

The way we were

Plans to establish a railway here began in 1857 with Canada Southern

By TIM GALLAGHER
T-J Staff Reporter

Railways were an important part of Canada's growth during its first years as a nation. Even before Canada became a confederation, the growth of railways had provided an important commercial link for Canada's outstretched communities.

The railways brought growth and prosperity to the country and served as a vital political bond between communities and provinces.

St. Thomas was one such community which benefitted greatly by the coming of the railways, but before they were established there was a lot of politicking and manoeuvring, both by the railways and political leaders of the day, to get the rail lines laid down.

The railway which was to spur growth in this city was the Canada Southern Railway, owned by American interests. The establishment of this railway was not an easy task.

When it was finally completed it ran from Niagara Falls to Windsor and provided the Americans with a shortcut between the eastern seaboard and Chicago, America's bustling mid-western commercial centre.

Communities along the route prospered because of the railway but before any of this took place, there was a lot of jockeying between rival railways and communities to block out competition for their own advantage.

Railways wanted to exclude rival railways and communities clamored to have new railway lines follow routes best suited to community interests.

St. Thomas was no different from the others in the 1860s and 1870s.

Talk of a railway to pass through this area first came to light in 1857 when a provincial parliamentary committee was formed to consider the incorporation of the "Great Southern

Railroad Company."

However, the original idea for a Southwestern Ontario railway came from Mahlon Burwell, a pioneer surveyer who saw the advantages of a route between Eastern U.S. ports and the frontier.

Isaac Buchanan, who represented Great Western Railway interests in London, testified before the parliamentary committee and recommended against having another railway in this region of the province.

Despite his protestations, the proposed Southern Railway was given the go-ahead, but political pressure to have it unite with the Great Western led promoters to withdraw their plans for the new railway.

For the time being, the Great Western had eliminated a potential rival.

The interplay of politics and business was to revive the idea of the Canada Southern through this region, but for the time being it was a passing dream for

St. Thomas which had fewer than 2,000 people in the late 1860s.

Austerity measures had been implemented due to a troubled Canadian economy. The effects locally were harsh.

Local interests in St. Thomas and Elgin County were not ready to give up on the idea of a railway through the village.

The residents of the county had not experienced any real economic stimulus since the Crimean War in 1853, which resulted in greater grain exports from this area.

By the late 1860s the people of this area were anxious to see prosperity return. While the idea of the railway had died in 1857, the hope that it would eventually gain substance wasn't abandoned.

That's the way we were before the advent of the Canada Southern Railway.

First in a four-part series on the Canada Southern.

The way we were

Canada Southern got charter in 1870 to build railway through this area

By TIM GALLAGHER
T-J Staff Reporter

The idea of forming a railway which would pass through this area connecting the U. S. eastern seaboard and the American mid-west was first proposed by Mahlon Burwell, a pioneer surveyer with the Talbot Settlement.

His idea gained substance in 1857 when a parliamentary committee granted American interests the right to build a railway through Southwestern Ontario.

The proposed Canadian terminals were Niagara Falls and Windsor.

Residents of St. Thomas and Elgin welcomed the idea and saw the construction of the railway as a boom to local prosperity.

Since its incorporation as a village in 1853, St. Thomas had undergone a spasmodic growth which had been hindered by the generally poor economic climate in Canada.

By the time the Canada Southern Railway was proposed, most residents were eager to see it go through.

But, political pressure to have the new railway amalgamate with the Great Western Railway based in Hamilton led to the collapse of the project.

The Great Western had eliminated a potential rival and began plans to extend its own railway system in this area.

In 1857, when plans for the CSR were first approved, St. Thomas had had only one railway passing through it. That was the London and Port Stanley Railway.

However, the L and PS served mainly London interests and didn't contribute to St. Thomas' growth in any significant way.

SERVED AS LINK
The L and PS served mainly

as a link between London and Lake Erie. Goods passed to and from London through Port Stanley, which in later years was to prosper considerably from the trade generated by the railway and Great Lakes shipping.

For St. Thomas, the economic advantages were minimal. A sluggish economy compounded the village's problems. Badly needed street repairs were shelved for lack of funds. The situation got worse and a beleaguered village council was unable to do much about it.

Backers of the CSR hadn't given up to their rivals. The interplay of business and politics which caused plans for the CSR to be scrapped, later served to enhance such plans.

American interests were still anxious to see a railway through Southwestern Ontario.

Canada, which had yet to gain independence from Britain was hard pressed to come up with funds for railways. The poor economic climate made such investment risky. Outside British interests, the only source of funds lay in the United States.

The man who finally secured a charter for the CSR to pass through Southwestern Ontario was William A. Thompson of Toronto who acted as promoter for the railway.

He campaigned successfully along the proposed route to gain support for the new rail line which got its charter in 1870.

His job was to convince businessmen and politicians that the railway would bring prosperity.

Aiding Thompson in his campaign was Daniel Drew, a partner of the CSR.

The main architect of the proposed rail line was Thompson. His job was to find the shortest possible route from

Niagara Falls to Windsor, while at the same time, convincing local politicians along the route to accept the idea and give the railway financial help.

WAS CONVINCING

He was a skilled promoter and proved to be convincing in outlining the potential benefits to the various municipalities.

Getting finances, the most from each municipality, was crucial to paying for the proposed railway.

Several municipalities near Hamilton granted sizeable bonuses to the CSR for the promise that the railway pass along routes they felt would benefit their communities most.

St. Thomas and Elgin County were in a central location and anticipated much gain.

Thompson indicated to St. Thomas that the CSR would consider erecting workshops and a major station in St. Thomas as well as constructing a through route along its central core.

The picture painted by Thompson was most impressive, but the Great Western which had a large stake in the area through its London operation, wasn't about to let the CSR get established without a fight.

Rumors spread that the CSR was on shaky financial footing. They were true to a point because it was very costly to build railways and the CSR was relying on anticipated municipal funding to help finance the rail line.

Further rumors suggested that the CSR would be unable to complete its line once it was started, leaving municipalities in the lurch. Talk also spread that its American backers were having second thoughts.

Printed opposition to the CSR came from as far away as

Brantford whose local paper, The Courier, wrote that the CSR was "in the hands of Yankee schemers."

That report was made after Canada had achieved its independence from Britain and was a struggling nation. There was talk that the U. S. would swallow Canada, using its economic might.

RUMOR WORRIES

The rumors so worried Thompson that he wrote from his Queenston, Ont., office that the CSR was going "full blast."

The CSR got started as tracks were laid in the Niagara Falls area and were built in a westwardly path towards the objective in Windsor.

One CSR contractor worried that the Elgin council would be swayed by the rumors written to St. Thomas' weekly newspaper, the Dispatch, that "all croakers and enemies of the Canada Southern who wish to have the scales taken from their eyes, should pay a visit to Waterford" where the railway was going ahead with its construction.

The local battle lines had been drawn, however. They more or less broke down the middle between supporters of the Great Western and supporters of the Canada Southern.

Elgin was aware prosperity lie ahead but the path to that prosperity diverged in two different directions.

The people of the county were anxious to see the economic benefits a railway would bring but for the meantime, the future of Elgin rested with the politicians on county council who were preparing for a final showdown on the issue.

That's the way we were in December 1870.

**PART TWO
OF A SERIES**

Railway battle settled by county as all sides manoeuvred for gain

By TIM GALLAGHER
T-J Staff Reporter

Construction of the Canada Southern Railway from Niagara Falls to its intended destination in Windsor was progressing well in 1870 despite efforts from rivals, particularly the Great Western, to have its progress hindered.

St. Thomas's 2,000 residents saw the railway as a potential boon to local business, but despite the desire to see the village grow, battle lines were clearly drawn between those who favored the railway and those who opposed it.

The centre of this battle was focused on the Elgin County Council which was to be the final battleground between the opponents and supporters of the railway.

Opposition to the railway appeared in the form of letters in the St. Thomas Weekly Dispatch which was the village's only newspaper at the time. Opposition also cropped up in rumors which became quite prevalent.

There was word the CSR could not complete its proposed rail line because of lack of funds, and there was a rumor that the American backers of the project were having second thoughts about the railway.

There was no doubt the promoters wanted to push through the idea but there was some truth to the rumor they lacked financial means to complete the line.

RELYING ON HELP

They were relying on local municipalities along the proposed route to come up with bonuses to help finance the line.

The line was billed as a big boon to local businesses because of its intended purpose of bringing American goods through from the American east coast and mid-west, where the terminals of the railway were.

There was considerable jockeying between representatives of the CSR and the municipalities along the route.

The CSR sought as much bonus money as it could get while the municipalities tried to get rail lines to follow through or by them so that they could get the most advantage from the railway.

Often councils were divided over whether to have the railway or not.

Their decision had a direct effect on what route the line would follow and promoters were after the shortest route possible through Southwestern Ontario.

Locally, the Warden of the County, who was aligned with the Great Western, came out against the CSR.

He wrote several letters to the Dispatch opposing the new rail line and read several petitions at council objecting to the railway.

The Great Western had also promised to build a line to this area which would line up with other lines carrying goods to the United States by way of Sarnia.

The railway had promised a line which would connect with Aylmer, the Warden's home town.

At the final meeting to discuss and vote on whether to give bonuses to the CSR and allow it access through the county, the Warden re-affirmed his opposition to the CSR, but forces favoring the line prevailed.

BIG STAKE

The pro-CSR faction on council was led by George Suffel of Vienna who was a prominent businessman and shipowner. He had a big stake in the new railway and mustered up support to grant bonuses totalling \$200,000.

In return, the CSR agreed to build the line through the length of Elgin County so that the line passed Vienna.

The Great Western had lost its battle with the CSR in Elgin County.

Nonetheless, Great Western went ahead with its own plans to have a line constructed from Glencoe to Elgin County.

The political manoeuvring wasn't over.

As a condition for bonuses to the CSR St. Thomas wanted the line to pass through the centre of the village and not outside the village.

It also wanted a guarantee that 600 jobs would be provided locally.

These guarantees were promised by William A. Thompson, the chief CSR negotiator, but in return, the railway wanted a \$25,000 bonus from St.

Thomas.

The bonus was granted with little opposition.

While the village had a fair amount of power over the CSR it also was at the CSR's mercy in certain respects.

Because of St. Thomas's central location, it was in an ideal spot for repair shops and a large station. Both promised to bring jobs and prosperity to the village, which had suffered from the general economic decline following Confederation in 1867.

FINAL SAY

But, it was the CSR which would have final say where the shops and station went.

They were able to play on local anxieties to get the additional bonus. CSR spokesmen played on the idea that shops might be built in Tillsonburg instead.

Meanwhile, the Great Western announced its intention of hiring 400 people locally to help construct its line from Glencoe and followed up with ads in the Dispatch. They also announced they would buy materials locally.

When they approached St. Thomas Council for aid, they said they were not "leeches or schemers" like the CSR. They didn't want bonuses. Instead, they "merely wanted tax concessions."

As a result, St. Thomas agreed to limit taxes on railway property to \$100 a year for 99 years and gained the promise that the Great Western would also construct workshops here.

The wheeling and dealing was found with other municipalities as well.

Charges the CSR was backed by "Yankee schemers" did find some validity once railway construction began, although most charges were based on the fears of a new nation bordering a rapidly-expanding power to south.

Ontario politicians did find that the CSR spokesmen were schemers to a point.

For instance, construction of rail lines past or through communities began after bonus by-laws were passed but money not yet paid.

When communities found the lines didn't follow the routes they had expected, they withheld bonuses. However, the CSR

had planned wording of agreements well and backed by lawyers was able to go to court to get money promised.

St. Thomas has avoided much of the problems of other centres and was pleased when the CSR was finally complete.

On Aug. 1, 1871, the first train from Niagara Falls arrived. St. Thomas's dream to have a through rail line was realized. On Dec. 19, a train from the west arrived from Amherstberg.

The railway ran 229 miles through Southwestern Ontario and passed through 10 counties.

The railway was noted for its straight rails, 96 per cent straight, and low grades, 15 feet per mile.

It was the shortest route from Buffalo to Chicago by 23 miles.

GOT WORKSHOPS

In construction costs, St. Thomas and Elgin County had paid 50 per cent of all bonuses in Southwestern Ontario but won out in the bidding for workshops and a new station.

The total cost of the CSR was \$15 million or no more than \$30,000 per mile of construction.

St. Thomas had paid a lot for the railway and the Great Western's "loop" line. People discovered that to bring the railways here meant financial commitments.

The railway promoters were a shrewd lot and were not about to bring any benefits without reaping substantial rewards.

They often preyed on local politicians who were outsmarted and outmanoeuvred by polished promoters.

But, in the end, St. Thomas and Elgin residents could be satisfied they had a major rail line passing through.

The prosperity which had escaped them in the past was about to be had and residents of the county were willing to forget any differences with the railways.

The railway was about to herald a new era in St. Thomas and residents of the county could sense it.

That's the way we were in 1871 when the Canada Southern Railway was completed through Elgin County.

Part three in a four-part series.

Railroad brought economic prosperity to DUTTON

By TIM GALLAGHER
T-J Staff Reporter

When the Canada Southern Railway's first train passed through the village of St. Thomas in 1871, a new era was heralded in this community.

Long affected by the general depression in the Canadian economy, St. Thomas was about to embark on a period of unprecedented prosperity.

The Canada Southern linked the United States eastern seaboard with the American mid-west and fulfilled a vision of Mahlon Burwell, a surveyor with the Talbot Settlement. He was one of the first people to see the economic advantages of such a route.

Despite the promise of economic benefits, the CSR had to wage a political battle with the Great Western Railway in order to complete its route from Niagara Falls to Windsor.

The Great Western had its headquarters in Hamilton and a regional base in London. The CSR was regarded as an unwanted rival by the Great Western.

Rumors spread that the Canada Southern didn't have the financial resources to complete its intended line through Southwestern Ontario and that its American backers were having second thoughts about the railway.

There was perhaps some truth to both rumors, especially the one about the lack of finances, but the CSR was determined to

go through and was aided by financial assistance from counties and municipalities along the proposed route.

EFFORTS FAILED

Efforts by the Great Western to persuade Elgin's County Council to deny the CSR a \$200,000 bonus failed and the CSR also obtained a \$25,000 bonus from the village of St. Thomas.

In return for financial aid, the CSR agreed to build workshops and a large station which still stands in the city's east end and is today the divisional office of Conrail.

The new rail line passed right through the centre of the village paralleled to what is now Centre Street.

With the railways came jobs and industry to spark the local economy.

Prior to the coming of the railway, the village was forced to forego badly needed street repairs for lack of money. The village was essentially stagnant.

Only one railway passed through St. Thomas. That was the London and Port Stanley Railway but it did little to boost the local economy. Instead, it served mainly as a business link between London to the north and Great Lakes shipping to the south.

ON THE MAP

While the Great Western promised 400 jobs and did complete a 'loop' line between Glencoe and St. Thomas, it was the Canada Southern which brought prosperity to St.

Thomas and put the community on the map.

The CSR provided the shortest route between Buffalo and Chicago by 28 miles and was noted for its straight rails, 96 per cent, and low grades, 15 feet per mile.

St. Thomas was in a central location and benefitted greatly from its geography.

Railway construction sparked secondary construction as well. For instance, a wood and iron bridge was erected to the west of the village over Kettle Creek and what is now Sunset Drive.

The St. Thomas Weekly Dispatch reported the cost of the bridge, including land purchase, was between \$80,000 and \$100,000. Switches and a depot were also constructed near the bridge and were included in the cost which was much higher than people expected.

The inflated cost was largely due to land speculation, which was another side effect of the coming of the railway.

The Dispatch reported that "land which would have gone begging at \$200 an acre is now going for \$1,200 an acre."

For others, the bridge and other facilities did not bring financial gain. They brought headaches.

Construction in the area disrupted drainage patterns causing flooding which affected both home owners and farmers to the west of the village.

But the benefits far outweighed any inconveniences the

village and surrounding area sustained.

SOURCE OF PRIDE

The biggest source of pride was the new station which was then outside the village boundary to the east. It was described by the Weekly Dispatch as "surpassing any in Canada and only in cities like New York and Chicago are there any found equalling it." The station's location was an incentive for the village to expand eastward.

The new roundhouse was also a source of pride. It could house up to 12 locomotives.

Besides construction relating to the railway, the village itself experienced a building boom as it expanded its boundaries.

One historical account later reported that "hundreds of private dwellings were erected with few vacant houses."

The reference to few vacant houses and the intensity of housing construction suggest the village was perhaps on the verge of a housing shortage because of the economic boom which followed the railway's establishment in St. Thomas.

Further proof of a shortage is found in the same source, which says St. Thomas annexed Millersburg in Yarmouth Township to the east. The account states housing developed in Millersburg "as if by the hand of magic."

Ironically, the major developer in the area was J.E. Smith, who was linked with opponents of the Canada

Southern before it was completed through St. Thomas.

The village grew to the east on flat land near the railway and at the same time, moved away from London instead of toward it. This guaranteed its future as an independent community.

NEW INDUSTRY

Giving St. Thomas more permanency were new businesses and industry.

C. Norsworthy and Co. in 1871 bought the Red Foundry, and enlarged and refitted it "to keep pace with the rapid growth of the town."

The CSR was cited by the new owners as an important factor in their decision to buy the foundry.

The Fingal Foundry, already well established by 1871, was able to increase its profits because of business generated by the railway.

The Aylmer Port House, an abattoir benefitted from the railway because it was able to ship meat to distant markets. Over 150 carloads of meat were shipped per year bringing thousands of dollars per year to the railway in shipping revenue.

Industry moved into Hog's Hollow to the west end of the village as well. Again the railway was a factor in its growth.

Along with businesses and industry came financial institutions. The Merchants Bank preceded the railway when it was established in 1868. The Molson and Imperial banks followed in 1871. Following

thereafter were two trust and loan companies and two banking and exchange businesses.

Spiritual salvation was also on the way. On August 22, 1872, the Dispatch reported the construction of the new Methodist church whose spire exceeded that of the recently built Catholic church. By 1876, there were 10 churches in St. Thomas, making it a religious centre for this area.

The establishment of St. Thomas as a religious community sparked some local issues as well.

TEMPERANCE

Temperance was a big issue at the time and the Dispatch is filled with articles on temperance. It went so far as to take a political stand on the matter, advocating the adoption of temperance.

While the churches were educating Elgin residents about the evils of alcohol, three new grammar schools and high school were busy educating the youth of St. Thomas in the three Rs.

The newspaper business changed as well in St. Thomas with the establishment of two new journals.

The newspapers reflected the changing character of St. Thomas which took on a more urban appearance and exhibited a growing concern with alcoholism, one of the negative aspects of its development.

The positive aspects of its growth were also present in the pages of the local press.

Increasingly there were more ads appearing for financial institutions, building firms, and manufacturing interests.

Growth attracted talent to the community. One example was Alfred Ware who came to St. Thomas in 1876 and formed "Ware and Bell Architects and Engineers" which was contracted by the CSR.

Naturally politics, which had played such a big part in the development of the railway in the county, played a big part afterwards as well.

Meredith Conn, president of the Conservative Association of West Elgin, was a grain speculator by trade and made thousands, according to one source, through his ties with the CSR.

George Casey, Elgin M.P. in 1872, was said to have profited well through land speculation.

Prominent businessmen like Albert White, who owned grist and saw mills, enjoyed a good business because of the CSR. White found his lumber had many markets thanks to the railway.

Politics and railway issues often coincided. There was a battle between those who wanted the village to move westward and others who wanted it to move eastward.

Patrick Meehan, a local politician with land interests, was one of those who successfully led a movement to expand eastward.

St. Thomas prospered greatly because of the railway, but

gained a reputation for spending more time speculating than looking after the railway.

This image was cast after innumerable accidents in the area which gave it a sinister reputation.

LIGHTED PATH

But, despite some evils, the railway was the most important industry in St. Thomas. It was the park which lighted the path to prosperity. It was largely responsible for getting local businesses back on their feet and attracting new growth which eventually resulted in St. Thomas being incorporated as a city in 1881.

St. Thomas had grown from 2,000 people in 1871 to 6,000 in 1876 and was close to 10,000 in 1881.

St. Thomas had come a long way by then and residents of this community and of the county were thankful for the Canada Southern and the benefits it brought.

That's the way we were in 1881.

Part Four
in a four-part series

Rejects gambling

TORONTO (CP) — The Ontario government has rejected an application by the Canadian National Exhibition Association for a licence to operate a gambling casino during the 1980 exhibition.

West Lorne and Rodney area students came to Dutton every morning, by train, to attend High School. They returned home in the evening on the "evening mail train".