

Palmerston Celebrates 100th Anniversary of Its Youngest Surviving Major Railway Landmark — the GTR-Era Pedestrian Bridge

by Mark Harris

On the second weekend of August 2012, out-of-towners driving through and unaware of Palmerston's rich railway heritage were likely bewildered by one of two scenarios. The first, they could not fathom why the town was making such a fuss over its 100-year-old pedestrian bridge. Or, they wondered in ignorance why any one or any town would bother building such a long and imposing structure across a park dotted with pool, playground, winding trails and much open field.

It was certainly an empty field or bush before the Wellington Grey and Bruce Railway extended its line north from Guelph to Harriston, then on to Southampton on Lake Huron, in the early-1870s. And it would take four decades before railway traffic would pose a problem serious enough to Palmerston citizens that it would take the Railway Commissioners of Canada to intervene. Both events, as we will see, would contribute to making the 100th anniversary of the Grand Trunk-era railway pedestrian bridge so special for Palmerston, Ontario.

More on the history later. Let's fast-forward to the weekend of August 10-12, 2012. On the Friday night, two more large railway-themed murals were unveiled in Palmerston, bringing the total to five. The railway museum — the former station — was open with railway images and memorabilia on display. The station was again a centre of attraction Saturday. For those not interested in railway history, there was the weekly farmers' market and a handful of other vendors. Unfortunately the threat of inclement weather cancelled the handcar races and demonstrations. A small switching layout was on hand but the operators were unsuccessful at getting my wife to try her hand at it.

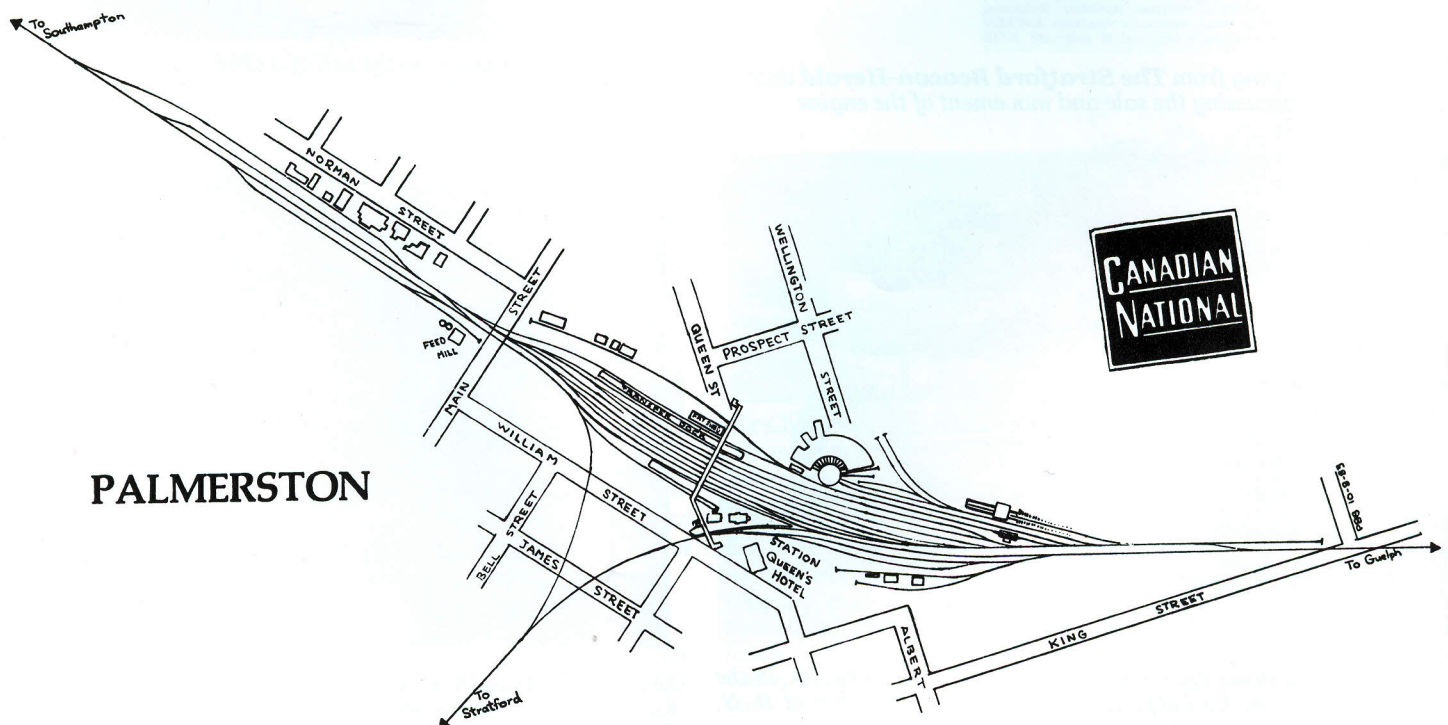
Over on Main Street at the Norgan Theatre, itself a town gem built in 1947, one could listen to talks about Palmerston's history. Local historian and author Stephen Thorning presented his talk on the history of the town's bridge and rail yard. At 4:30 p.m., for the

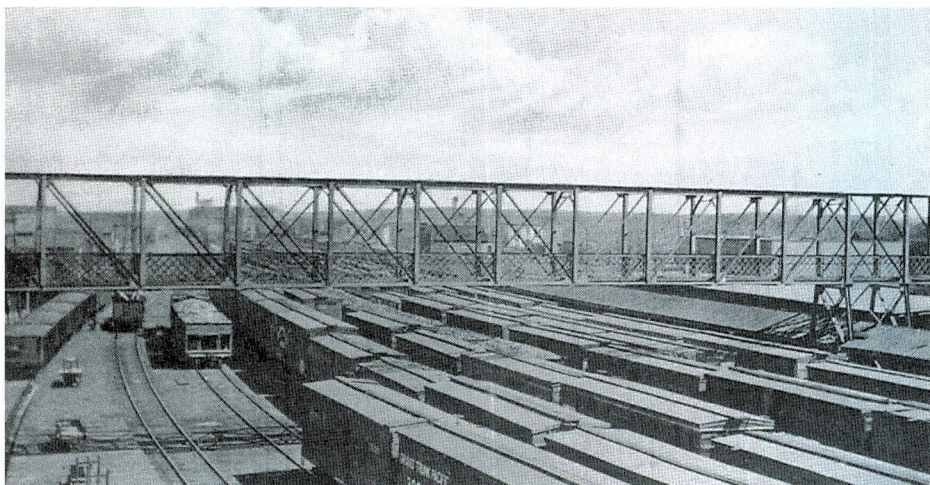
very first time, a 60+ minute documentary aired on Palmerston and its railway heritage. It featured several interviews with former CNR employees and some vintage town footage. There were also various musical programs that were hastily moved inside the theatre thanks to an at-times uncooperative Mother Nature. The former CNRA Clubhouse was open and still has a few rail-related artifacts on the walls.

That night there was to be what was billed as Dinner on the Bridge. Tickets, at \$100 a couple, sold out quickly but, alas, it too was moved inside at the last minute. Sunday began with a pancake breakfast. Many events were repeated, though a car show was added to the itinerary along with many different musicians. The weekend was sponsored by the Government of Canada, the Town of Minto, CIBC, the Optimist Club, TB Minto, Wightman Telecom and the Palmerston Lions Club. The park that now resides on the former railway yard is known as the Palmerston Lions' Heritage Park.

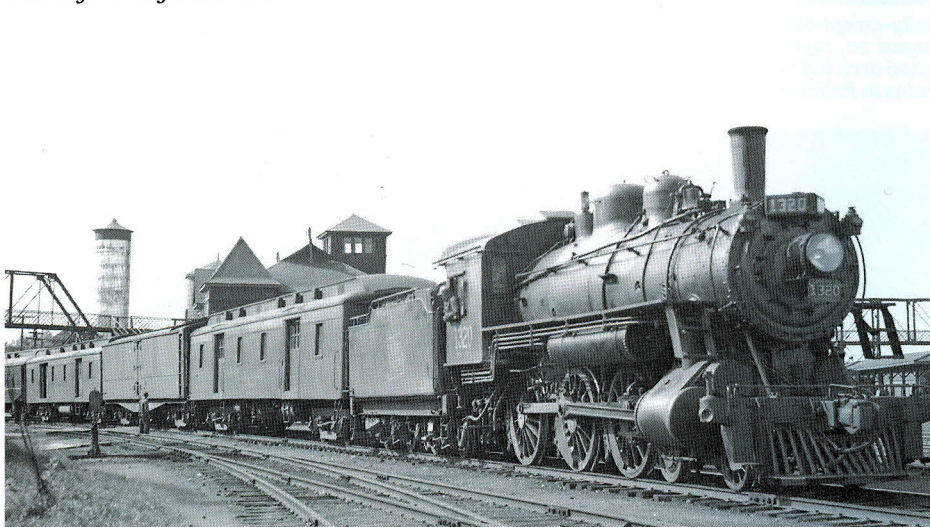
It was through this very same space that, in 1871, the first train of the Wellington Grey and Bruce Railway (WG & B) arrived at Palmerston behind locomotive 55. It was a 4-4-0 owned by the Great Western Railway and named after its first president, Adam Brown. Brown was also the chief promoter of the WG & B. The WG & B had a line extending northwards from Guelph to Southampton on Lake Huron. Palmerston became a junction when a branch was built in a roundabout westward fashion to reach the Lake Huron shore town of Kincardine. Later, passengers were able to also ride from Hamilton and Toronto via Guelph to Palmerston, or from London and Stratford into Palmerston. There were also lines to Owen Sound (with a short branch to Wiarton — home of Wiarton Willie) and to Durham.

Palmerston (named after a British Prime Minister) was unusual in that it was created by the railway. Like most towns, it required a

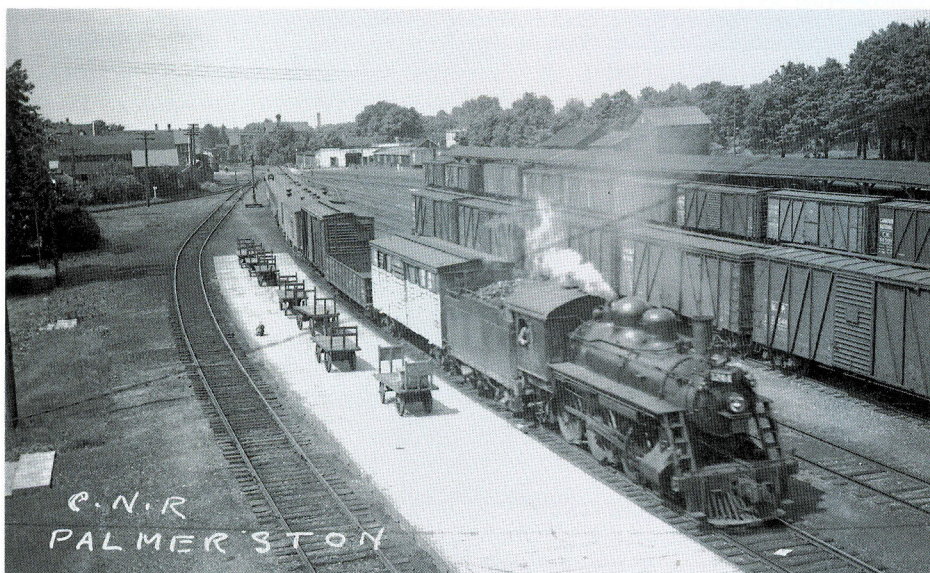




Palmerston's famed pedestrian bridge is the subject of this postcard. This view looking north was taken in the late teens or early 1920s, judging by the presence of a Grand Trunk Pacific boxcar, lower middle. The station is just out of the scene at far left. Photo courtesy of the Palmerston Railway Heritage Museum.



Photographer J. Adams was facing the south end of the Palmerston station when he caught Ten-Wheeler #1320 on the Newton Subdivision, which extended southwest towards Stratford. This photo was taken sometime in the late 1940s, or early 1950s before the observation tower seen above the rear of the tender was removed from the station's roof. Photo courtesy of The Sirman Collection.



This July 1943 shot from the pedestrian overpass captured CN Ten-Wheeler #1244 arriving in Palmerston with a southbound six-car mixed train. All but one of the 14 boxcars seen this side of the freight platform are of the outside-braced wooden variety. Photo by Geo. Harris, courtesy of The Sirman Collection.

station to handle passengers and freight. A single-story structure was erected in 1871. Traffic warranted a bigger station, so in 1876 it was enlarged to about 30 by 60 square feet and a second floor with office space was added. A roundhouse, turntable and other locomotive servicing facilities were built, along with a freight shed and cattle pens. A large percentage of the town's population was employed by the railway. A variety of new industries also sprang up, along with a hotel. Palmerston was booming!

In 1882, the Grand Trunk Railway acquired the Great Western, which had already taken over the WG & B. The GTR expanded the Palmerston yard. An 1890 insurance map shows a 12-stall roundhouse, double-track car repair shop, water tank and, as an indication of the cold winter climate, a two-track snow plough shed. By 1910 up to 40 trains a day entered Palmerston.

It was also in 1882 that a school was built on one side of the railway yard, even though most residents happened to live on the opposite side. Forty train movements a day plus constant switching in the ever-expanding yard was hardly conducive for children to navigate safely four times a day to and from school. Apparently the Grand Trunk looked into a possible subway beneath or a bridge over the yard, but did nothing until the Railway Commissioners of Canada ordered the railway to build a bridge. Construction began in either 1910 or 1911. Steel was in short supply due to the impending First World War. Completed in 1912, the 600-foot-long bridge has been described as the longest bridge of its kind in Ontario. (That same year, Grand Trunk President Charles Hayes was lost when he happened to book passage back to North America aboard "Titanic".) In another decade the Grand Trunk would become part of Canadian National.

Steam ruled the rail until 1957 when the first regularly assigned diesels arrived. In 1959 — nearly 80 years after the Adam Brown steamed into town — Palmerston witnessed the last of steam. That was the year that Palmerston's other noted landmark, "Old 81" as the townspeople still affectionately refer to the 2-6-0, was donated by CN and put on display just south of Main Street, where she rests to this day. When steam was gone, destruction of the roundhouse, coal dock and all other infrastructure so necessary for the daily upkeep of steam quickly followed. In 1960, two of the bridge's four stairways were removed — on the north and south sides closest to the station. They were never replaced.

Palmerston fared no better or worse than other railway towns in the 1960s, with branchline freight and passenger traffic continuing its steady decline. The 1959 opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway negatively impacted grain traffic. Mail contracts were lost in the late-1950s and passenger train service, provided mostly by Rail Diesel Cars at that time, ceased in 1970. Freight service continued. The station was closed to the public in 1982, though CN crews still used it.

The Town of Palmerston approached CN in 1986 about leasing the station and freight shed to restore indoors its slowly deteriorating Mogul.

Although nothing immediate came out of the discussion, CN did reveal that it was ready to part with the station. Ten years later the track southwest from Palmerston to Stratford, along with the last remnant of the former Owen Sound line, which by then extended only a few miles north to Harriston, was torn up. The town grew increasingly concerned.

Council at the time discussed putting a housing development in the yard area. Its tip of the hat to the town's railway heritage included a small replica of the station in a nearby park and keeping part of the bridge. Had these events happened you likely would not be reading this story today.

In 1992, handcar races, patterned after highly successful races in British Columbia, came to Palmerston. Not only did they attract money-spending tourists, they also helped put a positive spin on the yard. Although CN owned the land, volunteers cleaned up the yard for the races. Four years later, the Town of Palmerston made CN an offer to purchase the property. Hopeful volunteers again stepped forward, this time reroofing the badly leaking station even though it still belonged to the railway. Their efforts, however, were not in vain. In 1998, for \$26,000, the Town acquired 26 acres, with the station and the bridge.

The same year a plan to restore the station to its GTR era appearance was approved and work began. The ubiquitous red insulbrick was removed from the exterior. The dropped ceiling in the main waiting room — installed to reduce the heating bill — was removed. The original tin ceiling in the Agent's Office was restored, and countless other improvements were made. The station opened to the public in 1999 and has been open ever since. Since that time, countless railway artifacts from the townspeople connected to the railway have been donated and are on display throughout the station.

In 2008, the pedestrian bridge was closed off, much to the dismay of the town's people and visitors. It was in need of repair. Holes had begun appearing and the structure was deemed unsafe. It was closed due to insurance liability. The local MPP came to the rescue, securing provincial funds to restore the bridge to the purpose for which it had been built — to walk across. Ironically, the bridge was reopened at a special ceremony that included students from local schools. After all, the bridge was originally built largely for their safety.

Palmerston and the surrounding Town of Minto take their railway history seriously. Over the last several years about \$500,000 has been spent to maintain the bridge. More money has been spent to turn the former railway yard into the heritage park that it is today. Two years ago, on Saturday, July 10, Palmerston and the Town of Minto treated its former CNR Mogul #81 to a 100th birthday celebration.

There are many sources of information on, and photos of, Palmerston and the surrounding branchline operations:

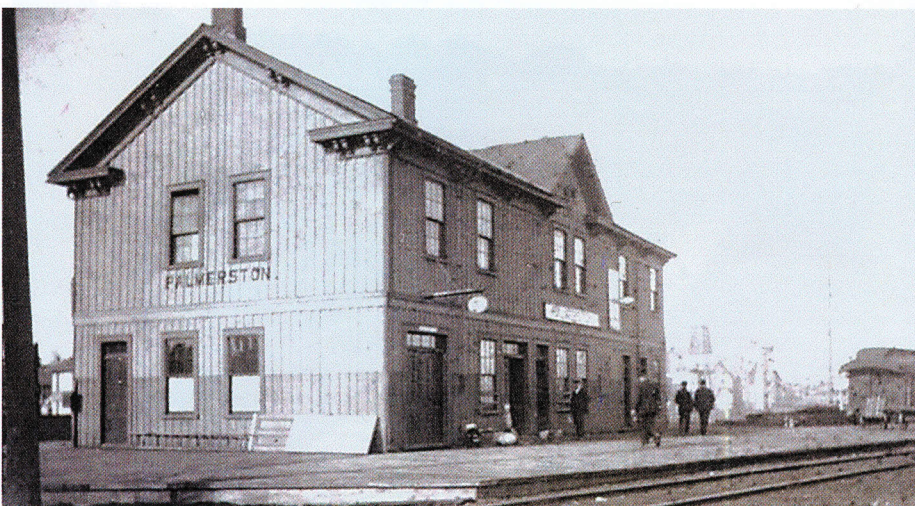
Steam Over Palmerston by Ian Wilson



Daily-except-Sunday Passenger #173 from Hamilton arrives in Palmerston on the morning of August 20, 1958. With all trains out plying the branchlines, the yard is devoid of power, except #5126 arriving here and a lone diesel. Within a year the arrival and departure of steam-powered trains in Palmerston would be just a memory. Photo courtesy of The Sirman Collection.



Palmerston did not let former CN Mogul #81's 100th birthday go unnoticed, marking the occasion with a day of festivities on July 10, 2010. Following several years of cosmetic restoration, she is seen here in immaculate condition. Photo by the author.



The original Palmerston station was built by the Wellington, Grey and Bruce in 1871 as a single-story structure. Traffic warranted a larger station so in 1876 the Great Western Railway enlarged it and added the second story, as seen here. Note the absence of the pedestrian bridge, which would be completed by the Grand Trunk Railway in 1912. Photo courtesy of the Palmerston Railway Heritage Museum.



Clad in insulbrick, with windows boarded over with plywood and displaying a somewhat run-down appearance surely to the dismay of the town's residents, the future of the CN Palmerston station did not look promising when this photo was taken 25 years ago. CN crews were still using this structure and the yard. Photo by the author.



Taken seven years after the Palmerston station was restored and open to the public in 1999, this view shows the incredible amount of hard work by the devoted volunteers to turn the former CN station into the town's railway heritage museum. Photo by the author.



Allen C. Hilgendorf was commissioned to paint three large Palmerston railway-themed murals a few years ago. What children on or from their way to school — using the bridge to safely convey them over the busy yard — could resist stopping to watch an approaching steam train? Photo by the author.

documents CNR operations in the 1950s. It is still, as of this writing, in print.

Two Divisions to Bluewater by Peter Bowers deals more with the history of the various branches. This title is unfortunately long out of print, having been published in 1983.

Rusty Rails by John R. Hardy features the author's photos and recollections of mid-Western Ontario branchlines from 1961 to 1996 and is still available.

Wellington County History from 2007 features a chapter on the history and restoration of the Palmerston station. Chapter author Bob McEachern is a local historian and Palmerston Heritage Railway Museum Director.

Another source of station information is the Palmerston Railway Station Report by Anne M. de Fort-Menares put out by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

Various back issues of the *Wellington Advertiser*, *Palmerston Observer* and *Minto Express* are also of interest.

Branchline has also featured Palmerston in its pages. See the July-August 1994 issue.



Thousands of passengers purchased their railway tickets from the station agent through this ticket window. This view was taken from the former passenger waiting room looking into the agent's office. After disappearing from the station years ago, the iron grill was eventually returned recently to Palmerston for the museum project. Photo by the author.

If you are planning a visit to Palmerston to explore the Palmerston Heritage Railway Museum it's best to check the web site www.palmerstonrailwaymuseum.ca/ first for hours and days of operation. The web site also has photos and information of interest. While in town don't forget to visit #81, take a walk across the pedestrian bridge and stroll through the park. Historical plaques provide the history of CNR and its predecessors, famous citizens important to the railway and help identify where various structures once stood. ■