

THE PORTAGE FLYER: THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

A review of

The Portage Railway: An Illustrated History of the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway

by Jeff Young and Peter Foley

By Heather Moffat

This is a book that can be enjoyed by anyone interested in local history and this unique railway. Authors Jeff Young and Peter Foley have done a tremendous amount of research to trace the Portage Railway Line from its inception and construction, through the boom years to its demise and its revival at Muskoka Heritage Place. They also include delightful descriptions of the train trip and provide fascinating photos of the railway line and its passengers from various eras, as well as interesting artifacts such as tourist brochures, tickets and schedules. As Robert J. Sandusky writes in the foreword, the book allows readers to be transported “back to a more leisurely and charming era in Ontario railway.” It is a fascinating read.

This one-and-a-half-mile narrow gauge railway was very important to the development of the Penlake area. In the early days, it was an essential link between the upper Muskoka lakes and Huntsville, used for transporting lumber to local sawmills and tanbark (hemlock bark used for turning animal skins into leather) to Huntsville tanneries. It was also hugely important to the development of tourism in the area, serving as the link between Peninsula Lake and Lake of Bays for passengers and their luggage arriving by steamship for holidays on Lake of Bays.

The railway was conceived by George Francis Marsh who, after starting a sawmill at Marsh’s Falls near Dwight in 1878, realized transportation for his goods was needed and saw the potential for tourism on Lake of Bays and the surrounding areas. In the winter of 1883-1884, he built his first steamboat and soon was running almost all the steamship lines on the north Muskoka Lakes.

At the time, Arthur Osbourne, a local settler, ran stagecoaches and freight wagons between North Portage on Peninsula Lake and South Portage on Lake of Bays, but the journey was slow and uncomfortable. Marsh realized these lakes had to be connected in a more efficient manner to accommodate increased freight loads and passengers. Two options Marsh and his associates considered were digging a canal between the two lakes or creating a hydro-electric generating plant there to produce power for a connecting electric railway (as well as other local businesses). The ideas were very progressive, but, in the end, proved too costly.

In 1900 Marsh formed The Huntsville & Lake of Bays Navigation Company and obtained a charter to run a railway between the two portages, but, due to financial difficulties, the railroad was not completed until 1904. Unfortunately, after realizing his vision, Marsh only managed to take one trip on his railway before he died.

The first train consisted of a wood-burning Porter locomotive and a flatbed car, and travellers had to sit on the floor with their luggage for the rough ride.

In the beginning, the short train line was mocked. Employees called it “the international corkscrew route” and *Saturday Night* magazine called it a “rickety diminutive railroad, the friend of dyspeptics (people who suffer from indigestion)”. The train was nicknamed the “hot tamale”, as flames shot out of its smokestack when it huffed and puffed up the steep incline to Lake of Bays with a heavy load.

However, despite the insults, many passengers were delighted to ride through the pretty Muskoka scenery. Children enjoyed reaching out and grasping at leaves and branches as the train flew by. When the train slowed to go up the steep hill to Lake of Bays, the passengers could hop off to pick strawberries or raspberries, depending on the season.

Over the years, many upgrades were made to tracks, terminals, and cars, and the Portage Railway became well-used and profitable, especially after the rise in tourism and the opening of the luxurious Bigwin Inn. By 1922, each year brought more than 8,000 tourists to Lake of Bays!

As cars became more popular and better roadways were built to the north Muskoka Lakes, fewer people relied on steamships and railways for transportation. However, a ride on the “Portage Flyer”, advertised as the “Smallest Commercially Operated Railway in the World”, was still seen as an interesting summer diversion, especially when it was combined with lake cruises. Also, despite the decline in ridership, by the late 1940s and 1950, this unique train service had become known in the railway enthusiast community and aficionados came from all over to experience it.

However, there were not enough passengers to save The Portage Railway from ruin. It ran its last trains in 1958 and the equipment was sold to Percy Broadbear of London, Ontario. Fortunately, The Huntsville & Lake of Bays Railway Society, formed in 1984, was able to repurchase the railway’s equipment to establish the line again in the Huntsville area. As they were unable to purchase the original property, they negotiated to establish it at Muskoka Heritage Place on a route along the shore of the Muskoka River to Fairy Lake. It opened with great fanfare on July 1, 2000, and the little train still runs four times a day during the summer, recreating for visitors the unique “Portage Flyer” experience.

The Portage Railway, a fascinating look at a bygone era, contains a treasure trove of facts and anecdotes. As the railway was tied to the local steamship lines and trains from Toronto, it also covers the broader history of transportation to our area of Muskoka. In particular, it tells the stories of the steamships that ran the Huntsville-Peninsula Lake, and Lake of Bays routes, such as the Algonquin, the Iroquois and the Mohawk Belle. The many photos of these boats are fantastic.

This book also has great appeal for railway fans, delving into depth on specifics of the line and equipment, and providing enough detailed and accurate information for enthusiasts to recreate this line in miniature. In fact Jeff Young began his research with this goal in mind! Of note are Peter Foley's amazingly detailed drawings of the railway engines, coaches, boxcars and station buildings.

The Portage Railway: An Illustrated History of the Huntsville and Lake of Bays Railway would make a great addition to your cottage library, as well as a wonderful gift for anyone interested in Muskoka history. Locally, the book can be obtained from Muskoka Heritage Place in Huntsville, Dorset Heritage Museum, Lake of Bays Navigation Company/Museum in Dorset or Veranda Designs in Bracebridge. In the Greater Toronto Area, the book can be purchased from the Credit Valley Railway Company in Mississauga. They also do web/mail/phone orders and can provide signed copies – visit them at www.cvrco.ca or call 1-(800)-464-1730. For folks living in the US, Ron's Books provides lower postage costs (www.ronsbooks.com).