

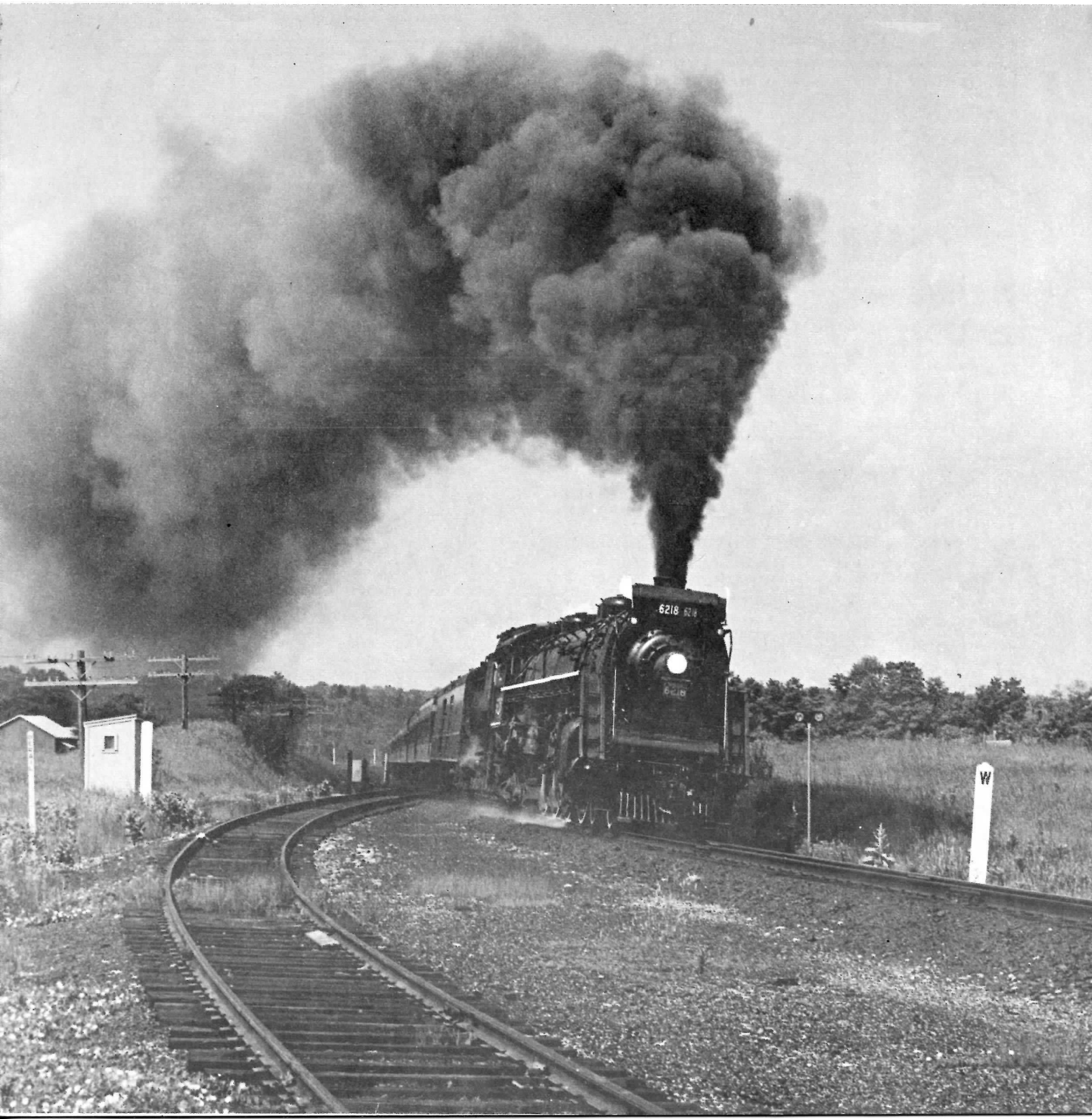
TORONTO BELTLINE

newsletter

Upper Canada Railway Society



July 1970 ■ 50c



The TORONTO BELT LINE Story

by John H. Walker.

Late in the nineteenth century an attempt was made to build and develop a combined real estate and transportation venture in the area surrounding the City of Toronto. The railway, known as the Toronto Belt Line Railway, was incorporated in 1889 under an Ontario statute.

Building commenced in 1890 but the line was still incomplete when, because of financial difficulties, the line was leased to the Grand Trunk Railway in 1892. The GTR completed the line, and the railway came into the Canadian National family, when the GTR was absorbed by Canadian National Railways in 1923.

The line consisted of two loops, a larger eastern loop and a smaller western loop. Both loops employed extensive sections of Grand Trunk mainline trackage in order to reach downtown Toronto. [The map shown below shows trackage only of the eastern belt.]

Advertising brochures for the development stressed the advantage of living in the clean countryside (yes! this was countryside in the 1890's) away from the polluted atmosphere of the central city. Development took place in areas close to the various stations, and a number of houses were built. Evidence of these developments may be seen in groups of older homes in such areas as St. Clair Avenue East at Welland Avenue, Spadina Road north of Eglinton Avenue, Fairbank Village (Dufferin Street) and St. Clair Avenue West between Jane Street and Scarlett Road.

The period of the 1890's was one of financial recession and "tight money". The same difficulties which delayed the completion of the line slowed down the development of the residential colonies around the stations. The completed houses were sold at low prices and building stopped. Many building lots were sold but were not occupied for twenty or thirty years, by which time alternative transportation was available.

With few passengers available, service on the line which commenced late in 1892 was soon reduced from several trips per day to one per day and was finally withdrawn completely in 1894.

Besides the obvious problems associated with the lack of development adjacent to the line, there were others. Some of the gradients were steep, particularly those from Rosedale to Moore Park, west of Fairbank and up the Humber valley. Certain stations such as Rosedale were in awkward locations. There were no feeder routes so that development was limited to areas within easy walking distance of the stations. In addition, sidewalks and street lighting were virtually non-existent.

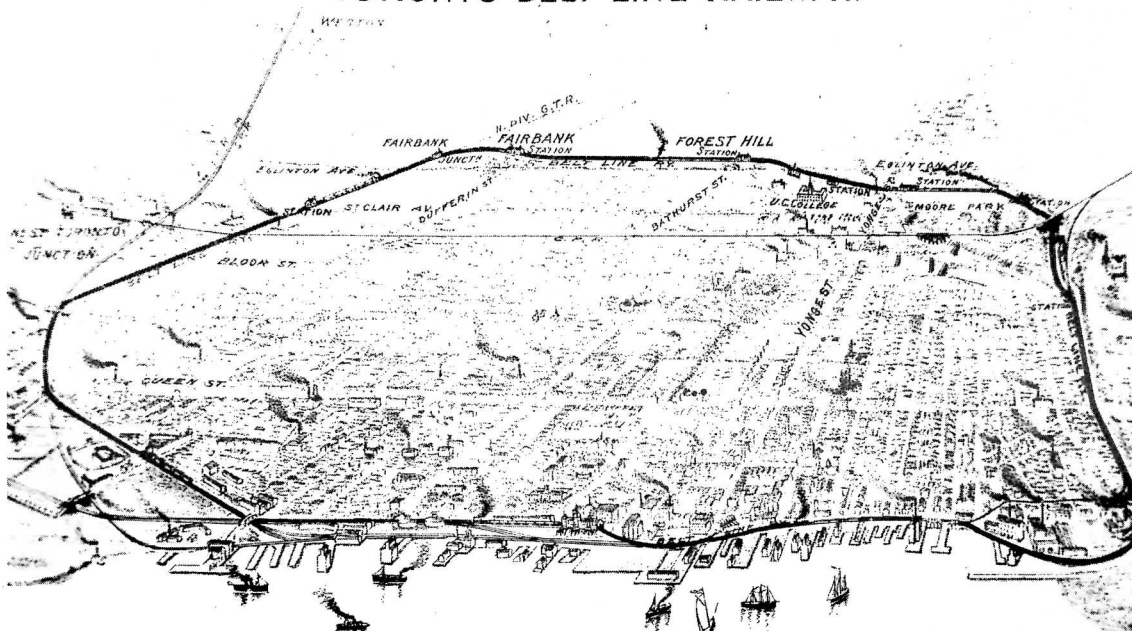
With the cessation of passenger service, much of the line fell into disuse. The section from Don to Rosedale became part of the Canadian Northern Railway about 1908. The Don Station was the last Belt Line station used for its original purpose as a passenger depot.

Ironically, it was the building of other transportation routes which was responsible for parts of the Belt Line becoming useful for other purposes.

The Metropolitan Railway was built along Yonge Street in the late nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century, with the electrified section through North Toronto being opened about 1897. By this time the depression of the early nineties was over and a building boom followed the line north. There was great need for building supplies and fuel, and a number of such depots was developed along the Belt Line between Mt. Pleasant Road and Bathurst Street. Similar developments took place west of Lyon Avenue and along the West Belt east of Runnymede Road. Another short segment in use until 1963 was the spur crossing of the Queensway west of the Stelco plant in Swansea. This spur served a brick yard.

After the Toronto Transportation Commission acquired the Toronto Suburban Railway's lines on Dundas Street west of Keele, the TSR required an alternative route for its Toronto to Guelph interurban. The entrance was effected by joining the existing line to the Belt Line right-of-way near Lambton Park and using this portion of the West Belt to a point east of Weston Road. A new bridge was built over Weston Road and a new station (now the Premium Lunch, and soon to be demolished) was constructed on Keele Street. This construction by the Canadian National Electric Railways took place in 1923.

BIRDS EYE VIEW OF THE
TORONTO BELT LINE RAILWAY.



LEFT: a map of the east Toronto Belt Line trackage, reproduced from a booklet "Highlands of Toronto", issued in 1891 by the Toronto Belt Land Company, promoters of the Belt Line project. (Mike Filey Collection)

Not shown, the West Belt left the CN Oakville Sub just at the present STELCO plant in Swansea, curved to the north, parallel to the Kingsway, and further up Humbercrest Blvd and Florence Cres then curving to the east well north of St. Clair Ave (and the meat packing plants) to a connection with the CN at Keele & St. Clair.

Service on this electric line was discontinued in 1931 and the tracks west of Runnymede Road removed about 1935. The portion between Runnymede Road and Keele Street continues to be used as an industrial spur.

Most of the track on the other abandoned sections had been removed at a much earlier date. Some of the rail from the Rosedale-Moore Park and Humber Valley segments was sent to France during the First World War (1914-1918) to replace rail damaged during the conflict.

Freight traffic has gradually decreased along the remaining segments. In some cases, particularly in the former Village of Forest Hill, there was political pressure to remove building supply yards. In addition, a number of coal yards along the line have closed or switched their activities with the conversion of most homes to other fuels. The building of the TTC Davisville Shops and Yard in the early 1950's and the subsequent deliveries of subway cars to the yard accounted for some business in latter years.

The construction of the Spadina Expressway appears to have assisted in the decision for the abandonment of the section of the Belt Line east of Lyon Avenue. At the present time CN crews have removed track from the right-of-way from just east of Mount Pleasant Road to just west of the bridges over Yonge Street and the subway yards. At the present time the future of the right-of-way east of Lyon Avenue is in doubt, once track has been removed. The City is about to conduct a hearing for proposals for right-of-way utilization within its jurisdiction. The Toronto Planning Board has proposed that portions of the Belt Line be turned into a park. Segments of the original Belt Line which will remain in operation after July 1970 include the Runnymede-Keele and the Fairbank-Lyon Avenue industrial spurs and the section of the CN Bala subdivision between Don and Rosedale.



P-5-f class 0-8-0 8357 pushes a cut of boxcars across the bridge over the subway yards and Yonge Street, July 1953.
(Don McCartney)



The Belt Line right-of-way looking west to Mount Pleasant Road, shortly before the removal of track.
(Robert D. McMann)



The Belt Line right-of-way looking northwest toward Eglinton Avenue. Track is still in position at this point.
(Robert D. McMann)



CN track crews hard at work removing rail from the Belt Line, west from Mount Pleasant Road, May 29th. The "burro" crane was quite adequate to lift rail and other hardware to be salvaged.
(Ted Wickson)



The Belt Line bridge over Yonge Street again, this time looking south from the fourth floor of the TTC McBrien Building. Geep 4152 is westbound across the bridge with a cut of cars.
(Ted Wickson)