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TRAIN 606 AT ST. LAMBERT QUE. MAY 1951

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FRONT COVER: In the years around mid-century, the last of CN's tiniest Pacifics were customarily assigned to the Waterloo - Montreal local. The K-1 class, numbering 43 locomotives, was built between 1905 and 1911, several units surviving until 1956-57. In May, 1951, at St. Lambert, Quebec, train 606 departs on its morning run to Waterloo.

BELOW: A map, drawn by Lorne Perry, showing the route of the train from Montreal to Waterloo Que. in 1951.

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Canadian Rail is continually in need of news, stories, historical data, photos, maps and other material. Please send all contributions to the editor: Fred F. Angus, 3021 Trafalgar Ave. Montreal, P.Q. H3Y 1H3. No payment can be made for contributions, but the contributor will be given credit for material submitted. Material will be returned to the contributor if requested. Remember "Knowledge is of little value unless it is shared with others".

EDITOR: Fred F. Angus

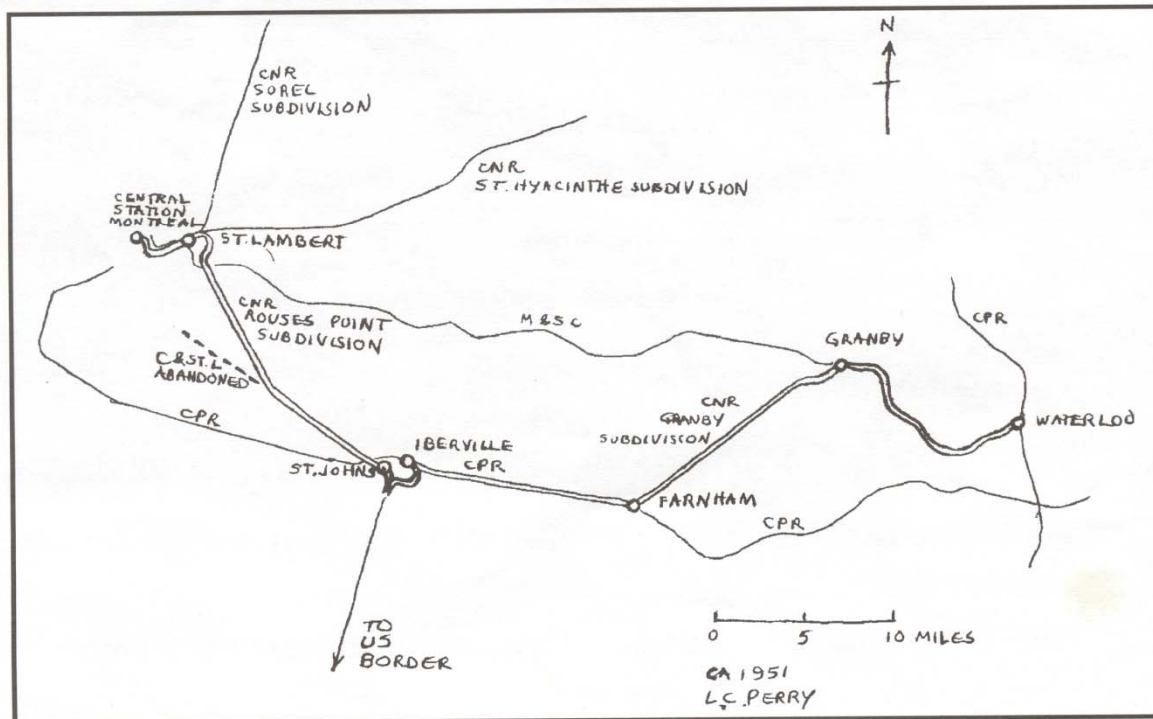
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A Rapture From The Ashes Of St. Clair Station

By Marco and Robert Marrone



Front entrance to the station — Circa 1990.

When passing by an abandoned railway depot it usually stands in mournful silence. Aside from showing the scars of its age, the signs of a bygone era, it rarely speaks to us about our mutual past. However, once in a while, like a madrigal, it regales those of us who are willing to listen — such was the sound from the station in this chronicle.

In the 1970s, as the traditional face of Canadian railways changed, so too did the social environment in which Canadians travelled; gone were many railway stations, especially smaller depots that were in or close to large urban areas. Becoming redundant, they were usually abandoned and, in many cases, demolished.

It was in these years that the authors experienced train travel for the first time. At the Christmas season the family always took the train to Sudbury to visit relatives for the holidays. The starting point of our journeys wasn't the Illustrious Union Station in downtown Toronto, but a far more unassuming depot that was then in the twilight of its era - The St. Clair Avenue Station.

The CN St. Clair Ave. Station was built in 1931, and was located where the CNR line crosses St. Clair Avenue at Caledonia Road in the Toronto area once known as the community of Carlton. It replaced the much older Davenport Station, constructed in 1853

along with Ontario's first railway: The Ontario, Simcoe and Huron. The line eventually became part of the Canadian National system.

The railway depot on St. Clair Ave. was a modest looking structure and didn't possess the fanciful architecture of its predecessor. In fact, the Davenport Station was such a handsome edifice, built in an English style with decorative gables, that it was featured in many Toronto area publications in the late 1800s. Although quite plain looking, simplicity, practicality and durability were the architecture characteristics of the replacing depot. The main floor had a waiting room, baggage room and agent's office; the interior was predominately maple. The basement had several rooms of roughly equal size that were used as office space and storage areas. These rooms enclosed an oil-burning furnace that had initially run on coal.

Throughout its history the station provided considerable support to the community: passenger rail service (including trans-continental and commuter), freight and express service, and, until the late 1960s, telegraph service. However, business steadily declined by the 1970s.

In 1978, Canadian National officially got out of the passenger rail business. This coincided with many station closures, including St. Clair.



Rear and side of the station as seen from St. Clair Ave.—circa 1990. The message scrawled on the side says "Dont nuke the dead cats"! We do not know about the dead cats, but the station was burned down.

The station's fate was unlike those of other stations in this part of Toronto. Not far away, in the West Toronto Junction area, stood the historic CP West Toronto Station that closed about the same time. Efforts by the community to save this building from demolition and turn it into a farmers market and museum were lost when in the early hours of a November morning in 1982, a CP wrecking crew quietly moved in and smashed the Tudoresque structure to rubble. Even closer to St. Clair is the CN West Toronto Station. Still standing, it has not aged gracefully. The object of repeated vandalism, severe deterioration and neglect, it has unravelled into a dilapidated eyesore.

Weathering from the natural elements had detracted little from St. Clair's external appearance. However, it fell victim to occasional graffiti, and became a sort of refuge for neighbourhood kids and drunkards who frequently broke in.

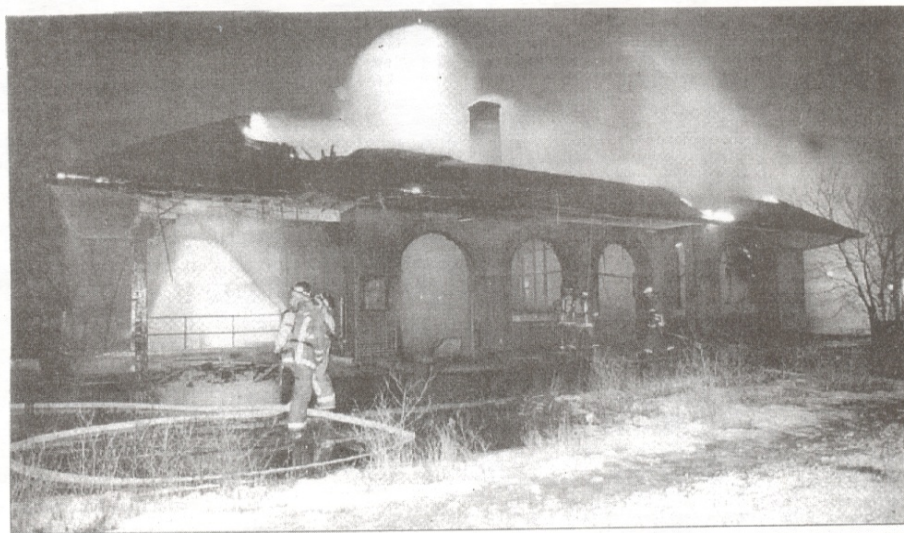
On the night of February 19, 1997, fire destroyed the building. The next morning just the brick skeleton remained. It laid there for three months before a wrecking crew pulverised the holdover and buried the empty hole.

During these three months, the authors, with the help of some friends and family, frequented the burnt remains in hopes of finding some tokens of remembrance that weren't ruined by the

fire. We found door hinges, a lamp, pieces of unburnt maple and, to our amazement, an old ledger, in pristine shape, containing an old memo with the name of the station agent — Nick Hretchka.

On a whim, we looked up the name in the Toronto phone book and, sure enough, it was there. So, we called. The genteel voice on the other end confirmed that, indeed, he was the station agent. We met Nick in person a few weeks latter at a restaurant on St. Clair Ave. where we got to know the man and his station.

The man, who hails from Melford, Saskatchewan, is very much a reflection of the station he managed — with silver hair and modest de-



YOHY COSTA PHOTO

HISTORIC STATION BURNS

Firefighters battle a blaze at a historic train station at St. Clair Ave. and Caledonia Rd. last night. Traffic in the area was tied up when roads were closed. The cause of the fire is still unknown.

The Toronto Star — The day after the fire.

meanour, he is polite and humble. He was 19 years old when he first moved from the west in search of a job; he met with the chief dispatcher at Union Station, "Toots" Harrison, who found him a position near London, Ontario. Nick Hretchka began his career with CN in 1943, at Hagersville, Ontario slugging freight as an assistant agent. Six months later, after learning Morse code and gaining measured experience, he became an operator. What followed was a seven year stint at Welland Junction. Then, coming back to Toronto in 1951, he worked at Union Station and, for one day a week, at the St. Clair Ave. station.

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS

DNR 172

YOUR FILE SUBJECT OUR FILE

Express Money Order DF-918200-DF918240
 July 24 - To April 29, 69

Express Money Order DF-454000-454040
 April 29 - To June 1, 69

Express Money Order DF-562160-562200
 June 12-64 To

Express Money Order DF-769840-769880 ✓

✓ ✓ DF 894800-894840 ✓

✓ ✓ DK 521800-521840 ✓

✓ ✓ DK 642920-642960 ✓

✓ ✓ DK 735120-735160

✓ ✓ DK 817400-817440

✓ ✓ DK 878280-878340

✓ ✓ DK 920760-920800

✓ ✓ DK 196400-196800

Page from the recovered ledger.

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS

Passenger Sales

Toronto Ont.
 File: 6600 :MHS
 Date: Dec.10/70

N.H. Bechthold, Terminal Traffic Manager, Brampton
 R.J. MacDonald, Depot Agent, Burlington
 L.H. Archer, Depot Agent, Dundas
 J.A. Elliott, Depot Agent, Georgetown
 Box 131 West Hill, Guildwood Ont.
 E.M. Swinizer, City Ticket Agent, Hamilton
 L.K. Gilchrist, Branch Manager, Hamilton
 P. Sheriff, Supv. Pass. Stn. Svcs. Hamilton
 D.A. Liddle, Depot Agent, Malton
 J.A. Boyd, Depot Agent, Newmarket
 D. Withey, Oakville
 S. Munday, Supv. Service Centre, Oshawa
 C. Leitch, Sub Agent, Parkdale
 A.E. Visentin, Depot Agent, 78 Queen St. E. Port Credit
 R.K. Hretchka, Sub Agent, St. Clair Ave.
 W.R. Gurney, Depot Agent, Stouffville
 G.A. Soul, City Ticket Agent, Toronto
 E.R. Knight, Depot Ticket Agent, Toronto
 M. Beauchesne, Depot Agent, Weston
 R.J. Franklin, Sub Agent, West Toronto
 T.R. Hughes, City Ticket Agent, 424 Main St. Buffalo 14202 NY B
 A. McKellar, Gen. Stn. Master & Baggage Agent, Union Station.

Subject: Ticket Requisition forms 1750 & 1758

Receipt of all tickets secured from the Ticket Bureau or direct from the printers, should be sent direct to our Area Comptroller.

Recent survey indicates the procedure has not been adopted by all.

Suggest you post this letter in your stock book, or Revenue Accounting Instructions manual, where all under your jurisdiction will be governed and guided accordingly.

H. J. Fry
 Passenger Sales Manager

cc: J.J. Menary, Regional Passenger Sales Manager, Toronto File: E-124
 R.H. Newcombe, Passenger Sales Manager, London
 O.A. Gallipo, Passenger Sales, Capreol
 S.J. Curreri, Area Comptroller, Toronto Attn: Mr. Cantafio.

CNR memo to station agents that was found in the ledger.

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS

DNR 171

YOUR FILE SUBJECT OUR FILE

St. Clair Ave Dec 6 69

Have received five
 keys to station

M. Hretchka

A note with Nick Hretchka's signature, also recovered from the fire.

In 1953 his position at St. Clair became permanent, and it is there that he spent the next 25 years. He remembers that business was good at the station in those days. "I sold a lot of tickets in that time, lots of express and customer service... we had our share". He worked alone in the daytime, then was relieved about 3:30 in the afternoon by another operator who would close up at midnight after train 47 — for Kirkland Lake / North Bay — departed. His years at St. Clair involved numerous colleagues — "they were so many that I don't recall." There was one pipe-smoking operator in particular who the authors vividly remember while awaiting the Super continental to Sudbury. "That was Ed Dobson, he smoked a pipe, he loaded it up and puffed on it". Ed Dobson was about 15 years older than Nick; they had a close rapport. "Oh yeah, we were good friends, he passed on about 10 years ago".

The Train crews were also great guys. They often stopped over, particularly when the cold weather came. "They used to come round especially in wintertime, park their backs against the water radiator, heat-up and have a little snooze". When reflecting upon the people and the company he worked with, he warmly reflects, "we were just one big happy family".

The corporate climate was a far cry from today's lean-and-mean business environment at CN. When asked about how the company treated him, he replies enthusiastically "very well. When I was at St. Clair I was my own boss; I didn't even know who my boss was. I kept my nose clean, everything up and up."

CN stations functioned very autonomously; company officials seldom interfered with daily operations. Nick recalls "The ticket supervisors were Fred Webster and Ed Pratt, they used to come around to see me, maybe once a year ... I looked after the accounting, passenger work and all that. I used to do the book work for express once a week and once a month for the tickets, and any money I got I deposited it in the Bank of Montreal.

On average, St. Clair's revenue was about \$20,000 per month, sometimes during peak seasons it ranged between \$40,000 and \$50,000 per month. Indeed, Christmas was the busiest time of the year. When business became that hectic, a package would periodically make its way to the wrong destination. Nick says veraciously, "Christmas was very busy, especially express — a lot of gifts and parcels ... Mistakes were made". The number of telegrams also increased during Christmas, primarily those sent by Italians that lived in the neighbourhood. Another peak time was early Autumn — grape season. The station facilitated sev-

TRANSCONTINENTAL SERVICE									
TORONTO — WASHAGO — PARRY SOUND — SUDBURY — CAPREOL									
WEST—READ DOWN					EAST—READ UP				
REFERENCE MARKS—TABLES 130-131									
☉ Meal Station.	North-land 49 ex. Sat.	Continental 53 Daily	Super Continental 51 Daily	Miles from Toronto	TABLE 131 Eastern Time		Super Continental 52 Daily	Continental 54 Daily	North-land 50 ex. Sun.
☉ Rent-a-Car Service.	P.M. 6.15	P.M. 11.30	P.M. 6.10	0.0	TORONTO, Ont.		P.M. 2.50	A.M. 7.00	A.M. 8.10
a Stops Saturdays only. 11.43	.. 6.28	2.4	Lv Union Station		..	..	..
c Stops for revenue passengers from Winnipeg and beyond. 11.55	.. 6.28	5.2	.. Parkdale		..	..	..
c Stops Tuesdays only.	C 7.01	34.1	.. St. Clair Avenue		C 2.33	..	..
f Stops on signal. 7.40	63.0	.. Newmarket		..	Via	Via
M Mixed Train. 1.10	.. 7.40	63.0	Lv Allandale		C 1.20	Beaverton	Beaverton
 1.25	.. 8.10	..	.. (Tables 86, 87, 90)		..	..	..
 1.30	.. 8.10	64.1	.. Barrie		..	..	..
 2.02	.. 8.10	80.3	.. Orillia		.. 12.48	..	..
 2.02	.. 8.10	80.3	Ar Washago		.. 12.28	..	..

CNR transcontinental timetable from the 1960s — Note St. Clair 5.2 miles from Union Station.



Nick Hretchka with the authors at the station site.

eral local grape and wine-juice distributors. "We used to have Culotta, Meschino and Caledonia grape. We had Mr. Vic Anderson, he was the fella that handled the grapes ... he had his office downstairs". Early Autumn was also the season for sportsmen. "Hunters and fishermen would go use the train. Many times they had a lot of baggage — Oh Christ, sometimes the train would be held up 10 minutes just to get the baggage on!"

By the mid-1970s, uncertainty about cutbacks was on the minds of all station employees. Nick recalls the mood as being very apprehensive. "Well, what happened was we got a letter from the union saying that they heard the railway was cutting staff and stations, but they didn't tell us which ones. So, they kept us guessing for about two years, and all of a sudden we got another letter from the union saying St. Clair was going to be closed, Parkdale and West Toronto were also going to be closed; other stations too".

It was Nick Hretchka who officially closed the doors of the St. Clair Ave. Station in 1978. CN continued to rent out one of the basement offices to a fuelling company [Bell Fuel] until the early 1980s. CN boarded up the building shortly afterwards.

Nick worked at the Mimico Crew Centre until his retirement in 1988; the year also marked his 45th year with the CNR. When asked if he is still keen about CN's business nowadays, he smiles and cheekily admits, "No. I just Wait for their pension cheque". He's got other interests in mind, which include his wife, daughter, and two grandchildren.

After talking in the restaurant, the three of us walked down the street to where the station used to be. As the station agent paced around the conspicuously solemn and barren place, he pointed to remnants and regaled us about their significance. Throughout, the authors couldn't help think that the raptures of this place and others like it across Canada are forever fleeting.

Canadian Rail

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