dawn of the 1850s, Canada was about to embark on its first railroad mania. The original role of railways was but a small cog in a water transportation system, but events soon started to stir in Portland, Me., Montreal, Que., and an area in what is now called the "Eastern Townships" of Quebec.

The history of the Eastern Townships developed from the practice under the French regime of bestowing lands in seigniorial tenure, and when this was abandoned by the British authorities in Quebec at the beginning of the 19th century, the then underdeveloped territory lying between the St. Lawrence River on the north, the American border on the south, and the Chaudière and Richelieu Rivers on the east and west respectively, was surveyed and divided into townships of 5,400 to 6,000 acres each and designated as the Eastern Townships, however without any statutory significance.

The Eastern Townships were at this time largely virgin forest. Only the fringes, or certain areas along the south shore of the St. Lawrence, which had been granted in seigneuries, were settled. Ten miles back the land was a virtual wilderness. A few hardy pioneers had straggled in, but colonization lagged because of the slow and difficult means of transport, the only reasonably accessible regions being along, or in the vicinity of, the main waterways such as the Chaudière, St. Francois, Richelieu and St. Lawrence Rivers, and which were available for water transportation during the summer months. Roads were opened up as the settlers came in, but progress was exceedingly slow. A better means of transport being the foremost need, the news of the coming of the railway was naturally hailed with great rejoicing, and by many with a distinct sense of liberation.

The first organized development in the Eastern Townships was through the British American Land Company formed in England in 1831 by one John Galt and his London associates, for the purpose of trading in the lands of the district. The connection leading to the formation of this company was that Galt had, from 1824, been actively associated with the management of a similar land company in Ontario; by the name of the Canada Company, which had purchased from the Six Nations Indians an un-surveyed and largely unexplored area of over a million acres in the western part of the Province, bordering on Lake Huron, and known as the Huron Tract.

The Canadian headquarters of the British American Land Company was established in Sherbrooke, and in 1835 John Galt's son, Alexander T. Galt, later Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt, came out to Canada in the service of the Land Company, established residence in Sherbrooke, and started to make a name for himself in the management of that company.

Civic debate about the prospects of linking Montreal and Portland, Me., the closest ice-free Atlantic port in the early 1840s, began to swell. A decisive influence was the eloquence of a young Portland, Me., lawyer, John A. Poor. On a "stump" tour of Canada, he mesmerized the people of Sherbrooke, Que., including Alexander Galt. From thereon in, Galt was at his side, and while Poor found that many Montreal businessmen were at first not interested in railroads, for in the colonies that were to become Canada, canals were still in vogue, Galt ensured that Poor met Montrealers of influence. [2] Poor asserted that Montreal business would be free of the restriction of trade imposed by the ice-clogged St. Lawrence River for five months a year. While Montrealers at first procrastinated about the prospects of a railway to the Atlantic Ocean, gradually Poor won converts. John Poor wanted Portland to be Canada's Atlantic port, and his enthusiasm for the project led to the forming of the Atlantic & St. Lawrence Railroad

in the United States, and the St. Lawrence & Atlantic in Canada in 1845. [2]

From the outset, Alexander Galt's fortunes had naturally been closely linked with those of the Eastern Townships, to which he devoted his untiring energy and every resource at his command, and it was with the object of opening up the district (and in turn to advance the sale of lands which had been purchased from the Crown by the Land Company), that he had become interested in railway development in general, and the promotion and construction of the St. Lawrence & Atlantic Railroad in particular, of which he was to become president. [1]

Meanwhile, railway promoters in Boston, Mass. had also started to court Montreal, and were anxious that a railway be built linking Montreal to Boston (largely for the benefit of the latter). With the attention that Portland and Boston financiers were paying Montreal, the Montrealers started to become eager railroad promoters. The dispute between Boston and Portland as the port of choice could only be settled by a race between Portland - Montreal and Boston-Montreal using sleighs. Part of the mail from England, destined for Montreal, was taken off a transatlantic steamer at Portland and was loaded on a sleigh for transport by land to Montreal. When the same steamer reached Boston, the remainder of the Canadian mail was placed on another sleigh. In the depths of the winter, these two sleighs sped northwards through the mountains of New Hampshire, Vermont and the Eastern Townships. The Portland sleigh reached Montreal 12 hours ahead of the one from Boston, and the dispute was settled. [2]

Alexander Galt supported Poor's route rather than the 'Boston route', as the latter would be too far west of Sherbrooke to benefit his territory. Galt and other Montreal businessmen had a charter to build the St. Lawrence & Atlantic from Montreal into the Eastern Townships through the towns of Richmond and Sherbrooke, and then to effect a connection with the American A&St.L. Railroad at the international boundary.

Early explorations indicated that there were three feasible routes from the east coast to approach the international boundary. Of the three, the favoured one was along the upper Connecticut River, then by the Vermont Nulhegan and Clyde river valleys to Island Pond, Vt., Derby Line, Vt., and Stanstead, Que., and then along the shore of Lake Massawippi to Sherbrooke. (Subsequently, the route that was adopted from Island Pond was via Norton Mills, Vt., and Coaticook, Que.)

Although civil engineer Casimir Gzowski [3] (later Sir Casimir) of Gzowski & Company, made a thorough survey of the region south of Sherbrooke and preferred the line through Coaticook, the people of Stanstead were angry at this decision, and accused Galt (with some justification, no doubt) of favouring this route because the British American Land Company, with which he was still connected, controlled large tracts of land in this area. [4]

Construction of the St. Lawrence & Atlantic (St.L&A) started in 1846, the line reached Sherbrooke in September 1852, and finally linked up with the American Atlantic & St. Lawrence (A&St.L) at Island Pond, Vermont in July 1853.

Both these railways were built to the "broad", also referred to in Canada as the "Provincial", gauge of 5'6". When the St.L.&A and the A&St.L subsequently formed the eastern nucleus of the new Grand Trunk Railway, this gauge became the standard width for railways in Canada for the next two decades. Incidentally, the adoption of the "Provincial" gauge in Canada has its roots in the politics of these two founding railways: the Portland, Me. commercial interests in competition of those of Boston, and also the probable gauge of the first two locomotives delivered to the A&St.L being likely major and minor factors in the "broad" gauge's adoption by the then unsuspecting Province of Canada. [5]

Incidentally, the Grand Trunk also absorbed a railway organized in Quebec City, called the Quebec & Richmond Railway. That railway, opened in November 1854, left Pointe Levis on the south shore of the St. Lawrence opposite the ancient capital of Quebec City and ran through Victoriaville to Richmond, Que., for the purpose of connecting with the St. Lawrence & Atlantic Railroad, and thence to Portland, Me. A GTR ferry across the St. Lawrence River connected Quebec City with the new railhead. This line will prove to be of relevance to the story of the Quebec Central Railway. (Subsequently from a

point on this line at Chaudiere Junction [Charny], the GTR also reached down the St. Lawrence River to Rivière-du-Loup in 1860.)

In a few short years, the Grand Trunk would have broad gauge lines from the Gulf of the St. Lawrence and Portland on the Atlantic stretching to the new west frontier at Point Edward (Sarnia), Ont. and the American mid-west. The Bostonians had lost the first round but hadn't called it quits. A railway had linked Boston to the Connecticut River at White River Junction, Vt., where connection was made with the Vermont Central.

The people of Stanstead were disappointed that a railway had not been built to their small border community; and so were the people of the upper Connecticut River valley. Railways were being built all along the Connecticut River. The genesis of the next railway to enter Sherbrooke started at the connection of the Vermont Central and the Northern Railroad of New Hampshire at White River Junction, Vt. Although chartered on November 10, 1838, the Connecticut & Passumpsic Rivers Railroad (C&PR RR) did not start construction until the mid-1840s. Its route extended up the Connecticut River and its tributary, the Passumpsic, to a point on the international boundary, where a connection would be made with the proposed Stanstead, Shefford & Chambly Railway (SS&C). In conjunction with the Champlain & St. Lawrence, it would form an independent through-route to Montreal.

The C&PR RR, or simply "the Passumpsic", as it was known during its life, was built in sections as money became available. The first stage was opened to Bradford, Vt. on October 11, 1848, and weeks later it reached Wells River on November 6, 1848. The line was extended to Barnet on November 4, 1850, but the section that linked Lyndonville and Barton was not opened until November 1, 1857. Construction costs were much higher than planned, but a more embarrassing problem plagued the line during the 1850s. The "Passumpsic", after reaching St. Johnsbury, Vermont, decided to proceed with the northern extension to the border only when money was available. Various towns and individuals on both sides of the border had pledged to subscribe stock in the railway. A contract for the northward extension was entered into in the full belief that sufficient means had been provided. The failure of the stock subscribers to meet the calls was an unexpected embarrassment, and placed the company at the mercy of the contractor with the road incomplete to Barton, and no apparent means of extrication from this dilemma.

The future of the "Passumpsic" was settled in legal battles fought between the railway and the stock subscribers between 1860 and 1862, until the investors started to honour their commitments.

During the early years of the American Civil War, the railway found that money and iron rails were both in short supply. The *Stanstead Journal* reported that the line to Newport and Stanstead could not be completed until money came forward, and further that a group of Boston capitalists were seeking a charter for a railway line from St. Johnsbury to what was now the Grand Trunk Railway at Island Pond. The Passumpsic charter was soon to expire, and if the other charter were granted, the northern extension from Boston would never be built. Boston wanted to be the terminus of the Grand Trunk, and the charter would be favourably backed.

At a meeting held at the Stanstead Academy on March 22, 1862, Passumpsic president Keyes told the assembly the road needed $60,000 to complete the line to the international boundary. Orleans County in Vermont was putting up $65,000. The money was needed for grading.

Trains descended into Newport, Vt., at the head of Lake Memphrernagog on October 5, 1863. The intemational boundary at North Derby was only a few miles north, but the Passumpsic was faced with a new problem: it had planned its Northern Extension to link with the Stanstead, Shefford & Chambly Railway at the border, even though this railway was still 45 miles away at Waterloo, Que.

The Stanstead, Shefford & Chambly was incorporated in 1853 with the intention of building a railway from the Champlain & St. Lawrence Railroad at St. John's, Que., through Farnham, Granby, Waterloo, Magog to the Connecticut & Passumpsic Rivers Railroad at Stanstead. Construction began in 1858 and work was completed to Farnham in 1859, and to Granby and Waterloo in August 1861.

“Meanwhile the Vermont Central Railroad and the C&PR RR had become bitter rivals for the traffic of northern Vermont, and since the Vermont Central had already established an international rail route to Montreal via Rouse’s Point, it was determined to prevent the opening of a rival route between New England and Montreal via Newport, Vt. and Waterloo, Que. In the autumn of 1862, the Vermont Central Railroad acquired a controlling interest in the Stanstead, Shefford & Chambly, and put a stop to all further construction work.

The Passumpsic, in its early years, had also been under the impression that the Grand Trunk planned to build a branch line from Waterville, Que.; just south of Sherbrooke, to a connection with the Passumpsic at a point called Benson Place, one-and-a-half miles northwest of Stanstead. However, in 1863 the Grand Trunk was in severe financial straits, and unable to meet up with the Passumpsic.

The failure of both the SS&C and the Grand Trunk to construct lines to connect with the Passumpsic at Stanstead made the Passumpsic look to Canadians to build a new line. A product of co-operation between Passumpsic president Keyes and the Stanstead Member of Parliament Albert Knight was chartered on June 9, 1862 - the Massawippi Valley Railway Company was allowed to build from a point on the Grand Trunk between Lennoxville and Compton to “Place Benson” (Stanstead) in the township of Stanstead or some point of connection on the provincial boundary with the Connecticut & Passumpsic Rivers Railroad.

The *Waterloo Advertiser* reported that shortly after incorporation, the Massawippi Valley Railway conducted a preliminary survey under J .M. Clark, previously assistant engineer of the SS&C. The newspaper reported that opposition to the charter by the Shefford Railway was withdrawn in consideration of the fact that the standard rather than the broad gauge was to be employed, and that arrangements would allow the Shefford running rights when it was in a position to connect with the new line.

A meeting in support of the new railway was held in Stanstead on June 4, 1863, and one of even greater importance was held at Sherbrooke in the rooms of the Board of Trade on July 23, 1863. The merchants and financiers of Sherbrooke were addressed by the Hon. Alexander T. Galt on the importance of the Massawippi Valley Railway, not only to the region, but to Canada. He explained that the new line would shorten the route to Boston. Galt explained that it was important to draw the western Great Lakes trade down the St. Lawrence to Montreal, then overland to Boston, rather than allow the trade to go via the Erie Canal and the Hudson River to Albany, and hence to New York. If Boston would flourish, then so would Montreal. If Montreal became a major terminal, Galt reasoned, the costs of all goods would be reduced. Walter Shanly, C.E. and Albert Knight, M.P. also addressed the meeting on the importance of the undertaking. Another meeting was held on June 28 at West Hatley Village for the purpose of organizing the company. After Galt had addressed the meeting in his customary fashion, the following officers were appointed:

The Hon. A. T. Galt, president;
Col. Benjamin Pomeroy, vice-president;
and directors Josiah Stickney, J .R. Brigham, Carlos Pierce, all of Boston, Mass.;
Emmons Raymond of Vermont, A. Knight, M.P. and C.C. Colby of Stanstead, Que.;
and Charles Brooks of Lennoxville, Que.

The Hon. Alexander Galt attended further meetings with Boston capitalists at the Memphremagog Hotel at Newport in October of that year. After the Americans had toured a part of the proposed route by carriage, it was expressed that the local residents did not want to operate the line, they would only build it. Local residents gave the whole railway scheme the cold shoulder.

The Passumpsic seemed to settle in at Newport, almost resigned that a northern connection would not be built. The charter of the Massawippi Valley was several years old and construction had not started. The Passumpsic claimed there was a shortage of rails that forestalled the completion of the line to the border at Stanstead. The railway started drawing trade from the Canadian side of the border via a number of steamboats, tugs and barges that reached up as far as Magog.

The close of the American Civil War provided the impetus for a second start to the Massawippi Valley. The charter of the railway was revived in 1866, and M.P. Albert Knight had also been granted a charter for a line called the Waterloo, Magog & Stanstead Railway.

The new interest in the Massawippi Valley made the Passumpsic start work to complete the line to the international border in the fall of 1866. The Connecticut & Passumpsic Rivers Railroad opened the portion from Newport to a point on the international boundary called at that time "Walker's Place" (later Linesboro, Que., North Derby, Vermont. On May 2, 1867 a large hotel was completed at the site by one Jerry Drew, who also purchased the stage lines running from the new railhead to the GTR at Compton and Coaticook. The completion of the Passumpsic was the needed impetus that residents north of the border needed to provide the much-needed northern link.

In each of its Weekly editions during April and May 1867, the *Stanstead Journal* cited the needs, advantages and benefits of railways in general and the Massawippi Valley in particular. (The paper's editor, Lucius Robinson, was later rewarded for his support by having a Passumpsic locomotive named after him.)

In the summer of 1867, the four British colonies Canada West (Ontario), Canada East (Quebec), New Brunswick and Nova Scotia became Canada; and the Massawippi Valley, after two false starts, was ready to provide a link between the Grand Trunk at Lennoxville, Que., and the Connecticut & Passumpsic Rivers Railroad at Newport, Vt. New plans included a branch line from the proposed main line to [Rock Island] Stanstead, Que. Also, there were still plans to connect with the SS&C near Hatley, Que.

The *Stanstead Journal*, in its May 2, 1867 edition, recalled somewhat drily that when the Massawippi Valley was first chartered in 1862, president Keyes of the Passumpsic and the Hon. A.T. Galt had both been given the cold shoulder by the local citizenry, and that in 1865 the Passumpsic had offered to build the line, provided that $200,000 were raised. The railway would rent the line, provide rolling stock and pay 6 per cent on the bonds.

The first indication of new support for the Massawippi Valley project came in May 1867, when the mayor of the Town of Hatley called a meeting to drum up support. In June 1867, the Town of Lennoxville and the County of Ascot pledged financial support for the line. (The railway would later be discovered to have pledged to make Lennoxville its northern terminus in return for financial support, but by year-end the required money had been raised and the line was assured.)

The spring of 1868 saw formal plans and contracts drawn up for the construction of the new line as well as the proposed lease submitted to the Passumpsic at its annual meeting in August 1868. In early November 1868, contracts were signed with three contractors to build the Massawippi Valley in three segments:

- the section from Lennoxville to Ayer's Flats by Mr. McGovern,
- Ayer's Flats to Smith's Mills (Tomifobia) by Ryan and Brooks, and
- Smith's Mills to the international border by Morrill and Williams.

Several weeks later it was reported that work had started at Smith's Mills.

Work progressed during the summer months in each direction, both from Lennoxville, Que. and North Derby, Vt. The Sherbrooke Gazette reported in September 1869 that a Passumpsic standard gauge engine was delivered by the broad gauge Grand Trunk on a flatcar to Lennoxville, for use on construction trains on the northern section.

Major flooding occurred in the first week of October 1869, which delayed construction work. Two major wash-outs occurred between North Derby and Newport, and south of Newport four Passumpsic bridges were swept away. However, by the end of the year only the section along Massawippi Lake had not been graded. Rails had been laid on the main line in May, with the Stanstead branch having to wait

for shipments of iron rails from England.

From the Passumpsic at North Derby, the railway descended into the valley of the Tomifobia River. At Smith's Mllls the river valley narrowed into a gorge for a mile or so, obliging the railway to follow a curving alignment along the west side of the valley. This resulted in a short, curving grade of something more than 1.5 per cent. Normally this would not have been an obstacle but with the reverse curve, the memory of the construction engineers who located this part of the line would remain roundly cursed in the vocabularies of the firemen on the southbound trains. There was poor visibility around one of these curves and on a dark rainy night 15 years later, this situation would cost the lives of the engineer and fireman on Number 18, the night express from Sherbrooke to Boston.

Reaching the lower levels of the river valley, the line entered upon a succession of crossings of the Tomifobia River, which wound across and through the valley in sprawling ox-bows. Approaching the outskirts of the village of Ayers Cliff, the railway curved west, away from the river to the station, about three miles from Massawippi Lake. On a slightly descending grade, the railway then crossed the Tomifobia River for the last time, and was soon running along the eastern shore of Lake Massawippi, past the modest station of the same name.

The four-mile stretch of the line from Massawippi to Putney Cut was, and is, one of the most scenic portions of the Massawippi Valley Railway. Here the substratum of hard rock erupts into 70 ft-high cliffs, arbitrarily christened "Rock Donald" by local writers. There was no subaqueous ledge for the contractors to build the line upon, so they were obliged to carve a ledge for several hundred feet along the base of the cliff.

About a quarter-mile further on, the process was again necessary until the railway was once again able to use the lower hillside terraces along the lake shore. South of the location that was to become Woodland Bay there was a final earthwork - Putney Cut - through which track was laid to avoid circumnavigating the rocky point. From Woodland Bay to the outlet of the lake at North Hatley, the railway ran along the lake shore or up to a few hundred yards inland. Leaving North Hatley, the railway crossed the Massawippi River on a pile trestle to the west bank, on which side of the river it remained for the remainder of the distance to Lennoxville. At Capelton and-Eutis, copper mines were later to provide traffic for the railway.

At Lennoxville, the new railway came to an interchange with the Grand Trunk. For the first year of operation, all passenger and freight had to be transferred because of the difference in gauges. July 1, 1870 saw the formal opening of the Massawippi Valley Railway. To mark the occasion, a special directors' train, pulled by a Passumpsic locomotive, the *Emmons Raymond*, left the Memphremagog Hotel and station at Newport and ran to Lennoxville. There it was met by Sir Alexander Tilloch Gait and a party of gentlemen representing the towns along the new railway. The special train then returned, carrying both the American and the Canadian dignitaries south to Newport for further celebrations. The lease was now in effect between the Passumpsic and the Massawippi Valley. The Passumpsic would provide rolling stock for the next two decades. Work on the branch line to Stanstead was completed in the late summer of 1870. Regular trains started running on the Stanstead branch on October 7, 1870. Trains connected with all main line trains north- and southbound. The station was known as Stanstead and Derby Line Station. The Passumpsic extended the railway into Sherbrooke in the next year over the tracks of the Grand Trunk. Lennoxville and Sherbrooke were now railway junctions.

Such was the extent of railway development prior to 1870 in the Province of Quebec.

END NOTES

1. *History of the Quebec Central Railway Company* - Fonds, Chambre de Commerce de la Ville de Sherbrooke.
(2). G.R. Stevens, *Canadian National Railways, Sixty Years of Trial and Error*, Vol I, Clarke, Irwin & Co., Toronto, Ont. 1960, p.53.
2. Robert F. Leggett, *Railroads of Canada*, p. 37
3. Robert R. Brown, *Road to the Sea*,
4. W. E. Greeing, *The Construction of the St. Lawrence & Atlantic*, Annals of Richmond County and Vicinity. Vol. 2; Richmond County Historical Society 1968.
5. Omer Lavallée, *Home of the 8400s*, Upper Canada Railway Society, January 1968.