

THE SHERBROOKE, EASTERN TOWNSHIPS & KENNEBEC RAILWAY
and the experiment with wooden railways
– by Carl Riff

The beginnings of a network of local railways in the Province of Quebec surfaced in the years following the American Civil War, and the Confederation of Canada in 1867.

Concern was developing about the almost daily accounts of trainloads of Canadians emigrating to the United States. Land suitable for the traditional agricultural Quebec society existed in a strip along the St. Lawrence, and in 1868 the members of the Quebec legislature decided that they were going to have to model the American system of development by heavy investment in colonization railroads. The majority of the rail lines in the province were the iron way of the Grand Trunk Railway, but the GTR seemed more interested in getting from the Atlantic seaboard to the American Midwest, and it was almost incidental that its tracks ran through Canada at all.

In 1868 there came to Quebec a railway promoter and civil engineer, one Jerome B. Hulburt from Boonville, N.Y. Like many railway promoters of the day, he was selling a railway system that was cheap to construct – one using wooden rails. During the 1870s every region developed its own local subsidiary feeder railways. In Ontario there were 3'6" light gauge railways, in Maine it was the 2' gauge, and in New Brunswick, a 3' gauge was popular. Admittedly all these operated with iron rails, but they were "narrow gauge" to save costs and to negotiate sharp curves, and often in hilly or even mountainous country. They enjoyed popularity because they promised economical construction – and after all, it seemed that every hamlet wanted to be connected by means of some kind of track to the emerging railway network.

The wooden railway of the Hulburt design was very strongly built, being formed of maple scantling 6 by 4 inches, wedged 4 inches deep into heavy ties about 3 feet apart. The top of the rail, 4 inches in width, and well sprinkled with pitch, or with fine sand from the locomotive box, soon formed a hard and gritty surface which did not wear, and greatly facilitated traction. The rims of the car wheels were all 5 inches in width. Mr. Hulburt had built a 23½ mile wooden railway in 1868, called the Clifton Railroad. It ran from the Rome, (N.Y.) via Watertown and Ogdensburg at DeKalb to the Clifton iron mines. Its unique motive power consisted of two "dummy" engines and one conventional locomotive. (A "dummy" engine was a small industrial-type locomotive with its exterior disguised as a car.) Forty ore cars rounded out the rollingstock. It must have appealed to developers where it could open up sections of country, where the expense of iron rails, even of a narrow-gauge road, was quite out-of-the-question.

Another wooden railroad, incidentally, was built from neighbouring Carthage, N.Y., to Russell, N.Y., where it connected with the Clifton Railroad. This was the Black River & St. Lawrence Railroad.

Every town wanted to be linked somehow to the railway network that was rapidly emerging to the forefront as the state-of-the-art form of public transportation. Hulbert was devout in his belief in the wooden railway concept, and news of this cheap and simple system soon spread. What Mr. Hulbert did not mention was that his system had shortcomings that were simple to recognize by anyone without an immediate interest in having some kind of railway in their burgh, but in the 1870s that would have been a rare individual.

The Quebec provincial legislature bowed to public clamour, and introduced a bill during the 1868-1869 session entitled "An Act for the Encouragement of Certain Colonization Railways". The intent of the bill was to encourage the construction of wooden railways. By means of this bill, the provincial government guaranteed the interest on the bonds at the rate of 3 per cent for 20 years upon the cost per mile not exceeding \$ 15,000. (*Ed. Note: Not by any means out-of-line with the cost of iron roads.*)

These would be small feeder lines – designed to exploit the hinterland of the province, and to open up areas that at the time were virgin timberland, so that they might become productive for agriculture. Trains were to creep over these lines at little more than walking pace, hauling lumber and mineral products.

On April 15, 1869, the Quebec & Gosford, the Montreal Northern Colonization, the Richelieu, Drummond & Arthabaska, the Missisquoi & Black Rivers, the Lévis & Kennebec Railroads, and the Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships & Kennebec Railway, all wooden rail projects, were incorporated on that same day.

The provincial treasurer at the time was the Hon. Joseph Gibb Robertson, MPP, the Conservative member for Sherbrooke. A native of Stuartfield, Aberdeen, Scotland, he came to Canada with his father in 1832 at the age of 12. Mr. Robertson served as the mayor of Sherbrooke for 18 years. He was elected to the provincial assembly in 1867, and was appointed provincial treasurer in 1869. In 1870 he married Mary J. Woodwards, a union that was to prove propitious for another office, that of his presidency of one of the proposed wooden railways: the Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships & Kennebec.

This railway was chartered to run north from Sherbrooke for 100 miles to a connection with another wooden railway – the Lévis & Kennebec, which was proposed to run from Lévis-Quebec City through the Chaudière Valley to connect with the Somerset Railway in Maine.

At the time the SET&K was being incorporated, other regional entrepreneurs were promoting an iron railway eastward across Maine to the ice-free port of Saint John, N.B. Originally the St. Francis & Mégantic International Railway, this challenger was renamed the International Railway Company in 1877. Both the SET&K and the International planned to use the St. Francis River valley. The SET&K would follow the river northward past Lake Aylmer, while the International planned to build up the St. Francis to the Eaton River, near the present town of East Angus, and then turn eastward to Cookshire. The International felt that because it was to be an iron road, it should have been allowed the right-of-way along the river, and to obtain the provincial subsidies as well. It proposed that the SET&K branch off the International near East Angus and continue its route north. The fight between the two railways developed to the point that the town of Sherbrooke split into two camps, one favouring the wooden SET&K, and the other the iron International. The latter and the town of Bury attempted to block the SET&K's incorporation in the Quebec legislature. President Robertson and the SET&K faction stumped the countryside for general and financial support in the various communities along the proposed route.

In these early years, the SET&K's chief objective was to reach Lake Aylmer, where a number of sawmills were to be built. The lime quarries in Dudswell Township (in which the promoters had an interest), were another incentive. For these reasons the SET&K became known in the local press as both the Wooden Railway and the Weedon Railway (Weedon being its immediate destination).

Tenders for construction of the line were called for by September 25, 1869. Work began in the summer of 1870 when over 100 men were employed grading the new railway. The first ten miles were completed and ready for rails by October 1870. Sufficient maple rails had been prepared and stocked all along the right-of-way. Yet the battle between the "Weedon" and the International railways continued in the local press. The proponents of the International appealed for a "union of the wooden and iron railway before another dollar is pledged", and that the wooden railway should feed traffic to the iron road in Westbury Township.

One letter to the editor of the *Sherbrooke Gazette* attacked the SET&K, telling potential investors to be wary of warped rails and poorly graded lines, and going so far as to describe the SET&K as a "dump without culverts" (a reference to what the SET&K espoused as "blind" culverts, a practice of "loose rock thrown together in sufficient quantity to admit the free passage of water.")

In another time and place, certainly there might have a response to this sort of allegation, but in 1870 in the scramble for a railway, such dissent fell on deaf ears.

SET&K director the Reverend T.S. Chapman "took pleasure in assuring the citizens of the Eastern Townships that the grading was nearly complete, and that any fears of failure were ill-founded". A uniform "boilerplate" press release was circulated to every newspaper in the province as follows:

"The directors of the Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships & Kennebec Ry. propose laying the track on their

line at once and procuring an engine and rolling stock. A further portion of five miles is nearly located and tenders will be asked for grading in a short time. This looks like business and probably during the next season the road will be completed and in running order to Weedon."

This announcement gave the impression that the wooden railway was close to completion, when the truth was quite the opposite. Even though the International had not yet begun construction, the Reverend Chapman and other SET&K directors still attacked the International on the scope of its line, citing "the present carrying trade of the west as everyone knows scarcely keeps the breath of life in the Grand Trunk, how then can capitalists see their way to commercial success in building another railroad to the Atlantic".

For the time being, the wooden railway adherents had won the battle. The SET&K would remain in the St. Francis River valley, and the International was forced to climb the hills to reach Cookshire and Mégantic, the route that the Canadian Pacific Railway, who eventually acquired the International property, was obliged to contend with for many a year until the spin-off to the ill-fated Montreal, Maine & Atlantic.

While all this was going on, and Mr. Hulburt was still selling his wooden railway concept to the people of Quebec, the precursor Clifton (wooden) railway was abandoned in 1869. At most, it had only seen two years of service, but in the desperate scramble by promoters and local populaces to obtain new railways and subsidies to go with them, few noticed the failure of the Clifton Railroad. Even the Quebec Mercury, in reporting its demise in December 1870, said

"the Clifton Wooden road has, we understand, been abandoned for the last two years and We hope the Gosford [Quebec & Gosford Railway] will inaugurate a new era in the use of wooden roads for colonization purposes".

By the fall of 1870, the Quebec & Gosford had been built several miles north from Quebec City to St. Raymond, and had been opened for service during the summer of that year. In April 1871, Mr. Hulburt leased not only the Gosford, but was building and equipping most of the other wooden railroads. Only a few days after leasing the Gosford, Hulburt went on "to start construction between Sorel and Richmond on the Richelieu, Drummondville & Arthabaska Railroad." He had already obtained the contract to build the Lévis & Kennebec in January 1871.

In January 1872, the directors of the SET&K determined that their contractor was unsatisfactory, in that work had not progressed during the summer of 1871. The directors had apparently lost confidence in the wooden railway concept because the Gosford railway was unable to operate during the winter season (whereas the iron-railed narrow-gauge Ontario colonization railways were operating year-round). Moreover the word was out that neither the Richelieu, Drummondville & Arthabaska nor the private Huntington Mining Railroad were considered successes. Despite the failure of the Clifton railway, the apparent success of the Ontario iron-railed colonization railways, and the adverse rumours about the other two wooden-railed projects, there must have been confidence in Mr. Hulburt as a contractor, for the SET&K now turned to him to finance, construct and equip their line to Weedon.

Effective February 1, 1872, the SET&K directors awarded him the contract for "building and running the wooden railway from Sherbrooke to Weedon with *iron [author's italics] rails*". In commenting on Mr. Hulburt's acquisition of the SET&K contract, the *Quebec Mercury* again prophesied somewhat optimistically "*with the great public works now being constructed by this gentleman he will, during the coming season, give employment to at least over ten thousand men*".

Mr. Hulburt, the champion of the wooden concept, could surely be forgiven for having assumed that his new contract continued to stipulate for wooden rails, but when he evidently read it a little more closely, only a few days later he told a reporter for the newspaper *Le Pionnier* that he intended to build the line using wooden rails and not iron rails as per the contract. The other fine print was that Mr. Hulburt would "build the 31 miles from Sherbrooke to Weedon on receiving as a bonus the debentures of the Sherbrooke, Weedon and Dudswell and the government subsidy accepting the work already done at cost, the road when finished to belong to him".

While Mr. Hulburt did make a start on the work during the summer of 1872, again no rails were laid, either wooden or iron. In February 1873, Mr. Hulburt reported to the directors that he was in New York obtaining rails. Three months later Mr. Hulburt was still in New York, assuring the directors everything was fine. At the same time press reports were beginning to swirl about, telling of judgments against the promoter, and there was additional cause for concern in the spring of 1873 as rumours became persistent that the Gosford railway was about to fail. The directors could no longer be appeased. They were resolved to look elsewhere to get the SET&K completed, and this time their search ended right on their own doorstep. When the 1873 annual meeting was convened on July 7, they expressed their unhappiness at the lack of progress, and awarded the same contract to two young men from Sherbrooke, J. R. Woodward and E. C. Bowen, working under the company name of Woodward & Bowen.

James Robertson Woodward had just celebrated his 27th birthday only days before being awarded the contract. His father Albert Woodward was the district coroner, and his brother-in-law was none other than the provincial treasurer and president of the road, J. G. Robertson. Woodward's partner Edward Charles Bowen, was the son of the sheriff and first mayor of Sherbrooke. He was also a distant relative of the vice-president and currently mayor of Sherbrooke R. D. Morkill.

Woodward & Bowen immediately purchased 20 miles' worth of iron rails and planned to start major work in 1874. The grading to Ascot was finished in the fall of 1873. Work had started a number of years earlier on the St. Francis River bridge, but it had to be completed before the railway could leave Sherbrooke.

The intention of the firm was to sell all the wooden rails on the property to the Gosford railway, but before this could be arranged, that line was bankrupt. So instead they were used to build proper culverts along the line.

These two young men had the confidence of many people in the Eastern Townships, for immediately after their appointment various towns and counties met with officials of the SET&K to attempt to lure the railway into passing through their bailiwicks.

After four years of false starts, this railway blossomed forth in the summer of 1874. Two engines were delivered from the Mason Locomotive Works of Taunton, Mass. Rails were being shipped from England. It all came together on July 7, 1874, when a celebration was held at Sherbrooke to mark the driving of the first spike in the Grand Trunk Railway yards. The *Montreal Gazette* gives the most detailed account of this event:

At 3:30 p.m. the interesting ceremony of driving the first spike of this road attracted a large crowd to the Grand Trunk station yard where the engine 'J. G. Robertson' gaily decorated stood ready to steam up to Lennoxville on a test trip."

President Robertson made speeches about how the line was to reach Dudswell that year, and Weedon the following year. Shortly after, he ventured to England in his dual role of railway president and provincial treasurer, to raise money for all the railways in Quebec, and indeed he returned with a promise of four million dollars in aid. The reasons, incidentally, that money for this railway and so many other Canadian railway projects had to be obtained in England is that cautious Canadians would not invest in these enterprises; and also because Canadian law regulated the interest on such borrowings, so that few Americans were willing to participate in these schemes, when they could obtain higher yields for their money in the United States. For the SET&K, in London, England the railway found a willing financial agent by the name of John Langham Reed, and its financial affairs came to be allied, as also in the case of the Lévis & Kennebec Railroad, with English investors.

In the weeks that followed, the bridge across the St. Francis was completed, rails were quickly laid and work trains were running daily. Unfortunately, just two months after the first spike ceremony, "a rail train and gravel train collided on the SET&K near Mulvena's (Newington) owing to a misunderstanding as to time".

On October 23, 1874, the Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships & Kennebec Railway was formally opened to Westbury, a distance of about 12 miles. The railway ran an excursion train of 12 cars, carrying almost 700 people over the completed line. Arches had been erected at Ascot and Westbury to welcome the train. A luncheon was served to guests at Westbury, and on returning, the train stopped at Ascot for the traditional speeches, first by SET&K president Robertson, followed by the Hon. Blanchet, Speaker of the Quebec legislature and president of the Lévis & Kennebec road. A Mr. Brandigee of New Haven, Conn. made an interesting speech of how a large wharf was being built on Long Island Sound to handle timber originating from Quebec and New England railroads. These and other speakers honouring Mr. Robertson that same night were the first indication of interest by American railway and other interests in the region to be served by the SET&K. The attendance of Mr. Brandigee, Governor Smith of the Vermont Central Railway, and Frank Johnson of the Norwich Bank, indicated the interest New England capitalists started to take in Quebec affairs.

The opening of the line should have brought financial success to the railway, but this was not the case. Notices started to appear in the *Sherbrooke Gazette* advising employees that if any of them served the railway company with writs for back wages, they would be at once discharged. To help cure the financial distress of the railway, Mr. Robertson introduced a resolution to the 1875 Quebec legislature to allow an additional \$1,500 per mile subsidy, to be made payable for each additional ten miles of track completed. The ten mile provision allowed the new railways to receive a portion of their subsidies as the line was being built, rather than on completion.

Furthermore, in order to enhance the company's image and to permit it to raise mortgage capital in Great Britain, it was reorganized on February 23, 1875, changing its name to the Quebec Central Railway Company, but continuing on with the same president and general manager, Robertson and Woodward.

Steam Locomotives of the Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships and Kennebec Railway

No.	Name	Specifications	Builder	Boiler no.	Built	Disposition
1	J. G. Robertson	4-4-0 16x24 60"	Mason	#529	5-1874	to QCR 1
2.	R. D. Morkill	4-4-0 16x24 60"	Mason	#530	5-1874	to QCR 2