Some Accounts About Canada's First Railway

Submitted by Carl Riff

Mr. Carl Riff has sent us two very interesting nineteenth century accounts relating to the early days of the Champlain and St. Lawrence Rail Road. One is from the March, 1896 issue of the magazine "The Canadian Engineer", while the other is an article from the newspaper "The Montreal Daily Witness" of March 25, 1881; this article is reprinted from "The St. Johns News" of an unknown date.

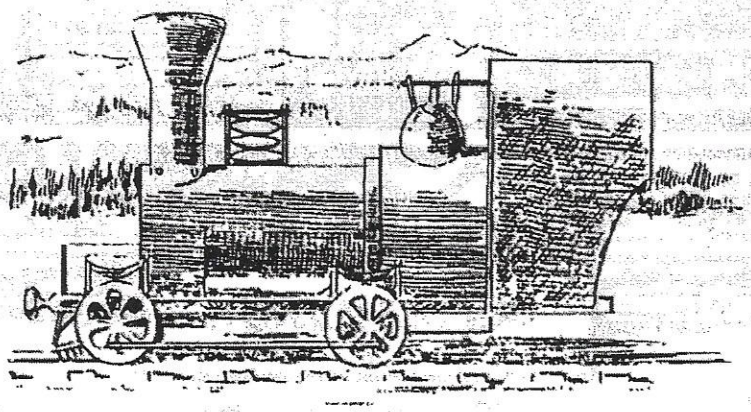
The 1896 article concerns the recollections of one George Ostrout who had worked for the C&StL in 1836 - sixty years before. While the reminiscences of an old timer are often notorious for their inaccuracy, especially after the long time of sixty years, the details that Mr. Ostrout gives about the engineering aspect, and the mechanism, of the "Dorchester" suggest that he had considerable knowledge of the workings of both the "Dorchester" and the "Jason C. Peirce", and the story may well be accurate. While the drawing has obvious inaccuracies, notably the size of the wheels, it was probably only meant as a schematic sketch. Whether the story of the little dog chewing up the notes is true, or is merely a quaint addendum, we will leave the reader to judge.

The 1881 account brings out some interesting points. Apart from the obvious error in the date of the opening of the C&StL (August instead of July), and the probable typo error of "scrap iron" instead of "strap iron", the article appears remarkably accurate. Several points are of interest. One is that the problem of "snake head" rails did not appear until the heavier locomotive "Jason C. Peirce" went into service, and also that these occurances were less frequent than some accounts would lead us to believe. Another point is the spelling of the last name of Mr. Peirce. For years, historians spelled it "Pierce"; however his tombstone, and this contemporary account (copied from the local paper), which refer to his then-living son, all spell the name "Peirce", which must be accepted as the true spelling. This article says that Mr. Peirce's namesake locomotive was then still in use on the Joliette railway; in fact it survived long enough to be taken over by (and later sold by) the CPR. Its final fate is unknown but it probably lasted as late as the turn of the century, remarkably long for a locomotive of 1837. The final point to be noted in this account refers to the original station at St. Johns. The 1881 article says that it was then still in use as a freight shed; there is good reason to believe that it survived until as recently as 1993, only five years ago! That it was then destroyed, without at least part of it being saved, is a sad story, and another great loss to our railway heritage.

REMINISCENCES OF CANADA'S FIRST RAILWAY.

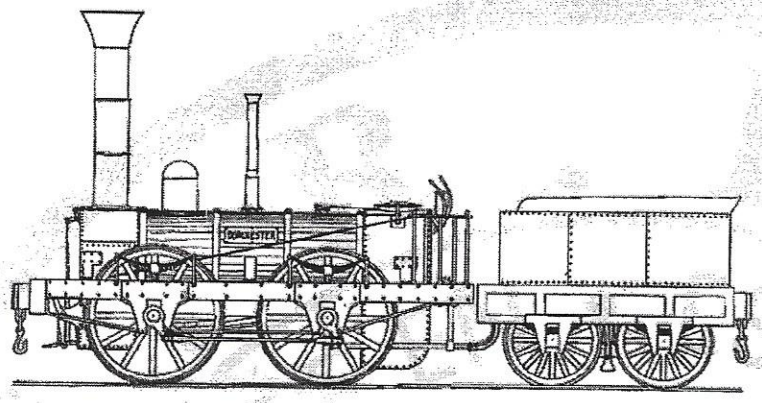
From "*The Canadian Engineer*", March, 1896.

A representative of The Canadian Engineer recently had an opportunity of gathering some interesting facts about early locomotive engineering in Canada, from Geo. Ostrout, late of Montreal, who drove the first engine on the Laprairie and St. John Railway, and who at the age of 70, could sit down, and with a steady hand, prompted by a perfectly clear technical memory, draw his first love, the "Dorchester", so well that the sketch needed only to he brought up to the requirements of modern illustration for reproduction here. Mr. Ostrout was born in Montreal, on February 28th, 1826, and records as his first recollection the building of the wharf for Bronson & Spiers, in 1830 and 1831. In 1832, during the cholera epidemic, young Ostrout and his mother boarded a steam ferry. Near them sat an old lady who, like many others at that time, had a superstitious horror of any powerful agent whose pedigree she did not know. She informed the Ostrouts that nought but unavoidable circumstances could have forced her into such a wicked contrivance, and that the devil himself must be aiding the engine driver. Young Ostrout replied that he meant to learn how to start an engine, devil or no devil, and a few years afterwards, when the lad had attained the advanced age of 12 years, he was actually running an engine on a three-mile journey, while the responsible driver lolled in a shed playing checkers. Previous to this, the cars been drawn by horses driven tandem. Most of these cars were made in Troy, N.Y. were mounted on four wheels, and had a high seat and a brake, acting on one pair of wheels. at each end. They were divided into three compartments, each having its own door, and with two leather-cushioned seats running athwart the car. The conductor had to travel on the step-rail which ran round the outside, unless he too got inside to play checkers.



The "Dorchester" as depicted in "The Canadian Engineer", March, 1896.

This was the state of things when the first locomotive - the "Dorchester", - arrived. She was built by Stephenson & Son, of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, of the type known as the "inside connection", The wheels were four in number, having felloes and spokes of English oak, with iron hubs and tires. She had two safety valves. That over the steam chest had a rod running back to the engineer, with a spring balance attached to the end by a screw, which could be shifted at will. The other valve was placed forward, as shown. It was pressed down by a number of elliptic springs, placed back to back between two little pillars, with cross-bar and nuts. The



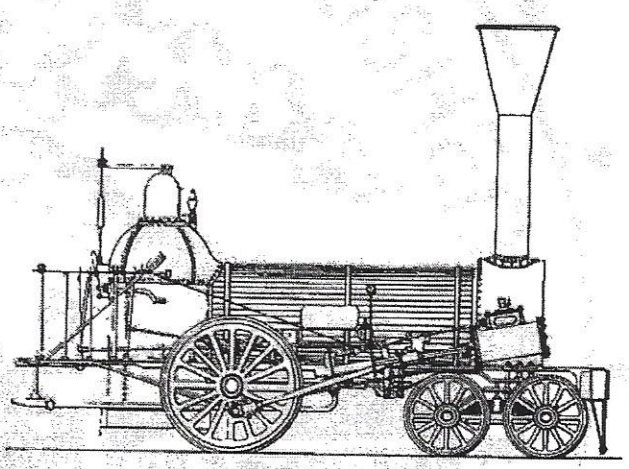
The "Dorchester" as it is believed to have looked when it was new. From a drawing by the late Robert R. Brown.

valve motion in the steam chest was produced by one eccentric for each cylinder, the back and forward motion being caused by raising or lowering what is called a double gab. The lever on the rock shaft being double-ended, the lowering of the gab caused the lips of the lever to thrust the pin into the gab, and thus the forward motion was produced. The backward movement was produced by raising the gab, which caused the upper lips to strike the upper pin, and this shifted it to go backwards.

The smoke-stack was funnel-shaped with a heavy wire screen, having a piece of boiler plate about 12 inches diameter in the centre, stretched across the opening. The frame was made of boiler iron filled in with oak. The protection of the driver seems not to have been thought of, for the "Dorchester" had no cab. A frame of iron was bent over the steam chest, and by stretching canvas over this some protection was obtained. The "Dorchester" was considered a grand engine in her day, but she was no light undertaking for her driver. For instance, the heat of the boiler at the bottom of the smoke-stack was often so intense as to burn the packing in the cylinders, and he had to pack the bottom of the smoke-box with clay.

The rails were of wood, with an iron strip running along the top about 5/8 inch thick and 2 3/4 inches wide. These served every purpose until the "Jason C. Pierce" appeared on the scene in 1837. This engine was built at the Norris works, Philadelphia, and was gigantic for her time. She had outside connections, a rather high boiler, cylinder on the incline, and four driving wheels - one set fore and the other aft of the fire-box. "She had the oddest rig I ever saw for valve motion", says Mr. Ostrout. "She had four eccentrics, four hooks or gabs, all disengaged at once, and tripped by small rock shaft with four short levers with friction rollers. To move ahead, two of the rollers were lowered to drop on pins, but the pins would not engage with hooks until the valve rods were manipulated by the engineer, who shifted the valve rods by levers on a slewed rocking shaft connected with the valves, and put the pins under the hooks. To back, it was necessary to reverse the small rock shaft to its full extent. This engine was much too heavy for the primitive wooden track, and would twist the iron strap into all imaginable shapes. On one occasion the strap rail curled up just behind the driving wheel, struck under the tender forward of the flange connection of the feed hose, running up through the bottom and top sheet of the tender and through the tool chest".

Mr. Ostrout remembers with amusement the first cut-off. It was a common throttle on which they set a band shaft with the lugs of two half hoops. As each lug revolved it would thrust a valve connected to a hinged post by an iron rod, rubbing on the shaft valve and closed or bumped out the opening valve. Some steam, he says, was saved, but the later introduction of the drop valve with dash pots was a great improvement. Mr. Ostrout is continually recalling, while he talks, little events which mark advances in both railway and marine engineering, and was recently engaged in writing his experiences when a calamity befell him like that which happened to Sir Isaac Newton - a little dog captured and tore into fragments his technical, though lucid descriptions.



The "Jason C. Peirce", from a drawing by the late Robert R. Brown

THE FIRST RAILWAY IN CANADA

From "*The Montreal Daily Witness*", March 25, 1881.

The first railway not only in this province but in Canada was the old Champlain & St. Lawrence line between St. Johns and Laprairie. It was opened in August [sic], 1836. Lord Gosford, the Governor-General, and other distinguished gentlemen were present at the inaugural and participated in the banquet, which was served in the station - the time-honored building, which, defying the ravages of time, still does duty as freight shed. One of the chief promoters of the railway was the late Mr. Jason C. Peirce, father of Mr. C.S. Peirce, of St. Johns, and associated with him were the late Hons. Peter McGill and Robert Jones, Mr. John Shuter, &c. Mr. James Macdonald, of St. Johns, was also connected with the early management of the line. The road was originally built of scrap [sic] iron - that is, thin plates of iron nailed on to wooden sleepers, and the rolling stock was very light. For about fifteen years after construction the road was not operated in the winter time. Then the track was changed from Laprairie to St. Lambert, and the line continued from St. Johns to Rouse's Point. The second locomotive used on the old Champlain & St. Lawrence Railway was called the Jason C. Peirce, and it is still in use on the road at Joliette. - *St. Johns News.*