



Jasper-Yellowhead  
Museum & Archives

# OUR JASPER STORIES

## Sir Henry Thornton



IN 1922, the Canadian National Railway (CN) hired SIR HENRY THORNTON as president to oversee the consolidation of the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR), the Canadian Northern (CNoR), and other publicly owned railways in Canada.

Sir Henry Worth Thornton was born to a prominent Thornton family in Logansport, Indiana, on November 6th, 1871. Thornton studied at the University of Pennsylvania, graduating in 1894, and joined the railway business that year at the Pennsylvania Railroad as a draftsman. He rapidly climbed the ranks; becoming District Superintendent in 1901. Between 1911 and 1914 he was the General Superintendent of the

Long Island Rail Road. From there he was the

General Manager of the Great Eastern Railway in England between 1914 and 1922. For his work as a Major General and the Director of Channel Transports during World War I, Thornton was knighted in 1919, and became a British subject.

Immediately, one of Thornton's main goals was to compete with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) on every front, and this included CPR's hold in the Rockies with their Banff Resort. Thornton led the way for many progressive technological innovations that have lasted to present day, including on-board radio technology (CNRadio 1923), diesel and ball-bearing train engines (1928) and he severely invested in local communities before they became hallmarks of corporate publicity stunts.

The 1920s were not without troubles. Public railways, like the Intercolonial, was viewed as a drain on the government as they historically never broke even. For private companies these faults could be pinned on directors, but the government took the brunt of criticism for Canada's largest crown corporation. CN faced many inquisitions, and a committee was formed to oversee all of Thornton's deals.

To help increase passenger service, Thornton set up the Department of Colonization and Agriculture to promote the west to new immigrants. This came to fruition when the

Railway Agreement of 1925 was passed giving CN and CPR the jurisdiction to veto, transport, and relocate incoming immigrant's right across Canada. While this did not completely offset the railway's dependency on freighting, it did help diversify CN.

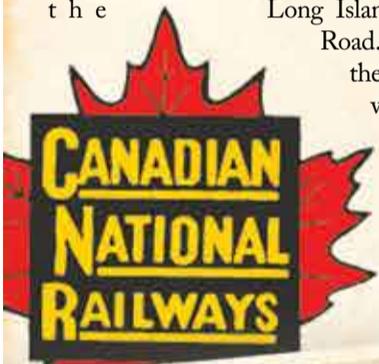
Thornton was a highly private man, was strong-willed, loud, and ambitious. His stature was well over 6' and from photographic evidence, he was a large man. His work was his life, memoirs from his co-workers showed that he would work day in and day out, drank often in his office, and was a man to be both understanding and demanding. He was the original 1920s 'Life of the Party'. Thornton, who fell in love with the picturesque views seen from Jasper, focused on building and expanding the town to become not only a well-preserved national treasure, but also a world-renowned tourist destination. He pushed for the development of Jasper Park Lodge (1922), expanded the roundhouse (1925) as well as funded the local hospital and infrastructure development. He was immensely popular with his workers as he took the time to visit remote areas and spent time with the engineers, firemen, and station attendants. As he visited Jasper often, he was known locally as "The Big Man on the Big Horse", and was a member of the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies. He hand-picked internationally famous chefs and golf course designers to work at Jasper Park Lodge, and even commissioned specially designed china and glassware for the hotel.

Jasper, a fledgling town at the time, consisted of a handful of buildings, stores, and a school, saw a massive

amount of growth during the 1920s. Lucerne, the CNoR's divisional point in the Rockies, was abandoned in favour of Jasper, GTR's Rockies divisional point, and the result nearly doubled the local population to 250. This led to a spike in home construction, road creation, and better amenities in town such as electricity, and running water. Under Thornton the CN station was rebuilt (1925) and became the center of town, where shop owners would receive packages; people would catch major games on the radio, pick up the newspaper, and load-up on the latest gossip. CN encouraged local businesses to expand to keep the tourism industry in town growing and healthy. Virtually all tourists during this time arrived by train, and by the end of the 1920s, the town was receiving 20,000 visitors annually. However, CN could not hold this monopoly forever, and signs of change were coming with the rise of automobiles, and the opening of the Jasper-Edmonton road in 1928.

In 1932, when the Conservative Party came to power, Thornton was forced to resign from his presidency and he was denied a pension. CN's conservative board worked hard to scrub their image of Thornton, who by 1932 represented what successful public works could become. Those who remember him recall the monolithic aura and personality he had, and his charisma. Sir Henry Worth Thornton passed away on March 14, 1933.

To learn more about Sir Henry Thornton, visit the CN 100th Anniversary exhibit on now until November 17th, 2019 at the Jasper-Yellowhead Museum & Archives.



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