

FRIDAY, JUNE 18, 1982

The Globe and Mail

Station by station

Hamlet by hamlet, the railroad is dismissing its sentries. Canadian National Railways has been closing small stations across the country, occasionally leaving agents behind to oversee the switching and signalling on the tracks but more often easing them into early retirement or transferring them to other jobs.

Last January, the Canadian Transport Commission gave CN permission to close stations in 16 Manitoba communities, towns whose very names echo the cadence of the engines that once steamed into view: Somerset, Swan River, Gladstone, Moosehorn. . . The list reads like an elegy for an age when the railroad was the focus of political and social gatherings, when townspeople would meet at the station to receive messages and when it was impossible to imagine life without passenger trains.

That age is dying; it is falling victim to economic necessity and decisions by the railways and the federal Government to trade history for efficiency, or what they claim is efficiency. "The railroads have all changed," says Robert Wickstead, station agent at Gladstone since 1953. "Passenger traffic hasn't been big here for 20 years. Freight is all marshalled in the big centres, and if people want to send a telegram they have a toll-free number to call." If a train route can't pay its way, it perishes. The stations are lifted from their moorings and moved to parks a few miles away to stand as museums; or they are sold and transformed into boutiques and restaurants; or they

are left, reluctantly, for the wrecker's hammer.

Often it is not only the station that dies. Often it is the route — as when the federal Cabinet decided last year, by order-in-council and without public hearings, to discontinue 19 per cent of the country's passenger rail service. Often it is an entire section of railway — as in the Lake Erie village of Port Stanley, Ontario, where CN has received permission from the CTC to close a 6.7-mile stretch of track.

The Port Stanley line has operated for 125 years. It has carried families from St. Thomas to the village's boardwalk and beach, where Guy Lombardo played for dances at the Stork Club and in the London and Port Stanley Railway Pavillion. It carried servicemen to the port during the Second World War for a late evening of revelry, and back to their base at 2 a.m. But in recent years it has carried a persistent deficit — \$17,299 in 1979, \$15,125 in 1980 — and it is, says the CTC's railway transport committee, "likely to continue to be uneconomic."

And so it dies, survived by memories of children who rode the line to St. Thomas Collegiate Institute, who bought peanuts near the station and gobbled them on the train, whose early days were shaped, like the towns they lived in, by the comings and goings of the engines and the high, distinctive pitch of the whistles. There are many such memories in towns and villages across Canada, which owe their existence to the railway stations and have lived — unthinkable irony — to mourn their passing.
