

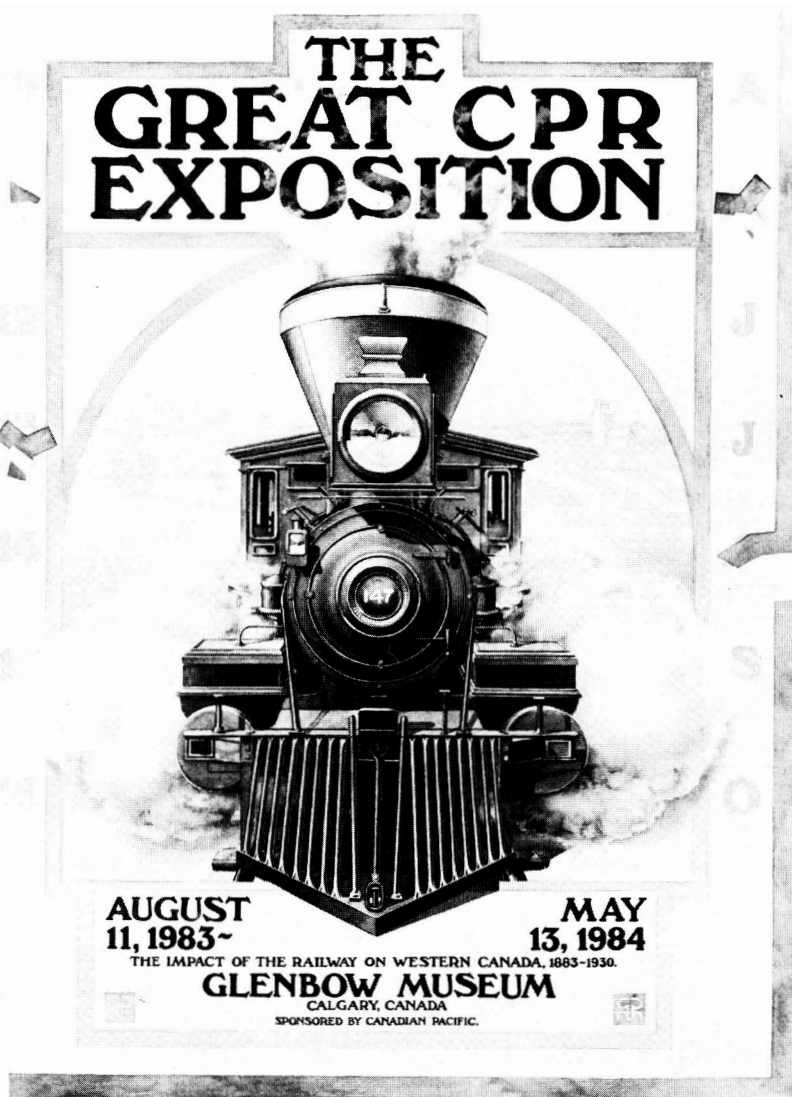
Canadian Pacific at the Glenbow: A Hundred Years of the CPR in Western Canada

by GLENN T. WRIGHT

All aboard! Two hundred and fifty historians, archivists, curators, and rail fans heard the traditional call of the railway porter and gathered at the Glenbow Museum last September to commemorate one hundred years of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Western Canada. Sponsored by the Glenbow-Alberta Institute with assistance from the National Museums Corporation and Canadian Pacific Limited, the festivities consisted of three major elements. In August the celebration began with the opening of the "Great CPR Exposition," a large exhibition that takes a comprehensive look at the construction, arrival and impact of the CPR on the Canadian West. During the month of September, the CPR West Conference attracted a good number of professionals and non-professionals and demonstrated that research on various aspects of CPR history is alive and well. To complement both the exhibition and the conference, Glenbow also sponsored the publication of a souvenir book, *Trail of Iron: The CPR and the Birth of the West* by William McKee and Georreen Klassen.

The centrepiece of Glenbow's tribute to the CPR is the "Great CPR Exposition," the largest and most ambitious exhibition ever mounted by the Museum. Glenbow staff spent over two years collecting materials and conducting original research, and the result is impressive. The exhibition is an attempt to portray the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway and its impact on the social and economic development of Western Canada from the time of its inception and construction to the 1930s. Historical records have been drawn from virtually every media that one would find in an archives or museum. The result is a multi-media extravaganza that includes generous samples of such traditional exhibition fare as documents, photographs, maps, books, posters, works of art, and artifacts, but also complementing these sources (and stealing the show) are model trains, film, several detailed and colourful dioramas, and full-scale "stage" sets. It is a remarkable achievement — bold in design, daring in execution, and truly informative.

The exhibition is divided into four general sections. It opens with a small gallery that traces the birth of the idea from Major Robert Carmichael-Smyth's 1849 proposal for a "grand National Railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific." The second and third sections of the display examine the unsuccessful attempts of the federal government to build the line in the 1870s and the subsequent reversal of fortunes in the 1880s when the Canadian Pacific Railway Company undertook the work and completed the dramatic construction of the main line across the prairies



Poster image for The Great CPR Exposition. Watercolour illustration (22" x 29") by Calgary artist Dennis Budgen features the first locomotive to arrive in Calgary, #147.

and through the mountains to British Columbia. The largest section of the exhibition is devoted to the operations and expansion of the CPR and its role in developing Western Canada. Samples of equipment and rolling stock are well illustrated with models, photographs, and paintings. The difficult and often treacherous operating conditions in the mountains are vividly portrayed with a three-quarter scale snowshed and an ingenious working model of the CPR's famous spiral tunnels near Field, B.C.

The coming of the railway had a lasting effect on the Western landscape and environment. The impact of the CPR on native peoples, the company's critical role in the settlement process, the selection and development of western townsites and its relationship to Western industrial growth are all documented and illustrated with artifacts, models, dioramas, posters, brochures, a 1910 promotional film, and so on. This portion of the exhibition also includes an impressive salute to the CPR and tourism in Western Canada. This is achieved with an array of photographs, posters, art, hotel furniture organized around stage settings of a dining car (with wine chilling in a bucket), and a sleeper. It is an elegant and nostalgic conclusion to an exhibition that never fails to evoke the past.

The rich diversity of the material collected for the "Great CPR Exposition" is awe-inspiring. Paintings (often commissioned by the CPR) show the grandeur of the mountain scenery; dozens of marvellous photographs capture precious moments in time as only a photograph can do; artifacts from survey equipment to the last spike remind us that construction of the line was a great engineering achievement; and a full-scale set of a small prairie station (with lights flashing and telegraph clicking) in the 1930s is a wonderfully detailed recreation of the past.

Travelling by train is not as easy nor as convenient now as it was in the days depicted in this exhibition. But if you can, buy a ticket and take a ride along Glenbow's version of the Canadian Pacific Railway — it is instructive, informative, and the scenery is memorable.

The second element in Glenbow's tribute to the Canadian Pacific Railway was the CPR West Conference. Held in September over a period of five days, the conference attracted well over two hundred people interested in the history of the railway and its place in the development of Western Canada. The proceedings, consisting of twenty presentations, paralleled the events and themes highlighted in the exhibition.

It is impossible to give a detailed account of each and every paper, but in order to convey the nature of the conference, a brief summary of the presentations might prove useful. The impact of the railway on people was explored from three very different points of view. Hugh Dempsey examined the culture shock experienced by the Indian people as the CPR snaked its way across the prairie. Patricia Roy looked at the labour question during construction, specifically Chinese labour, and in an exceptionally entertaining lecture, D.C. Jones revealed some of the successes and failures of the CPR's Colonization Department in Western Canada during the 1920s and 1930s.

A second series of three papers was devoted to the impact of the railway on industry in the West. Sheila Jameson described the intimate, but not always peaceful, relationship that existed between the CPR and the cattle industry; coal mining and the petroleum industries were also capably examined in excellent papers by Andy Den Otter and David Breen, respectively.

The railway also affected the landscape and the environment in the West. This general theme was explored with papers on the origins of the national park system and the role of the CPR by R.C. Scace; the company's irrigation work in southern Alberta was examined by E. Mitchner; and the CPR's townsite development policies were the subject of critical analysis by Calgary's historian, Max Foran. A related paper was Ted Hart's on the CPR and the beginnings of tourism in Western Canada, a subject that will be given more extensive treatment below.



Sir John and Lady Macdonald at Stave River, near Mission, B.C., 24 July 1886.
Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives, NRM (b).

A fourth category of presentations focused on some of the technical and engineering aspects of CPR history. Jim Shields and Omer Lavallée, both from the CPR Corporate Archives in Montreal, gave interesting papers on rolling stock and locomotive designers. John Marsh explained in as clear a fashion as possible the complexities and engineering accomplishments of the CPR's Spiral and Connaught Tunnels. The art and architecture of Canadian Pacific stations and hotels in Western Canada was the subject of a thoughtful presentation by Harold Kalman.

Another series of papers examined what can best be called the "image" of the CPR. Robert Stamp gave a witty description of the 1939 Royal Tour in which the "train" seems to have been given as much publicity as the royal couple. Cecil Halsey (from the CPR Archives) revealed something of the company's vast photographic collection by showing examples of one official photographer, J.W. Heckman, and George F. Stanley delivered a delightful paper on artist John Hammond. The historical record comes in many media and this was not lost on conference organizers. The conference proceedings included a "movie night" and those who attended were *not* disappointed. Sam Kula left viewers howling for more after running a number of short films and clips that depicted the CPR from the turn of the century to the 1950s. Papers of a more general nature were provided by Ted Regehr, who looked at the progress of the railway construction through the eyes and pens of those at the "end of track." And John Eagle examined the presidency of Thomas Shaughnessy during the important years from 1899 to 1915.

Some papers were better than others. In a conference of this size, this was probably inevitable but, taken together, the sessions were enlightening and informative. The conference also revealed that a great deal of original research has been and is being done on many aspects of CPR history and, contrary to what some may think, not all of it is in praise of the company. The sessions were also well organized — subjects were chosen that reinforced or elaborated upon themes highlighted in the exposition and, if audience response is any indication, those in attendance were pleased with the results.

As a souvenir of the exposition and the conference, Glenbow archivists Bill McKee and Georgette Klassen coauthored *Trail of Iron: The CPR and the Birth of the West*,¹ a profusely illustrated book that examines the role of the company in the development of Western Canada from the 1870s to the 1930s. This general theme is developed in four brief chapters that trace the history of the CPR from the period of construction and subsequent expansion of services, the impact of the coming of the railway, its role in publicizing Canada and in assisting in the settlement of the West, and its place as a factor in urban development and industrial growth.

These themes are, of course, those highlighted in the exhibition and elaborated in the conference sessions, but the book is not a catalogue of the exposition. In fact, the text provides only enough general history of the CPR to allow the authors a framework to place the book's numerous illustrations in context. *Trail of Iron* includes close to two hundred photographs with extended and informative captions. The four main chapters contain several subsections dealing with some of the artists and photographers sponsored by the CPR and with the company's advertising and publicity work. These portions of the book are handsomely illustrated with splendid colour reproductions of posters and works of art.

McKee and Klassen set out to produce a popular book that would complement the "Great CPR Exposition" — they make no pretension of writing a full and complete history of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Western Canada, although *Trail of Iron* can certainly stand alone as a good illustrated history of the company in the West. The book's prose is well written and readable and the work was obviously well researched. Some text notes have been included in a rather awkward format, but the book contains a useful bibliography of sources relating to the history of the CPR.

Echoing the overall theme of Glenbow's celebration of the CPR, McKee and Klassen conclude that "more than any other human agency, the CPR shaped the development of most aspects of social, political and economic life in the West." (p. 185) If this is true, and there is no reason to doubt it, then a good railway deserves a good book — McKee and Klassen have done just that.

Before leaving the Glenbow and the history of the CPR, it would be a serious oversight not to mention another important book published in September dealing with the railway. *The Selling of Canada*² by Ted Hart, former Chief Archivist of the

1 Bill McKee and Georgette Klassen, *Trail of Iron: The CPR and the Birth of the West* (Glenbow-Alberta Institute/Douglas and McIntyre, 1983), 192 pp., illus., ISBN 0-88894-399-7, \$29.95

2 E.J. Hart, *The Selling of Canada: The CPR and the Beginnings of Canadian Tourism* (Altitude Publishing Ltd., Banff, 1983), 180 pp., illus., ISBN 0-919381-09-X, \$19.95



View of the CPR's Banff Springs Hotel in the late 1920s, with a typical tourist in the foreground. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives, NA-4465-1a.

Archives of the Canadian Rockies and now Director of the Peter and Catherine Whyte Foundation in Banff, Alberta, examines in detail the CPR and the beginnings of tourism in Western Canada, specifically in the mountains.

The construction of the CPR through the mountains was a complicated and extremely expensive undertaking. It was also the section of the line that was least likely to yield a financial return for the company's promoters. Sir William Van Horne, the genius behind the successful completion of the line, had other ideas. "If we can't export the scenery," he is reported to have said, "we'll import the tourists." Thus began the CPR's interest in bringing tourists to the Canadian mountains.

The CPR entered a world of tourism at a time when the upper levels of society, especially in the United States and Britain, found such travel fashionable. The general increase of interest in nature was another factor that made the company's "sport and scenery" pitch particularly attractive. Van Horne took a personal interest in all attempts to lure the travelling public. Special emphasis was placed on up-to-date comfortable equipment and facilities, and promotional literature was designed to advertize the many natural wonders of the Canadian landscape. With crafty slogans such as "Canadian Pacific Rockies" and "See this world before the next," the company seemed willing to take credit for the scenery as well!

Hart examines how the CPR put Van Horne's philosophy into action from the late 1880s to the early 1920s. *The Selling of Canada* is illustrated in a most attractive manner with hundreds of photographs, advertising literature, posters and paintings; about three dozen of these being in immaculate colour. Ted Hart writes with ease and has made excellent use of source materials from a number of repositories

including the CPR Corporate Archives where Omer Lavallée and his enthusiastic staff provided invaluable assistance. *The Selling of Canada* is a highly readable and attractive book; it is also an important contribution to the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway and to the history of advertising and tourism in Canada.

Glenbow's celebration of the Canadian Pacific Railway emphasizes in a very positive way the role played by the company in the social and economic development of the West. This is precisely the interpretation that Calgary freelance writer, Barry Nelson, dismissed in a critical review of the exposition that appeared in the *Globe and Mail* on 6 August 1983. As entertainment, Nelson wrote, "the show is a pleasant diversion, but anyone expecting to experience the real story of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the settlement of the West will be disappointed."

Nelson viewed the exhibition a full two weeks before it officially opened and before many of the exhibits were in place. Admitting that any criticism under such circumstances was "dangerous," he threw caution to the wind and confidently predicted that the exposition would be a "whitewash," largely for the benefit of the exhibition's corporate sponsor, the CPR. To be successful, Nelson continues, the exhibition will have "to tell the tale of the vanished buffalo, squalor and despair on Indian reserves, the courage of pioneers who survived only because they built, hunted or grew everything they had and of the whites and Chinese who died building the railway."

The past point first. Bill McKee and his staff were aware that their exhibition lacked material depicting labour conditions during the construction of the railway. This should not come as a surprise — few, if any, Chinese labourers left correspondence, diaries, or photographs, the very stuff of historical research and exhibitions. That workers died during the construction period is not surprising either. The mountain section was rough, wild, and untamed wilderness; the work was extremely dangerous, but at a time when concern for the individual safety of workers was virtually non-existent, thousands of men flocked to CPR contractors.

Linking the disappearance of the buffalo with the coming of the CPR is, at best, tenuous. Buffalo in Western Canada were already seriously depleted in number by the mid-1880s. And this reviewer is at a loss to know how the CPR was responsible for the unfortunate living conditions on Indian reserves. Pioneer life was indeed difficult and undoubtedly created hardship but, if anything, the coming of the railway encouraged more settlement, established communications with Central Canada, and created a pattern of growth in the West. The Glenbow prepared an exhibition that focused on the history of the railway in Western Canada and, while it had a dramatic effect on native people, settlement, and so on, the negative aspects of western development cannot automatically be blamed on the CPR. Mr. Nelson was obviously expecting a very different kind of exhibition, one that was never planned.

Nelson is also critical of the CPR for not bailing the Glenbow out of its financial problems encountered at the end of last summer. Surely the provincial government of Alberta should be fingered for the events that led to the threat to close portions of the Glenbow. Why the CPR should be expected to contribute to an institution that is largely funded by the public sector is beyond me. Nelson would have been on the right track if he had asked his questions in Edmonton and not in Montreal.

Indeed, it is significant that the “Great CPR Exposition” opened at a time when the Glenbow itself appeared to be headed for a nasty derailment. How fragile our heritage institutions! The exhibition demonstrates at every turn the vast richness and diversity of the historical record in Canada. What the Glenbow achieved in preparing this exhibition (and conference and book) is strong and convincing evidence that archives and museums, as custodians of our cultural heritage, deserve solid support and assistance from governments at all levels. Glenbow archivists and curators should be proud of their achievement, a marvellous example of outreach that was scholarly, entertaining, and informative.