

RAILWAY CONNECTIONS WITH THE MUSKOKA STEAMERS

by Gordon C. Shaw

The Muskoka Lakes steamers served for many years as an extension to the several railways serving Muskoka; they interchanged passengers and package freight with the railways and carried this traffic to and from the various communities and resorts not served by trackage. The steamers continued in this role until the early 1950s when the railways' loss of passenger and package freight traffic to the highways made these ships uneconomic.

This article reflects this historic link between the steamers and the railways, and discusses the available railway service during the years 1915-1925, the peak of the steamboat era. My sources for the following information include the Official Guide of the Railways for June 1916 and the Grand Trunk Railway timetable effective June 25, 1922.

By the summer of 1916, there were three railways serving Muskoka. The most important was the Grand Trunk Railway from Toronto through Barrie and Orillia, to Muskoka Wharf, the steamer landing in West Gravenhurst. The second was the then newly constructed Canadian Pacific route from Toronto to Bala, and the third was the also newly built Canadian Northern Railway from Toronto, through the Don Valley and Beaverton, to Bala Park, just east of Bala, and to Lake Joseph Station, just north of Foot's Bay. These Canadian Pacific and Canadian Northern routes were both built just before World War 1 and, when opened, they provided the first direct service between Southern Ontario, the Bala area and Parry Sound.

Both the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk names have long since disappeared. The Grand Trunk originated in the 1850s as a line linking Montreal and Toronto with both Portland, Maine and Chicago. By 1900, it had extended its lines and had purchased other companies to become the principal railway in Eastern Canada. The Canadian Northern Ry. started in 1896 as a Manitoba short line and as a welcome competitor to the CPR. By 1916, it had become a transcontinental railway, the personal creation of two railway builders, Messrs. Mackenzie and Mann. It might have become successful but it was soon duplicated by a third transcontinental railway, the Grand Trunk Pacific, a creation of the Grand Trunk. Thus, for a time, Canada had three transcontinental railways. Unfortunately, both the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific encountered financial difficulties while completing construction in 1916 and 1917. World War 1 prevented their borrowing more money in Europe and, by 1923, both of these bankrupt companies were taken over by the Canadian Government to form the present Canadian National Railways. (Note the plural in "Railways" to indicate the many earlier companies. Also, for many years the

financial problems of the Canadian National were blamed on their absorbing the debts of these predecessors and on the resulting duplication of trackage).

In 1916, the Grand Trunk provided the following four trains on weekdays from Toronto to Gravenhurst: Lv. Toronto: 8:05 a.m., 10:15 a.m., 1:30 p.m., 8:30 p.m.
Arr. Gravenhurst: 1:00 p.m., 2:10 p.m., 5:28 p.m., 12:30 a.m.

The 1:00 p.m. and the 2:10 p.m. arrivals connected with the steamer which left Muskoka Wharf at 2:15 p.m. for Port Carling and Rosseau. The second of these trains carried a through sleeper from Pittsburgh which left the steel city on the Pennsylvania R.R. at 1:10 p.m. on the previous day. This direct connection with Pittsburgh, no doubt, did much to encourage the building of Millionaires' Row and other Muskoka landmarks. By 1922, service had expanded to six trains a day. One of the two additional trains left Toronto at 11:40 p.m. to arrive at Muskoka Wharf at 4:00 a.m.; this train set off sleepers so that passengers could sleep until the departure of the SAGAMO at 7:00 a.m. (At one time in the 1920s, there was even a through sleeper on Friday evenings from Windsor to Muskoka Wharf). The two morning departures from Toronto connected with the steamer leaving Muskoka Wharf at 3:00 p.m.

The CPR provided a local train which left Toronto around 9:30 a.m. and arrived at Bala around 2:00 p.m., to connect with a steamer going up the lakes. A similar service was provided on the Canadian Northern; in 1916, their train left Toronto at 9:00 a.m. to arrive at Bala Park at 3:15 p.m. These Canadian Northern trains also connected with the steamers at Lake Joseph station. The author recalls the SAGAMO stopping at this wharf in 1940 to receive passengers from the northward train for Lake Joseph destinations. While the Canadian Northern spent needed capital in building docks at Bala Park and at Lake Joseph, these ports never became important; in the later Canadian Northern years, the train service on their line was reduced to thrice weekly. Once the Canadian National was formed, it concentrated its steamer traffic at Muskoka Wharf. In contrast, the CPR Bala connection remained important and, in 1925, the SEGWUN was rebuilt, in part, to provide additional accommodation to this port.

These train and steamer connections were very important during the World War II years; the author recalls the crowds leaving the Royal Muskoka Hotel on Civic Holiday afternoon in 1943 on the SAGAMO to catch the train that evening at Muskoka Wharf for Toronto. However, with the improved highways and more automobiles, rail passenger traffic declined in the late 1940s and with it, the demand for the steamer connections. The Bala train connections were last provided in 1950 and at Muskoka Wharf a few years later. Muskoka Wharf was sold for industrial use; Lake Joseph Station became a camp for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind while Bala Park became a ruin. Fortunately, some of us still have memories of the great role played by public transportation, particularly the railways and the steamers, in developing Muskoka.