3a Early rural Ontario railway stations – a vignette

The second half of the 19th century saw the rapid development of a railway network across southern Ontario. This development was promoted by the early construction of two trunk railways, the Grand Trunk (GTR) and the Great Western (GWR) Railways. Civic and developer interests combined to initiate a great number of pioneering lines to connect with these major trunk railways and with each other.

Typically these pioneering railways designed their own stations and had local craftsmen construct them all along the line according to a basic template, usually only varying the length of the building according to the traffic needs of each community. Stations of communities of any size would be in charge of a station agent whose duties were to look after passengers and account for and expedite all freight, collect revenues for the railway, look after all aspects of operating the station and transmit train orders to passing trains. Hamlets and crossroads were more likely just to have an unmanned flagstop, a simple shelter where one flagged down an approaching train or had to ask the conductor to stop the train to set one off. These waiting rooms were sometimes combined with a section foreman's house. As the importance of some agency stations declined, they would be reduced to flagstops. As others grew into a 24 hour operation with an increasing number of trains, a full-time telegraph operator, clerks and porters might be added.

The majority of early Ontario (Upper Canada) rural stations were simple wooden frame buildings, often considered as "temporary" facilities, although some of them lasted until their general disappearance in the 1960s after the termination of passenger service. Their design was usually to a standard pattern by the railway that built them, with little variation except perhaps for the width of the building and/or the length of the baggage / freight room depending on the community's volume of traffic. Typically the interior would be divided into a waiting room, agent's and ticket office, and a baggage/freight room. (In the railway's heyday, passengers often travelled with many suitcases and steamer trunks.) Sometimes the line would be opened for traffic before the station was built, in the meantime making do with a simple shelter or a platform. As traffic grew and the communities became prosperous, separate freight sheds would be built, and many of the early stations would be replaced or rebuilt. Loss by fire, whether by lightning, carelessness or sparks from locomotives, was also a significant hazard and cause for replacement.

At the same time, as the early pioneering roads were being amalgamated into larger companies, significant or total design change would occur. The emerging major railways, the GTR, Canadian Pacific and the Canadian Northern Railways developed distinctive series of station designs. Also from the outset, both railway and civic pride and competition stimulated the addition of such features as separate ladies' waiting rooms, turrets, platform canopies, dormers, "gingerbread" bargeboards and roof finials. In many instances, where a station was replaced, the earlier building would be converted for use as a separate freight shed, with the corresponding space in the new building serving as a baggage room only.

Another feature that came to be added to all stations by the turn of the 20th century was a telegrapher's bay so that the operator had a clear view up and down the line without having to step outside the building, an operational necessity as the number of daily trains increased.

Last but by no means least, growing or changing operating requirements, such as the need for more accommodation, not only for freight and passengers, but also for staffing, was a frequent factor in design change. The early railways found that having the station agent "on the job" 24 hours a day by accommodating him and his family right in the station building was very attractive from an operations point of view, as the agent was then always on site to deal with late trains or emergencies. It was also a promotion incentive, and the station agent had standing in the community as a very necessary servant who contributed to its economic and social welfare. A "soft" additional benefit to the railway (and for the agent) was that a dwelling for the station agent invariably resulted in additional unpaid labour as the agent's family would pitch in with the office work, learn how to operate the Morse telegraph, look after the lighting of the station and signal lamps, and generally keep the place neat and tidy. And then there was the station garden, which was the agent's pride and joy. There was much competition between stations for the best-kept gardens and the railways encouraged this with the awarding of prizes as this was in their interest as manicured gardens were a form of welcome to the travelling public.

In short, railway stations became part of the fabric of their communities, but with the gradual elimination of local service, they have all but disappeared; some of them to survive in new roles such as restaurants, museums, tourist information offices, community centres, or privately owned as residences or cottages.

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