

## 22 The Great Western Railway (GWR)

The Great Western, unlike the Grand Trunk (GTR), was an all-Canadian venture, even though substantially financed by British investors (as most early railways in Canada were). Its chief sponsor was Colonel Thomas Talbot, the promoter of settlement in western Ontario. It was conceived as early as 1834 as the London & Gore Railroad. The passing of the Railway Guarantee Act in 1849 was the trigger for the cocoon of the London & Gore Railroad to emerge as the not-particularly-pretty Great Western Railway butterfly. The newly-formed GWR started construction in the expectation of becoming the premier railway gateway to the American Midwest as the south-western Ontario trunk link between the New York Central and the Michigan Central Railroads. Its intended major purpose from the outset was the U.S. border-to-border traffic between Niagara Falls and Windsor (with a branch from Komoka to Sarnia in 1858). The road had labour troubles, financial troubles and some ghastly accidents, but the line had to be readied in a semi-finished state to pacify the subscribing communities' clamour for transportation. With all its trials and tribulations, the Great Western Railway was opened in 1853 for traffic from the suspension bridge at Niagara Falls to Hamilton, Paris, Woodstock, London; and in 1854 to Komoka, Glencoe, Chatham and Windsor. Because its main source of traffic was intended to be the U.S. (4'8½" Standard Gauge) border-to-border traffic, the administering Railway Board of Commissioners' requirement for the use of the 5'6" Provincial Gauge, had obviously not been in its best interest from the outset. Despite that, the GWR did well at first, even though the cost of trans-shipment was a significant impediment to economy and speed.

The GWR was of special importance to Hamilton. It was that city's Sir Allan ("railways are my politics") MacNab's influence, energy and perseverance that caused the GWR to become a reality, and Hamilton's reward was the economic benefit of the railway's locomotive and carriage shops that came to be located in that city. Hamilton's steel industry and its many related enterprises are descendants of those early railway shops.

Upon MacNab's death in 1862, the GWR lost its political champion against its nemesis, the Grand Trunk. By 19<sup>th</sup> century standards, the GWR conducted business like gentlemen. It always paid its interest on its government loans and indeed retired the original loan of £770,000 under the Railway Guarantee Act. It had invested unwisely in the faltering Detroit & Milwaukee Railroad which undermined its relationship with its major western US customer, the Michigan Central Railroad. Its traffic receipts suffered from the fallout of the US Civil War, the economy generally was feeling the effects of the Civil War (very little, if any railway construction in Canada in the 1860s), and worst of all, the cut-throat competition with the Grand Trunk continued. At one point in 1860 there was a traffic agreement with the GTR for the western US traffic to Chicago, but the GTR denounced it upon its alliance with the Buffalo & Lake Huron road (B&LH) in 1863, and it was not until 1867 that a new agreement came into place. With potential competition from the GTR-B&LH alliance, in 1867 the GWR installed a third rail all the way along its main line route to save the time and expense of unloading and reloading. With the discovery of petroleum in south-western Ontario in 1858, the GWR built a branch to what is now Petrolia in 1867 but incurred considerable expenses for the handling of this new liquid freight.

When the proposed Canada Southern Railway promised to increase competition for the lucrative border-to-border traffic even further with a substantially shorter route than the GWR's main line, despite its own systemic financial strictures, the GWR had no choice except to come up with its own more direct route. In 1869, the GWR obtained a charter for a direct "Air Line", to diverge from its main line at Glencoe (southwest of London) and to cut across south-western Ontario via St. Thomas, Tillsonburg, Delhi, Simcoe, Jarvis and Cayuga. At Canfield it had hoped to come to an arrangement with the Buffalo & Lake Huron for running rights over the latter's track to Fort Erie, but with that railway by then part of the competing GTR, the GWR had to run its own line all the way through to the international border at Fort Erie (obtaining running rights over a portion of the Welland Railway at Welland Jct. to reach equidistant Niagara Falls as well). Completed and opened in 1873 almost simultaneously with the Canada Southern Railway (CSR), the "Air Line" more or less paralleled the Canada Southern's track. Both the CSR and the GWR's Air Line were built to the Standard Gauge. The GWR's faster overall route between Windsor and Fort Erie/Niagara Falls was now slightly shorter (226 miles) than that of the CSR (228 miles).

The GWR's last major expansion was its lease of the Wellington, Grey & Bruce Railway in 1869. Although it opened up Grey and Bruce Counties to the Railway Age (to Southampton in 1872 and to Kincardine in 1874), it was not a financial success for the GWR, and by 1882, the Great Western was at bay. Amalgamation with the GTR took place on August 12, 1882, with acquisition of its stock by the GTR in 1884.

### Major sources and recommendations for further reading:

Gilhuly, Brian: *The True Story of the Provincial Gauge*, Branchline (May/June 2017), Bytown Railway Society, Ottawa, Ont.  
Guay, David R. P.: *Great Western Railway of Canada*, Dundurn Press, Toronto, Ont. 2015  
Stevens, G.R.: *Canadian National Railways*, Volume I, Clarke Irwin, Toronto, Ont., 1960