

The Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Company

On Tuesday, August 21, 2007 at 2 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust and the Township of Lake of Bays unveiled a provincial plaque to commemorate the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Company at the South Portage Dock in Dwight, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

THE HUNTSVILLE AND LAKE OF BAYS RAILWAY COMPANY

When completed in 1905, the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway, or Portage Railway, provided a crucial 1.8-kilometre link connecting steamboats on Peninsula Lake to Lake of Bays and opened up North Muskoka to tourism and increased development. The railway was part of a larger navigation company owned by George F. Marsh and later sold to C.O. Shaw, owner of the Anglo-Canadian Leather Company in Huntsville and Bigwin Inn that opened on Lake of Bays in 1920. A narrow-gauge train fondly named the “Portage Flyer” plied the steep grade between the lakes carrying mail, tanbark and tourists for 55 years. By 1959, a decline in steamship travel led to the end of what was once promoted as the “smallest commercially operated railway in the world.”

LA HUNTSVILLE AND LAKE OF BAYS RAILWAY COMPANY

Une fois achevé en 1905, le Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway, appelé également Portage Railway, offrait un lien crucial de 1,8 kilomètre reliant les bateaux à vapeur du lac Peninsula à Lake of Bays et a ouvert la région de Muskoka Nord au tourisme et au développement. Le chemin de fer faisait partie d'une société de navigation plus importante, appartenant à George F. Marsh. Il fut vendu par la suite à C.O. Shaw, propriétaire de la Anglo-Canadian Leather Company de Huntsville et de l'auberge Bigwin qui ouvrit ses portes à Lake of Bays en 1920. Un train à voie étroite, appelé « Portage Flyer », a gravi la pente raide entre les lacs, transportant le courrier, l'écorce à tanin et les touristes pendant 55 ans. Par 1959, le déclin des voyages en bateau à vapeur entraîna la fin de ce qui fut jadis qualifié du « plus petit chemin de fer commercial au monde ».

Historical background

Early Muskoka and navigation on the lakes

Prior to the arrival of European explorers and settlers, the lakes and rivers of the Muskoka region were key routes for aboriginal trade and communication. The Algonquian-speaking Anishinaabeg peoples (such as the Ojibwe and Odawa) used the waterways for transport across the region and as a means to connect with a larger, continental network of First Nations peoples.¹ The first settlers of European origin also relied heavily on water transportation and followed many of the traditional aboriginal routes. South, or Lower, Muskoka – adjacent to both Georgian Bay and the Trent-Severn watershed – experienced a large growth in European settlement during the 19th century. This influx of settlers was due, in part, to provincial grants of free land for bush farming.² In addition to agricultural use, large tracts of old-growth forests provided a rich foundation for a booming logging industry. The natural beauty of the area also led to a rise in seasonal tourism with vacationers searching for a retreat from the increasingly urban regions to the south.

The same landscape features that attracted both settlers and tourists to the area also made settlement and movement challenging. Roads and railways were constructed, linking the larger towns – such as Gravenhurst and Huntsville – to the south.³ From these centres, further transportation was facilitated on steamships that plied the traditional waterways. Unlike South Muskoka, settlement in North, or Upper, Muskoka progressed at a slower pace partly due to the rocky and forested Precambrian geography of the Canadian Shield. Numerous portages existed to forward goods across the rugged divisions of land between the lakes. The rough nature of these portages meant only a limited amount of freight and numbers of people could be transported, and a great deal of time was spent unloading and restocking the vessels. During the 1870s, a series of locks was created between Mary and Fairy lakes; by the late 1880s, a canal had been dug at great expense to link Fairy and Peninsula lakes.⁴

The area between Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays remained one of the traditional portage points. Approximately 1.6 kilometres (1 mile) in width, the elevation of the portage exceeded 30.5 metres (100 feet) making a canal an impractical and costly endeavour. Even with a gravel road – constructed in 1887 to improve travel across the portage – the transfer of people and goods over the steep terrain remained a difficult process.⁵

The beginnings and development of the Navigation Company and the Portage Railway

In 1895, Captain George F. Marsh purchased the steamship business of Alfred Denton, his primary competitor on Lake of Bays and the lower Fairy, Mary and Peninsula lakes. Marsh had the newly expanded business incorporated provincially as the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Transportation Company. Realizing the obstacle that the mile gap between Lake of Bays and

Peninsula Lake created to the expansion of his business, he requested and was granted permission to develop an electric tramway across the portage.⁶ In 1895, electric railways had only been existence for 20 years and were predominately found in urban areas. The building of an electric tram in the middle of Muskoka would have been considered an amazing feat of technology that undoubtedly captured the imagination of tourists and investors alike.⁷ As the 20th century dawned, it became clear that Marsh had a grand vision for his Navigation Company and for its new railway.

By 1900, however, construction on this modern, electric railway had not yet begun. Instead, the transportation company was reincorporated as the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Navigation Company and Marsh applied for a separate provincial charter for the railway portion of its operations.⁸ It was proposed that the new rail company, the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway, would develop a standard gauge railway⁹ using either electric or steam motive power. The new railway was ambitious in design and was permitted to issue \$50,000 worth of shares for investors (double the amount initially granted to the steamship company in 1895). Not only would this new railway serve the portage between Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays, it was also chartered to connect the east end of Lake of Bays to the west end of Hollow Lake.¹⁰

By the end of 1902, the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Navigation Company had been reincorporated as the Huntsville, Lake of Bays and Lake Simcoe Navigation Company. The new charter not only reaffirmed the right of the company to operate and maintain steamships, but gave it a new, larger mandate to develop “hotels, house boats, boarding houses, cottages and summer resorts” in the districts of Muskoka, Nipissing and Parry Sound, and in the counties of Simcoe, York and Ontario.¹¹ The future of the reinvigorated and newly named “Navigation Company” looked bright.

On the other hand, the construction of the separate railway portion was proving more difficult than first anticipated. Initially, the company was given two years in which to build the railway and begin operations. By 1903, an additional two years was granted to the company in light of the initial planning and construction delays.¹² Construction of the railway began in earnest in 1903 and encountered several problems due to the awkward and steep terrain. In 1904, an application for federal funding was denied; but, in the same year, the provincial government approved a \$10,000 grant for the completion of the railway.¹³ Although the railway was originally to have been built in standard gauge, it was decided to use narrow gauge¹⁴ that was better suited to tighter corners and steeper grades. Despite the initial vision of an electric railway in the woods that would capitalize upon energy generated by the natural incline of the portage, the more standard method of steam locomotion was chosen in the end. The first section between Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays became known as the Portage Railway and was officially opened in 1905. The second section between Lake of Bays and Hollow Lake was never completed and the requirement to build across this portage was later dropped by the provincial government in 1906.¹⁵

Marsh died in 1904 before he could see his railway efforts come to fruition. In 1905, a controlling interest in the Navigation Company and Portage Railway was purchased by Charles Orlando Shaw. Shaw, an engineer by training, had come to the region almost a decade earlier and was the proprietor of the successful Anglo-Canadian Leather Company tannery in Huntsville and Bracebridge.¹⁶ The tannery, renowned as the largest producer of sole leather in the British Empire, required large amounts of cord wood and hemlock tanbark.¹⁷ The small Portage Railway became a key part in moving these raw materials for the tanning process between the lake steamers.

Shaw, like his predecessor, envisaged an auspicious future for the Navigation Company and the humble Portage Railway. In 1907, a provincial Act reaffirmed the incorporation of the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Company with Shaw heading a new slate of directors.¹⁸ Over the next decade, Shaw increased the size of his steamboat fleet by purchasing or refurbishing several vessels.¹⁹ Already permitted by charter to expand operations to hotels and other tourist services, Shaw soon turned his talents to resort construction.

Shaw's first foray into resort construction was the building of the WaWa Hotel that opened at Norway Point on Lake of Bays in 1908.²⁰ With the experience gained on that project, Shaw turned his attention to the building of the grander Bigwin Inn. The lavish resort was built on the 268-hectare (662-acre) Bigwin Island, purchased from Ojibwe Chief Chevodin or Joseph Big Wind in 1910.²¹ The sprawling, modern 280-room hotel opened in 1920. The Bigwin Inn also provided Shaw, an amateur musician, with a forum to present first-class music to his wealthy guests. The hotel soon became renowned in Muskoka – if not in all of central Canada – for its high-quality hospitality and musical entertainment.²²

All of North Muskoka benefited from the Huntsville, Lake of Bays and Lake Simcoe Navigation Company and the Portage Railway. The improved transportation across the lakes led to the opening of many independently operated hotels and lodges on the upper lakes in the 1920s and early 1930s. For travellers familiar with the standard pace of early 20th-century steamship and rail travel, the Portage Railway provided a breath of fresh air. The narrow gauge of the rails, the steam engines and the rolling stock were much smaller than many travellers were accustomed to. The train that slowly plied along the crooked route and steep mile-long incline was given the ironic yet affectionate name of the "Portage Flyer." For local residents and visitors travelling to and from the upper lakes, the brief journey on the "Portage Flyer" was a memorable experience.

The post-war changes and abandonment of railway

Although affluent members of North American society continued their seasonal trips to Muskoka during the Great Depression of the 1930s, tourism on the whole declined. By 1939,

Shaw's fleet – that had at one time boasted eight steamers – had been reduced to two: the S.S. Algonquin and the S.S. Iroquois. Shaw died in 1942 and control of the Anglo-Canadian Leather Company was transferred to Shaw's son-in-law, C.W. Conway.²³ Later in the decade, the operations of the Navigation Company, the Bigwin Inn and the Portage Railway were transferred to Shaw's daughter Pauline L. Gill. The Bigwin Inn was sold in 1947 and in 1948 Carl R. McLennan took charge of the remaining Navigation Company and Portage Railway.²⁴

McLennan, Gill and the company directors tried to revive the flagging interest in Muskoka steamship tourism. Although steamship travel was on the decline, large tourist motorboats were very popular in regions such as the Thousand Islands. McLennan, hailing from the St. Lawrence River town of Brockville, introduced a charter motorboat service that had moderate success.²⁵ He also capitalized on the unique appeal of the little "Portage Flyer." Special souvenir tickets were printed up and were validated when the traveller arrived at either North Portage or South Portage. All promotional material for the railway touted it as the "smallest commercially operated railway in the world."²⁶ In spite of efforts to introduce new attractions while also playing up the nostalgia for the region, the rise in automobile transportation and the increased popularity of personal watercraft were insurmountable. The Portage Railway shut down operations in 1959. Its track and equipment were moved to St. Thomas, Ontario where they were used at the Pinafore Railway Park.²⁷

McLennan died in 1965 and the Huntsville, Lake of Bays and Lake Simcoe Navigation Company remained in name only. Reflecting the company's early roots in hotel and entertainment business, the Liquor Licensing Board of Ontario was required to approve the dissolution of the company which officially ceased operation in 1967.²⁸ It was an inauspicious end to what had been the most successful – if not best-known – navigation, railway and hospitality company in Muskoka during the 20th century.

Subsequent commemoration and the memory of the "Portage Flyer"

Years after the dissolution of the navigation company and the removal of the railway, permanent and seasonal residents alike fondly remembered the little Portage Railway. By the 1980s, a local movement to bring back the railway started to gain interest.²⁹ In 1984, the locomotives that operated in St. Thomas were offered for sale and the newly created Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Society purchased them. Initially, it was hoped that the original road bed could be used across the portage. When the original site could not be used, several other sites were investigated by the Society throughout the 1980s. By 1993, the Society entered into an agreement with the Town of Huntsville's Muskoka Pioneer Village and a new park, Muskoka Heritage Place, was created. In 2000, the newly restored "Portage Flyer" officially took its first journey over a one kilometre route. Since that time, the railway portion of the park has continued to grow, thanks to the efforts of the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Society, a dedicated group comprised of local residents, ex-railway employees and rail enthusiasts. Most

recently, several restored buildings have been added to the line along with two manual turntables. The restored railway, and Muskoka Heritage Place, celebrate the rich history of settlement and tourism in Muskoka and welcome thousands of visitors each year.

The Ontario Heritage Trust gratefully acknowledges the research of Michael Eamon, BA (Hon.), MA, M.Phil.



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¹ Geraldine Coombe, *Muskoka: Past and Present*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976, pp. 6-9; Alan D. McMillan, *Native Peoples and Cultures of Canada: An Anthropological Overview*, Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988, pp. 87-101.

² For a contemporary account of the early settlement under the free land program see: Thomas McMurray, *The Free Grant Lands of Canada, From Practical Experience of Bush Farming in the Free Grant Districts of Muskoka and Parry Sound*. Bracebridge: Northern Advocate Press, 1871.

³ Lobbying from settlers and lumbermen in South Muskoka led to the incorporation of the Toronto, Simcoe and Muskoka Junction Railway in 1869 that linked Gravenhurst to Toronto (1875), and later Bracebridge (1885) and Huntsville (1886). The railway's role in opening up South Muskoka was recognized by the Government of Ontario in 1975 with a provincial plaque, "The Toronto, Simcoe and Muskoka Junction Railway."

⁴ Niall MacKay, *By Steam Boat and Steam Train: The Story of the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway and Navigation Companies*, Erin: Boston Mills Press, 1982, p. 11. Mackay reports that the construction of this canal completed in 1886 cost \$25,000.

⁵ MacKay, p. 11; Richard Tatley, *The Steamboat Era in the Muskokas: A History of Steam Navigation in the Districts of Muskoka and Parry Sound 1866-1905, Volume I – To the Golden Years*, Erin: Boston Mills Press, 1983, p. 224. MacKay talks about the "Osbourne family" and Tatley of "Arthur Osberne" who ran the stage and wagon across the portage. In spite of the best efforts of the proprietor of the forwarding company, the increase of freight and people led to an unavoidable bottleneck at the portage. The little lake in the middle of the portage that the railway travelled around is known as Osbourne Lake.

⁶ MacKay, p. 13; Government of Ontario, Companies Branch ONBIS Database, "Huntsville & Lake of Bays Transportation – 1895-03-07;" Government of Ontario, Companies Branch File TC-67262, "Huntsville, Lake of Bays, Lake Simcoe Navigation Company Limited." A letter from the Assistant Provincial Secretary for the Province of Ontario erroneously states that the company was incorporated on 7 March 1897 in file TC-67262.

⁷ The steep incline of the portage was seen early on as a potential means to generate hydro electricity, not only for the railway, but for the neighbouring town of Huntsville. In the end, neither the railway nor Huntsville benefited from this natural resource. Huntsville did not receive a permanent source of electricity (from nearby South Falls) until 1916, over 25 years after it was initially proposed for the portage railway. See: Susan Pryke, *Huntsville: With Spirit and Resolve*, Huntsville: Fox Meadow Creations, 2000. pp. 147-150.

⁸ MacKay, p. 13; See: *Act to Incorporate The Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Company, c. 113, 63 Victoria, 1900.*

⁹ With 56½ inches, or 143.5 centimetres, between the rails.

¹⁰ See: *Act to Incorporate The Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Company, c. 113, 63 Victoria, 1900.*

¹¹ Letters Patent, Huntsville, Lake of Bays and Lake Simcoe Navigation Company and corresponding documentation, Government of Ontario, Companies Branch File TC-67262, "Huntsville, Lake of Bays, Lake Simcoe Navigation Company Limited."

¹² See: *An Act Respecting The Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Company, c. 97, 3 Edward VII, 1903.*

¹³ See: Library and Archives Canada, RG43, Railways and Canals, Series A-1-2, Volume 276, File 3056, "Huntsville

and Lake of Bays Railway – Application for subsidy,” and *An Act Respecting Aid to Certain Railways, c. 18, 4 Edward VII, 1904*.

¹⁴ With 42 inches, or 106.6 centimetres, between rails.

¹⁵ See: *The Statute Law Amendment Act, 1906, c. 19, 6 Edward VII, 1906*.

¹⁶ The Bracebridge operations closed in 1932 and the Huntsville operations in 1960.

¹⁷ Susan Pryke writes that in 1906, “the company employed 200 hands, not including the men who worked in the bush collecting hemlock bark. Its annual payroll in Huntsville at that time was \$65,000.” See: Pryke, pp. 121-122.

¹⁸ See: *An Act Respecting the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Company, c. 100, 7 Edward VII, 1907*.

¹⁹ For a detailed account of Shaw’s efforts to expand steamship travel on Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays see: Richard Tatley, *The Steamboat Era in the Muskokas: A History of Steam Navigation in the Districts of Muskoka and Parry Sound 1906 to Present, Volume II – The Golden Years to Present*. Erin: The Boston Mills Press, 1983.

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 134; Douglas McTaggart, *Bigwin Inn*, Toronto: Stoddard Publishing, 1992. p. 20.

²¹ *Bigwin Inn*, p. 11.

²² Shaw was an amateur cornet player with a passion for music. Before the Bigwin Inn had opened, he had formed the Anglo-Canadian Leather Company Band for tannery employees and hired well-known musicians of the day, such as Herbert L. Clarke (1867-1945), who had played lead cornet for John Phillip Sousa, to direct it. See: *Bigwin Inn*, pp. 17, 20; “Anglo-Canadian Leather Company Band” Encyclopaedia of Music in Canada Online, Provided by Historica, Accessed on 17 April 2007 at:

www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=UISEC833118.

²³ Conway ran the company until 1952 when George Mosbaugh became director and the head office moved from Huntsville to Montreal. In 1953, the company was sold to Canada Packers. Canada Packers closed their Huntsville operations in 1960 and abandoned the tannery, which burned two years later. See Pryke, p. 230.

²⁴ MacKay, p. 14; Government of Ontario, Companies Branch, file TC-67262, “Huntsville, Lake of Bays, Lake Simcoe Navigation Company Limited.”

²⁵ MacKay, p. 30; Pryke, p. 232.

²⁶ See Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway pamphlet, c. 1950, Robert McLennan Collection, Brockville Ontario.

²⁷ MacKay, p. 50; Interview with Russ Nicholls, President of Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway Society, Spring 2007.

²⁸ *ibid.* Considering that C.O. Shaw was a well-known teetotaler who did not permit alcohol at the Bigwin Inn, the LLBO approval to the dissolution of his company was an ironic twist in its history.

²⁹ For a detailed account of the movement to bring back and operate the “Portage Flyer,” see Russ Nicholls, *Rebirth of the “Portage Flyer”*. Huntsville: Walker Lake Publications, 2005.