

Building the Canadian Pacific

The Canadian Pacific Railroad was built about the same time as the American Trans Continental. It is hard to decide which is stronger, the similarities or the differences.

Both projects were begun, proceeded and finished amid graft, scandal and bitter conflict both internal and with indigenous peoples. Both were fantastically profitable to the contractors selected by the governments. Both were hugely over budget and schedule. Both projects knit together enormous nations and encouraged settlement, economic and social development.

On the other hand, rather than the two starting points and steady progress for the American project, The CPRR was built in fits and starts from many points along the eventual route. Financial and political trouble as well as design and material problems delayed the CPRR, sometimes for years at a stretch.

In the end both projects followed roughly similar trajectories and had comparable success. The American railroad was completed in May of 1869. The CPRR held its completion ceremony fifteen years later in November of 1885.



First Train Arrives at Port Arthur

The CPRR was primarily intended to link the vast area north of the U. S. border into a single nation. In 1867 Canada formed a confederation out of the British colonies of Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick. At that time the colony of Canada was divided into Ontario and Quebec. As part of the agreement, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were promised a railroad to link them to the bigger population centers in the other colonies. Three years later Manitoba joined the confederation with the same promise of a rail link to the east.

In the 1860s several gold rushes and massive population growth had led to the formation of the Colony of British Columbia, an independent and prosperous colony on the Pacific Coast. Mounting debt, fear of annexation by the United States and the need for government funded services led the colony to request admission to the Canadian Confederation. Eastern Manufacturing interests in Quebec and Ontario were interested in access to raw materials and markets in Western Canada.

Part of the agreement to admit British Columbia, a four-month sea voyage from the east coast, was that the Confederation would construct a land route from the eastern provinces to the west coast. The initial

request was for a wagon road but powerful political and business interests immediately proposed extending the existing plans for a Canadian railroad clear across the continent to B.C. The promise was to build the railroad in ten years, starting the year of the agreement's signing. The first route planning took place in late 1871.

The first and most logical route went through the American Midwest and the city of Chicago, Illinois via some Milwaukee Road and Soo Line trackage. When this plan could not be arranged, an all-Canadian route was designed. The all-Canadian route would require crossing 990 mi of rugged terrain across the barren Canadian Shield and muskeg of Northern Ontario. In addition to this was the difficulty of building a railroad through the Canadian Rockies; to ensure this routing, the government offered huge incentives including vast grants of land in the West.

In 1873 government officials accepted massive bribes to grant federal contracts to Hugh Allan's Canada Pacific Railway Company. The resulting scandal toppled the government including the Prime Minister Sir John McDonald, the railroads biggest booster and visionary. The new government decided to proceed slowly with construction under the Department of Public Works. The work was limited to relatively short sections of the project. Lake Superior to Winnipeg (700 miles) was completed by 1880 as well as large segments of surveying for the whole project.

Sir John McDonald was returned to power in 1878 and his government took a much more aggressive attitude toward the project. By 1880 several short sections had been completed and a route agreed to and surveyed for the entire transcontinental line. The government floated bonds in the London financial market and requested bids.

In 1880 the McDonald government signed an agreement with a Montreal based syndicate to build the CPR. The syndicate was awarded \$25 million (approximately \$625 million in modern Canadian dollars) in credit from the Canadian government and a grant of 25 million acres of land. The government transferred to the new company those sections of the railway already constructed under government ownership. The government also defrayed surveying costs and exempted the railway from property taxes for 20 years. Critics complained of excessive generosity, but the government countered that the contract emphasized speed and immediate construction.



The westward expansion in 1881 began when the first spike was driven, on a date lost to history, in 1881 at Bonfield, Ontario the westernmost end of a segment completed previously. That first season was a disaster with only 130 miles of track completed. The superintendent was replaced and the following year saw more than 418 miles of main line finished.



After racing across the plains in less than two years, the line reached the Rocky Mountains in 1883. The plan had been to cross the Rockies at Yellowhead Pass but this plan was abandoned in favor of a more southern route near the U.S. border which kept the U.S. from poaching business from British Columbia traffic. The new route of choice was Kicking Horse Pass which cross the Rockies but led into the Selkirk Range across which no known pass existed.



A problem appeared when the route impinged on land control by the Black Feet nation of first people. With that issue resolved, construction continued. As the line, in 1884, reached the Continental Divide at Kicking Horse Pass its impossible profile became obvious. Schedule and finances precluded drilling a tunnel and the road went over the pass. The finished grade was 4.5%, a steepness requiring an act of the Canadian legislature to approve. Speeds were limited to 6 MPH and five runaway ramps were installed but it was still terribly dangerous. The first locomotive, carrying the contractors, crashed into the Kicking Horse River, killing three. The developers assured Canada that the route was temporary, but 'temporary' turned out to mean twenty-five years. In 1909 a double spiral tunnel was built that reduced the grade to a manageable 2.2%. It is still a dangerous spot with dozens of derailments over the last century.



Golden Spike Ceremony

On Nov. 7, 1885, the eastern and western portions of the Canadian Pacific Railway met at Craigellachie, B.C. The Canadian Transcontinental Railroad was completed. The first transcontinental train on June 28, 1886, the first transcontinental train steamed out of Dalhousie Square Station in Montreal arrived at Port Arthur on June 30th.
-- Jim Feldman, SCWD Member