

THROUGH THE CANADIAN SHIELD BY RAIL

- by **Peter Allen, M.D.**

We had been looking for a Canadian railway adventure, but it soon became obvious that few exist. However, by sheer luck, I found one listed in the Canadian History magazine (formally The Beaver) that read, “See pristine parts of the Canadian Shield from the Rail Diesel car remote rail service. Travel VIA Rail’s Sudbury—White River trains, enjoying fall colours and historic experiences through Northern Ontario.”

Here was a chance, and an immediate phone call was made to Rail Travel Tours in Winnipeg, and answered by a reassuring voice that said “Congratulations, you have the last of the forty openings on the tour.” He also said, “Others may sell you a seat but we provide an experience.”

At the appointed date and with high anticipation, we folded into the eager tour group assembled in the cavernous grand hall of Toronto Union Station. We settled into our Northern Ontario railway coach, and were soon moving slowly north from Toronto. Our guide explained that the Ontario Northland runs trains from Toronto over CN tracks for 225 miles to North Bay. They then use their own right of way via Cochrane to Moosonee on the west coast of James Bay.

Quickly, several hands shot up and anxious voices said, “Is this the wrong train?, we are supposed to go to Sudbury, not James Bay.” Our guide, Daryl, assured them, “all is well today as we are going 78 miles above North Bay to visit the famous Temagami Station Museum, then we will bus to Sudbury for a good night’s rest.

I am certain he was thinking, “If some of the group would just read the handout and listen to instructions then all would be well!” However, by speaking slowly he showed the essential qualities of a good tour guide. Assured all was on track, agitation and concern was replaced by sleep for many who had risen early for the 5:00AM departure from Toronto.

Northbound train travel from Toronto through southern Ontario is interesting, but if one chooses to sleep while passing through Richmond Hill, Zephyr or Washago not much is missed. But as we moved through Ontario’s summer playground, Muskoka and French River towards North Bay a sense of excitement replaced the early morning lethargy.

As our guide promised, 78 miles north of the “Bay” we detrained at the heritage Temagami station. Several of the group remembered bygone summers spent at Lake Temagami, having been lured by the colourful railroad posters showing the clear water, rugged scenery, and wonderful fishing from brightly painted canoes. After a detailed guided tour of the station, we travelled by bus the 80 miles to Sudbury and a comfy bed for the night as promised.

Next morning, we again travelled by bus a short distance to the International Nickel Company mines, now owned by Brazilian mining company Xstrata. Before the underground tour, we donned a hard hat and rubber boots then made the descent to the mine's tourist area. We were shown through the old narrow low ceiling tunnels and some modern larger ones that displayed mining machinery and drill holes in the mine face made to house explosives. The thrilling adventure ended with a film detailing the history of nickel exploration, mine development and metal refinement in the world famous Sudbury geological basin.

In the afternoon we visited the Northern Ontario Railway Museum at Capreol on the CN mainline, just north of Sudbury. The museum, founded twelve years ago, originally consisted only of CNR 4-8-2 #6077. Today the museum is a quaint Victorian home. The displays are a captivating historical collection of CPR and CNR artefacts, photographs, timetables and telegraphic equipment reminiscent of the days of Morse code.



A highlight of the outdoor exhibits is a railway school coach that from 1926 to the early 1960's taught reading and writing to children of families along the remote northern Ontario sections of the two railways. Every few days the mobile school room moved back and forth to a different location. Each car had a blackboard, a few chairs and desks and a miniature library. By the 1960's there were too many non English or French speaking children for the teachers to handle. Also, increased primary schools in the remote areas plus internet education and TV rendered the school cars obsolete.

The third day of our trip, the one we were waiting for, began at 8:00AM with a short walk from the hotel to the CPR station in time for the 9:00AM departure of the tri-weekly Sudbury—White River train.

We were reminded that VIA Rail Canada, started back in 1971, took over the money losing passenger services of both CPR and CN. However, most of the infrastructure used by VIA continues to be owned by the two railways. While most VIA Rail services operate over CN, this service uses CPR tracks, one of the few remaining passenger services using CP lines. This 300 mile service is one of VIA's few operations classified as a remote route.

Promptly at 9:00AM, our train clanged into the Sudbury station. It consisted of three stainless steel Budd RDC cars, (RDC-2 / RDC-4 / RDC-2) originally built for the CPR in 1953. In 1978 these were transferred to VIA Rail from CP, and now serve the Sudbury—White River route. These self propelled cars are ideal for this kind of service, relatively inexpensive to operate and capable of quick stops and starts—ideal for wilderness operations where stops are made frequently and unexpectedly. They are warm and comfortable, if well worn, and rode smoothly.

The first stop was Cartier, (photo below) 33 miles north west of Sudbury and the last major highway point for 140 miles to Chapleau. Cartier station was all prepared for winter as its signs assured us, “caution slippery conditions on account of winter”. Another sign informed us, “unauthorized vehicles not permitted on platform”. But the best one was, “caution—watch for falling snow and ice”.



An intriguing stop was the town of Biscotasing, deep in the midst of the rocky Canadian Shield. The town, once a thriving lumber centre and Hudson Bay Company trading post, was the early home of Archie Belaney. Perhaps you remember, he was the Englishman who, at age 18, came to Canada in the early 20th century. He claimed Apache ancestry and lived in the

wilderness as a native Indian. He called himself Gray Owl. In spite of his fraud and dissolute life, Gray Owl wrote and lectured extensively on the need to preserve Canada's wilderness and its wild life. His mascot and emblem was the beaver.

Next stop was Chapleau, a divisional station on the CPR mainline, 140 miles north of Cartier and 135 miles south of White River. The railway museum there was filled with magnificent CPR memorabilia. The ebullient curator kept us spellbound with early railway history and stories related to the displays, all the while plying us with coffee and fresh doughnuts. I don't know who was most unhappy when we had to leave—our group or the curator!

The special interest of the 300 mile tour was travelling through the rugged Canadian Shield. The kaleidoscopic views varied from placid lakes and gentle streams to rushing rivers dashing between rocky outcroppings. Seconds later there would be swampy brown muskegs dotted with high profile beaver dams. In addition, we were treated to explosions of red, orange, yellow and brown leaves on the deciduous trees scattered over the rocky hills and flats. The views were absolutely breathtaking.



As we travelled north, the colours gave way to stands of evergreen trees such as pine, spruce, tamarack and larch. Periodically, there were ugly gashes where trees had been so mercilessly harvested that nothing remained but the bare rocks and a few solitary stunted trees.

At the remote flag stop of Franz, there was a surprise. Not only did our west bound RDC's clank across the Algoma Central Railway tracks, but there was a waiting northbound Algoma Central freight train from Sault St. Marie patiently awaiting our passage.



Nine hours and 300 miles from Sudbury we arrived, on time, at White River. The town was originally named Snow Bank, but then the CPR president, Sir William Cornelius van Horne, ever conscious of tourist travel, changed the name to White River. Regardless the name, it is one of the coldest stops on the CPR mainline, recording temperatures to -35 degrees C.

We were treated to a sumptuous dinner prepared by the ladies of White River Harmony Society who asked us to “sing for our supper”. The singing quality of our hungry group was sufficient to bring on a banquet we will long remember.

Next morning, October 4th, at the train station we prepared for the return to Sudbury under a brilliant sky and a stimulating -4 degrees C. There was another surprise. White River is famous as the original site of Winnie the Pooh. In 1914, an orphan black bear cub was bought from a trapper by overseas bound Lieutenant Colonel Harry Colbourn during a brief stop at White River station. He named the bear Winnie, after his home town of Winnipeg. While serving in the Canadian Army in France, he donated Winnie to the London Zoo for

safekeeping. She soon became a favourite attraction, especially to Christopher Robin who added the name Pooh. Christopher's father, A. A. Milne, created the famous children's book character Winnie the Pooh, whose popularity remains to this day. Before our train arrived, we were treated to a re-enactment of the Winnie the Pooh story by Mrs. Sokoloski and her two sons on the same railway platform where it had taken place 96 years ago. How could one ever forget such a moment?

Next morning we bused back from Sudbury to North Bay. Following a visit to the original home of the famous Dion Quintuplets, we boarded the daily Ontario Northland railway's *Northlander* for the 5.5 hour run to Toronto Union station.

And so ended our five day fabulous rail trip through the panoramic Canadian Shield of northern Ontario. We had the luck to see its brilliant colours, evergreen forests, rustic vistas, isolated towns, historic railway museums and meet the very hospitable people along the way.

If you get an opportunity to make this trip, don't miss it!\