OUR JASPER STORIES

Railroads in Jasper

While Jasper's railway history goes back to the early 1900s, this year marks Canadian National Railway's 100th anniversary. The Canadian National Railway (CN) was formed shortly after the amalgamation of the Canadian Northern (CNo) and Grand Trunk Pacific (GTP) Railways by the Canadian Government. Both railway lines were struggling until the government stepped in during WWI.

The coming of the railway predated the town of Jasper and the first houses were built for Grand Trunk railway engineers on Snape's Hill. Once the railway engineers moved on, the houses were snapped up by residents. Jasper has always had a housing shortage. The town itself was first called Fitzhugh after a GTP vice president but changed to Jasper in 1913. From about 1911 to 1916 there were two sets of track running through the Athabasca Valley. The town of Jasper also had two railway stations-one for the GTP where the present station is and the other for the CNo across the road from the lumber yard, now known as Sleepy Hollow.

In the early days there were many stations and flag stops along the lines. Travelling east to west on the GTP line you might stop at Parkgate, Miette Hot Springs, Pocahontas, Hawes, Interlaken, Snaring Junction, Henry House, Fitzhugh, Geikie and Yellowhead. On the CNo line the stops were Bedson (Miette), Devona, Snaring, Henry House, Jasper Park, and Mt. Geikie. Each station was manned by a section man who was responsible for his section of track. In some cases, he might have his family living with him. Communication was via telegraph-a vital link for train orders and other messages.

In the early days, development of the Jasper National Park and the railway went hand in hand and there were big plans for hotels and tourist attractions. Railway officials were not impressed with the tent town that sprung up during railway construction and

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pushed for first class accommodation for their clients. At the east end of the park, plans were made for Chateau Miette complete with hot water and a monorail line to the hot springs. While those plans were soon discarded, a Tent City on the shores of Horseshoe Lake eventually evolved into Jasper Park Lodge on Lac Beauvert.

The layout of the town of Jasper was designed with the railway in mind. The V shaped layout radiated from the station and the old Raven Totem Pole faced the tracks- not the town. This made perfect sense as there were few roads in the park and almost everyone arrived by train. Early photographs of Jasper are dominated by the railyard and its buildings. In the days of steam, Jasper had a 12 stall round house with turntable to service the big steam locomotives. An ice house filled with blocks of ice cut from Lac Beauvert stood nearby until the 1970s. An immense coal dock ran along the front of the town where you could watch "the little engine that could" push the cars up the incline and dump their loads. At the back of the yard were stock yards where cattle could be fed and watered on long trips.

As Jasper National Park evolved the wisdom of having railyards in the centre of town was questioned and the idea of moving the railway divisional point out of Jasper was broached. In the 1963 the Oberlander Report looked at moving the rail line to the foot of the bench allowing the town to expand towards the Athabasca River. The idea was rejected and Jasper still faces many of the same issues 50 years later. The town, rail line, highway and pipeline all compete for space in a corridor that is vital to wildlife.

While cars, trucks and buses have changed Jasper's connection to the world, the railway continues to be a big part of town's development. Visitors still clamour for the romance of the rails and arrive in the heart of our beautiful town where they can explore on foot, with hotels and restaurants easily accessible on our welcoming streets.

As we prepare to celebrate 100 plus years of railroading in Jasper, we can reflect on one celebration that went horribly awry. In the early 1900s a monument was constructed at the edge of a rock cut at Yellowhead Pass. An immense rock turret towered over the track complete with a fountain. The water was piped in from the nearby Miette River. When the fountain flowed the turret collapsed onto the track and the train that was enjoying the spectacle was derailed! That's just one of many stories from Jasper's railway history.

We are celebrating 100 years on the railway with a special exhibition of the Canadian National Railway that will run until November 15, 2019 at the museum. Opening reception Saturday, July 27th, 2019, starting with a movie at 2pm in the basement of "Thomas the Train" (movie, chips and a drink by donation) followed by a CN themed walking tour of Jasper at 4pm (meet at the totem pole) and a reception back at the museum from 5-8pm with cake, appetizers and a cash bar. Everyone Welcome! All aboard!
MUSEUM HOURS ARE DAILY, 10AM - 5PM.

Jasper-Yellowhead Museum & Archives

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