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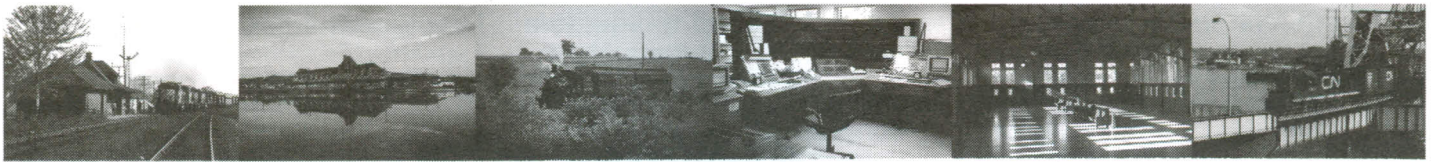
Rail & Transit



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THE PENNY WRECK
CN TRAIN DESIGNATIONS
TTC FLEET

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Research and Reviews



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Railway Archaeology

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The canes and the Penny Wreck

Tuesday, July 2, 1994, was a clear, sunny day, and I was out along CN's Springhill Subdivision near Dorchester, New Brunswick, photographing trains. With a lull in the traffic, I decided to visit the Keillor House Museum in Dorchester, New Brunswick, since I had not been there before. After I asked my usual open question, "Do you have anything on railways?" one of the chaps showed me a cane that had been made and presented to the museum to commemorate the 1897 Penny Wreck at Palmer's Pond. At that point, I didn't know the story of this wreck. The staff graciously brought out a few clippings they had, along with a couple of photos. It was definitely an interesting story that deserved a bit of research.

Early in my research, I found that the Honourable Frederick William Borden, the Minister of Militia for the Dominion government, was a passenger on the ill-fated train. While he was not the central figure of this story, his fame made him a trackable individual. One of the first stories I uncovered was one about a cane that had been presented to him while he was in Nova Scotia a few days before the train wreck.

Being a good Nova Scotian, and a minister of the crown, Borden had been presented a cane by Mayor Deblois of Annapolis, on Saturday, January 16, 1897. This cane was made from wood taken from the old block house of Annapolis. The block house had been pulled down some years before, and as it was an historic building, the cane was considered very valuable. It was of oak cut in England nearly 200 years previously, and contained a silver band on which the presentation was recorded. At this time, one can only wonder whether the individual who made the commemorative cane for the Penny Wreck knew of this earlier cane.

Dorchester, the shiretown of Westmorland County, is on the edges of the reclaimed marshes along the Memramcook River 14 kilometres (8.5 miles) west of Sackville, New Brunswick. Railway service to Dorchester officially started on November 30, 1869, and was to become part of the Intercolonial Railway, although this section was always the target of complaints about its circuitous alignment versus the straighter, shorter, and

better one available to the east between Painsec Junction and Sackville. The adjacent Memramcook River and nearby Petitcodiac River offered a water route via the Bay of Fundy for marine traffic. Early traffic was timber and stone from a couple of local quarries. One quarry had about a mile-long tramway, powered by oxen, to move the 5000 to 6000 tons of stone it shipped each season from the local wharf to New York for building construction.

With the coming of the railway, agitation soon arose for a spur line from the Intercolonial to the public wharf at Dorchester Island, a line which was eventually built. In 1880, again thanks to the power of the local politicians, a federal penitentiary was built on the outskirts of Dorchester. So, by the turn of the century, Dorchester was a busy village, and at the time of our story, the provincial courts were in session, with many of those associated with court having lunch at the Windsor Hotel.

Palmer's Pond is on the eastern edge of Dorchester, at a location presently defined as Mile 96.2 on the CN Springhill Subdivision. The line at this location is on a long downgrade that reaches a maximum of -1.1 percent with a vertical curve opposite Palmer's Pond. It is also at the end of a tangent on a broken-back curve with a maximum curvature of 4° 30". This curve is the eastern part of a larger "S" curve that snakes around the pond and along Ayers Brook and is elevated some 40 feet above the pond.

With a name like the "Penny Wreck," it is easy to conclude this is a story about railways and money. Perhaps most Canadians, do not recall many stories about money events on Canadian railways, but they do happen. The Canadian National had their "tooney" robbery of 1996 in Montréal. Then there were the "fish trains" that carried British gold from Halifax to be minted at Ottawa during the first world war. And while the canes led me to the story of the Penny Wreck, it was the 5½ tons of newly-minted 1896 pennies in 80 boxes, averaging 140 pounds each, loaded in one end of the mail car, on their way for Montréal, that are the centre of this story. These pennies were part of 65 tons being sent to Canada from the British mint in London.

The train, CPR No. 25, was running on the Intercolonial Railway between Halifax and Saint John with an Intercolonial crew. Train No. 25 had pulled out of Halifax at 7:00 a.m. on this bright cold Tuesday, January 26, 1897, pulling six cars. The engine was possibly No. 150, which had been rebuilt

four months earlier and had been assigned to Driver S. Trider for the CPR express. One report was that the temperature at Dorchester was -37° (F). The train had received a routine inspection prior to leaving Halifax and another inspection at Springhill. The train with about 25 or so passengers had met eastbound No. 2 at Sackville.

In addition to Dr. F. W. Borden, a cross section of some of the various people on board included:

- Mr. Barbet, the sleeping car conductor.
- Squire Cahill of Sackville.
- Dr. Calkins of Sackville.
- Isaac Campbell, the baggage master.
- Mr. Cole, representing Jardine & Company, Saint John.
- Mr. H. H. Colpitts, a commercial man returning from Halifax, where he was negotiating for the lease of the Queen Hotel.
- Mr. Charles Fawcett of Sackville, a local industrialist with the Fawcett Stove Foundry in Sackville.
- Mr. Arthur C. Edgecombe, Postal Clerk, Fredericton.
- Miss Nellie Gallagher, daughter of the proprietor of the Windsor Hotel, Dorchester, returning from her music lesson at Mount Allison, in Sackville.
- Mr. Andrew Gorman, manager of the Terrace Hotel, Amherst, was enroute to Moncton.
- Deputy Sheriff R. E. Keith, of Petitcodiac.
- Miss Patriquin, of Bloomfield, Kings County, a dressmaker.
- Mr. H. B. Peck, Assistant Postal Clerk.
- Martin L. Ryan, a "Spud Islander" returning to Connecticut.
- Mr. R. H. Webb, of the dining car staff.
- Senator Josiah Wood, an industrialist involved in wholesaling, lumbering and shipping. (He later was involved with the Moncton sugar refinery and cotton mill. After serving in the Senate, he retired and became the Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick.)

By the time Driver Samuel Trider, his fireman, Albert Wood, assisted by brakemen James Linkletter and Charles Thompson, had brought Conductor Edward Milligan's train to Palmer's Pond, on the outskirts of Dorchester, they were 11 minutes late with this westbound express.

The six cars of this train included a CPR six-axled postal-express car (No. 2041), a baggage car, a second-class car, a first-class car, the dining car *Cumberland*, and the parlour car *Sherbrooke*.

It was about 12:15 p.m. and some people were standing, putting on their coats, in preparation for detraining at Dorchester,

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while others were seated. Then, without warning, there was a sudden lurch, and the six cars left the rails and dashed over the bank to the frozen surface of Palmer's Pond, some 40 feet below. The passengers were tossed about in the cars, some seats broke loose, and glass broke and flew as the cars rolled down the embankment with their human cargo. The postal car broke away from the baggage car and, on striking the ice, slid some thirty feet from the others.

The locomotive, having broken away from the cars, dashed on by its velocity for a considerable distance. Once the crew brought the engine to a stop, they backed up and on realizing the magnitude of the accident, proceeded to the station to summon help.

News of the accident was telegraphed to Moncton, and the Intercolonial Railway authorities quickly prepared their auxiliary wrecking train. It left at 1:15 p.m. in charge of Conductor Thomas Coffey, and had on

board General Manager D. Pottinger; Mr. P. S. Archibald, the chief engineer; Mr. G. M. Jarvis, the chief train despatcher; Drs. Chandler, Steeves, and Burke; besides a large crew of men. Since the communication wires were torn down by the wreck, men were also sent to restore them.

In Dorchester, the news spread even faster, and the luncheon crowd at the Windsor Hotel left their meals steaming on their plates, grabbed their robes, and mounted sleighs for the short trip over the hill to Palmer's Pond.

The first thing they saw was the six cars, all lying on their sides, scattered over the frozen pond. The postal-express car was totally wrecked. The other cars were less damaged, and the passengers that could had started helping each other get out of the cars.

It was soon realised that two people, Miss Patriquin of Bloomfield, and Mr. Edgecombe, the postal clerk from Fredericton,

had been killed, both as the result of being crushed by flying equipment.

The injured were taken to the Windsor Hotel, where Dr. Calkins, assisted by professional nurses, the Misses Croasdale, tended their wounds. The Honourable Dr. Borden, was transferred to the residence of Mrs. George W. Chandler where he recuperated for several days. A special train with Colonel Domville and Mr. Howell on board went to Dorchester about 4 o'clock on Wednesday, January 27, to transport Dr. Borden to Saint John. It returned without the Minister of Militia.

While it is now 100 years after the accident, no one cause was ever pinpointed. The train had link-and-pin connections, but no chains. Opinions were that the rail had broken and the rail spread, since the engine's drawbar was broken and the engine, as mentioned, escaped the derailment. The following inquests (yes, there were two, held in parallel) asked many questions about the effect that the 5½ tons of pennies stacked near one end of car 2041 may have had on the wreck. Opinions varied, and while most considered they shouldn't have had much impact, no one would definitely say no. Driver Trider stated "... we do not make up time on grades and dangerous curves; we were running at about 33 miles per hour, without making up any time; we had the usual number of cars ..."

In looking at some of the statements from the 1997 perspective, one would no doubt ask different questions. While the rails were only six years old, there were statements about the sleepers being split and torn, although not enough to require new sleepers. What impact did the temperature have, if the temperature was in fact -37° (F)? Could the rail have broken from the horizontal force of the coins in the car? We will never know.

While to the railways and their passengers, this wreck was a catastrophe, the local kids had a different view. How many pennies are there in 5½ tons? This collection, from England's mint on its way to Montréal, had many boxes smashed, and Palmer's Pond strewn with coppers, in some instances two or three feet deep. A congregation of boys started to assist in the recovery of the mint from the snow in which it was embedded



◀ Photo looking westward, taken from the cutting approaching Palmer's Pond. The first car is the parlour car (*Sherbrooke*) in which the Honourable Dr. Borden, Minister of Militia was travelling. Following it is the dining car (*Cumberland*). The next car is the first-class car in which Miss Patriquin was killed. The car to the extreme left of the picture and at an angle, is the baggage car. Behind the baggage car, and projecting over it is a portion of the postal car in which the postal clerk, Mr. Edgecombe was killed. Out on the ice is the second-class car.

and by Tuesday evening Dorchester was flooded with new cents which had evidently been taken from the place. One should remember a penny bought a lot more a hundred years ago. This sport was not limited to the local boys, as a number of those of older growth also liberally helped themselves.

When the report of the wreck reached Dorchester, one of the first to reach the site was Judge Hanington, who, as a representative of the crown, assumed temporary control, and on his departure to return to his court room he placed Mr. S. Edgar Wilson, County-Secretary and Detective Ring, in charge, as an attempt to ensure that the number of souvenir pennies taken was kept to a minimum.

A news report on Friday, January 29, stated: "... In order to facilitate the recovery of coin, a steam engine was utilised with considerable success and although there is considerable of the mint yet strewn in the wreckage, the greater part of it has been recovered."

Another report, filed on January 31, pointed out that: "... another box of coppers was unearthed from under the express car, which leaves about one more box still missing."

There was a news report in 1985 that a search of the area using a metal detector failed to turn up any spare pennies around the wreck site. However, the same article mentioned that a lady from Dorchester, as a little girl, would go with her older sister down the hill to beside Palmer's Pond – and scuff up the dirt and were sometimes able to find the occasional large copper penny.

It is like Robert B. Shaw stated in his book *A History of Railway Accidents* – airplane crashes happen too quickly for anyone to realise what is happening, even if there are survivors; historically, ship wrecks occurred at remote locations and interviews with passengers are old news by the time survivors reached port; but railway accidents occur slowly enough, and if involving a passenger train, have plenty of witnesses, all with their own story to tell.

The case of the Penny Wreck of Palmer's Pond was no exception. Of the more interesting stories relates to Isaac Campbell, the baggage master, whose car was almost totally wrecked. There were a lot of traveller's trunks in his car, many of which fell on top of him. In addition, a small safe held him down for quite a while until some of the passengers and rescuers got him out of the car.

Then there was one group of passengers that went through the wreck without any complaints. They were a number of cases of fresh lobsters en route to Montréal. While they were in good order when they reached Saint John, Tuesday night, their crates showed signs of the wreck.

The postal-express car was a total wreck and the baggage car was nearly as bad, and

indications were that they were both scrapped.

A recent query to Don McQueen of London, concerning what happened to the other two known cars following the wreck at Palmer's Pond, brought the following reply.

Sherbrooke: Built by Barney and Smith in July 1890 as a 10-1 sleeper; converted in October 1910 to business car *New Brunswick*; renamed in November 1916 to *Laurentian*; renamed in March 1918 to *Ontario*; renamed in December 1918 *Laurentian* (again); renamed in March 1923 to *Selkirk*; renamed in May 1925 to *British Columbia*; sold in January 1963 to the West Coast Railway Association, and is currently on display as their prized car *British Columbia*.

Cumberland: Built by James Crossen in July 1892 as a diner; converted in January 1910 to tourist car 1425; renumbered in February 1912 to 2918; renumbered in March 1918 to 6018; converted in February 1923 to colonist car 2382; retired for scrap in May 1949 at Winnipeg.

The pennies claim a third victim

Three weeks to the day after the Penny Wreck, William E. Dixon, a deaf-mute person well-known locally, was killed while walking along the track at the Palmer's Pond curve. The February 16th accident occurred after the unfortunate man had visited the wreck site and was walking along the track, apparently examining some coins that he had found. Locomotive Engineer J. Stewart was driving Conductor Henderson's westbound special, with Fireman J. Baxter and Brake-men D. Sullivan and H. Bray, when they struck Mr. Dixon, who was also walking west at the time and couldn't hear or didn't feel the approaching train.

A New England account of the wreck

Mr. Ryan, on return to his Connecticut home, was interviewed by a local newspaper. This interview was as follows: "The Deep River *New Era* published in Connecticut on February 5th contains the following: Martin L. Ryan returned last Friday morning from his trip to his home in Anandale, Prince Edward Island. He was twelve days making the trip, though ordinarily it requires but three. On this trip Mr. Ryan had a narrow escape from a terrible death and an experience that comes to but few people in a life time. It was Tuesday, January 26, that Mr. Ryan, accompanied by his cousin, James Lawless, were making the return journey to Chester by train. Near the town of Dorchester, Province of New Brunswick, the train consisting of seven cars, struck a broken rail and were thrown down a 75 foot embankment. The train was running at a rate of 50 miles an hour at the time of the accident. The engine did not leave the track having crossed the broken rail in safety. Messrs. Ryan and Lawless were in the rear coach. There were six other men and a woman also in the same

coach. Mr. Ryan says that the car turned over once, resting on its side and then shot down the embankment, out on to the surface of the pond. It all happened so quickly that the car had stopped and was resting quietly on the ice ere the passengers fully realised what had happened. None of the passengers in this coach were injured to any extent, Mr. Ryan having a slight abrasion of the flesh on one leg and another gentleman a cut on his finger. Passengers in the other cars were more unfortunate, a man and a woman being killed outright and many more injured. The accident occurred about 1 o'clock in the afternoon. Mr. Ryan and Mr. Lawless, together with others of the passengers, were hurried off to the nearest town and their wants attended to and wounds dressed by the people. In the express car of the ill-fated train were twelve tons of Canadian pennies in bags and boxes. The parcels burst open in the wreck and thousands of the pennies were scattered about in the snow and on the ice. Men and boys in the crowd that had gathered at the scene of the wreck made a hasty raid on the glittering coins and many a pocket full was carried away. Mr. Ryan was given one and will preserve it as a memento.

"Mr. Ryan experienced some very cold weather while in the Northland. He says that there were many days of steady cold with the thermometer 15 below zero. The coldest day of his visit was January 26, when it was 37 below.

"Prince Edward Island is separated from the mainland by about 10 miles of turbulent sea, at this season of the year a mass of ice. The Canadian government maintains an iron steamer, called the *Stanley*, and known as the 'ice-boat' among the people, to carry mails and furnish transportation, which is said to be the most powerful boat of its kind in the world. This steamer can live in almost any sea and is able to cut its way steadily through from two to three feet of Arctic ice. It seldom misses a trip and is the only means of communication in the winter between the Island and the main. Mr. Ryan can tell much that it interesting regarding his trip."

A lawsuit?

A year and a half later, an article in the October 27, 1898, issue of *The Daily Times*, from Moncton, provides some idea of the magnitude of the legal problems following the Penny Wreck.

"W. B. Mackenzie, Chief Engineer I.C.R., went to Saint John yesterday in connection with a suit brought against the I.C.R. by H. H. Colpitts, one of the passengers injured in the Palmer Pond accident in January, 1897. After extricating himself or being extricated from the wreck Mr. Colpitts was driven to the Windsor Hotel where he asserted that he felt seriously injury to his back and side. For some weeks he was confined to the hotel and subsequently went to Saint John, thence to

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Boston. Mr. Colpitts claims \$50,000 damages."

Today

It has now been a hundred years since this wreck and while CPR trains no longer pass Palmer's Pond, VIA still runs its *Ocean* by this point. The pond still exists and the forests of the area cover about the same areas as one hundred years ago. A visit early last spring revealed a snow line that is probably the remaining edge of the roadbed built down the side of the embankment. This had been constructed to place a temporary spur to assist with the removal of the wrecked cars.

The local museum in the Keillor House has a pair of photos, that they have graciously provided for our use, as well as a few news clippings. My thanks to Phyllis Stopp and the rest of the staff at the Keillor House Museum for their help with my research.

In the cemetery across the road, overlooking the pond and tracks, is the tombstone of Mr. William E. Dixon inscribed, "Killed on the I.C.R. at Palmer's Pond."